

Annalise Eggimann - CEO, Innosuisse



A successful culture needs to guard against complacency. We must stay hungry

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Innosuisse CEO Annalise Eggimann presents the organisation's renewed mandate as the main Swiss innovation promotion agency, how Innosuisse serves Switzerland's vast array of SMEs, and why the country needs to guard against complacency to stay ahead of the competition on innovation.

Since we were last in Switzerland, the Commission for Technology and Innovation (CTI) has become Innosuisse - Swiss Innovation Agency. Why the change and what is the organisation's renewed mandate?

There were three main reasons for this reorganisation. The Federal Council and Parliament felt that the innovation agency should be closer in structure to other organisations in the Swiss science and innovation sector with which we are cooperating, such as the Swiss National Science Foundation, which has been a legally independent entity since its foundation. CTI was part of the federal administration as an extra-parliamentary commission.

The second reason for the change was to have a governance structure where strategic and operational tasks are better separated, which was not really the case at CTI. Now we have a board of directors, the strategic body, and then we have the executive committee, which I head. The third body, the Innovation Council, is responsible for making all decisions around funding.

The third reason was to give us a little bit more flexibility in financial terms. As a legally independent entity, we now have the possibility to build up reserves amounting to a maximum of 10 percent of the annual budget.

Innosuisse has taken on some new tasks, such as the responsibility for the innovation-led European partnership programmes with the EU and the market-oriented research and development initiative EUREKA. However, our mission has largely remained the same; we are still responsible for the promotion of science-based innovation in Switzerland, hopefully better and at a more optimised level than ever before.

Switzerland is a decentralised country where state agencies have tended to take a backseat role. How does Innosuisse fit into this ecosystem?

Generally, the Confederation has tasks assigned to it by the Constitution, one of which is research and innovation promotion. That means the federal level has responsibility for science-based innovation promotion. Innosuisse is responsible for supporting science-based innovation in Switzerland. However, we apply the subsidiary principle, meaning that we only intervene where private initiative is not enough. We do not intervene where the market is able to solve a challenge independently; we are only active where it needs some support.

Also, we have close contacts with the cantonal and regional level where we coordinate so that tasks are not inadvertently repeated. Normally, the Cantons are not particularly involved in science-based innovation, but only in innovation in a broader sense.

Last year Innosuisse had 808 funding applications, 400 of which were approved, and allocated CHF 266 million, predominantly on companies looking to start their innovation projects. What are your key industry areas of focus?

Switzerland is a strong supporter of the bottom-up principle, which means that we promote innovation by accepting the proposals that are submitted, checking their quality, and financing the best ones.

Our strongest sector is engineering, but life sciences is also very important, as is ICT – where we have many projects – and environmental and energy innovation. Over the last few years, we have also intensified our efforts to foster social innovations; innovations with a societal benefit, for

example those in the healthcare or educational sector. We are really active where there is added value for the economy and/or society.

Does Innosuisse work more with mid-sized companies or start-ups? What does your client base look like today?

Our main instrument is innovation project funding, within which we have a lot of mature SMEs with up to 250 employees. Innosuisse also serves start-ups in this funding instrument, but most of our clients are SMEs wanting to improve or renew their product portfolio, their production processes, or develop new services.

How would you characterize the SME ecosystem in Switzerland? What kind of companies are you dealing with and what are some of the challenges they are facing to develop their innovation?

Switzerland is an SME-heavy country. However, for many of these companies such as small consultancies for example, our funding instruments are not very relevant. We have a lot of clients in the high tech sector, many of which are very export-oriented, active in niches, and need to be highly competitive to be successful.

Is there an example of an Amazon or Uber-type company that you wish to build more of or is Innosuisse looking to foster more gradual growth?

Every country would like to have a big unicorn like Amazon or Facebook! We have big companies in the pharmaceutical sector, although that is not our client field as they are able to finance their R&D projects themselves.

However, Switzerland has a lot of so called “hidden champions” within the supply chain doing very specialized things very well. While that may not be so obvious, that is one of the country’s main success factors.

Life Sciences represents 5.7 percent of Swiss GDP and 30 percent of the country’s exports; how much of your work is focused toward the life sciences and what kind of

companies are you looking to help?

Life sciences is certainly an important domain for Innosuisse, and we are particularly strong in medtech. There are many SMEs actively investing in that field which are, of course, also very export-oriented. The pharmaceutical sector is very important for creating an environment that is good for nurturing new activities and start-ups, which is very important for us.

Where does Switzerland stand in terms of innovation and competitiveness and what are the threats to its position at the top table?

A successful culture needs to guard against complacency. We must stay hungry. However, some of the challenges we are facing help us to stay fit for innovation. For example, the strong Swiss franc has meant that export-oriented enterprises have needed to remain very competitive in order to continue their business and so they're challenged all the time. Other challenges, such as our ageing society, will also pose a problem to ensure that we have the collaborators and workforce we need for all our activities.

How much of a challenge is sourcing talent for the companies you work with?

A significant one. On the one hand, we have a competitive and high-quality educational sector with very good universities such as ETHZ and EPFL which are important sources for the Swiss workforce of the future. On the other hand, a small country such as Switzerland is dependent on having open borders in both directions. Although migration can create fear amongst Swiss citizens, we are dependent on this exchange of workforce and ideas.

2019 was a successful year for Innosuisse, in large part thanks to being more proactive; going out and finding companies rather than waiting for them to come to you. How has your work changed?

It is essential to be in contact with the customers to understand what their needs are, how we should direct our instruments to have the best impact on their innovation capacities, and best answer their needs. For this reason, we have been present at various innovation events and got in contact with representatives of both the research sector and private enterprise to better understand what they need and how they work.

COVID-19, in that sense, is a problem because we have not been able to hold these huge physical events this year. We have tried out other formats such as establishing webinars which have worked quite well so far. Although face to face contact is always better, for the time being, we have been quite successful in addressing this.

Has the pandemic and lockdown had any other effects on your operations aside from switching from physical events to webinars?

Yes. Our customers were having problems continuing their projects as research labs were closing and R&D staff being furloughed. We helped them get extensions to their projects and in many cases granted additional funds if they needed them to continue.

We also have a coaching program for start-ups which is normally done physically whereby a coach and some young entrepreneurs meet and have an exchange. The coaches were really innovative, as you would expect, and established virtual coaching sessions and events which allowed us to continue.

There have also been some virtual international fairs. We send start-ups to these fairs so that they have the possibility to present their business ideas and business models and continued to do so during the pandemic. Innosuisse is committed to doing whatever it can to continue with its support activities.

Having been in position for five years, what are your goals for the next five?

One thing we would like to do is to give some specific incentives to innovators to go into fields that are important for the whole society and economy. Next year we want to start with the so-called flagship projects, where we define the topics and then ask for proposals. These proposals will come from consortia of five or six groups from industry and research centres that work on a topic in a transdisciplinary way and with a very systemic approach. The aim is not just to look at a singular problem, but to have a broad picture of the challenge that they are attacking.

We hope that we really can make a big impact with these activities. But of course, we have first to start and see how it works!

How would you characterise the enduring importance of innovation, even during times of crisis?

In difficult times it is important to continue to innovate. Even in survival mode, one still needs to think about the future, which means thinking about innovation.

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