

## PANASONIC INDUSTRY STRENGTHENS FOCUS ON LAB AUTOMATION AS MARKET SPECIALIST

# MORE NEED FOR SMART AUTOMATION CALLS FOR LABORATORY 4.0

With a new strategy, Panasonic Industry is expressly profiling itself as a market specialist. This also applies to automation in laboratories, where the impact of an aging population and staff shortages is increasingly apparent. Challenging? Definitely. So product specialists at the European headquarters in Germany have a constant focus on solutions for the lab. And colleagues at local branches such as the one in Best remain literally close by for the customer.

BY JAN BROEKS

**P**lug & play where possible, so that the customer can continue immediately: optimization is what makes a company stand out from the crowd. How does that work out? Wolfgang Held, business development manager lab automation at Panasonic Industry, has an example. So halfway through the conversation – which is conducted via a video link – he shows a Panasonic sensor, with a cable of one meter long attached. ‘We cut the cable to length, add a connector selected by the customer, and so created customized sensors. All sensors have their own part number, each linked to a specific customer, that are ready for immediate use in a machine.’ Additionally, according to Held, take that one customer for whom several sensors turned out to have many similarities. ‘By using the same connector and cable length for each sensor, we were able to greatly reduce the number of part numbers. Therefore we ensured cost engineering within customization, which improved the supply chain for that customer.’

### AUTOMATION WHERE IT IS NEEDED

Held works for the European headquarters of Panasonic Industry. This is located in Ottobrunn in southern Germany and is close to the Swiss base of Filip Tratar, who is Lab Automation Business Unit Manager for Panasonic Industry. Both have a full focus on the lab, both are looking with the customer for solutions for smooth detection, analysis and control. Efficiency and cost savings play a role, but what about the shortage of personnel? By using the power of automation for handling and transporting tens of thousands of samples a day, the employees are free to be able to do what they are trained to. According to Tratar, there is no other medical field that has moved so much in the past thirty years towards industrialization and economic

considerations as lab automation. ‘That trend continues, faster and faster. Worldwide the population is aging and the focus on health is increasing. That reinforces the importance of lab automation, if only when you consider that some 70 to 80 percent of doctor decisions are made based on results from the lab. If a lab is to continue to meet this demand in the future, the speed of handling and transport will have to be increased. And of course without making concessions in terms of reliability.’

### A MATTER OF TRUST

Manufacturers of lab equipment apply Panasonic's portfolio widely, Tratar and Held explain. Think, for example, of ionizers, which strip objects of their electrostatic charge. Customers also use Panasonic's servo controls and laser marking systems. Yet for lab automation, the emphasis is on the use of sensors. ‘These are very compact and widely deployable’, says Held, who adds right away that there is more to it than just the product. ‘We are with a group of people dedicated to one specific market. That ensures solid customer relationships for the long term, and thus the necessary trust.’ Much depends on the cooperation with the branches in the European countries, such as the Benelux branch in Brabant. The specific market knowledge from the



Filip Tratar (left) and Wolfgang Held are both product specialists lab automation for Panasonic Industry in Europe. A dynamic field of work, they call it, where the need for intelligent products is growing. Photos: Panasonic Industry

headquarters, combined with the local contacts: it works well, says Ronald van Seters, key account manager at Panasonic Industry in Best. ‘We are literally close to our customers, discussing their challenges with them. We then involve Filip and Wolfgang in a question and, partly thanks to their knowledge, we come up with the solution.’

### WEIGHING UP THE POTENTIAL OF CUSTOMER DEMAND

The life cycle of lab equipment is above average at around fifteen to twenty years, Tratar explains. ‘This means that our products have sometimes been on the market for twenty years as well. Such a long period offers security, although this is offset by a development time of several years. There is always a risk that a development will fail, so it is up to us to weigh up the potential of the customer demand in good time. What is the ROI, is it useful to develop it? Sometimes there is

simply no market for something.'

In any case, what plays an increasingly important role in the development of a product is the link with the Internet of Things (IoT). Laboratory 4.0 is what Held and Tratar now call it. 'The need for smart products and data collection is growing,' Held says, 'and we are responding to that with our web server FP-I4C, among others. Think of it

## 'IT'S IN OUR DNA TO CONTRIBUTE TO OUR SOCIETY'

as the link for a digital twin of a machine, so that the customer can monitor processes via the cloud. The customer can remotely check the temperature, or check a calibration. Certainty and unambiguous analyses are paramount in the lab, and intelligent technology plays an indispensable role in this.'

### MORE THAN FANCY STUFF

The focus on lab automation is in line with the new strategy of Panasonic Industry. It is profiling itself more than ever as a market specialist, with

Your Committed Enabler as the accompanying slogan. In practice, according to Van Seters, that comes down to knowing what the customer really needs. 'Our broad product portfolio helps with that. If we talk to the customer about the use of a sensor, then the step to support with our other products is close at hand. Ultimately, it is also nothing less than propagating what you stand for, Tratar believes. 'It's in

Panasonic's DNA to contribute to our society through development and production. This goes beyond fancy stuff for the consumer, instead it is about focusing on the real problems in the world. That's the company's view, and that's also my personal view.' A lot depends on knowledge of the customer's world, Tratar notes. And admittedly, he laughingly explains, that was quite challenging in the beginning. 'Wolfgang and I sometimes felt like biology students. Electrical and mechanical engineering is our background, but what if you're



As key account manager for Panasonic Industry Benelux, Ronald van Seters is committed to long-term customer relationships. 'And our broad customer portfolio contributes to this.'

suddenly expected to understand immunology and clinical chemistry, and how processes for blood analysis work? It's up to us to translate science into automation, but just understanding the machines won't get you there. It's about speaking the same language as the customer, understanding the challenges they face. I think we've managed that quite well by now.'

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