

Europe's **Commitment** to small businesses



European Commission
DG Enterprise and Industry



Business Support at Your Doorstep

ec.europa.eu/enterprise-europe-network

Europe's commitment to small businesses



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Small businesses are the backbone of the European economy. They are major sources of employment and of innovative goods and services. As such, they fulfil a vital role in our current jobs and growth strategy to help the European economy play to its strengths in an increasingly competitive world.

The new Enterprise Europe Network we are launching this month is a significant initiative to help small and medium sized enterprises develop their full potential and innovative capacity. By offering high quality and cost-effective services, it aims to make such companies more competitive.

The network's particular strength is that it brings together for the first time two dimensions: regions and innovation. These were previously organised separately, forcing would-be clients to go to different addresses and follow separate administrative procedures. Now we are offering a one stop shop solution.

By grouping the services under a single roof, it is possible to reduce bureaucracy and enable all the major players in the business support community to offer their expertise alongside one another. The result is the creation of the broadest range of tailored services in the European Union to help SMEs develop new products and access new markets and to inform them about EU activities and opportunities.

With its extensive expertise and contacts, the network offers practical assistance, whether a company is looking for a business partner in another member state, seeking advice on how to develop an innovative idea or even how to apply for European Research funding.

It will not be starting from scratch. Its many members already have wide-ranging experience of helping small companies to access the information and potential partners they require and of guiding them through what can initially appear to be daunting administrative procedures. This will enable them to provide their services from the very first day.

This initiative is a two-way street. In one direction, the network will help SMEs across Europe, in another, it will serve as a channel to feed back to us in the European Commission the views, experiences and observations of entrepreneurs on the ground. This practical input is extremely valuable for developing policy proposals to best meet the needs of small businesses. I would like to ask companies to make the fullest possible use of this facility so that we can shape our future together.

The network is just the latest example of the importance which I and my fellow Commissioners attach to creating the right business environment in which, we hope, small firms can adapt to change and flourish. Their success will benefit individual entrepreneurs, their employees, customers and suppliers, local communities, and the wider European economy.

I now urge the network to make its presence, and the services it offers, widely known and available to small businesses. I would also like to call on European entrepreneurs to challenge the capacity of the service we have created for all of you to provide the assistance that you need.

Who are we?

- Some 500 organisations, including chambers of commerce, regional development agencies and university technology centres,
- Approximately 4,000 experienced professionals,
- Operations in almost 40 European countries.

Annually, it is expected to:

- Perform 50,000 technology audits,
- Document 1,000 technology audits,
- Organise 4,000 local events and workshops on SME-related topics.



What can we do for you?

Broadest range of services to help, assist and advise SMEs

The network partners supply information on, and help in accessing EU policies, programmes and funding opportunities.

They:

- Assist companies in identifying potential commercial partners, especially in other countries,
- Help SMEs develop new products, to access new markets and to inform them about EU activities and opportunities,
- Advise small businesses on technical issues such as intellectual property rights, standards and EU legislation,
- Act as a two-way street between entrepreneurs and EU decision-makers, relaying views in both directions.

Where are we?

EU 27

Candidate countries:

Turkey, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

EEA countries: Norway, Iceland

Other third countries: Armenia, Israel, Switzerland

ENTERPRISE EUROPE NETWORK

Big support for small businesses

Helping small and medium-sized enterprises to develop their innovative potential and to raise their awareness on Commission policies is the aim of the Enterprise Europe Network. Launched in February 2008, this new European Commission initiative offers entrepreneurs a one stop shop where they can seek advice and benefit from a wide range of easily accessible business support services.

Small businesses, especially in their early stages, often do not have the resources to closely monitor the many different kinds of assistance EU programmes can provide. Nor are they always able to fully assess the innovative and market potential of their products or explore new business opportunities, particularly outside the areas they know well.

The Enterprise Europe Network bridges this gap. With more than 500 contact points and almost 4,000 experienced staff, the network is the largest in Europe providing expertise and services for business. These are available to companies of all sizes irrespective of whether they are in manufacturing or services, although they are primarily directed at SMEs, research institutes, universities, technology centres and business and innovation development agencies.

