

# Executive decisions : Steve reviews and compares to GB some recent comments from Benedikt Weibel the CE of SBB

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## EXECUTIVE DECISIONS

**Steve reviews and compares to GB some recent comments from Benedikt Weibel the CE of SBB**

During the Autumn the board of SBB began what appears to be a coordinated campaign of briefing on their problems. On one Sunday the Chairman and the Chief Executive each gave interviews to different newspapers along the same theme that money is tight, performance is slipping and things have got to change. Following this Chief Executive Benedikt Weibel was featured in an interview on the *swissinfo* website. During 2005 SBB's performance has been seen as slipping and he has been under pressure to improve or, from some quarters, to resign. This follows the December 2004 timetable change which saw a 12.5% increase in services and a 7.5% increase in passengers - unfortunately the year also included a major signalling computer failure, a national power grid blackout and some incredible bad weather. Herr Weibel denied that the timetable change had led to the unreliability, saying that it was stable, although the perceived delays have continued even after the short term external troubles have been cleared. Parallels with Virgin Cross Country's "Operation Princess" spring to mind here - a radical new timetable with an increase in services and pressure on resources which generated an overwhelming increase in passengers but couldn't cope. Hopefully SBB will be able to pull through and not have to resort to hacking large parts out of the plan to save the rest. He said that the railways are not immune from technical problems and that they should work to improve their contingency plans for when things do go wrong, I can think of at least two members stuck in Bern during the chaos of the power cut who would agree with that. Part of his problem is that the Swiss have been used to a system which didn't go wrong or, if something did, had enough spare capacity to quick-

ly overcome problems. Readers will remember mention in past editions of trains with crews held on standby in case another had problems (many British controllers would go dewy eyed at the thought!) but the increased service level means that not only are these reduced but those left have to cover for a much greater number of potential problems. Also over the past few years SBB have been cutting down on staff numbers, with many more stations either completely unstaffed or with normal ticket sales functions undertaken by agencies such as the *avec* shops. In a normal day this is fine but when the trains stop who do the passengers turn to for help? To a British traveller this may seem both familiar and part of the rail travel experience but to the Swiss it is all new and probably a little frightening. So, how bad is performance for it to cause this amount of press briefing and for the Minister of Transport to tell the board that their bonuses will be cut? The published figure for January to November is 95.64% on time or within 5 minutes. In his interview with *Sonntags Zeitung* Herr Weibel said that it was not good enough for the 95% level to be regularly surpassed only at weekends and that weekday services need to be improved - which raises doubts about how durable the timetable is since bad weather and technical problems don't just occur on weekdays. This implies that weekday performance is notably below the 95% level and weekends are dragging the average up. Here we come to another British comparison, most British TOCs exclude weekends from their publicly displayed performance figures so the numbers which eventually get bounced around the press are only for Monday to Friday, Herr Weibel's target period. His comments suggest that SBB were only achieving the low 90's whereas most

British TOCs are spread across the 80's, usually measured against a 10 minutes of right time rule. Direct comparison is made even harder because British TOCs use a variety of loopholes to hack large amounts of delay out of the figures presented to the public; next time you read a monthly performance poster don't stop at the percentages but check whether any "void days" have been subtracted! The Swiss seem to include everything so their figures are probably a more accurate reflection of events. To be honest I don't think any of these figures are really comparable unless you use either absolute right time or a proportion of train journey allowance, say trains within 103% of advertised journey time. SBB's longest services are around 4½ hours whereas Virgin XC can more than double that, so if a Basel-Chiasso service rolls in 5 minutes late has it performed better than a Glasgow-Penzance which loses 10 minutes overall? More to the point, what's really important to passengers - the length or the effect of a delay? What's "better" - arriving 10 late, missing a connection and being stuck or 15 late but having a member of staff ready to help? This latter point brings us back to Herr Weibel's concerns about being able to react to problems when they happen, it's good that he grasps the issue (unlike many British managers) but unfortunate that staff numbers seem to be under more pressure due to the financial troubles besetting the company.

Finances were the other main issue in the *swissinfo* interview. The latest half year results show a loss of SFr36.6 million, much of it clocked up by Cargo. That division had been expected to break even in 2005 but Herr Weibel blames its poorer performance on a downturn in traffic caused by an increase in the Swiss HGV weight limit from 25 to 40 tonnes during the year. Am I the only one who thinks he should have seen that coming when they did the original forecast? The Federal Government is not willing to bail them out so the result will be further cutbacks

in jobs and services at Cargo. Another factor which probably had an effect is competition from open access rail operators but this wasn't mentioned, possibly because they don't want to highlight the success of competitors. Given that these operators deal mostly with block trains running right across the country and out the other side, whilst SBB Cargo also have to handle internal mixed traffic which is relatively much more expensive to run, it is somewhat unfair of the Government to stand back. If Cargo confined their activities to only running the same sort of transit traffic as the open access operators their losses would no doubt disappear, but I'm sure the Government would come off the fence at that suggestion.

The operating loss is nowhere near being the big problem - that is the pension fund. Once again we are back to something with a British comparison although this time the British directors will be feeling relieved! A joint working party has been set up with the Federal Government but this black hole is so big that, even if the Government takes over responsibility for those who have already retired, SBB will still be left with a shortfall of SFr1 **BILLION** for future liabilities. Having landed that bombshell the interview moved swiftly on to the new total smoking ban on Swiss trains without further discussion. If I was a member of the SBB Pension Scheme smoking bans would not be the top of my interests.

All in all this spate of interviews has worrying undertones. I think if anyone has any SBB rural branch lines they've always fancied doing, now may be a good time!

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