

# Bundled competences – strong brands

At Olbrich Group (Bocholt, Germany) much has changed since the integration of Polytype Converting. New structures and an even more comprehensive offering to the customers are regarded as positive signs for the future of the machinery experts. C2 in an exclusive interview with CEO Bastian Kuhl, CTO Rolf Langkamp and CSO Esa-Matti Aalto

**C2:** The start of 2021 still brings many imponderables for the companies in our industry. What lessons did you learn in the past 12 months and what is your overall assessment of 2020?

**Bastian Kuhl:** Of course, the Covid pandemic affected us – just like everyone else. Our first priority was and is, of course, the health of our employees, but also of our customers with whom we work closely. Thanks to a very fast, unbureaucratic and pragmatic approach, we have so far been able to keep the number of Corona cases in our company with almost 900 employees in the single-digit range. Particularly under these adverse circumstances, I was – as a relatively new player in this company – absolutely thrilled by the passion and commitment of our employees. With the

principles of “safety, quality and delivery reliability” at the forefront, they stood closely at the side of our customers during this time of crisis.

**Rolf Langkamp:** “Safety First!” also included the further establishment of the home office for us. We have set up virtual workstations where even the most complex 3D CAD applications are possible. Despite the circumstances and the travel ban, we managed to continue serving our customers worldwide. Commissioning was also carried out “remotely”. Our service strategy, which is based on a worldwide local presence, really paid off here.

**Esa-Matti Aalto:** I would like to add that we have already learned to work remotely very well in the past years – also due to our different locations in Fribourg, Hamburg and

Bocholt. This development was accelerated by the pandemic. We have seen that this functions well and is also accepted accordingly by the customers.

**C2:** “One Converting – all segments under one roof” – this is the motto under which the Olbrich Group presents itself after the reorganisation. What are the strategic considerations behind this positioning?

**E.-M. Aalto:** For our customers, we will remain present in the established markets with the two familiar brands. However, we will continue to offer the entire segment portfolio with our best-in-class special machines and plants across both brands. So the brand presence will remain, but our customers should be able to get the best of both worlds. This is what



Virtual meeting: Esa-Matti Aalto, Rolf Langkamp and Bastian Kuhl around the table (from left); Nina Pirchmoser, Helena Teuwsen and Martin Hirschmann on the screen



**Conclusion of a successful renovation project in corona times at Eastman Kodak Company in the United States**

“One Converting” stands for: a strong brand presence in our respective traditional markets, but in combination with even better services.

**B. Kuhl:** For example, until two years ago a Polytype customer just got a Polytype winder and a Polytype coating machine. Although we had already worked very closely together at that time, the Olbrich product portfolio was perhaps not yet accessed. This is exactly what we have now systematised and thus ensure that the entire product portfolio can be accessed across both brands! Furthermore, “One Converting” means for our customers that the existing brands definitely remain present. We are

talking about strong brands that have grown over decades. Internally, however, we naturally want to bundle our competences. This strategy is already bearing fruit, since we are already working on joint projects across different locations that would otherwise never have been possible.

**C2:** “New Energy” and “Packaging” are new focus markets at Olbrich. What can you offer your customers here?

**R. Langkamp:** As part of the strategic alignment of our “One Converting” businesses, we have identified a number of focus markets

that will be of particular strategic relevance to our group over the next five years due to existing or emerging dynamics. These include the “New Energy” and “Packaging” segments. However, it is also important to say that we will continue to offer our machines and services in the other business areas as before.

**B. Kuhl:** For us, “new energy” includes battery production, i.e. lithium-ion cells and fuel cells. While there have been established production technologies for lithium-ion cells for about 10 years, the industrialisation of fuel cells is actually still to come. Here, we are still very closely associated with research institutions and

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are pursuing some projects at an early stage of development. What is still very exciting in the battery segment: in the last 10 years, 80-90% of the market was based in Asia – this is also where you can find the established players. But now we are seeing increasing geographical diversification in this market – both in terms of production capacities and production technologies. The technical innovation cycles are so rapid in terms of loading capacity and speed that we are really at the forefront here with our functional coating technologies and experience.

**E.-M. Aalto:** We really benefit from the fact that we are so broadly positioned. The experience we have gained in completely unfamiliar sectors is extremely helpful to us technologically in sectors that are currently in great demand – such as the battery segment. We are known as a manufacturer of special machines – and special solutions are particularly in demand right now! Of course, we also continue to focus on the packaging segment. Especially when it comes to sustainability, we have our finger on the pulse. For example, together with our customers we are developing “green packaging” based on paper fibre. This has already led to us winning our first major projects.

**B. Kuhl:** If you consume with a keen eye, you will notice that some suppliers of snacks and chocolate bars have started to advertise with paper-based packaging! The eco-friendly/

sustainable packaging is promoted here more than the content itself ... It is all the more important for us to stay at the spearhead of technological development in this trend.

**C2:** How will the single brands of Olbrich Group work together from now on?

**E.-M. Aalto:** In any case, we will continue to run the single brands within their established market segments just like before. When we merged in 2017, we have already developed an industry focus together with Polytype Converting. This has definitely paid off!

**C2:** What are your respective responsibilities in the management?

**B. Kuhl:** As CTO, Rolf Langkamp is responsible for technology and the supply chain. This means: all construction elements, but also logistics, production and purchasing. Esa-Matti Aalto directs all sales and service aspects as CSO. As CEO, I am responsible for project management, finances and administration.

**C2:** What are some current technological highlights from Olbrich that you would like to present to our readers?

**R. Langkamp:** First of all, I'd like to mention our new digital print technology for decorative webs. Here, we have developed a very exciting technology together with RICOH. We are also working on the next generation of

high-performance dryers that operate with maximum energy efficiency. Dryers are often bottleneck systems when it comes to enabling even higher speeds – and with even lower energy consumption. This is our incentive to bring even more added value to our customers in this area.

