Sirris invests an additional €5.5 million in GenAI and three brand-new test environments

24 April 2024, 18:59

Ann Debaere

For 75 years, Sirris has been boosting the competitiveness of the Belgian technological industry by introducing cutting-edge technologies

This year, Sirris - Belgium's innovation centre for the technological industry - is adding an extra €5.5 million to its regular annual investments for knowledge and infrastructure enhancement. A significant part of that – €4 million – will be allocated to the construction of three brand-new industrial demonstration and test environments in the labs in Kortrijk, Genk and Charleroi. The remaining €1.5 million will be invested in GenAI research and development. With the additional investments, Sirris aims to further support the Belgian industry and help it meet the unprecedented challenges of energy transition, digitisation and GenAI. ‘Seventy-five years on, our commitment to bolstering companies' competitiveness via technological innovation is more relevant than ever. By facilitating the adoption of knowledge and technology, we enable companies to stay three years ahead of market trends, maintaining their edge in competitiveness’, according to Sirris.

This year marks the 75th anniversary of Sirris. Established by Agoria on 23 April 1949, the innovation centre has led the way in numerous technological breakthroughs for its clients. Consider the support provided to Sonaca in the 1970s with the numerical control of machines that produced Airbus's initial components, and the assistance provided to Arcomet in developing the first self-erecting cranes during the 1990s. Despite the many years on the clock, Sirris is more active and ambitious than ever.

‘Due to the various successive crises and geopolitical tensions, an increasing number of Belgian manufacturing companies are considering bringing their supply chain back to Europe. This is only possible if they make their production processes more competitive, greener and energy efficient using state-of-the-art technologies. SMEs have insufficient time and resources to keep up with the ever-faster technological evolutions and to assess which innovations they should implement. This is where Sirris makes a difference. Thanks to the know-how they have amassed and industrial test environments, an innovation project does not have to take months or cost unnecessary money. Even five days may suffice sometimes to arrive at a ground-breaking industrial innovation, providing work for hundreds of people.’

Experimenting with state-of-the-art technologies

To mark its 75th anniversary, Sirris is investing an additional €4 million this year in brand-new industrial demonstration and test environments in their labs in Kortrijk, Genk and Charleroi. From December, Belgian manufacturing SMEs will be able to conduct experiments there making use of the latest manufacturing technologies.

‘These major investments will enable Sirris to achieve its ambitions. By the end of 2025, we want to support some 1,350 innovation projects every year (+10%) and organise 300,000 contact moments with companies in the sector. We are therefore further expanding our expert team in the coming year with 20 new employees, to arrive at a total of 190.’
Herman Derache, Managing Director of Sirris

3-year market lead

Sirris' experts will also guide companies through new areas such as green energy, cybersecurity and circular production in the coming years, while also stepping up the efforts in the field of AI, with €1.5 million in additional investments by 2024. This should make it possible to give tech companies a good three-year lead in the market.

‘Sirris closely monitors all technological advances, well ahead of their introduction to the broader public. Our vision of the Factory of the Future, for instance, was already on point in 2012, long before Germany launched the concept of Industry 4.0. We have already invested some €50 million in it over the past 14 years. We have also been working on circular economy (€5.5 million) and energy transition (€12 million) for more than a decade and have helped many companies get started. This year, we are putting extra focus on AI, which is suddenly shifting gears at breakneck speed. Starting in 2013, we've been assessing its industrial viability and have invested around €14 million in AI, primarily in collaboration with innovative firms. This year, we're even augmenting that with an additional €1.5 million.’
Jeroen Deleu, Director Strategy & Corporate development at Sirris

SMEs under increasing innovation pressure

Interestingly, Belgium has recently achieved the top spot in Europe for R&D investment. However, there's still significant progress to be made in getting our country's SMEs on board with innovation and speeding up the adoption of new technologies, all while managing risks effectively.

‘In Belgium, we still have a lot of work to do to accelerate the use of new technologies. Especially when it comes to SMEs, which account for a good 80% of companies in Belgium. They need external advice more than large companies which have their own R&D and engineering departments. Companies that seek assistance from Sirris experience a fivefold increase in their added value to the Belgian economy, surpassing the average. That is where our brand-new test environments and our additional investments in GenAI will certainly help.’
Herman Derache, Managing Director of Sirris

