



European Business Support Network dedicated to internationalization of regional economies

Small companies tend to prefer doing business in domestic markets, which restricts their opportunities for growth and sustainability. Roughly two thirds of European SMEs are not yet involved in international business activities and only a small percentage has experience in international business cooperation. Why are small companies so reluctant to take their business abroad?

Small and Medium sized Enterprise (< 250 employees or less than € 50 million turnover) have huge potential to offer in terms of innovation and technology. Yet they seem to have a hard time accessing the supply chain of large procuring companies. To help SMEs release their full potential, twenty-nine European business support organizations, knowledge institutions and regional authorities have teamed up to help regional businesses improve their competitiveness on the European market.

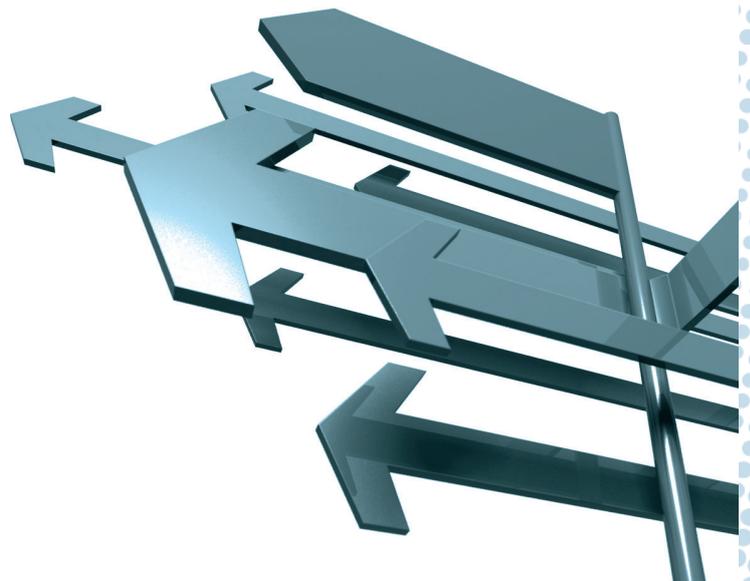
European Networks join forces to support SME internationalization

All twenty-nine partners in the new network are dedicated to the promotion of SMEs. They share one mutual interest: to strengthen their local business communities. Through collaboration in two Interreg (European funded) projects, North Sea Supply Connect and Baltic Supply, the participating business support organizations from eighteen regions in twelve European countries have created the **European Business Support Network (EBSN)**. The aim of this network is to support SMEs in their endeavor to enter the European market.

Small and Medium sized Enterprise: The backbone of European economy

With the recent economic decline that the recent Financial and economic crises have brought about, and the emergence of the competing BRIC-economies, much is at stake to help the European economy recover.

Accounting for over 98% of all business in Europe, Small and Medium sized enterprises (SMEs) establish the backbone of the European economy. They have provided two thirds of the total private employment and around 80% of new jobs created over the past five years.



Unlocking market potential

Dr. Nicolai Lutzky represents German partner HWWI. 'We all recognize that the true opportunities for growth and sustainability lie in internationalization and penetration of foreign markets,' he states. 'These may be as close as the neighbouring country right across the border. Regional business support organisations share the domestic outlook on the market, their SMEs alike, because that's the target group that they know and service. When internationalization of your local businesses is a focal point of your economic strategy, this regional scope does not get us very far. This is why we are reaching out to our partner organizations in other European regions. The knowledge that each partner has of its own regional business community, is an asset to the partners in different European regions. By creating an international network of business support organizations who share a mutual interest, it opens up a huge potential for our regional businesses that remained undisclosed up until now.'



Your Local link to global markets

Caroline Couperus is one of the project managers acting on behalf of the Province of Groningen (The Netherlands). According to Caroline, there are two main Unique Selling Points that set this network apart: 'First of all, each network partner is reliable and independent, because they are all not-for-profit or government organisations. They are solely committed to the reinforcement of their regional business communities. Their impartiality is self-evident.' 'Furthermore', she adds, 'each partner is very accessible for local SMEs; partners are thoroughly integrated in their regional business communities. They are easily available for any local business and, with access to the **European Business Support Network**, they can easily provide information, services or business contacts within another European region to the benefit of local SMEs.'



