

In Memoriam Jean-Claude Gabus (1950-2003)

On his way to Paris, on March 18, 2003, Jean-Claude Gabus suddenly died from an heart attack at the early age of 52. He was director of FST1, the Fondation Suisse pour les Téléthèses (Swiss Foundation for Rehabilitation Technology), and in this capacity had been involved in RTD projects of the European Union for many years. Only about a week before his sudden death he was in Brussels discussing his ideas for the future of the programme of the Information Society Directorate-General, and talking about the charter he wished to introduce amongst fellow researchers from the Assistive Technology Industry in Europe.



Jean-Claude Gabus spent his childhood in Le Locle. Already as a boy he loved do-it-yourself and had only one interest: repairing damaged everyday objects. In 1972, following some personal experiences that had affected him, he tried to meet people's needs with technological aids. He was hired by the company Carba, where he put to use his first inventions and developed a line of communication-aid products. In less than ten years he had gained recognition for the quality of its products by users, therapists, teachers, parents' associations, and even by the Swiss Invalidity Insurance scheme. His fame already transcended Switzerland's borders. He then created FST on December 16, 1982¹.

In 20 years more than 10,000 disabled and older persons in Switzerland and 6,000 abroad benefited from the FST's services. Among the best-known and most striking innovations there was Hector (1984), the

first apparatus to speak six languages and be programmable according to the user's requirements. Next came James (1986), a revolutionary remote control capable of learning codes to facilitate the control of electronic devices and later on of allowing control of the environment in a wider sense. It was followed by Quo Vadis 1, an installation designed to prevent people subject to wandering (Alzheimer's disease sufferers) from being confined to a restricted space. Then came B.A.BAR in 2000 (an apparatus capable of reading bar codes and speaking with a digitalized voice), whose aim was to facilitate language learning and speech therapy and which opened up new prospects for the use of technical aids. Finally, Quo Vadis 2, which was installed at the psycho-geriatric cantonal hospital of Perreux.

The work of Jean-Claude Gabus would not have been possible without the assistance

of his co-workers, to whom he listened constantly, seeking to make the best of each person's skills. He was also able to win the confidence and support of public and private organizations, both Swiss and foreign, without which the FST would not have been able to develop. He always displayed a tireless spirit of creativity and a sense of human relations that put people before technology. His exceptional qualities earned him nine prestigious awards, including the L'Express prize and that of the Institut Neuchâtelois.

Jean-Claude's enthusiasm and memory will stay with us in the domain of Assistive Technology and Design for All.

Reference

1. www.fst.ch

Laurent Junier, FST President
e-mail: info@fst.ch