



Encouraging SMEs by example

The Specific Measures for SMEs were introduced into the EU RTD Framework Programme to encourage more SMEs to do research, thus increasing the competitiveness of a category which forms the backbone of the EU's plans to create innovation and employment. Other publications have shown the measures' success through statistics; two new collections make the same point through lively case studies.



Descriptions of EU research funding programmes, however clear, can be hard for busy managers to digest. For managers of SMEs, pulled in many different directions and possibly inexperienced in innovation, the communication gap can be especially large.

Case studies about real companies are a good way to boost the believability factor, and that's the job of two collections, each of 25 project sheets, which show how smaller companies have benefited from EU R&D support. With a narrative that shows the human element behind a successful new product, a well-written case study draws readers in and encourages them to say: "Perhaps we could do something like that".

Measures that work

SMEs play a key role in Europe's competitiveness, both as employers and as sources of innovation. But those working in high-tech areas, which require heavy investment in research, may find it hard to match their larger competitors, while those in more traditional sectors often think that new ways are not for them.

SMEs with their own research capacity can take part, alongside larger companies and research centres, in the European Commission's collaborative research schemes. And for SMEs with little or no in-house research capacity there is CRAFT, under which three or more SMEs from at least two member or associated states join forces to commission research from specialist subcontractors. Europe pays up to half the costs, and the SMEs own the results.

Established five years ago, the SME Specific

Measures have already aided some 10,000 SMEs. They seem to be reaching the right people: a study found that two-thirds of participants were newcomers to European-level research, and almost as many were new to co-operative research at any level. Over half the firms were in manufacturing, and two-thirds employed fewer than 50 people. Best of all, 96% were satisfied with their experience and said they would join other EU research projects in future.

Real companies and real people

So much for statistics, but what about the believability factor? That's where the case studies come in. Each is an A4 sheet printed on both sides, with text written in lively journalistic style, a couple of photos and a box for contact information. Each folder also contains a one-page introduction to SME support and an index sheet.

Reflecting the need to modernise Europe's manufacturing - it was the BRITE-EURAM programme that was the first to discriminate in favour of SMEs in this way - nearly half the projects fall under the heading of Industrial Processes. The rest are quite evenly distributed among the main research areas of Medicine and Health, Agriculture & Food, Environment, Energy and Information Society, with just one relating to Transport.

Many of the manufacturing projects took place in very traditional industries - marble quarries, furniture factories, laundries - and the level of technology they developed ranges from moderate to high. One project, which became so famous that it featured on the front page of the *Financial*

Times, has worked wonders with an apparently simple domestic tool. It came up with a way of microwaving wine corks which could save Europe's winemakers as much as half a billion euros a year in 'corked' produce. Another developed an improved control system which prevents windmills from overloading the electricity grid in gusty weather. By bringing a stable power supply to remote Donegal in Ireland, it is supporting the whole rural economy.

Other projects appear so high-tech that it is perhaps a tribute to the Framework Programmes that they can be carried out by SMEs at all. Two examples are both from the medical sphere: artificial corneas, and semi-artificial pancreases for diabetics. Not surprisingly, the timescale for developing a commercial product is longer for projects like these, but they stand a good chance of eventual success.

All in all, the profiles are an excellent way to highlight the successes of measures that have been genuinely important in boosting Europe's competitiveness. The brochure *Taking the opportunity!* which is published simultaneously, explains in 12 pages the various forms of help SMEs can get to participate in European research.

Information

Research results for SMEs - I
KI-28-00-971-[EN][FR][DE]-C
Research results for SMEs - II
KI-28-00-979-[EN][FR][DE]-C
English, French, German, 25 sheets + folder per set, free of charge

Taking the opportunity! Innovation and research - European support for small companies
ISBN 92 828 9408 8 (EN)
English, French, German, 12 pp. free of charge

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