

» INTERVIEW



ITALY AT CERN: WHEN RESEARCH ATTRACTS INDUSTRY

Interview with Mauro Morandin, INFN researcher and Italian Industrial Liaison Officer at CERN

Italy at CERN Seventh edition happened in the first week of April. This is the event that opens CERN doors to the national excellences in industry that work in fields interesting for laboratory activities. The event is organized by the Italian Industrial Liaison Office (ILO) at CERN, with the support of the Italian Chamber of Commerce for Switzerland and the Italian Permanent Delegation at the International Organizations in Switzerland. Thanks to ILO, Italian industries played a major role in the building of the Large Hadron Collider (LHC) and of its experiments. The return on these activities for Italian industries has been greater than the investment made by our country. Recently, ILO office's activities expanded to other European research infrastructures, widening the strategic role of research and Italian industry relationship, that has its roots at CERN.

What were the new elements of this edition?

I would say, first of all, that the response of the companies was particularly strong this year, with 40 companies attending the event. Perhaps this outcome was the result of few contingent factors. The most relevant was probably the interest in the upgrade project of the LHC, HiLumi LHC, with which there will be many opportunities, already this year, for industrial orders which are expected to increase further in subsequent years.

In this edition, prior to the event itself, a half-day workshop was organised with the heads of various CERN groups showcasing to companies the opportunities for collaborations with the industry in the coming years.

The best use of the available time was made with individual meetings of companies, providing an on-line booking system, which was ultimately used to program more than 170 meetings. Finally, the companies were given access, for a whole day, to an expert on tax and regulatory issues from the Italian Chamber of Commerce for Switzerland.

» INTERVIEW

What are the final considerations?

As for the final considerations, the early feedback we have had has been very positive, especially from the companies that were at CERN for the first time. These meetings are important opportunities for companies, not only to create and consolidate contacts with reference people from CERN, but also to enable companies to get to know and cooperate with each other. I think the companies also appreciated the considerable importance acknowledged by the Italian institutions to an industrial presence in CERN, witnessed by the presence of Ambassador Maurizio Serra, the Plenipotentiary Min. Fabrizio Nicoletti, Central Director for innovation and research of MAECI and Speranza Falciano who oversees relationships with industry within INFN.

What really matters are the results in terms of new opportunities taken by the companies, but this will be quantified in the coming months.

Italy at CERN is periodically organized by the Italian Industrial Liaison Officer (ILO) at CERN.

What is its the role of the ILO?

The ILO is a figure that is provided for in the organization of CERN in order to inform the industries of each Member State about the opportunities for contracts and partnerships, thus facilitating the laboratory in its search for the best European suppliers, and fostering competition amongst companies. Each member or associate country at CERN therefore has its ILO that acts as an interface between the domestic industry and CERN and that takes part in meetings of the Finance Committee where the most valuable tender offers are approved.

The Italian ILO at CERN is appointed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs in consultation with the Ministry of Education and with the INFN which then provides the resources to support its activities. In practice, the daily work of the ILO office is to inform companies about the opportunities for jobs and collaborations with CERN and how to take part in them, to advise about tender calls in a timely manner, to inform the procurement office about potential Italian suppliers, to organize or take part in meetings with the national or regional companies and, finally, to provide support to businesses in the event of any difficulty in the interaction with CERN. Then, the ILO will meet regularly in an ILO forum where they discuss with CERN management any amendments to procurement rules and, more in general, to all actions that can lead to a more effective interaction with industries and a balanced return among countries that finance CERN.

What are today's opportunities for Italian industries at CERN?

Italian industry has always played a leading role at CERN. There are key areas of technology for the construction of accelerators and large detectors in which our companies, also through the interactions with CERN, have become leaders in Europe and around the world, such as superconductivity, ultra-vacuum, lab electronics, acceleration systems, etc. Moreover, Italian companies are very competitive also in more traditional fields, ranging from construction to civil

» INTERVIEW

and industrial installations.

In general CERN highly appreciates the passion and flexibility with which small and medium Italian companies work, that sometimes allows them to overcome unforeseen technical difficulties with brilliant and innovative solutions.

The HiLumi LHC project, to which I referred earlier, represents a significant investment for CERN, for a total of roughly one billion Euro, and a greater part of the budget will be used on industrial orders for which Italian companies have all it takes to play an important role.

Data on the 2016 industrial return for Member States of CERN were recently published. How did our country do in it?

I would say that we cannot really complain. In 2016, CERN paid over 46 millions of Swiss francs to Italian companies, and the coefficient of industrial return, that is the ratio between the quota of orders won by Italian companies and the quota of Italian funding to CERN, exceeded the values that classify a country as "well balanced", both for the supply of goods, and of services. With the exception of France and Switzerland, advantaged by the fact that they host CERN, none of the 22 Member States is in this position. Even early signals about the investments for the HiLumi LHC project are encouraging: indeed, last year Italian companies invoiced for orders of several million Euro, 17% of the total industrial orders, well above the quota with which Italy is funding CERN, at about 11%.

The ILO does not just support relations between the domestic industry and CERN, but it also encourages the collaboration of our companies in other major international scientific projects. What are the other possibilities?

Prior to broadening the scope beyond Geneva, I would like to mention the work done in collaboration with the Italian Diplomatic Representatives who last year allowed us to organize meetings to introduce companies to the opportunities that exist both at CERN, and within UN sites and in other international organizations in Geneva, which plan to make investments of hundreds for millions of Swiss francs in the coming years. The experience gained by Italian companies at CERN can indeed be valuable to start working also with other organizations in the area.

As for other international laboratories in Europe, a support activity to businesses has started also at the ESS centre in Lund, Sweden, where, unlike at CERN, important components of the new machine were entrusted to Research institutions of the Member States, including INFN, that have directly taken charge of their creation. Other initiatives were organized with colleagues at ESRF (European Synchrotron Radiation Facility) in Grenoble, France, and I believe that in the near future we will be increasingly heading in the direction of offering companies several chances for an overview of the opportunities existing within all the major international laboratories in Europe that use accelerators. ■