CATHARINA DAUM

Job shop business relies on digitization

The world was a very different place 100 years ago – but the Gefinal company founded by Ernst Hildebrandt was already up and running. Today, his grandson Ingo is the third generation of the family to head up the business. Many things have remained the same, but he has also had to make some changes to remain competitive. Read on to find out how a high bay racking system heralded the shape of things to come – and how success is linked to creativity.

At the end of June, Ingo Hildebrandt celebrated his company's 100th anniversary not just once, but twice. His enthusiasm was understandable, because Gefinal is in fine shape, and has been ever since it was founded by his grandfather a century ago. Since 44-year-old Ingo took over the reins, he has demonstrated an impressive ability to find creative ways of tackling new challenges and keeping pace with new technologies, especially when it comes to developing tailor-made solutions for his customers.

Gefinal constantly develops offerings

It all began in conventional enough circumstances. Gefinal had established a business making products for the mechanical engineering sector with a particular focus on stainless steel. "But we broke out of that mold, and now we also work with brass, copper and titanium. A significant number of our customers now come from the medical and food industries." Gefinal's products now include everything from sausage portioners to palladium-coated titanium expanded metals for smartphone displays, with batch sizes ranging from 1 to 100,000. This is a company that seems to offer something new around every corner. One example is the caravan pop top roofs made in Gefinal's inimitable style: "We've developed a knack for those that no one else has mastered. It's one of our unique selling points!" says Hildebrandt. Though unwilling to reveal the secret behind that particular product, he acknowledges that it put their abilities to the test: "It was incredibly tricky getting it right. We had to start from scratch and get really creative!" So what spurs on this ambitious Hessian businessman? Essentially, the urge to create things that other people regard as impossible. Hildebrandt and his team simply refuse to be intimidated. "If a customer's needs change, we simply switch to a different manufacturing technology." The company packages itself as a one-stop provider and doesn't shy away from even the most challenging assignments. From shop fittings to designer lamps, Gefinal's portfolio covers just about everything, even stretching to unusual services such as cleaning sheet metal parts.

Fascination with sheet metal – and close family ties

Ingo Hildebrandt's success speaks for itself, but things haven't always been easy. After completing his apprenticeship as a manufacturing engineer, Hildebrandt worked in the family business for a year before joining the management board in 2001. His switch to an executive role was unexpected, but unavoidable: "My dad was very ill, so I suddenly found myself taking over the business in my mid-20s. It wasn't easy, and I certainly had to earn my spurs." The experience he gained in that first year at the helm strengthened his resolution to take the company to the next level. He was determined that Gefinal should make more products in more creative ways, moving away from traditional sheet metal fabrication and adopting the role of a systems provider. "My fascination with sheet metal began during my apprenticeship," says Hildebrandt.

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Ingo Hildebrandt, managing director Gefinal Blech- und Stahlbau GmbH

In good times and in bad: A couple who have accomplished a great deal together: Redwana Hildebrandt is Ingo's most trusted adviser.
  – Christian Mader

The next generation: Ingo Hildebrandt's nephew Andy is already on board. The two have similar hobbies and are great friends.
  – Christian Mader

 The company's logo has changed over the past 100 years, but the name remains the same.

The word Gefinal is an acronym of a German phrase for a company that makes industrial equipment.
  – Christian Mader

And his enthusiasm hasn't wavered over the past eight years. In fact, nowadays this father of three has an even clearer idea of what he wants to achieve. He is supported by his family, with both his wife Redwana and his sister Ines working alongside him. "We have a very close, trusting relationship. That gives me the freedom to sometimes take unusual steps and add products to our portfolio that other people wouldn't even consider." His wife is far more than the perfect helpmate to her husband. Her business administration qualifications make her the perfect choice to take on responsibility for areas such as HR. And the next generation is waiting in the wings, with their 26-year-old nephew Andy already on board. He joined Gefinal after graduating from university, making his uncle Ingo very proud in the process.

Gefinal believes in digitization

Back when Ingo Hildebrandt took over from his father, he and his team were still carrying out job costing with a pen and paper. But he quickly saw the need to switch to digitalized processes. Gefinal's workforce has now grown to 100 employees, up from just 23 in 2001. "We've been growing fast in recent years, but now we're keen to take our foot off the pedal and focus on offering our customers an even broader range of products. Specifically, products that call for our special blend of creativity and expertise," says the managing director. He feels it is important to get to know his employees personally and

support them where possible, arguing that this is the only surefire way to keep Gefinal's competitive edge and provide customers with single-source solutions. That's something that Hildebrandt believes in passionately.

There is a story he likes to tell that illustrates this enthusiasm perfectly: "Last year, Samsung launched the German version of their virtual assistant Bixby. The South Korean company presented it in a soundproof enclosure at their booth at the IFA trade fair. Developers and design engineers from Gefinal and Samsung spent weeks working together to achieve the optimum results. One of the standout features of the sheet steel column was a special acoustic insulation material, which Gefinal applied after painting. "The project really showed what my employees are capable of. They are workaholics, but in the most positive sense imaginable! Whenever they're confronted with something new or particularly challenging, they pull out all the stops because they want to demonstrate what they can do." Robot welding was another good example of the team taking the ball and running: "People had barely heard of the technology back then, but we didn't let that intimidate us." Hildebrandt's team even took on the incredibly challenging task of making their own fixtures for parts that have zero tolerances. Laser welding continues to be a rarity in the job shop business. But Gefinal already has the next ace up its sleeve: handheld laser welding with a point laser. The operation is carried out manually instead of by a robot. "It supplements our robot welding services by allowing us to make exciting products without requiring any fixtures. That makes us even more flexible."

 The company's oldest TRUMPF machine is 16 years old and is still in use on a daily basis. – Christian Mader

 The TruPunch 5000 is the newest member of the family. – Christian Mader

Hey Mr. Robot: The TruLaser Robot 5020 helps Gefinal perform challenging welding jobs. – Christian Mader

Improving through creativity and automation

It takes more than just good ideas to inject creativity into the manufacturing business. The machines also play a critical role, and Gefinal has placed its bets on automation. The TruMatic 7000 features a brush table and automatic tool changer. It is connected to the STOPA storage system, as are the new TruPunch 5000 and the company's oldest TRUMPF machine – a 16-year-old TruLaser L3050. The high bay racking system heralded the start of Ingo Hildebrandt's own career in the company – although it did generate a fair amount of debate at the time! "My father didn't want such a big racking system. He didn't think it was necessary. I felt differently and fought for it from the start. Today, our business is even more productive and we can take on more exciting projects, so I'm glad that I got my way!" That's the kind of attitude that has helped Ingo Hildebrandt build a successful future for this long-established company – and he's always thinking ahead: "Our job is not to simply react to developments, but to make things better and use our creativity to suggest better solutions to our customers. That will keep us going for another 100 years!"

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Ingo Hildebrandt, managing director Gefinal Blech- und Stahlbau GmbH

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