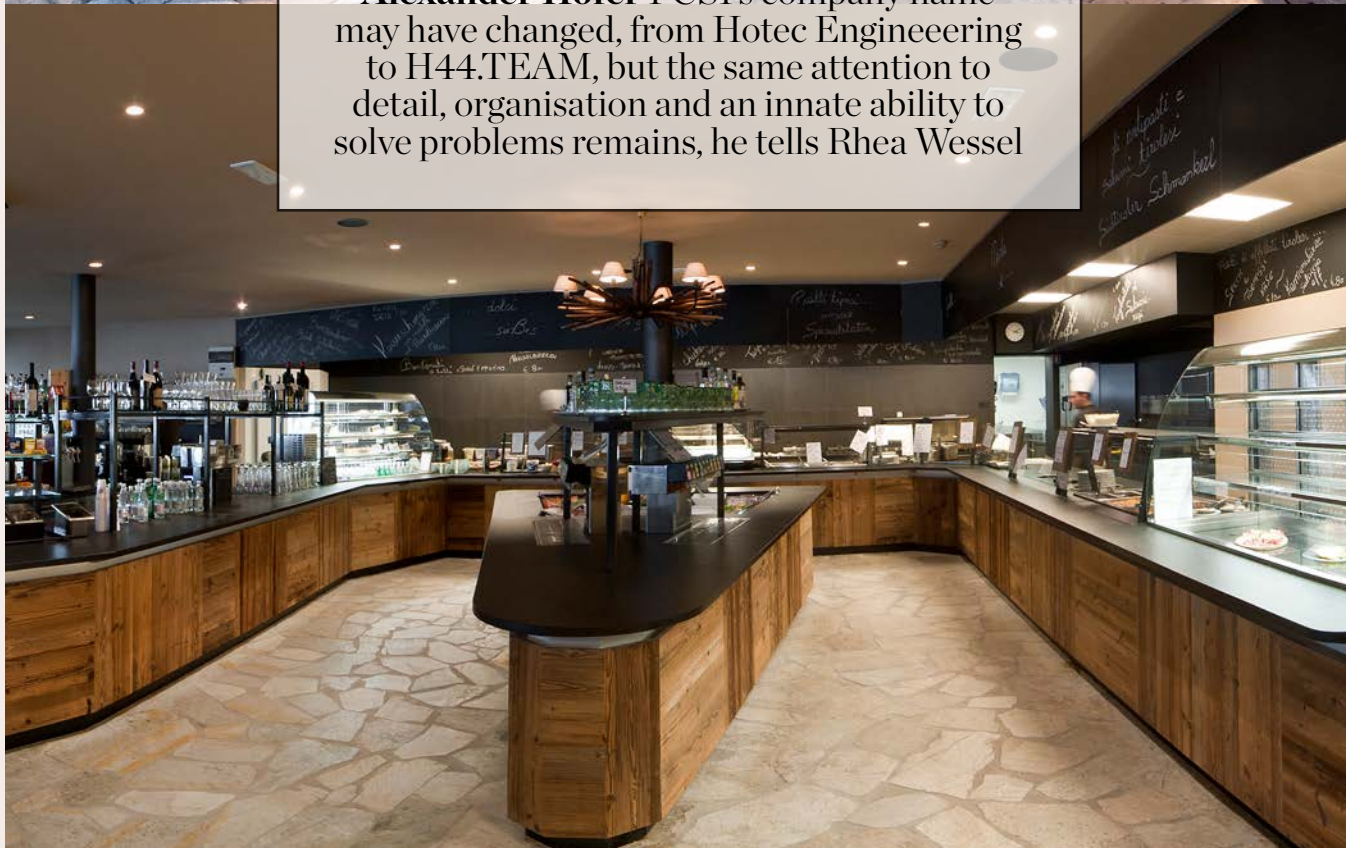




THE PROBLEM SOLVER

Alexander Hofer FCSI's company name may have changed, from Hotec Engineering to H44.TEAM, but the same attention to detail, organisation and an innate ability to solve problems remains, he tells Rhea Wessel





When Alexander Hofer FCSI was growing up in South Tyrol – the autonomous province between Austria and Italy – word got out in the village where he lived that neighbourhood kids could always find something good to eat at his house. It wasn't long before his house became a focal point for food, friends and laughter.

Today, the CEO of H44.TEAM, a brand-independent gastronomy consulting company, says: "I'm focused on the guest. If I can understand my client's guests, then I can help my client be the best possible host. This is what happens when you grow up as one of six kids in a home where food was served with love. It still impacts my work."

Hofer built up his company Hotec Engineering on the side from 2002 to 2016, while working as chief operating officer (COO) of Niederbacher GmbH, a gastronomy technology service company. "I wanted to find out if there was a market for speciality planning services for gastronomy technology," he says.

The company recently went through a re-branding – it's now known as H44.TEAM and moved into new offices not far from the previous location in Bressanone, Italy, in South Tyrol.

