

Background information

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From glass blower to digitiser: Pilz's history as a family company

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75 years of Pilz: Values. Create. Future.

Safe automation has a name: Pilz. Founded in 1948, the family business has continuously transformed itself – from a glass-blowing business to an electronics company, to an automation and digitisation company.

In 1948, in the difficult economic period after the Second World War, Hermann Pilz founded a glass-blowing business in Esslingen, in southwestern Germany. This laid the foundation for a family-owned company whose current mission statement is “Safety for human, machine and the environment”. The Pilz Group, now based in Ostfildern, is a technology leader in safe automation that is active around the world.

The company's products and solutions include sensors, controls and drive technology. This portfolio is supplemented by the corresponding software tools, diagnostic and visualisation systems as well as a comprehensive range of services. Safe automation solutions from Pilz can be used in all areas of mechanical engineering, such as the packaging and automotive industry for example, on robot applications, in intralogistics and in railway technology. Products from the Swabian automation specialist also guarantee that baggage handling systems run safely at airports, theatre scenery moves smoothly and funiculars or roller coasters travel safely.

From glass to electronics

In the postwar period, Pilz first produced glass apparatus for medical technology as well as mercury relays that formed the basis for future industrial relays. At this decisive point in the company history, it was the pioneering spirit of Peter Pilz, the son of Hermann Pilz, that drove the transformation from glass apparatus manufacturing to electronics in the 1960s. At the end of the 60s, Peter Pilz took over his father's company and initiated not only the technological transformation but also the internationalisation that characterises Pilz to this day. He founded the first subsidiaries in the 1970s – in Austria, France and Switzerland.

Peter Pilz was a visionary: he recognised the opportunities that electronics and miniaturisation could offer in this field – particularly for industry. In addition to electronic control and monitoring devices, at the same time Peter Pilz and his team also developed programmable logic controllers (PLC) – a product area that contributed to the success of the burgeoning company. Pilz was one of the first companies to introduce PLC systems to the market in Europe in the early 70s.

Synonym for safety

In 1987, Pilz developed the PNOZ: the first safety relay to ensure that machines stop reliably in the case of danger is now at home all over the world. Smaller than a conventional circuit, easier to operate, and above all safer thanks to a certified type examination – just the right thing in an era when machinery safety was becoming increasingly important, also with regard to the legal situation, and the implementation of this machinery safety should be as uncomplicated as possible for the plant operators. In the beginning, machinery safety was achieved with the PNOZ – the name PNOZ is synonymous with safety relays to this day. As the first to offer this on the world market, Pilz has been able to defend its position as world market leader to this day.

Peter Pilz did not live to see this breakthrough. In 1975 he died in a plane crash. His wife Renate, however, committed herself to continuing his life's work. And this although she had not had much to do with the company and its products as a housewife and mother. Renate Pilz never even considered selling. Instead she familiarised herself with technology and economics and joined the company as Chairman of the Advisory Board. In 1995 she became Managing Director. Renate Pilz strengthened the global presence of the company. Pilz is active all over the world, helping to create safer work conditions. For example, it was the first foreign company to become a member of China's most important standards committee in the area of machinery safety in 2004.

Focused on digitisation early

In 1995 the world's first freely programmable safe control system PSS 3000 came onto the market. The company once again made

history in industry. From this point it was finally possible to use electronic controllers in safety technology. Up until then this was strictly not allowed, even “prohibited”. The legal requirements only changed following tough negotiations with federal ministries in Germany and European committees.

Pilz anticipated digitisation and the trend toward software before the fourth industrial revolution dominated the headlines under the name “Industrie 4.0”. In 1998 Pilz founded its own software development department in Cork in Ireland and in 2009 introduced PSS 4000 to the market, an automation system with which even distributed plants can be controlled centrally – Safety and Automation included.

With digitisation and networking, Security is taking on an increasingly important role in automation. The company offers not only Safety, meaning the protection of people, but since 2018 also products and services for Industrial Security at the machine. The focus is on the availability of plant and machinery and the integrity and confidentiality of machine data and processes.

The introduction of pioneering products for safe automation was a key area during the early years – and remains so to this day. For example when Pilz introduced myPNOZ in 2021, the world’s first modular safety relay in batch size 1.

Family business in the 3rd generation

Since the end of 2017, the children of Peter and Renate Pilz, Thomas Pilz and Susanne Kunschert, have jointly managed the company as the third generation of managing partners. One thing that they have in common with their predecessors, across all times of transformation, is their joy in innovation. 20 percent of turnover is invested in research

and development every year. “Innovative capability is part of Pilz's DNA – it guarantees future viability. It is the mindset, the corporate culture and the focus at Pilz to promote innovation,” explains Susanne Kunschert, referring to this strategy.

The company is represented globally with 42 subsidiaries and four production facilities around the world. In 2022 the automation experts generated turnover of € 403 million with around 2,500 “Ambassadors of Safety” worldwide.

Susanne Kunschert and Thomas Pilz continue to follow the philosophy of their parents, leading the company Pilz on the basis of the company values. Because: values create future. A slogan that is also a statement and a commitment: Pilz will remain as it has always been – an independent and innovative company under family ownership.

75 years of Pilz: Values. Create. Future.

As a global supplier of products, systems and services for automation technology, in 2023 Pilz can look back on a 75-year success story: founded in 1948, today the Pilz Group employs around 2,500 staff in 42 subsidiaries and branches. This pioneer of safe automation, with its headquarters in Ostfildern, creates safety worldwide for human, machine and environment with its complete automation solutions.

The portfolio of the technology leader includes sensor, control and drive technology, as well as systems for industrial communication, diagnostics and visualisation. An international range of services with consultancy, engineering and training completes the offer. The safety and security solutions are used in many industries beyond mechanical engineering, such as intralogistics, railway technology or the robotics sector, for example.

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Pilz on social networks:

On our social media channels we provide background information about the company as well as the people at Pilz and report on the latest news from automation technology.



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