



What type of environment does Singapore offer EU companies looking to set up businesses in the region? Recently, EPIC Project Coordinator Erich Prem sat down with Georg Reithofer, Head of R&D Coordination in the High Performance Metals Division for voestalpine, a leading player in the global Oil & Gas market, to find out.

Mr Reithofer, how did voestalpine start out in Singapore?

Our engagement in Singapore has a history. It roots in our acquisition of Böhler-Uddeholm (completed in 2008) and its excellent service and distribution network. In 2013 we founded voestalpine Special Metals dealing with special alloys and special steels with some emphasis on the oil industry and aeronautics. From 2015 onwards, we have been active with start-ups in these areas.

What are the advantages of Singapore in research and innovation?

Firstly, the entry barrier is low as Singapore provides a high standard of living and the working language in our team is English. Secondly, we are able to find qualified staff, something, which has become a major challenge all over the world now. In Singapore we found a high-quality research environment addressing our topics. In addition, there is a good industrial environment regarding our main target industries.

What are the specific strengths of the environment in Singapore?

Support from the authorities has proven to be generally good, everything is quite unbureaucratic and quick. The voestalpine Additive Manufacturing Center Singapore (AMCS) provides a mixed team of experts from many nationalities. Such international teams are a real strength because they facilitate working globally. Cultural differences can be a problem but having a balanced mix is an asset. Singapore clearly shows awareness for this.

It was possible for us to start with infrastructure and other assets already in place. In other parts of the world, you are often expected to start from scratch, to invest and grow your team without much existing structure. But here, everything had been put in place already.

Also, there is sensitivity to competition between companies. We work as a part of a value chain and less in direct competition with similarly placed industry. This is extremely helpful for communicating in an open fashion.

What are the weaknesses – if any – in Singapore?

Like in other places in the world, there is a tendency towards isolation. It has become more difficult to bring in our people. This is particularly true for family members or partners and can really be a showstopper because we always need to bring in experts when we start new directions.

Also, it takes some time to understand the Asian mentality. All that glitters is not gold – you have to evaluate offers and promises carefully. There are many agencies that are active in parallel and it can be a challenge to successfully navigate them.

What is a good strategy for Europe regarding R&D cooperation with Singapore?

If you just look at the speed in Asia, it is vital to be proactive. We need to place Europeans here to effectively collaborate. This is also important to improve mutual understanding and build the right networks. There is a good network of European industry here and it is useful to maintain it also in the future.

Most important is speed. It is often much more useful to start with some projects rather than waiting for large and often cumbersome programmes. We need a bottom-up and lean way of doing collaboration with Singapore, a bit like lean start-ups. Pilot projects can be a successful route to getting to know business, experts and researchers. From there it is possible to grow – it is never just infrastructure or devices – it is always people that matter.

Singapore, as well as New Zealand and Australia, is a traditionally strong economic partner for Europe. The Horizon 2020-funded EPIC Project – the European-Pacific Partnership for ICT collaboration in research, development and innovation – aims to strengthen ties between these regions through academic, industrial and political partnerships. The High Performance Metals Division of the Austrian voestalpine Group signifies a technological expansion of European activities and opens up access to this growing market in the Southeast Asia region.