

Rubber and plastics manufacturer and machine builder live life to the max

Higher client demands the nucleus for collaboration

'If the product can be interpreted easily from the drawing, we don't make it anymore. It may just as well be faxed through to China,' says Wim Jan Groothuijs, director of rubber and plastics manufacturer Helvoet. 'We want to grow with our clients so they can give us more complicated products to manufacture.' That is why Helvoet is concentrating on the production of high-quality mono products and assemblies in the Netherlands and Belgium. The shift to the assembly of complex products has been especially demanding on Helvoet and suppliers such as machine manufacturer AAE, which has delivered four assembly lines. 'Co-operation is improving all the time but the technological challenges are increasing too,' says AAE director William Pijnenburg.

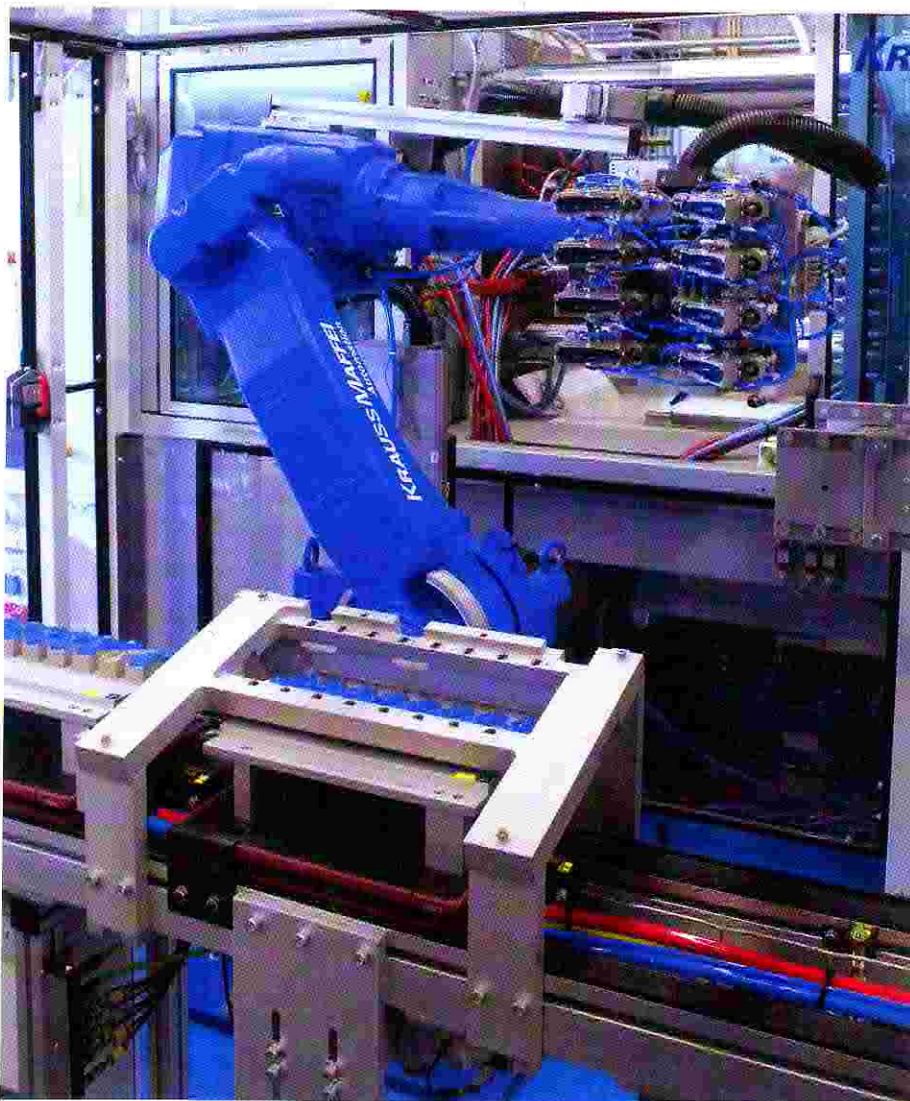
by Hans van Eerden

Since its establishment almost seventy years ago, Helvoet has grown into a manufacturer of high-quality rubber and plastics products with a workforce of more than 1,000 and factories in Hellevoetsluis (near Rotterdam), Veldhoven (near Eindhoven), Belgium, Mexico, the US, Singapore and India. They service clients in the consumer, automotive and medical markets including Philips, Heineken and large first tier suppliers. The simple injection moulding work has long since left the Netherlands and Helvoet now concentrates on more complex products that, says Groothuijs, can still be singular. 'The complexity then is in the narrow tolerances or in the higher multiples of a mould that can produce up to 128 identical products.' Additional client requirements include cleanliness and traceability – where a laser printer provides each product with a unique code, necessitating the introduction of an extra handling phase. 'It is becoming more knowledge intensive, and these additional demands make it more difficult to just take products to China.' So, in Groothuijs's eyes, there is still a future for the production of plastic and rubber components in the Netherlands and Western Europe.

Helvoet's biggest challenge is still the shift to assemblies of plastics and rubber products, which is the reason they are calling on partners such as AAE in Helmond. AAE is a worldwide supplier of high quality machinery for various applications, also operating under the name of their German subsidiary Grauel. The machines are built from standard modules, complemented with client- and product-specific parts. In this way, AAE manufactures 'specialist standard machinery' that keeps them on the golden mean: real specialist machinery is too expensive for their clients and standard machinery is now made in low-wage countries.

Handshake

AAE's approach demands intensive collaboration with clients, who contribute their product knowledge to ensure – in the words of director William Pijnenburg – that the 'handshake between machine and product' in the production process goes smoothly. 'You can have the client 'on board' full time for weeks during the project phase.' The same is true for Helvoet. Groothuijs: 'AAE helps us to materialise our production ideas by developing lines for the automation of high-volume and high-precision production. Such development projects



Helvoet's latest assembly line, intended for the production of a cartridge for Philips Consumer Lifestyle's new Arcitec shaver. Helvoet developed the cartridge's functionality together with Philips and the production mechanisation with AAE. Photo: Helvoet