

Big Strategies for Small Business

Also by Hans-Joachim Gögl and Clemens Schedler:

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Successful Models of Cooperation between Universities and Companies in Europe

This book is the first volume of the Landscape of Knowledge series and has been translated from the German original "*Strategien des Handwerks*".

Big Strategies for Small Business

Exceptional Projects in Europe

Edited by

Hans-Joachim Gögl and Clemens Schedler

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Preface

Das Handwerk der Zukunft (The Trades of the Future) is the title of a book* by Christine Ax, our discussion partner in the following interview, and defining this concept was perhaps the most ambitious phase in researching the examples compiled in this volume.

The future we had in mind, however, was one in the sense of innovative strategies for trades and crafts, which we sought to find in present practices of exemplary initiatives and enterprises in Europe. We have chosen solutions that have in a striking way proven their effectiveness over many years, but at the same time we are also showcasing outstanding prototypes: we are tracing visions of the future that have just begun to manifest themselves and reporting on small projects whose concepts could prove inspiring to many sectors and regions.

When forced to choose, we opted for an idea's potential, its strategic quality rather than the so-called best-practice model that has perhaps proven itself through its problem-solving approaches, but which nevertheless is often still oriented on challenges of the past.

The first volume of the series *Landschaft des Wissens* (Landscape of Knowledge) relies on carefully researched eye- and ear-witness reports by writers and photographers – seven stories on economic strategies for everyone dealing with the sustainability of trades and crafts and the development of rural areas.

Our goal is to introduce into the discussions of these usually quite localized occupations different perspectives from other regions. To provide new stimuli for one's search for his or her individual path.

The challenges confronting the trades sector have intensified in recent years: high taxation of labor income, increasingly restrictive financing conditions, and an industry not tied to a specific location, but that produces increasingly individual goods for lower and lower prices. The small business operates under conditions in which large size and the rationalization options this affords are being rewarded: large businesses can lobby, communicate, finance, produce, transport, and market more efficiently. The economy of proximity with its manifold social and ecological advantages usually draws the short straw when forced

* Christine Ax, *Das Handwerk der Zukunft*, Birkhäuser, Basel–Berlin–Boston, 1997.

to compete with articles of automated mass-production brought in from far away, a fact confirmed daily through our personal buying decisions. The range of ways businesses in different sectors have found to cope with this competition extends from retreating to elitist, sometimes eccentric niches – like the bespoke shoemaker specializing in footwear for carnival costumes – to assuming the role of the exclusive supplier of industrial corporations at the permeable interface between craft and serial production.

Cooperation – the expansion model for the self-employed

In our search for sustainable strategies for trades in Europe we discovered a common denominator in a series of innovative projects: the anticipation of the abovementioned market conditions. *All of the solutions presented here set store by cooperation.* To borrow an analogy from our portrait of the successful network of Leipzig construction businesses: the professionally navigated fleet in response to the tankers of the multinational companies in the global market. Self-employed business owners coordinate and organize themselves in different formations and with different intentions, generating in this way synergy effects that they wouldn't have had at their disposal if they had remained divided, but which industrial corporations have no way of accessing. Cooperative solutions give tradespeople the advantage of certain multiplication effects otherwise reserved for the large entity while maintaining the desired strengths of the small enterprise, e.g. individual consulting, bespoke work, and a strong regional base.

Cooperative solutions have a quality that small enterprises take for granted but which corporate groups with their sophisticated large-scale organizational and technological measures (CRM – Customer Relationship Management) can only simulate – the capacity for interpersonal relationships – and they apply the attitude and experience that go with this to their rivals ... no, competitors ... no, colleagues.

Through their proposed strategies, the case studies selected for this publication formulate possible answers to some of the trades industry's major problem areas, such as training, technology, design, or marketing, and execute these through various forms of processes aimed at cooperation. This system of working together as a network, often between partners within the same sector, always also converts measures that were perhaps originally inspired by business management considerations into powerful stimuli for regional development.

Business stories

The approaches, methods, and organizational forms described in this publication are tied to their specific situations, and since cooperation is always, to a large extent, dependent on soft skills and personal commitment, they are also inextricably bound to the specific persons involved. In order to reveal the spaces between economic analysis, corporate aims, and organizational structure, where landscapes, mentalities, or human relationships also play a role, in order to make this “in between” more readily perceptible, we chose a subjective reportage-style approach for both image and text – one reason for this was to avoid encouraging the misunderstanding of a would-be universality as purported by certain publications on this subject. The black-and-white photographs are a means to this end since, unlike color photography, the slightest attempt to convey objectivity is relativized by the formal distance.

Almost all of our photographers and writers are most at home with the vernacular of art, film, or feuilleton. With this conscious effort to integrate other perspectives than what is common for a business book, we seek to present widely ranging projects from six different countries portrayed using an alternative, “narrative” form of precision.

Hans-Joachim Gögl & Clemens Theobert Schedler