Better collaboration between man and machine increases competitiveness of SMEs

NEW INTERREGIONAL PROJECT IN NORTH-WEST EUROPE STIMULATES TECHNOLOGY UPTAKE IN THE AUTOMOTIVE AND FOOD MANUFACTURING INDUSTRIES

Lille, 4 July 2018 - Research centres, chambers of commerce and knowledge institutions from Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK join forces to set up field labs supporting SMEs in the adoption and incorporation of new technologies in their production processes. This was announced by the project's lead partner Flanders Make, following the kick-off meeting in Lille. The focus will be on robots that can work together with humans, enabling high levels of production flexibility. The project, which is an initiative of Interreg North-West Europe, aims to engage 60 SMEs in the automotive and food manufacturing industries in so-called field labs. To this end, they will set up a voucher system that companies can use for training sessions, demonstrations or technological support. This could increase the competitiveness of the companies involved, potentially generating an additional 50 million euro in turnover and creating 125 direct jobs.

Manufacturing SMEs in North-West Europe struggle to maintain their cost competitiveness against large-scale production facilities in low-wage countries. In addition, they are faced with a lack of qualified personnel because employees in manufacturing SMEs are often subjected to physically demanding and repetitive tasks. Flexible production that meets the customer's request for hyper-personalisation and production of small quantities (so-called lot size 1) is considered paramount to maintain a competitive edge and keep jobs within the region. However, few manufacturing SMEs fully grasp how collaborative robotics (or cobots) can contribute to this and are hesitant to invest.

Through Interreg North-West Europe, a collaboration was set up between 8 partnering organisations, including **High Tech NL and Food Tech Brainport from the Netherlands**[3]. Their goal is to stimulate SMEs to adopt collaborative robotics and digital technologies. Accordingly, by vitalising manufacturing flexibility, offshoring of production will be halted and manufacturing jobs will be elevated, thus increasing the overall competitiveness of the companies involved.

"Collaborative robotics have potentially more impact on the manufacturing industry than 3D-printing or the Internet-of-Things", says Maarten Witters, project leader for Flanders Make. "Contrary to industrial robots, they focus on the connection with human workers, reducing health risks and raising motivation in employees. Within this project, we want to overcome low sectorial awareness and knowledge gaps. By giving manufacturing SMEs the opportunity to directly interact with robots in a recognisable setting, they are much more inclined to integrate these technologies. This is important for the North-West European region because it creates jobs, not only within the manufacturing industry but also in the surrounding design, engineering and marketing industry."

Hands-on experience with cobots facilitates technology uptake

The COTEMACO[1] project targets 60 SMEs from the North-West European region in the automotive and food manufacturing industries. By means of a voucher programme, they will go through an introductory trajectory, leading up to the field labs. The field labs will tailor to the company's specific needs and use cases, and the SMEs experience the advantages of collaborative robotics and digital technologies hands-on.

The four research partners of the project (Flanders Make, Zema, Food Tech Brainport and the University of Lincoln) will each set up different field labs in which manufacturing SMEs of specific

subsectors can experience pilot settings that closely resemble their reality. As such, we can offer the economic actors an optimal setting to facilitate innovation.

The MAKE LAB[2], Flanders Make's mobile research laboratory, will be one of them.
"The MAKE LAB was conceived as living lab infrastructure from the very start", says Maarten Witters, project leader for Flanders Make. "It offers unrivalled flexibility to be tuned to company-specific cases. Moreover, we can literally bring new technologies to the shop floor, so that employees can easily try them out. Thanks to the voucher programme, we take companies on a journey and guide them in every step of the way: from awareness to the actual adoption of new technologies."
By doing so, the manufacturing economy in the North-West European region could see a potential increase of 50 million euro in turnover and an extra 125 direct jobs. The COTEMACO project runs from 2018 to 2021.

For more information
See this website:
http://www.nweurope.eu/projects/project-search/cotemaco-increased-nwe-competitiveness-through-efficient-man-machine-collaboration/
Or contact Ben van der Zon, from project partner High Tech NL: ben.van.der.zon@hightechnl.nl.

About Interreg North-West Europe
Interreg North-West Europe is a European Territorial Cooperation programme with the ambition to turn the North-West European area into a key economic player and an attractive place to work and live, with high levels of innovation, sustainability and cohesion. http://www.nweurope.eu/

About High Tech NL: the gateway to innovation with the Dutch high-tech industry
High Tech NL is the sector organization by and for innovative Dutch high-tech companies and knowledge institutes. Members share their knowledge, look for ways to cooperate and use the powerful network to become more successful innovators. High Tech NL is connected to the leading high-tech clusters in Europe through the cluster collaboration Silicon Europe. This provides members with access to innovative partners throughout Europe. Would you like to cooperate and innovate with Dutch companies, technical universities and research institutes? Contact High Tech NL!
www.hightechnl.nl

[1] COTEMACO: Increased **Co**mpetitiveness **T**hrough **E**fficient **Ma**n & Machine **Co**llaboration.
[2] The MAKE LAB is mobile, fully connected research infrastructure. For more information https://makelab.flandersmake.be
[3] The project partners are: Belgium (Flanders Make – lead partner, VOKA Limburg), Germany (Zema, Saarland innovation e.V.), the Netherlands (High Tech NL, Food Tech Brainport) and the UK (the University of Lincoln, Greater Lincoln Local Economic Partnership).