

The Three-Dimensional Perspective



Over the course of 35 years, Attila Toth—often referred to in professional circles as a "bridge-builder"—transformed a small design office of just a few engineers into one of Hungary's most successful and largest engineering companies. We spoke with the president and "future officer" of CÉH Zrt. about entrepreneurship, setbacks, and, of course, the future of the profession.

– Where did the story begin? What was the core idea behind founding a company during the political transition?

By 1989, I had already been working in various entrepreneurial settings for four

years—initially in professional groups, then in small private companies and cooperatives. I was 35 years old when we founded the company with the aim of creating jobs for ourselves. Everything around us was in decline: the economy, the industry, the large corporate structures. The state had increasingly limited means, and there were neither foreign companies nor domestic investors on the market.

In 1988, my colleague at the time, Janos Kalmar, went on to found the engineering firm Óbuda-Újlak. I established CÉH Ltd., and alongside building design, we started working on highway and bridge projects. The story of the Megyeri Bridge, in fact, began around that time with a conceptual plan. Our very first commission, however, was the editorial building of the *Pesti Hírlap*, behind Blaha Lujza Square.

The company got started, and we quickly learned that running a business is not just about doing good work. You need to secure clients, manage operations, build a team. Most importantly, we had to learn not just to survive day by day, but to create reserves, build systems, and consciously generate market opportunities. And not least, we had to understand what marketing and sales are all about.

– Did your background as a part-time basketball coach help in building and running the company?

Absolutely. I coached a women's second-division team, and I even met

my wife through the team at the University of Horticulture. From the beginning, building community and taking care of people were core to how I developed the engineering team. Just like a coach has to pay attention to every player, I monitored each colleague's performance and mental state. At the start, coaching was my only leadership model—we were pioneers with no clear path laid out ahead of us. A handful of us in the industry were building something from scratch, unlike those who acquired companies through privatization.

– There are always early setbacks. What were yours?

We stumbled three times early on. Sometimes it was our fault due to design errors—which taught us the value of quality control. Other times, external factors caused trouble: clients went bankrupt or acted maliciously. We encountered fraud, weren't paid, or were misled by people pretending to be professional entrepreneurs.

One key lesson: in nearly hopeless situations, fighting for what you're "owed" can drain all your energy. Instead, focus on how to move forward. Sometimes, you have to let things go—even if it means taking a loss. The construction sector was full of bankruptcies, debt chains, and sky-high inflation. Foreign investment hadn't arrived yet. Gradually, a new world began to form from the ashes of the old one.

We had a determined team representing various engineering disciplines. We worked together, took responsibility for one another, and that sense of accountability expanded as the company grew. Of course, some people left after setbacks, but those who stayed became stronger and moved forward with us.

– When did you truly feel the company had gained strength?

When we began working with Westel on the site of the old tobacco factory. That led to the formation of our project management office, which quickly adapted to the rapidly changing needs of this telecom company. As Westel (and later T-Mobile) grew, so did we. From office building conversions to retail outlets, telephone centers, base stations, and even the renovation of their central headquarters—this partnership taught us a lot.

We learned the importance of trust, and how to think with the client's mind. A similarly formative experience was our work with Porsche Hungária, where we also grew alongside the client.

In 1995, we decided to become a joint-stock company. It was a message to the market that we thought differently and a signal to our staff that we were in this for the long haul. That remains true: most of our leadership team has been with CÉH for over 20 years.

– Did you ever question whether this could become a success story?

Never. I believe I was coded for two things: entrepreneurship and community building. I never doubted this was my path. Once 40 or 50 people joined me on that path, I felt an even greater responsibility. Each colleague represents not just themselves but a family behind them. Today we are 350 people, and I still regularly stand before them to share our direction, the state of the environment, and the challenges ahead.

