

Grenoble Isère Report



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Patrick Bonnefond, CEO of Sofileta

Chips soon part of textiles and paper

At first sight there was no reason for contacts between CEA's advanced technology research laboratories in Grenoble and textile and paper firms, traditionally located in the north of Isère. But the Metis experimental platform, an initiative backed by the Isère Departmental Council, AEPI and Bourgoin-Jallieu town council, is banking on the joint venture to promote the growing use of micro and nanotechnology in conventional industry.

As a textile firm, what do you hope to gain from the Metis project?

We have a workforce of 286 in Grenoble-Isère and out of total revenue amounting to €75m half comes from

export sales, with end products as varied as fashionware and technical textiles. The only way we can go on competing with countries with lower labour costs is to innovate constantly. It is a key factor in maintaining steady growth.

But a firm our size does not have the means to pay for long-term research contracts. We never even dreamt of working with a major laboratory such as CEA. With the financial support of local authorities we were able to join forces with four other textile firms (Piolat, SIEGL and Filaxetor) and a paper manufacturer (Arjowiggins) and start networking. We have the prospect of tapping into a huge stock of new ideas. We aim to produce marketable prototypes in two years.

Such as?

One possibility is sensors integrated in textile providing a way of controlling stress or perspiration. Alternatively the fabric could be used as a medium for embedded electronics. Equipped in this way the textile would make it possible to monitor dependent people in their homes, or to keep track of parcels, or even as a countermeasure against illegal copies. Once you start thinking about it the list is endless. For the time being an engineer seconded from CEA and a researcher hired by the Metis platform are acting as an essential interface between the various players to explore possible lines of research of interest to all partners. We have agreed to take stock after a year. If the project is living up to our hopes we will sign up for another two-year phase.

UPDATES

Two new EDA publishers in Grenoble-Isère

With the risk of malfunctions increasing as chips get smaller, functional verification before production is crucial to avoid substantial cost overruns. To take advantage of this niche market three engineers, formerly of Cadence Design Solutions, have launched EdXact. They will be marketing a specific design software that significantly reduces the time required for functional verification. They chose to locate their business in Grenoble-Isère, at Voreppe, because of the technological environment but also to be nearer two large customers, Atmel and STMicroelectronics.

Coupling Wave Solutions (CWS) is also working in Electronic Design Automation (EDA), focusing on integrity analysis of integrated-circuit analog signals, a prime source of problems. CWS started out with five employees, but plans to bring its workforce up to 20 by the end of 2005. It too works with STMicroelectronics, but was attracted to Grenoble-Isère by the talent pool of engineers specializing in this particular field.

SPOTLIGHT

Grenoble-Isère fast becoming a mandatory location for electronics equipment manufacturers

US-based Photronics is one of the top manufacturers of photolithography masks (\$349m revenue in 2003 with 1,500 employees worldwide). It arrived in Crolles at the beginning of 2004, in the heart of Grenoble-Isère's answer to Silicon Valley, starting operations with a team of about 15. As Dominique Varloud, European Sales Director, explains: "The main thing is we are just down the road from the STMicroelectronics, Philips and Freescale (ex-Motorola) Alliance site, which is the biggest [R&D centre] in Europe." The facility could soon become the third largest worldwide.

Photronics is anything but an isolated example. Grenoble-Isère, already home to a good 50 international equipment manufacturers, is fast becoming a mandatory location for firms in this business. Recent arrivals include Jem Europe, of Japan (€90m revenue for 850 employees), the number two worldwide for probe cards, which are used to test wafers. It moved here from a site in Scotland. Another example is Axcelis, the world leader for ionic implantation. Apart from being close to major customers these firms are also drawn by the presence of numerous technology research laboratories and engineering schools. For instance UP-SGI, the French subsidiary of SGI, has just located its third unit in France in Grenoble to recycle and recondition equipment.

Fully equipped clean rooms to rent at Minatec

The Minatec micro and nanotechnology innovation centre is unique in Europe. Launched by CEA and INP Grenoble in partnership with the local authorities, it brings together at the same location some 4,000 experts in nanotechnology, working in advanced research laboratories affiliated to CEA and CNRS,

two major engineering schools and several specialist firms. Construction work – 45,000 sq m of buildings will be going up by this time next year – has just started, with delivery scheduled for the beginning of 2006. One of the key components in the innovation centre is the High-Technology Building (BHT).

It will enable startups to test and produce new designs fresh out of the laboratories in fully equipped clean rooms and office premises. The Minatec Entreprises joint venture, backed by the various project partners, is responsible for marketing the building. Half of the available 10,000 sq m² has already been reserved.

www.minatec.com

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Sports industry in top gear

Poma, Rossignol, Petzl and Béal, each in its own specialist field, are flying Grenoble-Isère's colours on mountains all over the world.

The area, which was one of the first centres of winter sports, is a paradise for skiers and climbers. Host to the Winter Olympics in 1968, Grenoble-Isère boasts 40 mountain resorts and is France's third most popular destination for winter holidays. But it is also home to a large number of firms producing equipment for mountain and open-air sports. One firm in 10 produces goods and services directly related to the travel business or mountain sports.



Poma, cabine de transport urbain pour Medellín en Colombie.

in an amusement park in Shenzhen, China.

