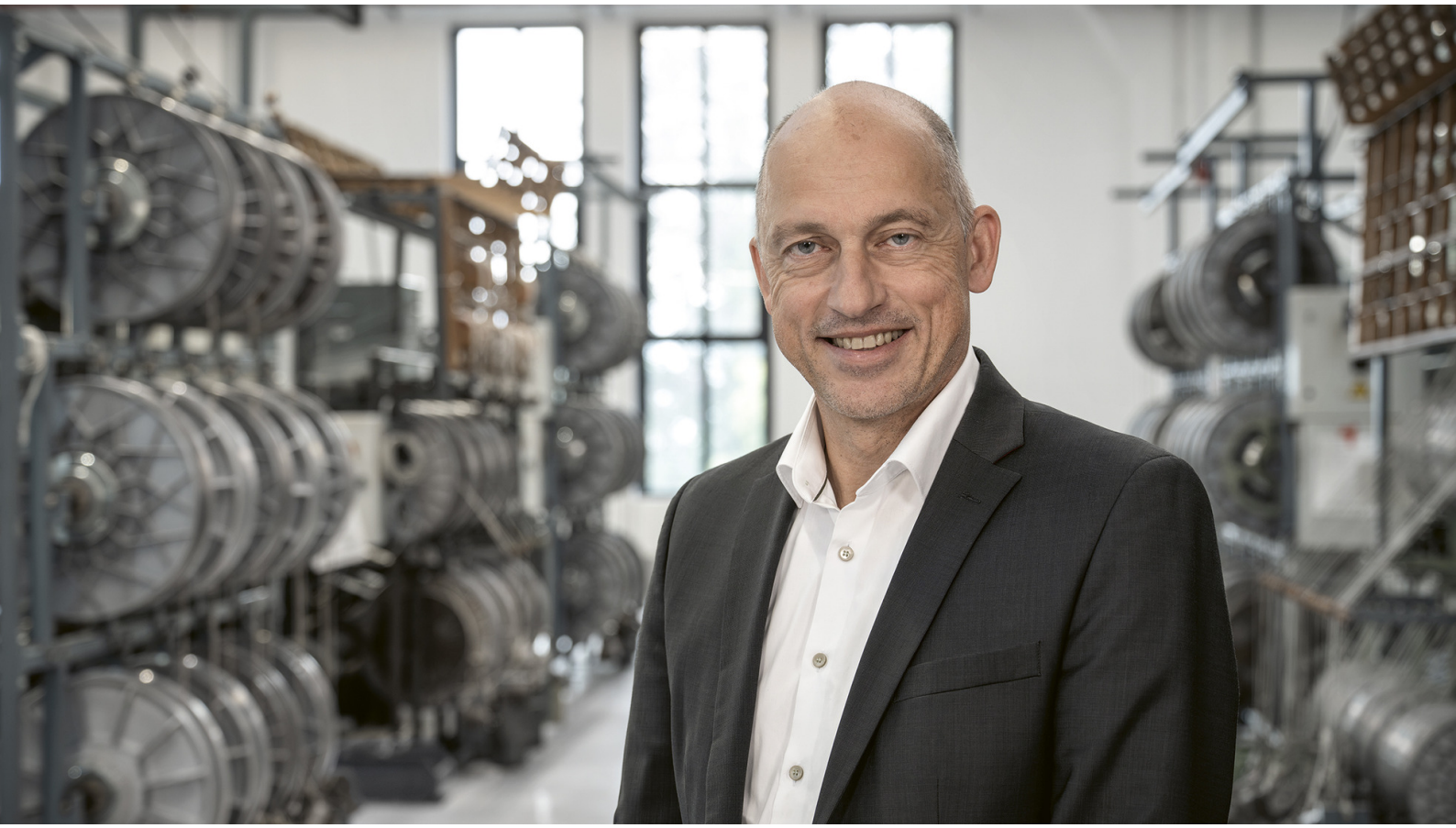
TECHNICAL TEXTILES / MANUFACTURING IN GERMANY

“For us, there is a clear economic case for manufacturing in Germany.”

