

ISABELLE CHILLIER

MANAGING DIRECTOR, FIEDLER SA, WATCH HAND MANUFACTURER



In the 1970s there were hundreds of watch hand manufacturers dotted all over Switzerland—today there are only four. Revolution talks to Isabelle Chillier, Managing Director of Fiedler SA, about how she ended up in this tiny niche of horological production.

by Sophie Furley

REVOLUTION: DID YOU KNOW THAT YOU WANTED TO TAKE OVER THE FAMILY WATCH HAND MANUFACTURING BUSINESS WHEN YOU WERE A CHILD?

ISABELLE CHILLIER: When I was a little girl I could never have imagined that I would take over the family hand manufacturing business. I completed a Master's degree in international economics and worked in finance before moving to Paris, where I worked in the art world and continued my studies with a diploma in cultural management and a diploma in history of art at Christies. Back then, my only thought was how I was going to tell my parents that I had no plans to return to Geneva. But one day my mom came to Paris to visit me and told me "If you do want to come back to Geneva, don't wait too long." I didn't really realize what she was talking about, but not too long afterwards it suddenly hit me: I was in the wrong place, doing the wrong thing. And that's when I came back to Geneva to work for my father's hand manufacturing business.

HOW HAS YOUR ROLE IN THE COMPANY CHANGED SINCE YOU ARRIVED?

When I arrived in 2001, I started working on the administration side of the business, and step by step, when I saw something that I could improve, I tried to improve it. I am naturally curious and wanted to learn about the machines, the workshops and the commercial side of things. In 2006, we moved to new premises and it was at this time that I hired a logistics manager and a quality manager. Over the last 12 months we have made a lot of changes, and I have a very clear vision of where we are going.

WHAT DO YOU LIKE ABOUT THE HAND MANUFACTURING BUSINESS?

Watch hands are so much more than just a watch component. On the one hand, there is the production and industrial side, but on the other, there is this world of luxury. I love that we sit between these two worlds. I also feel that it is more an industry for girls [*she laughs*]*—hand production is not a tough industry. Hands are both technical, as they are attached to the movement, but also aesthetic. This is where our biggest challenge lies.*

ARE THERE ANY PARTICULAR CONSTRAINTS THAT YOU HAVE TO CONSIDER WHEN PRODUCING A WATCH HAND?

The most important constraint is the dimensions; they have become increasingly precise over the years, as the means of control have improved. Now you have controls that magnify the hands onto a big screen, where before we controlled against a paper plan. There are also different constraints depending on the type of hands, such as those

that follow the quality criteria of the *Poinçon de Genève* or chronograph hands, for example.

WHAT ARE THE MOST COMPLICATED HANDS YOU MAKE?

The complexity of a watch hand can have many forms. You can have differently shaped hands and then there are the facets of the hand. Some might have three facets, where the two outside facets are polished and the inside one is sand-blasted, for example. The size of the batch can sometimes create difficulties, too. A small lot may be easy to produce, but if you need to produce the same hands on an industrial scale, it can create different challenges.

WHAT ARE THE LOWEST LOTS YOU PRODUCE?

We can produce as little as 10 hands for a client, but we would produce between 60 to 100 hands to guarantee that we had 10 perfect hands.

WHAT WOULD MOST PEOPLE BE SURPRISED TO LEARN ABOUT HANDS?

I think the first thing is that most people don't even know that there are companies just producing hands. And secondly, there are so many manual operations involved in making a hand; there can be up to 30 different operations in the production of a hand, and I don't think people realize that.

WHY DON'T THE BIG BRANDS MAKE THEIR OWN HANDS?

A big brand can do anything, but hand production is very complicated. You can't just buy the machines. A lot of the machines and tools we use, we have made ourselves or have personalized for our own production.

DOES THE FACT THAT THE COMPANY IS A FAMILY BUSINESS BRING ADDITIONAL STRESS AND RESPONSIBILITY TO YOUR ROLE AS MANAGING DIRECTOR?

No, not at all, or at least I don't feel it. I am currently taking the company into hand (excuse the pun), which is a lot of work, but also a lot of fun.

WHAT DO YOU ENJOY MOST ABOUT YOUR JOB?

The entrepreneurship. I love to have ideas and to develop them. I am more interested in the organization of the company. After all, I am not an engineer, but I have ideas and I let them flourish.

WHERE WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE THE COMPANY IN THE FUTURE?

I would like it to remain a family business and remain a leader in the hand business, in terms of quality and service. Besides this, I would like to improve production. ★