

Flanders Language Valley

Jo Edwards investigates

The Flanders Language Valley well there is not much there at the moment, bar some cranes and an almost constructed building. Yet this is meant to be Europe's worldwide competence centre in speech and language technologies - the Flanders Language Valley (FLV), based in Ieper, Belgium. So why choose Ieper? The location is central and is less than an hour to Brussels by car, and is two hours from London and Amsterdam. Apparently the Flanders region also has a high proportion of highly qualified engineers and, of course, a multilingual population.

Some may find it surprising that there is, as yet, no 'concrete' base for the companies which are to be based in the valley, as the initiative was established in late 1995. The construction work started in February of this year and the new Lernout & Hauspie building has just been completed. Lernout & Hauspie will move into these new premises at the end of this year. Construction on the main part of the FLV has now begun and it is expected that the first FLV companies will move on to the site in March 1999. The anticipated completion date for the whole site is September 1999.

The concept really began with the experiences of Jo Lernout and Pol Hauspie when they founded Lernout & Hauspie in 1988. They experienced difficulties in setting up the company due to resistance to high-tech business development in the region. The way in which the two men carried out their business plan, was by enlisting the support of a 'grass-roots' consortium of associates and neighbours from across the valley. Very few readers will need to be reminded of the recent successes of Lernout & Hauspie, and it was these successes that prompted the company to work with the Government of Flanders to try to find

ways to develop and support high-tech business development in the Flanders region. The proximity of Lernout & Hauspie Speech Products to the FLV is seen as a significant trump card for the companies based on the park, as their products and know-how will give added value to the companies. It remains to be seen whether the park will in fact become a harmonious cooperation between high-tech companies or a platform for Lernout & Hauspie.

The Flanders Language Valley concept was born and split into the FLV Fund and the FLV Foundation. The FLV Fund is a venture capital fund concentrating exclusively on profit-making activities; in October of last year it invested \$3.5 million in Speech Systems Inc., a company which also has a licensing agreement with Lernout & Hauspie. It operates completely separately from the FLV Foundation and aims to encourage well-established high-tech companies as well as early phase start-up firms. This is achieved through capital funding and technical support. The FLV Foundation coordinates all non-profit-making activities and manages and administers the FLV Technology Park. The Foundation also has various offices providing training and education, promotion and publicity and regional development.

At the time of going to press, FLV based companies are Voxtron Flanders, Omnivoice Technologies, Excalibur Technologies, Keyware Technologies, Xiox Group, Speech Systems Group, Amteva Technologies Inc., Creator Ltd, Associative Computing Inc., SmartMove, Lenel Systems Int. Inc., Hogadata Benelux, BCB Holdings Inc., Shonut, Innocom, Sequoia, Via, Telekol. The current rate of investment is approximately one company per month.

For further information visit <http://www.flv.be/>

