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WEATHER Fine and bright

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French firm crosses Channel to the 'land of opportunity'

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Paris

Come the new year, Olivier Cadic is moving himself, his hi-tech software and printing company and 15 of his 25 staff across the sea to a country where small companies can grow and enterprise is rewarded. He is not going to the US; he is coming to Britain, which is increasingly seen by France's young self-starters as Europe's "land of opportunity".

Mr Cadic insists the decision to transfer to Britain is purely economic. Nor, with an annual turnover of 17m francs (£2.1m) "and growing", is his company - Info-Elec - in difficulty; it makes a profit, at the moment. Earlier this year, however, he saw that one of his European competitors, a Scottish company, was offering products similar to his at half the price. He could not believe it. So he went to Britain to have a look and came back "shocked and scandalised".

After comparing charges that must be paid by employers in France and Britain for their workers' health, social security, insurance and job taxes, he calculated his company was being priced out of the market: "Sooner or later, I was going to lose customers, then jobs would have to go, then the company."

The bare figures showed that in France his wage bill was augmented by between 42 and 47 per cent because of government and other

charges. In Britain, for a company of Info-Elec's size, the equivalent figure would be 10 per cent. The difference was between profit of 22 per cent (in France) - less than the savings interest rate and so unattractive to investors - and 8.8 per cent (in Britain), well above the savings interest rate.

That, said Mr Cadic yesterday, gritting his teeth, was before you took into account the much cheaper telephone charges, lower living costs, the

superior level of computer compatibility and servicing, lower income tax, and more flexible working practices in Britain.

Mr Cadic, who founded his firm 14 years ago with his brother Jean-Jacques, says Info-Elec is far from alone in moving either itself or its jobs to Britain. "Others have done it, but they keep quiet about it; it seems like treachery."

The Cadic brothers, though, are intent on spreading the word, De

Gaulle-style, from their British exile. They are starting an information service called, with suitably Gaullist overtones, "La France Libre... d'entreprendre" (roughly translated as Free France - free enterprise) to compile and disseminate information about small business conditions in other European countries.

Of France, he says: "It's as though we were Marie-Jo Perec [France's double Olympic champion] trying to run the 400 metres with a huge ruck-

sack on our back. We may succeed, but we're weighed down all the way round."

His view that others have moved is supported by the Franco-British Chamber of Commerce in Paris. Although they do not keep figures, a spokeswoman said the number of inquiries about moving to Britain to work seemed to have increased significantly in the past two years. "Britain offers a more open society," she offered in explanation.