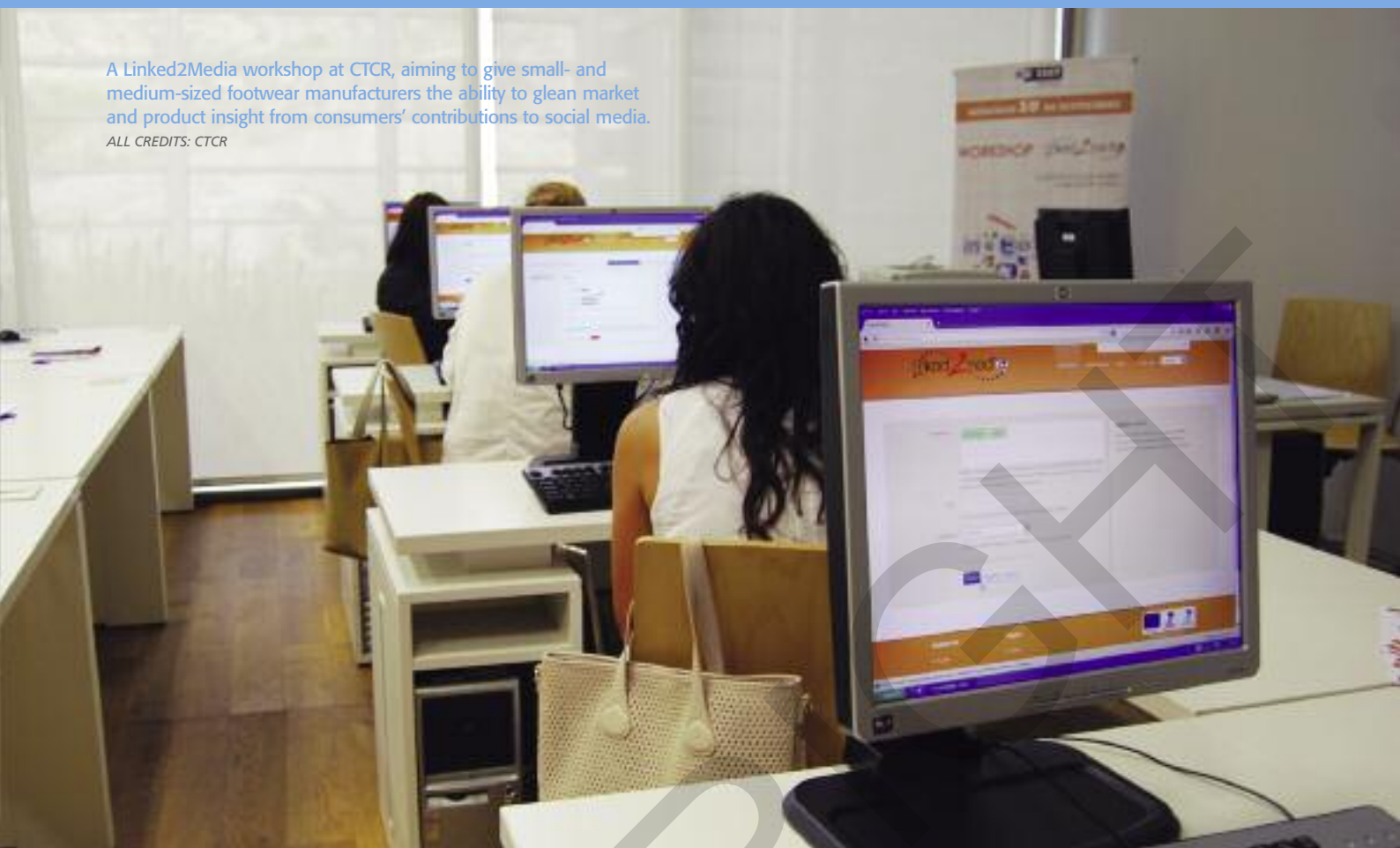


A Linked2Media workshop at CTCR, aiming to give small- and medium-sized footwear manufacturers the ability to glean market and product insight from consumers' contributions to social media.

ALL CREDITS: CTCR



When La Rioja's centre for footwear technology opened in 2007, the region's president said he hoped the facility would help the industry in this part of northern Spain not just survive but stand out. More than 150 projects later, the centre is now providing new ideas and new technology for footwear companies in La Rioja, across the whole of Spain and throughout the global industry.

