

Germany

75th Anniversary: DFFI Organiser of the PRE Congress on “The Talent Challenge”

The German Refractory Association (DFFI), which had also organised UNITECR 2023 in Frankfurt under the heading of “The Carbon Challenge” (refractories WORLDFORUM 16 (2024) [1] 27–33), has represented the interests of German refractories manufacturers since 1949. It works closely with a fleet of institutions that belong to the association, that is FGF (Forschungsgemeinschaft Feuerfest – Refractories Research Foundation), ECREF (European Centre of Refractories) and DIFK (Deutsches Institut für Feuerfest und Keramik – German Institute for Refractories and Ceramics). The PRE Congress of the European refractories industry was organised from 19–21 June 2024 by DFFI in Hamburg/DE with its focus on “The Talent Challenge”.

Ulf Frohneberg (UF), Chairman of the DFFI Board, and Thomas Kaczmarek (TK), Managing Director at DFFI, provided us with information on current topics addressed by the DFFI, the PRE Congress, and especially on the focus on recruiting young talents for the refractories industry.



Fig. 1 The board members of DFFI after the election (from left): Marcus Blumenberg (Knöllinger), Michael P. Wiessler (EKW), Dr. Andus Buhr (Almatis), Markus Pung (RHI Magnesita), Ulf Frohneberg (STEULER), Dr. Rainer Gaebel (Refratechnik), Marcel Mix (Intocast) and Dr. Harald Zender (Calderys)

rwf: *What is the function of the DFFI in the present conditions?*

UF: In 2020/21 we consulted with members’ representatives and external specialists to define and reposition our priorities. Central function of the DFFI is and will continue to be to secure competitive conditions for the refractories industry to ensure that it remains anchored in Germany. We consider this task as our mission. This includes preemptive action to safeguard access to raw materials just as much as forward-looking

environmental, climate and energy policies. The association represents the sector’s positions in public. Its aim is to play a part in the making of key political decisions and in the development of a legal framework. It is involved in science and research in the interest of the member companies on German and European levels. These tasks have become considerably more complex in the current situation.

Over the last four years we have been able to bring 16 new member companies on board

and increase the total number of members to 62. That’s an increase of a good third, which also indicates that collaboration in an industry association is expedient and necessary. Important remains our networking with research and development in order to utilise modern production processes and products from the refractories sector to make a contribution to sustainable economic development with viable process technology.

With Dr Andus Buhr (Almatis), for the first time a board member of the associated



Fig. 2 DFFI network: national, ceramic and international associations

member companies has been elected to the association's board (Fig. 1).

rwf: *What networks do you use to lobby for the around 6500 employees in the refractories industry in Germany to lend weight to your voice?*

TK: The DFFI works on different committees – in the Association of the German Construction Materials (bbs) and on Federation of German Industries (BDI) committees (Fig. 2). It introduces its own topics into the overall spectrum and is also a member in the DIN (German Institute for Standardization), CEN (European Committee for Standardization) and the ISO (International Organisation for Standardization).

Especially important against the backdrop of the high energy prices in Germany is our activity as an energy-intensive industry in the "Alliance for Fair Energy Transition". In this alliance, around 10 000 German companies with around 1 million employees and roughly EUR 200 billion annual sales are represented. In the light of climate change, the transformation and the procurement of sufficient renewable energy along with its supply to local production bases, our SME-heavy industry is faced with an immense challenge to decarbonize its production processes. It will complete this task for the coming century providing it can remain efficient and doesn't fall behind international competition because of overly high energy costs and excessive bureaucracy.

The relocation of production by German companies to other European or even non-European countries won't get us any further. A decline of the production base in Germany would have serious consequences for the general and especially regional pros-

perity and the supply reliability for the domestic industry.

