

New Work @ Varengold

INTERVIEW WITH THE MANAGEMENT BOARD,
DR. BERNHARD FUHRMANN AND FRANK OTTEN,
ABOUT THE NEW WORK CONCEPT OF VARENGOLD BANK.



#GREATPLACETOWORK

‘WHEN YOU ASK PEOPLE WHERE THEY’VE HAD THEIR BEST IDEAS, DULL AND DREARY MEETING ROOMS IS RARELY THEIR ANSWER.’

What does ‘New Work’ mean to you?

Fuhrmann: New Work is a philosophy that completely changes the way we work together - it is not simply a newly designed office: How will we work together in the future? How do we attract and retain employees? How do we create identification with the company, even when part of the team is mobile and working in a different location? This requires an appropriate working environment accompanied by a change in culture.

Why the effort to put everything under scrutiny and implement a New Work concept?

Otten: As the saying goes, old ways won't open new doors! It's important to keep asking the questions: Do working methods and processes, workplace and working hour models, or even one's own management style, still fit with the times and can the business goals ultimately be achieved? We have developed a New Work concept to maximise employee satisfaction and at the same time optimise the way we achieve our business goals. In doing so, we rely entirely on the personal responsibility of our employees and the advantages of mobile working as an additional quiet place to work.

What does relying on the personal responsibility of employees mean?

Fuhrmann: For us, empowerment is a key element of the New Work concept. Every individual in the company must be able to understand what part they play in the implementation of our strategy and thus in the success of Varengold Bank. This creates

identification. Our task as board members and managers is to provide freedoms that encourage individual responsibility and personal development.

Does New Work impact on your leadership style?

Fuhrmann: Absolutely, it does! Rethinking work also means rethinking leadership! If I want to use New Work and associated hybrid working models, then I need to be aware that leadership and management will become much more demanding. Currently, employees who I have seen on a regular basis up to this point may now be working remotely at home or from wherever they want for days or weeks at a time. It is unimportant to me when and where colleagues work, as long as the outcome is the right one. But the chance meetings over coffee or in the hallway, where I used to get a sense of the mood, are missing in some cases and need to be replaced with something else. As a manager, I still need to know how my people are doing, where they may need support etc. Staying in touch with them requires more time and needs to be better planned.

Otten: Anyone who takes their role as manager seriously will not have less to do in the future! A way to make work results more transparent needs to be found. Providing guidance and coaching is also part of the job so that such a change can be created together with the employees. And in this age of mobile working, we have to make sure more than ever that everyone has the information they need. An example: In our company, colleagues from different departments get together to tackle projects in the areas of digitalisation or sustainability. Previously, things were often discussed in passing. Anyone who wanted to just got involved. It doesn't work that way anymore. This means that internal communication is even more important. New ways and tools have to be found to keep all employees in the loop.



How do you intend to introduce this new mindset into the company?

Otten: We won't have to. As New Work affects us all, we have developed the concept together. In fact, our new innovative office space offers the flexibility of our working models and the less formal dress code with jeans and sneakers are an expression of a strong cultural change at Varengold, and everyone is very happy about it!

Unlike many other companies, you didn't downsize office space during the pandemic, in fact you expanded. Why?

Fuhrmann: When you ask people where they've had their best ideas, dull and dreary meeting rooms is rarely their answer. We wanted to change our working environment, to create space where we could encourage working processes such as team and project work. Walls were pulled down for this until virtually all that remained standing were the supporting columns. We created space for individual and flexible working, but also for a relaxed 'hanging out' kind of atmosphere. It is blatantly obvious that in the 'old world', where pretty much only one office with desks was available for all these working situations, was not ideal and the result of the change was really impressive.

Everyone is completely on board - even those who were critical of the concept at first.

Otten: Every employee now decides whether to choose a desk in one of the bright open plan offices, whether they prefer to retreat to a quiet conference room, open their laptop next to a colleague at the long dining table or sit on the top step of the leafy staircase in our garden area. Some like to lie in a hammock to think and those who prefer to stand use a height-adjustable desk to create a standing desk.

Is it true that the Board of Managing Directors no longer has fixed workplaces either?

Fuhrmann: Yes, it is. Frank and I come in here every morning just like everyone else, grab our keyboard and mouse from our personal locker and find a workspace.

Otten: I can't expect employees to accept and embrace concepts that I don't go along with myself. It starts with us and strengthens the feeling of 'we'.



"OLD WAYS WON'T
OPEN NEW DOORS!"

But you are still a bank and operate in a regulatory environment. How does that work with such an open and flexible space layout?

Fuhrmann: That's right. That's why together with our Compliance team and our external Data Protection Officer, we examined how the working environment had to be designed in order to meet all requirements. We were amazed at how well the issues could be resolved with a few tweaks. The fact that we were already a paperless office made things even easier. We have established codes of conduct and rules about which functions or departments are not allowed sit together and there are always quiet areas for certain activities. The subject of information security and IT security was also a major concern for us when designing the hybrid concept, because we work with sensitive data and wanted to take a holistic view of risk prevention. In addition to all the rules and safety precautions, it is the human factor that can pose risks, which is why training and awareness-raising are also essential for us in the new concept.



Is it true that there is even a gym and a game room in the office?

Otten: Yes and it's great there! No one is productive for ten hours a day. Simply let off steam, have a friendly game of darts or use the PlayStation to clear your head. That sets creativity free!

Fuhrmann: The enthusiasm with which colleagues have embraced New Work is contagious. The great new areas and the opportunities that are offered to everyone here have certainly played a major role in this and this enthusiasm is also reflected in our economic development.

You mean you are more successful than before because of New Work?

Otten: The deliberate promotion of teamwork is an important element of our New Work concept. Cross-departmental cooperation and an 'outside' perspective, i.e. from a completely different department, have made us faster and more efficient. In the Marketplace Banking division in particular, we deal with agile start-ups that act extremely quickly and expect the same from their partners.



Our efficient processes and agility set us apart from many traditional banks and recommend us as a partner of these fintechs.

Will there be flexible working models at Varengold after COVID-19?

Fuhrmann: Absolutely. The days of sitting in the office from 9:00 to 17:00 are gone. Here, everyone works where they want to. Who comes to the office, when and how, is coordinated with the respective line managers. We don't even have a booking system. As little red tape as possible. As we take this personal responsibility very seriously, we do not have a model where an employee has to be in the office two or three days a week. We are deliberately setting ourselves apart from the common 'half-baked' models that are currently being implemented.

What about the so-called six columns?

Otten: The six columns are: Culture, Work Environment, Leadership, Digital Transformation, Empowerment and Corporate Social Responsibility. We have derived these columns from our corporate values and the New Work philosophy. They are the foundation of everything we do, how we operate and how we aim to achieve our business goals.

Fuhrmann: We have built each of these columns brick by brick and this will continue to be a work in progress going forward where action is taken and projects are delivered. Our profession is characterised by changing customer requirements, transformation and digitalisation of business processes, and also our own digital competence, without neglecting the risk. We accept this challenge. Varengold Bank uses robotic process automation for recurring tasks in customer service, for example, and is currently testing the optimisation of process automation using artificial intelligence, in order to streamline and improve the quality of business processes. This, too, is a result of cross-departmental teamwork. In the same way as our comprehensive measures for greater resource efficiency, protection of the environment and social welfare as part of our Corporate Social Responsibility column.

