

Swiss quality and accuracy

"The Alternative Power": this is the vision with which RKB Group presents itself to the industrial field, as it can rely on a solid experience and a flexible efficient high-technology organization as well as on the complete control and management of the whole production process, thus qualifying itself as an ideal manufacturer of rolling bearings in all respects.

✎ Gianandrea Mazzola



Giangiacomo Colleoni (at left) and Giulio Bianchi, respectively Managing Director and Chief Engineer at RKB Europe SA.

RKB Group, manufacturer of technological rolling bearings for the heavy industry, operates in Switzerland (Ticino Canton) with executive headquarters in Balerna. Owing to a field experience that has been going on for over 70 years, the firm is offering itself as a worldwide reference point, involving not only Switzerland but also Italy, Ireland, China, Japan, The Netherlands, Belgium, Vietnam and Mexico in their direct operational activities and with a distribution network covering every part of the world.

At the RKB headquarters, which have been recently enlarged, the author met Giangiacomo Colleoni, Managing Director, and Giulio Bianchi, Technical Team Unit Chief Engineer, to analyze (also) the

growth of a brand that presents itself as a real concrete alternative to the big high-titled players in the area. *«Nowadays the world industry – Colleoni says – is seeing a growing demand of more and more sophisticated equipment and machinery in all areas. In this situation it is expected that rolling bearings comply with stricter and stricter parameters and have an increasing number of highly technological features to obtain better conditions of service life and reliability. During the last five years the market has been showing a situation where the demand of bearings, particularly medium and large size ones, has clearly exceeded the supply. This resulted in the growth of many new competitors which put new product solutions on the market that are apparently alternative. Very often, however, these showed inadequate technical and performance properties and this does not certainly help to recognize such components as qualified for conventionally intended uses. In this environment, thanks to the know-how gained in many years of field experience, a highly qualified managerial organization and an advanced production system, for a long time our firm is placing itself alongside the most important players of the area, as it can rely on facilities that allow to design and manufacture state-of-the-art products meeting the most demanding industry specifications».*

Such a result is obtainable thanks to a vertically orientated management model that is based on a complete corporation consistency. When one speaks of a rolling bearing, a simple product consistency is not in fact sufficient. It is required a

solidity covering the whole organization that designs, manufacture and distributes the product. This is an approach which necessarily results from the critical state of the product itself as it represents the connecting element between static and dynamic world.

«In other words – Colleoni adds – the component has to meet the technology and performance requirements for which it has been selected and manufactured for a specified application. Our guidelines, know-how, engineering as well as our R&D and applied technologies which distinguish our firm, permit us to provide high technical value-added products, guaranteeing the paradigm of reliability and consistency to our customers in the long run».

Among the first ones in Europe for availability from stock

In a world market estimated in about 30 billion euro (where almost 70% is considered held by the 4-5 biggest world concerns), RKB Group comes playing on the concept of "Single Universal Organization" in order to be competitive as much as possible in terms not only of price but also, and especially, operational flexibility, product quality, reliability and short delivery time.

«Our stock store, unique of its kind, - Colleoni continues – is recognized among the most important in Europe as product range and quantity are regarded. The availability of a product is obviously capital intensive. It is an absolutely considerable financial commitment that can be quantified in about 35 million euro and is necessary to



A range of Wind Class protocol rolling bearings for wind turbine gear drives.



CNC working at RKB T3 plant.



RKB rolling bearings.



The show-room at RKB headquarters in Balerna (Switzerland).



RKB Group store is one of the most important in Europe.

make sure that our worldwide distribution network provide a quick delivery. So, at present we have a stock range comprising versions which are able to meet the requirements of the industrial field».

Additionally, the same store is run by an appropriate patent pending advanced software (ASSM – Active Strategic Stock Management), which enables the Swiss firm to offer important competitive advantages in terms of drastic time-to-market reduction in its whole distribution network.

More in general, RKB is using an area of almost 90,000 m², of which 13,500 m² are in Balerna headquarters and other 65,000 m² in the three directly controlled manufacturing sites located in China. In Balerna indeed are located the engineering and R&D departments and the Laboratory as well as the whole commercial line and the logistics.

