

IXSEA

A Company with Direction



*Philippe Debaillon Vesque, CEO,
iXBlue Group*



iXSea's strength is in technology. Of its roughly 200 employees, a third are engaged in R&D. The company holds 21 key patents in the area of navigation and positioning - its core business - and has as its main claim to fame the fibre optic gyroscope. Invented by Dr. Herv   Lefevre, the company's chief technology officer, the device forms the basis of many of the company's leading edge products.

Founded in 2000, but with business roots that go back much further, iXSea has a capital value of about EUR11 million; its turnover in 2010 reached over EUR41 million. Privately owned and distinctly French, the company has broad international horizons. From its headquarters in Marly-le-Roi, near Paris, iXSea serves customers across Europe, the United States, the Middle East and Asia.

Flagship product

iXSea has single-handedly pioneered the fibre optic gyroscope, a versatile device for measuring and maintaining orientation. Crucially, unlike traditional instruments of this kind, it does so without having any moving parts. The company's flagship product, OCTANS, launched in 2000, is a fibre optic gyrocompass with an integral motion sensor that outputs the true heading, roll, pitch, surge, sway, heave, speed, acceleration and rate of turn of whatever it is strapped in to. It uses little energy and needs no maintenance, which all goes to explain why iXSea has sold over 2,000 basic OCTANS units in ten years.

Beyond OCTANS, iXSea's core technology finds its way into a range of inertial movement, attitude and heading reference, and inertial navigation systems. They are used on land, at sea, underwater, in the air, and even in outer space - in collaboration with the EADS company Astrium, the technology is being used in the latest generation of earth observation satellites.

On land and sea

The majority of iXSea's business is, however, earthbound, on land or particularly at sea, in either civil or military applications. The oceanographic and hydrographic survey sector is a big market for the company; offshore oil and gas is also an important market; and customers include 31 of the world's navies. iXSea has supplied more than 700 inertial navigation systems for use onboard all kinds of naval vessels from patrol boats and minehunters to destroyers, frigates and nuclear submarines.

MARINS is designed to meet the most stringent naval performance specifications and represents the state of the art in inertial navigation systems; drift is less than one nautical mile in 24 hours sailing in pure inertial mode, i.e., without GPS input.

It is a far cry from nuclear submarines to the commercial survey and mapping vehicles that are becoming an increasingly familiar sight on the roads of our towns and cities. However, the same fundamental fibre optic gyroscope technology, this time in LANDINS units, is being used in so-called scan-vans by ABA Surveying, in the UK, one of the leaders in high-speed image data capture using laser scanners. The inertial navigation system onboard the van provides position and orientation data and links to the scanning system to enable highly efficient kinematic mapping, mainly for civil engineering and urban architectural applications. Important in a device like this is not just accuracy but also the ability to provide information in real-time with precise timings and very high output rates.

iXSea has supplied in excess of 6,000 fibre optic gyroscope-based attitude and heading reference or inertial navigation systems since 2000. Reflecting its strong presence in the marine market, and continuing focus on this sector, iXSea also provides underwater acoustic

positioning systems (USBL & LBL), sonar systems for seabed mapping and reconnaissance, and acoustic releases, pingers and transponders. Not least, it is also heavily involved in software engineering, providing products under the DELPH name for processing inertial navigation data as well as for subsea imaging and mapping applications.

New man at the helm

This year sees a new man at the helm of the company, Philippe Debaillon Vesque, who has joined after a highly successful career with the French giant Thales Group. As well as being chairman of iXSea, Debaillon Vesque is chief executive officer of iXBlue. Formed earlier this year, iXBlue is a group of nine companies focused on customers in the defence, geosciences and offshore industries. iXSea is the biggest single entity in a group employing 550 people and turning over about EUR90 million annually.

Debaillon Vesque is clear about how he wants the new group to work: "The iXBlue companies are all essentially SMEs, known for innovation and some great technology products. We have to retain that character but, in addition, I want iXBlue to be recognised for its ability to integrate: to combine products and services from across the group to provide the kind of solutions that cannot be found anywhere else in this industry."

Debaillon Vesque states that getting the iXBlue companies to work together is vital, but he is adamant that this does not mean forging them into a single unit, as this would compromise their flexibility and blunt their competitive edge.

Double the size of the business

According to Debaillon Vesque, the group's main objective is to double the size of the business in five years. "I feel sure this is possible," he says. "We certainly have the technology and the products. Growth will mainly come from increasing our market share, and we are well placed to do that. The group has a strong presence in many key countries around the world and an effective global service network. We naturally have a better sales position in some regions than in others. Also, market conditions vary considerably; some parts of Asia, where we are already strong, seem hardly to have been affected by the global recession, and we see great opportunities. The USA is also a target: our market share is relatively small at present, but we have a springboard for growth plus tremendous will throughout the organisation to build our business there."

Debaillon Vesque believes teamwork is vital to the success of the new group. He is keen to instil an inclusive and supportive culture throughout the group and stresses that strength has to run right across teams and not come just from one person or even two. Transparency is also important; there has to be a willingness to share ideas. Finally, he says that discipline will be important. "We need always to assess the options, make plain our opinions and rigorously challenge each other. But once we agree on something, then everyone must commit to it. We all have to go for it."

From iXSea, a company whose business is so much about direction, the focus this year has shifted somewhat to iXBlue, a group that clearly knows where it is going.