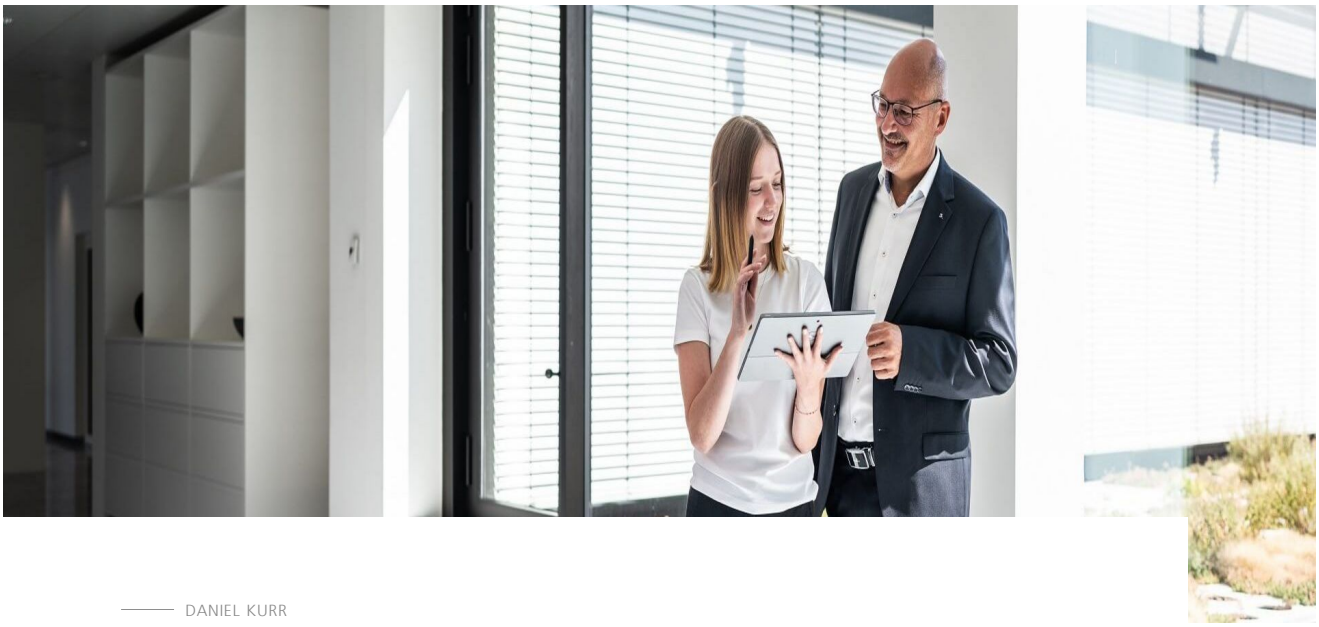

DANIEL KURR

Reverse mentoring – management team learns from the next generation

For the past five years, TRUMPF trainees and students in the Baden-Wuerttemberg dual studies program have had the opportunity to share their knowledge with company management as part of a reverse mentoring scheme. This involves the "younger generation" teaching the "older generation". Ingo Sawilla, Data Governance Officer at TRUMPF, and Mara Gurtner, a former trainee, are enthusiastic participants in the scheme.

Mara Gurtner and Ingo Sawilla are sitting eating lunch in the "Blautopf" canteen at TRUMPF headquarters in Ditzingen, Germany. Today's menu is baked potato with herb dip and Thai curry with rice. Mara Gurtner is talking, while Ingo Sawilla listens. She is a 19-year-old former trainee at TRUMPF. Sawilla is a 56-year-old stalwart of the mechanical engineering company. He has been with the company for 22 years and is now the data governance coordinator, responsible for the effective use of data in the company. There's a reason they're meeting for lunch today – more than a year ago, they both signed up to an internal mentoring scheme. The scheme is organized by TRUMPF's training department. When we hear the term mentoring, we normally think of an older person with professional experience taking a young, inexperienced colleague under their wing, dispensing wisdom and sharing experiences. At TRUMPF, however, the reverse is actually true. The scheme involves reverse mentoring, where the trainee becomes the mentor and the manager the mentee. The scheme was introduced at TRUMPF in 2017, and the concept has proved that older employees people can learn a lot from the younger generation. This is particularly true when it comes to using technology and dealing with social media, for example.

