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Leading-edge technology from SMEs

Small but dynamic

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) form the backbone of the Swiss economy. Such businesses are no longer merely small-time traders, as a few examples from Switzerland's various language regions show.

Global market leader Interelectric

Interelectric, the high-tech company situated at the foot of the Brünig, became world-famous thanks to its tiny drive motors for the Marsmobile. Describing the landing of Pathfinder on the Red Planet, majority shareholder Karl-Walter Braun says, "We watched with bated breath as the Mars probe Sojourner unfolded." The Mars Rover is driven by eleven Swiss-made mini electrical motors with an average diameter of only 16 millimetres. The prestige contract saved the largest employer in the Canton of Obwalden millions on advertising and helped it to attract the calibre of staff it needed for its growing requirements. Since 1997 the Sachseln-based company has increased its revenue by around CHF 10 million to over CHF 150 million. Almost 1000 hands produce 2.5 million miniature

motors a year. The products are sold to global operators like Siemens, Philips, Hewlett Packard, Nikon and Mettler Toledo, and are used in such diverse applications as cars and robots, medical equipment and animated films.

AB



(PHOTO: KEYSTONE)

High-tech Ticino-style

In relation to its size, the canton of Ticino boasts a substantial number of highly specialised companies. One example is Precicast SA in Novazzano – a foundry that makes components for the airline and shipping industries. The company's customers include major operators in France and the USA, such as the manufacturers of the FA/18 fighter plane.

Another example is Premec SA in Cadempino, a leading international manufacturer of cartridges for ballpoint pens.

Rovio-based Protos Car SA is a rarity in Switzerland. Although the country does not manufacture automobiles, this company specialises in automotive design and is active in the development of three-dimensional computer models (chassis, interior etc.) and computer animation. Protos Car's partners include such big names as General Motors and Fiat.

The last example is active in the major growth market of software: Manno is the home of the European headquarters of Intuit SA, a company specialising in online banking platforms, with partners that include important European banks like the UBS.

DB

Electronic support for the physically handicapped

The Neuchâtel-based Swiss Foundation for Electronic Aids (FST) provides physically handicapped people with electronic aids and remote control tools. Its staff of 23 consists of rehabilitation experts, engineers and technicians.

The FST performs an interface function, translating advanced technology into practical applications for the handicapped. According to its charter its mission is to help handicapped persons to lead an independent life. Every day around 10,000 people around the world use these technical tools. The Foundation cooperates with partners in approximately ten European countries. This allows it to further develop its own ideas while contributing to a pool of expertise that expands the knowledge of all concerned.

Among the latest projects is one for an environmental control system specially designed for older people, and a security system that allows people suffering from disorientation a degree of controlled mobility.

PAT

Ammann Research Facility

The new technology centre of construction supplier group Ammann in Langenthal is impressive. Measuring 80 meters in length and 30 meters in width, the hall is almost half the size of a football pitch. "We want to halve the time for production processes," explains proprietor Johann Niklaus Schneider-Ammann. Two hundred persons work under the supervision of a handful of specialists, and CHF 13 million was invested in the installation. The aim of the new facility is to develop new equipment like asphalt dryers and manufacture them more cost-effectively. Besides construction equipment, Ammann manufactures entire gravel-breaking and sorting systems. In 1998 the company posted revenues of CHF 550 million. It has a world-wide workforce of 1800, of which 800 are in Switzerland. Eighty percent of revenues are generated outside Switzerland.

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