

From classical music to the world stage

Is there a better place than an airport for a rendezvous with the chief operating officer of the World Economic Forum? For a man who runs what is arguably the most important platform of global companies, a logistical hub like this is a natural environment. We caught up with the Forum's second-in-command, André Schneider, between rental cars and airplanes.

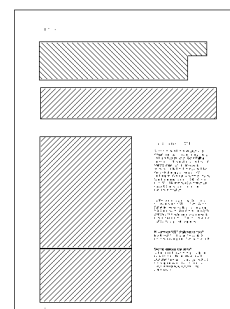
His day has been full of meetings. The local government of Davos is setting up a new initiative in health and tourism and could use some advice. Davos tourism wants to vet a new initiative. The Davos Congress Centre is planning a building extension and consults its most important customer. Generating some SFr 22 million of business a year, the WEF represents quite a chunk of the centre's annual turnover.

Although protests against the WEF still erupt occasionally (in Bern in 2005, for example), protesters have been taking a somewhat different tack since 2004 and the Forum's once-tense relations with the town of Davos and the canton of Graubünden seem to be in the past.

Gone are the anti-globalists that prompted local government to bring in armed riot police when demonstrations led by Italian and French anti-globalists got out of hand in 2000.

A protest ban in Davos ultimately deflected demonstrators to the World Social Forum held elsewhere, and demonstrations at the WEF have waned in recent years. But, the Swiss-born Schneider did a lot of community outreach when the heat was on the WEF, and helped to normalise the relationship with local officials. Today, the armed forces seem as much part of local folklore as the VIP's strolling down the Promenade.

Perhaps it helps that the World Economic Forum launches a new initiative every once in a while, such as the Summit of Growth Companies in China, to begin in 2007. While Schneider says Davos will remain the favoured epicentre of the Forum in



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the western hemisphere, he also notes that the East must be heard and its interests addressed.

On the fast track in growth rates, thousands of eastern concerns have quickly graduated from emerging companies to global players, and Schneider says they shape the future as much as the existing constituency of the Forum.

For example, Indian company Infosys employs 50,000 and is growing by 15 per cent every year. Chinese Lenovo, which bought the PC business from IBM, is growing by 20 to 30 per cent per year, he says.

By creating the new annual meeting, the Forum creates a balance between new members and the existing western constituency. In an interview he mentioned some other WEF priorities.

The man behind the WEF

André Schneider began his career as a classical musician. He was already playing for big orchestras like the Berlin Philharmonic at age 25 when he realised he didn't want to make music his life's work. Schneider studied mathematics and Information Technology working for IBM and the European Community before joining the World Economic Forum in 1998. Member of the WEF Management Board since January 2003, he is managing director and chief operating officer.

As the man in charge of logistics, personnel and security at the WEF in Davos, André Schneider oversees 300 discussion groups, 2,000 hotel rooms, 40,000 meals and 2,000 staff for 2,400 participants, 200 representatives of governments, 50 heads of state and 1,000 CEOs of global companies.

His greatest WEF challenge to date?

In 2001/2002, he had just ten weeks to move the meeting from Davos to New York.

Second greatest challenge?

To transform the swimming pool adjacent to the Congress Hall in Davos into a fully decorated party hall in four days – without removing the water. Divers built a steel underwater frame to support a floor for 2,000 people.



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Swiss News: What are some concrete results generated by the World Economic Forum in the past few years?

André Schneider: When the earthquake in Bham in Iran occurred in 2002, runways were blocked by trucks; no airplane could land anymore. The Forum has set up a small team – part of its Disaster Resource Network of some ten companies specialising in global logistics – that can dispatch goods very quickly in case of an emergency, to manage airports in case of disasters.

The team was in Sri Lanka for almost a month, managing the freight airport in Colombo, they helped after Katrina, in Central America, in Pakistan.

This is where the knowledge of our members from the big logistic firms such as DHL and TNT is really crucial. The UN and other help organisations have actually indicated that they would like to extend the agreements with business partners.

How do other global players see you at present?

The UN and other parties see us, more and more, as a possible catalyst in bringing business support to issues touching all of us. Very often these problems have been seen as political or civil society issues only. Now the concept starts to emerge that we can solve these problems together, with the resources of the business world.

