

Jacques van Rijckevorsel is known to everyone at Solvay as General Manager of the Plastics Sector and a member of the Executive Committee. He is also Group Innovation Sponsor, a “*passionately interesting*” task which is particularly close to his heart and which places him in an excellent position to talk to us about innovation at Solvay. He shares with us his impressions, his convictions and his hopes.



Jacques van Rijckevorsel, General Manager of the Plastics Sector and Group Innovation Sponsor

Solvay live: Why such emphasis on Innovation in the Group?

Jacques van Rijckevorsel: We live in fascinating times. Exchanges of every kind are multiplying across the planet, the “intelligence” of which (in the meaning of the capacity to interlink) is growing exponentially. At the same time we are becoming increasingly aware of the limits of our natural resources: energy, water, air, raw materials... Globally speaking, our planet is living faster and faster and our current production and consumption models are leading us into an impasse. We have to construct a future that breaks with the present. This is also the whole issue of “sustainable development”, which is calling on us to do more and better with less, but without sacrificing growth and jobs. A large part of the response to these challenges

lies in Innovation. Innovation is not an option we are free to take or leave. We have to take it. Governments and captains of industry are multiplying the signals and initiatives that say to us: we need to innovate, and to do so fast and well. This imperative, which is valid for national economies, imposes itself with equal force on every enterprise individually: competition is global and less innovative enterprises will go to the wall. But we also need to read the situation positively: how many opportunities, some of them gigantic, become accessible to the best?

S.L.: Being Group Innovation Sponsor is ...?

J.vR.: ... promoting the development and deployment of this continuous change for the better, inspiring new ways of doing business, new objectives and catalyzing decisions in these areas. This is a mandate given to me by Comex in its determination to respond to the challenges I have outlined above.

Innovation moving ahead



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Solar Impulse: technological innovation serving sustainable development.

S.L.: *As the six categories of the Solvay Innovation Trophy show, innovation is a multi-faceted reality...*

J.vR.: Yes, which also means that Innovation is a matter for each and every one of us. Each of us fits into at least one category. The Executive Committee has set the ball rolling and demonstrated its full support for the Innovation drive to be cascaded right through the Group. Ideally, all of us, wherever we are, should be self-starters, responsible for our own innovation efforts. Innovation should be inherent to the way we set about our work, not a bolt-on.

This is why one of the first things I did as Innovation Sponsor was to publish an Innovation Charter. This reaffirms several principles, including that Innovation is everyone's business.

S.L.: *And concretely?*

J.vR.: More and more internal processes are being aligned with the Group's Innovation drive. Human Resources, for example, have introduced a system of Innovation-linked personal bonuses for managers. This should help Innovation cascade rapidly into the four corners of the Group. Innovation Champions have been appointed in each Group entity and networked to interact in real time on ongoing initiatives.

The New Business Development (NBD) entity now has a New Business Board with well-known outside personalities who bring a different angle and formulate recommendations on certain research directions. Every

“Innovation is one of the most important investments a company can make to ensure its long-term survival.”



year, SBUs and CCs are invited to present their approaches and Innovation Scorecards to the Executive Committee. And Comex itself periodically assesses the Innovation process and gives additional stimuli if needed. As you can see, Innovation is being carried out in a structured way, right across the

organization, with the impetus and direction coming from the top.

S.L.: *You mentioned the “Scorecard” What is it exactly?*

J.vR.: The Innovation “Scorecard” defines a series of indicators which measure the degree of Innovation within the Group. This allows us to track progress over time and assess how the various Group entities are coming closer to their objectives.

S.L.: *Let's come back to this assessment. What conclusions do you draw from it?*

J.vR.: First and foremost it seems to me right and important to remind ourselves that this approach was born 143 years ago, along with the Group. It would therefore be presumptuous to associate a particular result with a particular initiative. Let's observe simply that our Innovation drive appears to be broadening and gathering speed. The number of patent applications has increased by 50% in three years. Our Scorecard too, shows progress almost right across the board. So much so that we can be confident to meet and even exceed the three “challenges for 2006” (*see our Reference Points page*). Furthermore, entries for the Solvay Innovation Trophy have reached a new record with high quality projects. By showing us what we are capable of, this success opens the way to other even more ambitious objectives. Would such a result have been achieved without the innovative and momentum-raising initiatives which have sprung up everywhere? >>>



“In 10 years’ time we may find ourselves in domains we don’t even imagine today.”

