

Siegbert Steuber

A Passion Passes to the Third Generation.

Siegbert Steuber can still remember exactly when the machine first started up. That was four years ago. The process technician and his team had been working on the development for months. Again and again they traveled to the Black Forest to run through the production process step by step with the mechanical engineers. The aim was to optimize the design of the base calender winder and to test the machine's control software.

Finally everything was ready. The new machine stood in the hall of the Continental plant in Korbach. For the very first time, it processed the rubber compound into the bases for green tires. "We didn't know whether it would work, whether the compound would tear. Running machines like this with material is difficult," explains Steuber. "But to see that it really does work was just fantastic!"

A success story that he is still proud of today. After all, automation of this part of the production process for special tires had failed elsewhere, both at Continental and at rival companies. The commissioning of the base calender winder in Korbach was therefore a world premiere.

Until Steuber and his team started developing the machine, the base for all green tires was made by hand in Korbach. A team of a dozen people was employed for this purpose. Their job was to insert the bead wire into the green tire base by hand. Not only was this very hard work. It was costly and that hurt the plant in comparison with other sites. The machine now up and running, Steuber has long since moved on to other projects that aim to make production in Korbach even more efficient.

"I'm good at analyzing where the problem lies in a process," he explains. This means he's not usually at his desk for very long. Indeed, Steuber is at his computer only to check mails or to write a program for controlling the machines used to manufacture a new type of tire. Once that's done, the wiry 47-year-old is usually right back in the halls. Taking calls on his cell phone, he always has one eye on the machines and another critical eye on the finished tires. In between, he still finds time for a few words with colleagues.

Here he is just "Siggi" to everyone. Like him, many of these Korbach colleagues have been with the company for decades. "They trust me and know that I will keep them in the loop," says Steuber. And he knows that to improve processes, he needs the counsel of active production staff. "My colleagues who work on the machines all day long are the experts. I may be more into the theory, but they have the upper hand in practical terms. That is why I always try to make use of their expertise."

But Steuber is by no means someone sitting in an ivory tower working on theory. After all, he worked in production for many years. Leaving school in 1984, he joined Continental in Korbach. He started work in the same factory that his grandfather helped rebuild after the war. His parents also worked there back then. After training as a plastics technician he switched to solid rubber tires. "Come to us, this is an up-and-coming department," said the head of Special Tire Production in an attempt to attract young technicians.

Steuber took his chances. Soon he was asked to take charge of staff. He was promoted to shift supervisor. He then studied for his master technician diploma, attending evening classes for two years after work. "I was lucky. I was always in the right place at the right time. And I always received help and encouragement from my superiors."

Commercial vehicle tire production quickly cast a spell over him. This enthusiasm has not ebbed any to this day. Solid rubber tires for tractors, forklift trucks, and flatbed trucks are manufactured in Korbach and are usually custom-built in small series. Quality, not quantity. "We have absolute premium products," says Steuber. "But quality has its price. If the tire does not perform as it should, no one will buy it."

Everyone in Korbach works together to ensure that performance is up to standard. "No one says 'that's not my job.' Our structures are designed in such a way that everyone is a team player," explains Steuber. There are no blockers and nothing is off-limits. Everyone knows each other. Channels of communication are efficient. And hierarchies are flat.

Steuber has found his home here. He never tires of starting new projects where he can work independently and put together the teams that he needs to achieve his objectives. Nowadays Steuber turns the works management down when they offer him a new career move during his annual appraisal. "I'm where I want to be," he says. "If I were doing exactly the same thing every day, it would be time for something new. But my work brings new challenges every day. I can develop my skills and abilities here and turn my ideas into reality."

Steuber knows the kind of effort required to stay competitive in a fiercely difficult market, both in good times and bad. "Optimize your costs but don't ever sacrifice quality. This is the balancing act that we have to manage," he explains. "We are now a high-wage location. So we need to ensure that we produce as efficiently as possible."

Steuber appreciates the secure position he enjoys at Continental in Korbach. And his job gives him the freedom to balance private life and work, despite all his passion for the latter. His wife is a nurse who works shifts. This means his role as a father is very important at home. Luckily his hours as a process technician are flexible enough. They allow him to take care of his two children on the occasional afternoon or to take them to school in the mornings. There is also enough time for his role as trainer of the youth team at the local football club.

"I'm always glad to come home after work," he says, "even if my department at Conti sometimes feels almost like a family." In the final analysis, Continental is part of his family's history, in which a passion for tires has passed from generation to generation. "I always say that I have rubber and not blood flowing in my veins!" explains Steuber with a grin, his eyes lighting up.