

Interview: Roel van Doren – President Europe, Emerson Automation Solutions, Switzerland



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Roel Van Doren provides a fascinating insight into the interplay between the life sciences and industrial automation sectors in Europe, whilst also detailing Emerson’s footprint in Switzerland and beyond, as well as the company’s latest innovations.

We understand you have been European President at Emerson Automation Solutions since 2012. What are your current priorities?

Leading Emerson Automation Solutions’s European operations is a very active and challenging role. We have over 13,000 employees supporting a \$2Bn business in the region. For industrial automation companies, it has been a challenging environment over the last couple of years (an experience reflected within the industry as a whole) due to the low oil and gas prices. However, the life sciences sector has been very positive and importantly has avoided repercussions from the global economic downturn. At Emerson, we have therefore really tried to understand the investments made by our life science customer. Not just in Switzerland, but also Ireland, Denmark and Belgium, which see the largest investment in Europe from a life sciences perspective. We have had to refocus the organisation. Between 2009 and 2012 we witnessed a period of heavy investment within the oil and gas industry, but since then we have dedicated a considerable amount of our business to the life sciences sector.

Could you tell us about your footprint in Switzerland and provide us with an overview of the areas Emerson is currently operating in?

We effectively have two organisations here in Switzerland. One is solely focused on the Swiss market, providing sales and support to our customers. Obviously, the life sciences industry is very important to that organisation, but we also support customers from a broad range of process industries including chemical manufacturing.

In addition, the offices here in Switzerland are also our European headquarters and host Emerson's European leadership team. The team comprises regional vice presidents who focus on specific segments of Europe. Supporting these are country managers and business unit leaders, who have product specific knowledge ranging from measurement devices to control systems.

Given Switzerland is not the cheapest country to conduct transnational business, why did you choose Switzerland as the location for your European headquarters?

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There were several factors behind that decision. We relocated the European headquarters from the UK to Switzerland in 2000. During the 1980s and 90s, the vast majority of our business was conducted in western Europe. After this period, Eastern Europe – Poland, Turkey and Russia in particular – became strategically very important. We needed a more central European location with great transport links, to enable us to travel efficiently to all our markets, which Zurich provides. Another critical factor was the availability of experienced and talented individuals in Switzerland – essential to building a high-quality business.

Emerson is sometimes growing much faster than the pace of the market. You've already mentioned the life sciences sector, what's the secret behind Emerson's recent performance?

It is a combination of things. Speed is particularly crucial. Whereas most multinational companies started manufacturing in their original locations before moving production to Asia, we have adopted regional manufacturing. Emerson products purchased in America are made in the US, the products purchased in Europe are made in Europe and the products purchased in Asia are made in Asia. We have added approximately 60,000 square metres of manufacturing capacity in Europe. This has enabled us to provide much shorter lead times and the ability to deliver some products in just a matter of days. This dramatically increases our market participation.

Another factor is that we have focussed a great deal on enhancing our lifecycle services. Emerson has always invested heavily in developing innovative technology, but we now have multiple service centres located across Europe that are specifically designed to help our customers achieve the best possible return on their investments. An automation system has a life of between 15-30 years, our investment in an improved service and support structure to help our customers maintain and develop their systems over their lifetime has definitely helped to increase our market share.

Emerson's focus on providing 'complete solutions' has also played a considerable role in our current success. Our portfolio and breadth of products and services for process automation makes Emerson unique. We not only provide advanced measurement and analysis devices, but also final control and regulate technology, and operate and management software solutions. In each of these three areas we face strong competition, but none of our competitors are visibly strong in all three. Having a broad range of individual products and services, also enables us to provide a much greater number of complete solutions to our customers.

Browsing Emerson's markets, we can see that the US/Canada accounts for 50 percent of the organisation's overall revenue, Asia 20 percent and Europe 16 percent. What is the strategic importance of Europe to Emerson?

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2016 was a particularly good year for Europe and that percentage is now approximately 20 percent. That figure will further increase with the acquisition of the valves and controls business of Pentair; a deal which is currently in the process of being finalised.

The European market is extremely diversified and very important to Emerson. In addition to life sciences, we have customers from the oil and gas, chemical, power generation and food and beverage industries. A lot of our strategic decision making takes place in Europe; the life sciences business being a key example. As you would expect many of our competitors are also located within the region. We are therefore operating near to both our customers and competitors.

Returning to the life sciences industry, how much of your business is focussed on this new field?

This depends on the number and size of projects we are working on, but approximately 10-15 percent of our business is currently focused on the life sciences industry.

Sticking to the European market, do you have any products or services that are particularly performing well?

