

TEXT
SABINE SIMON

PHOTOS
GENE GLOVER

REVOLUTIONARIES IN SNEAKERS



The app by start-up Staffbase is revolutionising staff communications.

IMAGES

1

The right idea at the right time: since its foundation in 2014, Staffbase's turnover has increased almost fivefold.

2

Like a good laugh: managing directors Frank Wolf, Lutz Gerlach and Martin Böhringer (left to right) stay relaxed even for press photos.



We pick up our smartphones about 100 times a day, to check e-mails, to chat, or to take a look at what other people are doing on Instagram. Everything takes place digitally, via social media channels, be it Facebook or Twitter for example. In the professional sphere too, we spend prolonged periods online, on networks like LinkedIn or using web-based messenger services like Slack. In just a short space of time, digitisation has changed virtually everything – most significantly how we communicate. This applies both personally and in the world of work.

Basically, though, in-company communications are still relatively unwieldy in many companies – particularly in times of decentral teams who work flexible hours from different locations. It's true that there are now social intranets, but less than half of all employees with access to these use them on a daily basis. And depending on the industry, employees without a PC-based workspace or company e-mail address can't even reach them. In Germany, 70 per cent of staff remains digitally invisible. So how do you let them know that the parking lot can be used again next week after the construction work, or that the business performance is exceeding all expectations? You could use a mass e-mail here, but that's neither emotional nor is it likely to fulfil one of the most important criteria for ensuring that company news will actually be read, namely relevance.

— **Mobile intranet via app** / This was what inspired business engineer Frank Wolf to set up a new company. During his time at Deutsche Telekom's subsidiary T-Systems Multimedia Solutions, the 43-year-old gained a lot of experience in the area of intranets. "I regularly dealt with companies that had problems reaching all their employees. The need was there, we simply had to act at the right moment, and that moment came with the spread of smartphones." In 2014, he joined forces with business informatics specialist Martin Böhringer and business manager Lutz Gerlach to found Staffbase. The app from the Chemnitz-based start-up relies on the principle that a company's intranet can become a kind of social media channel. The idea is as simple as it is ingenious. After all, individual smartphones are the communications channel with the greatest reach by far. Staffbase's first customers included T-Systems, Siemens and Viessmann, and even Adidas uses a personalised employee app from the young software company.

The business model hinges on providing 'Software as a Service'. The intranet and employee software available on mobile devices constitute a kind of modular system that each company can structure individually for itself – in just a few clicks. As with a content management system, content is prepared and



IMAGES

3
Anyone who needs some peace and quiet for a discussion can retire to one of the smaller meeting rooms.

4
For anyone who works at Staffbase, a day at the office is time spent in a chic loft space. There are stress-busting snacks like fruit and chocolate.

5
Lots of windows, lots of light, lots of communication: Employees sit close to one another. Concrete slabs on the ceiling reduce noise levels.

6
Some things just have to remain analog. The magnetic noticeboard displays postcards, flyers and words of wisdom.

managed via a browser application. Staffbase makes its platform available to the customer and handles all the technical support. Moreover, all the hosting is inside Germany. The costs vary depending on the number of employees, and are charged based on a monthly fee. "We take care of updates and app store management," explains Martin Böhringer.

Employees then install the app, adapted to their company's look and feel, onto their smartphones and complete a one-off registration process, after which they log in with a password each time. This ensures that internal company matters remain internal. As with Facebook, it's then possible to read, comment and like news wherever you are – either on a general company channel or on closed channels. There are directories of employees and telephone numbers, options for signing in and out, a pay-slip download function and an option to view the canteen menu. Documents, location planners for conference rooms, training videos and photos can all be uploaded, and push-notifications can provide staff with news items in real time. Where a company already

It's a typical start-up. "That's something we want to preserve as long as we can," says Martin Böhringer, taking a seat on an acid-yellow chair. "We sell that feeling along with the app."

has a social intranet, Staffbase is able to integrate the app easily, and it's also possible to incorporate other, individual plug-ins.

— **New corporate culture** / The app also fulfills another important function: employer branding. "These days, it's more important than ever that employees are able to identify with their jobs. This is crucial for the integration of new employees and for ensuring staff loyalty," suggests Böhringer. He is thinking primarily of young people like millennials or Generation Z, and of their greater expectations as regards employers and corporate culture. They expect to enjoy a strict separation of work and personal life, have a need for feedback and appreciation – and on top they want to find a meaning in the greater scheme of things. They ask, 'Why do I actually do my job?' "I need to demonstrate this outwardly, particularly at a management level. That requires a change of thinking," says Böhringer. With the right tool, you can get all employees on-board, he says: from the manager to the staff working in the field. At Staffbase, they can do this in multiple languages. Content is supported in more than 30 languages, while the user interface is available in eight – including Chinese.

"Of course we also use our app ourselves," says Böhringer, as he quickly pings a message to his colleagues. To do so, he uses the desktop version of the Staffbase app. Sure, Böhringer could also have just got up and spoken to his colleagues, as at Staffbase nothing is far away – including the CEO who can be easily reached by the individual teams made up of software developers, customer service staff, or marketing and sales specialists. There are flat hierarchies in the young, international team, the average age of which is just 30 years old. The atmosphere is informal and flexible working hours are the norm.

The team works in a chic loft and anyone who wants to can shift to the sofa with their laptop. "That's something we want to preserve as long as we can," says the 33-year-old. After all, it's part of the product, he says. "The big corporations want to take a leaf out of our book, to feel more like a start-up, and we sell that feeling along with the app." Hence customer visits are carried out in T-shirts and sneakers. Staffbase is often the pioneer for a new, international communications strategy, Böhringer explains, and indeed almost for a style of management. "As CEO, I'm not able to communicate strategically with a simple mass e-mail. Things don't work like that anymore."

The software solution is taking off, and the company now has some 250 customers in Germany and around the world. The teams at the offices in Chemnitz, Dresden and Cologne have little time to spare, and Staffbase has doubled in size each year since it was founded, Böhringer says. In order to cater to the growing client base, the three directors want to expand the team of around 90 Germany-based employees by an additional 100 colleagues. While primarily software developers were required when the company was founded, now the focus is on reinforcements in marketing, sales and customer service. This creates jobs and strengthens the economic region around Chemnitz, which has already been the cradle for a number of other software start-ups, such as Prudsys, Intenta or Baselabs. Dresden also harbours potential, mainly thanks to its technical university and the 5G Lab located there.

In the meantime, Staffbase's strategy is becoming more international: alongside the existing office with eight employees in New York, another is to be added in London. The approach is a global one, Böhringer says. "We want to become the market leader. Right now we have the best product for this – although rivals aren't resting on their laurels, either." The high level of interest from investors also proves the extent to which the idea of 'mobile first' is taking off in employee communications. In a third financing round Staffbase recently managed to raise 8 million euros for the further development of its employee app. Global venture capitalists e.ventures are now its new primary investor alongside Capnamic Ventures and Kizoo Technology Capital. It was a shrewd move on the part of Staffbase – the new backer is very well connected in Silicon Valley. ■

FACTS // **Locations:** Chemnitz, Dresden, Cologne, New York / **Year of foundation:** 2014 / **Employees:** 90 / **Executive management:** Martin Böhringer (CEO), Frank Wolf (CMO), Lutz Gerlach (COO) / **Mission:** to revolutionise company cultures by means of an employee app

