

## BECAUSE EVEN SMALL BUSINESSES DESERVE A CHANCE FOR CHANGE

### HIGHLIGHTS

Opening the pages of the "Pirkanmaan Historia", a book on the history of Tampere, we read: "The history of Tampere spans almost 10,000 years. Much has happened during this time, both major changes and unexpected events. Still, the evolution of the region has been part of a natural process, easy to understand: there is a background for every event. Today, Tampere is a prosperous and highly developed region, one that is ready to carry on the process, sometimes changing course but never stopping". This is how Tampere, the third biggest city of Finland and the second largest regional centre behind Helsinki, is seen by its inhabitants: an attractive city with plenty of drive, a place for new ideas!

During the mid-19th century, the Finlayson cotton mill was built alongside the Tammerkoski Rapids and a whole industrial community grew up around it. The community constituted the heart of the Finnish cotton industry, exporting the majority of its output to nearby Russia. Tampere also became the leading centre for the Finnish bricks and mortar industry, and a major centre for commerce and transportation. This prosperous heavy industry and textile sector began to quieten down though during the 1960s, when production started moving away from the area. And by the 70s and 80s, they had completely come to a halt due to structural change. But Tampere did not give up. Today, the old factories form a busy and bustling part of the city as most of them have since been adapted and created new business areas. Today, traditional heavy industries have taken on new technologies and businesses models, leading to strong, internationally competitive areas of competence. The best-known of these is the Finnish brand, Nokia, which has settled in the Tampere region, merging local, traditional industries with new information technologies.

But even if the bigger companies like Nokia have managed to adapt to change, it has been a tougher challenge for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). Without large resources behind them, these smaller businesses have often struggled to respond to the new requirements of a changing marketplace and have been fearful of the competition posed by bigger companies. Given this situation, the *Making a Change a Chance* project, has quite rightly chosen to focus on SMEs as part of the EQUAL initiative.



*Making a Change a Chance*, managed by the Institute for Extension Studies at the University of Tampere, together with the Federation of Enterprises in the Tampere Region and Finn-Medi Research Ltd., has been working to develop the readiness and flexibility of SMEs to respond to changes in the Finnish economy through innovative and comprehensive approaches. Three sub-projects have been especially designed by the project to improve the adaptability of firms by raising the skills and "readiness for change" of their most vulnerable workers.

These sub-projects are therefore particularly well aligned with the European Employment Guidelines insofar as they wish to foster the synergies between quality at work, productivity and employment. Furthermore, they are working to develop active and preventive labour market measures, including the early identification of needs, guidance and training as part of personalised action plans, as well as providing services to support the inclusion and adaptability of enterprises and their workforce.

As Minna Miettinen, project manager of *Making a Change a Chance*, puts it: "We hope that SMEs will be able to create their own business strategy and maintain their personnel. We give them the opportunity to be more flexible, have new skills. We give them a chance to meet with other companies so that they can create a network and tackle together common problems. In other words, we hope that SMEs participating in this project will have a better future!"

## **BUILDING A NEW APPROACH ON SOLID FOUNDATIONS: THREE IDEAS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF SMEs**

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An interesting aspect of *Making a Change a Chance* is that it has evolved from and built upon a Round 1 project, albeit with some changes to the partnership structure and objectives. The four-way model, 4T project, was also managed by the Institute for Extension Studies at the University of Tampere, and was the biggest EQUAL project in Finland under the Adaptability theme at the time. The project's aims were broadly similar to *Making a Change a Chance*: helping SMEs to develop their own business competences in a comprehensive way, maintain their competitiveness, and adapt to the demands of the new economy.



However, the innovation of *Making a Change a Chance* in comparison with four-way model, 4T can be seen in the originality of its structure. Three sub-projects - Learn, Adapt and Renew, Work Capability and Contact - have been especially designed to give an all-embracing service to SMEs facing structural change. Each sub-project has its own specific features, and emphasises and addresses different competences within SMEs, namely their competence to operate, renew, make plans and work together. This tripartite approach enables the specific know-how of each project partner to be exploited as they are each responsible for the implementation of a specific sub-project.

