

So that machines never run out of air

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For four decades Micronel in Tagelswangen, Switzerland has been producing miniature fans for devices and respirators for people.

Till Hiemer

Humans need air to breathe; machines need it for cooling. These two needs are combined at the company Micronel. Today forty people work at the facility in Tagelswangen, Switzerland, exactly forty years after Peter Meier Senior started the company single-handedly in a garage. This is a "vintage '68" of another sort.

His son, Peter Meier Junior has been running the company for quite some time, and the father has moved on to the board of directors. The elder invented the world's first ultra-slim fan a quarter century ago, just 14 millimeters thick, in a device measuring six by six centimeters.

A nose ahead in technology

As recorded in the commercial register, the purpose of the company is "the production and distribution of electric and electronic components and small devices," meaning the company develops, produces, and markets miniature fans and respirators.

Micronel is a technology leader in its field and has set new worldwide standards in many areas. The international orientation of the stock corporation is also reflected in its English slogan: "fan and blower technology and personal protection components." With exports comprising 85 percent of sales, this is perfectly fitting.

Toilets and refrigerators in outer space

The product range extends from battery-powered sleep-apnea devices (for respiratory paralysis, which formerly could be handled only with power-driven air compressors) to various sub-components in cars (such as cooling components in GPS devices for 66,000 new BMW 5 Series autos) and breathable whole-body suits for fighter-jet pilots who face biochemical risk.

"From chemical toilets in mobile homes to halogen lamps in the dentist's office, from door-opening systems in the Airbus A380 to refrigerators in the International Space Station, we ventilate and cool virtually everything," says Meier, who in this connection also refers to the company's collaboration with universities.

Loyal employees

Peter Meier Junior expects the company's future to remain in Switzerland. He describes himself as rather conservative. Important to him are sustainability, trust (true to the inscription on the Swiss five-franc coin, "*Dominus providebit* – The Lord will provide"), and a corporate culture of open communication. You can see this when you accompany him on a tour of the plant. Staff joke with the CEO as a colleague, and everyone is on a first-name basis.

Most of the employees have been with the company for years. "By no means do we have a hire-and-fire mentality, as one knows in the USA." Entire families depend on the salaries. And many of these families he knows very well—which is not the least reason the company takes on two apprentices a year.

"Certified" friendliness

At the company's anniversary celebration in January, the production staff presented Meier a "certificate for outstanding performance and exceptional friendliness." The anniversary of the ISO-certified company was celebrated by the entire staff with a lunch, a visit to Circus Knie, and an entrepreneurs reception last month. Planned for the end of this month is a visit to a supplier,

injection-molding company Laupen in Wald, and a cruise on Lake Zurich, to be followed in December with a big celebration in the QN Bar in Effretikon.

Recently the company began sponsoring the U-23 (under age 23) bicycle racer Elias Schmäh from Wädenswil. This sponsorship evolved through personal relations. The company donates about 50,000 Swiss francs a year to nonprofit organizations. "When we prosper, we would rather share something instead of driving big cars," says the CEO.

When asked whether the company, with its high percentage of exports, has fallen victim to the current recession, Meier says the company clearly feels that things are changing. Call-off orders are being postponed, and the declining euro is of course also suboptimal. "But we strive for organic growth, and, except for mortgages, we want to become as independent from banks as possible," says Meier of the company's financial strategy.

Sales doubled in four years

Sales at Micronel rose enormously in the last half decade, more than doubling from 8 million Swiss francs in 2003 to 16.5 million last year. Over a third (38 percent) is earned in the energy and industrial sectors; another quarter (24 percent) is earned with personal protection components. The remainder falls in the sectors medical (13 percent), dental (11 percent), automotive (10 percent), and plumbing equipment (4 percent).

