

Continuously Investing in Expertise and Skills

At framas, Advanced Training of All Employees Is a Cornerstone of the Company's Strategy

Digital transformation presents concrete challenges in a dynamic way. Continually mastering them, time and again, requires a workforce with a high degree of expertise and know-how. The plastics processor framas therefore not only regards training and ongoing education as essential, they usually begin directly on recruitment. It is now three years since the SME re-prioritized the issue of qualification as a strategically important competitive factor and began to promote it.

Advanced training is continually required and fostered – whether for new recruits or seasoned employees (© framas)



Framas Kunststofftechnik GmbH, of Pirmasens, Germany, is a hidden champion – “hidden,” literally because its functional injection molded components are inconspicuously incorporated into sports, functional and fashion shoes. The soles, heel elements, heel counters, insoles and lasts are not only used in brand-name sports shoe labels, such as adidas, Puma, Nike and New Balance, or in safety shoes by Uvex and Haix. Only insiders know that they are also used in orthopedics. Besides its ex-

pertise in all matters concerning shoes, the global player, with subsidiaries in China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, South Korea, the USA and Vietnam, also possesses a high degree of injection molding competence in electronics and automotive technology.

Digital Transformation: Further Process Changes Lie Ahead

As a technology-driven and highly networked company, framas saw itself con-

fronted with urgent issues such as collaboration (human/machine) and digitalization at a very early stage. As a result, the digital transformation also led to some rethinking, particularly in production. This occupies about two thirds of the global workforce of 3800 (135 of them at the company headquarters in Westphalia, Germany), with a degree of automation currently around 85% at the German site and 40% globally. A current example: framas is currently trialing the maintenance of machines

Five Questions ...

... to Carsten Schmidt, General Director of **fram**as Kunststofftechnik GmbH

Mr. Schmidt, what do you see as the biggest driver of the need for continuous qualification?

I should first mention the current trends in injection molding, such as automation and robotics. In addition, the employees are subject to requirements from digital transformation – in the context of Industry 4.0. We are continually pushing ahead with digitalization, especially in production. Here, we are currently introducing new software for process digitalization in order to better plan personnel deployment and production or enable predictive and preventive maintenance. After all, we do not operate on the market in isolation. On the contrary, the close intermeshing within the supply chain requires us to be on the same technical level as our customers and partners. Standing still also means stopping.

Don't increasing automation and fostering of co-robotics also threaten the employees' jobs?

Only when it is matter of replacing purely monotonous tasks for which there will simply no longer be a job market over time. We suffered similar experiences in the nineties in Westphalia, Germany, with the drastic decline in the shoe manufacturing industry, which had dominated the labor market until then and had also offered good money to poorly qualified, untrained workers. Only skilled workers sur-

vived the structural transformation; untrained people fell by the wayside. To this extent, personal competitiveness is a major issue and is associated with continually improving one's knowledge and skills, and staying permanently up to date.

How do your employees accept the education and training programs?

Very well. We are surprised ourselves by the strong response and the motivation that each individual brings along. They recognize and appreciate fram's willingness to invest in its personnel. It is good to see how more and more employees approach us on their own initiative with their own ideas about their individual development. They almost always coincide with the actual requirements and challenges of the company and job.

How do you motivate employees to undergo life-long learning?

We place value on praising our employees' successes and also rewarding their commitment financially. In addition, fram

bears the costs for approved measures and also releases the employees to attend. But their self-motivation must not be underestimated, since everyone knows today how important knowledge and skills are in professional life.



Carsten Schmidt (© fram as)

What career opportunities are available internally?

We are a growing company that can always offer development opportunities for good and motivated employees. Particularly for young people, it is very attractive to be deployed for a time at one of our global sites – of course, the international context is also a matter of give and take. In ad-

“More and more employees approach us on their own initiative with their own ideas”

dition, fram also prefers to fill its management positions from within its own ranks. It was the same for me: I trained here as a shoe last modeler, then underwent education and was eventually appointed managing director at the age of 30.

using “augmented reality.” The employee wears a semi-digital headset, which projects information graphics or circuit diagrams onto the actual image, and in this way guides him virtually through all the required maintenance steps.

