



**27.-29.9.2022
NÜRNBERG**

STORY

June 2022

Courage to break new ground

Ever since its founding in 1966, the Gerhard Schubert packaging machine manufacturing company in Crailsheim, Germany, has helped drive automation in the industry. Breaking new ground was the family-run company's secret sauce from the very beginning, says Ralf Schubert, Managing Director and shareholder.

When Gerhard Schubert saw an industrial robot for the first time in the late 1970s, he was certain that robots and packaging machines were an ideal combination. What we practically take for granted in modern machines today was easier said than done 40 years ago. "More than anything, the controller was still a problem in those days," says Ralf Schubert, whose father founded the company. "The controllers available on the market were simply too slow for the fast processes in packaging machines." Schubert's first task was therefore to develop a suitable controller.

This approach remains part of Schubert's DNA. "When we need new solutions, we don't try to copy others. Instead, we try to find and implement the most appropriate solution for our machines and customers." The symbiosis of mechanics and software – which is so successful today and typifies Schubert's top-loading machines – emerged from these beginnings.

A family-run company with a future

Since 2012, Ralf Schubert and the two managing directors, Marcel Kiessling and Peter Gabriel, have continued to follow the successful course set by Gerhard Schubert, who still provides important momentum in his role as Managing Director and shareholder. "My brother Gerald and I were raised along with the company, and we grew into our jobs,"

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Ralf Schubert remembers. “After many years in management, Gerald is now active in business development for the company group.” This tradition has now continued into the third generation. Gerald Schubert’s son Johannes has been with the company for 14 years and has now joined the management board of the subsidiary Schubert Packaging Systems GmbH. Peter Schubert, Ralf Schubert’s son, has also decided to join the company. Having completed training and earning a mechanical engineering degree, he’s now his father’s assistant. Daughter Franziska has also put down roots in the company and helps promote the important trend of sustainable company management.

After earning a degree in computer science, Ralf Schubert’s career path initially took him away from packaging machines. “In the early 1980s, my father still believed that computer scientists weren’t needed in the manufacture of packaging machines,” Ralf Schubert says with a chuckle. And just how helpful his career choice would be in the development of top-loading machines was about to become clear. His brother, Gerald, however, studied mechanical engineering. “We were therefore able to complement each other very well.”

Software-driven development

Ralf Schubert implemented digitalization for the direct benefit of his customers, and he also introduced an ERP system in-house in the 1990s. “It was one of my firsts tasks,” he remembers. The company – which at the time consisted of only 290 employees – was therefore able to organise its production processes more efficiently and was prepared for the steadily growing volume of orders. “We’re very software-driven,” says the Technical Director.

Why is software so important? It’s what makes operational control and the configuration of the complex machines possible in the first place. “Retrofits should not take more than 30 minutes to complete,” says Ralf Schubert. As a general rule, the company’s top priority is to make its machines as easy as possible to operate, even – and especially – when it comes to managing complex packaging tasks.

“It’s important to be close to the customer so we know where the shoe pinches. This doesn’t mean to always do what the customers want, but rather to understand their problems and offer the best possible solutions. This only works if you look at the processes on the customer’s end,” Ralf Schubert

explains. Schubert has another “secret weapon” at hand for regular visits or fast on-site deployment. Like their father, Ralf and Gerald Schubert are passionate about flying. Sometimes they fly their PC-24 to visit customers in the morning and return home in the evening. Customer proximity doesn’t get any better than that.

Schubert wants to find the best possible solutions for individual customer problems. If this can’t be done with existing standard solutions, they look for a new one – without spending too much time thinking about whether the solution could be used more frequently. And this is exactly how innovations emerge, according to Ralf Schubert. “The end result always involves a certain amount of coincidence. That’s why we give our employees a lot of freedom in how they implement their ideas. This applies to individual machines and projects as well as entirely new approaches.” It’s especially true for one of Schubert’s latest projects: the cobot.

Artificial intelligence for smart cobots

In 2016, Ralf Schubert recognised that collaborative robots could help bridge automation gaps in packaging processes; namely, when it comes to feeding the products. Once again, it was clear that Schubert would develop its own cobot from the ground up.

The company now has two of its cobots in field trials on customer premises. Next year, the cobot will be launched for handling pouches in mass production. Ralf Schubert would have liked to present the cobot at FACHPACK 2022. “Unfortunately, we won’t have quite finished running all test loops by September,” he explains. “However, we’ll exhibit a case packer at our FACHPACK booth in Hall 1.” This is a machine for assembling and filling collapsible boxes. “I’m looking forward to meeting customers in person again at FACHPACK,” he says. “The trade fair is so close to Crailsheim that it’s a home game for us.”

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