A hotbed of innovation

The centre for footwear technology in La Rioja in northern Spain, CTCR, situated in the footwear manufacturing hub of Arnedo, has said it is currently engaged with shoe companies in 29 different innovation projects and has been involved in more than 150 projects in all since its inception in 2007.

Participants in the memorable international footwear congress that La Rioja hosted in April 2007 may recall an excursion to Arnedo one day to visit the CTCR to celebrate its opening. At the time, the region's president, Pedro Sanz (who continued in that role until July 2015), said: "La Rioja certainly has a future in footwear. We don't just want to survive, we want to lead, to stand out."

Investment in research and development has been a key factor in the local footwear industry's attempts to live up to Mr Sanz's statement. These up-to-date figures on research projects came to light during a visit to the centre in mid-September this year by the current Rioja regional government

minister for economic development and innovation, Leonor González Menorca.

CTCR president, Basilio García (who also runs the Hergar footwear group in Arnedo, and who presided at the centre's opening in 2007) and director general, Javier Oñate, said on showing Ms González Menorca the facilities that current projects include ideas looking at how footwear production can be enhanced by nanotechnology, electronics, automation and fast prototyping, as well as ways of improving the industry's environmental footprint and its use of up-to-date communications and IT.

Local, continental, global

Six of the current projects focus on Spain, one on the global industry and 22 on the European shoe sector. Among the European projects are three for which CTCR aims to secure funding as part of the European Commission's 2015 LIFE (Financial Instrument for the Environment and Climate Action)

programme. LIFE is the EU's "funding instrument" for the environment and climate action. The general objective is to contribute to the development of environmental and climate policy and legislation by co-financing projects that appear likely to add value to the European economy.

LIFE began in 1992 and to date there have been four complete phases of the programme, with the fourth, LIFE+, that ended in 2013. During this period, almost 4,000 projects received co-funding, with EU grants exceeding €3 billion in total. There were question marks over the life of LIFE beyond 2013, but new budgets to provide grants of €1.3 billion for projects on the environment and of €450 million for projects on climate action are now in place for the period spanning 2014-2017. A further €1.65 billion will be available to help fund projects between 2018 and 2020.

Safe as houses

So far, projects that CTCR has worked on include one to develop an innovative soling system for use in safety footwear, specifically aimed at protecting wearers from live electric charges. Based on a proprietary sole injection formula, the system is suitable for use as an additive to a wide variety of soling materials and in a range of production processes. Early adoption by a local safety footwear manufacturer, Garmaryga, has produced positive results and the company is now working on a range of protective shoes and boots that it believes will meet the needs of workers who come into contact with electrical hazards.

In a similar vein, CTCR also worked on a project to help Arnedo-based soling materials manufacturer Cauchos Ruiz-Alejos find a solution to the problem of the presence of toxic materials in flame-resistant soles. Traditional methods for making the soles of safety footwear flame-resistant have used products containing volatile organic compounds (VOCs) and this particular CTCR project set about finding a viable non-toxic alternative using nanotechnology and inorganic solids. Cauchos Ruiz-Alejos believes the new products it is able to make as a result of this project will open up new export possibilities for it because the company will have a flame-resistant offering that will meet the VOC-restriction requirements of even the strictest markets.

Affordable insights

CTCR has also taken part in projects to help the footwear industry improve its use of information and communications technology. One example is its participation in an international project called Linked2Media, which will enable companies to learn from what the public is saying about their products or products like theirs on social media. The CTCR signed up to take part because it is convinced the ability to glean relevant information from this user-generated online content will help small- and medium-sized shoe producers gain valuable insight into markets and trends. This has traditionally been the preserve of bigger companies that can afford to invest money in their own market research.

La Rioja has reported footwear exports with a value of €114 million for the first six months of 2015. This represents growth of 15% compared to the same period last year. Clearly, the industry there is doing much more than just surviving. 📍



An "intelligent" cycling boot is one of the recent developments at La Rioja's centre for footwear technology.



Soles that local safety footwear manufacturer Garmaryga is using on special shoes and boots for workers that deal with electrical hazards.