Carsten Schmidt thinks that this is by no means the end of the line. The General Director of fram as Kunststofftechnik GmbH sees many manpower-driven areas that can be replaced with digital or

algorithmic technology in the short and medium term. Thus, in the foreseeable future, co-robots, supporting humans at the workplace, will take over many routine jobs and 3D data creation and 3D printing will digitalize complete workflows in sampling. In future, customers will receive digital files instead of tactile samples, and be able to examine them with corresponding 3D devices – with sections, changing perspectives and undreamt-of analytical features.

Challenging and Fostering People as the Success Factor

“We shall and must continue along this road if we want to continue to play in the big league,” stresses Schmidt. Since this can only be achieved with well-trained employees, fram as considers human resources to be its most important capital asset: “We see retaining and expanding skills as a highly profitable investment, and, to that extent, qualification of »



The way to digitalized manufacturing is paved. The new injection-molding machines at framas give employees an insight into the processes of smart production planning, complete traceability and automated quality testing (© framas)

employees as an ongoing process and mission-critical task."

For the young people at framas, their "lifelong learning" starts with their training as industrial clerks, tool mechanics (mold construction) and process engineers for plastics and rubber technology (molded parts) or via dual study courses, e.g. the cooperative study model (Kosmo) or medium-sized enterprises, each in cooperation with Kaiserslautern University, Germany, and its sites in Pirmasens and Zweibrücken, Germany.

But seasoned employees are also required and encouraged to continue developing. For example, the training and ad-

vanced education measures conducted at framas are usually already engaged directly on recruitment, coordinated via the HR department and department managers. This is based on individual development wishes just as much as on the needs of the company. The offers are in many cases obligatory, but in other cases are contributed by the employees themselves.

Internal and External Qualification Measures

The internal measures include, e.g., a special offer for machine setters, which was designed for framas by external specialists and teaches the most varied methodologies starting from the material properties of different polymers through to the fundamentals of injection molding; the modular, interdependent workshops focus, among other things, also on quality management and assurance. After the initial training, the courses are continued and assigned according to position, e.g. in order to qualify production employees as shift leaders.

A 12 to 18-month course, and a purely internal training program, takes the trainee a step further in the field of shoe last modeling, and even closes a gap. Thus, the shoe last modeler no longer ranks among the official training professions, but enjoys greater popularity – especially among the graduates of the German College of Shoemaking (DSF), which is also based in Pirmasens.

External qualification offers are implemented via specialized providers, such as the Haufe Akademie or the St. Gallen Management School in Switzerland. These involve needs-oriented topics, such as "From Colleague to Manager" for employees just promoted to a new managerial function, just as much as technical topics. The wide spectrum ranges from company controlling and export, through ISO certification, to marketing, personnel leadership and agile management.

Every Individual Employee Is Integrated

Traditional training formats are often replaced by webinars, particularly for short events. But extensive qualifications are also performed digitally – a current example is the training of an employee as a human resources manager in the form of "blended learning." With this measure by the German Chamber of Industry and Commerce (IHK), classical in-class lectures and digital learning are combined – the participants consolidate their knowledge by working by themselves between the sessions at IHK Pfalz. Accompanying exchange with other participants and lecturers is possible in the form of forums, chats and email.

If all internal and external measures are taken together, every employee at framas is integrated into the concept of continuous qualification measures.

High Motivation and Strong Loyalty

Whether classical, digital or in blended form: regular training and advanced education have a direct impact on competitiveness by retaining and expanding competences and skills, especially in technology-driven market segments. However, for framas, maintaining its human capital also pays off elsewhere. An extra measure of motivation must also be put in the balance, since the employer invests actively in its employees and opens up lucrative internal career opportunities for them. framas thus also consistently fills its national and international management positions from within its own ranks. And, moreover, an employee-friendly corporate culture and regular HR investment also pay off in the form of active company loyalty. ■

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