

»THE KEY TO SUCCESS LIES IN THE FLEXIBILITY OF BOTH OUR PROCESSES AND OUR PEOPLE. THAT, IN TURN, REQUIRES THE RIGHT COMPANY CULTURE. BEING HIGHLY ADAPTABLE AND CUSTOMER-ORIENTED IS PART OF OUR DNA, ALTHOUGH IT IS NOT ALWAYS EASY. «

**SAMO JENIČ, EXECUTIVE
DIRECTOR AT MG ROHR
D.O.O, GMP 2011, SLOVENIA**



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*Interviewed by Vera Pasyukova,
photos by Kristine Kneis, Marko Delbello Ocepek, MG Rohr and IEDC*

You've been with MG Rohr - a highly specialized, fast-growing technology and manufacturing company - since 2018. In the meantime, the company successfully transitioned from a specialized steel trading company to a high-tech manufacturing partner for global giants like Mercedes-Benz, AL-KO, Leitner, Otto Bock,

Liebher. What was the catalyst for this bold strategic shift, and how did you manage the initial risk?

When I joined MG Rohr in 2018, the company was already carrying out smaller tube-processing projects, but it was still primarily organized as a trading company. We knew that competition in trading would only continue to increase while margins

would keep shrinking. Competing with the largest players on economies of scale was simply not a realistic option. Instead, we saw our opportunity in engineering expertise, product development, and manufacturing high-value-added products.

The turning point came very soon. We were offered the opportunity to take over the development of

an entire product family with significant serial production potential and an exceptionally demanding timeline. We prepared thoroughly, and then—quite literally in the middle of the night—we decided to commit all our resources to winning the project. This meant investing in new machinery, developing nearly one hundred new products, designing and manufacturing a large number of production tools, and establishing serial production virtually from scratch. So rather than focusing on managing risks, we took the leap.

Your €5 million investment into an automated “smart factory” earned MG Rohr a prestigious Digital Transformation Award in 2024. MG Rohr operates a 2,500 m² state-of-the-art facility completed to high architectural and environmental standards, heavily incorporating Industry 4.0 guidelines, robotics, and paperless material tracking. Looking back, what were the major operational challenges in moving to a paperless, robotized production floor? What do you think was the biggest contributing factor for implementing the whole project successfully?

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The investment in the new facility and equipment was both demanding and intensive. From erecting the first column of the new building to its official opening took less than six months. During that time, we constructed a new production hall, connected it to the existing facility with a bridge, installed everything from an automated cassette storage system to a rooftop solar power plant, relocated all machinery and the entire warehouse, commissioned all robotic cells, and designed completely new

people think and operate. That work is never truly finished. We always have a long list of improvement opportunities, and the real question is how many of them we can implement - and how quickly.

While many companies are still just talking about Artificial Intelligence, MG Rohr is actively hiring AI specialists to build digital assistants and optimize production scheduling. Can you share some examples of how AI is already changing your



production processes. It was a very intensive period. The key to our success was that, for six months, everyone in the company worked as one team with a single shared objective.

However, this turned out to be the easier and faster part of the transformation. The real challenge lay in the “soft” side: establishing new processes, redesigning the organization of work, and changing the way

daily workflows or logistics?

Because we operate in a high-mix, low-volume environment, AI is not about replacing people or running fully autonomous production. Instead, we see it as a powerful advisor and assistant, applying it wherever it delivers tangible value. Today, AI supports us in customer communication, quotation preparation, material selection,



logistics optimization, machine setup, and quality analysis. While none of these applications is revolutionary on its own, together they improve hundreds of day-to-day decisions across the company.

We are still in the early stages of our AI journey and believe we have only begun to unlock its potential.

Digitalization often sparks fear of job displacement. How did you guide your team through this transformation, so they viewed automation and AI as tools that empower them rather than replace them?

Technology only creates fear when people don't understand its purpose.

From the very beginning, we have been completely transparent about why we invest in automation. Our goal has never been to reduce headcount, but to build a more competitive company - one capable of winning more demanding projects while creating more interesting and

rewarding jobs. Automation also improves working conditions. It eliminates repetitive physical tasks, reduces ergonomic risks, and enables employees to spend more time monitoring processes, solving technical challenges, and contributing ideas for continuous improvement. Another key factor is employee involvement. We do not develop new processes behind closed doors. The people who work with our equipment every day are actively involved in decision-making. Their feedback often leads to the best solutions because they understand the practical challenges better than anyone else.

Today, our employees are

just as enthusiastic about introducing new robots as the company's owners.

MG Rohr excels in small-series manufacturing and high-precision prototyping. How do you design internal processes to stay flexible enough for custom prototypes while maintaining the rigid quality standards required by premium automotive clients?

One of our distinguishing characteristics is that we operate with very little high-volume serial production. Sometimes we manufacture just a single part; other times we produce small batches. This makes process automation significantly more challenging, as maintaining efficiency in such an environment requires a completely different approach.

The key to success lies in the flexibility of both our processes and our people. That, in turn, requires the right company culture. Being highly adaptable and customer-oriented is part of our DNA, although it is not always easy.



Ultimately, flexibility and standardization are not opposites - they go hand in hand.

A smart factory is only as smart as the people running it. What are you doing right regarding leadership and talent development to ensure your team's skills keep pace with technology?

