

## French companies' transplants grow in Bay Area

Sasha Vasilyuk, Special to The Chronicle  
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Last year, when Marine Leroux, founder and CEO of mobile application development firm Bamboudesign, decided to drop everything and move her business from Paris to San Francisco, it wasn't for the lack of love for her motherland. "To me, there was just no better place to establish my company than where iPhone was invented," she said. "Here, I knew I could find the most talented people and the best resources. I wanted to be in the middle of it all."

Bamboudesign is one of several hundred French companies that now call the Bay Area home. According to the Consulate General of France in San Francisco, the number of French citizens in Northern California increased from 13,446 in 2000 to 18,056 in 2007, an unprecedented 34 percent jump. Because many don't get registered, officials estimate that number to actually be around 30,000 and will conduct an updated study next month.

"We have seen more incoming French businesses in the last 18 months than in the past," said Carole Granade, who has headed the French American Chamber of Commerce in San Francisco for the past seven years.

Just last year, about 200 French companies paid a visit to the Bay Area, said Gaetan Gachet of Ubifrance, a trade organization that helps French companies with business development abroad.

In fact, their increased presence is having a direct impact on the local economy: French companies employ 63,000 people throughout California, the most of any state.

### French effect on lingo

With so much cultural exchange, it's no wonder the French influence is starting to creep into Silicon Valley's lingo: Remember Google's Super Bowl ad about moving to Paris? And what about all those subtitled "Windows 7 *c'était mon idée*" commercials?

Attracted by the forward-thinking Internet mecca that is Silicon Valley, the French takeover of the Bay Area isn't showing any signs of slowing down, said Phil Jeudy, whose company, Altaide Valley, organizes



weeklong GeekTrip tours for French entrepreneurs interested in establishing local ties.

Just last week, Jeudy, along with dozens of other French entrepreneurs, took over SF New Tech, the city's biggest monthly tech event, for a night of showcasing new Web technologies coming out of Paris, including Tellmewhere, GreenIvory and GrandTweet.

"Many French entrepreneurs were interested in coming to the valley, but they couldn't find an organization that would help them really understand Silicon Valley's ecosystem and how they can benefit from it," said Jeudy, who started his company two years ago. "My goal is to help French entrepreneurs make it here."

That is exactly what this year's GeekTrip participant Thibauld Favre wants for his recently launched company, Allmyapps, a service that makes it easier to install all necessary software on PCs. Favre, who had never been to San Francisco before, said he loved it here after one week.

"All the guys I wait a year to meet at the annual LeWeb conference in Paris are just hanging out here at all these events," he said giddily. "It seems so easy to meet people and do business here."

### **'Stimulating environment'**

Many said expanding a company in France can be hard because of stringent employment laws and the country's small market. In the United States, on the other hand, a startup can expend the same resources to access a much bigger market - and thus faster growth and larger profits. There's also something to be said for the Bay Area's culture of innovation.

"Compared to France, people here are much more enthusiastic about new projects and innovation," said Skander Larbi, founder of Techshower, the first French Web TV and tech news site about the Silicon Valley. "The valley is a very stimulating environment."

It is in search of this stimulation that French entrepreneurs often make several trips to the Bay Area before moving their operations here, said Gachet of Ubifrance's information technology team, which is bringing its own group of French entrepreneurs on the fourth annual French Tech Tour in June.

"Silicon Valley has six to 18 months of advance in the vision of solutions," he said. "They come here to pick up the right ideas and get feedback about their solutions, and then they build big companies in Europe. Once they're big in Europe, they come back and set up their business here."

That's exactly what Vincent Vergonjeanne, founder of the successful social gaming company Kobojo, did this year. Having reached millions of users with a suite of francophone games, Vergonjeanne moved to San Francisco to form distribution deals with local gaming companies. But for him, as for many others, it wasn't just a business decision.

"The charm of this unique city helped make the choice to stay here pretty easy," he said.

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