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Machine safety from a global player

70 years of the Schmersal Group: From component manufacturer to world-wide provider of systems and solutions

The Schmersal Group, a leading company in the international market of machine safety, can celebrate its 70th birthday this year. Philip Schmersal, managing partner from the third generation of the family, explains the company's strategy, the new business activities and the current trends in the market of machine safety.

A SURE AND SAFE BET: Together with his brother, your grandfather founded the company in 1945. Putting it simply with just a few facts and figures: How does the Schmersal Group present itself today after seventy years?

Philip Schmersal: We employ 1,750 members of staff who were responsible last year for a consolidated revenue of about 210 million euros, we produce at seven sites, are represented in about 60 countries, offer a portfolio of approximately 25,000 products and are among the international leaders of machine safety. And, of special importance to us: For about three years we have been consistently developing from a product manufacturer into a provider of systems and solutions.

What does that actually mean and what are the benefits to your customers?

Philip Schmersal: Firstly, we can offer our customers systems and solutions for machine safety based on our very extensive product programme – for example complete solutions for safeguarding danger zones. Furthermore, with our business activity tec.nicum, we have set-up a dedicated services division for machine safety. Among our safety services, for example, are customer-specific programming of safety control systems as well as providing support to our customers with tasks such as hazard analyses, conformity rating and safety technical assessment of existing machines and facilities.

For customers, this means that they can delegate complex tasks to specialists and concentrate on their core competencies.

How do customers react to this extended offer? Do manufacturers and producers, particularly renowned ones, not want to keep the upper hand over the safety of their machines?

Philip Schmersal: Developing into a provider of solutions and systems is a process that we embark on together with our customers and one that many customers desire and have positively requested. Of course, we have always provided our customers with advice and within the scope of the CE network, for example, have also supported them on very challenging consultation projects of machine safety. However, the machine constructor as well as many machine users want to delegate tasks of this nature to competent experts. The demand for our safety services around the world, therefore, is very high and all of the signs indicate that this development will continue.

Even before machine safety you discovered elevator technology as an area of expertise. Where do you stand here and what is the strategy for the future?

Philip Schmersal: We offer a complete range of switchgear for elevator construction. Our presence is likewise international here and we profit from the construction activity in emerging markets and the modernisation of old systems. Developing into a systems provider is promoted in exactly the same way as machine safety. This was a major reason behind the takeover of Böhnke & Partner GmbH in 2013. Since then, we are able to offer elevator manufacturers switchgear and tailored control system technology from one source.



Graduate in business engineering Philip Schmersal is the third generation to lead the company, which was founded 70 years ago.

By concentrating on system solutions, you have also strengthened your industry orientation. Which areas of the machine and plant construction industry do you appeal to specifically?

Philip Schmersal: We are traditionally very well represented in some areas, such as the food and packaging industry, but also in heavy industries, and we have also developed special series of safety components for these areas of industry. Demands such as hygiene-related design, explosion protection and non-sensitivity to coarse environmental conditions are relevant here. We target these areas of industry more specifically – not just in marketing and sales

but also in development. A newly set-up industry management team is tasked, among others, with incorporating the requirements of the target industries in our product development. The aim here is to offer products and solutions that are even more specific to industry.

Among the current trends in automation technology is the shifting of functions from the hardware level to the software level. Does this also apply to machine safety?

Philip Schmerral: Yes, very much so. Our safety control systems enable very convenient adaptation of safety functions to the individual application. Many customers procure customer-specific OEM versions from us with customised programming. And the trend of shifting to the software level remains, above all in the course of changing to a “smart factory” and to “intelligent production” – keyword “Industrie 4.0”. This presents completely new tasks in terms of safety technology that we are preparing for intensively as a company.

Two other current topics are networking and human/robot co-operation. Are you also active in these areas?

Philip Schmerral: More than ten years ago, we already supplied fundamental developments for safety control systems that enable monitoring of robot movement. Not only the axles of the robots are monitored here but also their positions within a three-dimensional space. In this way, a protective, virtual working space can be realised. This is a central requirement for co-operation between man and robot without a protective fence. And as far as networking is concerned, we offer our customers in machine and facilities construction a broad range of interfaces for different concepts and communication standards such as “safety separated” and “safety integrated”.

Organic or inorganic – what does your growth strategy for the future look like?

Philip Schmerral: We have grown largely organically and will continue on this course in future as well. However, we have also become stronger through takeovers where it made sense to enhance our portfolio. This was the case, for example, with Safety Control and Böhnke & Partner. But, essentially, we rely on our own strength to grow and on innovative technologies that we develop ourselves. The industry solutions and business area tec.nicum offer more than adequate potential for growth, too. And with our own factories in future markets, we are suitably prepared internationally to recognise and acknowledge market opportunities.

This brings us nicely to the next question about Germany. You produce among other areas in China and, of late, in India. Will production in Germany gradually be farmed out to these places?

Philip Schmerral: No. Our factories abroad produce almost entirely for the markets there. Wuppertal is not only the location of our head office but also our largest production site. The fact that we have chosen this site for our newly built central European warehouse clearly shows that nothing is about to change.

You are a third generation manager of the company. Are management style and management structure different from that of the previous generation?

Philip Schmerral: The demands in the area of management have also become more challenging. Decisions must – or ought to – be made quickly, competition is international and so, too, is the market for our products and solutions. Even the size of the company

presents new demands: A corporate group with seven production sites around the world, a very broad and, at the same time, sophisticated technology portfolio as well as a presence in sixty countries can no longer be managed by the owner alone. Therefore, on April 1st this year we appointed Michael Mandel as managing director of K.A. Schmerral GmbH & Co. KG, who, in this new position, will also remain head of our technology division. Furthermore, we also have a very good management team. And the steering committees and other management bodies have an increasingly international flair with colleagues from different locations.

Images:
K.A. Schmerral GmbH & Co. KG, Wuppertal

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