

PROFILE | Christoph Rennhard

AN ENTREPRENEUR THROUGH AND THROUGH

TEXT Felix Würsten
IMAGES Daniel Winkler

PROFILE | ETH alumnus Christoph Rennhard runs a company that develops precision machines for the global market. The keys to his success are technical expertise, customer orientation and talented staff – plus the ability of his SME to respond faster than big corporations.

We are in an unremarkable industrial estate on the outskirts of the Swiss village of Küssnacht am Rigi. Intersected by a busy main road, the site consists of a series of functional industrial buildings, with the first farmhouses visible just a stone's throw away. There is little to suggest that these doorways lead to the headquarters of a company that supplies the global market with highly specialised machinery.

"I'm Chris," says our host Christoph Rennhard, greeting his guests with a firm handshake. He immediately launches into a description of his company, telling us about his employees in China who are currently in lockdown in Shanghai, showing us a series of oddly shaped concrete parts fabricated by a 3D printer gantry system his company designed and built, and pointing out the yellow floors that make it easy to spot dirt and the wide corridors that keep everything moving at a brisk pace.

It's been 12 years since Rennhard took over LCA Automation, which now has around 80 employees. Almost 70 of them work here in Küssnacht; the others are located in Puebla, Mexico, and in the Chinese city of Shanghai. LCA produces sophisticated, custom-made manufacturing and testing systems that fabricate and test parts fully automatically – at high speed and with maximum precision. When Rennhard and his team design a new machine, they typically combine a whole series of engineering challenges. Their goal is to create a machine that can perform specified tasks, such as positioning objects with pinpoint precision, processing materials, assembling components, processing information or monitoring steps in a production process.

During the presentation, which by now has taken us to Rennhard's office, we spot the logos of well-known automotive companies that use LCA machines. "Big corporations enjoy working with SMEs like us because we're agile and good at what we do," he says. The key to a successful SME, he explains, is to get everyone pulling in the same direction and make sure that each team member's performance is visible to everyone else: "That maximises efficiency and offers a refreshing contrast to the complex development and procurement processes you typically see in big companies." He acknowledges that it can sometimes be challenging for employees, because a small team means that each individual's performance counts for a whole lot more. "You need to know you can rely on everyone in your team," he says.

EQUIPMENT AND EXPERIENCE Originally from Appenzell, Rennhard acquired his professional skills at ETH Zurich after completing his matriculation exam with a focus on classical languages in nearby St. Gallen. "I'm still glad I opted for humanities," he says. Yet mechanical engineering and materials technology were the subjects he chose to study at university. "I was just fascinated by these subjects," he says. "Though I wasn't exactly a model student! I spent a lot of time in the military, plus I had a job on the side." He shrugs off the question of whether he financed his studies himself: "Of course, an ETH degree course doesn't cost that much."

Working with industry partners, he completed his doctoral thesis on powder-metallurgy processes, which also gave him his first experience of being abroad. His next port of call was South Africa, where he worked as head of new product development at a steelworks, developing new materials and the corresponding process technology. It was an exciting time, not just professionally, but also because of South Africa's radical transformation after the end of apartheid. Rennhard was impressed by how much bolder South African managers were than their European colleagues. "As a young engineer, I was able to carry out some fairly intrepid experiments that would never have been permitted in

CHRISTOPH RENNHARD studied Mechanical Engineering and Materials Technology at ETH Zurich and completed his doctorate in 1993. After working for three companies, including posts in South Africa and the US, he took over ownership of the company LCA Automation in Küssnacht am Rigi in 2010. He also sits on the advisory board of Inspire, the ETH centre of excellence for technology transfer.

Europe, where the risk of damaging the plant would have been seen as too high." South Africa was also where he met his wife, who came to Switzerland with him in 1996 and now also works for LCA.

"The opportunity came up to do my General Staff training," he says, explaining why he decided to return to Switzerland. He attended Grenadier school in Isole in the canton of Ticino on four occasions, gaining a different rank each time. "At first, I saw my military training as a kind of sporting challenge, but I ended up advancing all the way to the strategic planning level." Much of what he learned is still useful today, he says: "Many aspects of military decision-making can also be applied in a modified form in business." The military also taught him how to lead and motivate people, he says, and it showed him how important it is for managers to give their staff the appreciation they deserve. Many of those working in Rennhard's team are still young, but he insists on giving them leadership tasks and plenty of leeway to make their own decisions.

"My biggest challenge is finding talented and loyal employees," says Rennhard. He would like to recruit more ETH graduates. "But a lot of them prefer the option of a bigger company, because we're not exactly a household name," he says. "They also tend to underestimate how challenging our business is. We don't offer the kind of in-house workshops where people can unwind and relax," he says with a twinkle in his eye. Nonetheless, he feels it would be a mistake for Switzerland to produce even

more graduates. "It's not mediocre academics we need, but as many skilled professionals as possible, plus a smaller number of high-calibre graduates."

Away from work, Rennhard is a keen motorcyclist and an amateur pilot – two areas where he can apply his technical skills. On the job, he is an entrepreneur through and through, combining a global outlook with solid Swiss pragmatism. He regularly comes out with phrases that he learned as a boy in Appenzel: "Always be who you are" and "Be careful who you trust". He also emphasises his close ties to his native land: "I'm a patriot and proud of Switzerland's culture of hard work." And he is quick to highlight the importance of honesty and loyalty: "Leaving a company and taking the customers with me is not the kind of thing I would do."

ACTIVE IN MANY INDUSTRIES After returning from South Africa, he worked for two Swiss companies – and still serves on the board of directors at one of them. As the new head of LCA, he immediately realised they needed to beef up the software department. "The control units for our machines are highly sophisticated," he explains. The company's efforts have clearly paid off. "Breakdowns are few and far between," says Rennhard proudly. The company can access customer machines via the internet, but supporting customers on site and in person continues to be important. "When our customers call us, they expect to speak to a trained professional as fast as possible. We achieve that in nine out of ten cases."

LCA works in many different industries, as shown by the variety of parts in Rennhard's office. But how do they keep so many balls in the air at once? "The basic focus of what we do is clearly defined," says Rennhard. "We combine different technologies to build a single automated system." He recently gained insight into a new sector as part of a project involving the construction materials manufacturer Sika and the construction company Affentranger. The three partners developed a gantry system that fabricates customised components from special concrete. As a member of the advisory board of Inspire, the ETH centre of excellence for technology transfer, Rennhard also has a gateway to the latest research. "It's important for us to have access to ETH expertise so that we can keep pace with our competitors," he says.

At the end of our tour, Rennhard shows us the automated marble run in the foyer that a team of apprentices developed for the local trade fair. "The visitors absolutely loved it," says Rennhard. "We think it's important to have a local presence, because this is where we find the young people who do vocational training at our company." Eventually, some of them will even end up working as his employees as far away as Mexico or China. ○

