Heading forward, with ambition
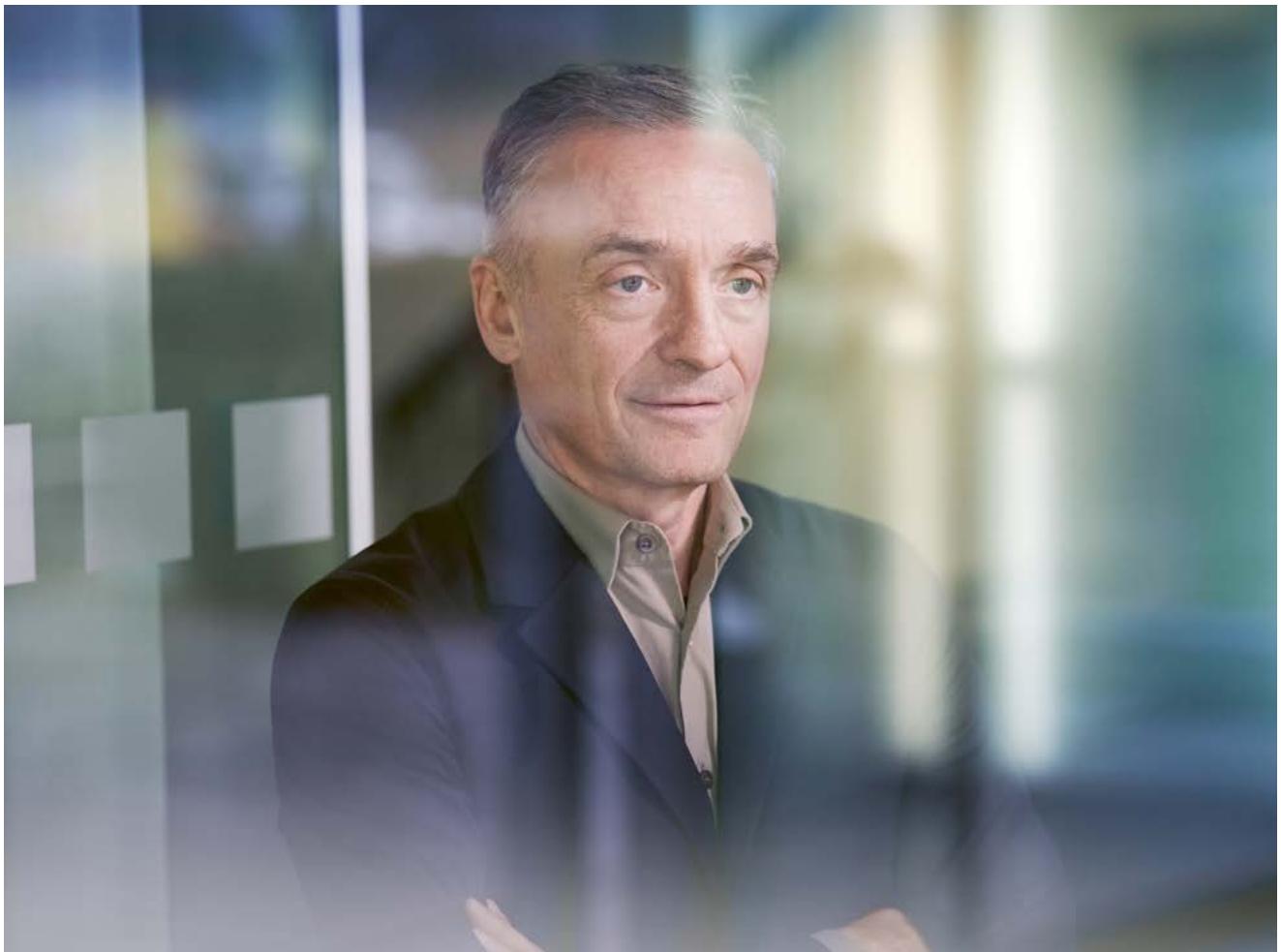
INTERVIEW
_AUGUST HARDER
Head of IT & CIO, Coop

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"One shouldn't get too hung up on previous stumbling blocks."

August Harder has been Head of IT at Coop for more than 20 years and is one of the driving forces for digitalisation at the company. His goal is to use computers to make the firm more efficient – always for the benefit of the customer, of course, but never losing sight of his ideals. So what helps him get out of bed in the morning? Curiosity, tenacity and enjoying what he does.

Mr Harder, what is it about IT you find exciting, and how did you get into computing?
I have had a passion for IT since I was an undergraduate and human/computer interaction, the user interface, in other words, has always intrigued me. I wanted to know how you could create value with technology.

You have been Head of IT at Coop since 1998, leading a team that is now some 500 strong. How does one reach such a position?
By having an interest in processes, not taking your eye off the ball for a second and spotting connections. Just as importantly, by finding ways to make the firm more efficient and effective. In short, it is key to get close to customers and thereby understand them better.

And technology has a role to play there?
We believe that the technology we use should improve our inventory management, thus generating genuine added value for our company and for customers; it has no intrinsic value of its own.

How can such a large department be led successfully?
It's vital that everyone on the team is focused on the client. On the one hand, you have to determine which developments and client needs are relevant in the short term and on the other hand, having a medium- and long-term perspective is crucial in order to succeed over time. That requires solid structures, rather than making compromises to accommodate every single request or project.

What are the day-to-day challenges you have to face in your role as CIO?
Making decisions, striking the right balance between imposing and deviating from standards, for example, and prioritising wishes. That last one is key. People always want much more than you can deliver. Working with our customers and business partners to set the right priorities is an important part of the job.

So you've had the occasional setback?
Yes of course – you are always putting out one fire after another in IT, but one shouldn't get too hung up on previous stumbling blocks. You can certainly think about what you might have done better but then you continue to look to the future and concentrate on the task at hand. Tenacity is important, as well. Throwing in the towel and leaving a project half-finished is pointless – it won't solve the original problem.

What factors are key to working well with other people?
Trust, reliability and continuity in a team. The work also has to be fun at some level, then it's almost as if things take on their own momentum. But trust has to be earned. That's how it was with Ergon: they took a leap in the dark and got stuck in, gaining an understanding of what we needed and developing highly complex solutions for our inventory control and time-logging systems, which in turn helped us take a quantum leap. I see cooperation as a kind of symbiosis. Ergon brings the technology to the table, we bring the processes, and together we create solutions that also benefit our in-house IT department.

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How do you make sure you keep developing as a manager?

I'd say one always learns new things by staying curious, having good work colleagues and cultivating business relationships with customers or partners such as Ergon. Coop staff are always looking for new ways to improve their business with IT. This gives rise to new requirements and also gets you thinking about how you can take the next step in your development and understand what changes might make sense in a given segment. Coop's CEOs, formerly Hansueli Loosli, and now Joos Sutter, have also played a significant role in shaping our approach: they have been pragmatic and ambitious but have always been guided by the facts rather than political considerations.

What do you personally think is important in your work?

Enjoying what I do.

What are you most proud of?

I am particularly proud of the self-service scanners in the supermarket. Here, we've made sure we have good ergonomics and that the devices look attractive as well. These may seem like minor details but we serve a million customers a day, which means that a million people see those screens daily.

What plans do you have for the future?

We still have several inventory management projects that we are currently moving forward – we are attempting to improve forecasting, both for our stores and our distribution centres, for example. Our aim is to have the right amount of stock in the right place at the right time, every time.

We are also trying to bring our online and offline services into ever-closer alignment. In the end, what matters most is that customers find shopping at Coop a positive and memorable experience. />