The network can help clients in their search for business partners, especially in countries other than their own, arrange individual on-site visits to assess a company's needs and provide advice on a broad range of business issues. A well-proven database enables different contact points to remain constantly in touch with each other and to pool partnership offers and requests.

It is not possible to provide funds to firms directly. However, the network can explain the financing possibilities which exist under individual EU programmes.

One shop for all services to boost the knowledge economy

The advantage of the Enterprise Europe Network is that all services are offered under one roof reducing bureaucracy and the confusion which arises when it is unclear to which organisation a particular issue should be addressed.

Technological breakthroughs are crucial to local economic development across Europe. Therefore, the network attaches special attention to encouraging the knowledge community. Innovative processes do not only enable companies to develop new goods and services and reduce costs by improving production techniques, they can also contribute towards energy efficiency – a priority which has risen rapidly up the EU's agenda. Promoting innovation to strengthen Europe's economy is of the utmost importance for the European Commission within its wider Growth and Jobs Strategy under the renewed Lisbon programme.



Experience and professionalism

All the organisations in the new network, with their different backgrounds in business, research and industry, have extensive experience of helping small firms. The majority had already participated in the two previous support networks – Euro Info Centres and Innovation Relay Centres – which had operated for 20 and 12 years respectively.

By welding those earlier services together, and adding additional ones, the new network provides a more integrated approach, particularly as the consortia involved are more extensive than previously.

Not only are greater synergies possible, but the network is also closer to its potential clients. The large number of contact points in each geographical region means that entrepreneurs have business support at their doorstep.



Two-way street between entrepreneurs and EU decision makers

Providing practical assistance and advice to business is only one way the network can help SMEs. It will also strengthen the voice of businesses within the EU's decision-making process. The network can be used as a sounding board, channelling the comments, views and observations of entrepreneurs on the ground back to policy makers in Brussels in order to be fed into discussions on future policy initiatives.



Marco Mangiantini

Tackling forest fires

To limit the damage of forest fires, early and accurate information on the details of any outbreak are essential. A recent partnership between two companies – one Swedish, the other Italian – could provide fire fighters with the effective early warning system they need.

The two are currently developing a cheap and reliable ground-based network sensor that can monitor better than any satellite, 24 hours a day, conditions in forests and send the data back to a central server.

The initial step was taken by the Turin-based company, Minteos, which expressed its interest in a technology offer in 2005. A year later it was in negotiations with Sensible Solutions Sweden AB. Both were assisted by IRC Alps and IRC Northern Sweden. The outcome was an agreement which has led to close technical collaboration to develop an innovative system to detect forest fires by combining Sensible Solutions' knowledge of sensors with Minteos' expertise in communication networks.

Marco Mangiantini, who has been IRC Alps coordinator since 1997, explains that he and his colleagues will have a far broader role in the new network. "So far, we have concentrated on technology transfer. In the future, we will have a wider panorama covering EU legislation and rules and also supporting SMEs in the EC RTD Framework Programme."



Marjeta Trobec

Testing protective equipment

How do you design potentially life-saving equipment, and test its effectiveness, without using human guinea pigs and endangering their lives? That is the challenge which a research institute in Slovenia and a company in Norway are now addressing. The initial trigger for their collaboration came during a lecture at the Jožef Stefan Institute in Slovenia by IRC Norway member, Hans Jørgen Flor, who was on a staff exchange programme at the time. Professor Igor Mekjavič was in the audience.

During their discussions, Mr Flor realised he knew a company in Norway that might be interested in the professor's work in designing highly sophisticated manikins that can be substituted for humans and used to test protective equipment against fire and extreme temperatures. Introductions were made and soon led to collaboration between the Institute and Thelma Inc, a research consultancy in Norway. With the help of their local IRC services, the union has so far led to six successful technology transfers.

