

This high-ranking Dutchwoman is helping an international 'auction house for machinery' achieve further growth



- Ghislaine Duijmelings (51) has been at the head of the German auction house Surplex since June 2020.
- There, she ensures that large-scale industrial machinery that one region may have a surplus of is given a second lease of life elsewhere.
- The company has 200 employees and a turnover of around 100 million euros.

A large milling machine, a hydraulic press, or perhaps even an entire production line? If a machine is written off in Europe, it is often the case that it can be given a new lease of life somewhere else in the world. But how do we reconcile the supply with the demand?

51-year-old Ghislaine Duijmelings knows all of the answers. Since June last year, the Helmond native has been at the rudder of the German auction house [Surplex](#). A kind of 'marketplace for machinery', which operates worldwide.

'In the Netherlands, I worked for the auction house Troostwijk. At the time, I just called them once on the phone and asked: should we grab a coffee sometime? I clicked with the two German owners straight away. It's not only that they are around the same age as me, they have also adopted the same management philosophy as I have.'

Dismantling and shipping

Surplex was formed in 1999. In 2009, it had 15 employees, and today that number has risen to 200 employees, spread across 13 countries in Europe. The online platform sees 50 million page views a year. In almost 600 auctions last year, around 55,000 industrial products were sold by their owners, equating to a total turnover of some 100 million euros.

This turnover has shown double-digit growth over recent years – entirely autonomously. Even – or perhaps, especially – in the COVID era. 'Because many clients are currently restructuring, and we can help them maximise their proceeds.'

Last year, we saw not only the opening of the first Surplex office in the Netherlands, but also a new main office in Düsseldorf. 'At the moment, it's completely empty', Duijmelings explains. 'In Germany, the lockdown restrictions are still somewhat stricter than in the Netherlands. Unfortunately, this means that I still haven't seen many of the employees face-to-face.'

As an auction house, Surplex organises everything 'from A to Z', with a central focus on the client. 'Yes, I know; that's what every company says, but we've taken it much further. We primarily auction B2B machines, with a focus on the wood and metalworking, construction, and earthmoving sectors. On the one hand, we deal with clients who want to automate, modernise, or relocate their business operations. We often assist in cases of bankruptcy, too.'

'On the other hand, there are buyers all over the world who are interested in those products, and we do all we can to help them as well. It's not a matter of: "Figure

out how to get the machine to Pakistan or Mexico.” We dismantle the machines, ship them and take care of the customs declarations. We’re actually the only company in the world that does this.’

This is yet further proof that the client really is the central focus, she says. ‘We don’t have dashboards with dozens of KPIs, we use only one indicator: the Net Promoter Score (NPS). For both the buyers and the sellers.’

NPS is a commonly used method of measuring customer satisfaction and it is based on a single question: how likely is it that you would recommend us to others?

A multinational suffers through the coronavirus crisis

Surplex’s business is done almost entirely online, for example with virtual 3D inspections of the machines and production halls in question. But that’s why local contacts are so important, Duijmelings emphasises. ‘You don’t buy a large-scale production line on a whim, which is why we also have offices in thirteen countries and multilingual employees. Doing everything from Germany? That wouldn’t be feasible, the service aspect is much too important.’

With your employees so spread out across the world, how do you ensure unity? Especially during the coronavirus crisis? At Surplex, one of the ways we tackle this is with ‘Brain Breaks’: lunch meetings, during which an employee will share something that could be of importance for several of their colleagues.

In a culture where ‘learning from one another’ is a central tenet, such meetings are certainly ‘crucial’. ‘We simply want to do better every day. This means: you can make mistakes and you will be given feedback in a respectful manner. This stimulates introspection. When people serve as examples for one another, then the effect is even stronger. If one employee sees their colleague step up to explain what they have done wrong, the employee is more likely to come forward themselves in another similar situation. That works much more efficiently than sending down orders from the top.’

From soulless to sustainable

Before Duijmelings found her feet at Surplex, and before that at Troostwijk, she worked for many years at Manutan, a company that had long been known as Overtoom in the Netherlands prior to its rebranding. As CEO, she transformed the company from an outdated ‘*dozenschiuver*’ [a company that provides goods but offers no service] into a company that didn’t focus as strongly on profits, and paid attention to things like sustainability, success, conscious consumerism and personal growth.

It's much the same at Surplex, she says. 'People want to feel a certain amount of appreciation. Our personal and professional lives are becoming increasingly intertwined. Trust, a safe environment, a healthy culture; these are the things that help me decide where I want to work. Fortunately, this company ticks all of the boxes. When it comes to our Christmas party, we also invite people who have left the Surplex family. I hope we will continue to do this, I will certainly advocate for it.'

She describes the management style at Surplex as 'not typically German'. She explains: 'The employees have a lot of self-responsibility, and the management structure is as flexible as possible. Extremely approachable, non-hierarchical. That was the deciding factor for me' says Duijmelings, who says she's not a fan of dominant leadership.

'I want us to be able to speak our minds to each other, to continue to listen to one another. I'm aware that we at the top need to play an exemplary role, but we make mistakes sometimes too. That's why I want to make it clear that we appreciate any input or feedback from others. Because if things go well at the top, it should go well throughout the rest of the organisation, too.'

Source: [businessinsider.nl](https://www.businessinsider.nl)