The second life of Robotron

A success story: after German reunification Robotron, in Dresden, went from being a nationally-owned business to being a highly specialized software company and covert market leader.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 was the end, or so it seemed at first. Robotron, the once proud large combine in Dresden that for thirty years provided the socialist world of the Eastern Bloc with computers, software, telecommunications and typewriters, was liquidated by the privatization agency Treuhand. The latter’s task was to privatize the GDR’s nationally-owned companies in keeping with market-economy principles, and if that was not possible, to shut them down. Outdated technology, inflexible structures, the new era – no future. In September 1990 the company that in its heyday employed 70,000 people bade farewell. That same year, Rolf Heinemann made his first ever visit to the CeBIT computer fair in Hanover. Heinemann had been with Robotron from the beginning, in 1969, and had built up the Database Systems Department, which he ran for 20 years. Was he to stand by now and watch everything go belly up? No. Later he would say: “Instead of buying cars after the turnaround with our ‘Westgeld’, we set up Robotron Ltd and took on 26 colleagues.”

Oracle helped with the spin-off
At CeBIT Heinemann met Franz Niedermaier, the Germany manager of the US software company Oracle. The two men found that they were on the same wavelength and became friends. In the end, Oracle supported the persistent Dresdners with the hive-off. The US company even became involved in Robotron Datenbank-Software GmbH, which today is still a “Platinum Partner” of Oracle. The plan was daring all the same: at the time, Robotron was not actually regarded as being at the forefront of technical progress, something Heinemann noticed to his chagrin on his first tour of CeBIT. But he had faith in himself, his team and the brand name, which united the terms robotics and electronics. Whether it was inspiration or stubbornness is immaterial – the decision to hold out was right.

The rest is a success story: the owner-managed software company has become a covert market leader in applications for the energy sector. Large electricity companies like EnBW, Vattenfall and RWE rely on its software to administer their data. Since the new beginning, the company has grown continuously: between 2007 and 2012 the turnover doubled from 14.3 million to 31.3 million euros with a significant return on income. In the same time period, the number of employees increased from 141 to 264 and jumped to 329 in 2013.

Down-to-earth on principle
What is the secret of this success? The business magazine brandeins regards the manager’s “socialist socialisation” as an important factor. Heinemann does not think much of modern managerial methods, nor does he have much faith in the financial sector: investments are made with surpluses, not with loans; being in the red does not suit the patriarch’s self-image. Meantime he has appointed his son Ulf to the executive board. And there is something else that does not suit his worldview: management consultants juggling with slide presentations. Even in the GDR days, his office door had a sign that read: No Dogs or Economists Allowed.

12.09.13

© Chris Löwer / de-deutschland.de, www.deutschland.de