Ian Restall – General Manager, Metallform, Malta



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Ian Restall, general manager at Metallform, explains how he built up the manufacturing plant of the German company in Malta and discusses the future plans to grow the affiliate even more thanks to their newly-opened second factory on the island.

As an introduction, could you tell us about the evolution of the company over the last few years?

Metallform Malta was founded in 1992 as part of the Metallform group based in Lüdenscheid in Germany. It is a family-owned company originally focused towards the relatively small market of West Germany. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Iron Curtain, they saw their market expand significantly and decided to invest in new production sites. Malta was particularly attractive due in part to tax incentives under the foreign directives scheme. We are producing highly precise plastic parts for medical technology and we are one of the leading providers of sterile infusion systems for pediatrics and for the intensive care unit.

In the first five years we were working with 16 to 50 employees and now we employ 320 people. We are working in collaboration with the German plant to avoid duplicating procedures. Therefore, while Germany takes care of sales and marketing, research and development and the injection molding machines, Malta is focusing on the labor-intensive aspects of the business. We utilize the strength of the German mindset and the productivity of Malta. Using this approach, we have seen exponential growth and we have been able to adapt to the market and fulfill a niche role in pediatric products. We generally produce batches of only 600 to 1000 which allows us to be more

competitive than larger companies.

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What practices have been fundamental to Metallform’s growth and success since the company first moved to Malta?

Metallform’s growth was in many ways a natural process. Indeed, 18 years ago, we experienced significant growth thanks to the demand from EU countries. A few years later, when the US Dollar rate increased, we received requests from South American countries. With partnerships, we have been able to penetrate the UK and Commonwealth markets as well. Indeed, we started collaborating with Alaris. Currently, 20 to 25 percent of our production is distributed by BD and as such, we are really pleased to see the success of our partnership.

As a manager, I also received a complete support from Metallform’s owners who worked closely with me in order to identify new opportunities. Malta is welcoming several key manufacturers and I was able to visit them and learn from their methods and processes. I was able to compare methods and create our own strategy that will take the best aspects of all my visits. Therefore, we believe that flexibility is the key to our success and the willingness to learn and adapt to upcoming technologies has been fundamental.

Metallform has always made quality a priority. How do you ensure that you are producing the best quality products?

27 years ago, I visited our headquarters to learn about the company and our products. While I was there, the chairman told me that it is better to produce one hundred sets that are all perfect rather than to produce one thousand sets with one set being flawed. Indeed, our products are used by patients and the potential risk related to a flawed pediatric medical device can literally be a matter of life and death for a baby or young child. Therefore, this approach has been fundamental to our business model and our daily activities and we aim to pass this message onto all of our employees. In this regard, we have also requested high quality standards that ensure that all of our sets are individually tested for pressure, decay and leakages. We have also decided to take down the quota rule so we are probably the only factory in Malta that does not impose quotas on its employees as we believe removing this pressure can help our employees work at their own pace and ensure the quality of our products.

In which directions do you see Metallform expanding in the future?

We established a second factory and started the production there last October. This new facility will be focusing on the manufacturing of drip bags. We have been working at full capacity since February and we are now thinking of the next step. We currently have fourteen dedicated sales personnel who offer the opportunity to hospitals to order unique (customized) sets. This has created a large number of opportunities for us considering that professionals working in the field have approached us with this offer in mind as there is a strong desire for personalized sets. However, while sales and marketing are often the largest economic drivers, it is important that we produce products of the highest quality. I hold the opinion that research and development should remain rooted in Germany as Metallform has a duty to employ German people while utilizing the German winning mentality that is fundamental to our success.

We are growing both here and in Germany so our focus is on investing in new machinery to consolidate what we have and to get stronger. We are now represented around the globe. We have lately started to manufacture Compounding Machines in our German plant and our focus is to keep introducing new products into the markets.

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What objectives do you intend for Metallform to achieve in the next three to five years?

Overall our main objective is to create a strong and talented team and continue to grow the business. Due to the brain drain in Malta, we place particular significance on training and retaining our employees. Our company has a very hospitable environment to work in and I like to consider our employees as a family. I employ a diverse set of people and I am willing to train unskilled laborers. For example, our company employs the highest number of people with disability in Malta at a rate of 4.8 percent and we currently have eight different nationalities working in our company in Malta. This is partly related to Malta’s status as a holiday island which creates a very international environment. We also are employing two refugees. This strategy has worked well for us and as a company, we have never advertised for new employees as we are able to recruit through word of mouth alone.

What advice do you have for companies eager to enter the Maltese market?

My main advice is to consider the reality of doing business in Malta as a specific business activity may not be the best fit for the Maltese environment or the competition may be stronger. Secondly, considering the complex Maltese regulations, it would be important to collaborate with an expert accountant who can help navigate the regulatory framework and thoroughly understand this aspect of the business. The third advice would be to partner with an efficient freight company who

can help you navigate tariffs, import tariffs and taxes. It is not necessary for you to do everything yourself as we have a strong range of service providers in the island. Finally, the key to success in Malta is to have a Maltese person running your operations. At the very least, it is important to have a Maltese person in human resource that can understand Malta’s unique culture and the different methods and processes here. It is important to create a team and in order to do that successfully, you need a person who understands the culture.

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