



# High-tech HELPER

## European SMEs are ready to fill Japan's technology gap

Text: GEOFF BOTTING

**A**s the crisis at the Fukushima nuclear power plant started to unfold, it soon became clear that the Japanese authorities were lacking some critical technology. Where were the robots, the media wanted to know? Alarming, it didn't end there. Scientists and workers in Fukushima have been battling the multiple reactor meltdown and leaking radiation using improvised – and in some cases completely inadequate – equipment.

Foreign governments and companies have stepped in, offering highly specialised and cutting-edge technologies. Several of those are European, and many of them are small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

In just one of several deals, HELIPSE, a small French manufacturer of unmanned helicopters, announced in April it would be shipping three aircraft equipped with radiation sensors, infrared thermometers and cameras to Japan to help monitor the nuclear plant.

Such news doesn't come as a big



ECA S.A.  
Montpellier's  
Roving Bat

surprise to Michel Theoval, president of Group Hi-Tech, a division of PMC, which represents European high-tech SMEs in Japan.

At his Tokyo office, he shows off a stack of brochures advertising a mind-boggling collection of European-made high-tech gadgetry – including some that wouldn't be out of place in a James Bond film. There's a swimming robot (the Roving BAT, made by ECA S.A. Montpellier), a gun that shoots non-lethal rubber bullets and flight-simulator machines.

"There aren't many other countries with the technology that Japan has. But

rather conventional, little different from the connectors on the back of a desktop PC. On closer inspection, however, their ultra-high precision becomes apparent.

The Space D-Sub connector, for example, is gold plated so that it can endure space environments, according to Danielle Muyl, SOURIAU Japan's general manager. Then there's the Composite D38999 Series III. It looks like metal, but it feels like hollow plastic due to its ultra-light weight. In fact, it is constructed of a composite material treated with a very thin layer of metal.

Such products are designed to keep electricity flowing in the harshest environments known to man, from outer space – where SOURIAU supplies connectors for the International Space Station – to deep under the sea.

In Japan, the railway industry is SOURIAU's biggest customer. Many of the connectors are used in equipment for trains, including the Shinkansen bullet train, and train signaling.

But why would Japanese customers, with some of the world's finest industrial technology at their fingertips, look to a foreign company to supply such key components?

Long experience, says Muyl, in reference to her own firm. Established in 1917, SOURIAU has been doing business in Japan since 1963, meeting the needs of customers in the rail, defense, space and nuclear

power industries.

"We are able to bring our technology that was developed in Europe and integrate it into SOURIAU connectors that we design and manufacture here in Japan," Muyl says.

Meanwhile, other companies are looking to Japan for new opportunities. When small aircraft manufacturer GECI International looks at Japan, it sees a market with the potential for rapid growth in the next few years.

"There are a total of 228 turboprop aircraft in Japan right now," notes Christian Polak, GECI International's representative in Japan. "But those aircraft are ageing and due to be replaced soon."

GECI, a French company, has yet to deliver a single airplane here. But Polak, who is founder of K.K. SERIC, a Paris-based consultancy, is looking to the maiden flight scheduled early next year of its 19-passenger Skylander SK-105, which is powered by twin turboprops.

"We think the next-generation SK-105 could be a very good solution for getting from island to island, and also for rescue, research, fishing fleets and so on."

Japan, he notes, is an archipelago that includes scatterings of small islands. Turboprop aircraft are ideal island-hoppers thanks to their engines' fuel economy and ruggedness, and their ability to land and takeoff on short – even unpaired – runways.

Still, Japan hardly seems like an easy

## EUROPEAN SMES HAVE BEEN BUSILY – AND QUIETLY – SUPPLYING JAPANESE CLIENTS WITH HIGHLY SOPHISTICATED COMPONENTS AND PRODUCTS

market to crack for most foreign SMEs in high-tech fields. Quality standards are exceedingly high, competition is intense, and then there are the language and cultural barriers.

One important requisite, says Theoval, is to have a constant presence here: "Being here is the key to success. You can't do your business by remote control."

Muyl notes that Japanese customers tend to require regular and close attention. "Through our Japanese team, we have a high level of customer intimacy, which is absolutely key with rail, a very conservative market," she says.

Both agree that Japan is a challenge for newcomers, especially ones with a short history.

"You should not come here with a brand new approach," Muyl says. "You need to bring something that's been proven over many years in your home market." **E**



GECI Skylander SK-105



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