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from Chemicals to Cranes

In September last year, Phillipe Cohet joined the Manitowoc group as executive vice president for the European, Middle East and Africa region, replacing Jean-Yves Bouffault. Six months on, during a brief interview at Conexpo, C&A asked how things were going.

Prior to taking the job at Manitowoc, Cohet spent 20 years with Rhodia, a chemical company based in France, where he held senior positions, including vice president and general manager of the firm's North America industrial specialities division.

We asked what it was that attracted him from chemicals to cranes?

"The crane business seemed like a traditional heavy industry with its share of difficulties, I am at heart an engineer and intent on challenges" It seemed to be a business in which I could make a difference.

"The Chemical industry offers few opportunities for true differentiation, you work hard and long to develop new products which you patent and find a market for. In the crane business you can see and feel the product straight away".

C&A: So after six months what are your impressions of the crane industry?

Cohet: I have met a lot of great people who have a real passion for cranes; people who have built their own businesses from scratch. I can see that it is highly competitive industry with competitors in all areas of the business showing no mercy. Above all it is a people business and I like that.

"I also like the fact that each day you can see what you have produced. You can look at a crane coming off line and see the quality that you have built. You can check that all is OK with it straight away; this is quite different from the chemical



Phillipe Cohet at Conexpo

business. The downside is that if you have a problem, customers find it very quickly. But then you can also improve very quickly too.

"For example, one of the first things that I did after coming on board was to postpone the deliveries of the new GMK 5130 for two months, so that we could bring customers and users in for some focus groups to evaluate it and make sure that we had it right. As a result of that exercise we made several improvements before the first units shipped."

C&A: "What do you see as the key strengths of the Manitowoc group?"

Cohet: "Our commercial and market coverage: we have a unique network

of partners, giving us the ability to market products at a global level very quickly.

Our engineering capabilities: we need to improve cross fertilization between the various groups, but we have a tremendous strength in this area.

"The commitment of the group to the crane industry: four or five of our main board members were on the stand at Conexpo.

"Our product support through our Crane Care group, particularly when it comes to parts and logistics.

"A less direct strength is the quality of our people. We have a relatively young team made up of many nationalities. They have managed well through a difficult period."

C&A: And the weaknesses?

Cohet: "We are still an engineering company, rather than a marketing company, this is something we need to change. I think that there is a tendency to add new technology for the sake of it rather than asking if it provides any benefit to the user. I have been through that in the chemical business where the chemists would create a new molecule and then say now we need to find a market for it! We need to be market led. People are ready to follow if they are sure that it is in the right direction.

Our speed of development of new products: sales, marketing and engineering all need to work much more closely together.

"Our plant in, Wilhelmshaven, Germany, was not functioning satisfactorily. We have put an aggressive operational plan in place and a result of that plan was that Lothar Hahn, the previous Geschäftsführer for Deutsche Grove GmbH, decided to retire. He is though still helping us with the Kobelco/Grove All Terrain programme. Erik Devautour, who was responsible for Potain production stepped into the Wilhelmshaven role. Erik is only there for a few months. It is also a signal that Grove and Potain must work much more closely together. We have not yet decided how we achieve this with two teams but we will. I do recognise that we need a solid German leader but we are not rushing that selection."

C&A: "In some markets you sell through company stores rather than through distributors, what is your thinking on this? Do you plan to move towards more direct sales outlets?"

Cohet: "First of all, I firmly believe that you cannot apply the same marketing decisions everywhere. We need to take a regional view while being global. Different countries require different solutions. We need to be very flexible in this area. For example, in France we have 60 local Potain dealers and in Italy we have 80. In some markets we might have different dealers for each brand, while in another one will handle them all. The most important thing is what is best for our customers."

C&A: "The agreement with Kobelco will be extended later this year, providing you with Manitowoc-branded Kobelco crawler cranes, yet the Manitowoc brand has not been strong in Europe in recent years. What are your views on this?"

Cohet: "The agreement with Kobelco is an extension to our existing agreement along the lines of the American contract. We think we can add something here in Europe with our service and support as well as our distribution network. It is all part of an evolving relationship.

"We will improve our Manitowoc sales and market share step by step, it is already developing quite nicely with more Manitowocs sold so far in 2005 than ever before."

C&A: Finally a few personal insights:

'What is your favourite..?'

C&A: Film?

Cohet: Star Wars

C&A: Music?

Cohet: Eclectic - Celine Dion & Jazz

C&A: Gadget?

Cohet: any small electrical gadget

C&A: Book?

Cohet: John Grisham books - The Firm