A good place to exchange ideas. Mentor Mara Gurtner with her mentee Ingo Sawilla at lunch in the TRUMPF staff canteen.

More than an experiment

"When I first heard about the reverse mentoring scheme, I immediately thought it sounded cool and I wanted to get involved," recalls Mara Gurtner. And the scheme has certainly not disappointed, due in no small part to the HR team matching her with Ingo Sawilla, who was equally keen on the seemingly upside-down mentoring scheme. "The whole thing was an experiment for me in the beginning, and I was particularly interested in the generation question. What are young people concerned about? Am I out of touch with the modern world? My aim was to enter into a dialogue with young people. And in the end, it worked out really well with Mara," recounts Sawilla.

Mara Gurtner was still in the second year of her apprenticeship when she met Ingo Sawilla for the first time. Their initial meetings were online due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite the physical distance, the two managed to establish an open and trusting relationship. "We hit it off immediately and bombarded each other with questions – and we have always treated each other as peers," recalls Mara Gurtner. They discussed a wide range of topics, including social media such as Snapchat, Instagram and TikTok. "Ingo had more social media experience than I'd first imagined. He is technically literate because of his job, and he also has children. And yet he didn't always quite understand what prompted me to follow certain influencers on Instagram," Gurtner smirks. The two also discuss the topic of podcasts at their meetings. That's because Sawilla believes the podcast format has great potential in terms of spreading his message about data use and data protection within the company. That's where his young mentor's knowledge and opinions about podcasts comes in handy.

Peer exchange: Mara Gurtner belongs to Generation Z and uses social media very differently than Ingo Sawilla, although he is a tech fan and by no means inexperienced when it comes to new media.

We don't think in terms of young and old

Reverse mentoring is about more than just sharing knowledge. "It establishes contact between two people who otherwise might never meet during a normal working day," explains Judith Richter, Head of Business Apprenticeship at TRUMPF. The mentoring program creates a win-win situation as it is a good way to introduce young employees to the company and also to make the experienced management team aware of the issues facing young people. Since its launch a few years ago, the scheme has brought together more than 90 trainees and managers. And there is more to come, because the scheme also promotes corporate culture and understanding for one another.

Ingo Sawilla is also open to new ideas. He wants to learn from his mentor. He finds it easier to do so now that they have been able to meet in person again. "It's much better than talking on Teams. By having lunch together or taking a walk around the TRUMPF campus - I often just listen to Mara with great interest, and I enjoy hearing her forthright opinions and can always take something away to apply to my everyday work," says Sawilla. Mentor Mara Gurtner also found reverse mentoring extremely beneficial: "I consciously wanted to get out of my comfort zone by taking part in the scheme, and I succeeded. As a mentor, I was gradually able to overcome my reservations and am now much more open-minded than before," says the 19-year-old.

For a long time, reverse mentoring only took place online, but both agree that face-to-face meetings are better.

Far from over

After one year, the scheme has officially come to an end for the two participants, but Mara Gurtner and Ingo Sawilla are keen to keep talking. They see the scheme as an opportunity for TRUMPF colleagues to engage in more frequent dialog with each other: "In the future, I would like to see us take things into our own hands by working together – whether young or old. Because it's clear to me that we can only solve future issues by working together, not as individuals. And by working outside of hierarchies," says Sawilla.

The two certainly never run out of topics to discuss. From global political events to current economic challenges and the work of the future, there is plenty to chat about. "But today, over a baked potato and Thai curry, we're dealing with the lighter topic of vacation planning," laughs Mara Gurtner. And that's the way it should be. Because this kind of small talk is another sign of a successful reverse mentoring match.

"Everyone who participates in TRUMPF's reverse mentoring accepts that young trainees know more than their older colleagues in certain disciplines. And that open mindset pays dividends in terms of our company values." Judith Richter, Head of Business Apprenticeship at TRUMPF

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