Hanspeter Kehrli shortly before retirement

Thinking in LEAN, we should not have conducted this interview!

In April 1998, Hanspeter Kehrli began his journey at Müller AG Verpackungen – a step that not only shaped his professional destiny, but also had a decisive influence on the development of the company. From a passionate problem solver in a family business to one of the key players in one of the leading packaging companies, he talks with calm composure about challenges, change and the many facets of leadership. As he now prepares for his well-earned retirement, he looks back on a time full of change and reflects on how not only the technology but also the corporate culture has changed over almost three decades. What remains? A deep insight into the transformation of Müller Packaging and the unbroken passion for the work that still burns at the age of 65.

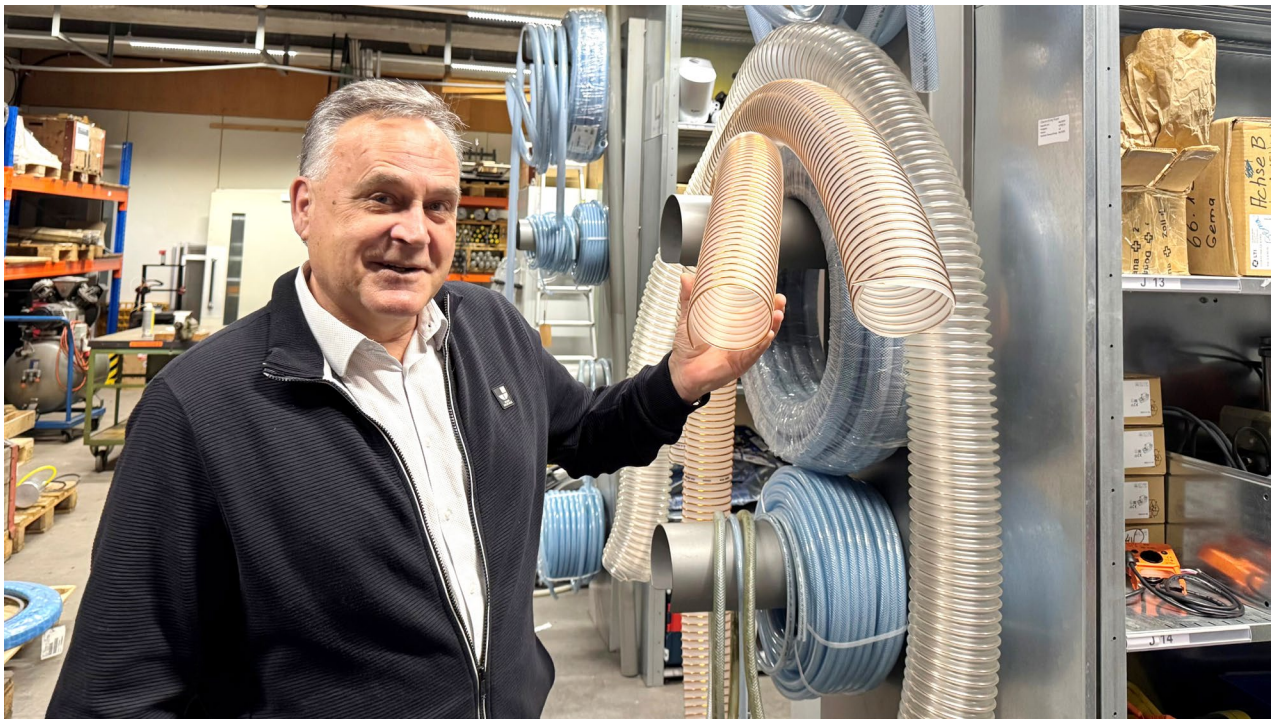
The pictures in this article show Hanspeter Kehrli on one of his last tours of the plant in Münchenstein.

By Ralf Stöckli, April 3, 2025

Hanspeter Kehrli, how did you come to Müller AG Verpackungen?
Hanspeter Kehrli (HPK): I started at Müller AG Verpackungen in April 1998. Before that, I worked at Häusler in Duggingen, a family business that produces bending machines. I took this job because Urs Grüter (now CEO of Stöcklin Logistics) asked me to help Häusler with the technical challenges they were facing at the time. That turned out to be difficult at the time, as not everyone in the family business was pulling in the same direction. I then told Urs Grüter that I didn't like it at Häusler. He then put me in touch with Marco Fischer, the CEO of Müller AG Verpackungen at the time. The first talks then took place on Saturdays, rather secretly. It dragged on and after two months I asked myself whether I would soon be told whether Marco Fischer would be taking me to Müller. Then there was that Monday. I came home from work at Häusler. It was a mild spring day. And Marco Fischer was sitting in the garden with my wife drinking coffee. He said: “Hanspeter, you've got the job with me. Your wife said yes and she knows your salary too."

