



Gustav in conversation with:
Marc Walder

“AI only benefits those who use AI”

How can we persuade employees to become enthusiastic AI users? And what must Switzerland do to ensure that it doesn't miss the digital boat? Gustav Baldinger discusses these questions in an interview with Ringier CEO Marc Walder.





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Gustav Baldinger: As a digital pioneer, what advice can you give us about dealing with artificial intelligence?

Marc Walder: Courage and openness are key. At the moment, nobody really knows exactly where this journey is heading, but we do believe that AI encourages, supports and helps those who actually use it. Those who have the courage to take the plunge will be rewarded for it in the years to come.

What makes you so sure?

The numbers are indisputable: In a field study conducted by Harvard University and BCG involving 758 consultants, those who used AI completed 12 percent more tasks 25 percent faster and to a 40-percent higher standard. Those who turn their backs on AI will miss out on the next chapter.

What are you doing at Ringier to ensure that your employees take that path?

We focus on their personal achievements – however small – in dealing with AI. To this end, we equip all employees with powerful AI tools. For us, full access to Google Workspace, including Gemini, is standard. This means that everyone has what could be described as a Ferrari installed on their laptop.

What have these ‘Ferraris’ already achieved?

An astonishing amount. One of many examples is the implementation of ‘conversational search’ in our marketplaces. Anyone looking for an apartment or a job no longer has to set filters, but can describe what they want using voice input. We generally divide AI into the following categories: firstly, ‘behind the scenes’ – using Palantir’s AIP across the board, for example. Secondly, for Ringier’s staff in their day-to-day work at their respective workstations, however varied these may be. And finally, ‘facing the user’ – in other words, how we can massively simplify the use of our digital services.

And in journalism? Ringier’s 2024 annual report states: “By deploying AI, we are achieving greater depth in journalism.” Isn’t that a contradiction in terms?

No, not at all. One of a journalist’s main tasks is to aggregate and analyse data. Only then can information be obtained and placed in context. AI perfects those initial tasks in record time. It’s a phenomenal tool for newsrooms and an advantage for media companies.

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And what are the disadvantages?

The biggest challenge is to ensure that people continue to see and use our content. Today, many people hardly ever consume content on a medium's website. They use social media feeds instead. Even active information searches such as "Who will be competing at Weltklasse Zürich?" bring media companies less traffic than they used to. Anyone who asks ChatGPT or Claude these types of questions will very probably be satisfied with the aggregated answer. As a result, people are no longer clicking on links to news sites.

And yet it's the media companies that research and publish this content.

This is precisely the dilemma that we face: to a significant extent, large language models have been trained using journalistic content. All online articles are crawled and used to generate responses. Simply put, this is the biggest data theft in history. I'm by no means a fan of over-regulation, but we do need a copyright law to protect against this kind of theft. Otherwise, the situation will be disastrous – not only for all those innovative content creators, YouTubers and bloggers, but also for media companies.

You are considered a pessimist when it comes to the future of the media industry.**Has this "data theft" cemented your attitude?**

I see myself as a realist. The media are facing economic pressure – and will continue to do so. The past 20 years have seen a historic decline in media brands' economic models. This must be an incentive for us to rethink the tried and tested and do things in new ways. At Ringier, this has meant investing in digital marketplaces. At first, people laughed at, indeed criticised us. When we bought the Scout 24 Group for 180 million Swiss francs, we were accused of spending far too much money and being excessively euphoric. Those digital marketplaces went on to become much larger and more important companies than we could ever have imagined. And now it transpires that AI is continuing to offer huge opportunities in this business area, which we can exploit by increasing efficiency, improving the user experience, expanding personalisation as well as matching offers to searches.

What has been your best digital transformation-related decision over the past five years?

We've made plenty of mistakes – without which such a radical transformation simply wouldn't have been possible. But when I returned from the WEF in Davos in January 2023, we made AI transformation our number one priority at Ringier. That was important.

Marc Walder (*1965) is CEO and Managing Partner of Ringier AG and Chairman of the Group Executive Board. He serves on numerous boards of directors, including that of SMG Swiss Marketplace Group. As founder of the digitalswitzerland location initiative, under which about 200 of the largest Swiss companies and institutions have joined forces, he is committed to Switzerland's digital development and transformation.



Do we tend to be too slow in Switzerland? Or too cautious?

Wealthy countries have a tendency to be a little too frugal, too sluggish and not sufficiently ambitious. This also applies to Switzerland: we do not give digital transformation the political and social status that's required to defend our top international position and prevent us from slipping into mediocrity. There are still far more agricultural lobbyists in the Federal Parliament than advocates for digitisation. There should be a better balance between the two.

What can Switzerland do? And where do our opportunities lie in a realm dominated by major powers such as China and the United States?

Switzerland must establish itself even more firmly as a trustworthy yet innovation-driven location. E-ID – digital identity – is an example of such innovation. It benefits citizens and should be consistently adopted as the standard. Our universities – such as ETH and EPFL, which are world leaders in their field, as well as all our other higher education institutions – are the basis of our innovation hub. This is how they should continue to be viewed.



The media are under pressure – and will continue to be.



Personal questions

When did you first become really excited about AI?

At the WEF 2023, in Davos. I could hardly believe what ChatGPT was capable of – and compared to today, that was a joke.

Which AI application is indispensable in your day-to-day (professional) life?

The Google suite. For example, every evening it helps me to prepare perfectly for all the meetings I'll be attending the following day.

In which areas do you believe that AI has no place?

I can't think of any area of my life where I wouldn't use AI. I even use AI for sensitive, perhaps even very personal, topics. After all, I've Googled these topics myself to find help, context, knowledge and perspective.