

Expanding horizons

As well as expanding its coverage in Europe and Russia, Haas Automation Europe has set itself the task of expanding minds, as Andrew Allcock discovered

At the official opening of the newly extended Haas Automation Europe headquarters in Zaventem, Belgium, at the end of October last year, a running slide show of Google Earth images highlighted the location of the American machine tool maker's distributors across Europe and Russia. It was a powerful graphical message that spoke expansion and growth on a wider basis for the Belgian arm of the California headquartered machine tool maker.

By the end of this year, 52 Haas Factory Outlets (HFOs) will be operating in Europe and Russia – most of those locations were up and running last October, but are not all to the required HFO standard. (The UK Haas Automation operation headquartered in Norwich is run independently of Europe, incidentally, and is not included in these figures).

Haas Automation Inc has marketed its machines under its own name in mainland Europe via a European mainland presence in Belgium since 2001,

but moved to larger premises in Zaventem in 2004 (prior to 2001, an association with Switzerland's Micron existed). The Zaventem facility, whose sole purpose is to support the current 52 Haas Factory Outlets, has since grown from 3,500 m² to 5,580 m².

The latest expansion, effectively its third grand opening, has seen additional space given over to a larger marketing department, larger HFO sales support facilities and administration departments, for example, plus a new open atrium for events, larger service training area, a rotary table repair area and new, larger warehouse featuring an increase in spares stockholding, which now amounts to €15 million. The company has also additionally leased 2,200 m² of space close by for five years – exhibition, marketing and general materials are housed here.

TEN YEARS, MAYBE

"We think that we now have a building that will serve us for 10 years – although if we keep growing at the rate we have been, we may grow out of this building," offered Haas Automation Europe managing director Peter Hall. Indeed, from 2003 to 2007 (five years), the company grew at a compound rate of 40 per cent in terms of units shipped, he observes. "We were on track for another 30 or 40 per cent until May (2008), when something happened," the managing director revealed, adding that the company had seen a downturn but still had aggressive plans in place, intending to add further to its headcount of 61 by a further seven or so.

So far, Haas Automation Europe has

overseen the sale of some 16,000 Haas machine tools into Europe, and with a 40 per cent market share in North America, Mr Hall believes a market share in Europe of 20 to 25 per cent is realisable – that's 7,000-8,000 machines/year, about double the current volume.

The HFO concept, developed by Mr Hall after he joined Haas Automation in 1998 and which has been applied since 2000, is believed to have been a key factor in the American company's rapid growth over the past 10 years or so. HFOs, introduced to mainland Europe in 2004 and rolled out from 2006, are a uniform concept of distributor – they look and feel the same – offering a high, uniform level of facilities – showroom, sales, service and support – focused totally on Haas.

All this underpins the Haas offer: "single source responsibility, best overall value and lowest cost of ownership". The company also additionally claims "the industry's best customer service levels". HFOs typically carry spares stock to the value of €150,000 and there are, collectively, around 100 Haas service vans operating in mainland Europe, while all service technicians are factory trained. And Haas says it supports its products throughout their entire life. "If you had machine number two, or machine 100,000, which will be delivered before the end of the year [2008], you can get parts within 24 hours; you can get service as if the machine was bought yesterday. I am not sure any other machine tool maker can claim that, we build everything ourselves, machines, drives, controls, and spindles," Mr Hall emphasised, adding "one call does it all".



Peter Hall celebrates Zaventem's 'grand opening'



However, notwithstanding current market softening, a barrier to the application of modern manufacturing technology in virtually all countries is the availability of skilled personnel to operate it, as the European managing director explained: "We do business in over 100 countries in the world, and everywhere we hear that there is a shortage of technologists: people who can program, set up and operate machines. This is also true of Germany and Switzerland. Many companies tell us they would buy more machines if they had more such people. It's holding back companies and economies.

"The reasons are rather simple. Young people are simply not attracted to technical professions or manufacturing. On the other side, teachers lack knowledge about the exciting nature of manufacturing. So we are taking a direct and practical initiative; you can't wait for governments to take action, they are focused on other things, as we found in America."

In similar vein to its standard HFO concept, the machine tool maker has

rolled out, initially in America but now in Europe, its Haas Technical Education Centres (HTECs). Mr Hall estimates that already in America, some 10,000 students every year are trained on Haas machines in such organisations, of which there are around 750 with over 2,000 machine tools installed.

In Europe, each of the 52 HFO locations is working with two or more technical schools in order to establish a network of HTECs, with the goal being to establish around 200 by 2015, covering 28 countries. Sixteen were established in 10 countries in 2008.

The HTEC concept is described as: enabling technical schools to transform, typically, very outdated machining training facilities, with obsolete equipment, into bright, clean, Hi-Tech, environments, having state-of-art production CNC machine tools and all current technologies and equipment for modern CNC manufacturing; provide an environment that motivates students to become interested in the large spectrum of interesting and rewarding careers in 'High-Tech' manufacturing; with the HFO

Bird's eye view – Haas' European showroom

showroom acting as the model for providing a stimulating learning experience.

Haas works with other technology partners to deliver such things as CAM systems (Keller, Esprit), probing (Renishaw), tooling (Sandvik, Urma), workholding (Chick, Schunk), and coolant (Blaser). These partners also contribute a related training package to support the application of the technology.

Initial successes have been achieved in Belgium, Belarus, Austria Portugal, Ukraine, Poland and Germany. It has made the difference between dark, dingy workshops equipped with 50-year-old machines and bright, modern environments with latest CNC technology. And Mr Hall highlighted correspondence from an American facility that demonstrates the effect of the HTEC initiative. It stated that the college had seen numbers on the training course rise from 10 to 50, then to 70 and finally to 120 □