



LAWYERS ON FIRE

Lawyers on Fire: Here is Lawyer on Fire. Today we have a guest with us – Cornelia Nett. Doctor Nett is General Council at the GE Capital in Germany. She has been with GE for many years, in various roles. The interesting thing about her is that on the side she has other interests, which are not exactly part of her job profile – she founded an association, writing a book “The power of two”, written like “x²”, and she is involved with very particular subjects in this association and this is what we would like to talk to her about today. Thank you very much for joining us today. Please tell us a little bit more. You founded this association outside of your work as General Council – what motivated you to do this?

Cornelia Nett: There are two phenomena occurring in Germany that drive me – one is the lack of specialists, which we perceive much more clearly here in Mainz than is the case in Frankfurt for example. We notice that it is difficult for us as a company to recruit good lawyers to Mainz if they can also work in Frankfurt. This is one aspect. The other one is, that we realize, when you look at the newspapers, that in Germany we are always lagging behind in terms of gender diversity. If you look at the quotas of supervisory boards, we are in the lower middle field in Germany, when making an international comparison, and also in terms of gender pay gap we are not performing very well. This made me reflect on that we do not use our talents here in Germany properly. Yes, we do not use these women who are to some extent highly qualified, who would also be able to be motivated to work. And this gave rise to the idea of the association.

Lawyers on Fire: What do you do concretely in the association?

Cornelia Nett: Well, the non-profit goal of the association is of course equality, but equality is not an end in itself. We see that, for example, companies that have women as managers, or in any case are more diverse, are more profitable economically speaking. Thus we think that it makes sense, not only as a societal objective but also as an economic objective of companies, to have a pipeline of highly qualified and motivated



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women, and we want to groom these. How do we want to do this? For example we are doing a mentoring program, where we match women with other women or also men across companies, where we think that they can continue to develop mutually. And we want to make this interesting for companies, because they can then also use this as personnel promotion. For example, it could be that you have someone who has leadership qualities, but without a sense of team. In such a case, a mentoring program can be used to further develop this person. And, as a side effect almost, a woman who is finding herself in a crisis or in a difficult situation professionally speaking, can be helped to find her feet again. It could be that she is in the come-back situation or sees herself confronted with the glass ceiling, and we believe that this mentoring program can help in these situations.

Lawyers on Fire: Who can become a member of the association?

Cornelia Nett: Everyone.

Lawyers on Fire: So men and women?

Cornelia Nett: Men and woman, companies and private individuals. We would like to keep it very open to everyone.

Lawyers on Fire: And the membership structure so far, as it is still a relatively new association? Are the members largely younger women who have just started their career, are you still working on balancing the relationship as you also need mentors, people who have more experience in relation to the “mentees”. Did you get a feeling of that already – what the situation is in terms of members?

Cornelia Nett: Well, we are a real start-up, and at the moment we are also still in a test



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phase of what we think will finally work and it is totally mixed. We have quite a lot of people from GE who are involved as private individuals and GE supports this and allows them to continue their involvement. We have a few law firms who are very interested because this makes them earn points in terms of the pro bono account as well as the diversity account, as such firms often have to deal with the topic of gender and diversity. And we have small and medium sized companies that are involved and then of course many friends and associates that choose to become involved as private individuals.

Lawyers on Fire: And in terms of the women with whom you are working, out of their perspective, what are the main issues that make the ideal come-back more difficult or even prevent it? You were speaking about glass ceiling, is it possible to describe it and recognize a pattern?

Cornelia Nett: Well, we see very different phenomena. The main problem of women is the come-back of course and the main problem of the come-back is child care. Now, this is a problem that we may not necessarily be able to solve. Obviously, there is a lack of full day care places and there is a lack of extensive day care places everywhere, but we also believe that there are things that we can actually do something about. For example, we see that women fail at their own motivation in these situations due to the difficulties and due to the preceding difficulties that they have to confront and because it is simply hard to have small children and then to take the step to also confront the professional come-back with all the energy necessary – a lot of women simply cannot make it. And we are realizing that if we give them a hand, support them, tell them it is possible, I have also done it, or I have an idea how you could give it a try, then it could be a great help at that point. In regards to the glass ceiling, which we also come up against sometimes, our idea is that we can use the cross-linking amongst many companies, we could possibly change the culture of some companies to prevent the high quantity of glass ceilings.



