An interview with Mr. Jean-Philippe PARMENTIER,

Director of the INFOPOLE ICT Cluster

Could you present your network and the technological skills of your members?

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The cluster has been in existence for about twenty years and brings together about 150 digital players: companies, of course, but also research centres, skills centres (training organisations) as well as research and higher education players (universities and colleges). The member companies are of all sizes, from very large companies such as NRB (Network Research Belgium) and NSI IT to SMEs employing a few to a few dozen people. In 2020, these companies represented 7,000 full-time equivalents. Their technological skills are just as diversified, from first step technologies (software development, etc.) to cutting-edge technological advances in cybersecurity, via the development of CRM or ERP applications (for the initial structuring of good databases) and the integration of solutions based on artificial intelligence (AI) and the Internet of Things (IoT). Our network covers the entire value chain and the players concerned in all their diversity: innovative players, advanced technology players, players resolutely focused on exporting to Benelux, France, other European Union countries and even beyond… This diversity is a source of wealth.

How does the cluster participate in the implementation of the Digital Wallonia strategy?

We ensure the operational aspect of this strategy by getting involved in various programmes such as “Industry of the Future”. In this context, we are participating in the ChiMérique project with the Greenwin competitiveness cluster and the Plastiwin cluster: the objective is to raise awareness among green chemistry and plastics companies and to help them to jump on the bandwagon of the “Industry of the Future” thanks to the development of new digital tools adapted to their needs. Our collaboration with the Walloon clusters is also reflected in the organisation of cross-sectoral meetings for industry in the broad sense (with MecaTech) or the Building sector: we run workshops to enable companies to express their needs and to propose appropriate digitalisation solutions. In addition, we relay the calls for projects launched within the framework of Digital Wallonia and organise meetings between the various players to help them submit projects. For example, in this respect, we work with the CAP Construction and TWEED clusters on circular economy projects (Digital Wallonia 4 Circular).

What services do you offer to your members?

As a cluster, we are like a hub for the Walloon digital sector. We connect companies and digital players. In addition to the above-mentioned calls for projects or workshops, we offer dedicated and personalized services to connect our members with companies looking for digital partners. Moreover, we are keen to see how to make two competing companies complementary, in the field of IoT for example, and how to transform them into sources of innovation for a product or service at the intersection of their respective activities. Furthermore, we help our members grow by developing their business, by proposing collective visits to international fairs and exhibitions to make technology watch or be inspired. Finally, we offer them a showcase and put them forward to promote their companies, use case and business in Wallonia.

In your opinion, what are the major challenges in your field of expertise?

The major challenges concern both the digital sector and companies in need of digital tools (data analysis and enhancement, AI, cybersecurity, etc.) in various sectors such as construction, logistics or even industries undergoing relocation. Digital technologies have serious advantages in meeting the challenges of labour shortages, competitiveness, market changes, cost pressures, etc. Entire sectors are being transformed, encouraged to reduce their energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions, and to produce goods and services differently at a time when customisation is booming. This transformation is closely linked to the issue of the professional skills to be acquired between now and 2030: it is important to know that 30 to 40% of professions will evolve, that others will disappear and that digital technology and AI will play a greater role. Production operators and laboratory researchers alike will have to train to stay in the race. It is

therefore urgent to develop the digital skills of Walloons: specialized skills that will benefit the entire regional economy.

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