



Is there a feminine approach to founding start-ups? Stephanie Birkner hopes to find out.

Innovation Sets the Pace

Stephanie Birkner holds Germany's only junior professorship for "Female Entrepreneurship". Her research looks at how female entrepreneurs can inspire business and society – beyond women's quotas and STEM funding

It's Pippi Longstocking. If you ask Professor Dr Stephanie Birkner, Junior Professor for Female Entrepreneurship about a role model for a female entrepreneur, she will tell you it's the cheeky little girl in Astrid Lindren's children's books. "She is the most entrepreneu-

rial girl I know," Birkner says. In her view Pippi stands for everything that defines entrepreneurial thinking and acting: openness, considering things out of the box and having the will to develop ideas of one's own when problems arise.

When the economist talks about herself it soon becomes clear that she herself has plenty of Pippi Longstocking's traits. The 36-year-old has two children, a husband who works in the Netherlands – and a junior professors-hip in a new research field. On the side

she also teaches at Regensburg University, coaches entrepreneurs and is involved in numerous projects and committees. Her packed daily schedule calls for highly developed improvisational skills. But Birkner takes it all in her stride. "I mean, what would be the point of being a junior professor for female entrepreneurship if I didn't have a creative approach to challenges?" Still, she emphasizes that there is plenty of room for improvement when it comes to supporting young women in science and the start-up world.

Linking two established areas of research

Her journey into academia began with a degree in Business Consulting at Emden. After completing her doctorate at the University of Oldenburg she took up an acting professorship for Business Economics at the Jade University of Applied Sciences. In October 2014 Birkner became Germany's first Junior Professor for Female Entrepreneurship at Oldenburg University's Department of Business Administration, Economics and Law. "I like the agile environment of an Entrepreneurial University," she says, referring to the EXIST 2011 competition in which the University made it to the top three alongside the Technical University of Berlin and the Munich University of Applied Sciences. This is why Birkner works closely with University's start-up and innovation centre (GIZ). She also attaches particular importance to international exchange.

At the beginning of her junior professorship Birkner faced the challenge of having to combine two established research fields – entrepreneurship and gender studies. "I did a form of pioneering work, looking for paths between both worlds," she explains. Gradually a research design began to emerge that was deliberately application-oriented. "My research field is all about transfer and practical application. Multi-methodical, transdiscipli-

nary science is the only approach that makes sense to me."

Birkner explains that her junior professorship is designed around two central concepts: entrepreneurship and "female". But in her understanding entrepreneurship means more than just starting up a business in order to develop and pursue new business models. Entrepreneurs, she believes, are people who identify a problem and have the confidence to develop and implement solutions to it – whether this involves pursuing the economic objective of building up a company (entrepreneurship), making an established company more innovative (intrapreneurship), or aiming at changing society to the better. Her approach to the word "female" is similar: for Birkner it goes far beyond the biological sex. "In my definition 'female' applies to anybody with a female attitude to things. I am interested in whether there is such thing as a female entrepreneurial spirit, regardless of biological sex," the academic explains.

In order to find answers here, Birkner and her team prioritize explorative research designs. For example, in interview studies the research focus is on finding out more about the context that triggered the intention to launch a start-up, as well as the challenges taken on and experienced in this process. The first result: entrepreneurs who fit the "female" profile are more interested in finding meaning in what they do. "They measure success according to whether they can change something qualitatively, whereas characteristically male entrepreneurs measure success according to quantitative growth factors such as money. This applies particularly to patriarchy-dominated sectors such as the tech industry," Birkner explains.

In addition to the tech industry Birkner's research currently focuses on the health industry and digital transformation. "Here I let myself be guided by the question of where I can make the most changes through entrepreneurship education, in

other words in promoting intention and competence in entrepreneurial thinking and acting," Birkner says. The health sector is ideal for this because the majority of its workers are women, which means there are plenty of potential beneficiaries of entrepreneurial support, she explains. What's more, the health industry is becoming more and more economically relevant. "Experts predict that the key innovations of the twenty-first century will be in the field of psychosocial health," Birkner says. "The still male dominated start-up world needs to discover the more female-dominated health industry as a key innovation field. I would like to find out how to best foster these processes."

Upgrading "typically female" skills

Innovations on the labour market inform her third field of research: digital transformation. "As I see it, it looks increasingly likely that as 'typically female' considered abilities such as communication and social skills are going to increase in value," Birkner says. As she points out, in nearly all branches digitalization is ushering in cultural change; it is strengthening the principle of globally linked labour network – the focus is increasingly on collaboration, and "egotistical movers and shakers" are no longer in lead. Female entrepreneurship, with its focus on qualitative success measures, can position itself perfectly here.

Three research fields with very different demands – Birkner's junior professorship is in itself an exercise in entrepreneurial thinking and action. She meets the challenges with female entrepreneurial spirit – just as Pippi Longstocking would: "I have never done this before so I am absolutely sure I can do it!" Accordingly, Birkner would like to see a culture that is more open to mistakes not only in the academic world, but also in the start-up world. (bb)