Technology can be purchased. Culture cannot. That is why we invest as much in our people as we do in our equipment. Continuous learning, regular team-building activities, company-wide meetings every two weeks, workshops, training programs, and clearly defined values help us improve day by day. Perhaps our most important principle is that mistakes are opportunities to improve the system - not to blame individuals.

Working as a direct supplier for premium brands like Mercedes-Benz leaves zero room for error. How do you foster a culture of extreme

accountability and precision within a team of fewer than 50 people?

We have adopted a principle similar to the one introduced in the aviation industry after the Second World War. Back then, air travel was considered dangerous; today, it is one of the safest modes of transportation. No one is punished for making a mistake. However, every mistake must be reported immediately so that we can analyze together why it happened and, more importantly, how to prevent it from happening again. The only unacceptable behavior is hiding a mistake. If an error goes unreported, the organization loses the opportunity to learn from it and improve the system.

Another point is that customer-centricity must be the center of everything. It starts with understanding the customer's challenge - not simply producing what they ask for. The biggest transformation at MG Rohr has been moving from a component manufacturer to a development partner. When you understand your customer's processes, you can often solve problems they haven't yet identified themselves. That partnership is our strongest competitive advantage.

You are an alumnus of the IEDC General Management Program (GMP). Would you recall what was the best feature of the program for you? Or maybe the biggest

takeaway back then? Would you say something in particular from GMP program did help you deal nowadays with the intense digital and operational scaling you lead today?

It's been a while, but I still have very fond memories of the GMP. I enjoyed every part of the program, although Professor Krzysztof Obłój's strategy module is probably the one I remember most vividly. The most valuable lesson I took away from the GMP - and from the programs I attended afterward - was learning to step back and look at my own situation from a broader perspective, almost as if it were a business case. Ask what has already been done well, what could have been done better, learn from the experiences of others, and then apply those insights to make the best possible decisions and execute them effectively. And one more thing: don't be too hard on yourself when things don't go as planned, even the best organizations have made worse mistakes.

We were happy to see you recently back to school, attending our short seminars such as Disruptive Innovation seminar with Harvard's Rory McDonald. Did Rory McDonald's insights spark any new ideas on how MG Rohr can find or create new niche markets before competitors do?

Professor Rory McDonald's



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lecture on disruptive innovation was particularly insightful because it demonstrated that there is more than one path to achieving a competitive advantage. The principles of disruptive innovation are invaluable for understanding industry dynamics and represent one possible strategy for entering a market, even if they are not directly applicable to your own business.

As a specialized niche B2B manufacturer, we rarely enter new markets by competing on price. Instead, we differentiate ourselves by creating greater value for our customers through engineering expertise, innovation, and tailored solutions. The broader your understanding of different business models and competitive strategies, the better equipped you are to choose the right path for your own company.

Moreover, you also participated in Juan Serrano's seminar on Inspirational Leadership and Inspired Customers. In a highly technical B2B engineering sector, how do you translate the concept of "customer-centricity" on all levels of the organization?

The key is to truly understand the customer and the challenges they are facing. Our goal is not only to provide the solution they ask for, but also to identify needs they may not even



have articulated. In other words, we aim to solve the immediate problem while consistently exceeding expectations.

Over the years, we have evolved from a manufacturer performing straightforward operations according to customer drawings into a development partner that understands the customer's challenges and designs the right solution to address them.

Having experienced IEDC through a long-term executive program and through a few short seminars, what role does continuous, lifelong learning play in your ability to remain an effective, forward-thinking executive?

If you stop learning, you fall behind. The world is changing faster than ever. No matter how quickly I learn new things, relatively speaking, I know less every day. Even in areas where I once believed I had mastered the subject, I keep discovering new

perspectives and better ways of doing things.

That is why I set myself a goal every year to attend at least one program at IEDC. Continuous learning is not just a personal ambition - it is a necessity for staying relevant and making better decisions as a leader.

Last but not least, as life is not only about work, what are the things that keep you grounded and bring you joy and satisfaction?

On the one hand, I need sports to feel good and function well. It's not just about staying fit or boosting my energy - I often get my best ideas when my heart rate is high, ideas that simply wouldn't come to me sitting in an office.

Another passion of mine is traveling and discovering new places and cultures, especially with my family. I'm fortunate that my children share this passion, and every trip becomes not only an adventure but also a valuable bonding experience for all of us.

WHAT ONE CANNOT FIND ON SAMO'S RESUME



GMP 2011

Samo Jenič
Slovenia

*Executive Director,
MG ROHR d.o.o*

What kind of sport do you practice or follow as a fan?

As a former triathlete, I still enjoy practicing and following endurance sports. I was a passionate cycling fan long before the Roglič–Pogačar era.

How many languages do you speak and which ones?

I conduct business negotiations in English, German, Croatian/Serbian, and Slovenian. Unfortunately, my Italian and Czech have become quite rusty over the years.

The best piece of advice you got from your kids so far?

I got it in German and cannot translate it to

English:) - »In der Ruhe liegt die Kraft, in den Tomaten liegt der Saft.«

And the last question, a coffee-version of the "Myers-Briggs test" :) Are you a 'Black Coffee/No Nonsense' operator, or a 'Double-Pump Vanilla Latte/Comfort First' strategist? If none of that, what type of coffee do you like, so we can profile you accordingly and serve you the best coffee at IEDC next time? :)

I'm a no-nonsense kind of guy, so my coffee is usually black and strong. That said, I wouldn't say no to a cappuccino in the morning.