"The innovation of the project is that the partners work both separately and together. In this way, we are able to reach more SMEs and enhance the impact of the project. This is the secret of our strength!" says Anneli Sorkio, project assistant for *Making a Change a Chance*

Thanks to the two rounds of the EQUAL Initiative, *Making a Change a Chance* has been able to take advantage of the experience of its predecessor. This combination of continuity and innovation has therefore ensured a kind of "intra-Round mainstreaming", which has brought clear benefits to all those involved.

## **LEARNING HOW TO ADAPT AND RENEW YOUR COMPANY**

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The Institute of Extension Studies at the University of Tampere has been responsible for Learn, Adapt and Renew, a sub-project aimed at improving the professional skills, motivation and management knowledge of service-sector SMEs. The Institute has been a leading academy for adult education since its foundation in 1970 and therefore well placed to lead this sub-project. This lead role has entailed providing training to SMEs to help them in setting up an effective management plan and a valid strategy to address critical changes in the economy. One group of eight SMEs has so far been trained since September 2005, with the total target being 20.

The training itself has consisted in 10 one-day courses and seminars focusing on different topics, spread over one year. Among the widespread list of subjects covered, there has been managerial support, proactive leadership, tacit knowledge transfer, and internal communication skills. One day has also been dedicated to individual workshops whereby each company can set up its own and personalised development strategy, and review, together with the trainers, what they have learned during the previous sessions.

One of the participating companies has been Hakasen Leipomo, a 55-year old bakery. Hakasen Leipomo had extensive experience of conducting business prior to the training, but in the words of its manager, Marketta Hakanen: *"Even a bakery has to face the tumult of environmental change, and concentrate more and more on introducing new business systems, operations and strategies"*. She admits that *"when we started, these issues were not really talked about, nor was there any knowledge or awareness about Information Technologies...Keeping up with international competition requires continuous updating of know-how and increasing specialisation. For this reason, this sort of development project provides the ideal support for the development of our business"*.

## **A WELLNESS CHAIN TO IMPROVE WELL-BEING AT WORK**

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The second sub-project developed by *Making a Change a Chance* has been called Work Capability and been led by Finn-Medi Research Ltd., an organisation offering expertise and services in the field of health technology. While Learn, Adapt and Renew has focused more on developing a strategic plan for SMEs, this sub-project has concentrated more on workers with three distinguishing features: being at risk of marginalisation, with reduced work capability or strong rehabilitation needs. Overall, Work Capability has been conceived as a "package of services" that can be provided to companies who wish to maintain the functional capability of their staff and improve the well-being of their employees at work.

Before starting the training, an assessment of the specific training needs of each SME is undertaken via a questionnaire. The questionnaire is filled in by each of the employees who are asked whether they agree or disagree with statements relating to their perception of the workplace; for example, *"I have lately enjoyed coming to work"*, *"I get on well with my boss and colleagues"* or *"My workplace is well organised and it does not cause any physical problems"*. The questionnaire is especially designed to give an all-encompassing picture of the employees' well-being at work and to point out any potential problems.

A total of 15 enterprises have been involved in Work Capability, receiving tailor-made training on subjects such as ergonomics, occupational health, health-related fitness and occupational safety. But more than this: Work Capability has also offered services within the workplace such as workplace adaptations and health-enhancing physical activities for employees, based on collaboration between the employee and a physiotherapist.

Ilkka Saarnio, project manager of Work Capability, highlights that: "Health and Safety is becoming more of an issue in Finland. More and more companies are thinking about this topic and becoming more aware of the problems that employees, especially the older ones, can encounter in the workplace. What we do is try to develop a new approach to well-being at work that can be seen as a model or a service for SMEs. We want to put in place a wellness chain, a sustainable process that will bring benefits to companies even after EQUAL".

## **TAKING CARE OF THE SMALLEST ONES**

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Last but not least comes Contact. This sub-project, managed by the Federation of Enterprises in the Tampere Region, has been particularly conceived to help the smallest and most at-risk companies in the area. Micro-enterprises have been a particular target group for this sub-project for several reasons. Firstly, these firms usually don't have time to think about developing opportunities, secondly they are not familiar with how to develop their business services, and thirdly, they are not used to asking for help - as their concept of consultancy is generally an old-fashioned one. Contact has therefore developed a delivery method that responds exactly to this "micro-enterprise profile", a method that consists of training that is tailor-made, bite-sized (ranging from half a day to a few days of consultation per company), easy to start with, and finally cheap.