»»» *S.L.: Are there lots of examples?*

J.vR.: Yes, from local productivity gains to strategic projects. Allow me to cite some recent examples. These are concrete and therefore a little “technical”. In Pharmaceuticals: the new cell-based vaccine production technology recently rolled out at Solvay Pharmaceuticals at Weesp (Netherlands) and shortly to be in the USA. In Plastics: new vinyl and specialty polymers technologies, thanks also to the acquisitions of Mississippi Polymer Technologies and Gharda. In Chemicals: an opening towards Organic Chemistry with the acquisition of Girindus, the new H₂O₂ process or the new Epicerol™ process. At NBD, the advances we have made in fuel cells, like the SolviCore joint venture or our participation in Conduit Ventures, leading in turn to a new collaboration with CMR. At DCRT, the development of the Novosol® process for stabilizing and recycling canal and lock dredging sludge. In Finance, the recasting of our financial processes in the context of the 3S project, and the Nafta factoring initiative in North America. In the Legal Department: the OCAP⁽¹⁾ training tool. In Communication: the new *Solvay live* and the dynamic adaptation to the demands of the internal and external target audiences. In Asia-Pacific: the shock team that is helping us grow. In Europe: the ideas management, emulation and replication systems in Germany, Iberia, France, Italy... And in South America, the root-and-branch updating of our industrial vision. There are many other quality examples everywhere, so please excuse me for not being exhaustive...

S.L.: And the future direction for the Group?

J.vR.: In future, each SBU will be taking charge of its own destiny, with its strategic vision examined by Comex at least once a year. Multi-SBU partnerships are also being built, such as the Solution Units promoted by the Chemical Business Deployment entity.

At Group level, our New Business Board has opted to explore two of the three top strategic technologies selected by the prestigious Battelle⁽²⁾ research group: innovative materials (including for electronics) and sustainable energy (including fuel cells).

Solvay is the technology partner for Solar Impulse, the solar aircraft dreamed up by Bertrand Piccard, a project that will push us to the limits of what materials can and ought to deliver.

Externally, several of our SBUs have signed up to InnoCentive, a world-wide network of 80 000 scientists, offering leading-edge expertise unavailable elsewhere. Internally, the Science for Innovation Congress brought together 140 researchers from across the Group to focus our competences around major issues like nanotechnologies... As you can see, the beehive is buzzing with projects.

S.L.: You have hardly mentioned global competition...

J.vR.: Some people say this complicates things, and it’s true. But it can also be a source of at times unsuspected opportunities. Let us never underestimate human beings’ capacities to create and adapt.

S.L.: Including those of people from emerging countries?

J.vR.: We need to look at emerging countries in two ways. Yes, there is the short-term vision of low cost competition. We respond to this by choosing those professions in which we remain the best, in which we are increasingly specializing, and to which we give the resources of excellence. But alongside this relatively classical vision, I would like to juxtapose that of the opportunity that these countries offer us. First of all, they are keen for growth and we can participate in this. Second, we can also open up to their creativity, their curiosity, their spirit of enterprise. They impel us on towards a planetary view of progress. We have an enormous amount to learn from these countries.

S.L.: What does the Solvay Innovation Trophy represent for you?

J.vR.: Three things: A festive moment where all eyes are focused on certain achievements. An event where one is delighted at the sheer amount of energy and enthusiasm invested by those who have taken part, who have succeeded, and who have worked hard to defend their projects.

A time for reflection also, to question our creative capacities and draw lessons in order to do even better. Finally, a stimulus, an impetus, a goad for the future. ●

(1) Online Competition Awareness Program.

(2) See www.battelle.org/forecasts.