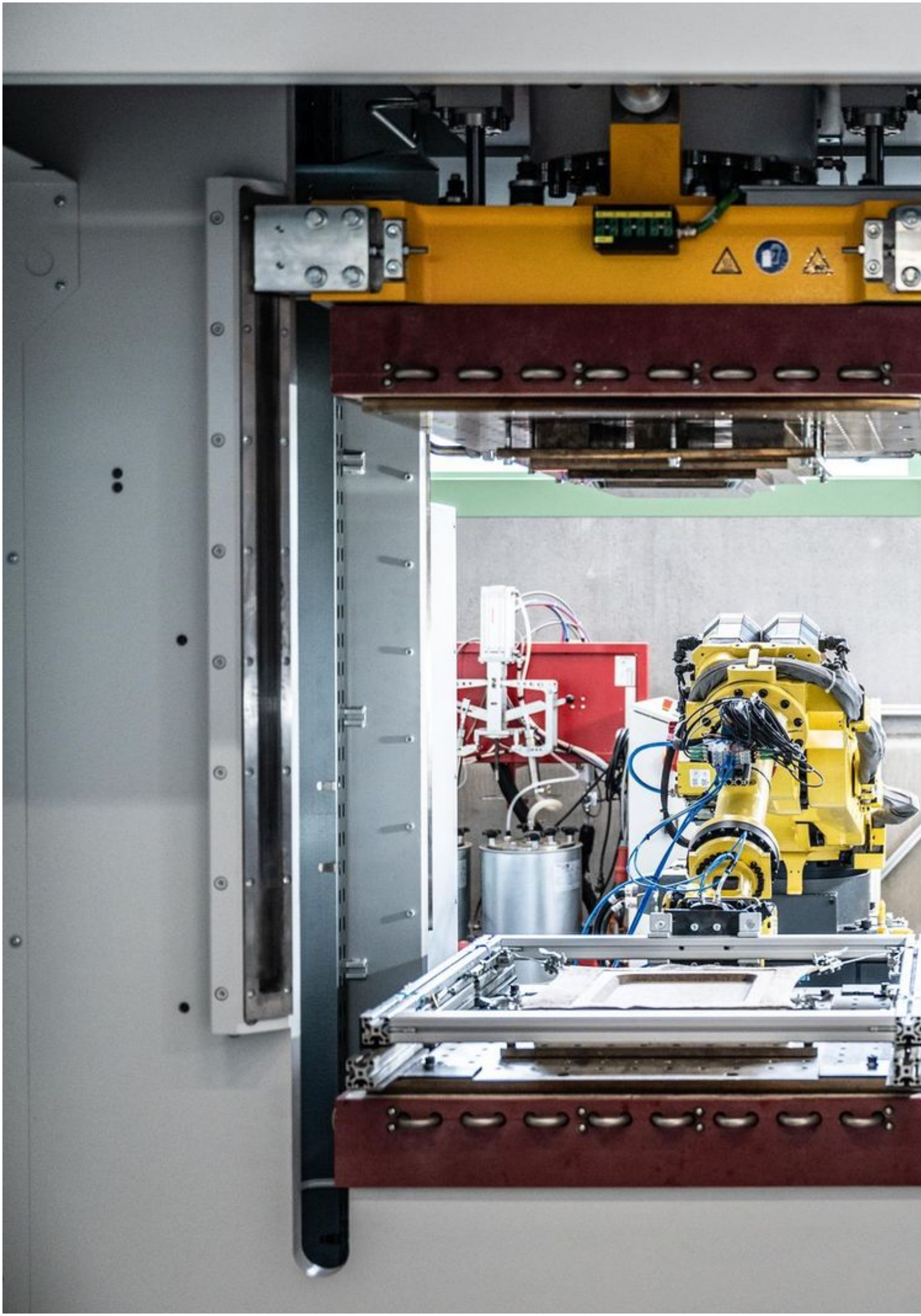
Five milestones in 75 years of Sirris

The major role Sirris has played in the innovation of the Belgian manufacturing industry up to the present day is evidenced by the following five major milestones over the past 75 years.

1. Belgium's first CNC (Computer Numerical Control) machine, an automated machine controlled by a computer program was demonstrated at Sirris in Leuven in the late 1960s
2. Belgium's first additive manufacturing machine, say 3D printer, was set up at Sirris in Liege in 1990
3. Pioneer of professional software engineering in the industry from the early 2000s
4. First experiments with AI in an industrial context, from 2009 in Brussels
5. Forerunner on 'the factory of the future', publishing its vision in 2012, a reference in Europe

Context of the foundation in 1949

Sirris was established by Agoria under the impetus of the De Groote Law of 1947. This law allowed sector federations to create collective centres, based on the principle that most technological challenges within a sector are collective, necessitating shared expertise for the benefit of the companies involved. Nowadays, these centres, including Sirris, which are active across different sectors, are gathered within Innovaders (www.innovaders.be).



©Sirris

©Sirris

Authors

Ann Debaere