After the first contact with the enterprise, a short but intense training plan is set up. Informed by this plan, the subjects are made as near to "reality" as possible, responding to the actual needs of the companies; marketing, time-management, electronic invoicing and taxation are among the most common of these subjects.

## MAKING THE CHANGE VISIBLE AND MEMORABLE

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*Making a Change a Chance* partners are not only busy with developing their sub-projects, but are also heavily focused on disseminating the outcomes of their work. And to this end, they have developed an impressive mainstreaming plan, a plan that also conveys the number three! Three, as in the number of audiences that Making a Change a Chance is trying to reach: one, all the project partners, two, the final beneficiaries, and three, the social actors and policy makers interested in the project's outcomes.

Across these three audiences and underpinned by the plan, the project has been extremely active and inventive in making its results visible. The "professional steering group" is one good example of this. This group has comprised key project representatives, as well as experts from different business sectors and SME staff. This combination of group members has meant that the current situation in the region and the future needs of SMEs can be debated, discussed and ultimately linked. What is more, by posing critical questions, the links can draw directly on the experience of EQUAL, questions such as: What will SMEs need in the future? What kind of products and actions will the project have to design to fulfil these needs? What kind of actions can policy makers offer to companies? Answers to these questions not only help to highlight potential mainstreaming opportunities for the project, but they also provide a positive environment for the experts to offer guidance and advice directly to the SMEs that are present in the group meetings.

Talking of SMEs, the Federation of Enterprises is by far the best actor to reach this target group. And it has done so by, for example, organising an annual entrepreneur event called "Karonkka". The event brings together more than 3,000 of the Federation's members from across Tampere region and has the "Entrepreneur of the Year" award ceremony as its centrepiece. At the last event, the biggest held in Scandinavia, Making a Change a Chance did not go unnoticed. It set up a stand brimming with information on on-going training, brochures and other dissemination materials to promote the wide range of activities and services provided by the project.

But the project's promotional activities have not stopped there. Aside from events, the project has also reached SMEs through the publication of newsletters, brochures, newspapers and a wide set of gadgets including notebooks, pencils and candies. A magazine called *Muutos Voimaksi* (Making a Change a Chance in Finnish) has been published twice and distributed to all the enterprises participating in the different sub-projects. Information on both EQUAL and the project has also been published in the Federation of Finnish Enterprises' newspaper "Pirkanmaan Yrittäjä" (Entrepreneurs in the Tampere Region). Pirkanmaan Yrittäjä is by far the largest Finnish newspaper focusing on entrepreneurship. It is not just mailed to the members of the Federation, but also 155,000 copies go to every household in Tampere and the surrounding municipalities, 11 times a year.

All of the above illustrates how well the project has been communicating with partners and its SME target group, but what about the public at large? This public has by no means been forgotten, in fact Making a Change a Chance has already organised two Non-stop Days, kind of thematic seminars targeted at wider audiences. The themes of these Non-stop Days have been directly linked to the four SME competences on which the project is based, namely competences in: devising strategies, adapting new skills, operating day-to-day business, and working together inside and between companies.

The first Non-stop Day, held in November 2005 in Tampere, was called "Know and Succeed - a good manager supports training" and focused on modern models of leadership based on the development of the knowledge and skills of staff. An excellent way of illustrating these models - and of course promoting the Day - was by inviting a famous Finnish ice hockey coach, Mr. Juhani Tamminen, to share his experience of teamwork.

Teamwork of another kind has come in the form of participation in the European Commission's showcase event: Employment Week. All of project staff and partners pulled together to have a stand at the event, which provided a great opportunity to meet policy makers and practitioners at European, national, regional and local levels, as well as to build relationships with peers and potential partners.

So where have all of these promotional materials, group meetings, events and gadgets been leading? The goal of this all-embracing and integrated communication approach is clear, as Minna Miettinen says: "*We want people to remember our project!*" A project therefore that is both visible and memorable!

As a whole, the partners of *Making a Change a Chance* have designed and put in place an integrated and innovative approach to supporting the adaptability of companies in Finland. The project is undoubtedly a success bringing constructive and concrete solutions to tackle the needs of SMEs, and raise the skills and well-being of their most vulnerable workers. This innovative approach is coupled with an extremely effective mainstreaming strategy supporting the participation of all the partners and ensuring the visibility of the EQUAL initiative around the country.

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