

Lyon thinks big

DESPITE BEING NINE TIMES SMALLER THAN PARIS, LYON'S COMMITMENT TO PROVIDING AN ENVIRONMENT CONDUCIVE TO BUSINESS MEANS THAT IN SECTORS SUCH AS GREEN TECHNOLOGY AND LIFE SCIENCES, THE CITY HOLDS A PRESENCE FOR INVESTORS THAT BELIES ITS SMALL STATURE. **MICHAŁ KACZMARSKI** REPORTS

It seems that everyone in Lyon has lived in a bigger or more famous city. From its taxi drivers to its highly qualified businessmen and women, everyone has a story to tell about how and why they decided to give up the hustle and bustle of mega cities to enjoy the relaxed, yet professional atmosphere of Lyon.

"There were many discussions about whether Lyon was the right place for us. We report on current affairs and for many that means we should be located closer to the centre of the political debate," says Michael Peters, managing director of Euronews, an international television channel. "But we are here to stay. This is the right place for us for many reasons, one of them being the networking possibilities that are hard to find in other places," he adds.

Well connected

Networking is indeed one of the main draws of Lyon. Businesses setting up in the city can benefit from the many clusters operating in the wider Lyon region, in sectors such as clean tech, life sciences, creative industries and transportation. There are more than 1100 companies involved in Lyon's clusters and their primary aim is to increase the awareness of offers and projects conducted in the region.

The existence of these clusters was one of the main reasons why Westport Innovations, a Vancouver-based provider of natural gas engines, decided to set up its European operations in Lyon in 2010.

"Once we decided to develop our European operations, we were considering opening an office in cities such as London, Paris or Berlin. Lyon was not the most obvious choice, but the urban truck and bus cluster located here gives us access to more than 150 companies that operate in the same business as we do," says Nicholas Sonntag, European and Asian president of Westport, who was in charge of launching Westport's Lyon operations. Mr Sonntag adds that there is no reason to locate the business in a major European city, just for the sake of being there. "What we really need is [to be] close to the people who have similar interests in markets that are crucial for us," he says.

Unique advantage

In the case of Lyon, the term 'being close' can be taken literally. Despite the fact that the city, together with its suburbs and nearby



Vast possibility: Lyon is a favoured by investors because of its resources and networking opportunities

towns, constitutes the second largest metropolitan area in France, it is nine times smaller than Paris.

"It is often said that Lyon should be bigger, that because of the city's size, there may not be enough resources available to attract big businesses to move here," says Jacques de Chilly, executive director of Aderly, the economic development agency responsible for attracting investment to the Lyon region. "But then again, because of the size, the city is more accessible. People take better advantage of what is happening here, both in terms of cultural events and business opportunities," he adds.

Mr de Chilly makes a point that, because the city cannot compete with major European cities in terms of its size or recognition, it had to come up with a different approach. "We learn how to survive in the [field of] global competition and we like to do things step by step," he says. Instead of trying to attract investors from every possible sector, the city is focused on gradually building a brand as a 'vaccine capital of the world' and clean tech hub. Its efforts have paid dividends: of the 66 new enterprises established in Lyon, more than half are focused on green technologies and life sciences.

So while it may not be the biggest city in Europe, in terms of setting goals and working hard to achieve them, Lyon makes a case for quality over quantity. ■