In what function were you hired?
HPK: As Head of Technology and Production. Now you have to know that at that time, IT, HR, in fact everything except finance and sales, was also part of production. A very broad range of tasks and responsibilities. I was also involved in Müller Immobilien and its subsidiaries.

Does that also mean that areas of responsibility were taken away from you over time?
HKP: The company has developed and grown. For example: when I started at Müller, we had an IBM system and three PCs. I was given one of them. Over time, the company became more professional in various areas. And so it was only logical that responsibility was shifted onto several shoulders. It made sense to me and I was now able to strengthen my focus in the area of technology and drive production forward in a more targeted way.



Did you feel any personal pressure given the great responsibility?
HPK: I don't know any pressure or stress. Nothing upsets me. There are always problems at work and they simply have to be dealt with. Then you set priorities and do one thing at a time. That's it. But what used to happen was that you only went home once all the problems had been solved. Nowadays, you sometimes go home earlier and leave a problem for the next day. The attitude towards work has changed over the years. Managers and members of the management team were made to do their duty, and vacations of more than two weeks were not appreciated by managers. Then we also worked Mondays to Fridays. Taking Friday off? That wasn't possible back then!

Not feeling any pressure is a gift! I find that remarkable. In your management role, how did you deal with people who felt pressure, who got stressed?
HPK: In the past, pressure and stress, and therefore burnout, were unknown. This certainly has to do with the spirit of the times. The obligation to do a good job used to be taken for granted. Saturday work was also defined from the top down and everyone went along with it. But because I knew my employees well, it was also clear that an employee didn't have to come to work on a Saturday if his wife had to go to work on a Saturday and a small child was at home. Today, less attention is paid to such individual situations and “equal treatment for all” is the top priority.

We would now like to open up the suspense about how certain points have changed in 27 years at Müller AG Verpackungen.

Spring 1998	**Manufacturing**	Spring 2025
HPK: We used to have little to no automation. We were more dependent on our employees. The employee produced something on one machine and then took it to the next machine, to a colleague. If an employee wasn't there, we immediately had a problem. It was not uncommon for people from administration to step in! It was a matter of course to keep the business running!		**HPK:** Today, we have an extensive automation system. This also makes it possible to compensate for a lack of employees. Perhaps the machines are then allowed to run a little slower so that all employees who are available can cope with the workload.
HPK: Employee absences used to be more important. They also felt less frequent. The zeitgeist was clear: work comes first.		**HPK:** If someone is absent or ill today, you make a note of it, make a line on a piece of paper, punch a hole in it and file it away.
HPK: We used to have four systems in production at the Münchenstein site, in single-shift operation. Back then, Reiden had two systems, as it does today, in two shifts.		**HPK:** Today we have two production lines in Münchenstein, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. The changeover came with the new Managing Director, Roland Tanner, after 2008. It was a decision to invest less in production (two systems cost less than four).

"It was not uncommon for people from the administration to step in! Quite naturally, to keep the business running!"

Spring 1998	**Leadership**	Spring 2025
HPK: The former CEO, Marco Fischer, was omnipresent, decided everything, said how everything was going, he was very dominant. If he ordered production to start at 05:00, he was here. If he ordered work to start on Saturday, he was there. Mistakes were allowed to be made - once. The second time, you could be happy if the mistake was only classified as a “bonus” by the CEO. Meetings were kept to a minimum. Anything over half an hour was “Larifari” in his view. And punctuality was a top priority. Tardiness was not tolerated.		**HPK:** This is the area that has changed the most compared to the past. Today, people are more modern, more sensitive, look out for everyone, pay attention to minorities. Today, people can tolerate unpunctuality. Today, you can also work from home if you work in administration. These observations are not intended to come across as judgmental, they simply capture the spirit of the times. In contrast to the past, there is more freedom for managers and employees. Today, management is more cooperative. Management principles were developed in management workshops last year. Investments are being made in the leadership quality of management staff. That didn't exist in the past. That has clearly improved.
		HPK: Today, we sometimes get lost in too much administrative work. Everything has to be put on paper, everything has to be recorded. In the past, things were no worse with less paper. That's why I sometimes ask myself what the purpose of all these minutes and forms is.

Spring 1998	**Value and appreciation of employees**	Spring 2025
HPK: Employees used to be highly valued, probably more than they are today. CEO Marco Fischer knew who did what, knew the people personally. Everyone. When extra work was done, the CEO would come by personally and thank each employee, sometimes even paying for a round of pizza. Or Hans Müller would come by and hand out Goldvreneli for exceptional work.		**HPK:** Employees are still very important to us. However, the family and personal aspects have certainly diminished, probably also because we are more employees today than we used to be. That's why I don't agree with the statements I sometimes hear that we "value our employees more today than we used to": We still do it well - but not better than we used to. We just do it differently.

