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The route to the future – summing-up and forecast

For many years in the days of the Töss convent, the tower clock reminded the Dominican nuns of the time for prayer and called them to meals. Its precision mechanism has meanwhile made way for modern technology. In retirement this gem now decorates the Rieter Training Centre and gives special pleasure to admirers with an eye for artistic beauty.

In retrospect, people are ultimately responsible for how companies perform, in the present and the future. At the time when Rieter celebrated its bicentenary emancipation was on the advance. The female urge to tackle management assignments was unmistakable, perhaps more obviously in politics than in the management of a machine works.

The coming generation

First-class products and qualified personnel are vitally important for a

company's future. Attention must therefore be paid to the training and development of the coming generation of personnel. The company first presented the Rieter Award in 1989 in recognition of the work of especially gifted university graduates, thus making its contribution to furthering the cause of education.

The rising generation of Rieter personnel comes largely from a wide range of craft trades, finding its way to engineering schools via vocational secondary education and higher vocational qualification after completing its general education. The engineering schools in Switzerland are currently developing from the status of higher technical education institutions into specialist technical colleges. Secondary education graduates and outstanding students from the higher technical education institutions become the students of the colleges. These institu-

The Rieter Award is presented annually to between eight and ten successful graduates of colleges, universities and engineering schools specializing in textile technology.



tions are currently accused of having obsolete curricula and excessively long training courses. The only breath of fresh air at present is being brought in by post-graduate courses, for example for biochemistry or MBA studies.

Prominent industrial leaders warn of a fossilization of the school system in light of the fact that eighty percent of new companies are being founded by non-graduates. This suggests a link between an academic education and the loss of entrepreneurial drive; creativity and the readiness to take risks must therefore be encouraged systematically in education in all subjects. Technology transfer offers special opportunities for cooperation between business and education. The aim must be to promote these opportunities for the benefit of both partners.

Lessons for Rieter's machine manufacturing operations

Assuming a critical attitude in group and divisional management, a company of Rieter's calibre always has a large number of pending tasks. Listing these projects is no problem, but setting priorities and obtaining funds requires entrepreneurial patterns of thought and action, and painstaking implementation. As we know from surveys by the Association of German Engineers (VDI), no more than five percent of all innovative ideas result in genuine market success. A particularly important task in research and development is therefore the early identification of potential failures. During Rieter's history this fate befell the card and the speedframe, on which projects were discontinued in 1844. In the nineteen-sixties it was the Hebucofil combined fibre and dust extractor for ring spinning frames which was too complex to hold its own on the market. Finally, in the early nineteen-

eighties the F3/1 speedframe project was abandoned. This enabled resources to be concentrated on the demanding D1 drawframe and the M1 rotor spinning machine. The acquisition of Schubert & Salzer AG in Ingolstadt (Germany) with similar products meant that the M1 and D1 projects were abandoned and their scientific findings incorporated in the products from Ingolstadt.

Finally, in the filament sector the excellent new J8/21 draw-texturing machine was on the point of an expensive launch on the market at the end of the nineteen-seventies. The purchase in the UK in 1982 of Ernest Scragg & Sons, which had good products in the fine texturing field and was fully conversant with the relevant process technology, reduced the number of competitors and saved the heavy cost of promotion.

In slightly different economic sectors, Rieter's textile machines and systems were subject to similar cyclical fluctuations. When business activity was healthy, for example, combers, speedframes and ring spinning achieved higher sales. Depressed markets opened up special opportunities for high-volume opening operations and drawframes.

The company was therefore especially interested in finding products with business cycles different from that of textiles. This objective was achieved with the purchase of Unikel AG in the noise control and thermal insulation sector.

It has been pointed out on various occasions that advanced and efficient new designs are important means of assuring the survival of a machine manufacturing company. They are also the only insurance against the loss of know-how through licensing agreements and joint ventures. New designs are usually subject to the laws of ad-

vanced technology. The associated know-how therefore has a half-life of five to seven years. Twenty percent of working time should therefore be devoted to the further training of personnel in order to keep them up to the mark.

