

Startups in the AI boom: innovations at the startup days

How can startups help shape the rapidly growing AI market with innovative ideas and position themselves well? This was the topic of the startup days on 30 May 2024 at Kursaal Bern.

The location itself provided perspective: high above Bern's old town, over 1,300 participants from the deep tech sector gathered at the startup days in the Kursaal Bern. Every year, this family gathering of the Swiss startup scene brings together founders, investors and experts and promotes networking and the exchange of ideas between research and industry.

Keynote by Stuart Russell: The importance of safe AI development

This year's conference focussed on the development of artificial intelligence (AI) and the unique market opportunities currently available. AI pioneer and Professor at UC Berkeley Stuart Russell opened the conference with a gripping presentation on key problems and prospects in the development of intelligent systems. Shortly beforehand, he had debated AI governance with heads of state at the UN summit in Geneva.

Russell sees clever engineering and regulation as a prerequisite for humanity to retain control over its creation and utilise its enormous potential. At the moment, it seems that we are making the same mistake as we did with the internet and social media: Technologies flooded the market before risks such as manipulation by algorithms or security vulnerabilities were regulated. "We need to build secure AI," Russell therefore demanded in his opening speech. "Not build the AI first and then try to make it safe."

Networking, know-how and matchmaking

It is a balancing act between the safe development of systems, which takes time and resources, and the dynamics of a new market. In addition to fundamental thoughts on how to deal with AI, the startup days offered participants plenty of opportunities to network and receive input on company development. This took place in over 50 sessions with 140 speakers, 750 1:1 meetings between startups and investors, a marketplace with over 30 exhibitors and a program on two stages.

Real-life entrepreneurial conversations

The added value is tangible for participants. "We can network directly here," says startup founder Dereck Gibeyo. "Normally, we have to send thousands of emails before we reach an investor. We also get input that immediately helps us move forward."

For example, from established founders who talk about failures on the road to success on the Unplugged Stage. Like Philip Bucher, founder and CEO of Chopfab Boxer AG. The brewery got into financial difficulties due to rapid growth and the pandemic. "We should have reacted and acted faster," summarises Bucher. One of several conclusions that the audience listens to attentively in front of the stage with its living room flair. Heiko Trautwein, Board Member of the Entrepreneurs' Organisation, likes the format: "It's an

open and personal sharing of great founders who can also fail." After questions from the audience, Bucher gives one last tip: "Get the best cracks in your industry on board!"

The best cracks are a key issue in the AI sector. In this young, flourishing market, talent is rare and in high demand. If you want to position yourself as an AI startup, you need experts - in AI technology, of course, but also in marketing and business administration. A good team is essential.

Swiss AI perspectives with Federal Councillor Guy Parmelin

The race for the best talent has long been in full swing. Switzerland must be careful not to be left behind in the international competition. The roundtable with Federal Councillor Guy Parmelin therefore focussed on the question: How can Switzerland take on a pioneering role worldwide in the context of AI? Sixteen experts gave their assessment of the status quo and what measures are needed. Conclusion: Switzerland has talent and important infrastructure such as specialised research centres. The ETH supercomputer "Alps" in Lugano can keep up with the biggest players in the world. But investors - including those from the state - need to be bolder. In the USA, AI research is supported to the tune of billions, whereas in Switzerland the figure is just a few million. Bureaucratic hurdles in the recruitment of foreign talent also need to change.

Federal Councillor Guy Parmelin appreciates the exchange. He will take the experts' concerns back to the Federal Parliament. The founders who come together at the startup days are also undoubtedly valuable to him: "Perhaps they will develop the technologies of tomorrow. All innovations that we can transfer to everyday life are investments in the future." Parmelin advises young entrepreneurs: "If you have good ideas, then have the courage to realise them."

AI research and the digital sovereignty

EPFL Ambassador Martin Rajman agrees that Switzerland needs to promote talent. He is part of the Swiss AI Initiative, which was launched by ETH and EPFL. The initiative aims to bring together players from science, industry and politics in order to position Switzerland as a leading country in AI research and protect its digital sovereignty. This includes, for example, developing its own large language models (LLMs). The initiative also addresses other questions: How do humans and AI work together? What framework conditions are needed in terms of ethics, data protection and security?

At the AI Stage, Rajman is confident: "We are living in an extraordinary time with great opportunities. The train hasn't left the station yet. We can still influence what will happen." But time is pressing: Industry, and therefore innovative startups, must communicate their needs to research. Rajman sees Switzerland's opportunity in specialised LLMs, for example in the healthcare sector.

Diverse opportunities at SUD and its side events

Whether discussing the challenges of AI development at the AI Stage or brainstorming in a workshop on how to attract major investors, the startup days offered a wide range of opportunities to stock up on knowledge and make contacts. Other events also took place around the startup days. The day before, 120 female founders met at the

Collective Gathering to exchange experiences, while over 250 invited guests took part in the Secret Launch, an atmospheric networking event at a secret location.

Isabel Siegrist, founder of Sandborn, also takes a lot away with her: "The startup days bring together everyone from the Swiss ecosystem. I find out what the status quo is and how to make Switzerland a better startup country."

Youngsters – new startups first seen at SUD

More startups are already waiting in the wings. In the Youngsters format, 18 promising early-seed companies were able to present themselves. "First seen at SUD" is the motto: many of them have not yet presented themselves on any other stage and are therefore the hidden gems of the startup scene. It will be interesting to see where they are in 2025 when we open the doors again for startup days 2025!

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About startup days:

startup days (SUD) are the nationwide business and networking event for startups, investors, enablers and SMEs & corporates in Switzerland. Every year, the dynamic Swiss startup ecosystem comes together for this family reunion to strengthen innovation and business growth. Attendees share peer-to-peer knowledge, network and explore collaborations in a safe and supportive environment.