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Bühler Holdings – from a different angle

by Hans Vetsch

In 1860, some 157 years ago, a company called Bühler Brothers was founded in Uzwil St. Gallen and I can't believe that I was working for this company almost 50 years ago. It just makes me feel a bit older than 21 and I would like to share some of my experiences while working there. At the end are some current and very interesting data about this very successful, but not that well known company.

It was in 1969 when I joined Bühler Brothers as an apprentice in mechanical engineering. Bühler Brothers employed about 5000 people in 1970 in Uzwil and around the world and about 400 apprentices all in Uzwil across all divisions. They ranged from milling engineers, machine fitters, mechanics, technical drafting, electronics, electricians to sheet metal fabrication, carpentry, office professions just to mention some.

The factory in Uzwil is best described as a campus of a multitude of buildings housing different businesses making up the company. It's similar to a large University campus where you drive on to campus and then you try and find your way around. In short, it was back then, a very big place.

The first year we were working pretty much full time in a full sized workshop that was predominantly non-profit making. We got exposed to the different engineering tasks which set us up for working in a range of production environments to deepen our knowledge. Buhler had its own technical school with standards set to ensure we had the best opportunity to achieve high skill standards. 1½ days per week was spent behind the desk on theoretical tasks. The company also provided physical exercise for the apprentices with one or two hours per week spent on sports activities. A fully qualified sports trainer, together with a crew of apprentices with the right attitude and interest, ran a diverse number of sports programs for all apprentices. I was fortunate enough to be part of this

team. It gave me an opportunity to attend the Magglingen Sports Institute to obtain, the then called VU Trainer certification. This gave me another couple of hours away from my real job doing what I liked. As you can see the company set an example in guiding us into our professional lives.

I finished my training in 1973, had a break to do my duty in the army and ended up there for some 35 weeks. It was during the last two years of my apprenticeship that I decided to aim for some overseas work experience and soon after I completed the army service I was successful in joining the "external installation" department. My first job was in Wallisellen, not exactly overseas but one has to start somewhere and two of us were in this chocolate factory replacing parts and machines. It was a real eye opener to work in food factories rather than engineering workshop where food hygiene didn't really play any part in our daily activities. All of a sudden we had to cooperate with the production team and take special steps to avoid contaminations.

No sooner was I back, I had to pack my bags to go to Sweden. It was there that I realised that there was more to this job than technical knowledge. The customer was a bit irate about some delays and diplomacy and long working days saved our bacon. We weren't even finished when a call came to go across to Oslo to fix a problem for another customer. Well, weekends were there to catch up on work and not sleep!

And so I travelled around Europe, had some time in Germany, then 4 months in Innsbruck installing a pasta line under extremely difficult conditions. Temperatures in that factory were 30 plus all day. The machine was a prototype endless installation issues and the customer was pressuring us continuously with deadlines. After that it was off to the south of France for another pasta line installation. These plants are typically 4-6

meters wide and high and anything from 20 to 50 meters long and start normally with an empty building and a mountain of huge crates packed full of bits and pieces. France was very challenging as the French just didn't like these German speaking intruders, but hard work and patience got us accepted with the crew and the public in the latter part. It was a great 4 months, plenty of weekends at the sea or at times a race home to catch up with my girlfriend!!

That late summer I got a call to come home where I was briefed on a project in Japan. Well, that got me going as it was a sole charge project and a bit far away for help if needed. I clearly remember the flight from Moscow to Tokyo, probably one of my all time worst flights and it was my first long distance one. I remember sitting in the seat for several hours without any service at all. The plane moved along a bit like a boat in a two meter swell and outside we could see severe snowstorms and temperatures were something like -50 degrees the flight indicator showed us being somewhere in the middle of Siberia!! I have never felt as bad in any of my subsequent flights and I have had a few of those!!

I got a further briefing at the agency in Tokyo before being put on this train I had to board and get off, I think, at the 12th stop!! Well there were no English signs, almost no one spoke English and I was the only white person around. I did make it and was shown my staffroom and I was eager to see what the task ahead was. Well, there was this massive jumble of huge wooden crates left out scattered in a big yard and everything appeared to be mixed up. I have to say, those 3 months were some of the more challenging ones I have had. Christmas came and it was a great relief to get a ticket home for two weeks to catch up with family, friends and that girlfriend – she was still around!! Off to Japan again to complete the first task and then it was on to Osaka for a month for another smaller job.



