

Making sure everyone feels secure

by Roland Schlumpf

Sooner or later, everyone working at Novartis in Switzerland will come into contact with the Novartis Pension Fund, a highly specialized 20-strong team responsible for any questions the Novartis associates have on personal insurance matters. While the focus here is on pensions, the team is also well acquainted with all other types of insurance – including often complex issues involving health insurance. The job requires a large amount of specialist knowledge that has to be tailored and adapted according to the latest developments. Novartis associates benefit directly from this expertise. The team seems to find both fun and satisfaction in this demanding role, as demonstrated by the cheerful atmosphere during lunch following an internal training workshop.

Getting the entire or even nearly entire team from the Novartis Pension Fund together around a table is a rare occurrence. Managing Director Markus Moser took advantage of an in-house workshop in the morning and invited his 20 associates to lunch at “prima” on Aeschenvorstadt. This cozy restaurant with delicious Italian cuisine is situated directly opposite the offices of the Novartis Pension Fund. As with some other teams, the Pension Fund is not based on Campus. “This has both advantages and disadvantages,” finds Marcel Rutz. The Campus is certainly a very pleasant place to work. However, as discretion is extremely important when working at the Pension Fund, the off-campus location has its advantages. Especially during periods of restructuring, many associates appreciate a fuss-free trip to the Pension Fund. The colleagues at the Pension Fund consider themselves to be a service provider for each individual associate working at Novartis in Switzerland. While the main body of work focuses on pensions, the team also offers advice to Novartis staff on virtually all other insurance and pension-related issues. In addition to pensions, health insurance is often a central aspect of their work. New colleagues joining the company from abroad are frequently confronted with a significantly different system from back home. Wherever an explanation is needed, the Pension Fund team is never far away. The Novartis Pension Fund is among the largest autonomous providers in the Swiss pensions sector. The team offers support to around 15 000 insured associates

and 17 000 pensioners. It provides all the required services entirely on its own, with the exception of management of the foundation’s assets totaling 13 billion francs.

Always on top of the game

Pensions are a complex matter. While the basic principles and legal framework are relatively clear, the various ordinances, provisions and jurisdictions weave such a complex web of regulations that professionals in the field not only have to possess a great deal of knowledge but also have to update and expand this knowledge constantly in the light of the latest developments. For this reason, the Novartis Pension Fund team takes part in an in-house workshop twice a year. The morning before the lunch at “prima” focused on the latest legal developments in Pillar 2 survivors’ insurance relating to the conflict between pension law and inheritance law. What at first sounds both abstract and extremely technical is broken down with the professional help of the Novartis associates into some frequently unconsidered, yet very important questions on the financial consequences of old age, death and disability.

First work, then play

The lunch together gives the colleagues a breather from the intense concentration of the workshop. The World Cup has just started in Brazil and is one of the main topics of discussion. While the level of knowledge is varied, the emotional aspect of soccer is great-

er than the technical side so that everyone has something to say. Emotion brings people together, of course. Susanne Verkerk is having a somewhat tough time of it. As a German, her home country is set to enter the tournament that evening, while the Swiss team already won its first match the previous evening. Yet Susanne takes the little jokes from her colleagues the way they are intended – with humor. (If we had visited one day later, she would surely have been the center of attention after the German team’s fantastic 4:0 triumph over Portugal.)

The atmosphere is relaxed without becoming too boisterous. The participants clearly enjoy the moments of relaxation, jokes and laughter, but still remain professional. While she has only recently joined the team, Susanne already feels at home. A lot of her colleagues have been part of the team for many years. On the one hand, the complexity of the material prevents frequent changes. On the other hand, the material itself undergoes rapid change without any alteration in the basic mission. The internal restructuring that drives fluctuations in personnel is thus largely avoided in the pensions field. Despite this, everyday work is anything but easy, with the amount and complexity of the work remaining high. Having lunch together like today at “prima” – with trusted work colleagues but without the “work” aspect – is thus a welcome change.

Planned team events such as this are held every now and then, including barbecues, bowling and becoming a chocolatier for a day. Even a swim in the Rhine was once planned when the Novartis Pension Fund still had offices by the river. As a result of

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the weather, not many took up the offer – and those who did can only shiver when recollecting the event. Spontaneous meetings outside work continue to be popular among some team members, whether a picnic lunch at the Tinguely fountain or a beer after work. However, while the atmosphere in the group is friendly, outside work the team members tend to lead their own lives. “Everyone welcomes the clear separation between the life they have at work and their families and private life,” comments Nadia Mattera on this important balance.

Active on many fronts

In addition to personal consultations in the offices on Aeschenvorstadt, the team also continues to reach out proactively to associates at the various Novartis sites across Switzerland. It is responsible for organizing numerous information events on pensions and related topics. Delegations of around

10 people with a wide range of information are regularly to be found “on site” at the Campus or in Nyon, Rotkreuz or Locarno. These events have proven extremely popular. “The queues are huge,” comments Marcel Rutz. A lunchtime session between 11:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m. usually sees between 200 and 250 consultations take place, with the information covering the whole spectrum of pension issues. The permanent contact with colleagues at Novartis is what gives Nadia Mattera so much enjoyment and motivation in her work. And last but not least, “we almost always receive a great deal of appreciation and recognition for our work, which is great.”

The homepage of the website pensionskassen-novartis.ch features a video entitled “We’re happy to help you.” This video provides a light-hearted introduction to the professional and friendly team. While filming took place a while ago, the production of the

video has clearly left its mark and there is a great deal of enthusiasm among the team members when speaking about it, which also reflects the mood that is clear to see in the video. Markus Moser is rightly proud of this three-minute trailer, and not just because the result was so positive – the script came from the team itself. The director and cameraman only filmed on Campus for half a day – a bitterly cold March morning, as Nadia Mattera remembers.

For dessert, several team members enjoy a scoop or two of Gasparini ice cream – a local specialty offered at “prima” that is just as popular with the guests from Novartis as are the exceptional salads, pizzas and pasta. The lively lunch is rounded off by an espresso before work calls again across the street. All that remains is for the boss himself to make a quick detour to the shop next door, where he buys some more ice cream for the freezer in the small office kitchen.