



A founding Beckhoff Switzerland team member and his successor: Gerhard Meier (right), Managing Director, Beckhoff Switzerland, and Executive Director René Zuberbühler.

# Beckhoff Switzerland: 15 years of success through technological innovation and local presence

The Swiss subsidiary of Beckhoff was founded in Schaffhausen on September 9, 1999. Celebrating the company's 15th anniversary, PC Control talked with Gerhard Meier, Managing Director of Beckhoff Switzerland and one of the founding team members, as well as his designated successor, René Zuberbühler, about past successes, the ongoing expansion of the Swiss distribution network, and the company's future growth prospects.

## **What led to the decision to set up this subsidiary, and how has Beckhoff Switzerland developed since?**

**Gerhard Meier:** I started working for Beckhoff in 1996 as a sales representative in Switzerland. Although at the time, Beckhoff was active almost exclusively in the woodworking industry and still quite unknown in other industries, we quickly won new customers. The work load soon became too much for a single person, which is why we hired additional staff for support and administration. The success in the market, compounded by the need for additional office space, was the reason the Schaffhausen subsidiary was officially established in 1999. Today, almost 30 people support a large number of Beckhoff customers in Switzerland. In fiscal year 2013, for example, we had revenues of roughly 22 million Swiss francs (about 18 million euros).

## **What were the historical reasons for machine manufacturers to select PC-based control technology?**

**Gerhard Meier:** Then, as is the case now, the benefits of PC-based control technology included better performance when compared with conventional PLC technology, as well as the ability for users to integrate custom functions according to their requirements. A good example is punch press specialist Bruderer, who has been a customer and satisfied PC control user since 1998. We custom-designed a powerful cam controller for them that seamlessly integrates into TwinCAT software. The powerful control PCs used by Bruderer today feature numerous additional functions, including tool safeguards and press force monitoring that previously required separate devices from third-party providers. Having everything in an integrated system reduces costs and enables



The Swiss headquarters of Beckhoff Automation AG is located in Schaffhausen.

Bruderer to keep their entire intellectual property (IP) in-house. This clearly highlights the value of the PC-based solutions from Beckhoff: they offer all capabilities required to integrate complex applications that are either impossible to implement with traditional PLC systems, or very expensive to do so, often requiring additional modules. A powerful and open PC-based controller that can be adapted to unique requirements with software or specific terminals is simply a better solution. Bruderer realized another great advantage over time: easy maintenance, even when a machine has been running for a long time. For example, after replacing a Beckhoff Industrial PC (IPC) from the year 2000 (14 years later), it took only 30 minutes to get the machine operational again. In Bruderer's experience, other control systems would make such a replacement process very expensive and involve significant downtime, even after only a few years of operation.

#### **What makes the Swiss market special, and what role does innovation play here?**

**René Zuberbühler:** Swiss companies set themselves apart predominantly with innovation, quality, and increasingly, with the design of their machines. Beckhoff supports each of these aspects to the fullest as the technology leader in PC-based control and drive technology, and by producing its components exclusively in Germany with the high quality and long availability customers expect. Beckhoff systems also maintain a high degree of aesthetic quality. A prime example is the CP32xx multi-touch Panel PC that was honored with the coveted Red Dot design award in the spring of 2014. Accordingly, Beckhoff is recognized throughout Switzerland as a maker of highly innovative products that are also high quality in every respect.

**Gerhard Meier:** Beckhoff is known as a technology leader in Switzerland largely because of its EtherCAT technology and TwinCAT software. We are also known for our technological leaps, such as the eXtended Transport System (XTS), which opens up entirely new avenues, particularly in the area of packaging

machines. In addition, for an export-driven Swiss machine manufacturer like Bruderer, working with a leading control system supplier is an absolute must.

