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Leading the Digital Revolution – The Case of KUKA

*Following his speech at the 11th stars Switzerland symposium in Stein am Rhein, Dr. **Stefan MUELLER**, Head of Corporate Strategy and Development at KUKA Group, shared his views on the unique innovation culture and growth potential of KUKA in an exclusive interview with Dr. Sophie Liu, stars alumna.*

Sophie Liu: Which trends and developments provide the biggest challenges and opportunities for KUKA in the coming years?

Stefan Mueller: Our robots are developing beyond the limits of production. Topics like sensitive robots, ease of use as well as artificial intelligence and machine learning accelerate this development. Robots in private homes, which create real added value, are a next logical step. With the concept study i-do, KUKA shows how a modular, mobile robot system can support us in our daily lives today. To address the challenges of the future, companies need to go beyond existing automation solutions. Artificial intelligence, networking and deep learning are shaping the industrial environments of the future. Big data can help to make an existing production facility more efficient and an entire network of partners can also help small companies to take a technological leap forward. KUKA is addressing these trends and is continuously expanding its product portfolio, e.g. with a sensitive robot for human-robot-collaboration without any safety fence.

What is the role of digitization and Industry 4.0 for KUKA's further growth?

Digitization and networking are blurring the boundaries between the real world and the digital world – merging IT, software and hardware. For KUKA, Industry 4.0 stands primarily for networked automated processes. Intelligent machines are collaborating in global networks. KUKA is showing how this can look like in its Smart Factory. Robots, mobile and conventional industrial robots, automated guided vehicles and software solutions interact in manufacturing. The machines – networked via KUKA Connect – collect and exchange data and thus offer transparent information concerning machines and processes. Digital business models and profitable Industry 4.0 solutions therefore already play an important role at KUKA today. We offer our customers comprehensive know-how and individual advice on how they can use digitization and networking for themselves and what really makes sense for them.

What are the impacts of the Midea ownership on KUKA's future plans?

KUKA and Midea strengthen their cooperation in China. KUKA is further expanding its China business and is intensifying its cooperation with Midea through joint ventures. With the joint ventures, we are now concretising our growth plans in China, thereby securing global success for KUKA. KUKA and Midea complement each other very well. The cooperation brings us closer to the goal of becoming number one in robotics in China.

One of the greatest strengths of KUKA is its focus on innovation. How do you define innovation and how is innovation at KUKA different from other companies?

The word innovation comes from Latin and literally means “to change” or “to renew”. Our ambition is to bring new ideas and inventions to market success. This is driving us and therefore innovations are not left to chance. At KUKA, the Innovation Office is fervently addressing the question of what KUKA customers may need in 2032. This involves studying trends and exchanging information with research institutes. Technology scouting

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is an important issue. You have to keep your eyes peeled at all times and think outside the box. After all, there may be interesting technologies around which are used in areas other than robotics, and which may be adaptable to robotics. This is why we cultivate long-term and very close contacts with the research community and maintain a lively exchange.

There is no doubt that KUKA contributes significantly to technological development and productivity improvement. However, does KUKA also pay high attention on issues of corporate social responsibility?

At KUKA we are at present more than 14'000 colleagues worldwide. We have reached a size that makes us play a role within society, and we influence our environment. We want to take on responsibility for our products, for our employees, but also regarding our social and environmental role and we strive to always get better. We are convinced that sustainable business becomes more and more important for our future success. Promoting responsible business practices to further growth improves our efficiency and reduces risks for our environment, our customers and our employees. It is the human being who is central to us. Our technologies, our innovations and our business models should help people at work and support them in everyday life. That is our credo.

The vision of stars is to develop better leaders of the next generation and to be the premier platform for these future leaders. In your opinion, what are the essential qualities of leaders of the next generation?

Teams of the future will have points of contact with many areas, interdisciplinary work will become increasingly important. Therefore self-responsibility, a degree of flexibility and the ability to work in heterogeneous teams will be important skills of the future. The leaders of tomorrow should build skills in this area to create sustainable teams.

What advice would you give to stars alumni to help them build up these qualities?

Probably nothing that special: A broad education and continuous learning over the entire professional life can help next-generation leaders to prepare for a working life 4.0. Furthermore, I would recommend to stay hungry, curious and open to new developments and technologies.

The views expressed here are solely those of the speaker and they do not necessarily represent or reflect the views of the stars Foundation.

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