The supporting slogan for the **EBSN** was chosen with these two unique features in mind: 'Your local link to global markets. 'Being part of a network provides access to nearly unlimited knowledge and resources. In the age of internet, we are all aware of the effect of social media structures like LinkedIn. The **European Business Support Network** operates in much the same way: When you know somebody who knows somebody, you can carry on forever. The **European business support network** is an open network. We welcome Business Support Organisations from all over Europe to join. That's the essence of a network', Caroline concludes.

Contacts, contact, contacts!

In close cooperation, the EBSN has developed a unique service portfolio over the past year. A common trait in many of the services is that they center around the opportunities to meet new business contacts; either through matchmaking events, dedicated database searches or through the attendance of relevant events that are recommended by the network:

'There are truly thousands of business events throughout our regions that are normally just promoted locally or regionally. Many of those events offer added value to foreign SMEs as well, if not only because they offer the chance to meet potential business partners. Being regional business support organizations, all partners are well informed about these events and usually participate in them one way or another. By bringing these trade fairs and conferences to the attention of a wider audience, businesses can take advantage of our local knowledge and matchmaking services', **Jesús Zepeda from the Economic Development Agency in Bremen (WFB)** explains. 'In addition, we will often organize a special program including matchmaking services for the companies that come from abroad to make sure these visits are worth their while.'



Benchmark supply chain competencies

One of the cherished assets that the platform provides is a self assessment tool for companies to benchmark their supply chain competencies. **Dr. Michael Pearson of Edinburgh Napier University**, as partner in the Network, has elaborated an online self assessment tool that assists companies in the process of identifying trans-regional tendering and partnering opportunities. He explains:

'SMEs often encounter great difficulty entering new supply chains. The choice of suppliers by large procuring companies is complex. Suppliers have to meet with a large number of trade and quality standards as well as other demands of their industry.'



After completion of the online questionnaire, the company is given feedback on its strengths and weaknesses with regard to a number of areas of business practice related to the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM). Subsequently, the network partners are available to provide training and advice to improve on those areas. The tool allows businesses to evaluate their performance against the established industry standards of EFQM and Supply Chain 21st Century(SC21).

Find the network online @Eubizz.net!

The service portfolio offered by the European Business Support Network is available online at **eubizz.net**. The website operates as a business development platform for small and medium sized enterprises as well as for business development organizations. The self assessment test for example, can be conducted online by companies who want to benchmark their supply chain competencies, but it can also be used by business support organizations in workshops or during consultancies. BDO's and RDA's can even use the tool to benchmark their entire business community or a specific section of it.

The **eubizz.net** also provides access to the Enterprise Europe Network (EEN) company register, and offers a search tool to specify the type of business contacts any given company is looking for. Companies may also want to insert their own company profiles, so that other businesses can find them. The website offers an overview of relevant B2B events and training and e-learning programs suited to the needs of small businesses. On eubizz.net, businesses can locate network partners in their region and the services that they offer.



Collaboration with Enterprise Europe Network

Besides the twenty-nine business support organizations, the network also liaises with the Enterprise Europe Network which is another European initiative that supports SMEs internationalization. The Enterprise Europe Network and the **European Business Support Network** are working towards a similar goal: create new business opportunities for innovative SMEs. The **European Business Support Network** complements the Enterprise Europe Network by adding a regional and cluster-specific focus as well as enabling more direct contact with companies to support the EEN services like matchmaking and business search.



The EEN, as it is abbreviated, works with Local Contact Points in each European country as well as abroad e.g. China, the USA and Mexico. The European Business Support Network creates a link to the EEN company register which is famous for its accuracy and detail. The so called "Searching for international business partners" service is offered in cooperation with EEN. The European Commission in its Communication paper from November 2011 suggested this kind of cooperation (for the first time?) and the **EBSN** is a pioneer in this approach. The cooperation between EEN and EBSN had already started in the summer of 2011.

Future ambitions

The lessons learned from establishing the **European Business Support Network** are also very useful for policy makers and people involved in the EU programs 2014-2020. Funding for SMEs should be more easily accessible than it is at the moment. Also, intermediate organisations could increase their efforts with regard to exchanging experience between SMEs and procuring companies.

The partnership behind the **European Business Support Network** is looking for new partners to expand and enhance the network in the future. Potential partners and networks, like business development organisations, industrial associations and cluster organisations are welcomed to express their interest in future cooperation.



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