

## Germany's Hesitance Slows Technology Cooperation With France

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At the opening this week of Cebit, the European technology fair, President Nicolas Sarkozy of France surprised his hosts by suggesting that France and Germany work together to develop a supercomputer.

But the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, speaking after him, did not mention the offer. And a day later, the German and French economic ministries announced a high-technology partnership without endorsing Mr. Sarkozy's idea.

A year ago, a German-French program to develop a software search engine to rival Google's collapsed. Since then, Germany's wariness of forming a new partnership is just one of the challenges facing Europe as it seeks to compete in technology with market leaders from the United States and Asia.

"An Airbus for the European I.T. industry, that is what we need," said August-Wilhelm Scheer, the president of Bitkom, the leading high-tech industry association in Germany.

The two countries together will spend 258 billion euros (\$392.5 billion) on information technology products and services this year. Mr. Scheer said the failure to coordinate those efforts was a lost opportunity for a continent whose greatest successes — Airbus, the Ariane rocket program and the GSM mobile phone standard — are all more than a decade old.

But rivalries between German and French companies — and financial concerns about committing to open-ended research without assurance of a commercial payoff — could hinder the latest attempt at French-German cooperation, just as they torpedoed the search engine, Quaero. That project, initiated in 2005 by Mr. Sarkozy's predecessor, Jacques Chirac, dissolved last year after the countries could not agree on a common vision for the project.

Taking different paths in joint technology projects is not uncommon for Germany and France. The two countries, for example, have used different approaches in introducing the so-called Vitale cards, national health cards with embedded computer chips to store vital patient information.

France's centralized government structure, which put the design, purchasing and distribution of cards in the hands of government agencies, aided its swift introduction in 2006. That was not the case in Germany, where government is decentralized. There, 250 government health payment agencies are devising their own cards, and German citizens are not expected to get the cards until the end of next year.

"In France, there is more willingness to experiment and to perfect in subsequent generations," said Guido Lenzen, the head of health sales for Sagem Orga, a maker of government health cards and card-reading machines in Paderborn, Germany. "In Germany, the thinking is if you are going to do something, you should do it right and work out all of the bugs first. That has advantages, but it also means things take a while."

At times, that also holds true for decision making in Germany. And one official said the French president's plan to coordinate supercomputer research with Germany may not be dead after all.

Bernd-Wolfgang Weismann, head of the information technology industry division in the German Economics Ministry, said the two countries were in exploratory talks about coordinating their supercomputer projects. But questions about financing a common project need to be clarified first, he said. "Our answer to the French president was not no," Mr. Weismann said. "There is no answer yet."

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