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CATHARINA DAUM

The future is paperless

In a time when it has become impossible to imagine life without smartphones, tablets and computers, Corné van Opdorp is taking things to their logical conclusion within his company: comprehensive digitalization. The BOZ Group in the Netherlands has already initiated a process that many companies have not even thought about. This is a courageous step.

At the end of 2008, when Corné van Opdorp took over at the BOZ Group from his father, the company's founder, there was one thing it didn't take him long to notice: the printouts of order documentation lying on each machine. "Without these papers, there was basically nothing the staff could do. That was quite simply a no-go for me," the 37-year-old explains. And since he is not just fundamentally open to change but also very interested in the latest technologies, Corné decided to completely digitalize the BOZ Group and turn it into a smart factory.

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"Of course, there's no way to deliver comprehensive change overnight. But we've already achieved a whole lot," Corné says. The company's success speaks for itself: the BOZ Group is one of the Top Three sheet metal processing companies in the Netherlands, with a workforce that is now over 100 strong. Its factory in Bergen op Zoom produces parts for the high-tech sector, for medical technology and for the food industry. During the day, the focus is on smaller jobs; bigger batches are processed at night and on the weekends. The Dutch company specializes in thin sheets up to six millimeters thick. It was also among the first to adopt laser welding for sheet metal processing and to purchase a TRUMPF panel bender. This means the BOZ Group not only serves customers throughout the sheet metal process chain, but also supplies correspondingly complex components.

Corné is convinced that digitalization has to proceed step by step at his company. This will keep the degree of adjustment manageable for everyone. "Our first milestone was to ensure every order can be programmed offline, to make work even more effective and efficient," the CEO reports. "We no longer program on the machines themselves; instead, programming is done at a desk during our main production hours. That lets us make much better use of the machines."

This is particularly important given that all the machines in BOZ's production facilities are connected to form a network, meaning they can be monitored and controlled centrally. This network includes the STOPA storage system, with its 571

storage locations and connected robot. Any problem reports can for instance be sent by text message or e-mail directly to an engineer's smart-phone. The Dutch company already makes very little use of paper – and the future is paperless. In practice, this is achieved using 2D codes, which the laser machinery marks onto the sheet metal parts. Each code contains information on things like the subsequent process step. TRUMPF calls them Dot Matrix Codes and has worked with BOZ to modify them so they meet the specific requirements in Bergen op Zoom.

Corné van Opdorp (37 years old), CEO (© Tim van der Most)

The machinery of the BOZ Group includes a TruBend Center. (© Tim van der Most)

Two laser welding cells connect components to each other. (© Tim van der Most)

No change without knowledge

Employees are learning about this digital transformation little by little. "That way, nobody feels overwhelmed," Corné says. To make the transition as uncomplicated and as pleasant as possible, the CEO regularly has his managers and staff complete external training courses. After all, as his father taught him long ago: "You cannot think only of your own company; you need to go one step further and see what else is out there in the world."

The younger Van Opdorp likewise lives by this motto. That explains why he is active not only within the BOZ Group but also as chairman of the Dutch sheet metal processing association. This role is something of an honorable tradition for Corné – his father founded the association many years ago. Members meet three times a year in the offices of one of the member companies, plus a fourth time for a fact-finding mission. The most recent such trip took them to Silicon Valley to learn about digitalization and the latest technology trends.

Nowadays, Corné is known in the Netherlands as one of the most influential ambassadors for Industry 4.0. This is perhaps surprising, given his non-technical background: he studied business management, and sees numbers and processes as his greatest strengths. Presumably it is precisely this comprehensive outlook that helped him implement his own vision for his company with such courage and dynamism. Simply because he believed in it.

"We were very quick to make the move towards the smart factory, which is why we had to be very resourceful ourselves. But it was worth it." Peter Quist (29 years old), responsible for finances and digitalization (© Tim van der Most)

"Working with a welding robot is more demanding and more challenging than the work I was doing previously – I like it!" Jianbin Lin (20 years old), production employee (© Tim van der Most)

His father, too, took a bold risk when he founded the BOZ Group at the age of 28. The company came full circle when Corné took up the mantle of CEO – also aged 28. But he is nothing like his father and has a very different management style, as his employees can attest. Some of them remember their current boss romping around in the factory as a young boy. This close contact is very important to Corné, which is why he spends at least an hour every day on the shop floor talking with a broad spectrum of staff: "I'm interested in each member of the workforce as a person. And I'm interested in the work each of them is currently doing. I want people to know that." A glance at how the BOZ Group handles succession planning is enough to show that these are not just empty words. Jianbin Lin and Peter Quist are two good examples. Both were offered exciting opportunities for career development within the company – and they have gladly taken them up. Peter had a free hand in setting up the IT infrastructure, while Jianbin had a chance to really get to grips with the details of laser welding with robots. Many of their colleagues will be given similar opportunities in the future – because courageous and qualified employees are essential to making digitalization a reality.

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