The Textation Group is investing in a new production site in Wuppertal. Textination spoke to CSO Stefan Ickler about the new dual leadership structure, technical textiles and the future of industrial production in Germany.



Stefan Ickler, CSO of the Textation Group

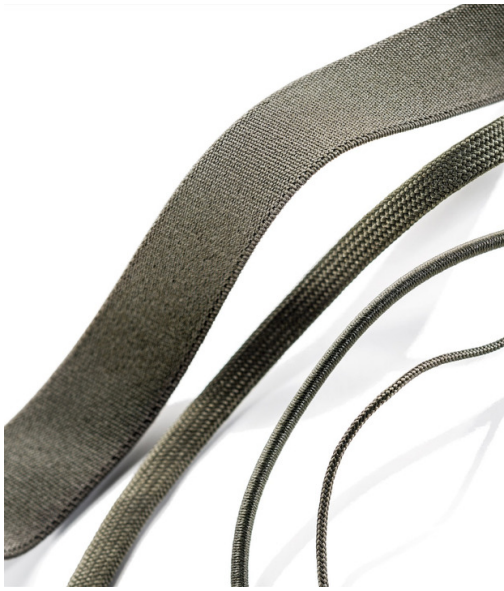
Back to the world of technical textiles

Mr Ickler, you joined the Textation Group at the beginning of 2026. The economic environment is currently challenging for medium-sized manufacturers, and the Federation of German Industries (BDI) continues to describe sentiment among industrial SMEs as subdued. What attracted you to the role at the Textation Group at this particular time?

A great deal! First and foremost, the nature of the work. Unfortunately, there are some misguided stereotypes about the textile industry. Stereotype number one: textiles almost always come from China. Stereotype number two: textiles are almost always cheap, simple mass-produced goods. Neither applies to the Textation Group. We manufacture high-quality, bespoke technical textiles in Germany. And even in the current environment, sentiment within the group is good to very good. So, after 14 years in the mobility sector, I was very happy to return to the world of technical textiles.

As technical textile manufacturers, we deal with a wide range of industries, customers and applications. At the Textation Group, we are constantly encountering new challenges. Then there is the nature of the group as a family-owned business: things can move quickly here. Management and shareholders are closely connected within the Textation Group. This means decisions can be made as soon as we identify new market opportunities. And not least, the company's commitment to Germany as a manufacturing base and its willingness to invest make the group interesting to me. With a new production site in Wuppertal-Varresbeck, the Textation Group is currently demonstrating its confidence as a strong, forward-looking player in the industry.

In short, the diversity of the work, the high degree of flexibility and the Textation Group's long-term approach to business are what make the role so appealing to me.



Woven elastic tape and braided cords
JUMBO-Textil

“Things can move quickly here.”



Textation Group leadership team

Andreas Kielholz stepped down from operational management in the summer. The Textation Group is now led by Patrick Kielholz as COO and you as CSO. Dual leadership is often justified by the desire to bring different areas of expertise closer together. Where does this arrangement actually speed things up, and where does it require particularly clear responsibilities?

The group's management got together early on to put the leadership team on a sound footing for the future and organise a transition that was both well thought out and smooth. The aim from the outset was to establish a dual leadership structure with distinct areas of responsibility. What was needed alongside COO Patrick Kielholz was a fellow managing director with a clear focus on sales. Initially, the three of us, including Andreas Kielholz, led the group together for six months. That ensured continuity. And continuity is particularly important when the market is changing rapidly.

As joint leaders, Patrick Kielholz and I each bring different perspectives and experience to the management team. We complement each other. That adds considerable value in terms of expertise. Dual leadership also gives us greater flexibility, as we can share certain tasks and stand in for each other, which makes us faster. At the same time, of course, it requires coordination. We discuss our respective issues in weekly meetings. But dual leadership also has to work well on a personal level. Working and leadership styles should be compatible in the key areas. My impression after just over a hundred days of dual leadership is that we are a good fit. We work well together. And in the wider management team, CTO Kevin Kielholz and CFO Ralph Cammerath contribute their expertise too. With this broad-based leadership team, we can drive the group forward with foresight and momentum.

