

Research and Development at Companies in Berlin

Interview with Dr. Werner Arts, Managing Director of LAR Process Analysers AG

LAR Process Analysers AG develops, produces and markets online monitoring systems for water analysis around the world. The company supplies instruments for measurement of summation parameters such as chemical and biological oxygen demand, organic carbon, toxicity, total nitrogen and total phosphorous, which cover the entire range of analytical applications, from ultra-pure water to WWTP effluent water. LAR is a member of several research networks, including WaterPN Berlin-Brandenburg, and has its own R&D department.



One could say that LAR is a start-up company of the Technical University of Berlin. Is that correct?

Yes, that is correct. My academic career didn't stop when I graduated from technical university. I went on to Berlin to study environmental engineering at TU Berlin. It was there that

Dr. Werner Arts

I met my fellow company co-founders during work on a research project on lead pollution in water. Scientists had known for some time that the heavy metal was unhealthy but could not clearly explain how the contamination was occurring. After completing that interdisciplinary research project, we young scientists joined forces and started up the company.

LAR celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2006. How was the road up until its present success?

We came close to succeeding with our first idea but, unfortunately, failed. My four co-founders and I had developed a product that should have revolutionized the market. It was an automated test system that allowed the user to monitor and analyse heavy metal contamination in pure substances such as semiconductors using laser technology. However, two corporations which had secretly been working on a similar technology used their high market power to cut the ground from under our feet. In other cases, LAR placed products on the market prematurely. For young companies, in particular, it is important to find reference customers in order to maintain a technological edge. A lot of products do not reach true maturity until after contact with potential buyers. Customers know best what they need. Conse-

quently, our technologies are constantly changing. An investor stepped in during the 1990s and six years ago, together with the company employees and partners, I led a management buyout that allowed us to prevent a takeover and re-gain a majority share in the company. We learned from our early mistakes and have worked hard to gain a secure foothold in the online analyser market.

Which goals are you pursuing within the various networks and organizations?

For a long time, we were operating as the lone wolves on the market. When you unite with other companies, you can achieve so much more on a national and international level. A lot of small and medium-sized enterprises in Germany have scarcely worked together until now, and they are having a hard time asserting themselves against the overwhelming power of large international corporations. Interest groups provide unified representation and raise the international awareness of these companies substantially. Within these networks, our main concern is to pool the common interests and expertise of the members on the one hand and to approach and solve important problems more efficiently by means of exchange and cooperation on the other. However, the individual companies maintain their autonomy. The interest group can also engage in lobbying and exert greater influence on politics in order to strengthen the economic position of Germany and Berlin. Networks also provide a good opportunity to raise the public awareness of one's company, e.g. with cooperating engineering firms.

How would you rate the field of online analysis and the position of German suppliers in an international comparison?

A strong upward trend in the online market can

be seen around the world. As the number of processes to be controlled is steadily increasing, users are demanding systems that provide direct results without a lengthy wait for laboratory test results. With many processes, it is crucial to obtain test results quickly because this is the only way to prevent damage following any incidents that might occur. In international comparison, the innovation potential of German suppliers gets a positive rating but shows constant fluctuation. International competitors are increasingly buying know-how from German SMEs, which then disappear from the market. The presence of a few large corporations on the market makes it very hard for German small and medium-sized enterprises.

Your company is involved in a variety of research projects. Can you give us some insight on this?

As a customer-focused SME, we do not stop making technology. Innovations are realizable only through research projects and, in this regard, our collaboration with universities and engineering schools has been very successful.

What has your experience been on the domestic market?

Germany is not our largest market but we have good references in the industry and that is what successful marketing always depends on. We wish to establish closer cooperation with the BWB in order to generate additional references to attract visitors to our location in Berlin.

Interview: Dr. Bodo Weigert