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VIEWPOINT

Grenoble cultivates biocomputing

By 2005 Europe's biotechnology market will be worth an estimated €250bn, with 3m jobs. Grenoble-Isère has some major assets for biocomputing – information technology (IT) for life science – thanks to its potential in IT and microtechnology. According to François Rechenmann, head of research at the National Institute for Research in Computer Science and Control (Inria) in Montbonnot, biocomputing can look forward to a promising future: "These techniques are now essential for storing, analyzing and managing the phenomenal amount of data needed to identify and characterize genes."

It is no coincidence that Inria has chose to concentrate its forces in this field of research in the Grenoble area, close to the CEA laboratories and not far from the major centres of biological competence in the Lyon area. At Genostar – a consortium formed by Institut Pasteur, Hybrigenics and Genome Express (another Isère-based company), with strong public backing – some 20 researchers are putting the final touches to software for automatic characterization of the genes in DNA that has already been sequenced. Biologists are impatient to get their hands on the software, currently still being prototyped.

Work is also underway at CEA Grenoble on biochips and the proteome. Furthermore Grenoble has been certified as a national platform by the French network of genome centres. All this contributes to the dynamic of Grenoble-Isère in a high-growth, but extremely competitive field.



SPOTLIGHT

Isère exports boom

Not only does Grenoble-Isère continue to attract foreign and above all US investors, but it also boasts an enviable balance of payments surplus. For a long time (until 2000) it was the top exporting department in Rhône-Alpes, accounting for 26% of total exports. The main explanation for this is the large number of cutting edge firms, working in sectors such as IT and microelectronics, which have little difficulty crossing national borders. But another factor is the area's international outlook which goes back to the beginning of the 20th century. Companies such as Caterpillar, MGE-Ups, Becton Dickinson, Skis Rossignol and Porcher Industries export most of their production. Isère's top customers are its neighbours in Europe, led by Germany and Italy, closely followed by the US.

UPDATES

IBG, from Germany, the world leader in industrial control for automotive components, has decided to start trading in France at Saint Quentin Fallavier. The proximity of equipment manufacturers such as Valeo and A. Raymond, and the quality of regional infrastructures, were decisive in the choice of the site.

SebaKMT, one of the two world leaders in the localization of buried networks (power, water, telecommunications, etc.) and leaks from networks, has also chosen the north of Isère, for its first French subsidiary. Its new base in Saint Quentin Fallavier will cover the whole of France and French-speaking countries.

Silicomp, headquartered in Montbonnot (€88.6m revenue in 2001), is set to launch an intelligent pen with Hewlett-Packard. In one stroke users will be able to scan the contents of a document into a PDA or onto the internet. They will also be able to feed handwritten text into a PC. The pen is due to hit the market at the beginning of 2003.

Sanmina-SCI, number three worldwide in electronic subcontracting, has been given the green light by the European Commission to purchase Hewlett-Packard's professional PC assembly unit in Isle d'Abeau (500 employees, 100,000 PCs manufactured per month).

RECENT EVENTS

Solar-powered Photowatt



With revenue up by 50% (€50m forecast for the 2002-3 financial year, compared with €37m for the previous year) and massive investments scheduled there seems no stopping Photowatt International.

The company is based in the north of Isère. For more than 20 years it has specialized in manufacturing photovoltaic systems. It is taking full advantage of the upturn in the market for renewable energy sources (20% to 30% annual growth). Photowatt, a subsidiary of the Canadian group Automation Tooling Systems, is the eighth largest manufacturer of solar cells and panels worldwide. It is also the only industrial manufacturer of any size in France. Over a year and a half, culminating at the end of 2002 it will have invested about €10m in its Isère facility, which employs 350 people. The aim is to double production capacity and launch a new, cheaper product that yields higher conversion efficiency. "That is currently the focus of all the competition," explains Eric Laborde, Photowatt's Managing Director.

The French are far from being the main beneficiaries of this clean energy: 98% of the firm's output is exported. California, for instance, can no longer satisfy all its electricity requirements and is particularly interested in solar power. Demand in Germany is also booming. Following the government's decision to phase out nuclear power, Germany is keen to develop other sources of renewable energy. Photowatt may not have many customers at home but it does take advantage of local brainpower and enjoys close links with CEA laboratories in Grenoble. Looking to the future its ambition is admirably straightforward: "To maintain growth and profitability," says Laborde.