For this reason, our focus is of course the dialogue between our SMEs with national government ministries. On European scale, we are working intensively in the ceramic cluster of the Cerame-Unie and present ourselves on the Brussels stage through PRE, the European Refractories Producers Federation.

rwf: *You have headlined the PRE Congress "The Talent Challenge" and with this heading, you have addressed another formidable challenge facing the German and European industry. What was your motivation for this?*

UF: We have to enter into dialogue with Generation Z and Generation Alpha to understand their needs. Only in this way do

we have a chance to resolve our recruiting issues in the sector. Moreover, only in this way do we have the possibility to inform these young generations about our system relevance for the green transformation of the buyer industries, like, for example, the steel and cement industries. The development of renewable energies only works in collaboration with the refractories industry and its products. The focus of the PRE Congress 2024, that is "The Talent Challenge", was the right choice. A conference with two relevant keynotes:

Simon Schnetzer, Youth Researcher, Speaker & Futurist, shared his expertise and insight on recruiting and retaining the next generation of talents for the refractories industry. Generation Z representatives gave their view on how to make the industry more attractive to the next generation: visibility, carbon challenge, new work culture, and social media. Earlier this year, he published the "7th Trend Study on the Situation of the Young Generation in Germany" (see text box).

Helena Marschall, Fridays for Future Germany, underlined that instead of just pointing out the climate crisis, citizens, businesses, and authorities hold the power to be and make the change, like never before. At the same time she explained that we risk missing our own climate targets if we do not accelerate the speed of transformation, with time running out.



Fig. 3 Auditorium at the general assembly



Fig. 4 Highlight for the attendees: the barge trip

TK: Furthermore, we had organised three workshops in a “World Café” format.

- Workshop 1: Career path expectations: What do young people expect from their professional life?
- Workshop 2: Branding: Increasing the attractiveness of the refractory industry.
- Workshop 3: Outreach: Effective communication strategy and tools.

rwf: *On the last day of the PRE Congress, you already discussed the results of the workshop. The European refractories industry – as well as the industry worldwide – tends to have the image of being a less attractive sector. It plays, however, a very important part in the global transformation and CO₂ reduction. How do you intend to pursue this topic further?*

TK: We already have a first evaluation of the survey by Simon Schnetzer in the refractories industry, which I only want to reference with examples. Already at ICR in Aachen (18./19. September 2024), we want to go deeper into this with Simon Schnetzer. The responses given by the refractories managers show that there is awareness of the influential role of the refractories industry on the pathway to climate neutrality. They are also familiar with the high complexity of industrial links in the manufacturing processes. 20 % of the group concede, however, that refractories obviously does not appear that attractive for young com-

mercial or academic talent. How, therefore, can we build this bridge, create attractive working conditions and make these widely known?

We know from these surveys that it is increasingly important to offer young people opportunities to play a valued contribution in their respective tasks from the get-go. Young professionals want to be able to see the impact of their work, they want to work on a good cause, play their part and contribute to development. The basic idea of “purpose” is coming to the fore again. Not only in our industry, but especially with the view to the application sectors in steel, cement or glass.

Survey results from the young people who already work with us show enthusiasm about the variety in the refractories industry, a sector that is represented worldwide and which will continue to be needed urgently in future, too (e.g. transformation of the steel industry). The refractories industry has contributed a great deal to those things that we use every day today (mobile phones, computers, cars, aeroplanes, etc.). Without our industry, the life that we know today would not be possible.

Only 10 % of the survey respondents working for us think that the sector is unattractive for young people. Here, we still have something to do, but it has also been shown that we can make the content of our ac-

tivities and the impact on our environment clear.

The expedient further procedure is indicated by the following quotation. “As an outsider, the industry in my mind tended to be dusty and old-fashioned. Now that I am working in the sector, I no longer think that. Especially in respect of sustainability, it is vital for companies to be innovative and steadily further evolve.”

That is a good result from the voice of an employee. We should not rest, rather we must continue to listen and remain in dialogue. We need these young people also as ambassadors in their peer groups, which we have found difficult to reach so far. A lot is already going on; companies present themselves in schools, at vocational training fairs or sport events. These traditional approaches must be complemented increasingly with digital channels. Facebook is unsuitable for this, LinkedIn is too business-heavy – so Instagram and TikTok are the logical way forward. For this, we have to develop an overall strategy.

