

View from the top: interview with new CEO Leif Frilund

In February, Leif Frilund took up the reins at the company's headquarters in Eclépens, Switzerland. He took a little time out of his hectic schedule visiting BTG offices and customers worldwide to speak to Digital UpTimes about his background, and his future vision for BTG.



Leif Frilund, new BTG CEO

DUT: Glancing through your CV, it seems that paper has been your main interest right back to university days.

LF: Yes, indeed. My MSc in chemical engineering specialized in pulp and paper processes, and the whole of my career has been spent in the paper industry cluster, working principally for three different companies, the most recent being Ahlstrom Corporation in Helsinki. During those years I've switched between being a supplier of paper chemicals and paper machine fabrics to the manufacturing side, primarily in the specialty paper business.

DUT: What do you see as the major challenges facing today's pulp and paper industry?

LF: Different regions face different issues. In Europe, the main challenges are chronic overcapacity and the slow but steady move away from traditional printing to electronic media. I think the strong focus on renewable energy sources will also put pressure on the supply of wood fibres, increasing fibre costs for the industry overall.

Unlike some regions, however, I don't see European markets threatened by cheap imports from lower-cost countries like China. This will be a problem, I think, for North America, which will also have to face further capacity reduction in the years ahead.

Both Latin America and Asia are fast-growing markets with an increasing demand for paper products. Latin America is also successfully carving out a niche for itself as a source of cheap fibres for markets like China, where new paper production capacity is coming onstream at an unprecedented rate.

Russia, with its huge untapped fibre resources, remains a question mark – but could become a major player in the not-too-distant future.

DUT: Which markets will be most important for BTG's future growth?

LF: There's no doubt that Asia and some of the Latin American markets will continue to drive growth for the entire pulp and paper industry, BTG included. At the product level, BTG will remain focused on its core markets of instrumentation and blade and rod technologies. These products will allow us to help mills address the growing need to reduce expenditure – particularly energy costs and chemicals – which will intensify in the future, not just because of economic imperatives, but because of mounting environmental pressures.

DUT: Will helping mills address environmental issues and meet emerging benchmarks for factors like emissions, effluent and sustainable growth be an important part of BTG's focus?

LF: Undoubtedly. From our earliest days we've been about helping our customers become more energy and material efficient. Our portfolio of market-leading technologies, from consistency measurement to specialized instruments to analyze complex wet-end variables, can substantially cut chemical consumption and have a major impact on energy use. And products like Duroblade® can dramatically reduce production stops and broke, translating into less waste and lower energy needs. We like to think we're creating a virtuous circle, with mills reaping the rewards of improved economic and environmental performance, and BTG reaping the rewards of increased market share.

DUT: What about the future shape and direction for BTG? What are your priorities?

LF: BTG has a great many assets, particularly our application know-how and our proven capacity to deliver a steady stream of product and service innovations, from new instruments that address key industry needs to our new consulting service that leverages our expertise to deliver real process improvements to our customers.

We have great technologies and a great skill set, and we should be focusing our energies on further developing these capabilities. One very recent example is our acquisition of IPI, a US company with a strong range of metering rod products that will complement and strengthen our market offer. Another important BTG asset is our tradition of working in close partnership with our customers. As mills upgrade to new technologies, finding further productivity and efficiency gains will get tougher. That's where our in-depth understanding of pulp and paper processes will really give us a market edge.

DUT: How are you finding life in Switzerland? And with so much travelling, do you ever find any time for leisure pursuits?

LF: My career path has already taken me to Germany, France, the US and Switzerland, so all I can say is, it's great to be back! Outside time with the family, I do like to keep fit through jogging and badminton – though the constant travelling has pretty much ruled out regular golf and tennis. But those long flights aren't so bad, because they give me a bit of time to catch up on my reading, particularly history. I'm also reading a lot right now about forestry, in an effort to take better care of the family farm in Finland, which I share with my brother.