



Merck CEO Stefan Oschmann wants his employees to dare to be more curious.

MANY EMPLOYEES HESITATE TO ASK QUESTIONS

The Merck Group studied the “curiosity index” of employees in Germany, China, and the United States.

new. The urge to explore and the joy of discovery are therefore our most important resources as we search for solutions to global challenges such as the demographic structure of our society and population growth. And that’s why curiosity should play a central role in our work.”

Merck, a global research and technology corporation headquartered in Darmstadt, is a heavyweight in healthcare, life science, and performance materials. It employs 50,000 people in 66 countries, and posted sales of around 15 billion euros in 2016. Its employees work to further develop technologies that enhance life—such as biopharmaceutical treatments for cancer and multiple sclerosis, cutting-edge systems for scientific research and production, and liquid crystals for smartphones and television screens. No one at this company can afford to stand still. Its competitors aren’t standing still, either. Which is why Merck is promoting curiosity as a driving force for innovation.

Merck recently wanted to find out how curious employees are. Although curiosity plays an important role at work, most participants in the company’s study did not consider themselves to be curious. Just one in five people (20%) identified with this quality. Respondents were more likely to describe themselves as organized, team-oriented, and detail-conscious. “Curious” came in twelfth place. But precisely this trait harbors great potential for a company’s ability to innovate, and therefore also for its competitive edge.

“Innovations and technological advances don’t just fall from the sky,” says Stefan Oschmann, Chairman of the Executive Board and CEO of Merck. “They invariably arise from curiosity and an interest in what’s

In order to define and measure curiosity, Merck worked closely together with an expert in the field, Professor Todd Kashdan from George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia. Together they worked out four dimensions of curiosity: inquisitiveness, creativity, openness, and stress resistance. Merck carried out a study consisting of online interviews of more than 3,000 full-time employees in Germany, the United States, and China. The study also included interviews of focus groups.

Nearly three quarters (73%) of the participants reported that they hesitate to ask more questions at their places of work. Almost half of the employees in Germany (45%) agreed with the statement “my employer discourages me from challenging the status quo.” To develop new ideas, the main thing employees need is flexibility. Thirty-five percent of German employees cited self-directed work as the most important factor here.

To improve this situation, Merck launched its Curiosity Initiative in August 2016. Visitors to the interactive online platform at curiosity.merck.de can take a test to discover how curious they are. And receive tips on how to overcome creativity blocks.

Merck CEO Stefan Oschmann personally took charge of this innovation initiative. “I’m convinced that we can dare to be more curious. In fact we need to—in order to understand the technological advances taking place all around us and to actively and responsibly shape our future. We need scientific curiosity in every part of society. The challenges we face are considerable, starting with a population of seven billion—plus all the other forms of life on our planet.” ←