After Minatec, Nanotec 300...

"The Atomic Energy Commission (CEA) will be investing several €100m at its Grenoble facility in 2003-7 to develop tomorrow's nanotechnology."

The announcement was made by Pascal Colombani, the Head of CEA. It came just a few weeks after the historic decision by STMicroelectronics, Motorola and Philips to invest €2.8bn in Isère over a five year period. They plan to concentrate their R&D activities for the next generation of chips on 300 mm wafers. The new CEA project, codenamed Nanotec 300 in reference to the new generation of silicon wafers, will fit into the larger picture of the Minatec centre for micro and nanotechnology. This vast project, worth €150m, was launched in January with strong support from local authorities and under the supervision of the Isère Departmental Council.

It sets out to bring together, in and around CEA, all the players in micro and nanotechnology in the Grenoble area. Nanotec 300 will be working further upstream. Ultimately some 150 researchers will be responsible for keeping local industry supplied with cutting edge technology, and by the same token providing the local economy with a fine insurance scheme.



Isère perfects its metalwork

In the days of Louis XIV the province of Dauphiné – much of which now lies in Isère – was a major centre for steel production. Nowadays Isère no longer produces metals and alloys in large volumes, but it still plays a key role in the manufacture and processing of special alloys for a variety of industrial sectors. From the stainless steel blades used in Swiss Army knives to permanent magnets in cars, not to mention packaging for Vache Qui Rit cheese, Isère products find their way into many consumer and industrial products.



Powder metallurgy – a technique that involves tightly packing metal powder and sintering it at high temperatures – has long been a Grenoble speciality. The US firm Federal Mogul operates two production sites at Veurey and Pont de Claix (with 560 employees manufacturing sintered parts for the car industry). Ugimag, at Saint Pierre d'Allevard, manufactures permanent magnets for the car industry. Eurotungstène, in Grenoble, produces sophisticated metal powders for the diamond-tool industry and cemented carbide applications. Sandvik Hard Materials, also in Grenoble, produces cemented carbide

components for cutting tools and engine parts. Overall this part of the industry represents over 1,000 jobs in Isère, as well as a precious store of brainpower. Ugimag's division headquarters in Saint Pierre d'Allevard is working on the development of increasingly sophisticated magnets to satisfy car manufacturers' demands for greater power. In Grenoble the Cermep laboratory, jointly operated by Sandvik Hard Materials France and Eurotungstène, focuses on improving the properties of its powders. A further 3,000 other people work in the processing of special alloys. Pechiney, the world's fourth largest manufacturer of aluminium, is the main employer in this sector with a total of 940 employees at five facilities in Isère. The research centre in Voreppe (CRV), with a staff of 320, is the firm's only horizontal laboratory in the world, working for the entire group. It is, for example, working on ultralight vehicles for the future – aluminium withstands shocks and corrosion better than steel and is easier to recycle. But it is also developing new beverage

cans and materials for the aeronautics industry. Ascometal, a subsidiary of Lucchini, from Italy, is the European leader for spring steel. Its unit in Allevard (600 employees) manufactures special steels for construction materials. Another Isère speciality is steel shot, an abrasive material used in surface treatment and stone-cutting. Wheelabrator Allevard is the world leader in this field, with a 41% share of the market. The firm's headquarters in Le Cheylas employs 182 people, out of a total of 1,300 worldwide. Paturle Aciers is located on the edge of the Chartreuse regional natural park. For a century it operated as a family business but it has recently been taken over by Theis, from Germany. It produces hardened steel strip for making cutting tools. Aciéries de Bonpertuis is located not far away, in Rives. The firm goes back to 1434 when the Carthusian monks opened a forge. Nowadays it employs 200 people

