

## An Internet tool to monitor the robotic market

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Over recent years, robotics has made a decisive mark on the bioscience field, particularly in areas related to the human genome. Fundamental research, drug discovery and proteomics have all looked towards process automation and, as a result, the instrument market has grown following the introduction of a number of new systems. While the number of robotic workstations has increased considerably, so has other instrumentation, such as DNA extractors, microarrays, DNA sequencers and real-time quantitative RT-PCR systems.

Confronted with such a wide choice in products, researchers can understandably feel lost. However, a free Internet tool known as Robtain ([www.azco.fr](http://www.azco.fr)) is now available to help scientists focus on their specific laboratory needs and to speed the selection of robotic systems. The idea was conceived by AZCO, a French company specialising in robotic instrumentation, who developed the software to help scientists through the purchase process.

Simple and easy-to-use, this tool allows you (with no charge) to visualise different robots according to personalised laboratory criteria. One html page is provided for each robot to allow sufficient room for detailed technical specifications, photographs, contacts and links.

With over a year having passed since its launch, the usefulness of this Internet tool can now be gauged. While users come mostly from labs, it is interesting to note that manufacturers and distributors are also using

According to Philippe Dutriat, Manager of Proteigene (Genetix's robot distributor for France), Robtain can play an important role in the decision making process:

'We will use Robtain for promotion and sale of AUTOSHEARER 96, our new robot that automates DNA shearing and extraction/purification of plasmid

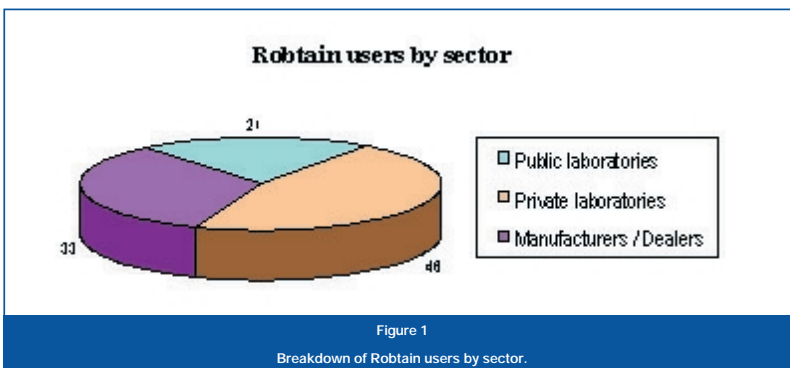


Figure 1

Breakdown of Robtain users by sector.

this tool to monitor competitor products. Most of the users originate within France, although the 15% of international visitors is a figure growing all the time. The robots most frequently viewed are the liquid handling workstations (32%), specialised robots for extraction and purification (27%) and microarrays (22%). The highly rated systems for 2001-2002, as recommended by Robtain, include the Biomek FX, Qarray, MicroLab STAR, SPBio, RoboSNIP, MultiProbe II, MicroGrid II and the Genesis Freedom.

DNA fragments of BAC for sequencing. Proteigene uses Robtain to support and boost its sales and to help the sales people follow up on leads. It is also a valuable tool for our clients, helping them to identify and choose robots amongst everything available. Information is extremely complete and precise.'

Once a company gives its consent to being part of the site, it commits itself to sharing all its validated technical information on its featured products. This is then updated on a regular basis. While 10 companies have already given full consent, a number of other companies are ready to sign up with just the legal rights with regard to photo use etc having to be finalised.

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## AWARD WATCH



The winner of the Buchi NIR award 2002 has been announced. The \$5000 prize, awarded for research that extends the application fields of NIR, went to two teams. A team from Kwansai-Gakuin University of Japan used a chemometric technique and NIR spectroscopy to assess the state of health of cows, while a research team in the UK were awarded the other part of the prize for work using FT-NIR and Raman microscopy to visualise pharmaceutical formulations. More information can be found at [nir.award@buchi.com](mailto:nir.award@buchi.com)

Serotec (Oxford, UK) has been awarded its ISO9001:2000 accreditation. The latest upgrade to its Quality System covers all aspects of the company's operations, through product development and production, to after-sales service. According to the company, the accreditation not only benefits life science researchers by reducing the chance of disappointing reagent performance, but is also of vital importance to

the growing number of clients who use its antibodies as key reagents in their commercialised kits.

Synoptics, the developer and manufacturer of digital imaging systems for scientific applications, has been included in The Sunday Times' elite ARM Tech Track 100 technology league for the first time. The company was chosen from a database of one million private UK companies after extensive research by Fast Track, the company responsible for compiling the Tech Track 100. In what is the UK's only league table of fast-growing unquoted technology companies, Synoptics was ranked 79<sup>th</sup> based on a sales growth of 67% per year between 1999 and 2001.

Dr Thomas Monath, Chief Scientific Officer of Acambis plc, has been awarded the Walter Reed Medal for distinguished accomplishment in the field of tropical medicine at the 51<sup>st</sup> annual meeting of the American Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene. In a long and varied career, Dr Monath has become a recognised authority on arthropod-borne viruses and his work on infectious diseases, such as yellow fever, has taken him all over the world. The Walter Reed Medal is named after Major Walter Reed, whose discovery that yellow fever is transmitted by mosquitoes is regarded as one of the most important findings in the history of tropical medicine. Previous recipients of the medal have included DA Henderson, who directed the World Health Organisation's smallpox eradication campaign, and Albert B Sabin, who developed vaccines against polio and Japanese encephalitis.

Biacore International AB (Uppsala, Sweden) has announced the receipt of the Frost & Sullivan Award for 'Drug Discovery Enabling Technology of the Year 2002 and Product Innovation' in the field of protein microarrays. The company was selected for its excellence in the launch of new products and technologies as well as for its innovation in the development of new system platforms. Biacore was recognised as a company well-positioned to benefit from future growth in the global protein array market, which is expected to expand by more than 50% per annum over the next five years to be worth more than \$665 million in 2007.



A Shimadzu scientist has been jointly awarded the Nobel Prize for Chemistry for his work on a revolutionary mass spectrometry technique. The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences announced that Koichi Tanaka of Shimadzu Corp, Kyoto, Japan, was jointly awarded the prize with John B Fenn of Virginia Commonwealth University for the development of soft desorption ionisation methods in mass spectrometric analyses of biological macromolecules.

Tanaka's approach has become fundamental in the standard methods (MALDI, SELDI and DIOS) for structural analyses of proteins.