Sharing knowledge

Hofer and his team primarily serve customers that include resorts, restaurants and hotels in tourist destinations in Alpine South Tyrol. He sees his role as helping customers optimise all the processes around eating and drinking by sharing his knowledge. "I see myself as a member of the orchestra, not a conductor," he says.

In the earlier years of running H44.TEAM, the business model was more focused on the planning and execution of projects. From around 2013, Hofer began concentrating almost exclusively on consulting. "I had a customer in Russia who had been to Italy on vacation. He wanted the same kind of kitchen he saw in the hotel where he stayed. He didn't want me to implement it – he only wanted me to plan it. Since then I have

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been focusing on the consulting," says Hofer. "I sell ideas, knowledge, projects. And then we look around in the customer's area to find the right technology for implementation."

Hofer sees one of the biggest challenges in gastronomy as finding and keeping good personnel. "A hotelier's employees are representatives of the host. If an employee is valued, treated well, given good food and a nice place to sleep, then that person sends the message that the host cares," he says. "But too often, the needs of employees aren't considered. The break room is in the basement with an old sofa and a TV. If the employee comes late to eat, there's nothing left."

Observing this problem, Hofer recently advised the Sanoner family, owners of the five-star Adler Thermae Hotel in Tuscany, Italy, to create a separate bistro as an employee break room. The hotel is in a rural area and employees who work there come from far away and can feel socially isolated. Just a few months ago, the owner opened an inviting space in the middle of the



grounds just for employees to eat and relax. So far, the employees have reacted positively to the restaurant, which is attached to the main kitchen.

"Some companies simply think they can pay more and keep employees happy," says Hofer. "But sometimes a welcoming and highly functional work environment is the most important thing. It can be even more important than the paycheck."

Building experience

Hofer got his start as a young apprentice who learned operational accounting at Ambach Commercial Kitchen Technologies, which was later acquired by the Ali Group.

"My dad wanted me to study. I was good in school. But at 17, I wanted to earn my own money and not be dependent on my parents," he says. At Ambach, he learned the ropes of the business and the technology. "I built commercial kitchens with my own hands," he says.

When Ambach was acquired by Ali Group, Hofer began to work under a boss who constantly challenged him, Helmut Brockelmanns. "He was a great mentor to me. Helmut trusted me with important >



Clockwise from above left: Alexander Hofer FCSI; blanc restaurant, Hamburg; Paganella resort; kitchen of the Boè Alpine Lounge; Golf Lodge. Previous page (top): Hotel Adler Mountain Lodge, South Tyrol; (below) Alpina Dolomites hotel



work at a young age. He helped me develop personally and professionally,” says Hofer. “I was never a person who lived in the past. I thought ‘just do it’. I simply took on the challenges.”

In 1993, after Brockelmanns left Ambach, Hofer struck out as an independent consultant, working for Niederbacher and then later starting Hotec Engineering, which became H44.TEAM earlier this year.

A sense of anticipation

Hofer sees himself as a problem solver for his customers, bringing in years of project experience to anticipate possible headaches when projects are still on paper.

“I look at the architect or engineer’s plans and see potential problems: Maybe it’s with workflows for hygiene or the management of stock rooms with

Above: Hotel Adler Mountain Lodge, South Tyrol; the restaurant kitchen of Geiselsbergerhütte in Kronplatz, South Tyrol

principles such as ‘first in and first out’. These details are important to investors. If they make planning mistakes, the resulting problems cannot be fixed easily.”

In an ongoing project at a seaside resort in Sicily, Hofer advised the resort owner how to rebuild so that deliveries and guests don’t arrive at the same door. And he suggested a way for waste to be transported through a vacuum so that employees don’t have a long walk to the bins, wasting time and effort.

“When hotels and restaurants are being designed, sometimes there’s not enough attention given to the back of the house,” he says.

Hofer says his goal is quite simple – his work should be aesthetic and functional. “One of my favourite eras in history was La Belle Époque [a period from the 1870s to the outbreak of World War I in 1914], and sometimes I wish we could go back there.

“Now, through digitalisation and modernisation, I think we have lost focus of true innovation. A refrigerator: now

that was an innovation – or a car. However, today we’re focused on incremental improvements and making them fast. I see it as all very hectic. It’s a flood of information. What we need is to separate what’s really important, like it was done during the Belle Époque era. And that means food. Soon we will be able to eat just by swallowing a pill, but do we really want that?”

Quality counts

Looking back at his childhood, Hofer says his family put a focus on the quality of the food that was served. “We didn’t have a lot of money, but my parents didn’t try to save on food. There was an understanding that to have good food, you’ve got to spend money on quality ingredients.”

Hofer says he was not too involved in the cooking at home. “Of course I had to help with the shopping or setting the table, but my job was to be the one who enjoyed the food or took on an organisational role,” he says. “I’m still strong in organisation.”

Perhaps all these experiences came together to give Hofer an approach that he says his customers value: “We are focused on helping our clients achieve cost-savings – and doing that in ways that do not impact on either the pleasurable experience of the guest or the food.” ■

