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In terms of extending equipment lifetime and increasing efficiency and safety, coatings are key – and one Italian company is a market leader. James Wills reports on the globally growing influence of Donelli.

**T**he mark of a resilient company is one which, over time, spots new opportunities, adapts, grasps them and expands. Donelli has certainly been doing that since 1911, when the technological sector it is now a market leader in barely existed.

This family venture – which now includes a fourth generation in its midst – was originally set up in Legnano, Northern Italy, to provide decorative coatings for villas, churches, hospitals, schools and other major building projects.

A large power generation manufacturing enterprise, heavily involved in heat generation and hydropower, had its headquarters nearby Donelli. When it rapidly became a global player, it started requiring anti-corrosion specialists and solutions. Donelli evolved to meet these needs.

When that company expanded, both domestically and overseas, Donelli expanded too. As the company moved into manufacturing boilers for the oil and gas industry as well, Donelli began to also service those sectors. Then came expansion into chemical manufacturing and, after the Second World War, the oil and gas industry grew exponentially. ▽



Donelli now supplies a significant number of services to different sectors, including industrial sites, petrochemical plants, power generation facilities, offshore platforms, HVAC, buildings and civil engineering projects. Its services include anti-corrosion coatings and linings, passive fire protection, insulation, chemical resistance, waterproofing and consultancy services – to name but a few.

Its work can generally be split into two sectors, on-site and in-shop. For on-site work, Donelli sends its teams across the globe to install, repair and maintain facilities. The in-shop works sees it protecting and repairing products in its own premises from external coatings of industrial equipment to re-machinable internal lining with FBE (fusion bond epoxy).

“In Italy we have a saying, ‘one cherry calls to another’, and it simply made sense to take advantage of these new opportunities,” said the company’s Technical Director, Piero Donelli. “As the enterprise expanded and the work grew more technically difficult, we realised doing on-site work would not always be

possible and so we began to open in-shop facilities. And as we could not provide a local service to companies in the south of Italy from our base in the north, it made sense to open up facilities in the middle and south of the country too.”

### Diverse offering

These expansions have given the company its current structure where there are a total of seven divisions.

The parent company – Impresa Donelli – is specialised in robot assisted hydro power plant maintenance, passive fire proofing and energy efficiency in buildings.

Donelli Eos focuses on offshore maintenance, anti-skid coatings and insulation, with many of its clients in the Adriatic and Mediterranean seas. Next up, Donelli Alexo operates two state-of-the-art painting facilities in Northern Italy dedicated to surface preparation and speciality coatings for valves, HVAC equipment, heat exchangers, pipes, fittings and so on. Bersud, meanwhile, is specialised in asset integrity management of chemical plants. ▸

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The next three companies highlight Donelli's international reach. Having set up a stable organisation in Libya in 1975 to assist with the country's infrastructure and oil industries, this branch closed in the 1990s as the political situation became unstable.

However, since 2009, Donelli Sh.p.k. has served the growing energy industry in Albania, Donelli Bulgaria was set up in 2014, and Donelli Mozambique in 2015.

"All of these foreign entities are run with the same philosophy. We do not simply turn up with teams of Italian workers and try to take over the sector. Instead, we train, develop and instruct local people in the technology we use and the standards we insist on," explained Market Development Manager, Luca Donelli.

"They become truly local companies. In Albania for example, it is almost an entire self-running entity. While it can take advantages of the synergies we enjoy with our other divisions, the division has the skills, expertise, equipment and capacity to run almost entirely independently.

"We have adopted the same approach in Bulgaria and Mozambique. Of course there are challenges. In Bulgaria, we anticipated seeing major opportunities for us with the South Stream, but its path was later modified.

"As for Mozambique there is a saying there "if you travel alone you can go fast, if you travel with others, you can go far." That is the only truly indigenous entity in which we are the minority owners with 49%, and we are fully set up to take advantage of opportunities in the opening of its gas fields with floating LNG platforms."

While this is a couple of years away, Donelli is still running projects there, for example with its hydro-power plant which is crucial for the country's economic development as it exports energy to South Africa.

### Multi solutions

In terms of total turnover, Donelli's work in the oil and gas sector represents about 40%, hydro and power generation 25%, petrochemical and chemical 15%, with HVAC corrosion protection about 10%.

