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“Our goals give us passion and harmony.”

From storing scrap in their garage to recycling close to 20 tonnes of precious metals per year, joint CEOs Julia and Thomas Maier have built a business with “passion and harmony.”

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Everything began in our garage like a fairytale,” says Julia Maier, joint CEO of MAIREC, a precious materials recycling company operating in Germany and the US. “Before MAIREC, my [now] husband, Thomas, was working for Demet Deutsche Edelmetall Recycling [DDER], and I was the student apprentice trainee there in 2002,” she says.

It was not long after this that DDER, a metals-recycling company, closed its doors, meaning the couple became unemployed and needed to look for a new challenge.

“I said, ‘Let’s try with our own company and I’ll help you,’” says Julia. “So we founded MAIREC in September »

2003 and started buying and selling scrap. I was an economics and law student at the time and helped Thomas with the Russian-speaking market and financial questions. We hired one assistant and started with an office in our house and our garage as our first storage facility.”

Starting a business is never easy, however, and the pair found themselves needing to pick up extra work in order to fund the founding business, with Julia working as a waitress in a bar on weekends. No bank wanted to give MAIREC credit to kick-start the business.

That changed in a few months, however, with a call from a former colleague. “Our ex-boss, the owner of DDER, called and offered us a lease on a part of the company that he couldn’t sell. He helped us with financing, and we rented a few machines to

start the first processing. We hired three more people and got started.”

Almost 15 years later and the company now employs more than 200 people in Germany and the US. With innovative methods, MAIREC recovers valuable precious metals from various waste and scrap materials, such as mobile phones, computer processors and autocatalysts. It has evolved into an international company with a global presence while successfully

maintaining its family-business roots. The key to its success is its vision of “passion and harmony” – key values for employees from the top down. “We work with specific, measureable goals which give us passion and harmony, and we hire our employees on this principle,” says Julia. “They should burn for this; they should love what they do and do what they love.”

MAIREC is dedicated to ensuring its employees do what they love, even extending to them the possibility to choose a different job within the company if they are feeling unfulfilled or are not enjoying themselves. It’s an approach that’s allowed several employees to find new roles within MAIREC, along with greater job satisfaction. One example of this policy working successfully is in the case of an employee from maintenance.

“This employee didn’t have the education for it, but he loved machines,” says Julia. “We gave him a chance, he learned to work with computers, and now he’s the best technician for maintenance. After that, more and more people have come to trust in this ethos, and we have a lot of

examples of people changing their job. After the change, they are much happier and do their best work.”

This philosophy is part of the running of a business that has recently had MAIREC placed in the top 100 innovative companies in Germany. It’s also a company that takes environmental concerns very seriously, with accreditation and certification a vital step of the process. This gives MAIREC an edge over

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companies from other regions with fewer regulations and standards of doing business.

“Our mission is to save as much raw material from waste as possible, and prevent the generation of landfill,” says Julia. “We have a project with steel cords and rubber. At the moment, it is usually burned or goes to landfill, whereas we recycle, separating the rubber from the steel so you can use it again in new products.” It’s also important to Julia and her team to save precious materials used in electronic waste, including gold,

platinum and palladium. To be able to source these elements from waste is a real win, as it reduces landfill, while supplying materials that would otherwise have to be mined – itself an intensive and environmentally damaging process. “Every year, we recycle eight tonnes of platinum, eight tonnes of palladium, and about three tonnes of gold,” says Julia, noting that MAIREC intends to increase this to 20 tonnes between the three elements. “We want to recycle and we want to continue to feel passion and harmony in what we do. So the important goals for us are to continue our vision and to do what we love.” ■

MAIREC has been identified as one of London Stock Exchange Group’s 1000 Companies to Inspire Europe. The report is a celebration of the EU’s fastest-growing and most dynamic small- and medium-sized businesses.