

How creative steel engineering know-how from Brehna is making oil sheikhs, filmmakers and roller-coaster fans happy

The answer is no secret, and the company logo even provides a hint: it is in the large steel and glass pyramid at the company STAHLBAU BREHNA in the south of Saxony-Anhalt that they have decoded the recipe for success.

Those who enter the two-level company headquarters situated adjacent to Autobahn 9 for the first time start by looking upwards. It is as if the offices and workspace are floating in the pyramid – and only the friendly “hello” from the reception desk that reminds the customers and visitors why they are there and occasions them to lower their gaze again.

“This is the best marketing that you can get!” says Managing Partner Matthias Gabler with a smile. “And at the end of the day, we are a company that’s known for realising highly sophisticated steel structures.”

Creating a future without lamenting the present

Matthias Gabler is no pessimist. Rather than loudly lamenting the lack of skilled workers, he and his team of sixty structural engineers at Brehna take a different approach. “We organize our own supply of highly qualified, creative and motivated employees,” explains Gabler.

Hiring one to three apprentices per year is compulsory. The young people are made to apply themselves and give their creativity free rein – imagination for the world of steel as it were, as the requirements of the contractors and the customers are extremely exacting. A steel construction for the “Chipas” water ride – a kind of roller coaster at Phantasia-Land in Brühl, an exclusive conservatory for an oil sheikh in Qatar, a giant sized events hall at Babelsberg film park, sophisticated systems for the chemicals industry – these are just a few examples from the wide variety of national and international projects for the worlds of industry and commerce that have been successfully realised by Stahlbau Brehna.

Twenty-six year old Han Wang is sitting at one of the desks in the glass pyramid. This young man from China is a master’s student in Industrial Engineering at the Otto-von-Guericke University of Magdeburg and is already an integral part of the team. Cooperating with technical colleges and universities that enable bachelor’s and master’s degree students to gain practical experience has been standard practise in Brehna for nearly seven years. Successful students can also expect to be offered a permanent job from the company that has the pyramid in front of its factory building.

A little phone call with a big impact

A year ago, Matthias Gabler got a phone call from a Chinese steel engineering firm. The company needed his help as they had a project that they couldn’t complete with the educational level of the employees and quality standards considered the norm in China. Today – almost a year later – a joint venture is underway. Stahlbau Brehna is training the Chinese employees here in Saxony-Anhalt and thereby selling German know-how. They are being taught German professional know-how, and German standards of quality apply. The new steel engineering company in Kunming, in the South China Province of Yunnan, has been up and running since the start of the year.

The company plans, makes and constructs sophisticated steel constructions and hall facilities. Assuming everything goes to plan, the volume will total up to 15,000 tonnes per year.

And maybe it’s no coincidence that the new steel engineering company that is now open shares many similarities with the one in Brehna – although it doesn’t (yet) have a pyramid in front of its factory building. Highly qualified will then be available to work in China at the touch of a button.

And in return, some employees from Brehna will be able to go to China where they will be able to learn about the conditions on location.

“The Chinese employees are motivated, flexible, hard-working, and adapt quickly to new tasks,” explains Matthias Gabler. “The only thing they are lacking is specialist knowledge – which we provide. And it’s also possible that one or two employees from Kunming may even stay here.” Those are long term perspectives, however.

And almost incidentally, this project has also brought another advantage for the steel engineering firm from Brehna: it has occasioned some companies to find out about the company in Saxony-Anhalt with the strange pyramid at its head office. Follow up orders aren’t to be ruled out.

"We build pyramids outside the desert too"

The company has thrived on creative and innovative solutions for steel engineering ever since it was founded in 1995. This is a place where unconventionality is written in bold. It all started with just five employees and an annual turnover of one million Euros. Today it is sixty employees and the turnover has multiplied.

The company has an in-house planning office in which another 20 employees resolve the trickiest tasks. “There is no such thing as the impossible” is the company philosophy.

In 2010, an extension to the existing production hall was completed – and the site that is the size of one and a half football fields now hums with the sound of welding, drilling, sawing and painting work. The company invested 1.3 million Euros, with 40 percent of the sum total coming from funds the state of Saxony-Anhalt.

“Whenever new machines are acquired, the employees who operate them are encouraged to express their suggestions and needs,” explains Matthias Gabler, who joined the company in 2002. Motivating employees, giving them a stake in the business and encouraging their creativity, specialist knowledge and engagement is also responsible for the excellent atmosphere at the steel engineering firm in Brehna. “It is only possible for a medium sized company to work and delivery top quality products on such a basis. We build pyramids outside the desert too,” says Matthias Gabler, smiling.

What the Brehna steel engineers are doing is one small part of the blueprint of the RIS – the Regional Innovation Strategy Saxony-Anhalt 2020. Mechanical and plant engineering is one of the key markets here that should provide the state and the region with great future prospects. A high degree of specialisation and the ability to compete internationally thanks to highly qualified and motivated employees; promoting and supporting the creative potential of employees; co-operations between small and medium-sized businesses from Saxony-Anhalt and universities and colleges. Such are the key attributes of the sectors in Saxony-Anhalt.

And these attributes appear to chime in very well with the company philosophy of Stahlbau Brehna. As Matthias Gabler puts it, “we can let the others get on with simple hall building projects.”

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