

Schunk Sintermetalltechnik Thale: excellence in products few can produce



Over the past seven years, Schunk Sintermetalltechnik GmbH Thale has nearly doubled its output. This achievement is sure to be mentioned when the metal ceramics specialist celebrates on 29 September, but it is not the occasion for the celebrations. Managing director Ralf Will-Eric Stein and his staff of 350 are marking 50 years since the official opening of the current production plant. 15 years ago, the company which succeeded Eisenhüttenwerk Thale was acquired by the Schunk group. Both the management and staff are proud of what has been achieved since, as a DVD to be presented to each employee documents.

The DVD reminds viewers that the history of metallurgy in Thale goes back over three hundred years. The greatest moments in that history include the world's first ever industrial use of sintering, over 70 years ago. Although seen as one of the oldest branches of metallurgy, sintering is also one of the most innovative. It involves mixing and fusing powdered substances. "In a way, the industrial use of sintering technology in 1941 was innovation born of necessity - there was not enough non-ferrous metal for arms production during the war", explains the managing director Ralf W.-E. Stein. The process has since been continuously developed and improved, and now serves exclusively peaceful ends. Powdered iron is pressed at high pressure into a blank, which is then sintered in the hot furnace to produce a semi-finished product. This approach enables extremely precise production in large volumes, says Stein, highlighting the benefits of this forming method.

In Thale, sintering is used to produce a wide range of parts for the automotive industry. "One of our strengths is manufacturing components to a quality which many manufacturers simply cannot achieve", says Stein, citing camshaft phasers, oil pump components and ultra-heat-resistant parts for the aerospace industry. 90 million euros have been invested in the site since the Schunk group took over. Tools, furnaces, moulding presses and machines for mechanical processing were all renewed.

Stein believes the company's entrance onto the aviation market was successful because the Thale site was able to drive forward development of newer, "MIM" (metal injection moulding) technology. This special form of moulding allows the manufacture of not just one, but up to eight parts simultaneously. Schunk Sintermetalltechnik Thale is now the largest MIM manufacturer in Germany. The company, managed since 2005 by a trained smith with two engineering degrees, is now the market leader in the manufacture of special steels for turbochargers. Since 2005, output at the production plant has almost doubled with the annual number of parts manufactured rising from 17 to 34 million, and the volume of powder processed from 5,000 to 8,700 tonnes. Turnover has also increased from 34 to 62.7 million euros.

"This makes us one of the hundred largest companies in the state of Saxony-Anhalt", says the 55-year-old Stein from Brandenburg. That was not always the case. When he was appointed to Thale, he recounts, the situation was anything but satisfactory; a wide range of measures including the continual improvement process (CIP) still used today brought progress in all areas. Productivity doubled, and the reject rate was halved. An internal development department continues to work on innovations. Its objectives include greater material density and new materials for turbochargers and for the aviation industry. Work is ongoing on improving competitiveness, launching new products and securing jobs for the next generation, says Stein. For example, the company collaborated with aviation companies for four years to develop components for aeroplane engines. Now, the company has launched series production for the engine manufacturers Rolls-Royce Aerospace and MTU. For the gearwheel manufacturer, even each "project" appear to link smoothly and seamlessly to the next.

The current list of automotive manufacturers supplied by Schunk Sintermetalltechnik Thale reads like a who's who of the European automotive industry. It includes Audi, BMW, Daimler, Ford, GM (Opel and Vauxhall), MAN, Porsche, PSA, Seat, Skoda, Volkswagen and Volvo. Among the customers from the automotive supply sector are Benteler, Borg Warner, Brose, Continental, Getrag, Hilti, Honeywell, HuF, Keiper, Magna, Montaplast, Mubea, Pierburg and Schaeffler.

Schunk Sintermetalltechnik GmbH Thale has been part of the Schunk group for 15 years. The Schunk group is an international corporate group providing products and services in the following divisions: Schunk Materials, the Weiss Group (heating and air conditioning), Schunk Sinter Metals and Schunk Sonosystems (ultrasonic welding). Founded in 1913 in Fulda by Ludwig Schunk and Karl Ebe, the company generated a turnover of 780 million euros last year. The group has 60 operating subsidiaries, is active in 26 different countries and employs a total staff of around 8,200 worldwide. Alongside the plant in Thale, Schunk Sinter Metals also operates plants in Gießen and Mexico.

The anniversary DVD to be introduced and presented on 29 September will report on everything that has been achieved, to ensure that such success continues in the future, says Stein.

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