Rieter's competitors at the beginning of the nineteen-nineties

As this text was being written, the incorporation of the Schlafhorst and Zinser companies in the Saurer Group was still new, for example. Zellweger, in a monopoly position as market leader in all aspects of textile measurement, was feeling the pressure on the market in the same way as Rieter's order books were reflecting it. Looking a little further back in the history of textile machinery manufacturing, Rieter's major competitors Platt International (UK), Roberts and Whitin (USA) and many others have disappeared from the market. Many large groups which had workforces of several thousand in the nineteen-fifties have in the meantime shrunk into small organizations conducting spare parts business with a few dozen employees. The inexorable laws of the market economy have repeatedly demonstrated that a strong company cannot afford to economize on research, and that real innovations are not obtained merely by purchasing licences. Recent decades have also taught the lesson with pitiless clarity that in modern business fleetness of foot can certainly open up realistic opportunities relative to richer competitors, and computers rarely offer business decisions.

Outstanding products – a reliable vehicle for the route to the future

In his farewell lecture at Zurich's Federal Institute of Technology in 1992, Professor Hans W. Krause took

the trouble to list textile development trends and products with an assured future. Without judging or categorizing, the end products include, for example, bullet-proof vests for security services and armed forces, superlight parachute silks, sportswear and geotextiles. In new textile yarns, water absorption properties and texturing open up great potential for hollow fibres. In the production of fabrics and in recycling, nonwovens and knitted materials are keywords. Finally, the recycling of textile products can release secondary raw materials for new applications, in which Unikeller is also especially interested for its insulating mats. In fibre development, wide horizons are open for chemical-free natural cotton, and natural coloured cottons are also growing in importance. New microfibres with gauges of less than one denier (unit of thread thickness) enable «silk qualities» to be produced in fabrics which are sought after on the market. Rieter's high-quality carded or combed yarns therefore still have good chances of participating in further development and meeting fashion requirements.

Decisions on future production sites

Decisions on future production sites have to be guided by the markets. At the planning stage they must therefore first satisfy global needs, then European requirements, and finally Swiss needs. Rieter followed this decision-making model at the beginning of the nineteen-sixties in its licensing negotiations and the development of Lakshmi Machine Works. The plants in southern India satisfy the basic, local needs of the subcontinent. Supplies of high-technology, precision machine components from Switzerland ensure the required quality standard.

When acquiring companies it is advisable to create order by proceeding systematically, to cast off old ballast, to assess costs realistically with uncompromising strategic planning, and not to rush into things. Close contact with customers and concentration on the customer's needs hold great opportunities for all concerned. Since the manufacture of high-quality products is shifting increasingly away from human operatives to CNC machine tools, the make-or-buy issue, the clear definition of the extent of in-house manufacture and sensible outsourcing are growing in importance. With Switzerland's standard of living feeding the trend towards high wages, the opportunities offered by global – and at least European – markets and production sites must be exploited systematically. This will make conditions harder for Swiss personnel if jobs are to be preserved. However, these requirements cannot be ignored in the efforts to keep costs in line with the market.

While acknowledging all the business arguments which can be advanced, attention must also be paid to secure communications between assembly, development and service for the manufacture of high-technology components. Customer service in the fields of installation, maintenance and

spare parts supplies is especially important for maintaining good Swiss traditions. These tasks must be given special attention and encouragement.

Concluding remarks

A whole range of unwritten business practices contributes to good contacts between customers and manufacturers. This well-known fact is in conflict with the goal of building mammoth companies in the textile machinery sector in order to cover all manufacturing stages, virtually without competition. Tempting as the thought may be of utilizing the financial strength of large companies to meet the heavy expenditure on high-tech projects, such a monopoly would have an adverse impact on sales. A number of major competitors have attempted to create textile empires during Rieter's 200 years, but never with long-term success. Comparison with events in world history may seem far-fetched, but there is no disputing the similarity of the results. Realistic opportunities for success in the future lie rather in the continuous development of products and systems, the timely development of innovations, the early recognition of promising new technologies, the protection of intellectual property and the exploitation of optimum manufacturing sites.