

STEFANIE LINDSTAEDT: A PIONEER IN EUROPE'S DATA-DRIVEN ECONOMY



Data-driven business is one of the most important global economic trends. Its central paradigms are seeing data as a central corporate asset and utilizing Artificial Intelligence (AI) to transform it into business value. China and the USA have fully embraced these paradigms and are rapidly driving innovation. Europe faces the challenge of finding its own way to promote the exchange and widen the use of data, maintaining high standards of data protection, security and ethics while at the same time enticing (young) AI experts to put their brains to work for European companies and Start-Ups.

Stefanie Lindstaedt is a clear frontrunner in this context, on the one hand driving the data-driven business paradigm in Europe and on the other, developing AI talent. As an expert in AI she recognized the potential of data early on and has made significant contributions to the establishment of data-driven business in Austria. Stefanie is the Director of Institute of Interactive Systems & Data Science (ISDS) and the first female professor of computer science at Graz University of Technology. Since 2011 she is also the CEO of Know-Center, an excellence research center funded under the Austrian COMET program and is the first and only woman heading such an institution.

Under her leadership, Know-Center has developed into one of the leading European research centers for Data-driven business and Artificial Intelligence supporting European companies of all sizes and sectors to turn data into value. Together with her team, she is constantly developing and improving AI technologies in a way that supports secure and responsible use of data and promotes trust in these new technologies. With strategic foresight, targeted measures and a strong commitment, she stands up for more computer science competence in the business world. She emphasizes "Today each management board needs at least one computer scientist member in order to be successful!".

Developing talent is most rewarding

Stefanie is a strong believer in the power of converging disciplines (inter-/multi-/trans-disciplinary). During her PhD at University of Colorado at Boulder she was part of the cognitive science research institute which brought together researchers from disciplines as varied as philosophy, neuroscience, and computer science. Bridging the boundaries between disciplines is an important experience which students need to learn as early as possible. This involves overcoming the "symmetry of ignorance" (Prof. Gerhard Fischer, Stefanie's doctoral supervisor): Most people value the opinions and approaches of their own discipline more than those of others, often being ignorant and arrogant about the knowledge accumulated over centuries, expressed in different terminology, and applied in "simple" methods. To learn to respect the different disciplinary backgrounds and

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cultures can bring us a long way in developing truly novel approaches and theories. "Unfortunately, in Europe, we still have a long way to go to truly embrace convergence of disciplines – in academia as well as in business."

However, the ability to collaborate across different industries and disciplines is key to data-driven innovation. An important measure taken by Stefanie was therefore the development of a unique training programme for data scientists within Know-Center which particularly promotes the development of interdisciplinary cooperation and communication skills. This has enabled the development of a large pool of experience at the center in various fields of application, which also had an impressive impact on the growth of the organization. Currently, with a team of 130 people, Know-Center cooperates with over 150 international scientific organizations and maintains long-term partnerships with more than 50 industrial partners from different sectors.

Stefanie also emphasizes the importance of encouraging and developing female researchers and young parents to advance in their careers. As a result, Know-Center has a higher proportion of women (31%) than many comparable organizations. She articulates, "An important learning for young researchers is to stay focused and to keep an eye on big goals. This is not an easy task, especially if you have kids. I am particularly pleased that I have succeeded in establishing a corporate culture at Know-Center, which is very family-friendly and at the same time promotes scientific excellence." Over the past years Stefanie has supported the careers of at least 10 young professors (3 of them women and mothers) who started their careers as researchers at Know-Center.

Making a difference is essential for yourself

Stefanie started her professional career at a large automotive group (Daimler) where she developed and led research projects. While learning a lot about corporate processes and politics, she quickly realized that it is not easy to make a difference in such a huge corporation, especially as a young person. This experience was reinforced by the fact that computer scientists and women were not particularly valued in the male-dominated automotive industry back then. What really bothered her was that she could not get close enough to internal customers in order to really make a difference.

Therefore, she decided to join an American start-up (GlobalSight) and later Know-Center. In these smaller organizations she could see the change that her work was making. This gave her the foundation to believe in her own ideas and judgement. It also allowed her to understand "networking" in a different way: instead of having to impress people nonstop (which she found very tiring), networking became the much more enjoyable journey of finding like-minded people to work together and develop new initiatives.

Acting as digital innovation hub and trendsetter

"Since I took over the management of the company, I have consistently been working with my team to further develop Know-Center to make it known as a digital innovation hub and to expand the data-driven business landscape in Europe," says Stefanie. She has built up the center as an enabler and facilitator of innovation for the economy. As such, the center must constantly innovate itself and already today deal with the trends of tomorrow such as data protection-friendly analytics, explainable AI and quantum computing. "We need to identify, track and shape the latest research trends before anyone else. We must remain "fluid" and consistently expand our horizons to enable companies to gain a clear competitive advantage," Stefanie explains.

This commitment has been recognized at the EU level: Since 2016, Know-Center has been awarded the silver iSpace label by the EU Big Data Value Association every year. It has now received the golden iSpace label for the first time for delivering excellence in innovation. This award highlights Know-Center as a Trusted Data Incubator, accelerating the uptake of Data-driven innovation in all economic sectors. The center so far is the only Austrian research center and one of the few European institutions to have received this award.

Cooperation with innovative start-ups and spin-offs are also an important part of Know-Center's agenda as this provides important impulses for AI research and drives the data-driven economy in Europe. They also provide vital impetus for AI research. In recent years the center has founded three spin-offs on the basis of its research results: Invenium, e-nnovation and OpenKnowledgeMaps.

Data-driven business needs new leadership skills

Stefanie's personal mission is to help European businesses to gain a clear competitive edge in the global marketplace by building up new, data-driven business models in parallel to the established ones. For companies, this requires looking at their business from the data point of view, which often feels like turning everything upside down.



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Having worked in the fields of AI, Big Data, and Data-driven business, Stefanie has learned that it is tough to help people see their own organization from a different (data) perspective and to realize what opportunities can be gained. Transforming your own business is no doubt the most challenging endeavor one can engage in since it questions all the rules, beliefs, and what the business stands for. This change of perspective requires new leadership skills at the top and middle management levels. Traditionally, leadership is seen as the art of managing the triangle consisting of (1) strategy, (2) structures and processes, and (3) culture and values. With the current wave of digitalization, a fourth dimension enters the picture: disruptive technologies such as AI which is no longer a tool to support or enact the other dimensions of the leadership triangle but a force which influences them all and potentially transforms them.

In a continent where programming is not taught universally at school (unlike in Asia and the US), and people are more than critical (afraid) towards new digital technologies, this is a major undertaking. Many of the management boards today do not have sufficient computer science know-how to even ask the right critical questions, let alone to identify technology trends to plan for your business development five years down the road. Therefore, Stefanie urges that there is a need for computer scientists in each management board.

Advice to Young Women Leaders

Stefanie's advice to emerging women leaders is to believe in yourself, your ideas and your judgment. This includes setting yourself challenging goals. Even if these goals change over time, you will need them to motivate and drive yourself forward. She says, "I have often set goals which I thought I would never reach – and then one fine day you wake up and realize you actually did it."

Another important point is your relationship to power. As girls and women, we are often told that striving for power is bad. She advises young leaders to reflect on the aspects they could achieve if they have a bit more power. What kind of decisions could you make, what priorities could you set, which differences could you make? This helps you to recognize that power implies the chance to follow your own ideas and make them reality. It also implies that you have to be brave and stand up for your ideas, decisions and values.



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