



Hagen does

Hagen Geppert is the entrepreneur founder and CEO of German global traffic information company GEWI whose software is used around the world by police, media and sat nav providers. Yet this self-made man grew up in Communist East Germany and was educated in the Soviet system. Paul Hutton met him to discuss the changes he's seen in his lifetime

INTERVIEW BY **PAUL HUTTON**

Q Everyone's seen changes in their lives since childhood but you much more than most...

Yeah. When the wall came down in 1989 many people left the eastern part of Germany and went to the west. I couldn't make a decision what to do. It took me a couple of years to decide to stay in the region – I still don't know why – and to set up my own business to do something different.

Q But our perception of the eastern bloc was that you wouldn't have entrepreneur tendencies and from my understanding your education was such that you got a scholarship and were educated in Russia so what happened?

The way our education worked was that the government would tell you what to do, where to go to school, what to study. It might be to go the Soviet Union or go somewhere else. Then you go back and then you go somewhere else and work somewhere and so on and at

the end you will get a pension from the government. So this was our education and I wanted to use the opportunity to do something different.

Q So where did the entrepreneurial spirit come from, because there wouldn't have necessarily been role models for you?

I don't know, I don't have an answer it was a long time ago – it was 30 years ago!

Q It still doesn't seem that long ago! So what did you know of the West when you were growing up?

I had the opportunity to go to Berlin and Munich before the wall came down for a couple of days. I worked with a TV manufacturer and they used to go to visit Siemens to see microchips, or to go Berlin. I needed special permission and faced a lot of checks of me and my parents and all my relatives before I could go. Then finally they

“ The way our education worked was that the government would tell you what to do, where to go to school, what to study ”

decided yes you can go to west Germany... but please come back!

Q Okay, so you're going to start a business, you're going to stay in the East whereas you say lots of people were moving across to the West. But where an earth did the idea of GEWI come from?

I was on a business trip to West Germany, about a two-hour drive away. It was to do with a research project set up by the German Government to fund a project to improve traffic information. The idea was that the police would create the traffic information and then somehow the car radio receiver will receive the information and then present this to the traveller as a spoken announcement – so instead of waiting for the next traffic recap, you can listen to the traffic announcement at any time.



Left: the early days of GEWI in the 1990s

problem. So we spent six months developing the software and we showed it to the police and they said yes, we can use this – we like it.

Q So of the different sectors you've worked in – police and media and highways authorities – which would you say has been the most successful or did you need all of them to make the business work?

We started with one state in Germany and then they got visitors from other states who saw the system. So they did the marketing for us which was great. The other states told us they were also interested in the solution and could they buy it? So we then showed it to a radio station and the same process happened - they talked to each other and then without any sales knowledge, resources or marketing we got a lot of sales so it was a kind of self-selling solution. Then we got the first project outside of Germany, in the Netherlands, and then later we got our first project in the US in 2005 and now it's worldwide.

Q As you know, I came into this industry in 2000 delivering radio traffic news. Sources of data were extremely different 20 years ago.

Oh yeah very, very much so yeah it was only information that had been corrected by humans by police guys.

Q When we started using floating vehicle data. I worked with your colleague Danny Woolard on an in-car solution project in the UK in around 2002 and the way of

actually integrating sensor data with human-generated data wasn't as easy as it sounds. How

did you actually take on the challenge of adding these extra sources?

The software architecture was already there to collect and build the multiple sources from different formats so for us this was not an issue at all.

Q Now you're very much focusing on safety and roadworks in traffic announcements. You even have a real-time solution for road works gathering



The GEWI office in 1999

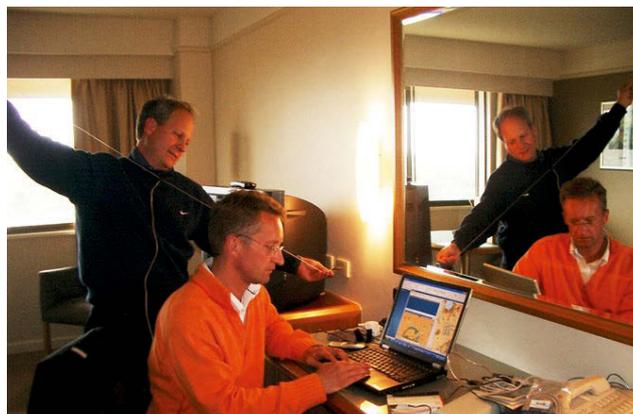
One thing the Government was doing was offering businesses funds if you include a company from East Germany so before I left my previous employer I became aware of the project because I was supposed to show the traffic incident information on the visit.

Q So you provided the mechanism for the human being to enter standardised data?

In the project we were responsible to show the traffic incident data on a TV set. We manufactured four. One was deployed at Dusseldorf airport and one night I received news that there was a fire there and I was so scared that this was caused by our TV sets and I couldn't sleep all night!

During the project another company was responsible for creating a kind of incident information software but the operators - the police guys who would use the software - rejected the system because it was very, very poor. Then I thought that it's not such a big deal to implement and develop a software which can be used by police. It shouldn't be a

“ One was deployed at Dusseldorf airport and one night I received news that there was a fire there and I was so scared that this was caused by our TV sets and I couldn't sleep all night! ”



An early demo being prepared in Australia



A wintry scene around GEWI HQ, located in Bernburg, Saxony



The company's success has led to increased head count and a new office in Leipzig

◀ **data from maintenance vehicles on the road. Your ability to be able to link with the actual machines - that's obviously a growth area and it's an extremely important thing that you can deliver. So how does it work and secondly what's been the reaction?**

Five years ago, I went to a conference in Berlin and everyone started complaining

about roadworks information. The view was all information is wrong, either by location or by time. As with 20 years ago when the police rejected the other software, I figured solving their issue shouldn't be a big problem. And 20 years later, we have developed a solution that can create accurate and precise works information. We developed this software as

a feature to our existing software and then we actively started looking for customers.

“As with 20 years ago when the police rejected the other software, I figured solving their issue shouldn't be a big problem”

Q You mentioned about your product being used around the world, are there any markets that you're still looking to crack?

Yes, South America, Africa, and maybe China. We tried to go to China maybe 12/13 years ago but it's a very challenging market for a small company.

Q When you look back on your life and that seismic change when the wall came down, do you ever pinch yourself about how successful you've been and how international you've been?

I never look back I always look forward!



Traffic technology solutions to improve roads, journeys and communities.
Speed & flow management solutions.

JENOPTIK Traffic Solutions UK are experts in compliance management, having delivered hundreds of successful UK temporary and permanent enforcement & monitoring schemes.

From short term works to SMART motorways schemes, route strategies to urban networks, Jenoptik has the equipment, staff and experience to make it work for you.

Want to know more? Contact one of our solution experts today.



Tel 01183 130333 | info@jenoptik.co.uk | www.jenoptik.co.uk