«The trend of big groups – Giulio Bianchi cuts in – is the delocation of production units in emergent countries. We keep all capital intensive activities within our Swiss managerial center as we see an important value-added in this type of organization. In particular, the above activities are those of inventing, designing, engineering, fine-tuning and development of guidelines, protocols and procedures. As a matter of fact, our production units carry out machining activities only according the headquarters instructions and using high technology custom-made machine tools. In other words, they are manufac-

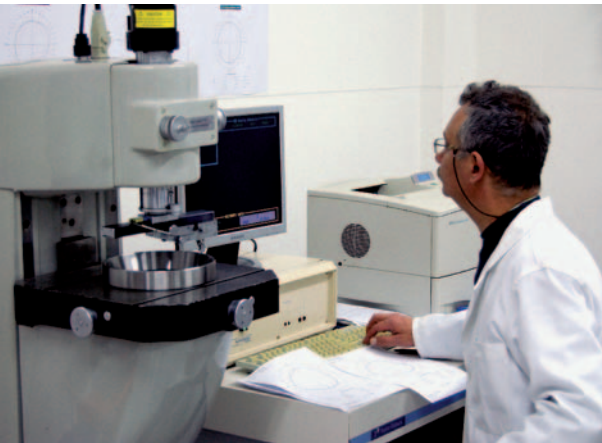
turing sites committed to material transformation only. Contrary to the ill repute given to China and other emergent countries, I should like to emphasize that our facilities were well studied and are controlled every day. In this way it is as if the production steps were carried out directly at our European operational center. We have full control of all the processes occurring in our production units. And this is not all, as our organization directly looks after supplies too, following specific protocols. In spite of the general unfavourable business situation, at present the purchasing volume of steel is around 250 tons per month, but with a production capacity of over 350 tons».

Process and product consistency

The Swiss Group production is mainly focused on three specific product areas devoted to industry:

1. miniature and small size precision ball bearings (up to 35 mm inner bore) – T1 Segment;
2. standardized rolling bearings – T2 Segment;
3. T3 Segment includes technological bearings and optimized bearings for specific applications with outside diameter up to 1800 mm.

These products are mainly for iron and steel and power transmission industries as well as marine industry. According to RKB top management, a notable proportional increase is seen also in the applica-



The laboratory serving the R&D at RKB Swiss headquarters.

tions for the alternative energies, which are an extremely important business area both for what concerns the first equipment and the supply in its widest meaning.

«For a long time now, the so-called “wind industry” - Bianchi adds – represents a big opportunity for us and at the same time a big technological challenge, at least for the strict approval protocols applied to first equipment supply and the constant requests for high-

er levels of machine performance, reliability and sizing which we are able to satisfy through effectiveness and product quality as well as active co-engineering collaboration with our customers. In this way, the positive reactions which have been obtained over the last few years and confirmed by acquired orders, clearly emphasize the excellence of our action at all levels».

Quotation on the Stock Exchange as natural growth

Certainly, in future the main targets of RKB are consolidation at international level and position reinforcement on the various reference markets. As far as the product is specifically concerned, an important role is played by Research & Development department which about 10% of the turnover is yearly devolved to (an amount much higher than industry average).

«I should like to emphasize – Giangiaco Colleoni points out – that our product is the result of an industrial and entrepreneurial activity that covers all development and production stages. This allows us to qualify as manufacturers of world-class rolling



RKB is in the forefront for the development of high value-added technological products.

bearings: from the initial design, through the stages of engineering, fine-tuning and transformation (including all manufacturing processes from forming/forging to heat treatments, from grinding to all machining operations and assembly) up to multi-level protocols for quality control and after-sale services. We are talking about minimum requirements that we deem absolutely necessary to identify a firm as a real qualified bearing manufacturer. On the other hand, we at RKB are well aware that our Group consistency is the source of our product reliability and this plays a crucial role within our customer reputation».

However, the trend of the Group is to grow steadily without moving away from the guidelines that are outlined in its own business model, that is maintaining high flexibility levels and capacity to meet customer requirements, acting as “bearing tailors” with a value-added available also in terms of service. The portion of custom-made products, that is products manufactured according to customer specific demand, is higher than 50%.

«Our development and growth program, – Giangiaco Colleoni ends – as natural completion of a complex project which we very deeply believe in, provides the quotation on Zurich Stock Exchange (Swiss Performance Index) within five years. It is a step that leads to open the corporate stock also to outside and institutional investors in order to create the necessary conditions for a further more vigorous operation enlargement with the target to improve our proposal regarding our product and customer service as well as our international presence».

The Group in brief

RKB Group, with headquarters in Balerna (Switzerland), has a turnover of about 20 million euro for technological bearings only and hires about 600 employees, of which 50 only at the head office in Ticino Canton and the rest of them at the various direct branches and production units. Thanks to a well-established experience lasting since 1936, the Group involves not only Switzerland but also Italy, Ireland, China, Japan, The Netherlands, Belgium, Vietnam and Mexico in their own activities and with a distribution network covering every part of the world. An organizational and managerial system based on the concept of “Single Universal Organization” allow the Group to be competitive as much as possible in terms not only of price but also, and especially, operational flexibility,

product quality, reliability and short delivery time. In this context, all standardized and custom-made products are manufactured in conformity with the international standards by production units which are ISO 9001:2002 and ISO 14001:2004 certificated as well audited and approved also by customers and independent test centers. For these reasons, RKB quality standards were analyzed also at Tokyo University Institute of Technology and Switzerland Economy Business School.



RKB headquarters in Balerna (Switzerland).