

Q Who was Otto Bock, and how did he come to found the company?

A Otto Bock was a young prosthetist practicing in Germany at the close of World War I. So many veterans were returning home requiring prostheses that, at a time when you would literally measure someone and carve them a leg out of a block of wood, he realized there was no way that he and his colleagues would be able to keep up with demand. He took a cue from the mass-production manufacturing techniques that were being introduced around the world—think of the Ford auto assembly lines—and began making limb components in advance that could be fitted to a range of different people. This helped in the initial fitting and then in enabling adjustments to be made to improve their function and level of comfort. This was in 1919, and you can imagine how his ideas revolutionized the field of prosthetics. In the coming years the company would begin experimenting with different materials—such as aluminum, plastics, and foam that we actually manufacture ourselves—and even electronics, creating a prosthetic hand that takes electric impulses from the muscles and translates them into movement. A theme you see running through the company’s philosophy from the very beginning is to approach the prosthetics we design and manufacture as part of a system rather than just a standalone unit. Today we’re based in Duderstadt, Germany, but we serve more than 140 countries as the world’s largest manufacturer and distributor of orthotics and prosthetic components.

Q Tell us about the company’s various product lines.

A I’d be glad to. Prosthetics are at our core, of course, and within that category the C-Leg is a real standout. It’s a knee that’s controlled by a microprocessor, and it’s really the standard of care

for today’s returning veterans, and others as well. We’re also involved in a “Revolutionizing Prosthetics” project funded by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, or DARPA. Our orthotics division offers a variety of bracing devices and systems, using lightweight carbon fiber materials and even gyroscopes to help match a person’s particular gait. Then we have Otto Bock Kids, which is one of our most-successful areas. Part of the reason for that involves the quality that goes into manufacturing each of these devices, but also careful design that allows them to grow with the child for as long as possible. One of the most valuable things a rehabilitation product can do is to help the child or adult fully participate in the world around them. Something as simple as being at the same level at the family dinner table can make a wonderful difference in a person’s quality of life. In addition to the wheelchairs, seating, and a wide range of orthotic bracing, we also provide postoperative therapies such as continuous passive motion (CPM) therapies, cold compression therapies, and electrotherapy devices. Our technicians are located around the country so that they can quickly reach nearly any home or facility to set up the equipment.

Q I understand that you also provide wheelchairs and related accessories for adults.

A That’s right. Our third division involves adult mobility and daily living aids, which includes power and manual wheelchairs, bath-safety devices, and seating systems and accessories. One product in particular I’d like to point out here is the OBSS custom-contoured cushion. Since everyone has different seating needs, we’ve come up with a way to custom-shape cushions to the end user’s personal dimensions. It begins by the person sitting in a form that looks a lot like a beanbag chair. Then our techni-



cians remove the air from the bag, which reveals the person’s exact shape. We then digitize that shape and relay the information electronically to a five-axis carver that can manufacture nearly any shape you can think of, and the resulting cushion matches the user’s contours perfectly. My favorite story is of a woman who was having a hard time maintaining an upright seating position in her wheelchair. She was also missing one arm, and since she had to support herself with the remaining arm, it greatly limited what she could do. Once she’d been fitted for an OBSS cushion, however, it changed her whole life. She felt better physically, became more positive mentally, and within a few months she had enrolled in college. Her entire outlook changed because she wasn’t in pain any longer, and she could interact with the world. So that’s the kind of outcome that we’re constantly striving toward, and really what makes working for Otto Bock so meaningful. When you can help people enjoy their lives and navigate their world, you know that you’ve really accomplished something that matters. ✍

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