

Helping businesses grow

A 'good practice guide' for business support organisations





EUROPEAN COMMISSION

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A 'good practice guide' for business support organisations

Directorate-General for Enterprise

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The contents of this brochure do not necessarily reflect the views of the Enterprise DG.

Where this brochure refers to support to enterprises, it should be understood that such support is only acceptable if it is given in accordance with the provisions on State aid in the EC Treaty (particularly Articles 87 and 88) on the compatibility of the State aid with the common market.

State aid provided to enterprises has to comply with terms and conditions defined by the Commission's competition policy in regulations, frameworks, guidelines, notices and other texts concerning various sectors (motor vehicles, synthetic fibres industry, etc.) or having various horizontal objectives (subsidies to SMEs, research and development, environment, etc.).

State aid helping businesses suffering from financial difficulties may in particular be subject to the Community guidelines on State aid for rescuing and restructuring firms in difficulty (OJ C 288, 9.10.1999).

Other brochures addressing business support measures:

Helping businesses start up

Helping businesses overcome financial difficulties

Further information can be obtained from:

European Commission

Directorate-General for Enterprise

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A great deal of additional information on the European Union is available on the Internet. It can be accessed through the Europa server (<http://europa.eu.int>).

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Introduction by Erkki Liikanen

Member of the European Commission
responsible for enterprise and
the information society

A dynamic economy needs new inputs in the form of new ideas, new products and processes and the enthusiasm and skill of new entrepreneurs. Encouraging the creation of new businesses is therefore an important part of the enterprise policy of the European Union and of the Member States. But a dynamic economy also requires the continuing and successful growth of these new businesses, together with the consistent development of existing enterprises. It needs to use the accumulated experience and resources of existing enterprises to help create new markets, introduce innovation in all its forms and make the organisational changes that are necessary in responding to the challenges of the modern economy.

At the Lisbon European Council in March 2000, Europe's leaders set a very clear objective: that of making Europe 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world' over the course of the decade.

Achieving this objective requires many changes and improvements in the way that our economy and society operate, but one of the areas where public authorities and agencies can have most impact is in the improvement of the environment in which enterprises are created and develop their activities. It is by creating the right environment that enterprises will have the best chance to launch their activities and subsequently thrive.

This means having the right regulatory framework, but it also means having the right support structures and organisations and operating them in an easily accessible and efficient way.

Business support organisations have a vital role. If they provide the information and advice that their clients really need efficiently and effectively, they can make a crucial difference to the performance and success of a significant section of the enterprise population. It is for this reason that in the European charter for small enterprises (1), there is a commitment to providing 'top-class business support'.

There are some very good support services to be found in all parts of Europe. Our aim is to help bring the general level of provision up to that of the existing best. To this end, and in agreement with the Member State authorities, the Commission launched a project on business support services under the 'Best procedure' established by the multiannual programme on enterprise and entrepreneurship (2). This project has resulted in a series of conclusions which give guidelines on creating the top-class support services referred to in the European charter.

In publishing this sequel to our earlier publication 'Helping businesses start up' (3), we are drawing together cases of good practice that have been presented in a series of events organised by the Commission and the Member States over the last few years. This good practice has formed the basis for the Commission's conclusions on improving support services. It also has the merit of demonstrating in an obvious and graphic way how some of the principles enunciated in the guidelines can be put directly into practice.

The European Union is increasingly making use of best practice exchange as a flexible policy instrument for improving the general performance of various aspects of the European

(1) Text available at:
http://europa.eu.int/comm/enterprise/enterprise_policy/charter/index.htm

(2) Council Decision 2000/819/EC of 20 December 2000 on a multiannual programme for enterprise and entrepreneurship, and in particular for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (2001-05).

(3) European Commission 'Helping businesses start up. A good practice guide for business support organisations', ISBN 92-828-9316-2. Text also available in all Community languages at: http://europa.eu.int/comm/enterprise/entrepreneurship/support_measures/start-ups/helping.htm

economy. I am very pleased to recommend this publication to business support organisations and others concerned with enterprise policy as a practical demonstration of how we can all learn from the diverse experience of practitioners across the continent for the mutual benefit of all.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "E. von Weizsäcker".

Helping businesses grow

A 'good practice guide' for business support organisations

The changing nature of support service provision

Helping enterprises to develop their business activities, particularly at important turning points over the course of their life cycle, is the central task of business support organisations. The services that they provide are many and various, but, in almost every case, they essentially concern the provision of information and advice to entrepreneurs and business managers.

