



Perspectives

## HUMAN RESOURCES

# Learn and prosper

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**Walter Schön, the new Chief Human Resources Officer, explains how KHS is addressing challenges such as the lack of specialist workers, recruiting, knowledge transfer and artificial intelligence. He takes a fresh look at the company and finds plenty of parallels between his personal values and those of the machine and systems manufacturer.**

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## PHOTOGRAPHY / ILLUSTRATION

Frank Reinhold

## COVER PHOTO

New Chief Human Resources Officer at KHS Walter Schön is primarily concerned with the lack of specialist workers which needs to be combatted by a strong employer brand, training and knowledge transfer – and with the help of automation and AI.

One of the most pressing challenges in human resources is the lack of specialist personnel – and has been for some time. This also applies to KHS: alongside people in administration and sales, qualified developers, design, mechatronics, commissioning and service engineers and expert metalworkers, to name but a few, act as a guarantee of the Dortmund systems supplier's expertise and quality. One reason for the shortage on the personnel market is our aging society – with no alleviation in sight. "This problem is especially pronounced in Germany," explains Walter Schön, who has been Chief Human Resources Officer or CHRO at KHS since June 2025. "The baby boomers are starting to retire. Because this generation is now approaching the age when they stop work, we need to employ a lot of new employees to be able to retain the strength of our workforce. In 7 2022, it was already estimated that the Salzgitter Group, to which KHS belongs, would lose 25 to 30% of its personnel within ten years owing to demographic change.

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Walter Schön

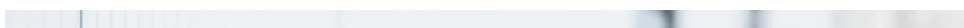
Chief Human Resources Officer (CHRO) at KHS

## **New expertise through training**

What's KHS doing to remedy this situation? "One key lever for us is technical, clerical or skilled manual vocational training," says Schön. "We hire up to 55 high-school graduates a year for six different courses of apprenticeship at our five production sites in Germany alone. We also combine theory and practice in three dual work-study degree programs. Here, we match degree courses in electrical engineering, industrial engineering or business information technology to the respective apprenticeship. Our company also offers students internships and student trainee positions to develop new expertise. Graduates can then start directly or sign up to a trainee program."

## **Strengthening the employer brand**

However, the chief factor in the recruitment of new employees is how well-known and attractive a company is. "In order to assert ourselves in the competition for new talent, we want to position ourselves as a strong employer brand," emphasizes Schön. "We need to bring across even better what makes us what we are, how efficient and capable we are and what we have to offer our employees and applicants." One of the CHRO's main aims is to build up communication aimed at specific target groups on social networks. While most experienced professionals and university graduates can be found on LinkedIn, school pupils and high-school leavers are today more likely to be reached through TikTok, for example.





Walter Schön

Chief Human Resources Officer (CHRO) at KHS

“AI offers great opportunities – however, humans must always maintain responsibility.”

## **Early knowledge transfer a success factor**

With particularly experienced personnel now leaving the world of work, another major objective is to retain this expertise within the company. For successor planning to prove effective, it's important to transfer this knowledge not as the person in question retires but well before they do. The

idea is to systematically secure critical know-how and pass this on to potential successors. This is brought about with the help of structured handover processes that are supplemented by training courses, plus documentation and knowledge management – also using digital tools. In this way, KHS makes sure that key skills are maintained and that there's continuity within the company.

## **Automation and AI as an opportunity**

The current hot topics of artificial intelligence and automation can also contribute here, believes Schön. "At KHS, we don't use automation, industrial robots and other concepts primarily to reduce personnel. Rather, we apply them to make workstations more ergonomic and to close gaps caused by missing company workers." It's no secret that nowadays AI is involved in practically all processes and offers great opportunities. However, it must be handled so that it consistently adheres to corporate values. "Humans must always maintain responsibility," Schön insists – and in this context praises the open and cooperative exchange with works councils both on fundamental issues and specific topics. Moreover, above and beyond this the CHRO's first encounters with employee representatives have proved extremely positive, which for him is an expression of social partnership on an equal footing.

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## Increasingly international

Another challenge for HR according to Schön lies in the internationalization of the company and its business activities. “This is clearly the motor driving KHS’ growth and success. This is why we’ve created around 200 new positions a year throughout the world since 2021 – and in doing so also secured jobs in Germany.” KHS’ increasing alignment as a global corporate group requires the support of local HR departments and international networking of HR activities. The KHS employer brand also needs to become better known and more appealing across the globe. These aspects of internationalization are also key fields of action for Schön in his new post.

## Success through excellence and innovation

What the native Austrian finds most impressive about his new employer is the company’s success rate despite the current rather adverse conditions. In his opinion, this is largely attributable to KHS’ outstanding operative excellence, unique innovations such as ↗ Nature MultiPack and ↗ Plasmax and high level of cost discipline; here, especially, his colleagues have notched up great achievements over the last few years. “In addition, there’s a healthy dissatisfaction with the status quo,” Schön observes. “This ensures that the determination to continuously improve is firmly anchored in the KHS culture.” He’s also positively surprised by the company’s extremely smooth and streamlined processes. This enables lots of questions to be solved very pragmatically – with a handshake mentality, so to speak.



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transparency in decision-making and  
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**Profile: Walter Schön**

Born in Vorarlberg in Austria, Walter Schön studied electronics, communications engineering and business administration. He started work in 1995 as an SAP consultant specialized in HR information systems. From 2006 to 2012 he held various posts as an executive HR manager in compensation management. He then joined the thyssenkrupp Group. In 2019 he was appointed Chief Human Resources Officer (CHRO) at thyssenkrupp Uhde in Germany. The 50-year-old then took on this role at KHS in June 2025.

## Early encounter

Incidentally, Schön first heard about the Dortmund plant engineering company long before being contacted by the headhunter. “My father was head of bottle filling at Rauch fruit juices, a KHS customer. Whenever I went into work with him as a teenager, I was able to watch the systems in operation.” When he then made contact with KHS at the end of 2024 re his possible new position, the group was by no means an unknown quantity for Schön.

## Focus on values

When he joined the Executive Management Board, Schön not only introduced himself to the workforce outlining the milestones of his professional career; first and foremost, he described his values as both a manager and fellow human being. “Care is my top priority. I genuinely want to ensure that our colleagues all over the world stay healthy and can work safely.” Other important criteria for him are transparency when making decisions and in communication – especially in partnership with works councils – reliability, appreciation and recognition. Performance orientation is another of his defining benchmarks. “If we can see that someone’s not unfolding their full potential, we don’t stand idle. We check whether this person is entrusted with the right task or if we can perhaps support them with some training.” This fits in nicely

with a motto coined by Kai Acker, CEO of KHS: “truth and clarity before harmony”. He also takes this stance as CHRO. “Feedback is a gift that enables our personnel to learn and prosper.” After all, Schön can see plenty of parallels between his personal values and those actively practiced at KHS.

## Any further questions?

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