#### **Which application areas do you focus on the most, and where do you see the greatest market potential in the future?**

**Gerhard Meier:** Beckhoff generates a large portion of its annual sales from the machine building applications, particularly in industries such as metal-working, plant engineering, watch-making, medical technology, and packaging technology. PC control is especially popular in the packaging industry, which is very strong here because of Switzerland's many global food, biotechnology, and pharmaceutical companies. These are areas that still harbor abundant potential for our control technology. Building automation has also been very successful in Switzerland for many years, advancing rapidly with numerous major commercial building and hotel projects. We are confident that our customers will benefit from our „TwinCAT Building Automation“ software suite with its Project Builder configuration tool, as well as from our BACnet-compatible products. We also foresee significant growth in the machine tool industry, where more and more users recognize the benefits of TwinCAT's CNC functionality. We are currently working on some very large projects where the open characteristics of Beckhoff control technology really come to bear, because it makes it easy to develop customer-specific hardware and software products exactly according to the requirements requested by customers. Additionally, TwinCAT 3 enables our customers to develop technology-specific TcCOM objects in high-level languages. This means that they can keep their knowledge base in-house, removing the need to transfer it to the controller manufacturer. Such components can be seamlessly integrated into the control solution, again demonstrating the system's openness.

**René Zuberbühler:** Switzerland continues to have a very strong machine-building industry, although only the engineering activities are left here, in some cases. However, particularly with regard to the engineering portion, we offer with



Park Hotel Vitznau, situated directly on the shore of the Lake Lucerne in Switzerland. The state-of-the-art, holistically integrated building automation of the historic building was implemented with Beckhoff control components.



Swiss punch press manufacturer Bruderer has relied on Beckhoff PC-based control technology since 1998. The picture shows a high-speed BSTA 150 punch press.

TwinCAT 3, an innovative tool that, in combination with our drive technology, will strengthen Beckhoff's position in the Swiss marketplace considerably. Especially for this market, Beckhoff offers optimized solutions whose compatibility and openness provides our customers great flexibility and independence. These are considerable benefits, particularly in the area of building renovation and automation. That's why I believe that Beckhoff Switzerland will experience double-digit growth rates in the coming years.

### How important is it for the customer to get a complete solution from a control system supplier with industry-specific expertise?

**Gerhard Meier:** Although many customers got to know Beckhoff from our I/O terminals, we are viewed predominantly as a systems supplier today. Another great advantage of our product line and capabilities is the fact that users who want to convert from machine controllers can often migrate very easily and incrementally from their existing I/O terminal system to a comprehensive Beckhoff solution. We have the industry know-how to propose and implement compelling solutions in all areas – sales, support, and application work. This also applies to the machine lifecycle as a whole. We also are seeing a clear trend, indicating that some of the expertise formerly resided with the machine builder must now be provided by the controller supplier.

**René Zuberbühler:** The focus is truly shifting more and more towards holistically-integrated solutions. Our customers place great value on being able to procure such solutions from a single source while maintaining their engineering independence. This also applies to the machine tool manufacturing industry, from which I originally came, that now increasingly bases its products on the TwinCAT CNC solution in connection with Beckhoff industrial expertise.

### Just in time for its anniversary, Beckhoff Switzerland is opening a new office in the Italian-speaking part of the country. Do customers increasingly demand local support?

**Gerhard Meier:** Correct. Our new office in Losone, an industrial region in Ticino, will open its doors in September. Upon opening, we will have one technician and one experienced sales engineer for our customers to receive rapid responses and access to local expertise. This is particularly important in a multilingual nation like Switzerland. To be taken seriously, you must be present in all regions in the ways your customers are most comfortable with.

**René Zuberbühler:** In Ticino, we previously only had one freelancer, who is now employed by Beckhoff. The new office enables us to measure up to the economic importance of the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland. Our general goal is to continuously expand our technical support in all locations.

### Speaking of continuity – you will have a change in management in September 2015 that has been well-planned in advance.

**Gerhard Meier:** Beckhoff has always emphasized long-term customer relationships with close cooperation and best-in-class support. Needless to say, our people share this approach and we therefore think strategic succession planning is very important. This is why René Zuberbühler, as a proactive first step, took over our sales and personnel management this year. He will begin to take on additional executive duties, with the goal of a complete transition by the next anniversary of Beckhoff Switzerland on September 16, 2015. After this date, I will concentrate on key account projects and the CNC industry until my expected retirement in the summer of 2017.

Further information:

[www.beckhoff.ch](http://www.beckhoff.ch)