Another example is the fight against AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. Providing cheap medicine is not enough.

Companies working in parts of the world where 50 per cent of the population is affected by AIDS need to roll out health programmes themselves, because their human resource will be touched by AIDS in one way or the other.

They actually have a better access to the population than many governments in these regions have.

The Forum is creating a framework with its members to cope with these issues. Governments and the United Nations acknowledge that. We have more requests than we can fulfill at present.

It was based on Infosys in Bangalore that author Thomas Friedman derived the title for his book *The World is Flat*. The book underscores the connectivity of a world economy in which we compete relentlessly, 24/7. What are the implications of this intense global competition for your work?

Geopolitical and societal questions have become more important at the World Economic Forum than before. We are trying to help our members navigating in this world.

In today's world the most important corporations need to understand geopolitical evolutions and put them on their agenda. The emerging companies meeting in China are at a stage of development that is much more business-oriented. They are creating a global brand, looking at maintaining growth, and how they are going to find the right people.

Established companies with more resources will need to

turn increasingly to more-sophisticated concerns such as the environment or the aging of the population. It is vital for us to bring both types of businesses together. Although we continue to be business-oriented, social and geopolitical issues obviously play a role.

You are in charge of all operations – including personnel numbering 2,000 during the annual meeting. How do you manage your team?

There is a very open, co-operative atmosphere at the World Economic Forum in Geneva. We are facilitating an environment that allows for free exchanges and free collaboration amongst all our employees.

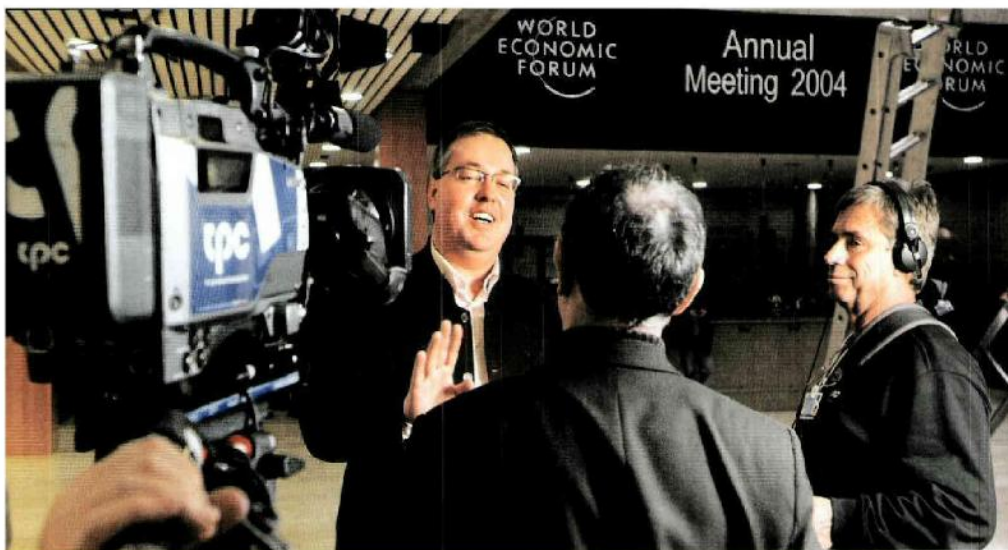
We also do not have terribly strong hierarchies. Furthermore we constantly make sure that all staff are included in brain storming sessions to get out the best ideas. We are all in open office spaces; it's a bit like a campus.

The Forum has been criticised for taking politicians hostage, the argument being that an increasing number of world leaders serve as secondary players behind business leaders.

I don't think there is any government member who lets him or herself be taken hostage anywhere. Their attendance recognises the fact that neither the business world, nor governments, nor societal institutions, can solve problems on their own. Politicians would not show up if there were not a clear interest for them.

We are a private not-for-profit organisation where they can discuss topics in an informal way. I would, by contrast, argue that the Forum is a very good place to informally exchange views – without the diplomatic pressure of any formal meeting.

By Renske Heddema



The WEF is a great place for politicians to exchange views informally and without diplomatic pressure, Schneider says.