Rossignol surfs on new glisse sports

Just down the road from Voreppe, the small town of Voiron is the birthplace of Rossignol, the world's number one winter sports equipment manufacturer (€478.6m revenue in 2003-4, 2,948 employees). The town

is still home to the firm's head office and a production unit. Abel Rossignol, a local carpenter, made his first set of wooden skis in 1906 and went on to found the company. It now has subsidiaries all over Europe, in the United States, but also Japan, South Korea and recently in China. Rossignol accounts for one quarter of the world market for winter sports products with a range of brands (Rossignol, Dynastar, but also Lange for boots and snowboards, Look for bindings, Hammer, etc.).

Béal roped up

But there is also scope for much smaller companies, firmly rooted in niche markets. Béal (€10m, 60 employees) is based in Vienne, in the northwest of the Isère department. Since the 1980s it has been the preferred supplier of climbing rope for mountaineers worldwide. A family firm, founded by Pierre Béal in 1950, it has managed to stay one step ahead of market trends, producing 8 million metres of rope

for various types of terrain (ice, rock faces, artificial climbing walls, etc.) and all categories of climber. As the managing director explains: "The only way for us to stay out in the front is constant innovation."

Béal consequently spends 10% of revenue on R&D, drawing on the skills of several university laboratories in the Grenoble area.

Petzl, constantly reinventing itself

Petzl is similarly attached to innovation. Appropriately many of its neighbours are high-tech firms and this thriving concern (€70m revenue, 300 employees) has its own advanced laboratory. It is constantly launching new products, no doubt a key factor in an annual growth rate of 15% to 20%. Its founder Fernand Petzl was a keen pot-holer and invented two products that revolutionized the sport. In the 1950s he developed the first descender, a belay device specially for caving. He went on to design a headlamp, leaving climbers' hands free. These two products established the company's name and since then, they and many others have been constantly evolving.

With the boom in open air leisure activities other firms are eagerly following the trail blazed by these forerunners. Fastnet and Lisker, for instance, make technical garments that withstand the most severe conditions, tailor-made for an ever-increasing throng of sports enthusiasts. And by the same token the French subsidiaries of some of the big names in outdoor sport, notably Lowe Alpine-Asolo (backpacks, mountain garments), have settled in the area. Grenoble-Isère may be well known for technological innovation, but with its peaks and snowfields it is also a superb location for perfecting tomorrow's outdoor products.

Poma goes to town

"All our competitors are based in the Alps and our technological know-how is concentrated around Grenoble," explains Pierre Gauthier, CEO of Pomagalski (€189.4m revenue in 2003). Almost 70 years after installing its first draglift at Alpe d'Huez – a structure made of wood and sheet metal – Poma lays claim to some 7,600 lift systems worldwide. In 2000 it became part of the Seiber group, of Austria, but it is still based at the foot of the Chartreuse range, near where it first started. Almost half of its 765 employees, 50% of whom are engineers, work at the headquarters in Voreppe. It is still a leading player in the world of winter sports and last year delivered the Vanoise Express, the biggest ever cable car transport system. But it is also busy developing new markets, notably urban aerial transport facilities. Recent projects in this field include a cable car linking the heights of Medellín, Colombia, to the subway network, and two funicular railways, currently under construction,

WIDE-ANGLE



Marc Minkowski. Photo Alvaro Yanez

A music lover's favourite

Opera and classical music enthusiasts in Grenoble have long deplored the lack of a concert hall worthy of the top orchestras. They should be more than satisfied with the refurbished arts centre's new auditorium, which seats 1,000 people. Marc Minkowski, one of the MC2's prime movers, conducted the inaugural concert on 22 September. After the show he confirmed: "The acoustics are exceptional." Particularly well known for his work with baroque opera, assisted by Les Musiciens du Louvre, Minkowski will be staging eight performances of music and opera.

MC2, an arts centre on a par with Grenoble-Isère's international ambitions

Grenoble-Isère is not just a paradise for sports enthusiasts. It also has a lively cultural life and now, with the reopening of the MC2 arts centre in Grenoble, it has the means to stage a whole range of impressive shows.

National and local authorities have invested some €42.6m to refurbish and enlarge the old centre, originally opened in 1968 by André Malraux, and now born again as the MC2. Covering a total of 20,000 sq m, it comprises an auditorium seating 1,000 people, two theatres – a large hall for high-profile events and a smaller space for more specialized productions, a creative centre, two dance studios, a recording studios, etc.

Under the overall management of Michel Orier the centre's programme will

concentrate on drama, music and dance. It will be home to three well-known companies, led by the choreographer Jean-Claude Gallotta, director Laurent Pelly and conductor Marc Minkowski. The new season will feature no fewer than 247 shows, an opportunity to see some of the top contemporary artists and performers, including the singer Cécilia Bartoli and the choreographer Philippe Decouflé, as well as Georges Lavaudant, Peter Brook, Franck Castorf, Emmanuel Krivine.

Just one hour's drive from Lyon and two hours from Geneva Grenoble now has an arts centre on a par with its ambitions, reaching out well beyond the borders of Grenoble-Isère. The objective is to boost admissions, quickly attaining 100,000 entries per year.



MC2. Photo Guy Delahaye



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