Many industries. Many perspectives.

Official economic data currently paint a mixed picture. In July, new orders in manufacturing rose by 2.5 per cent compared with the previous month, but fell by 1.4 per cent excluding large-scale orders. In the automotive industry, orders actually fell by 12.5 per cent. How do you see current market conditions from a sales perspective, and how differently are the customer industries that matter to your group performing?

Your description of the situation is absolutely right, but as I said, our order books are healthy and morale is good. At the Textation Group, we are less affected by the crisis in the automotive industry than other suppliers. Firstly, our automotive products are needed in all vehicles, regardless of their propulsion system. Secondly, as I mentioned, JUMBO-Textil and vombaur supply a wide range of industries. This means we can always serve growth sectors too, even when turnover in one sector is declining, as is currently the case in automotive.



Textile net for an automotive application
JUMBO-Textil

Particularly in technically demanding B2B markets, many suppliers are finding that customers are making decisions at shorter notice whilst demanding greater flexibility, technical advice and security of supply. What has changed most noticeably among your customers over the past twelve to eighteen months?

As suppliers today, we must provide solutions to demanding challenges very quickly. That is only possible with a deep understanding of our customers, their products and their challenges. I am a firm advocate of a segment-based structure: we must define the various markets we want to serve and then develop in-depth expertise in those areas. In other words, we must understand the markets and our customers across the entire value chain. We need to know not only our direct customers and their issues, processes and challenges, but also their customers. That makes the task complex. By taking the entire supply chain into account, we are effectively thinking in several dimensions.

> “As suppliers today, we must provide solutions to demanding challenges very quickly.”



Bandage tapes
JUMBO-Textil

Keeping the route to a solution in sight

Technical textiles are often not standardised products, but part of a bespoke development process. In previous interviews with Textination, the Textation Group's management has emphasised the close collaboration between sales, development and production. Which aspects of this collaboration need to work faster today than they did three years ago?

In my view, what really lies behind the recurring emphasis on speed is the question of quality and substance. Only when I have a thorough understanding of the subject can I quickly draw on or develop good solutions. That is another reason why I believe it is essential to break down the divide between sales and development. Today more than ever.

If the integration of sales and development is becoming even more important, does this also change the nature of the sales role? Will a CSO in a technical textiles company need to become more involved in development and technology matters in future?

We must see ourselves as sales engineers who are both technically proficient and commercially astute and assured. The recurring question is: what solution is feasible, and at what cost? We can offer a good product at a price that is fair to all parties only because, and only if, we think of development and sales as a whole. We must respond quickly and flexibly and provide first-rate application engineering advice. That is what our customers expect and what we expect of ourselves. Sales does not need to have every solution ready immediately, but it does need to know which direction to take. The route to a solution must be clear at all times.

“The route to a solution must be clear at all times.”

Speed and reliability

Speed and flexibility are also becoming increasingly important in technically demanding B2B markets. At the same time, technical requirements, obligations to provide evidence and documentation requirements are increasing. Where does the greatest tension arise today for a medium-sized company between speed and the need for safeguards?

I do not see an inherent conflict between speed and complexity. Both are indispensable in industrial B2B business. Our customers expect fast response times, whilst quality, the provision of evidence and compliance must be ensured at all times. The real conflict arises when technical requirements, regulatory provisions or documentation obligations change at short notice. Every change must be assessed, implemented and documented in a way that can be traced. That takes time and resources away from innovation or customer projects elsewhere.

For us as a medium-sized company, the reliability of the business framework is therefore crucial above all else. Flexible as we are, we plan investment, capacity expansion and staff development over many years, not from quarter to quarter or merely until the next election cycle. When conditions are stable, medium-sized businesses can play to their strengths: making decisions quickly, implementing them pragmatically and ensuring the necessary technical and regulatory certainty at the same time.

