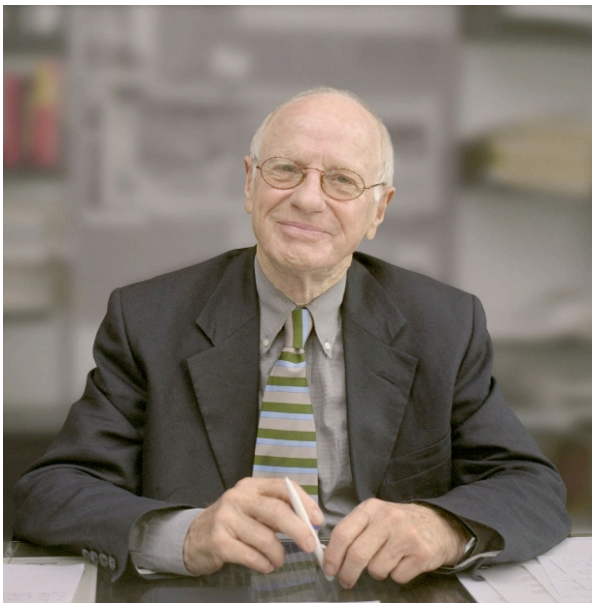


Wilkhahn

Press release and obituary



Fritz Hahne, pioneer entrepreneur and winner of many awards, born on April 15, 1920, died on June 28, 2008.

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A pioneer entrepreneur has died: In memoriam Fritz Hahne

Hanover. The longstanding principal shareholder, Managing Director and Chairman of the Administrative Board of the office furniture manufacturer Wilkhahn in Lower Saxony, died on June 28, 2008 at the age of 88. Fritz Hahne was honoured on many occasions for his lifetime achievement of formatively linking modern product design with social partnership and ecological responsibility. Apart from economic prosperity, his course of direction and longlasting influence earned the company significant distinction.

Fritz Hahne, who withdrew from management as Chairman of the Administrative Board at the age of 63, also pressed ahead with significant projects for Wilkhahn such as modern working forms, ecological transition and the buildings of the architects Prof. Frei Otto (1988) and Prof. Thomas Herzog (1992). When his son, Dr. Jochen Hahne, took over as Chairman in 2000, Fritz Hahne withdrew from the business side of the company. The publications and events on the occasion of the company's 100th anniversary in 2007 attest to the topicality and modernity of his life achievement.

An obituary by Rudolf Schwarz

Fritz Hahne †

He also had a dream: the dream of a human company, useful and true to society. When he took over the management of the chair company, in 1946 together with his cousin Adolf Wilkening that had been founded by their fathers in the Lower Saxonian "chair village" of Eimbeckhausen, Fritz Hahne was 26 years old and resolved upon making his dream come true.

For the entrepreneurs at that time, bound to tradition, he was a "Red", for the patriarchs, a worldly social romanticist and for the other chair manufacturers of the region a bit crazy, who instead of producing technically stable chairs in the familiar form, produced chairs for the next generation. In cooperation with the well-known companies of the Deutsche Werkstätte and the legendary Academy of Design in Ulm (HfG), the young entrepreneur went through a learning process which characterized his life, and many years later earned him the highly honoured title of "Design Leadership" as well as diverse honorary memberships, for example, in the Deutscher Werkbund.

More than once, he was in danger of failing, but after 20 years, Wilkahn was a top-class address for high-class, modern office and contract furniture and it enjoyed its increasingly popular international reputation.

Besides its claim of being a cut above other production companies, Fritz Hahne was deeply uneasy about the social imbalance. As early as 1971, he enforced amongst his partners that the employees of Wilkhahn were to have a 50-percent share in the operating results as dormant partners – hardly any other company had ever realized such extensive participation of personnel. This in turn resulted in a very liberal style of leadership that was based on mutual respect; the works council did not constitute a bothersome evil, but was instead a respected partner in fulfilling mutual tasks.

As a social democrat, he confessed unconditionally to the Godesberg Programme of the SPD; a second fixed star for him was the theses of the Club of Rome, which thematized the ecological theme for the first time.

With great powers of persuasiveness, Fritz Hahne promoted environmental protection that was to become part of the corporate culture. Wilkhahn was presented with the German Ecology Prize in 1996.

"I am life that wants to live, in the centre of life that wants to live. "Albert Schweitzer's aphorism was Fritz Hahne's motto and describes the self-conception of this exceptional entrepreneur. On one hand, the self-assured claim and on the other hand, the respect of fellow men marked his humanitarian attitude. He was absolutely averse to being named "the boss" and consequently made no secret of his aversion to threatening types of people à la "here I am", irrespective of their status. His tendency to understatement and his contempt for status symbols were just as notable as his self-ironic composure. Upon receiving the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany, he commented on the festive stage decorated with green that he felt he was taking part in an anticipated funeral service... Notable persons from the business world and politics were part of his circle of friends, but more of the sort that were not in the limelight. Fritz Hahne always conceived himself as the *primus inter pares*, who enjoyed temperamental discussions without wishing to assert his opinion at all costs; he also had the greatness to acknowledge errors.

After Fritz Hahne led the company as Managing Director for 35 years, and acted as Chairman of the Administrative Board for another 15 years, he had the satisfaction of knowing his son, who had been prepared for his tasks over the years, would continue to manage the 100-year-old company successfully in his interests.

Following a serious illness, Fritz Hahne died on June 28, 2008 at the age of 88 years.

Rudolf Schwarz has accompanied Fritz Hahne as press spokesman and confidant over the last few decades.