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A German auto supplier on Birmingham, success in business and America

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Although Manfred Heisen heads up an IT firm operating out of the Innovation Depot, he doesn't consider himself a techie.

"I'm a car guy," he said. "I'm not sure if I'm going to like going forward with autonomous driving. That takes a little of the fun away."

Heisen, managing director of abatUS, comes from a part of Germany that is rich in automotive history.

"We're the Scottish of Germany – which means prudent, not spending money, those kind of things," he said. "But also, we are very intuitive in engineering."

Along with Gottlieb Daimler, Wilhelm Maybach, who was from Heisen's hometown of Heilbronn, invented the precursor to the modern gasoline engine in 1885.

The BBJ recently featured Heisen in an executive profile. Here's more from our conversation on Birmingham, being in America and finding success in business.

If you could change one thing about Birmingham, what would it be?

I can tell you what – what we're struggling with is the airline connection. Because, first of all, it's a small airport, and our business – if I'm into Daimler or any of the OEMs, they have multiple sites. So, I have to have people travel a lot. So, for me, the accessibility by an airport into an area is very, very important. Right now, for instance, we go a lot to Atlanta, because again, even though there is a two-hour travel, the flight connections and also the cost of travel is a lot less out of Atlanta. A flight from Birmingham to Detroit is about double out of Atlanta. So, that would



BOB FARLEY

Manfred Heisen of abatUS works in both the auto and IT spheres.

be one thing to improve. Now, I do know that is related to the volume going back and forth, so I don't know. But that's something – if you ask me right now, that's a major hurdle.

What is Birmingham doing right?

Well, I think they're trying with business development, they're trying to attract the right companies – it's high tech. With this facility [Innovation Depot], I think this is something. When I first found out about it a year ago, we moved here in May or June of last year. I was impressed; I didn't expect something like this in the city of Birmingham. So, and I also think it's the city and the combination with the universities around here, because that's basically what we're looking for is the people. And, of course, the customers, but then again, customers – if their main way of deciding where they will physically locate, if Mazda is coming here – great, because it's not only the OEM. We've seen this many times before, they will also bring their suppliers with them – the supplier parks. So, there's a multitude of companies that will be attracted by an OEM coming here. And that helps.

I think overall, the cost of doing business here is reasonable. I think this comes with the territory, it comes with the size of the city. I'm impressed to see what the city is doing with Innovation Depot – what it triggers the amount of young startups, high-tech companies around here. That helps tremendously.

What's keeping you here in Birmingham?

Well, one of the things I decided very clearly to stay with the office in Birmingham was – if I would be in Atlanta, I would have a lot of competition when it comes to resources. That's not the case with Birmingham. Although, with UAB and University of Alabama down in Tuscaloosa, I still can tap into young professionals. The other reason I have to say was, the Innovation Depot as a facility, because there's other high-tech startup companies I can tap into. We can share things. That made it very attractive to me. And I hope the new mayor, to be honest with you, because what I read about him – I haven't met him, but I've read about him – I think that gentleman is really eager to make things happen for Birmingham.

How do you measure success at the end of the day?

Now, I'm a businessman. The only way I measure this is in profitability. So, for me, it's in growth of the business. And that is what it is coming down to. Of course, also I acknowledge multiple measurements. One is the ability to grow, which means with people the kind of business environment that's in front of me. I look at the eastern half of the United States as my territory out of all of them. It's not so much only what is local here, because again, automotive is no more a Detroit – it's spread across the United States.

Where I see ourselves – honestly, will the headquarters of abat, going forward, remain here? That has to be seen. I don't know. Quite frankly, that's not necessarily need to be here.

What advice would you give your 21-year-old self?

Take the challenge. I see a challenge always as an opportunity and I would reassure this and say, "Go with what your guts are telling you. Be true to yourself." There were times when I doubted this. As a student, I came to the U.S. as an exchange student. I did it as a co-op for Ford Motor in Detroit. And when I finished my studies, I went back to Ford and did another one – versus some of my friends in college moved on and had their first real paying job. But, as it turned out, it was much better to do that, because I got rewarded for that. I met with the expertise and all that instead of – don't look for the money; the money will follow your success.

What do you think about America?

America is everything and nothing. There is no such thing. If I went to New York – my wife's family: Kevin was an astronaut. My wife has three brothers and a sister, so there's a big family there. When I'm in New York or in L.A. or in Miami – this is in America. But then I go to rural America, that's very different. So, there's no such thing. America is to me a big country with a lot of gray. It's not black, it's not white – it's gray. And that makes it different.

And I also think when people, specifically in Europe, specifically in Germany, do not really understand is how America really works. In Germany, we have the federal government with Ms. Merkel. They basically drive everything; the states have very little power. Versus here, that is not the case. I keep telling people you have the federal, you have the state, you have the counties.

And what people also don't understand is, for the price of freedom, people are giving, taking a lot of risks here. And that's something that's a challenge for me sometimes, because being raised in Germany, things are regulated; but at least you know what's going on. Here, you have to explore for yourself a lot of stuff. You don't know. You could do things that are not legitimate, not knowing about it. But then again, when I talk to Americans, they want it that way, because it's all about freedom. And sometimes to me, that price is very high. So, that's what people in Germany, that come here and, of course, they come on vacation and then they think they understand. I can tell you what, the longer I live in America, the more questions I have. That's surprising to myself, to be honest with you.

I feel fortunate to be here. Like I said, I have chosen to be here. And I'm glad I'm here. It was very clear to me I want to live in America with all the pros and cons. You cannot only take the good things – you buy the whole package; you know what that's like. Again, it's something you are challenged almost on a daily basis, and you gotta find a compromise.

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