



Real social partnership

“Seventy years of the AVR means seventy years of real social partnership,” says Bruno Weissen, Head of Human Resources Basel & Kaiseraugst. “It’s a success story.” Together with and thanks to the AVR, it has been possible to overcome various challenges over the years. Management and employee representatives have become true sparring partners.

Jürg Erismann, Head of the Basel & Kaiseraugst Site, shares this view. Even if employers and employees represent different positions, they agree on the objective: everyone wants the best for the site and the employees. Discussions arise about what form the respective implementation should take. Over the years, they have developed a trust-based relationship with one another, which shapes the Roche culture.

Even in its 1966 Annual Report, the AVR wrote: “We are not a fighting unit that views the employer as the enemy.”

Volunteer system

Crucial elements for the success of this good cooperation are the volunteer system and the principle of good faith, emphasises Bruno Weissen. The volunteer system means that employee representatives return to their normal jobs after a set period of time and do not have to rely on making a career out of being an employee representative. The volunteer system also guarantees that matters are addressed at an early stage and real issues are brought to the table, because employee representatives are established in the work process. The typically Swiss principle of good faith means that a handshake is binding and that trust is more important than short-term success.

The members of the Executive Committee also appreciate the volunteer system. Line managers support activities for the AVR and – even more generously, depending on the department – grant the necessary time capacity. On the other hand, people involved in the AVR might occasionally see their own careers put on hold because they are absent from the department and often passed over for promotions.

With its 6,200 active members (of 14,000 Roche employees throughout Switzerland), the AVR is recognised and well positioned both in the workforce and with management. Its role in the transformation of the company has become a permanent one, as it has repeatedly dealt with major reorganisations. There is no organisational change within the company that the AVR has not been involved with from the very beginning.

Activities

The Executive Committee meets once a week to discuss HR- and site-related topics. The entire Committee meets every three weeks; this additionally consists of site representatives for Basel, Kaiseraugst, Reinach and Schlieren plus a retiree representative. HR managers and the AVR Presidium hold a regular meeting every two weeks. Bruno Weissen says: “We don’t just talk to each other when there are problems. We talk to each other all the time.”

The entire Committee meets the Site Head four times a year. Jürg Erismann explains: “We always take this as an opportunity to disclose what the company is doing: What is the direction? What is the strategy? It is important to us that the AVR learns relatively early and first-hand if something is changing.” If management staff receive training as part of a “Roche transformation”, employee representatives are also given appropriate courses. Communication on both sides is also discussed jointly.

Once or twice a year, a meeting is held with the company CEO, Severin Schwan. The AVR is also a member of the “Roche Europe Forum”, in which the European works councils are organised. Initial changes are discussed here before they affect the individual countries and sites. Once a year, the AVR organises a two-day off-site meeting for its entire Committee to define the strategic goals. HR Managers join in on the second day to discuss site-related topics.

The AVR’s activities are extensive: It is the central point of contact for employees as part of its “HR counselling”. It has a seat on the Pension Fund's Board of Trustees, which has equal representation of employer and employees, as well as on the Health, Safety and Environmental Protection Commission (KGU). It organises regular events, such as the annual Children’s Walk, and the “Retirees’ event”, which takes place every two years. It negotiates affordable collective contracts with insurance companies and mobile telephone providers. It runs its own discounts office, which can offer reductions on sporting and cultural events plus discounts on various services provided by removal companies, craftsmen and gardeners. Together with management, it drafts the redundancy scheme – last approved in 2018 – and takes care of individual solutions in further exchanges with HR managers. It brings up topics that are currently of concern to employees, such as work commutes, working hours, the balance between work and family, and tax issues. Last but not least, once a year it participates in tough salary negotiations with management.

This consists of two to three meetings in late autumn. An agreement does not have to be reached; the employer can stipulate the salary adjustment unilaterally. But this is neither in the interests of the employees nor the management: “Of course, it’s much nicer if we can communicate that we have found some middle ground,” says Jürg Erismann. He confirms that the current President is always very well prepared for the negotiations and that the discussions are not always easy.

Future

The AVR, which has grown over the years, has taken on new and even greater significance in recent times. In times of VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity) and the associated “Roche transformation”, the AVR has a key role.

Changes to the portfolio, digitalisation as a fundamental task affecting all areas, and finally the reorganisation of hierarchical structures into flat, flexible networks all mean constant, organisational change, which needs to be implemented and shaped by the employees and thus the AVR.

One recent success is the "partnership leave" which was devised jointly by management and the employee representatives: both men and women are entitled to ten weeks of leave in the first year after the birth or adoption of their child. The regulation therefore also applies to same-sex couples, and as of 1 January 2020. Another prospect is the Roche anniversary in 2021. The AVR has already floated the idea of a "special bonus" for all employees to mark Roche's one hundred and twenty-fifth year.

Bruno Weissen, Head of Human Resources, Basel & Kaiseraugst Site

"I would like to congratulate the AVR on seventy years of real social partnership. Together, management and the AVR have overcome various challenges over the last few years. Focusing on the Roche culture of real, in-house social partnership has always been crucial to success. The volunteer system has proven its worth, as has the typically Swiss principle of good faith. The management supports the assumption of AVR tasks by elected representatives. Seventy years of success can be seen in Roche's positive business performance, the successful development of contemporary solutions such as working beyond 65, Elder Care and Family & Flexibility, the successful design of support structures and negotiation of redundancy plans, and successful negotiations in salary rounds. The AVR plays a particularly crucial role in today's radically changing environment (VUCA) with the necessary Roche transformations. I would like to thank the AVR for its major contribution over the years, for the open, transparent and clear sparring sessions, always with a view to securing the best outcome for Roche and its employees."

Jürg Erismann, Head of the Basel & Kaiseraugst Site

"We have a very good relationship, a valuable relationship, even if I represent the employer and the AVR represents the employees. I don't see myself as a counterpoint. We share common goals: we want the best for the site and the best for the employees. We are pursuing a Roche culture that has been around for a long time. We talk to each other regularly so that the AVR learns early on and first-hand what is changing and where. This is only possible because we have a solid relationship of trust. We also coordinate our communication, which cannot be taken for granted. Our common topics are varied: from the constant transformation, to the Pension Fund, across mutual events and all the way to salary negotiations. We also share a common sense of humour. We don't have the same views in every case. But there's more of a sense of working with one another than against one another."