

## **Libor Heger No quiet please!**

"I love the speed, the dynamics!" says Libor Heger, and he doesn't just mean in his favorite heavy metal music. "It suits me, my work, the company, and the direction we're going in: it's all very dynamic. I like that."

The 38-year-old Czech leans back and smiles happily. He's in no hurry to leave.

Fourteen years ago, Barum Continental was looking for a product manager in Otrokovice, in the Czech Republic. Libor Heger applied. "I had no idea about tires," he says. "I knew nothing about marketing and I didn't have a college degree. The only requirement I met was that I spoke English." But that's a huge understatement. Heger was a badminton player who was successful across Europe. However, as he grew up under a communist regime, a great career was closed to him, as he faced a lot of travel restrictions. When the borders opened in the Czech Republic, the tall young man was already too old to pursue his sporting career seriously. He turned to another passion: For 18 months, he crammed for a stockbroker license and then opened his own company with his brother.

"I felt like I was in a film," he says. "At 20 years old I had 20 employees, and we bought and sold companies! It was really exciting."

But then the Czech banking system collapsed due to bad loans.

"Interest went up to 250 percent," says Heger. "Until then, we had been very successful. But then we were forced to give it up." And he decided that it was finally time to study. "I thought: The better your education, the more security you have for the future." He wanted to study management, to give his vocational practice a theoretical foundation. "But to do that, I needed English. To really learn a language, you have to live in a country where it's spoken. There were already too many Czechs in England – I would never have learned the language there. So I went to New Zealand."

He lived with a family in New Zealand for nine months, worked hard at the language, and then went back home. He really wanted to enjoy the summer before his degree started. Until he saw Barum Continental's advertisement in the newspaper.

He had experience on the free market as an independent entrepreneur, and had managed to come out on top of quickly growing competition through clever marketing and good work. Barum Continental offered him the opportunity of a lifetime. But it wasn't just handed to him on a plate. Libor Heger studied in addition to his full-time job. He hung in there despite the workload and over the years worked his way up from Product Manager to Marketing and Sales Manager. "I had just finished my part-time studies," he says, "and I wanted to follow up with a Master's when I got the offer from Continental to take over the brand management of truck tires for Europe and Africa. What an opportunity! Of course I said yes." He moved to Hanover with his partner. And she drove him to and from the Czech Republic every weekend so that he could study for his Master's degree in marketing and management. "I would sit in the car and study while she was driving." He shakes his head. "It was crazy but we did it."



This unusual path has proved the perfect one for Libor Heger. "I think that it was an advantage for me," he says. "I started when I was very young, and Continental gave me the chance to try out different roles very early on. At work, some people like to stick to what they're already familiar with, but I prefer to try out new things. Fortunately, it is precisely this kind of freedom that the company offers, so I fit the requirements well."

Today, fourteen years after joining the company, Libor Heger isn't just married to his girlfriend from his student days – he also still works for Continental. He has switched countries again and is now based at the Fort Mill site in South Carolina, USA, and is responsible for truck tire technologies across the whole American continent. "Continental is very open to its employees doing something different," he says, "and it gives you the chance to get to know different jobs and markets. And he likes America's positive attitude and dynamism. He thinks it fits Continental. "I've got almost unlimited options here," he says. "I get offers from other companies but it would be stupid to leave. I know Continental, there's a great working atmosphere, and the people are really motivated. People here are encouraged to be creative and productive, and not just do what the boss says."

Heger finds it "pretty impressive" to work for a company which is 140 years old: "The last year was the best ever. And this year will be even better. It's a great feeling to have been part of that. I'm really lucky." He has contributed to this success for fourteen years, and has seen the best year ever so far. He wants to do everything he can in his position to make future years even better. "Of course," he says smiling, "I want to keep on enjoying this success."

Having arrived in the USA, he and his wife had planned to travel the vast country and get to know it inch by inch. However, this was not to be as his wife fell pregnant. "That was great," Heger says with a smile. "We just changed our plans again." They're flexible, as they've already shown many times before. Very different to his parents' experience, their young son is now growing up in a free country. When the Hegers are out and about, he also learns about his father's professional passion. "The world of truck tires is one where you actually see the product that you develop, manufacture, and sell every day. That's fascinating. Our products are a part of everyday life, not only in small countries like the Czech Republic or Germany, but also in Brazil or the USA, all around the world."

"My wife sometimes tells me that I should really stop looking at the tires on trucks," admits Heger with a laugh. "But that's how we are at Continental: we always have to take a look. We are passionate about tires, they're our product after all, and we contributed to their development. And when I'm outside with my son, I say: 'Look, that fire truck is driving on Continental tires. The ones that your daddy's been working on every day for a long time – for 14 years.' In those situations I say to myself: 'Wow, that's pretty cool!'"