The ifo Institute currently identifies bureaucracy and regulation as the greatest challenge for companies operating in Germany; in industry, high energy and labour costs are also cited in particular. The BDI likewise sees regulatory requirements, labour costs including social security contributions, and energy prices as major burdens on industrial SMEs. How severely do these factors actually affect the Textation Group, and which of them has the greatest impact on your competitiveness in international markets?

Regulatory requirements relating to sustainability and the circular economy, high non-wage labour costs, energy costs … These are current challenges that concern us. But the most pressing issue for all companies in the industry at present is recruitment. In the nineties and noughties, the key question was: how do we secure orders? Today the question is: how do we find the skilled people we need to fulfil our orders? How can we attract well-trained textile engineers, weavers, braiders and talented apprentices? That is the make-or-break issue. And the combination of a shortage of skilled workers and high wage levels makes the situation more difficult.

“But the most pressing issue for all companies in the industry at present is recruitment.”

A question of substance

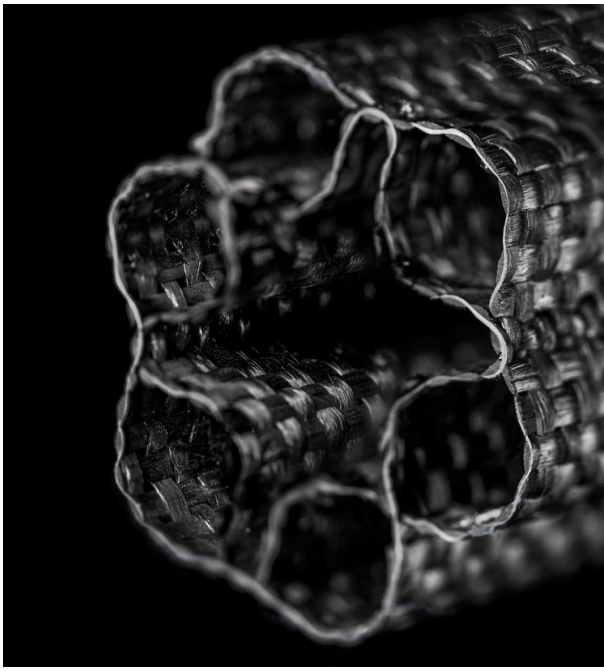
In your view, is it still a matter of individual cost items, or is the combined burden of energy, labour, levies and regulation now the real problem for medium-sized industrial companies?

Doing business always means operating under complex and only partly predictable conditions. We are prepared for that. We have learnt to calculate risks. I am therefore convinced that companies able to meet their need for skilled workers can also overcome all the other challenges, even when they occur all at once, as they do now. As a medium-sized business in particular, we have the flexibility to do so.

“We have learnt to calculate risks.”

At the same time, the Textation Group continues to invest in Germany and explicitly affirms its commitment to the country as a manufacturing base. Is this primarily a decision based on conviction, or can manufacturing your products in Germany also be clearly justified on economic grounds under today's conditions?

That brings us back to the question of skilled workers. Yes, the cost pressure on companies manufacturing in Germany is high, but the Textation Group makes technically complex products. Finding skilled people for this work is already difficult here; elsewhere it is almost impossible. The tradition of Wuppertal and the surrounding area as a textile region actually helps us find good people. For us, there is a clear economic case for manufacturing in Germany. So, if you like, it is a decision based on well-founded conviction.