Marjeta Trobec of IRC Slovenia explains how the new network will strengthen the work already taking place. "We will have new partners. The consortium will contain all the main players to help SMEs, be more visible and be able to offer a broader range of services."

ENTERPRISE EUROPE NETWORK

* **Raising awareness** and giving advice on EU legislation, standards and policies

Sometimes it can be difficult for companies without the necessary internal resources to remain abreast of changes in EU legislation and policy programmes. The network can provide this data and explain the potential implications for individual companies.

* **Accessing EU projects and funding**

Too often, small businesses are not fully aware of the many different sources of EU financing – regional, social, research, environmental – that exist and for which they are potentially eligible. The network aims to overcome this knowledge gap and ensure companies, either individually or in consortia, are aware of the possibilities available.

* **Providing an internet platform** for cross-border cooperation

Sharing the results of research can trigger new ideas and new opportunities, stimulating firms to develop beyond their initial horizons. The network can help develop these exchanges and nurture potential partnerships.

* **Organising business cooperation among SMEs**

An estimated one million European SMEs could be involved in cross-border trade and investment, if only they could call on the appropriate support services. The network will organise one-to-one match making meetings to help identify trustworthy partners. All requests are treated in confidence. Basic details of would-be link-ups are stored in a business cooperation database. These are widely circulated and easily accessible.

*** Promoting innovation**

To better convert innovation into commercial success, the network provides support services to encourage SMEs, especially in their early stages, to become more innovative. These are either based on existing EU programmes, such as Europe INNOVA and PRO-INNO Europe, or on Member States programmes promoted at regional and national level, or involve exchange of best practice with like-minded businesses.

*** Going international**

Fewer than one in ten SMEs do business outside their own country, despite the abolition of national barriers and the opportunities firms with comparative advantages can find in niche markets. By using established contact points, the network can provide specialised advice for companies wishing to expand their operations abroad – not just within the EU, but also further afield.

*** Providing feedback**

The Commission will use the network to receive regular feedback from companies to ensure that the policies and initiatives it prepares suit their requirements and will not lead to unnecessary bureaucracy that could harm their competitiveness and innovation potential.



Irja Ruokamo

Keeping adults fit and healthy

Children's playgrounds, virtual environments and physiotherapeutic rehabilitation centres might at first glance have little in common. Yet, thanks to some lateral thinking and the help of the IRC network, four companies in Germany, Finland and Spain share an innovative attitude towards toys and are designing products that promote physical exercise in a fun and entertaining way.

The target is to design equipment to be installed in public places that will really motivate adults, and seniors, to move and take exercise, thus improving their overall health. Still at the concept stage, the project is looking to create innovative products that go beyond the traditional items found in gyms and playgrounds.

The lynchpin of the quartet is the Finnish company, Lappset Group Ltd. Via the IRC's Selected Request Group, it was put in touch with the Bavarian firm, SportKreativWerkstatt which was seeking a creative partner. Both wanted to design the intelligent playground of the future that would support educational and physical development and encourage creativity in all its users.

After a successful start, the partnership was later broadened when the Lappset Group introduced the German company to AIJU, a well known private non-profit association in Spain that is involved in technologically innovative products for children.

Looking ahead, Irja Ruokamo of IRC Finland notes: "We will have a more powerful network as we have quite strong partners and we will be able to offer more services and events to our customers."



Steven Amenda

Turning waste to good use

A.G.T. Anlagenvertrieb GmbH, an Austrian company specialising in the development of renewable energy, uses a low temperature conversion thermocatalytic decomposition process to treat waste. After conducting a company audit that highlighted the importance of this particular technology, IRC Austria recognised the business potential the firm possessed and encouraged it to look for partners by participating in IRC-organised brokerage events. At one of these, organised by the IRC Lower Saxony/Saxony-Anhalt in Hanover in 2006, the company came into contact with EnviCont Solution Ltd., a specialist German firm for composting technologies, waste and biomass recycling. Both parties quickly realised they could form a mutually beneficial partnership – AGT had a unique technology and EnviCont could provide access to markets in Eastern and Northern Europe. They quickly signed an agreement. Steven Amenda from the IRC Lower Saxony/Saxony-Anhalt, who, with his Austrian IRC colleague, Bernhard Jauch, helped bring the companies together, believes that the new network will be even more efficient. “We used to work in both the EIC and IRC networks. That meant two separate work plans, which was time consuming. Now, there will be just one, which will make us more efficient.”

