

Sharpening the cutting edge of medical technology

Cornwall has proved a fertile base for one of the world's leading makers of IVF equipment

Overview

You might not guess it from its name, but Research Instruments (RI) has helped create more bundles of joy than perhaps any other company in the world. That's because it's a leading maker of micromanipulation equipment used in in-vitro fertilisation (IVF). These astonishingly accurate and sensitive devices have helped thousands of people overcome fertility problems that fifteen years ago would have been insurmountable.

When the company started out in 1968, IVF was still very much a speck in a petri dish, and RI began by making equipment used to handle micro-electronic components. Then, at a meeting of the British Association, a leading fertility specialist saw a demonstration of this equipment and realised that it also had applications in his field. Within a few years, RI was selling micromanipulation devices to IVF centres all around the world. Competition in this market is now much more intense, but by continuously extending and upgrading its product offering, RI has remained well ahead of the field.

Workforce

Research Instruments employs 36 fulltime staff, and 2 self employed people, and is planning to take on at least 10 more. Many of the employees are of graduate level. A high proportion of its staff are recruited locally, with the company providing training in the highly specialised processes that it uses.

RI also takes part in the Shell Technology Enterprise Programme (STEP), funded by Cornwall Objective One. Last year, one of the STEP engineering students placed with the company received an award for developing a method that allows technical support of RI devices over the Internet, thus cutting travelling costs for support engineers.

Clients

RI sells mainly to hospitals and clinics, and is the leading supplier of IVF micromanipulation equipment in the UK. It exports 70% of its production, with Asia and Europe each accounting for around half of these exports.



The company, which relocated from London to Cornwall in 1975, was the subject of a management buy-out in 2000. Within three years, RI had clearly outgrown its premises in Penryn. Fortunately, it was able to find exactly what it needed without having to leave Cornwall: 11,000 sq feet of purpose-built high-tech production facilities and offices in Falmouth. The new premises has been a catalyst which has helped increase turnover from £0.5M in 2000 to £3.5M today. Why was RI so determined to stay in Cornwall? Managing Director Bill Brown explains: "When our distributors come over to see us, they immediately understand why we want to be here. It's a pretty intense business that we're in, but where else can you go surfing 30 minutes from work?"

Technology

The company's new premises are very much in keeping with the technological sophistication of its products. They include a state-of-the-art "clean room" as well as precision assembly stations for laser and micromanipulation fabrication. Many of the components used are precision-engineered by local companies.

RI was quick to realise the potential of the Web, both as a marketing platform and as a means of distributing technical information and software to users and distributors. In this respect, broadband has made a huge difference, says Brown.

Support

RI's recent relocation was made possible by a £490,000 investment from the South West Regional Development Agency (SWRDA), which is committed to providing quality workspace in Cornwall and helping to secure highly skilled employment.