

Success Story

Making the most of what's left over: Zelfo Technology researches packaging and panels made from plant fibres



A designer from London decides to take a career break. He travels the world with his wife. During a stopover in Berlin, he passes an old water tower and the ruins of a villa while cycling in the Schorfheide. He is fascinated. They stay. At the end of this story with the beautiful beginning, emerges a new company north of Berlin. And what a company it is: Zelfo Technology GmbH is researching innovative technology with natural fibres. For this purpose, the company recycles otherwise unused agricultural residues. In a special and multi-patented procedure, with its own machine and secret mixture, cellulose fibres of different origins are made extremely stable. This is achieved without any additional binding agents. Richard Hurding, the cyclist - and managing director of Zelfo Technology - calls it: "a hair becomes a bush" or also "the miracle fibre". It can

be used to make the sturdy plant pots for hops from hop waste (and more). A producer of fruit salad can process its orange peels, otherwise waste, in the production of packaging for transport. "Additionally," the bike tour also gave rise to the BIORAMA project, a much-visited viewing platform on the roof of the old water tower. On a clear day, visitors can see as far as Poland and the Berlin television tower. But that is another story Hurding can also tell.

Sustainability, creativity, and business acumen

Back to the research facility of Zelfo Technology, which is now based in Schwedt an der Oder, while the company's headquarters are still in Joachimsthal, in the very water tower that had caught the cyclist's eye and from whose roof one now looks out into the distance. Richard Hurding is a designer by background, having worked for architectural firms for many years. He became interested in ecology early on, designing one of the first shops in London for sustainable interior design. When he fell in love with the tower in Schorfheide during his year off from work and thought about what they could do there, where there are mainly plants and water, he remembered a seminar on paper during his studies at the Glasgow School of Art. He collects ideas, does research, and comes across a company in Austria that already does, in a very simple version, what Zelfo Technology is successful with internationally today. By a lucky coincidence, he was able to acquire the company and its patent. This is the start of the success story.



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Good neighbourhood



With the help of their first client, a licensee from the United States, the process was further developed. The main machine has been patented since 2010. The five patents in total cover both processes and products. Since 2017, Zelfo Technology's research and development site has been located in Schwedt an der Oder. Together with the local neighbouring company BIO-LUTIONS Deutschland, they won the Brandenburg Innovation Award in the Plastics and Chemistry Cluster in autumn 2021 for their innovative natural fibre technology. From the award statement: "With this technology, sustainable packaging and disposable tableware, among other things, can now be produced from agricultural residues. These sustainable products, made

from the specially developed natural fibre mix, offer an optimal alternative to common products made of plastic." And it is precisely this topic that Richard Hurding is passionate about.

Enterprise Europe Network helps with internationalisation

The business model of the bioeconomy company is based primarily on licensing the processes. Zelfo Technology has clients for this in many countries. The Enterprise Europe Network Berlin-Brandenburg, or EEN for short, has provided support for internationalisation on several occasions since 2014. Hurding has taken part in information events on EU funding, bioeconomy regulars' tables and the Biobased Barcamp 2018. In October 2020, the EEN contacted Philips in the Netherlands, which organised a Supplier Innovation Event. Among other things, alternative packaging options for end-customer products were sought. Zelfo Technology was able to present its bio-based alternatives in an exclusive pitch. Where does the company stand in this liaison today? "There is good potential for cooperation in various areas, including materials and packaging. Further developments can be expected in the future," says Hurding, assessing the positive situation.

The company is positioning itself even more strongly for the coming years. Hurding is about to take the cooperation with BIO-LUTIONS to a new level. "We have a long-standing, good cooperation, which we will also expand further under company law." Another local neighbour in Schwedt, the LEIPA Group, specialising in recycled-based paper and packaging, is planning to set up a real laboratory at the site. Zelfo Technology will be their first research partner.

