

FOOTWEAR TECHNOLOGY: HI-TEC

Sports and outdoor brand Hi-Tec's decision to relocate its global headquarters from the UK to the Netherlands is part of a broader push to encourage its employees and customers to be 'inspired by life'.

Where the action is

Sports footwear brand Hi-Tec has relocated its global headquarters from the UK to Amsterdam, the Netherlands. The move took place at the start of this year and involved the group's product development, design, marketing and finance functions.

"Hi-Tec is primed for growth and Amsterdam is the hub for some of the best talent in our industry and is also an extremely creative environment for the entire team to benefit from," said Ed van Wezel, the company's general manager, and son of its founder, Frank van Wezel, on announcing the move. "We are extremely proud of our roots and will continue to run and invest in our successful UK subsidiary."

Martin Binnendijk, formally European chief executive, has now become the group's new chief finance officer. This position was previously held by Bob Kaiser who has been named as the chief executive of the US business of Hi-Tec safety and work footwear brand Magnum.

Meanwhile Hi-Tec USA has relocated to Portland, Oregon, from Modesto, California, under chief executive, Bill Berta. Ian Cameron, previously UK sales director, has been announced as Hi-Tec UK's managing director effective January 2011. Parallel moves have involved the footwear company's South African business relocating from Johannesburg to Cape Town, its Czech business moving to Prague from an out-of-town location and its Canadian offices moving from Kitchener, Ontario, to

Hi-Tec is intent on encouraging people to be inspired by life and to make the most of the outdoors.



Mississauga, which is part of the Toronto metropolitan area.

What's going on here is that Hi-Tec wants to apply to the whole of its business the thinking behind the move of its global headquarters. Ed van Wezel describes this as a concerted effort to tap into as much outdoor industry energy as Hi-Tec can find in various parts of the world. Clearly, this means more than breathing the same air as its big rivals in the world of sports and outdoor shoes and apparel; it's not just Nike, Keen, Columbia Sportswear and other important sports and outdoor brands located in Portland, for example, but expert suppliers of public relations, design and other services too. "We've interviewed people for roles in sales in the US," the Hi-Tec general manager continues. "They knew the industry, they knew our brand and they were available because they were unemployed at the time. But they simply didn't want to live anywhere but Portland."



Hi-Tec's UK headquarters in Southend-on-Sea.

 Hi-Tec

The moves the company has made in the last few months are its response to this situation, and as a brand with its roots firmly in Europe, its global headquarters were always going to stay there. Amsterdam is a European hub for creativity and fashion, with Nike and adidas





Hi-Tec founder, Frank van Wezel (left), and general manager, Ed van Wezel (right), with Europe's 2006 Ryder Cup-winning captain, Ian Woosnam.

Hi-Tec

both siting important parts of their creative operations there. It feels right for the industry and right for the company now, Mr van Wezel insists. "We'd be very small in a major, global city like London," he says. "But in Amsterdam we know where to go. There is a concentration of talent there and we're seen by the people in our industry in Amsterdam as the number-two global outdoor brand."

It's a sort of homecoming: Mr van Wezel senior is originally from the Netherlands, though from near Rotterdam rather than from Amsterdam. The company is clearly sincere about its ties to the UK and, particularly, to the Essex town of Southend-on-Sea where its global headquarters have been until now. Its first major product after launch in 1974 was a shoe for squash, then a very fast-growing participation sport. It was 1982 before it went global, but this was always the founder's intention, Ed van Wezel says, adding: "When my father arrived in the UK from the Netherlands to start the business, he wanted to launch a global brand, and the UK was the place to do that. Southend was a good place. Coastal towns are always fun. Its airport, then, had a daily flight to Rotterdam and passengers could even put their cars on board the aeroplane. It's 40 minutes on the train from Southend to London. My father is going to continue to live in the area and it's good that we'll continue to have our UK office there."

The moves are part of a wider company

philosophy that Hi-Tec will highlight in 2011 under the heading 'Inspired by Life'. Each of the examples will offer higher quality of life to the company's employees. The brand is family-owned and owner-driven and wants a better quality of life for its people and its customers, Mr van Wezel says. He wants Hi-Tec employees to have inspirational places to work and users of the company's footwear and apparel to enjoy the outdoors as much as they can. "Quality of life is the buzz," he says. "That's what people everywhere are seeking."

This desire for quality time makes him confident not only of success for the series of relocation exercises Hi-Tec has embarked on, but also of growth. He explains: "This whole industry is on the up. The global recession has led to the increased popularity of 'staycations', with a lot of emphasis on camping and other low-cost family activities in the outdoors. Plus, we are seeing lots of brown shoe on the street. Merrell pioneered this, but now you can walk into Starbucks in New York City and expect to see people wearing hiking shoes."

His conviction that there will be good growth in 2011 for his company also owes something to increased prices among his big corporate rivals who have what he calls "huge margin requirements". Hi-Tec believes its status as a privately owned company (it hasn't always been, but has for most of its 34 years and is now) frees it from this level of pressure and will allow it to remain attractive to a larger range of outdoor enthusiasts, people who demand quality products, such as stylish and light hiking boots made weatherproof by advanced technology such as ion-mask from P2i (for which Hi-Tec was the first footwear brand to sign up), and are willing to pay a good value price. 



Part of Hi-Tec's V-Lite trail trainer range.

Hi-Tec