Spring 1998	**Company culture**	Spring 2025
HPK: The corporate culture under CEO Marco Fischer was military, tight, without much freedom to contribute. This changed noticeably after Marco Fischer handed over his position as CEO to Peter Müller in 2006. Peter Müller's human, friendly manner led to the involvement of many people and he initiated many good things. Working together became more relaxed.		**HPK:** Today, we have an open, modern corporate culture that is characterized by many cultural influences. And despite this diversity, I sense a good sense of cohesion and a stable working atmosphere. We laugh a lot together. We play table tennis or "Töggelikasten" during the breaks.
HPK: The administration used to be "in the middle of the cake", "in the middle" of production. Parts of IT, sales and personnel were located in production, as there was no room for everyone in the administration building. That's why people used to talk to each other more, quite naturally, because of the proximity.		**HPK:** The new building in Münchenstein, with the logistics hall and the administration section, is a great achievement. However, it has led to a certain separation of production and administration. Without a batch, you can no longer get from production to administration - and vice versa.

> "Today, we have an open, modern corporate culture that is characterized by many cultural influences."

Is there anything in your Müller career that you would have done differently in retrospect?
HPK: Not in principle. Looking back is easier than focusing on the current situation and the future in the present. It's the experiences we've had that help us move forward. There are two or three decisions that I would no longer support today. But these are also based on experience. I'll keep the three I mean to myself here - and let's be honest: if I mention three decisions in 27 years, that's only a few over the course of time.

How do you assess the succession plan?
HPK: I'm pleased that the replacement, which has been underway for some time, is going well. I can see how the new colleagues in charge are tackling their tasks pragmatically and calmly. And that makes me happy. I don't go into the office so much anymore, so that the employees realize that there are now different contact persons. It's going well!

With the reorganization, your job was divided up among different people. Why is that?
HPK: There are more tasks. The time it takes to complete them is also increasing. I used to be able to take care of production on my own. Today, this is no longer possible, partly because of the increased administrative requirements that we impose on ourselves, that are required in the management systems and that customers impose on us.
Can you give us an example of the administrative tasks we impose on ourselves?
HPK: In the past, when we had to buy a new folding machine, I told CEO Marco Fischer that it would cost 1.5 million. The CEO wanted to know a lot during the conversation, probed, asked questions about transportation and discount negotiations. But then it was fine and he decided: “Then buy it!”. Today, we write investment proposals, half books, with descriptions, advantages, disadvantages, etc. These are then distributed and a decision is made. These are then distributed and a much broader discussion takes place ...

... I can still understand that. The company has to assess the risk and the optimizations before spending 1.5 million ...
HPK: ... the counter to this is that there is always a residual risk when you invest in machinery. Sometimes an investment may not bring the desired improvement. That has already happened - even with an investment application and subsequent question time. It shouldn't. But it can happen. My opinion on this is also: the more paper we push around, the more responsibility we relinquish and the less managers take their responsibility for decision-making seriously.

Now shortly before the end of your career –how does that feel?
HPK: Certainly mixed. On the one hand, I'm glad that I've reached retirement age in good health. On the other hand, there's also the question of what to do with all this time. Doing nothing can be nice for two or three months. In the long run, it's certainly not worthwhile. Of course, I'm not going into retirement without a plan. I've signed up for the seniors' university. There you attend lectures on various topics. Four lectures of three hours each per week. They are varied and shed light on a wide range of issues, for example: “What impact does smoking have on the heart?”, “What do new insights into Swiss colonial relations tell us?”, “How can the war in Ukraine be ended?”, “Can the dominance of right-wing parties be stopped?” or “What impact do climate fluctuations have on human evolution?”.

That sounds really interesting! Do you have any other plans for the near future?
HPK: Next fall, my wife and I will be spending three months in Fiji, Tonga and the Solomon Islands - all islands and archipelagos in the South Pacific. My wife will be working there for a month as a physiotherapist free of charge to show how aftercare following joint operations can be improved through therapeutic measures. I really liked the idea from the start, because there are wonderful diving spots in the South Pacific. But just diving is not for me either. So we did some research and found out that the hospitals there use donations to buy beds with electric motors or compressors to generate electricity. I will then contribute my expertise and help to get the equipment up and running safely.

In the Swiss Müller companies, the tradition of retirement events is upheld. Will you also be seen there regularly?
HPK: Definitely, whenever possible, at every one!

Let's move on to the last question. What do you wish Müller AG Verpackungen for the future?
HPK: I see a good future for Müller AG Verpackungen. The company is well positioned. The age mix could become an issue in the next 10 years. But we are aware of that. I also think it's good when know-how keeps leaving - because then fresh knowledge and new approaches come into the company. What I would really like to see at Müller is a reduction in all work that is not necessary and not directly related to the barrel. In other words, pure LEAN! In principle, the two of us also have to ask ourselves what we are doing here in this interview? It's an expensive thing for us to sit here together. And it will be even more expensive until the interview is written down and edited. Thinking in LEAN terms, we shouldn't have conducted this interview!

Thank you very much for the nice conversation and the many insights. I wish you all the very best for the future, starting with good health.

Bye-bye …