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Up and Away

Zurich Airport is Switzerland's most important transport and meeting hub, offering excellent access to international, national, and regional networks.

Images courtesy of Flughafen Zurich

Flughafen Zurich AG operates Zurich Airport with a concession of the Swiss Confederation. Stephan Widrig has been on the management board since 2008 and was appointed to the top spot of CEO in January this year. He holds a degree in political and economic sciences, and has worked within the airport sector for many years. Stephan initially joined Zurich

Airport in 1999 before the merger of Flughafen-Immobilien-Gesellschaft with Flughafendirektion a year later, and he played a role in its privatisation. He also has experience with the Kempegowda International Airport Bengaluru in southern India. *The CEO Magazine* had a chat to Stephan about Zurich Airport's importance, how it has achieved success, and its plans for the future.



The CEO Magazine: How important do you believe the role of the airport is in Switzerland?

Stephan: Zurich Airport is the biggest airport in Switzerland and it is the Swiss gateway to the world. It fulfills its role as a key traffic infrastructure of our country, not only for the economy, but for export and tourism as well. Zurich Airport offers direct flights to 184 destinations in 70 countries. Our goal is to meet the economy's requirement for direct flights to the most important economic spots worldwide. About 26,000 people work in the 280 companies at Zurich Airport. Every third holiday visitor to Switzerland arrives by air. One-third of the value of all transported goods leaves Switzerland as air freight. Zurich Airport generates a value creation of 6 billion Swiss Francs.

What have been some of your proudest moments or greatest achievements since joining the company?

I joined Zurich Airport in 1999. The biggest challenge then was to get the inhabitants of the Canton of Zurich to vote in favour of the airport's privatisation. Until then it was a state-owned airport. Luckily, people voted in favour of the privatisation. Then, not long after the privatisation—this took place in March 2000—our former home carrier Swissair got into financial problems, which ended in the bankruptcy of the proud airline in October 2001. The following months were a role

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- Stephan Widrig



model of crisis management, of which I was a part.

Zurich Airport then was in the middle of one of its biggest expansion projects ever with several important infrastructure parts. The fifth expansion phase cost 2 billion Swiss Francs. Since then, the whole terminal infrastructure has been extended and modernised. Zurich Airport was also among the responsible parties for the first big privatised airport in India, which was built on a public-private partnership. The greenfield airport in Bangalore was realised with great influence of our company. As a passenger who travels regularly through Zurich Airport, you'd recognise quite a lot of the Zurich spirit in the way the airport in southern India presents itself—be it on the infrastructure or the operational side. I used to work at Bengaluru Airport for three years as chief commercial and chief financial officer.

What core values are integral to the operations of Zurich Airport?

In Switzerland, costs are high, and therefore we can only succeed with quality and efficiency. Commercial as well as operational excellence is at the core of our company, with a great team spirit in our staff.

How do you collaborate with key suppliers and other partners (for example, the Swiss Federation) to achieve success?

The key suppliers which stand for the high quality of our flight operation are all gathered under

one roof in the so-called 'airport steering'. There, all the operational processes are being monitored and a close cooperation is being guaranteed. This strengthens the confidence among the important players and it is also the key to our success. Zurich Airport has already won the World Travel Award for Europe's leading airport for the eleventh time in a row.

With around 1,600 employees, how do you ensure a great workplace culture is maintained?

Leading by example and integrating the team in key decisions helps to keep a great spirit within our company. I believe in goals and visions to be realised through honest work. Employees and highly motivated teams are a great asset and the key to success for every company.

What does the future hold for Zurich Airport? Are there plans for expansion or further construction projects?

With our project The Circle, with a total cost of 1 billion Swiss Francs, we are transforming the airport into a business and lifestyle destination. Also, we are targeting airport projects abroad, in Brazil and India, for example.

How is the aviation side of Zurich Airport complemented by the non-aviation side (for example, the retail, catering, parking, and real estate sectors)?

A passenger at an airport wants to benefit from smooth and fast processes, as well as good restaurants and retail offers. Airports are becoming more and more hospitality platforms, and are the most modern traffic platform in the world. The integration of fast, efficient processes and vibrant commercial centres is our key competence. They both have to be as seamless as possible to cater for the needs of our travellers. ●