

“When I joined Burda, I couldn’t speak in front of more than three people”



Trainee Johanna Böshans (l.) and *DLD* founder Steffi Czerny (r.) © Daniel Grund for Hubert Burda Media

The best way to start your career is to learn from role models who have already achieved professional success. In our interview series, female trainees from the Burda Journalism School get the chance to do precisely that. This time, Johanna Böshans meets Steffi Czerny, founder and managing director of *DLD*, to discuss optimism, flying saucers in Israel and the things she would still like to learn.

Johanna Böshans: I imagine the managing director of *DLD* needs to keep an eye on the latest topics and trends. How do you stay up to date?

Steffi Czerny: By going through life with my eyes open. I read a lot – blogs, news and magazines – to stay informed. You can also follow the lead of trend-setting people. Another very simple method I used when setting up *DLD* was going to conferences. I listened to speakers I had never heard of before and who focused on topics I knew nothing about. I think you need to move beyond your comfort zone to experience new things. And you need

to listen and be brave enough to approach new people and completely unfamiliar topics with an open mind.

Can you give a specific example?

Yes – every year I go to (*DLD* chairman) Yossi Vardi's internet camp Kinnernet in Israel. Around 12 years ago there was a group of young men there who had just been discharged from the military and were gliding flying saucers over the Sea of Galilee – back then nobody was talking about drones. At first I thought "oh, these boys with their toys", but then I realised that they had learned to do this and developed the technology while in the military and were now using it for a totally different purpose. I suddenly realised what a huge impact that can have on society. Civilian use of drones has changed so much – in terms of aesthetics and visualisation alone.

How do you manage to stay in contact with all the people you meet?

Who says I do? (laughs) If someone is truly interesting, then you will want to stay in contact. If you can learn from them and they inspire you, then staying in touch will be easy. In some cases, your paths will often cross. The *DLD* event creates common ground and provides a chance to reconnect. How do you manage with your friends? After all, you stay in touch with them.

Yes, but sometimes I find it difficult. All my friends live in different places. It's a challenge to constantly check whether I've been in touch or who I can meet and when.

Do you think that men generally find it easier than women to make contacts and establish networks?

I think it's a question of personality. It's easier if you have a certain charm, if you're friendly rather than surly or arrogant – whatever your gender.

In your opinion, what does it take to be a professional success and to make things happen?

The older I get, the more convinced I am that you need to know as early as possible what you want to achieve with your talents, skills and knowledge. Then you will also know how you want to make a difference. It's important to be strong, consistent and persistent enough to pour all your passion into a topic close to your heart. I think this helps to boost your confidence.

I have learned a lot about myself during my time at the Journalism School, in my various editorial teams and at the Burda boot camp. I've sometimes been surprised by the unexpected things I can do well. In your opinion, what is the best and fastest way to find out what you're made of?

Giving things a try, making mistakes and starting from scratch again and again. You can't let yourself be demotivated by defeat and rejection. For example, when I joined Burda, I couldn't speak in front of more than three people. Now I'm a proper keynote speaker. Why? Because I kept on trying and realised that it was important to me to be able to speak in front of an audience. I also think it's very important to try out things that you don't enjoy at first but that you know could prove important in one way or another.

But that takes a lot of effort.

Of course. It helps to have a goal – to know why you're making yourself do it.

You've achieved so much. What other goals do you have?

I definitely want to develop *DLD* even further. We are a famous brand now, but we could roll it out even further. This is why we have set up *DLD Campus*, in which we network medium-sized companies with interested academics in exciting university cities and work with people from Silicon Valley to create a sort of ecosystem. I want to use this idea to create an extensive *DLD Campus* brand. And I aim to keep pace with the changes occurring in our world. To ensure we find the new and exciting people of the future and invite them to *DLD*, to ensure we can identify "the next next".

How do you cope when things don't work out?

Of course I have low points and I too get frustrated when I fail to achieve something. Luckily, I am an optimist by nature and my glass is always half full. We need to realise that things go on, even after the lowest low, and not just in our careers, but also in relationships, in our private lives. Stay positive and don't let anything rob you of your strength – that's my motto.

While we're talking about positivity, was there a moment or a contact that proved pivotal for your career?

My foundation was my thorough journalistic training. Journalists don't just learn to write; they also learn to tackle topics. This was the basis for my career. The first thing I did after my training was to have four children and lead a totally normal family life. I was lucky enough to meet Dr Hubert Burda during the period in which the internet arrived and the first online media developed. He's a visionary publisher, and even back then he said that these new media would change the world. He awakened my interest and roused my curiosity. At some point during our discussions of how the new media would change the world, it became clear that I was going to work for him. So meeting Dr Burda was a crucial encounter for me.

Is there something you wish you'd known when starting your career?

I wish I'd known more about structure and organisation. I drove my colleagues mad with my chaos. Maybe I still do (laughs). On the other hand, good things can come from chaos.

(Laughs) I hope so. I'm pretty chaotic myself.

Looking back, is there something you wish you'd done differently?

I wish I'd been able to write better. I attended the German School of Journalism and was always good at identifying topics, but not so good at executing them. Even now it makes me sad. If I had the time – and at the moment I simply don't – I'd like to have another go at writing. There's an art to portraying people, events and topics – you can learn to do it, but only to a certain degree.

Finally, what tip do you have for young professionals?

Hone your tools! If you want to work in digital media, for example, learn as much as you can about digitality, right through to coding. Find the topic that's right for you and explore it from every angle. Learn to understand people, to watch how they function. And, of course, you need to look at yourself as well – if you're weighed down by personal issues, you won't be able to approach other people openly.

Steffi Czerny is managing director of DLD Media and co-founded the DLD conference in 2005. The conference takes place in Munich and has many spin-offs around the world, including DLD New York, DLD Europe in Brussels and the DLD Tel Aviv Festival. Since joining Burda in 1995, she has held several senior positions in the New Media division. She attended the German School of Journalism and has an academic background in politics and communication. She has been following the development of the digital world for over 20 years.

Johanna Böshans is trained in media management and is currently a member of the 2016–2018 cohort at the Burda Journalism School. Her training has included positions with Meine Familie & ich, the Burda boot camp and the Bunte.de correspondent office in New York. After completing her training, she will join the Burda boot camp as Head of Content.

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