

There was no such thing as “it won’t work”

In conversation with Peter Skutl and Rudolf Siegart

We celebrate 25 years WFL Millturn Technologies and 35 years of complete machining



A STRONG TEAM

Rudolf Siegart und Peter Skutl (f. l. to r.) paved the way for WFL Millturn Technologies and laid the foundation for innovation in complete machining

We joined former managing directors **Peter Skutl** and **Rudolf Siegart** to explore the origins of MILLTURN and the beginnings of WFL. With their combined forces and a highly motivated team, the two leaders managed to stake their claim in the world of complete machining despite all of the initial difficulties. Find out in this interview what it means to devote yourself to an idea, to have the determination to see it through and to succeed by pulling together.

What feelings and recollections do you have when you think of WFL?

Skutl: I have been thinking about WFL a lot recently, particularly because it celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2018. In October 1993, very few people would have bet on our company lasting for 25 years. The machine tool industry was in a historic slump back then. New order intake in the sector had declined by more than 50%. One by one, businesses were slipping into insolvency. In addition, profound structural changes took place during the transition from VA-Steinel to WFL. Changing the entire parts procurement system to purchasing without reducing the quality of our machines was a logistical challenge. We were all conscious of the fact that we could only have one attempt, and it had to work.

Siegart: At the start, we had problems building up our workforce, because a lot of people were still in an employment contract with VOEST until the end of 1993 and then had the option to join the VOEST Steel Foundation. The people I wanted to attract were of course aware of the risk involved in our undertaking. If we failed, they would have missed the chance to join the Steel Foundation's retraining scheme. So I began to take steps to make it possible for WFL to become part of the Steel Foundation, even though we were a private-sector company. For many people, that was the crucial moment when they decided to come on board with us.



RETIREMENT

After a successful time at WFL, the retirement was duly celebrated.

WFL is considered a pioneer in complete machining. How did that come about?

Siegwart: Unfortunately, our attempt to develop our own tool turret with rotating tools for genuine complete machining failed in some respects. That was partly due to the number of tools, the collision problems and the size, and partly because the technology was too complex and could not be implemented. In addition, there was no standardised tool system available.

That's why I decided to integrate our own slide to accommodate our own milling unit with our tool magazine for standard milling tools (SK40) into a turning machine, in addition to a standard turret for turning. That was in October 1982, and the result was the first MILLTURN.

Skutl: At this point, we set a milestone in the history of complete machining. The competition was green with envy and played the whole thing down as a technical gimmick with no practical value. But I have to add that the market was not quite ready for it. There were reservations. The conviction that turning machines had to be used for turned surfaces and milling machines for milled surfaces had to be dispelled first.

How did the name "MILLTURN" come about?

Siegwart: The name originated in the VOEST era. Back then, there was a large-scale development programme under which various generations of machines were developed. There were machines with robots, and they were named AUTOTURN. We had to think of something for our multitasking machine too. Then I said, "It's a MILLTURN." That was in 1983.

What has been the most significant technical or economic development in your view?

Skutl: For me, one of the most significant was definitely the step towards a single tool holder in conjunction with an external magazine. Suddenly there were barely any limitations any more on the tool side. It also meant the rigid separation of fixed and rotating tools was history, plus the whole thing was collision-free too. This new concept meant machines could be equipped in parallel to machining time, which had a positive impact on the degree of utilisation, lead time and hence cost-effectiveness.

Another step was the integration of a second tool accommodation on the single

tool holder to accommodate long boring bars. The restriction on the maximum tool length was suddenly eliminated.

That reminds me of a situation at an IMTS trade fair in Chicago: a showcase programme was under way and a visitor was standing watching the process take place. When a flap opened and the machine changed a two-metre boring bar, he uttered an awestruck 'Oh boy...'. The machine was the main attraction at the trade fair.

What has been the biggest area of interest and main inspiration for you in your work?

