

"Our industry thrives on finding innovative solutions"

Ahead of glasstec 2024, Gesine Bergmann, Head of the Glass Technology Forum at VDMA, and Peter Oswald, Managing Director of BENTELER Glass Processing Equipment, discuss the current challenges facing German machine builders.

Ms. Bergmann, glasstec 2024, the world's leading trade fair for the glass industry, will open its doors in Düsseldorf on October 22. What important challenges do you see for the glass processing industry?

Gesine Bergmann: As in other industries, there are a variety of issues. I believe sustainability and energy efficiency will continue to occupy us, along with the requirements for products and companies associated with them. Added to this are tasks that can be summarized under the headings digitalization, automation, and the use of AI. But the shortage of skilled workers, recruitment of new talent, and competition, particularly from China, also remain ongoing issues. These are all diverse challenges. But our industry thrives on finding innovative solutions. It has repeatedly demonstrated this. So, we should remain optimistic.

Mr. Oswald, how do you at BENTELER Mechanical Engineering assess the competition from China, and how does your company handle it?

Peter Oswald: Firstly, competition is fundamentally to be welcomed. German machine builders can benefit from the innovative pressure it creates by positioning themselves successfully in the market with corresponding solutions and developments. For us, this applies, among other things, to the areas of connectivity, automation, and handling. In China, BENTELER addresses competition in glass processing with both technical advances as well as a localization strategy – our "local for local" approach. With this, we also produce systems and machines in China tailored specifically for the local market.

What advantages do Germany or Europe still offer as locations?

Peter Oswald: I don't think we need to hide; on the contrary, many of the world market leaders and hidden champions in machine manufacturing are found in Germany and Europe. The quality and durability of machines and systems, as well as the service, are compelling arguments in a highly competitive market. Our innovative strength is primarily based on our excellently trained and experienced specialists – German engineering remains our decisive competitive advantage.

Gesine Bergmann: I completely agree. The value of products “Made in Germany” is exceptionally high. Our machines are known for their reliability over a long period of time. Customers appreciate this, as it means they don't have to buy new machines every few years. For our machine builders, however, this means that they have to develop the products in such a way that they can be kept up to date for a long time and can adapt to technological developments.

A topic that definitely concerns many companies and decision-makers is securing skilled workers and attracting new talent. Do you see solutions to this problem?

Gesine Bergmann: Many companies are certainly already doing a lot here. It's important to keep pointing out that mechanical engineering is an extremely attractive professional environment in Germany – German mechanical engineering companies are regularly among the top employers and among the most positively rated training companies. Companies should make even more use of this, become much more active in schools, support and equip extracurricular groups and work together with teachers to arouse pupils' interest in fields such as mechanics, electronics and IT.

The difficult personnel situation will certainly also ensure that companies will focus even more on the areas of digitalization and automation. As VDMA, we will also continue to engage in discussions with government, for example to reduce bureaucratic hurdles for companies when hiring qualified workers from abroad. The government also needs to take action to counteract the exodus of production sites with incentive systems, for example.