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Brooks-PRI Takes Over Hermos

August 19, 2002 – Semiconductor fabrication plants are the most automated factories in the world. The new generation of fabrication facilities, which make 300mm wafers, are moving towards adopting RFID to track silicon in process. Hermos Informatik GmbH has been one of the leaders in providing RFID systems for tracking wafers, but it lagged its competitors – Asyst Technologies and Omron – in the all-important Asia

region.

Earlier this year, Brooks-PRI Automation, Inc. (NASDAQ: BRKS), a Chelmsford, Mass., company that provides automation technology for the semiconductor plants and related industries, announced plans to purchase Hermos Informatik from the Hermos Group for \$41 million. The deal closed recently. It gives Hermos the resources to expand into Asia and takes Brooks-PRI a step closer to its goal of being able to offer a complete line of automation tools and software for semiconductor fabrication.

Brooks started out as an engineering company focused on robotic systems for the semiconductor industry. In 1996, the company realized that to survive the industry consolidation that was going on, it had to diversify. It began buying up makers of software for managing the automation of the fabs.

As semiconductor makers moved from facilities designed to make 200mm wafers to more advanced fabs for 300mm wafers, they also began moving from infrared identification systems to RFID. Hermos sells readers that are built into the various stations along the semiconductor line. Chips are placed inside front opening unified pods, or FOUPs, which hold cassettes with 20 wafers. The FOUPs are tracked as they move from station to station, which enables managers to know which processes each wafer has gone through.

“We’ve had the hardware to move anything anywhere in the fab,” says Brian Dawson, GM of Brook’s factory interface division. “We had the software to track the processes and to schedule maintenance and optimize the fab. The piece we were missing was the real-time data about where a wafer was when it wasn’t at a station. Hermos has the ability to track wafers at the tools, tracking bays, stockers and even when they are on the shelf.”

Silicon wafers can undergo 500 different processes at tool

stations throughout the plant. And a typical fabrication plant may handle 40,000 wafers per month. Some of the wafers can cost upwards of \$250,000, so tracking them and ensuring there are no errors in the process is critical.

Hermos, based in Mistelgau, Germany, uses TIRIS RFID capsules from Texas Instruments and readers designed for the tool stations. The company also developed the Carrier Management System, or CarMaS, software that acts as the foundation of the tracking system.

Brooks-PRI was working with Hermos to offer the technology to its customers. Hermos has a strong market position in Europe and the U.S., but didn't have the resources to expand in Asia. With much of the industry moving to places like Korea and China, Brooks-PRI felt it would be in a better position if it could sell Hermos's products directly.

"Hermos struggled to have the sales and applications engineering resources in China, Taiwan, Korea and Japan to compete," says Michael Pippins, senior VP of business development at Brooks-PRI. "Brooks brings a large Asian operation that has direct presence in all of those markets and can support and promote the product."

Hermos recently introduced a handheld reader (see photo). The company is now working on enabling a PDA to read tags anywhere in the fabrication plant. "Staff scan the FOUP directly back into the manufacturing execution system and download the process for that FOUP or an individual wafer," says Dawson. "Before you had to go to a process station."

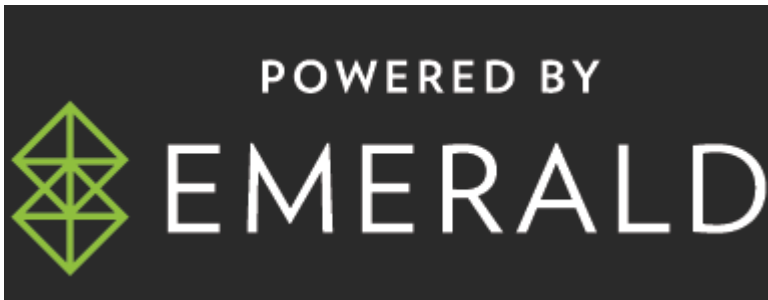
Under the terms of the acquisition, Hermos will continue to be based in Germany. It will assume the Brooks-PRI name, but will continue to sell product under the Hermos brand. Harald Buchmann, Hermos's managing director, will remain on as the head of the unit.



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