Our success within the life sciences industry is not because of a single product, it is about being able to offer a complete portfolio of automation products and services that meet the specific needs of the industry. For instance, if you are looking to develop a new manufacturing plant, you will need control systems, measurement devices and final control products. Usually automation projects start by focusing on the control system and I am pleased to say that most of the major pharmaceutical firms are currently using Emerson's DeltaV control system to operate their processes. We use our successful implementations of DeltaV as an opportunity to discuss complete automation solutions.

Are there solutions you can provide that you believe would unlock value for your customers who are yet to fully embrace them? Where can you aid your consumers further?

One of the technologies I would like to highlight is model predictive control. This technology is embedded within Emerson's DeltaV control system and has been used to improve production processes in oil refineries for a number of years. Model predictive control helps our customers to switch from batch manufacturing to a continuous manufacturing process. Batch manufacturing can create a considerable amount of wasted time during the production of a drug; waiting for test results etc. During continuous manufacturing the product can be continuously monitored and necessary adjustments made. This means that quality is increased and waste reduced.

We are currently piloting a series of model predictive control applications in Basel which appear to be producing very promising results. Continuous manufacturing technology has the capability to reduce the production time of a drug from months to just days. This is a game changer, because the time between initiating the process and the product reaching the market is significantly reduced.

Switzerland consistently ranks as one of the most innovative countries in the world; have you found companies increasingly willing to accept new technologies?

To a certain extent yes, but I must point out that in general the life science sector as a whole has really embraced innovation in recent years. I do not have enough data to confirm whether there is a greater willingness to accept new technologies in Switzerland specifically, but companies from within this country have always been known for developing and implementing advanced technology.

Looking at the competition, Emerson is competing against smaller companies focussed on niche opportunities. What kind of synergies are you able to leverage being such a huge global corporation?

We sometimes work with other companies to supply very niche measurement tools, but this is not Emerson's general approach simply because our customers are usually looking for a complete package from a single supplier. Equally, if you are developing a new manufacturing plant, there are not that many control systems that are suitable to meet the needs of life sciences. It is not about just providing the technology, but also the expertise and the experience that we can bring because of being involved in this industry for many years. When I was General Manager of Emerson's UK and Ireland operations in 2000, the company was already heavily involved in supporting the life sciences industry. 17 years later and we are now in an even stronger position.

We have also increased our competitive advantage over the past 12 months by launching two new transformational initiatives; Project Certainty and Operational Certainty. Project Certainty is an innovative technology and engineering-based approach for reducing capital project cost and schedule overruns. Project cost is important to most industries, but for the life science sector it's absolutely essential to begin production from a new plant as quickly as possible. The longer it takes to complete a project, the smaller the window of benefits. We know that early engagement with the automation provider can have a big impact on the success of a project, whilst technology can reduce its complexity and help overcome inevitable last minute design changes that impact schedules.

Emerson can also help to reduce operational costs and risk through Operational Certainty, a technology and engineering-based program designed to help industrial companies achieve top quartile performance. Here, it is important to look beyond basic process control and focus on the business impact process automation can have. Through our industry expertise, consulting services, comprehensive automation technologies portfolio and new Industrial IoT solutions, we can help customers extract greater value from their investments and deliver measurable results to their bottom line.

Over the years, we have developed many technologies, including a range of wireless transmitters, which have enabled new pressure, level and temperature measurement points to be added to the manufacturing process cost effectively. However, as the industry has evolved, the opportunity to measure additional parameters has also increased. For example, using acoustic transmitters, it is now possible to automate the detection of steam leaks. Implementation of this technology may not affect the process control directly, but the additional information provided can help to make improvements in terms of plant energy consumption. Emerson has invested a great deal in Pervasive Sensing, which complements the existing process control information to help companies operate their plants safer and more reliably. Pervasive Sensing strategies can also help companies to reduce their carbon emissions.

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You have been working for Emerson for 27 years. Upon reflection what is your proudest achievement in your career?

Between 2000 and 2004, whilst running Emerson's UK and Ireland operations, I became heavily involved in a project to automate a new manufacturing plant in Dublin. This was to produce a new drug to combat rheumatoid arthritis. We faced very challenging deadlines, but it was particularly important to complete the project on schedule because a lot of patients were waiting for this new treatment. To ensure we met those deadlines, at certain stages, we had over 250 people, in a variety of locations around the world (UK, France, India and the US), developing the automation software for the plant. Meeting the deadline was a hugely significant achievement and extremely satisfying to know that you have helped get the drug to market as quickly as possible.

When we return in three to five years what would you ideally like to have accomplished?

We will continue to help life sciences companies to improve the time to market for the treatments they are producing, but I also want us to work with our customers to help them develop the safest and most energy efficient manufacturing plants. Finally, I want to ensure that the service and support experienced by all our customers is to such a high standard, that when they are asked "who is helping you?" they simply reply "Emerson." If we can convince our customers that we are a company with these ambitions, within the three to five year period, then I will be very happy.

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