3D carbon fabric, six chambers · vombaur

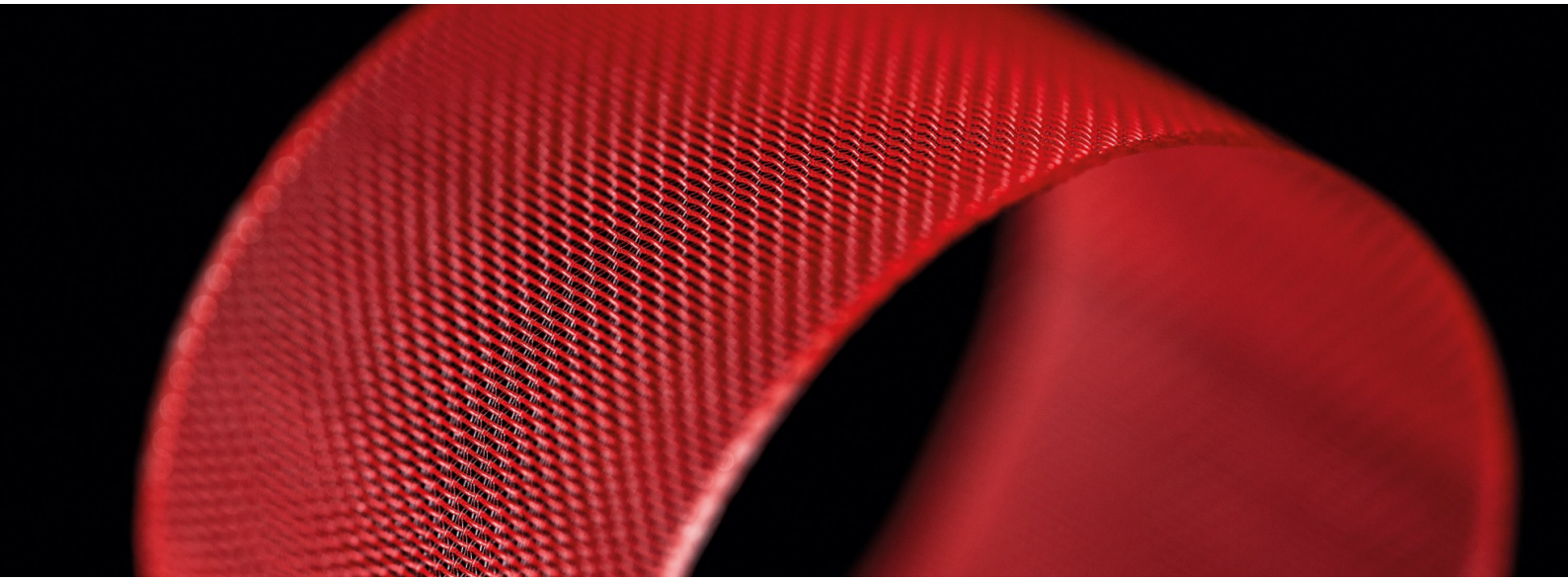
What endures. What comes next.

The shortage of skilled workers remains one of the more frequently cited challenges of operating in Germany. At the same time, the demands on employees in technical B2B markets are becoming broader: specialist textile knowledge, engineering, digitalisation, customer understanding and international collaboration all come together. Which qualifications are particularly difficult for you to find today?

We are looking for skilled people and talent in all areas of production, from apprentices to textile engineers. In part, this is probably also related to the stereotypes about the textile industry mentioned earlier. I think we urgently need to correct the image of our industry. As technical textile manufacturers, we are involved in incredibly exciting projects. We supply both medicine and the space industry. We can make a meaningful contribution to climate-friendly and climate-resilient construction, and so on. If we tell these stories, we will get more people excited about the textile industry again.

If we speak to you again at the end of 2027, what factors or developments would you personally use to judge whether the restructuring has been successful?

The journey will not be over by the end of 2027. By then, however, we should be able to see that we have set the right course for the years ahead. Success means more than good figures in a single financial year. A stronger market position, resilient customer relationships, an innovative organisation and a business model capable of withstanding future changes are what matter to me. If, in a year's time, we can say that the Textation Group, with its two brands JUMBO-Textil and vombaur, is now even more robust, relevant and fit for the future than it was a few years ago, then the restructuring has been successful.



Tubular woven fabric · vombaur