It became clear to me then that this was great but not for me long term. I went home and requested a transfer and permission to attend the HTL in St. Gallen as a working student. That meant 6 hours work, 4 hours school every day and study in between. My time was booked up to the max for the next two years.

At Christmas 1976 that girlfriend and I got engaged. Returning to work, my old boss approached me with a job opportunity. (Don't you like it when they put it that way?) Some key questions popped up:

Where? Timaru New Zealand

What's involved?

Installation of pasta and snack food plants and technical support

Can't speak English that well

- no problem you will learn

Can my fiancée come along?

For 6 months but no work permit

Rewards?

Salary offer was half of what I had!!

Length and when – 3 years starting now

Well some brainstorming and discussion kicked into gear such as relationships, school, family, jobs and so on. In the end WE decided to take this opportunity and pick up where we left off once we returned.

We decided to quit our jobs, put school on hold and Vreni (that girlfriend!) and I decided to get married so she could stay for the whole three years (good reason to get married??). The wedding was put together, we sold our belongings and planned to leave at the end of April 1977. After some immigration delays we ended up leaving in May 1977.

As some of you know, 40 years later we are still here!

Timaru Milling Company was the furthest away customer of Bühler. I had another offer to build a new plant in Sydney in the late 80s but neither of us were interested in living in Sydney and going through the workload such projects bring with them.

What it does show you is the coverage Bühler Holdings had in those days and much more today.

Bühler is a success story and I believe it survived because it was a family enterprise then and is Bühler Holdings now.

As you can see in the stats in the box, the company has grown a lot, it is profitable and appears to be set up for the future. Great place to work, almost as good as retirement!

Food processing machines made by Bühler in Uzwil St. Gallen. This Company feeds the world

Number one in grains, cereal, rice, chocolate, beer and pasta: The Company Bühler in Uzwil is a giant. If their machines were turned off worldwide, the whole world would run out of food within days.

The company is 156 years old, though apart from the locals of Eastern Switzerland only insiders can understand the concept. "Nutrition for us is systematically-relevant", says the Chief of Bühler Calvin Grieder (60). These are the facts:

Grains: Bühler is the largest manufacturer of milling machines in the world. 66% of grains worldwide are milled into flour by Bühler machines. Mega-mills in Nigeria and Indonesia produce up to 10,000 tonnes of flour per day. The largest and most modern mill in Switzerland, Swissmill, in Zurich, is also using Bühler machines.

Rice: 30% of worldwide crops are cleaned, peeled and polished through Bühler machines. Special cameras scan several thousand grains per second. If one doesn't comply with the norm then it is sorted.

Chocolate: 60% of the worldwide Cacao crops are processed by Bühler machines. Swiss companies Lindt & Sprüngli, Barry Callebaut and Laederach are also customers of Bühler.

Beer: Without Bühler there is no Heineken. 66% of worldwide malt stocks come through Bühler machines.

Pasta: 30% of all pasta is produced through Bühler machines. Bühler's capacity is equal to that of the Italian company Fava.

Breakfast cereal: Bühler is clearly no 1 in this sector. US giant Kellogg's is one of their customers.

Coffee: Bühler is number two in the world in supplying coffee bean processing plants

The company's profit is increasing despite the strong Swiss Franc. The turnover last year was 2.4 billion Francs, 3.4% more than the previous year. The profit even rose by 18% to 143 million Francs despite the high value of the Swiss Franc.

After the end of the lowest Euro/Chf exchange rate, Bühler increased their working week from 40 to 45 hours. Did the family business increase its margins at the expense of the workforce??? "Without longer working hours we would no longer have been profitable", contradicted CEO Grieder. The overseas competition took advantage of the situation and lowered their prices. Thanks to the input of the workforce Bühler continued to be competitive. The workforce played a big part in this success, says Grieder. "We make substantial bonus payments and the whole workforce benefits from our success."

Bühler wants to break through to the battery market. Apart from their food processing business, Bühler is also very active in the automobile industry with 25% of all motor blocks getting manufactured on Bühler presses. Bühler now wants to become a big player in the battery industry. The company manufactures the so-called Extruders for the production of electrode paste. "We only ever hear of Tesla", says Grieder. "But the Chinese are building up twice the capacity. We want to be part of this too." They are also in discussions with Tesla and with Swatch "As you can see, we are in discussions with the whole industry," says Grieder.

Source: www.blick.ch