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Lawyers on Fire: So your approach is now cross-linking, networking, mentoring.... have you also developed other ideas already in your young start-up in terms of what you would like to do in the future? Where you can offer assistance in the come-back cases?

Cornelia Nett: Yes, we want to do it step by step. We also have individual events, where we make a very concrete day of application. So women who are in the application phase come to us and we make specialists available to them on that day, or also people who have enough professional experience, who are able to help them to update their application documents. There is the possibility to do trial interviews to get an idea how well one would do, we have also held trial salary negotiations and realized how easy it is to mercilessly bring down the price with women who are momentarily not very confident. Women who start with the idea of working part-time and earn 70,000 and within five minutes are down to 35,000 full-time. And this is an example of what we want to practice. We do not want women to have to always sell themselves below their value, which eventually will maybe lead to an improvement in the gender pay gap.

Lawyers on Fire: You talked about it at the beginning, on your website you write that companies that are struggling with the lack of specialists or do not have access to a large enough pipeline of female leaders, many of these companies desire a larger diversity because they notice that this increases productivity. If you look around and for example through your female colleagues, who become members of your association, but also the law firms – how would you describe the landscape here in Germany?

Cornelia Nett: Well, I believe that we are at the beginning of the path in Germany. I think other countries are a little further ahead, for example, if you look at the USA or at France, obviously the Scandinavian countries, then you see that the implementation is much further advanced. One constraint has to be made. Diversity initially means a lack of efficiency. Settled, very homogeneous teams are incredibly efficient, but they are not very



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creative and a company has to make this consideration and decide what is presently most important. Thus I am saying that not every company needs more diversity in every situation, but there are companies that could need it and these are the ones we want to reach. If I look at lawyers, I would say that we are simply a representation of what is also happening in other professions. We may have a slight advantage in comparison to STEM professions because we have better quotas at the level of students and graduates. There are simply more women that study Law than Maths. But looking at how this develops over time and throughout the career steps I have to say that the quotas in regards to partners of law firms are also not very great and there is also not a great representation of female General Councils and that is why I would say, it is probably similar to all other professions.

Lawyers on Fire: In terms of innovation, there is a lot of talk about technology in Germany right now, the tech-scene, FinTech scene, and the question is what these programs can do ad to what extent they can replace a human lawyer, so neither diversity nor efficiency, but gender-neutral – mechanically. But innovation always involves a societal dimension – do you see, well you have already described a little, but do you see a societal-political potential in your initiative?

Cornelia Nett: Well, the problem with digitalization and the whole technology is that it is being celebrated as an end in itself in Germany. I believe that for every innovation you first have to ask, “who needs this product”, “is there a market”, “is it going to be a product that is accepted”? And as a second step, “can I improve it through digitalization and technologization”. And when I have answered these two questions, then I have a case for a legal tech or a Fintech. I thus believe that we have to, and I would also view our own initiative like this, that we have to start with what is really needed. I do not want to tip out technologization through diversity across all companies; there are companies that need something completely different right now. And for those companies that say, yes, this is exactly what we need right now, we believe that by opening ourselves towards a certain



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direction, we can also increase our innovations, and perhaps, precisely through such a mentoring program, there could be an exchange between older and more experienced specialists and younger people who are entering with new ideas, possibly even resulting in a new idea for the mentor's company. This what we would like to reach.

Lawyers on Fire: Are there books that you would like to recommend to our listeners?

Cornelia Nett: No. I do not read any management books myself, which is maybe because we had good in-house training at GE and I therefore did not see the necessity to further educate myself in that direction. If that changes, I will let you know. At the moment it is a luxury to be able to read what I like in my free time and I am happy to give recommendations in that regard.

Lawyers on Fire: Mrs. Nett, thank you very much for the conversation. Thank you.