A very important point is that customers can come directly to us with their product ideas. With our wide range of test facilities, we can develop them directly with the customer and produce samples. The customer brings a product to us and can then assess and qualify it. Together, we will work out the best concept to then manufacture this product industrially.

**C2:** Another focus of your new alignment is the service segment ...

**E.-M. Aalto:** Basically, we are continuing to build up and expand our worldwide service locations – especially in China and the USA. As I said at the beginning, this is paying off, especially during the pandemic. With the further expansion of these locations, we want to be even closer to our customers. We are also in the process of further expanding our predictive maintenance solutions so that we can assist customers in a forward-looking manner.

Remote service applications are extremely important nowadays: In China, we carried out a complete commissioning remotely – also with the help of our local partners. Something like this would have been unthinkable before the pandemic! By not having to send our specialists to a specific location all the time, we can be in many more places at the same time and scale certain operations. We have learned a lot from the crisis – and the service profits particularly strongly from these insights.

**R. Langkamp:** We are also working on solutions to support our customers on the path to digitalisation. I refer to the topic of AI here: We are working intensively on new developments in the area of machine learning. These packages are also part of our service offering.

**B. Kuhl:** AI is a strategic focus that is also directly on our desks. However, a complete, self-optimising and self-adjusting machine is probably not to be expected from our side alone. For us, the strategic relevance of AI lies in the production technology and process engineering expertise. The customer, in turn,



**Full order books in spite of the pandemic:  
Josef Döing and Esa-Matti Aalto in the assembly hall at the Bocholt site**

brings product and chemical expertise to the table. In addition, there are other providers who are familiar with data management, AI programming, algorithms, etc. So we need to define a platform that invites all these entities to a constructive dialogue!

An example would be a cloud-native data platform to create a basis so that the diverse data coming from different stakeholders can communicate with each other and becomes synchronised.

**C2:** A new year has started. What are your expectations for 2021?

**B. Kuhl:** It is somehow fascinating how much we are living in a “new normal” in the pandemic. Once again, humans have proven how adaptable they are. We can continue to work relatively normally despite the sometimes terrible news. As a company group, I see us at a point where we have already made many adjustments in order to be able to take the next step in terms of customer benefits.

**E.-M. Aalto:** Driven by the pandemic, we are already seeing strong shifts into the first and

second quarters of the new year. That makes us very optimistic, especially in view of the vaccines now available. Some customers are still a bit “wait-and-see” – and that’s another reason why we’re actually looking at a flood of orders.

What I also expect for the next few years: we will hold many more high-quality meetings. The mindset that you have to travel around the world every day will no longer be so pronounced. As we have just seen in this video interview, it works very well – but it’s also nice to sit together at the same table. When we do that, we should have everything else sorted out beforehand and then have really good and highly efficient face-to-face meetings. We will travel less, and when we do, in a more focused manner.

**R. Langkamp:** What makes me very positive for 2021: despite the Corona pandemic, we have not once had a situation where one of our clients’ projects was at risk. We are learning to make the best of the situation. ■

*Image sources: Olbrich*



**From left: Ullrich Eitel, Marburger Tapetenfabrik J. B. Schaefer GmbH & Co. KG, and Bastian Kuhl, OLBRICH GmbH: Handshake after a successful machine commissioning**



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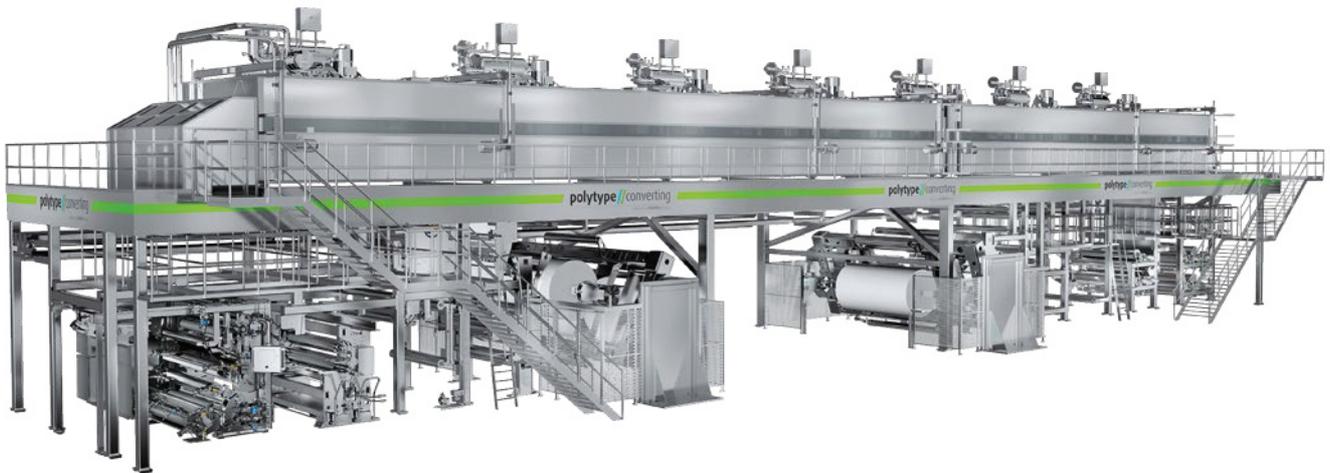
As of 1 January 2020, Polytype Converting GmbH has been merged under company law into OLBRICH GmbH. The brands' Polytype Converting<sup>®</sup> and OLBRICH will continue to serve their customers in their respective markets and branches whilst delivering the benefits of synergy.

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