

Abo SWISS ANSWER TO CHAT GPT

From the mountain bunker to the doctor's office

Neuroscientist Pascal Kaufmann is revitalizing the AI market. Companies like his Alpine AI are strengthening Switzerland's position between the US and China.

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"Everyone should know: When it's important, we use Swiss software": Entrepreneur Pascal Kaufmann.

Those: Thomas Egli

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S Imagine you're a doctor, and your job could suddenly become easier. Here's how: Before consulting a patient, you place a small, nearly invisible earpiece in your ear – similar to the models used on TV. You ask the patient their name and symptoms, and you concentrate fully on the conversation. No tedious typing, no averting your gaze. Artificial intelligence (AI) automatically documents all information in the patient's file.

"You only have to make the diagnosis yourself for legal reasons," says Pascal Kaufmann, founder and CEO of Alpine AI, which offers precisely such a solution: Swiss GPT, a kind of Swiss answer to Chat GPT. It specializes in highly regulated sectors such as hospitals, but also government agencies, research institutions, and the financial sector. Can the startup even compete with tech giants like Open AI, Google, and Meta?

Cracking the "Brain Code"

A January morning in Zurich. Pascal Kaufmann gives a tour of the local office of Alpine AI, which is headquartered in Davos. In Zurich, the team is located in a historic villa on Rämistrasse.

Future technology in an old building – "I like the contrast," says Kaufmann, whose workstation is framed by five screens. It's the control center from which Kaufmann, via headset, manages not only Swiss GPT, but countless of his activities.

The 46-year-old neuroscientist is one of the most prolific entrepreneurs in the field of AI in Switzerland. In 2010, he founded StarMind with Marc Vontobel, an AI-powered platform that connects knowledge and expertise within companies. His heartfelt mission, however, is the Mindfire initiative, with which he is attempting to crack the "brain code," the principle of intelligence. "For this, I need language models. That's how Swiss GPT came about," says Kaufmann.

Safety is particularly important

Swiss GPT isn't a proprietary language model. Instead, Alpine AI uses the most advanced open-source language models as a basis and trains them on customer data. To protect against access by attackers and foreign authorities, the entire process runs on its own servers in the Swiss mountains. This, along with its own software, is its most important asset, says Kaufmann: "We use some of the most secure data centers in the world."

Anyone responsible for a research department or working with sensitive government or patient data would ultimately prefer to trust a Swiss solution rather than an American or Chinese one when introducing a new AI tool, especially when it comes to issues like data protection and technological sovereignty. "We are trying to leverage the outstanding position of Swiss high-tech worldwide and leverage the trust bonus internationally as well. Everyone should know: When it's important, we rely on Swiss software. That's our positioning."

Swiss advantage between security and psychology

The mountains offer physical protection, and the data is geographically and legally protected: This can be attractive for highly regulated sectors. Franziska Bächler, a legal scholar with a doctorate from the University of Basel, nevertheless sees challenges: "If large AI models for companies are run on servers in Switzerland, security concerns about the use of foreign networks can be reduced, and potential false flag attacks can be more easily detected and traced." However, sovereignty over the hosting of the algorithms alone does not eliminate all security concerns.

For the results generated by the software, it is also relevant which data the model uses, what quantity and quality this data has, how consistent it is, whether it is usable for the model or the specific question, how consistently it is collected, curated and used and how securely it is stored.

Alpine AI jumps into the niche

In this complex situation, a Swiss provider doesn't automatically have the edge when it comes to data protection. "Data security is fundamentally ensured even through the cloud data centers of Microsoft, Google, and Amazon," says Prafull Sharma, AI and cloud expert at PwC Switzerland. While it makes sense for the federal government to also invest in a private cloud, for example, with the Swiss Government Cloud, not every activity in a highly regulated sector requires specialized or even national AI solutions. "Many of the requirements are more psychological in nature."

A good niche for Alpine AI. According to the company, around sixty institutions in Switzerland already use the service. Swiss GPT is technically and financially competitive, says Kaufmann.

For a company, the solution is no more expensive per employee than, for example, Open AI's. Furthermore, it is less error-prone because the software is specifically trained using customer data.

Swiss AIs benefit from trust bonus

Alpine AI is still a small AI company with 15 employees. In addition to Kaufmann and his co-founder Thilo Stadelmann, Professor of Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning at the ZHAW, the commercial register also lists Daniela Suter, a biologist and AI expert with a doctorate, Marcel Blattner, a physicist and entrepreneur, and Andrea Luca Schärer, Head of Product. And the team is set to grow: Kaufmann is already planning a major financing round.

He doesn't reveal how much initial capital he received or how much money he intends to raise. Venture capitalists from the US have been involved from the beginning, and there's no shortage of interested venture capitalists, says Kaufmann: The runway is sufficient.

What Swiss GPT can do, others in Switzerland are also attempting. For example, Unique, a GPT specifically for banks, or the equally well-positioned startup Enterprise Bot, which provides AI-supported chatbots and voice assistants for companies. What Alpine AI emphasizes, however, according to experts, is the interplay between software and its own server infrastructure.

Because with data centers alone, a Swiss company can never compete with the

Keeping up with the billions of investments made by Microsoft and others. A national digital giant like Swisscom has already had this painful experience with its own cloud infrastructure.

“Talents and know-how are more powerful than fast chips”

The large-scale business of multinational data clouds is already occupied by American big tech companies.

However, Swiss companies can still score points in the field of artificial intelligence. Marcel Salathé, co-director of the EPFL AI Center, advocates national AI solutions "not only in highly regulated areas." The stronger the country's AI expertise, the less technological dependence on other countries like the US. The current US chip debate clearly demonstrates how quickly AI technology can become a geopolitical lever.

In fact, shortly before leaving office, the administration of US President Joe Biden announced export controls on AI chips, which also affect Switzerland as a technology and innovation hub. AI entrepreneur Pascal Kaufmann is relaxed about the American initiative: the currently available technology is sufficient for his purposes. Because: "Talent and know-how are more powerful than fast chips." And Switzerland, thanks to its high quality of life, is in a position to attract the most talented individuals to the country.

This way, the country may still be able to win the race for the best artificial intelligence with the best human intelligence. Or at least be among the top contenders.

