



Perfect is the enemy of good.

Interview

Peter Schmidlin

CINO, Belimo Automation AG

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Peter Schmidlin is Chief Innovation Officer (CIO) at the Swiss SME Belimo, which is headquartered in Hinwil. The company is the global market leader in the development, production and marketing of actuator solutions for controlling heating, ventilation and air conditioning systems. Belimo has a global footprint and operates in 80 countries across every inhabited continent. Founded in 1975, it now employs more than 1,700 staff.

Mr Schmidlin, how did your journey with Belimo begin?

Peter Schmidlin: I came to Belimo as a young electrical engineer, straight after graduating from the ETH more than 30 years ago. To be honest, I only wanted to earn some money to go travelling but things worked out rather differently. I quickly saw that the company doesn't just manufacture little motors, it works in a highly focused way and develops things off its own bat. Wherever we can do something for ourselves, we do it in depth – that was the exciting thing for me as an engineer. Creating electro-mechanical components fascinated me and that's why I stayed.

It's worth noting that, back then, we solved problems by finding the right blend of mechanics and electronics. Nowadays, there is software in the mix, and, almost more importantly, an in-depth understanding of building physics. Our goal is to combine these disciplines in an optimal way in order to develop exceptional solutions that meet the requirements both of our clients and the application.

“We shouldn't do ourselves what others can do better.”

How has your career evolved?

I have been working in research and development since my very first day and I have tried my hand at pretty much everything: motors, sensors, microprocessors and software. Back then, I was exclusively an engineer, I was the technology guy. We have more or less mastered the art of splicing electronics and mechanics. In the past, we would always ask ourselves: *“How can you do that with hardware, with electronics?”* Nowadays, though, we are much more interested in asking: *“What can you do with that?”* This is a real paradigm shift.

You have now become a global market leader with your products – how did you manage this feat?

With “innovation leadership”. And by that I mean that we have focused on a very specific segment – actuators, valves and sensors. The client has always been at the centre of everything we do and as we go about our work, we continually ask ourselves: “How will our efforts add value for our customers?”

Where is there still untapped potential?” We want our customers to get the best. That's why we make a point of going out into the field and listening to them. We want to understand what they do. We then develop ideas and take them to the next level, coming up with solutions that no one has ever considered before.

How can good ideas be cultivated?

By being open, pushing the envelope of our thinking, creating a working environment in which everyone feels at ease and can make their contribution. By not dodging the difficult discussions. By always going the extra mile, thinking through the next step, looking a little further. And by sticking steadfastly to the philosophy that we shouldn't do ourselves what others can do better. The Internet of

Things (IoT) is a sector like that and a great opportunity for us. Here, we need partners that are experts in the field. If we cooperate successfully, both within the company and with our business partners, we can come up with ideas that are truly transformative.

Belimo and Ergon share a history going back many years. What is at the heart of this partnership?

We are only interested in long-term partnerships and we want to be able to rely on our suppliers. We don't think of them as jobbing sub-contractors but rather as sources of expertise. When we have good partners, we have the benefit of their knowledge and this is true in the field of research and development as well. Ergon is a strategic partner with knowledge that we simply don't have. We have learnt a lot from them and they have learnt a lot from us. The bottom line is that we are both pulling in the right direction. Other people talk about the IoT, but we've been doing it for ten years, together. We are setting new milestones in the IoT.

And your personal highlight?

I don't have an individual highlight but I certainly feel pride when I flick through our latest catalogue and can see that there's a little bit of me in everything. I was involved back then and I'm still involved today. It's really gratifying that there will always be new challenges for me – for instance, product design is part of my remit as well now. In the old days, industrial design played second fiddle to technological considerations, but now aesthetics, brand identity and individuality are becoming more and more important – even within the product itself. Belimo's has a very distinctive design language that has become synonymous with quality. People can spot our products a mile away.

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In your experience, what is the secret to being a self-starter?

There's more than one way to skin a cat! I think you should always be making space for yourself, creating room to think. Remaining mentally porous is also important, as are not giving up, wanting to see something through to completion, not getting stuck halfway, thinking things through to the end, getting your hands dirty, motivating people. And I think it's very important to set a good example – even if you make the occasional mistake. Nobody is perfect. Stand by your work, be fair, be collegial – this is the best way to create a climate of fairness and mutual respect, despite the fact that things inevitably get stressful at times.

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