

# IN OUR OWN BEST INTEREST.

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The business headlines on the last day of January certainly brought reassuring news. The Ifo Institute announced that Germany had reclaimed its crown as the “Capital Export World Champion” only one year after losing it to China. Germany came back with a bang, too: a current account surplus of 297 billion US dollars and 8.6 percent of our annual economic output. Those are the kinds of figures that will make many observers, neighboring countries and the European Commission sit up and take notice. But what do they really mean? Simple: German engineering is still a global success story, particularly in our blockbuster industries of chemicals, pharmaceuticals, carmaking, machinery and heavy industry. “Computer, electronic and optical products”, however, come a little further down on the list. That suggests, quite rightly, that pure IT exports have room to grow. In 2004, 10.4 percent of our exports were ICT products. Today, that number has shrunk to below five percent, in contrast to over 25 percent in China. I don’t believe that the numbers tell our whole digitization story, though. ICT is ticking away in almost all of our exports: from combine harvesters and washing machines to machine parts and smart medicine. But that fact is not captured by the export statistics.

There are, however, two things that affect all of us: our industry’s ability to extract value from digitization and our approach to tackling the serious challenges that digital transformation presents. We cannot take Germany’s leading position for granted, either. To explore different ways to defend and maintain it, we have invited representatives from industry, research and policymaking as op-ed contributors to analyze the current state of affairs in Germany’s economy and society from their own perspective and identify specific needs and frameworks for action.

To what extent are we failing to live up to our potential? It almost seems that, between German thoroughness and the much-quoted German angst, we lack the courage to put our true greatness on display. Or does the mere thought of making mistakes, sharing knowledge or being hacked turn us into prophets of doom? When we hear the words “automation” or “artificial intelligence”, do we immediately envision the loss of our jobs or can we think more universally and recognize our opportunities? Are we too hesitant to devote venture capital to getting startups and their ideas rolling faster?

In this issue of Best Practice, we learn how to shed our image as a digital non-entity in this era of real-time internet, autonomous systems and the Internet of Things from Dorothee Bär, Parliamentary State Secretary in the German Federal Ministry of Transport and Digital Infrastructure; Wolfgang Clement, former German Federal Minister of Economic Affairs and Labor; Prof. Reimund Neugebauer, President of the Fraunhofer Society; Prof. August-Wilhelm Scheer, long-standing President of Bitkom; and Prof. Wolfgang Wahlster, President of the German Research Center for Artificial Intelligence (DFKI). The answers range from soft factors such as accepting, embracing, owning and understanding to the hard re-engineering of countless digitization processes that, in many cases, have already been rolled out with the kind of determination that Germany needs. Just not always in the same direction. In that sense, this issue is no doubt a must-read for every one of us – in our own best interest.

Best regards,  
Reinhard Clemens