

Smart household appliances will “communicate” with cell phones and tablets.

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Following the announcement of the **5,000 jobs cut in Europe and North America**, Whirlpool is concentrating again on research and development, and therefore, on the investments. This is the calm after the storm, a message that takes on particular importance on the eve of the first meeting between management and unions, on Thursday 10 November.

Maura Piloni (see photo), the multinational's Vice President for R&D, provides the **identikit** of the household appliances of tomorrow (**in 5–7 years**), which will be programmable by cell phone, will connect to the Internet and care for **the environment**. They will be increasingly similar to tablets, in the way they interface with the Internet, and able to communicate with mobile phones. In a few years, the household appliances in our homes will change image and will have more new functions. “The household appliance sector is extremely dynamic,” Piloni explains. “For this reason, R&D is of fundamental strategic importance. Today's innovators are laying the foundations for market success tomorrow. We're involved in a global competition with extremely high technology content; only those who can to provide something really new and original will be the leaders.”

Today **the main areas of development** in technology for household appliances are **connectivity** (the interaction between products and smart networks), the cutting of consumption, by integrating household appliances, the maintenance of the organoleptic characteristics of food, and the adaptation to changes in habits and lifestyles. For example, there is movement away from the classic concept of the kitchen as a place where food is prepared, to that of a room in its own right, that fits into the sphere of social relationships.

The Whirlpool manager continues. “These are areas in which **Europe** can claim to have an advantage over international competition, thanks to a different cultural sensitivity and unique technological skills. Then, there is creativity, a particularly Italian characteristic that plays a decisive role in this challenge. My job entails close collaboration with **the company's design Centre**, in Cassinetta di Biandromo, near Varese. The technology of house appliances develops hand in hand with the design, which is never a question of just aesthetics, but functionality. In this respect, the house appliance sector is a close relative of the automobile sector. It's clear there is an advantage in being near Milan, one of the fashion capitals of the world, where there is an abundance of design professionals. As I have to contact the Whirlpool Corporation head office every day, I could move to the **US**, but Italy has the right creativity to stimulate innovation in the field of house appliances.”

In seeking to conceive new products, Whirlpool's research and development division, which employs **400 people in Italy, and 4500 throughout the whole world**, works by focusing attention on people's lifestyles, interpreting their expressed or latent needs, and collecting and analysing information from consumers. And on the basis of indications from consumers of electronics, we are developing the interfacing of domestic appliances, which is changing in the

wake of tablet and cell phone developments. What has become a habit in communications products will be reproduced in the home; household appliances will speak the same language as cell phones and tablets, and it will be possible to **activate them by remote control**. From research on users, the company obtains information to start work schedules, and then, technological screening, when the availability of resources and the feasibility of ideas are assessed. The next step for the approved projects is implementation and the start of production.

"The selection procedure is thorough," says Piloni. "On average, **80%** of ideas get eliminated by increasingly selective tests. Whirlpool only brings out products that it considers really innovative, that satisfy three requirements: they need to be unique, have a competitive advantage and have value for the **stakeholders**. If even one of these characteristics is missing, the idea is not innovative".

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