

'I don't like a culture of excuse-making'



GHISLAINE DUIJMELINGS (51)

Born in Helmond. Studied in Antwerp, then at INSEAD. Worked at Overtoom starting in 1991, then with Manutan until 2015. Became CEO of Troostwijk Veilingen ('Auctions') in 2015 and was appointed as CEO of the German auction house Surplex in 2020.

1. What was it like for you growing up?

'I was born in Helmond. We moved a lot, from Brabant to Drenthe, and then to Zeeuws-Vlaanderen. This moving around was an important aspect of my youth, which had lots of warmth and love in it. My mother was at home and went back to work when my younger brother was twelve. My father worked in the textile industry and when he had to go somewhere else for work, we went with him. He was in carpeting and that is a smaller sector in the Netherlands.

'This moving around was quite typical throughout my youth. Every five years, I had to leave my friends behind and move somewhere else. It had a positive influence on me, because I learned how to adapt more easily. I have always worked for international companies and I personally have had to move often as well. I studied and worked in Belgium, then moved to France, and from there worked in Spain, Portugal and Italy. I returned to Belgium and have been working in the Netherlands for ten years now.

'I still find travelling to be important. We have the goal of visiting every continent with the children before their 21st birthdays. I think it is an important part of their upbringing. Although we can't travel right now.'

2. What did you want to be when you grew up?

'I wanted to be part of the business world ever since I was a child. I was always drawn to it, which is why I planned to study business administration.

I never wanted anything else. I don't know where that enterprising spirit came from. Perhaps from my father to some degree, but I don't come from an entrepreneurial family. I worked in stores to supplement the family income. I cannot really say that I learned a lot from it. Perhaps with regard to social contacts, but it wasn't career-defining for me.

'During my studies, I noticed that the business and marketing sectors appealed to me a great deal. I started out in marketing at Overtoom in Belgium, working with office supplies. We were taken over by a large French company listed on the stock market, Manutan. That was when I found myself in an international environment.

'I've always had the drive, asking myself: what can be done differently, what can be done better? Thanks to the takeover, I was able to develop my career in an international environment and was constantly taking on more responsibility.

It was a natural fit for me. I had a certain demeanour and a certain mentality, and that led to being given certain roles.

'It wasn't a case of having planned my career as such, it was more that I seized the opportunities that came my way. I worked at Manutan for a long time and became

director of the Benelux countries. I was later given a managerial position, and after 24 years, I thought: should I stay here until I retire, or should I do something else?’

3. You went and did something else.

‘I resigned from my job and started talking to a number of companies. Quite coincidentally, I ran into the son of the owner of the auction house Troostwijk Veilingen and they were looking for a new CEO. That’s how I ended up in the auctions world. I was CEO of Troostwijk for four years. A completely different experience.’

4. How would you describe this world?

‘An auction is something quite unique. Troostwijk auctions more than just Surplex machines. Their work is business-to-business and very international. It was the same at Manutan as well, actually. There is also a focus on online business and the work is data-driven. I had already experienced all of that at Manutan. The thick catalogues were replaced by entirely digital versions.

‘I’ve been using data for a long time already, for predictive modelling, for example. This way, you can predict who is going to buy what.

You connect the buyer with the seller, but you may well have to find that buyer. The use of data and industry expertise is very important. You also need to have very good marketing, because people who are looking for a specific machine really need to know how to find you.

‘Previously, when auctions were conducted traditionally, with a hammer in an auction hall, you had the opportunity to negotiate. Now, you have buyers all over the world. The real value of machines has become a lot clearer as a result.’

5. You left to go and work for Surplex. Why?

‘I was drawn to the international aspect of working there. Troostwijk is very big in the Netherlands and Belgium, and Surplex’s presence extends beyond these countries. I gained quite a lot of experience at Troostwijk.

'But I opted for Surplex because of its two managing directors, who are also co-shareholders. I have a stake in it as well. I got in touch with them and we have been gradually getting to know each other better.

'I left Troostwijk and had to wait a year before I could begin at Surplex due to a competition clause in my contract. During that year, I also received other offers, some of which made me think: oh, that sounds nice! But you have to follow your heart and not your bank account.

'It is a German company, but not uptight or standoffish in any way. I based my decision on the company's values, standards and culture. They seem to suit my management style very well. Here, I can be myself, make mistakes and learn from them. In my opinion, trust is essential, and I firmly believe that a company can only grow when its people grow.'

6. How do you ensure this?

'There are different ways of doing it. First and foremost, be introspective and pay attention to how you conduct yourself. When something doesn't go the way you want it to, ask yourself why. Before blaming someone else, ask yourself 'what could I have done?' I really don't like a culture of excuse-making. We communicate this and it is a focus of our employee training.

'It's part of our personal development at all levels. I introduced sports activities at Manutan, not because it is healthy, but rather to stress the importance of personal responsibility. We had a library with books and films, and our own gardens so we could learn about nature.

'At Surplex, many employees offer training to their colleagues during their lunch breaks. Now everyone has to do these via Teams. We do everything we can to help people develop their careers. I think it's very important.'

7. What kind of things do you auction?

'People auction machines because they have too many of them or because they want to save on costs. Or because they want to modernise or reinvest. The Dutch manufacturing

industry certainly likes to have state-of-the-art technology. And the local standards and requirements for safety are very strict. Now and then, a machine may need a part replaced. But, of course, it not the case that we auction unsafe machines: we thoroughly examine and monitor everything. People cannot put a machine up for auction online themselves: a team from our company examines all of the items and provides an accurate description. We have buyers all over the world. The costs of the items auctioned are often very large, and the products on offer can range from a single drilling machine to a complete production line.

'We also auction items from companies that have shut down or been liquidated.

Of course, the latter is more unpleasant, but finding a way to pay off any debts quickly is certainly a good thing. This also gives the owner of the company a clean slate. We also advise companies on their options for auctioning off their inventory as soon as the risk of liquidation is identified. There aren't that many right now, but we do expect an increase.

'We also do private sales. This is usually done for smaller markets or if people enquire about a very specific machine. Sometimes, if customers so wish, we can buy the machine from them and auction it afterwards. 40 percent of our turnover comes from these types of purchase arrangements. We offer a wide range of services: we perform appraisals, arrange exports and transportation, and dismantle machines. It is more than just auctions.

'The nice thing about this work is that you give machines a new lease of life and create job opportunities somewhere else. You also see that businesses in the Netherlands do not always opt for a new machine: you can implement a second-hand machine very effectively in production operations, which can reduce investment costs.'

8. Which business sectors does Surplex operate in?

'We mainly focus on the metal and wood-processing industry, but also on the construction and earthmoving sectors.'

9. What is your management style?

'People actually regard me as a colleague, even though I'm actually the one who ultimately calls the shots. I think that I am approachable, not bossy. That is a very Dutch way of being a CEO. Our Prime Minister, Rutte, travels by bike and the royal family regularly interact with the populace. My co-shareholders have the same mentality. When I read online reviews, they often say that we were very helpful and that the people were friendly. We do our utmost for the customer. And we are growing by 20 percent each year, even this past year, despite the pandemic. It's getting easier and easier for people to find us.'

Source: Liesbeth Wytzes, [EW Elsevier Weekblad](#)



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