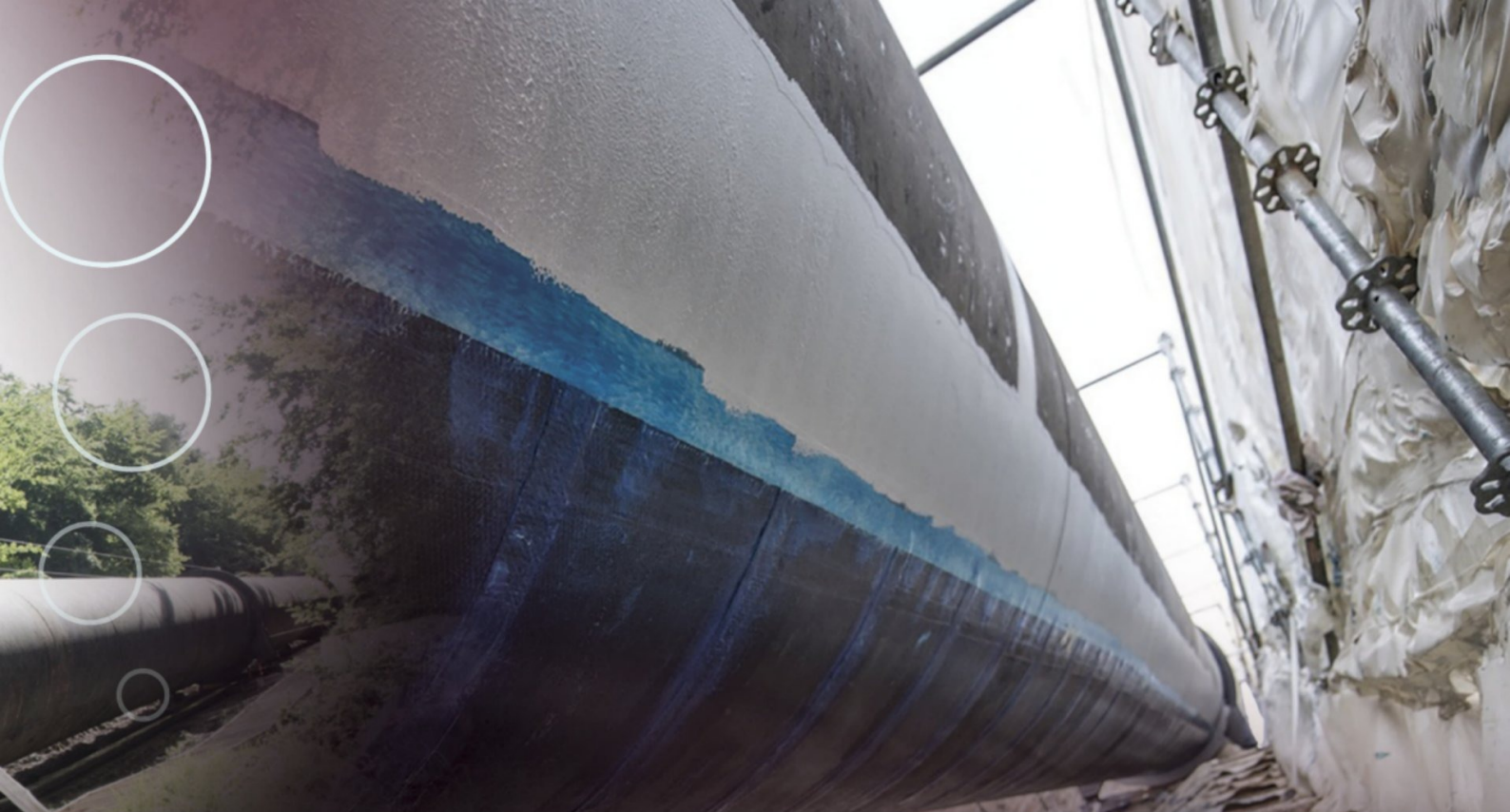
Luca Donelli was keen to point out HVAC corrosion protection is a growing field as the high level of specialisation and expertise allowed Donelli to become a relevant Southern European actor. The remainder of turnover is made up of projects, which take advantage of the company's versatility, knowledge and expertise in industries such as that of food and wine.

Piero Donelli said: "There is lots of competition in the various industries we serve, both with the in-shop and on-site sectors. But for the in-shop work we have a lot of expertise and offer a diverse range of services, from the most basic to the most intricate and technical. We offer a one-stop-shop for our clients where they can get a variety of services from our company and that is a major advantage.

He continued: "In terms of on-site services, while there are bigger players in the market, our smaller size means we create true partnerships with better communication and a streamlined, faster decision making process. Our customers are not anonymous numbers on a spreadsheet; they are people we know and work in partnership with.

"We are also unique in that 7% of our entire workforce is inspection orientated. We have a reputation for quality because no-one inspects their own work, and ensures the highest standards are maintained, like we do."

In terms of the future direction, Piero Donelli said the business is in a strong position in the hydro energy sector as its value as a clean source of renewable energy is more and more recognised.



“At many sites the trend is to maintain and improve the existing infrastructure, which is what we are experts in. Some of this work can be technologically challenging and we are leaders in the emerging field of automation and robotics to perform certain tasks which increases safety and efficiency.

“In the HVAC field there are increasing opportunities in data centres and we already serve clients right across Europe, and renewable energy is also an ever-growing sector.

“We are also leaders in extending the lifetime of our customers’ assets, with carbon fibre reinforcement of structures and pipelines being a significant milestone in new technology and thirdly, we are also becoming accustomed to evaluating the impact of CO2 emissions during the life of assets.”

With the future taken care of, what of the recent past?

“The last ten years have been a time of repositioning the company in various sectors, for example reducing our workload in the construction sector, while more than doubling our in-shop revenues,” remarked Luca Donelli.

“We are also dedicated to constantly updating our infrastructure and technology. Every two to three years we invest approximately 10% of our turnover, which is a lot for a medium-sized

enterprise, but it keeps us ahead of the competition and ensures we can meet all of our customers’ requirements.”

He added: “Covid obviously affected all industries in different ways, but we kept our operations running throughout the crisis. The biggest issue was our teams abroad. Normally they stay there for 30 days before coming home.

“However, they all agreed to stay longer - some remaining on site for three months - because they appreciated the difficulties of international travel and also, because most of our staff have worked for us for many years, they knew how much it would help us and our clients.

“Fingers crossed the worst is now over, we facilitated all staff at each site to be vaccinated, and, like everyone, we look forward to normal working practices resuming as soon as possible.”

With a catalogue of services and solutions almost as long as Italy’s coastline, Donelli is truly positioned to serve a huge number of industries in a variety of different ways and, one suspects, its evolution has not stopped yet.

Donelli is participating in the OMC 2021 - Med Energy Conference and Exhibition, which takes place from September 28 - 30 in Ravenna, Italy. ■



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