

**Titel:**

Constantly in motion

Untertitel:

Courage to change, trust in innovation and an absolute focus on customers – hallmarks of the WITTENSTEIN group for 75 years.

Teaser:

The WITTENSTEIN family business turns 75 this year. We spoke to shareholder Dr. Manfred Wittenstein and CEO Dr. Bertram Hoffmann about the company's journey.

Text:

Mr. Wittenstein, your father founded the company back in 1949. What is your very first memory of the business?

Manfred Wittenstein: How my father built an apple coring machine together with another engineer. I must have been six or seven years old at the time and I remember it being a really big and amazing machine. It left a mark on me and stirred my passion for technology.

What was so special about that particular moment?

Manfred Wittenstein: It made me realize just how exciting it can be solving a problem that I didn't even know existed. Why would anyone need a machine like that? It fascinated me asking questions and trying to understand. That curiosity is still very important to me today and it's played a central part in everything I've done over the years.

Is that basically what WITTENSTEIN is all about – curiosity?

Manfred Wittenstein: Curiosity has something to do with it. But there's also the constant change. That's something I could see in my father. First he built compasses, then apple coring machines, then sewing machines – they were what made his business successful – and later chucks.

I didn't grow up with a basic assurance; I grew up in the knowledge that flexibility and adaptability are essential to succeed in the long term. If you take a look at nature, or at our World Garden that surrounds the premises here in Harthausen, nothing ever grows forever until it reaches the sky. Sometimes things are damaged or die. Elsewhere, though, something new shoots up in their place. Provided you plant it in good time and make sure it has the right conditions to thrive.



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Are you telling us that plenty of foresight is needed? How do you manage that over and over again for such a long period of time?

Manfred Wittenstein: You can never be absolutely sure. No-one knows what the future holds. You can formulate hypotheses. Dialog, openness and debate are crucial here. You need to listen to what your potential customers are saying. Ask them what it is they need, over and over again, rather than taking all of the limelight for yourself. You also have to be capable of taking responsibility and building trust. That requires an attitude. It's easy when times are good. But when the company isn't doing so well, that's when you discover whether the partnership with your customers, employees and other stakeholders is for real. Good employees are always welcome. People who don't see change as a burden but who enjoy constantly questioning things they've thought up or done themselves and improving them or possibly finding something else to take the place where necessary.

Bertram Hoffmann: You're right: it's important to endure the tough times together successfully. When an organization like WITTENSTEIN succeeds in emerging stronger than ever from a difficult period – a crisis – you also grow closer than ever together as a team. The Covid-19 crisis is just one example where we managed that.

Mr. Hoffmann, you're CEO of a Management Board that, for the first time ever, doesn't include a member of the Wittenstein family. How do you make that work out?

Bertram Hoffmann: Once again, the answer is close, constant dialog, listening and asking questions where necessary and last but not least trust, trust and more trust.

Of course, it's inevitably a balancing act for any CEO when you've got an owner who knows the company inside out and asks challenging questions. It works if you want to be part of the solution rather than simply taking any problems you have to the owner. I can go to Manfred and tell him I'm planning to try something out in a particular way. I don't know if it will work, but I believe it's the best and quickest route to get a problem under control. That kind of openness is vital for both of us. That way, we can agree on something in a matter of minutes that would involve long processes and piles of documents elsewhere. Speed is one of the WITTENSTEIN group's biggest assets. I'm talking here about speed as the outcome of solid trust.

Manfred Wittenstein: You have to understand that I used to be commander-in-chief here. I was in a position to decide everything alone – but at the same time I was alone with my decisions. However, there came a time when I was forced to admit that the company had become so big that I could no longer be responsible for everything on my own – as owner and CEO. That was when we resolved to try out this new management style. We've been very lucky with Bertram. He understands our past and he's committed to our future. Bertram is a staunch loyalist where our family business is concerned. That's how WITTENSTEIN has managed to grow, become more robust and emerge stronger from the Covid era.

I'd like to cast a look back nonetheless. WITTENSTEIN started out building sewing machines under the name DEWITTA. You then switched to making gearboxes. Today, the portfolio



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also includes electric motors, software and nanopositioners, among others. Is there still a common thread running through all of this change?

Bertram Hoffmann: I'd like to cite Manfred's image again here – the nature in our World Garden. People's first impression is that there are so many different plants growing there that they all need individual attention or else each one won't thrive as well as it could. At the same time, they all form a harmonious whole. They may be highly diverse plants but in actual fact they benefit from each other.

When applied to the company, this means we profit from the ability to bring together our experience and our diverse perspectives in support of a universal issue: we drive motion. We drive motion at low temperatures, in harsh environments, deep down below ground and high up in space. We do so extremely precisely and reliably, with nano accuracy. Our strength is that we make our customers' wishes come true, no matter how impossible they seem – with the help of our passionate team. Success is driven by people who understand that and who search for other people who also want to succeed, again and again of their own accord.

So how do you go about finding these people?

Manfred Wittenstein: That's a top-priority management task. You then have to enable those people to develop all of their strengths, goals, ideas and visions. Bertram was definitely a lucky find for me. We're now in a phase of stability, which we can use to prepare for the next change and focus on core issues. We look at these from different perspectives in the search for the solutions that fit our company best.

What would they be? Are we talking here too about the next generation in the family business?

Manfred Wittenstein: We're obviously talking about that too; after all, my children will be taking responsibility for our family business over the next 40 years. My children are closely involved in building a structure for tomorrow. We're devoting considerable attention to the roles the next generation will play as the foundation for our company's future.

Bertram Hoffmann: We're specifically looking for people to create and live strong governance levels which, first and foremost, are independent of them as individuals. Where previously a single person took care of everything alone, the Wittenstein family, the Supervisory Board and the Management Board are now in a close triangular relationship. We set an example of how trusting cooperation can work. The close dialog that we've formulated for both of us must function perfectly between these various governance levels.

When you both look back a few years from now, how will you decide whether you've set out the markers successfully?

Bertram Hoffmann: That's not the way we both think. We look far into the future and discuss where WITTENSTEIN will be in 2040 and beyond. We don't intend to look back – we're more likely to be applauding the creativity and the unique ideas of the new generation.



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Bilder: Portraits Manfred Wittenstein und Bertram Hoffmann