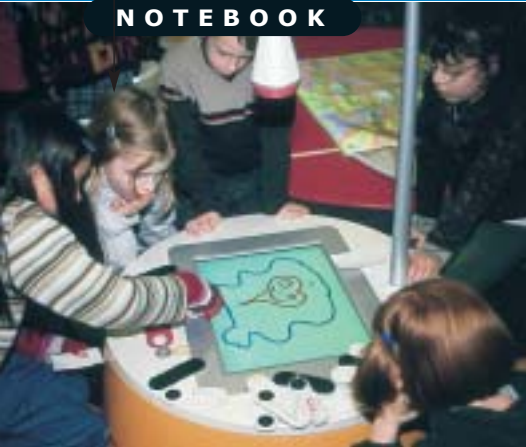


making high quality stainless steel, used in particular in Swiss Army knives and surgical instruments. There are several research laboratories in Isère – operated by CEA, CNRS or Grenoble university – which help the industry to retain its competitive edge. Of particular note are the Louis Néel Laboratory of Magnetism (95 people), and the Physical Engineering and Mechanics of Materials Laboratory (GPM2), at the interface between physics and the mechanics of materials. It specializes in metal plasticity and shaping. Also of interest is the Production through Magnetic Processes Laboratory (EPM), which specializes in intense magnetic fields and superconductors. It has worked widely in industry. At a time when the car, aeronautics and building industries are on the look out for innovative materials, this brainpower, associated with a longstanding metalworking tradition, is a major asset for the enduring success of metallurgy in Isère.

The metals and alloys industry in figures:

- **4,000** jobs in industry
- **2,500** students in higher education and **180** theses per year
- **425** jobs in dedicated public research

NOTEBOOK



Villa Media opens its doors

The first ten residents of the Villa Media – which aims to become the equivalent of Rome's Villa Medici, but for multimedia – will be arriving in Grenoble this coming autumn. For the time being they will be based in the offices of Metro, the Grenoble urban area council. In two years the centre will move into its permanent home, in new premises yet to be built in the grounds of Château de la Beaume in Seyssins, on a hill overlooking the city.

A centre for road-rail transport soon to open in the Alps

At the beginning of 2003 special low-loader rail trucks, ordered by the motorway operator Area, will carry the first heavy goods vehicles through Mont Ceniz rail tunnel. The aim of the initiative – launched as part of the Fund for the Development of Intermodal Transport Policy in the Alps (FDPITMA) – is to carry 30 to 50,000 vehicles a year. Once work

enlarging the tunnel has been completed traffic will be stepped up, with a further increase in 2012 when the high speed line between Lyon and Turin is due to open, with scope for passengers and freight.



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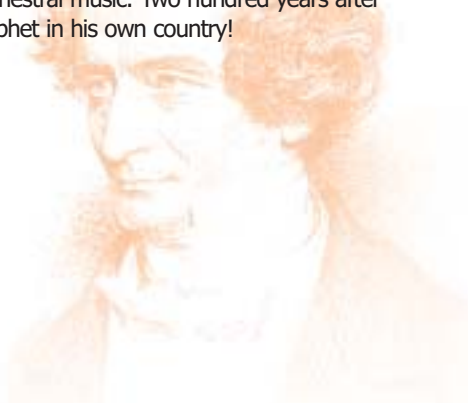
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Berlioz, the prodigal son of La Côte Saint André

"I was born on 11 December 1803, in La Côte Saint André, a very small town in France, located in the department of Isère, between Vienne, Grenoble and Lyon," Hector Berlioz wrote at the beginning of his memoirs. In 1890 the town raised a statue in honour of France's greatest composer of Romantic music, in the Medieval covered market where Berlioz played marbles as a child. Almost 200 years after his birth the inhabitants of La Côte Saint André, a pretty little town in the north of Isère, still pay tribute to the illustrious composer. They are currently preparing to celebrate his bicentenary in fitting style with a major dramatic production retelling the composer's life, in the courtyard of the town's Louis XI castle.

The event will also mark the highpoint of next year's Berlioz Festival. The festival was started in 1992. Supported by about 200 volunteers it seeks to promote the music of Berlioz to as wide an audience as possible. It has proved a huge success. Every year, for a week in August, some 12 to 13,000 spectators from all over Rhône-Alpes, and further afield, flock to La Côte Saint André to attend a series of concerts (19 this year) in and around Berlioz's birthplace.

The programme features large formations and chamber ensembles, established musicians and promising young talents, favourite classics but also little known or previously unperformed works. To bide the time till the celebrations next year – with the reopening of the renovated Berlioz Museum, in his birthplace – enthusiasts may want to purchase a new educational CD-Rom. It offers an interactive introduction to the life of the man whom many consider to be the inventor of modern orchestral music. Two hundred years after his birth Berlioz will truly be recognized as a prophet in his own country!



AEPi is the Isère county's economic development agency. It provides companies with assistance setting up in business in Isère, free of charge: economic data, offers of property and premises, meetings with local decision-makers, help with overall project management. Do not hesitate to contact us.