

demand intensive and flexible collaboration, which makes it advantageous that they are based in the southern Netherlands as well.' In 2005, AAE supplied the first line and is now more or less ready with the fourth. Groothuijs: 'This latest showpiece integrates the injection moulding process with an eightfold mould in one assembly line. The products have to be positioned to an accuracy of one hundredth of a millimetre for welding purposes and have to be physically tested for things like leakage.' This level of accuracy is unique to rubber components, which are difficult to handle. The latest assembly line is 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. 'It's very technical, with pumps and dispensing; that's something you can't just obtain from China. Moreover, the product has to meet stringent cosmetic requirements; it should be 100 per cent scratch-free, which demands adjusted handling,' says Groothuis. In short, a complex product and even more complex production automation.

Spin-offs

These are very large and very difficult development projects, agrees William Pijnenburg. In addition to the injection moulding process, handling with pick & place units and robots, leakage testing and laser-coding, there is also

detection, vision-based product recognition and packaging. 'We generally use our standard components and modules in such a line but the product specific factor makes this difficult. Products are becoming ever more complex in terms of handling and testing. Challenges are increasing, particularly since we prefer to offer turn-key.' The knowledge that AAE needs

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comes from different partners. 'For example, we work with knowledge institutes to generate high-level, constituent solutions. It takes some tinkering before it works, but once it gets to that stage, its effect will be felt by other clients, and we can use the resulting knowledge on new projects. We always consider whether or not the knowledge that we add will generate spin-offs. You can't limit yourself to a single specialised machine, because that might be your downfall.'

Larger playing field

However, AAE are not the only ones being pushed to their limits. The transformation process that Helvoet is experiencing draws heavily on the organisation, Wim Jan Groothuijs admits. 'The more complex interaction with suppliers that are being handed more responsi-

bility while we concentrate on organising the supplier network and managing the entire process, is asking a lot of a company that has always kept itself to itself. Our playing field is continually growing, even in terms of the moulds, for example.' Helvoet used to buy them in the Netherlands and Germany, and later in Portugal and Italy as well. But now they

also come from Singapore. Groothuijs: 'These are exciting times for our staff.' But they are also successful times for the two loyal partners, as witnessed by four large-scale projects in the last three years. Pijnenburg: 'It's great that we started the assembly line activities with Helvoet because it's a fantastic reference for us. It's good that you get the opportunity to build a relationship with such a client. Co-operating at such a high level can only work on the basis of mutual trust and on condition that each party dares to tell the other the truth. In the current project, which is our fourth, the co-operation is going more smoothly than ever but the technological challenge is growing as well.' ●

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