We have institutionalized this through the CÉH Forum, which we hold at the beginning and end of each year, with online events in between. Just last week, we held a team-building event with 180 participants, including the BYD team from Szeged and the BMW group from Debrecen. These are great opportunities for open dialogue. For me, CÉH is a creative, collaborative community where we share a professional life and take responsibility for one another.

– When did the company truly become a community?

By 1995 we were already a compact organization with a solid structure: design office, project management, and bridge design departments. With about 60 employees, we still operated on a scale that allowed for a real sense of community. As we grew, smaller sub-communities began to form—based on disciplines, offices, or projects. Today, each team has internal resources to

organize its own events, including team-building programs.

– How did you train yourself?

Early on, I asked a friend, who led a large bearing company, for advice on what to study. He gave me a long list of names and topics. I followed his advice, taking one course after another. The Dale Carnegie program was especially foundational for me, and later I earned an MBA. There's no such thing as knowing everything. Without constant learning, you can't move forward.

It's not enough to approach a technical project with an engineering mindset alone. When the time came to work with foreign clients, I realized I didn't speak proper English. I had to go back and study again—and believe it or not, I still take English lessons twice a week.

– What competencies are most often missing from Hungarian engineering management?

A three-dimensional perspective. It's not just about knowing your technical field—you need to understand the client's market, economic context, and future trends. The third dimension is vision: knowing where the world, and Hungary, are heading, and how our sector will evolve. I no longer serve as CEO but as president, responsible for strategy and development. You could say I am CÉH's "future officer."

– The past 20 years in construction have been a rollercoaster. How did you handle the crises and turning points?

We had to develop a kind of resilience that allowed us to survive tough and even tougher times. During the property crisis, we were in a terrible position, but we pulled through. That requires strong financial reserves, which we monitor constantly. The second is having a broad market presence, and the third is professional adaptability.

– How do you create today?

I no longer work on specific engineering projects. My creative work lies in enabling others to create—to help them succeed. When two colleagues received the Széchenyi Prize for the Megyeri Bridge, I was thrilled. My contribution is building and sustaining a creative community. That includes fostering innovation and shaping strategy: which direction to go, what the market demands. My role is to shape the future of the company—to make CÉH future-proof.

– Do you still come to work with the same motivation?

The drivers have changed, but the motivation remains. There is always a goal in sight. I'm more tired physically, yes. Six hours might be enough in theory, but I still work ten to twelve. That's part of being an entrepreneur. At seventy, the pace slows down, but the energy is still there—and so is the motivation.

– Over the past 35 years, your team has delivered countless projects. Do you have any favorites?

Absolutely. At the top of the list is the Megyeri Bridge, a cable-stayed structure designed by two Széchenyi Prize-winning engineers, Matyas Hunyadi and Dr. Sandor Kisbán. Then there's the Europa Nostra award-winning Millenaris Park, the MOL Tower, and the Elysium luxury residential development, built on the site of the old SZOT Hotel.

– As CÉH's future officer, what do you think engineers should prepare for? What does the future hold for the profession?

There is some fear in the profession—a kind of "what will become of us?" mentality. But I agree with FIDIC, the International Federation of Consulting Engineers: the biggest challenge in the future will be sustainability. In Europe alone, 35 million residential buildings require urgent renovation.

Engineering tasks won't disappear. We will continue to redesign, rebuild, and build better. AI has arrived, and we're learning to use it. If we can integrate it smartly, making it a capable assistant or even a partner, we have a good future ahead.

– What advice would you give to a young engineer looking to start a business?

Find a niche! Look for future-oriented opportunities you can build a company around. If you do what everyone else does, the road will be difficult—full of

resistance. Have a clear vision, innovative capacity, and strategy. Understand the market, and be sensitive to evolving your company culture alongside your growth.

– Would you walk this path again?

Definitely. It was a beautiful and very difficult journey. There are things I might do differently in hindsight, but it was truly my own path. I still travel the world—I've been to 73 countries—gathering information, watching where engineering is heading, what new ideas and trends are emerging. I study the future of the profession—and I feel very lucky that I can.