UF: With the “talent challenge”, we have made the first important and right step forward, but it has to be followed by many more. Besides Simon Schnetzer, Helena Marschall has also provided valuable impetus. Many of her statements confirm the analyses of the trend study. Both, however, have specifically called for better establishment of the right communication channels to reach young people.

I should also like to thank other stakeholders at the PRE General Assembly (Fig. 3). Christian Meyre, PRE President, gave the audience the opportunity to share their input by responding to key polls regarding their own personal experience as part of the refractories sector. Renaud Batier, Director General of Cerame-Unie, presented the outcome of the European elections, the Ceramic Manifesto 24–29 communication campaign, and the foreseen post-election activities. Ansgar Jüchter, head of a steel plant, shared the decarbonization pathway of ArcelorMittal Hamburg GmbH, and its essential connection to the refractories sector.

Finally, our steamboat trip along the river Elbe gave attendees time to relax and reflect on the findings of the meeting (Fig. 4).

rwf: *Thank you for this comprehensive information.* KS

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Extract from the 7th Trend Study on “Young Germans”

The study is based on a representative survey of 2042 persons at the age of 14 to 29 years. The “Young Germans” trend research and participation format is directed by the youth researcher Simon Schnetzer as the managing director. Kilian Hampel (University of Constance) and Klaus Hurrelmann (Hertie School, Berlin) acted as consultants for the development of the content and method for the questionnaire.

At ICR Aachen from 18./19.09.2024, Simon Schnetzer will present a follow-up for the industry after the PRE Congress in a keynote.

The young generation in Germany is more pessimistic than ever. Worries about safeguarding prosperity are leading to a high degree of political dissatisfaction, and consequently to a distinct swing to the right. The young people are willing to take responsibility for the future. What is needed for this is shown in the following extracts from this trend study.

... 11 % of those questioned stated that they were currently under treatment for mental health issues. The economic situation is also weighing down on them. The majority of those surveyed expect that the economic situation in Germany will deteriorate. “Our study documents a deep-seated mental uncertainty with a loss of confidence in the ability to influence personal and social living conditions,” says Simon Schnetzer. “The prospect of a good life is dwindling. The big question for all stakeholders in society will be how they can gain the enthusiasm of young people for a positive vision in the country and engage them in change processes.”

... With regard to the attitude of the young generation to environmental protection and sustainability, it has been shown that almost half of those surveyed are worried about climate change, and they are of the opinion that not enough is being done to protect the environment in Germany (45 %). At the same time, those prepared to do without for the sake of sustainability are in the minority. The young generation expects collective approaches and structural changes from policymakers and industry because this is where it sees the most effective lever for change.

... The huge financial worries of young people in Germany on account of inflation (65 %), expensive living space (54 %) and poverty in old age (48 %) and poverty in old age (48 %) or the increase in streams of refugees (41 %) are leading to enormous dissatisfaction of the young generation with their life situation and political circumstances. The potential for right-wing populist attitudes in the young generation has increased significantly, as evidenced based on a comparison with earlier studies.

... The study examines the life situation of the young generation from school to gainful employment. The findings show an urgent need for action: young people criticize a blatant deficit in digitalization in the entire educational sector and in industry in Germany.

... Young people in Germany are fundamentally prepared to take on responsibility for shaping the future. Around 45 % expressly agree with the statement that they are taking responsibility for securing prosperity in Germany. However, they want to do this on their own terms. This becomes particularly clear in the professional sector where they are stepping up with clear ideas about different working conditions and questioning many of the older generations’ ways of working. In many respects, they are expecting reform in education, policymaking and industry, which they themselves cannot deliver alone: life-relevant learning, effective participation, comprehensive digitalization, environmental protection and prospects for a good life.

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