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ERA Benelux

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# ERA Benelux: steering a safe course

Belgian remanufacturer of steering racks, steering pumps, air-conditioning compressors etc., ERA Benelux is embarking on the next phase in its development. Having steadily built a solid business base, the company is now intent on raising its profile in the European market. ReMaTecNews visited ERA Benelux in Gulligem to report on a business that puts quality before growth but is now gearing up for expansion, too.

## Gulligem, Belgium

Close to Belgium's border with France, less than two hours from the channel between France and England, a couple of hundred kilometers distance from Holland and Germany, lies the town of Gulligem. Not exactly a tourist destination - but its location has one undisputed advantage: easy access to Europe's motorway network.

And that's why, seven years ago, Dutch automotive group, BOAC, chose Gulligem as the home of its new reman steering rack business. There has been no reason to regret the decision ever since. Building on a philosophy that can perhaps best be described as 'safety first' the company has, from its inception, focused on building a solid platform and establishing a

comprehensive customer base. Now, however, Managing Director Stefaan Vandenbussche, has his eyes set on the next chapter.

"We decided to nurture our home markets, the Benelux countries, Holland, Belgium and Luxembourg first," he says. "Having established ourselves as market leaders here, we believe the time is right to expand into the rest of Europe. I also believe that as remanufacturing processes improve all the time, an awareness of remanufactured products is growing too. At this stage we have no plan to expand outside Europe, however. There is plenty to do here as it is."

In a number of respects, ERA Benelux' business model differs from that of some other players in the industry, not least in that the company relies on suppliers to undertake the actual remanufacturing of the cores while taking charge of all other aspects, all the way from core sourcing to distribution



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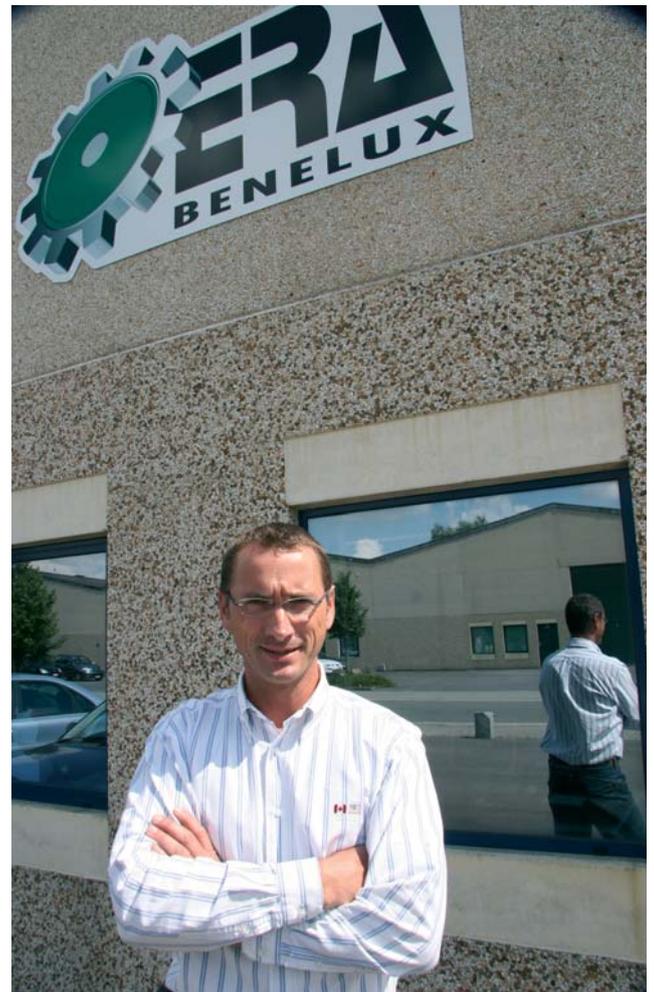


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Managing Director Stefaan Vandenbussche: moving up a gear.



Purpose-built for the company's needs, ERA Benelux' head office in Gulligem in Southern Belgium has plenty of room for expansion.



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and, in particular, quality control. "Many of the processes involved in remanufacturing, especially with regard to high-value products like steering racks, are so complex that they should be left to the real experts," says 38-year-old Economics graduate Stefaan Vandebussche, who has been in charge of ERA Benelux from the outset. Before that he worked as an assistant to the management of the BOAC parent company.

"I believe in the old saying that we have in Europe about shoemakers staying at their last, i.e. keeping to what you're good at - and we're quite open about it. Our strength lies in taking control of all other parts of the reman chain. You could call us a marketing company for high-quality remanufacturing. This has been our concept from day one. And it has worked."

Besides steering pumps, steering racks and aircon compressors, ERA Benelux' range comprises ignition distributors, driveshafts and CV joints, starters and alternators and brake calipers. All are tested to OE standards and subject to painstaking quality controls. More-



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Product Manager Angelo Spiteri and Technical Assistant Bart Gheysen.

over, only original spare parts are used and every old core is checked against ERA's database before being dispatched to a reman facility for remanufacturing to OE specifications.

Right from the early days, ERA Benelux has adhered to the green principles that are now becoming increasingly important for the reman industry. One example of this was the decision back in 2002 to stop producing

printed catalogues - a courageous decision in that printed catalogues still remain a source of information for many remanufacturers. Nevertheless, Stefaan Vandenbussche has had no regrets: "Yes, we may have lost some business by not having printed catalogues, but I think in the long-run we will have gained more. Part of our argument was that remanufacturing is an industry that cares for the environment so that when electronic

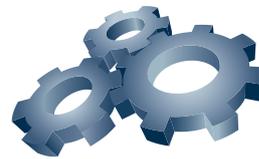
solutions are available, it would not be right to use up resources to print catalogues."

Hardly surprising that ERA Benelux has been using TecDoc since 2004 as a Certified Supplier. This year, ERA Benelux has further expanded its electronic order system by integrating TecCom into the company's website and allowing for on-line ordering, facilitating further electronic interaction with customers.

"Being a Certified TecDoc supplier has been crucial to our credibility and being able to make full use of TecDoc through our website will further strengthen our position in Europe," van der Bussche says. For someone operating solely within the Benelux countries, TecDoc was, perhaps, less important, but further afield, such as in Germany where many distributors use electronic ordering only, it is imperative.

Stefaan Vandenbussche places great emphasis on ERA's credibility and, during a long conversation at the head office in Gullegem, stresses time and again the importance of quality.

"We're not selling on price," he says. "For us, personal attention is key and we don't regard the job as done just because the part is sold. Of equal importance is that we provide technical assistance for our customers either by phone and, if necessary,



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we'll send someone to the customer's site to sort out any problems. What's more, as we undertake our own core management, we're in full control of the core flow and the quality of cores which, in turn, allows us to impose specific quality requirements on our suppliers."

With current deliveries to customers in six countries, Belgium, Holland, Luxembourg, Denmark, France and Germany and more in the pipeline, ERA can look back on six years of steady progress. The figures speak for themselves: turnover has risen from 700,000 euros in the first year to 3 million in 2007 while sales of steering racks have increased from 1,000 to 8,000 over the same period.

**And five years from now?**

"We expect to double our turnover and to have established a firm position as a key player in the steering rack and pump segment. Aircon compressors are also likely to be an important pillar," says Stefaan Vandenbussche, adding: "We have only seen the beginning so far."

*Stefaan Vandenbussche:  
'We're not selling on price.'*



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