Questions and answers



1. What can Enterprise Europe Network do for my company?

The Enterprise Europe Network can help you with developing business activities or technological cooperation, provide advice on support for innovative business and how to access risk finance. It can also explain the opportunities available from EU programmes and funding. All services are offered by each network partner as a one stop shop service for companies. They are mainly directed at start-ups and existing small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), but may also be used by larger companies, research institutes, universities, technology centres and business and innovation development agencies. More than 500 contact points in some 40 European countries are part of the network

2. Can network partners help organise meetings with companies in other European countries?

Yes, network partners regularly organise missions and brokerage events for local SMEs everywhere in Europe and beyond. On the basis of their clients' particular interests, they take care of all the logistics – arrange meetings, provide venues, make travel and accommodation arrangements – to ensure the process of business and technology cooperation runs smoothly.

3. Is European funding available through the network?

The network can provide assistance and advice to enterprises seeking help in looking for debt and risk capital, participating in the various EU funded programmes, particularly those that target SMEs, but does not provide finance directly to companies. The network can also help businesses to exploit the results which stem from European RTD projects.

4. Can the network assist with marketing and commercial transactions?

The network can assist in finding business partners and in the development of cross-border business and technology cooperation between companies or research institutes, but cannot help companies sell their products and services.

5. What about the legal and IPR aspects of technology transfer?

A network partner can advise on intellectual property rights in general. When dealing with complex matters, it will indicate experts, such as the IPR Helpdesk (www.ipr-helpdesk.org) or patent lawyers. The same working method is used for all legal and contractual issues in technology transfers.

6. Does the network handle all types of businesses and technologies?

Yes. Although some partners are focussed on business co-operation, while others specialise in technology transfers, SMEs have local access to both types of services through the one stop shop. Partner organisations can easily forward requests to, and receive information from, colleagues across Europe.

7. Can the network help with business and technology cooperation outside the EU?

Yes. The network has contact points outside the Union as well. Besides the 27 Member States the Enterprise Europe Network has partners in Turkey, the Western Balkans, the EEA countries and other third countries. However, in practice, the vast majority of activities are expected to be within the EU.

8. How can I be sure that the particular organisation I am dealing with is a member of the network?

You can find a list of all network partners at the following address:
<http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise-europe-network>

9. Will my request be treated in confidence?

Yes. Any commercially sensitive information will be treated in confidence. Only data that is specifically linked to your request – for example looking for a business partner in another country – will be made public with your agreement.

10. What about languages?

As the network is present everywhere in Europe, there are no linguistic problems at all and all EU languages can be used. A local network partner may provide linguistic assistance and arrange for accurate translations of documents and interpretation when needed.

11. What to do, if I have difficulties with a particular contact point?

The Executive Agency for Competitiveness and Innovation (EACI) in Brussels, established by the European Commission, is responsible for supervising the network. This role involves network governance and quality control. You can find EACI at the following address:
http://europa.eu/agencies/executive_agencies/eaci/index_en.htm

Need further information? Please visit the following sites:

Enterprise Europe Network

<http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise-europe-network>

Directorate General for Enterprise and Industry policy

<http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/>

Executive Agency for Competitiveness and Innovation (EACI)

http://europa.eu/agencies/executive_agencies/eaci/index_fr.htm

SME-Portal

<http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/sme/>



Committee of the Regions

<http://www.cor.europa.eu>



European Economic and Social Committee

<http://eesc.europa.eu>



European Economic and Social Committee

This brochure and the complete list of network partners are downloadable in the 22 official languages from the Enterprise Europe Network homepage.



