



Member Interview



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Nationality	Austrian
Hometown	Dubai
Education	by profession wood turner, afterwards education in economics in Salzburg, St. Gallen, London, Toronto and Shanghai
Employer	BENE Middle East (Office Furniture)
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Q: Our interviewee today is Mr. Juergen Loeschenkohl, managing director of BENE Middle East. Juergen welcome to this interview.

Juergen: Thank you very much Werner. Pleasures on my side.

Q: Juergen, I think pretty much everybody knows the company BENE, but maybe you can tell us a little bit about it, in your own words.

Juergen: BENE was founded in 1790, so it is pretty old, and started developing in the 1950's a strong focus on industrial produced office furniture solutions. And since then, the company has grown quite internationally. We are represented in about 40 countries globally and came already in the year 1978 to the Middle East. We started in Iraq as well as in Saudi Arabia until the year 1991 then had to step out for a couple of years and came back in the year 2001. And since then, we are located in Dubai. Dubai is our Middle East hub. But over the years we have also developed our geographical approach to Africa as it is basically in front of the house door but also further to the East, particularly to India and also to the Far East.

Q: You are here now since 2006. So you have been largely responsible for the success of the last 15-16 years, and I guess it was a real success story.

Juergen: Yes, it is. Given the size of our company compared to our global competitors. We are comparatively a tiny company, but we have a good reputation, a strong brand because innovation is driving us and this is gaining attention in the architecture and design community. But I have to admit that we always had - and right now at this point have - a very dedicated, passionate team. It was and it will never be an individual success. It is always the success of the team. And so, we have been able to develop a pretty good success story here. We are even responsible till now for the three largest orders in the company's history.

Q: Could you tell us a little bit about the business setup of your organization?

Juergen: We have tried quite a lot of things, particularly in the early 2000's, but then have concentrated on what we are kind calling a hub and spokes strategy. Our hub is here in Dubai and our spokes are dedicated dealers. Though I would like rather to call them partners. They are almost mono brand companies who are fully committed and work only with BENE as we have a very wide and large product portfolio which needs a lot of knowledge. We didn't go down the route of having plenty of dealers. Because it would be too challenging and difficult to transfer the needed knowledge. So, we are working very specifically with the selected partners. So, the teams are really at an excellent level and are capable of conveying our message, especially the brand identity, and our conceptual strength towards the market. So, the hub is supporting our partner net, but in the same time my team is also out in the market making sure that the architecture and design community is well informed. As a joint team, we enjoy finding the right projects and turn them into success stories.

Q: From a geographical reach, you are set up in a quite unusual way in the sense that you are even covering the United Kingdom and Ireland. Why is that?

Juergen: A good question and I know it sounds awkward so basically, I am responsible for all operations outside of the European Union. And the reason why the UK is also part of my responsibility is that our projects are in most cases heavily influenced by the architecture and design community. And the UK also traditionally has a very strong link with the Middle East and even beyond. By beyond I mean towards the Far East and therefore that very large geographical spread is from a BENE's perspective linked together in one market segment out of four that we have in BENE.

And the UK architects have a close collaboration with architects from Singapore or Hong Kong, which are influencing their own markets, the mainland China market, the Indian market but also the Middle East. And not to forget they are also quite heavily involved in very interesting projects in the African market.

So therefore, my area of responsibility is quite a big one, but for all the major markets I'm happy to have dedicated teams which are managed out of the Dubai office.

Q: In how many countries did you have projects so far?

Juergen: In the last 15 years, my team and I have been able to sell on 4 continents in more than 40 countries and more than 100 different cities. Our projects included some really significant large ones.

Since I am with the company - that is already for 20 years - BENE had always a very strong export DNA. So, we do not have to have necessarily a set up in a country to sell to a project. It is an additional challenge, and we use our global network to sell for example in the remotest

areas of Africa or anywhere else where we do not have anyone on the ground and make sure that import, installation and even the after sales is working in a proper way.

Q: I would assume you're permanently in the air...

Juergen: Well, thanks to Emirates, we are linked from the Dubai hub to basically all the markets where we are operating. For the frequent traveler it is a very big advantage that Dubai is a hub for the West, particularly for Africa and definitely for the GCC region, and also for the East. I need to travel a lot because client and team facing is very important. But at the same time "all roads lead to Dubai" and that helps a lot. So, the setup of our regional hub definitely makes sense here.

Q: Today, when we are recording this interview, it's a public holiday here in Dubai. But nevertheless, you are sitting in your office in Dubai Design District. That brings me to a question that seems to be quite natural when we talk to an office furniture manufacturer.

We are just coming out of the pandemic, and it can be argued that a furniture manufacturer would be at the forefront of the discussion about Home Office vs "real office". How have you been affected during the pandemic with your business and how do you see the future for your business?

Juergen: A very good question, which I think with each and every month gets clearer and clearer. In the beginning of 2020, there was this big statement: "the office is dead". "So, by the way, dear office manufacturer: That's it. You're going to have no business anymore. Everyone will work in the future from home". And we immediately started to react on these statements. And of course, we reflected ourselves as well, because we were sitting also at home and did our work from home. We developed various concepts like the "Core of BENE", which is a smart office solution, where BENE and a provider for Sensorics worked together to create a safe - in the sense of a health perspective - environment in which we all are going to keep our distances and in which the office will not be overloaded. So, we tested a lot of things straight away, maybe not with the perfect outcome, but immediately the research and development process started. What's the next thing and how do we have to adapt our concepts? One thing is clear and that statement I can make with full confidence. The office is everything else, but not dead, but it will have a new purpose for sure. I would say in the majority of my markets, remote working - not necessarily home but remote working - will stay for 2 to 3 days a week and during the time when the employees are coming back to the office the major focus will be on communication because I don't have to come to the office to sit for 10 hours in front of the screen. I can do that from anywhere else, but when I come to the office, I want to have a personal exchange. I want to have this interview on Zoom today in reality. Because almost everyone was missing that human touch, that conversation over a coffee. That conversation over lunch where 80% is about business topics anyway and not private. But what happens here? The great ideas are happening in these situations and luckily, we are human beings. We are also social animals. So, we enjoy this collaboration. And the combination of remote working and real office makes a difference as to be seen by potential candidates as an innovative company. Providing the right flexible working environment will be very important besides the monetary package. I just came back from Australia. If you don't have any flexible working options, your employees are gone, so the exchange of good talents in the Australian market is brutal at the moment and I can see that also in my conversations back home, in Europe. That is a fact. So, I really must ask a company:

- How do I have to change my mindset?
- What can I provide to my employees?

- Maybe I have to change even my leadership style because leading from a distance is something else compared to seeing my people every day.
- And, what about me? Do I have to adapt to my working environment? I don't want to say make everyone happy. But to give everyone an environment to perform efficiently and with enjoyment.

Q: So, in short: The office is not dead, but the office will change.

Juergen: The office will change. We recently launched a new office guide "Ways To Work Now", where we have compiled our knowledge in a short crisp guide readable for everyone, particularly architects and designers, but also for an owner of a company who might be in the beautiful need to adopt the working environment. So, that could be an interesting booklet to read available on the BENE homepage. Or give us a call and let us talk about it because – yes, we do produce office furniture, we design it, we develop it ourselves - but at the end of the day it is a product that has to contribute to a client's success by improving the working environment. That is a big challenge. We have to first engage in a needs analysis before we actually can talk about the product.

Q: Juergen, thank you very much for those insights. It was a pleasure talking to you. Wishing you continued big success here in the Middle East and all other markets that you cover.

Juergen: Thank you so much for the invitation.