Interview: Raymond Cron – CEO, Switzerland Innovation



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The most innovative country in the world must constantly launch new initiatives to attract R&D activities if that lead is to be maintained, and Switzerland Innovation is doing just that – by showcasing the opportunities that the Swiss Innovation Park holds for innovative companies around the world.

Switzerland Innovation was created just over a year ago. Given Switzerland's already robust innovation ecosystem, what was this organization created to accomplish?

The concept for this organization was created jointly between political stakeholders, Swiss academia, and the Swiss private sector: that Switzerland is a global leader in innovation but to retain this leadership we have to constantly be on the move, launch new initiatives, and continue to push boundaries. Switzerland Innovation is to be an additional tool to further develop Switzerland's innovative ecosystem, and keep our position as the most innovative country in the world.

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As such, Switzerland Innovation was created as a public private partnership and officially launched on the 18th of January 2016. Our main priority is to promote Switzerland as an innovation location based on the excellence of our universities, particularly the partner universities, e.g. the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH, EPFL) of the Swiss Innovation Park in our network, and of

course other factors that make Switzerland an attractive country to work in like stability, our economic framework conditions, and quality of life. In more tangible terms, our mission is to help to generate additional private R&D investment in Switzerland, specifically around the Swiss Innovation Parks in Basel, Zurich, Western Switzerland, Biel and the Park Innovaare located on the campus of the Paul Scherrer Institute (PSI). Additionally, we aim to create the conditions that discoveries, technologies, and ideas created in Switzerland stay in Switzerland, until developed into marketable products, and that they aren't brought elsewhere for commercialization.

The model for how we are working to achieve this is by creating a platform where groundbreaking researchers, innovative companies, and entrepreneurs can work together. By providing the right framework conditions and creating the right ecosystem of actors, this should lead to an acceleration in the process of turning the results of research into commercial products and services.

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What can Switzerland Innovation, the Swiss Innovation Park, offer innovative companies and entrepreneurs?

There are three key aspects that we focus on communicating to innovators; our innovation focus areas, the portfolio of expertise and innovation services that are available at the park, and finally information and services around providing infrastructure.

Regarding our fields of expertise, they are broadly defined as health and life sciences; energy, natural resources and environment; manufacturing and materials; computer and computational sciences; and mobility and transportation. We have defined the portfolio of expertise which gives us a clear profile of the topics of focus. Thus, we can offer many companies the chance to engage with a community and ecosystem with strong knowledge in these specific areas of expertise.

By extension of these specific competencies, there are a range of innovation services available at the park. These can be services provided by the partner universities or private companies within the parks. For example, companies with a lab at the EPFL innovation park have direct access to the people, professor and PhD students and post-docs working at the EPFL, who can provide a range of research services.

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Finally, each of the parks offer infrastructure to innovators, whether it be office and laboratory space to rent, or access to sophisticated technology platforms. For example, a new site will be built

alongside the Paul Scherrer Institute, where companies will be able to get access to their accelerator installations and platforms. Moreover, given the Swiss federal government's support of Switzerland Innovation, we can help companies and project teams to receive favorable financing terms for certain infrastructure development projects or technology acquisitions they make at the Parks. This is because we have a federal guarantee of CHF 350 million, meaning we can guarantee up to CHF 350 million in total, and thus as an example, should a company need to build a clean room for their research site at one of our parks, we can guarantee the loans needed to finance building the clean room.

The needs of established companies differ greatly from those of entrepreneurs and startups. Which group are Switzerland Innovation's efforts more targeted towards?

Our first priority is on attracting established companies. In Switzerland, we differentiate between technoparks, which are purely startup focused and essentially infrastructure providers, and innovation parks which have a broader focus and provide services and partnership opportunities around the university ecosystems. That said, if you go to the Swiss Innovation Park you will find startups as well. They are very important for the ecosystem and have a catalytic effect as well.

Seeing as the basic mission of Switzerland Innovation is to attract R&D investment into Switzerland, our focus is of course on the larger companies with significant investment capacity. This often means convincing companies or research teams to engage with Swiss universities, and in cases where they already have research partnerships, persuade them to increase their investment and set up a full-time research team in Switzerland.

With the first year of operations finished, what will be some of the next tangible steps for Switzerland Innovation as an organization?

The first year was dedicated to organizing ourselves, defining our corporate identity and visual corporate design, and now that that process is finished its time to start our international marketing activities. For 2017 and 2018, we will be focusing on three key pilot markets being the US, UK and China. The idea is to work with very focused events on specific subjects, where we can approach companies that are interested in that field, and show off the success stories and groundbreaking developments taking place in Switzerland.

To do this, we decided not to set up our own marketing organization, and instead we work with existing organizations like Switzerland Global Enterprise and Swissnex. We also always try to make use of the international networks of our partner universities, and even of individual professors, and as such we have developed a multichannel approach in terms of marketing.

How will you define success for Switzerland Innovation going forward?

Switzerland Innovation is a generation project, and it will take a long time to judge our success. It takes time to set up partnerships, build trust, and then let such projects grow and flourish.

Thus, our success is connected to the success of the wider Swiss innovation ecosystem, and we will be able to clearly measure that in the coming years in terms of products developed, R&D francs invested, and the vibrancy and occupancy of the Swiss Innovation Park.

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