Skutl: In terms of complete machining, we were at the start of a development and no-one then could guess how big it would become. The MILLTURN concept is aimed at customers who manufacture complicated workpieces in relatively small batch sizes. It wasn't yet clear whether the risk of fully concentrating on this field could pay off. The exciting thing was that there were new challenges and tasks practically every day, and the solutions to them were being welcomed by the market. That had an incredibly motivating effect and felt very rewarding after all the hard work.

Siegwart: We received a very positive response bit by bit without really being aware of it. For example, we gained an order in Norway from the aviation industry. Their specifications were just monstrous. However, they did not give up after we initially turned them down, and brought us over to Norway. I said to them I was prepared to go to the limits of what was technically feasible. These people were so interested; it was a mystery to me why. It was only later that I found out they had recruited an expert as a consultant for this project – who was a former competitor of ours. He believed our machine was the most suitable one for their requirements. That was high praise indeed.

What memories do you have of your colleagues?

Skutl: I genuinely only have great memories, particularly of the group that got WFL off the ground. Their motivation was outstanding; there was no such thing as 'it won't work'. Whether it was a hush-hush operation to get a machine ready for an important demonstration at a trade fair the next day, or whether they had to



FASCINATION

The magic of the MILLTURNs keeps the two former managing directors in the spell to this day.



»When a flap opened and the machine changed a two-metre boring bar, he uttered an awestruck "Oh boy..."«

Peter Skutl

work an unplanned nightshift to rescue an acceptance test, they took everything in their stride without needing lengthy discussions. That awful, corny quote 'the sales department is not the whole company, but the whole company better be the sales department' actually described us quite accurately.

What boosted the team spirit?

Skutl: At the start, it was the "backs to the wall" situation – the awareness that there was no going back and we really only had one chance. Although we never were owners, we felt like we were and took responsibility like owners.

Siegwart: There was a global recession on the machine tool market in 1993, the year of our foundation. Many commentators – particularly our competitors – believed our chances of surviving the first six months were minimal. What helped the team spirit and motivation of the whole company was that we only approached those people who believed in our product. By doing so, we were able to start out with a motivated, skilled team.

What major events really stand out in your memory now?

Siegwart: Above all, the development of the new M100 MILLTURN generation and the purchase of the property we had been renting, because then we became masters in our own house. WFL was taken over by the Germany-based Rothenberger family in 1993. Once we were out of the

woods after the first few years and our orders and results were good, we gained a fairly free hand both in terms of technical activities and market activities. That then led to the establishment of different branches with their own sales and support staff, while business grew continuously.

Skutl: Having local addresses in different countries – for example in the USA – also saved us from our customers asking if we had travelled from Austria by car.

What trends do you see for the tool machine market in the future?

Skutl: I believe the complete machining market will continue to grow. In addition, a stable market for replacement investment will develop, with customer satisfaction remaining high. I think that the difficulty our customers have in finding enough qualified staff will increase pressure towards automation. Automatic processes prevent human error. This is opening up a broad field for development.

What was your key to success in your time at WFL?

Skutl: I read somewhere that if, on a Sunday evening, you're not looking forward to work on Monday, you're in the wrong job. I have to say I have never enjoyed going to work so much as I did during my time at WFL.

Siegwart: Don't rest on your laurels. Discuss new application ideas on the market and at your customers, and take them

into consideration whenever possible for an order or when developing the next MILLTURN models.

What advice would you like to leave WFL with?

Siegwart: Concentrate on gaining and expanding global technology leadership.

What would you do differently today?

Skutl: I would go into the cosmetics industry so I could be surrounded constantly by lovely fragrances and beautiful people. (laughs)

What is your favourite book?

Siegwart: I haven't got a favourite book. I don't like seeing things through the thoughts of some poet or other – I prefer to have my own. But I do like reading about politics, especially geopolitics, history and technology. And every day I check what the Russians and Americans are writing about it.

Skutl: The MILLTURN operation manual.