

With its origins dating back to 1899, the french railway industries association (fif) currently numbers some 300 member companies. Representing the whole spectrum of railway equipment industries, the latter range from rolling stock builders to engineering firms, rail-way equipment manufacturers to track & signalling industries, designing to testing; in short, the entire industrial railway manufacturing chain.*

Today, the Association has globalisation on its mind ; a phenomenon that really hit the French rail industry around 15 years ago. *"It impacted different industries at different times,"* points out Jean-Pierre Audoux, managing director, FIF. "

The aeronautics and automobile sectors went global around 20 years ago, because their markets are very open compared to rail

. "

However today, our rail industri-als no longer have a choice. They are facing competition at the European level, plus from foreign firms exporting to, or investing in Europe,

" adds Jean-Pierre Auger, industrial advisor, FIF.

"This means exporting is now no longer an opportunity, but an obligation

."

In the past, French rail industry equipment manufacturers and suppliers, in particular, tended to stay within the comfort, and boundaries of their national market. Yet come the 1990s, markets began to open up, plus the European Union (EU) public procurement Directive 93/38 came into force, which resulted in more public tenders taking on a European dimension.

Rolling stock manufacturers already entered the international marketplace some years ago, as did the big equipment manufacturers. Yet given the above combination of factors, it is now time for the French SMEs, or even smaller firms producing components or sub-systems, to seek Further afield for business.

French rail export figures peaked at €1.5 billion in 2013, a sum Mr Audoux attributes largely to the addition of options to previously inked contracts for locomotives, tramways, and signalling. However he is not convinced 2014 will have performed so well, estimating a more modest taking of around €1 billion, which, he says, is not sufficient. *"The French market is collapsing, so to compensate we need to anticipate significant increases in volumes from elsewhere*, " he adds.

RAIL EXPORT

In order to safeguard the future of the French railway industry, to help its SMEs offer added value for export, and so create jobs in France, at the end of 2014 the FIF launched Rail Export. This platform is open to any French firm, from any rail segment, with a product or service it believes has export potential. It offers them support in the form of net-working (seeking partners), and technical, commercial, and contractual advice.

"We have received a government grant to set up this service to help companies with the knowledge and skills they need," explains Mr Auger. "Part of the approach involves getting large companies to act as 'sponsors' to help these SME certify and introduce their products."

FUTURE FORWARD

Despite a somewhat uncertain future, the French railway industry, can, at least, count on its renowned *"savoir faire"*; a technical know-how that is highly specialised in all rail segments, with expertise in each and every railway system. "*The only areas where we are not so strong is in diesel motorisation*," concedes Mr Auger, "*and in high power locomotives*."

"There is definitely a future for our rail industry at the international level," reckons Mr Audoux.

"Particularly given the population growth in cities worldwide, and the subsequent need for metro, tramway, and regional rail networks." Indeed in the years to come, he believes the smaller of the current rail equipment suppliers in France will become subcontractors of the

larger ones, or will continue to do business in the form of clusters that may, over time, adopt legal status □

Lesley Brown