There is evidence that good business support can make a measurable contribution to the competitiveness and dynamism of a modern economy. There are certainly many individual enterprises that can testify that assistance from support organisations has made a critical difference to their business operations at significant points in their development. There is an increasing interest, therefore, as a matter of public policy, in ensuring that business support is as effective as possible.

The European charter for small enterprises, endorsed by the Feira European Council in June 2000, includes among its commitments to small enterprises a call for the promotion of top-class small business support.

In the last few years, business support organisations across Europe have initiated a process of change that is radically transforming the nature of the services provided and the way that they are delivered.

These changes are being driven by major economic and political developments, which include the impact of the

knowledge economy, with new applications of information and communications technology, and the continuously increasing pressures of globalisation. In addition, in a situation where there are constant calls on public authorities to review their expenditure and evaluate their initiatives, there is a growing appreciation of the extent of resources dedicated to support provision and an increasing tendency to require providers to demonstrate the efficiency and effectiveness of their services.

But importantly, changes in support services are also being driven by the dedication and professionalism of the staff that deliver them. Staff are generally very willing to develop ideas and to learn from their own experience and that of others.

Exchanging good practice

The European Commission, along with the Member State authorities, have been tracking these changes in a series of forums and seminars that have examined good practice in support service provision. Initially under the concerted action programme (1994–2000) and more recently as part of the 'Best procedure' project on business support services, a series of events have brought together support service practitioners and officials with responsibilities in the relevant areas in a structured programme which has examined the changing nature of the services provided on the basis of a systematic presentation of good practice. The initial results of this process were described in a report to the Council and European Parliament ⁽⁴⁾.

In the earliest phase of the work, there was a concentration on support for business start-ups, which gave rise to the earlier collection of good practice cases, published as 'Helping businesses start up' ⁽⁵⁾.

A forum in Baden near Vienna in September 1998 launched the work on growing enterprises. This initial event took a broad view of support for growth, looking at training issues

⁽⁴⁾ 'Report on concerted action with the Member States in the field of enterprise policy', COM(1999) 569 final of 9.11.1999.

⁽⁵⁾ See footnote 2.

and access to finance as well as at promoting networking through business cooperation. Subsequent events looked at more specific issues. A forum in Helsinki in September 1999 examined 'Rapid growth and competitiveness through technology'. There was also a series of highly focused seminars that examined how support services were responding to particular aspects of the changing economy. The themes treated were:

- the impact of the Internet (Paris, January 1999)
- support services in the face of globalisation (Copenhagen, January 2000)
- more strategic conceptions both of business and of support services (Athens, May 2000).

More recently in March 2001, reactions to the wider aspects of the 'new' or 'knowledge' economy were considered in a forum on 'Entrepreneurship for the future' at Växjö, in Sweden.

Finally, the general conclusions from all this work and a set of guidelines were prepared for a forum in Cardiff in October 2001 on 'Top-class business support services'.

Reports on all these events are to be found on the Commission web site at:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/enterprise/entrepreneurship/support_measures/reports_studies.htm

Summaries (in English) of individual cases presented at these events can also be found in a database on good practice to be accessed through:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/enterprise/entrepreneurship/support_measures/index.htm

The cases of good practice highlighted in this brochure aim to draw attention to the vast amount of good practice in this area, although, of course, they can represent only a small proportion even of those set out in the reports. Furthermore, in this publication only a short summary of the cases can be presented. For each good practice therefore, a reference is provided to further information, both in the reports on particular forums and seminars and in the web sites of the organisation concerned.

The 26 cases presented are, however, intended to give a representative overview of the issues that arose in the course of the exchanges that took place. They are also closely related to the guidelines on creating top-class business support services, published by the Commission ⁽⁶⁾.

The issues identified

It was apparent at an early stage in the work on identifying good practice that support for growing enterprises was nothing like as systematic as support for start-ups. The Baden Forum, for instance, demonstrated that training provision, specifically for enterprise managers facing the problems of growth, was in need of substantial development both in conceptual terms and in application.

None the less as work progressed, it also became clear that considerable developments were under way both to fill specific gaps and, more generally, to develop a more systematic approach to support service delivery covering all phases of an enterprise's development. In fact, in many Member States substantial reorganisation of support services was under way, providing more coherent structures and, in most cases, reflecting a more conceptually rigorous approach.

As this picture emerged it was supplemented by fascinating detail on how support providers were addressing particular problems, especially those arising from the application of information and communications technology and other aspects of the 'new' economy. Often there was reference back to issues that had arisen in earlier events and it was evident that there was a certain consistency in the responses being adopted. In order to do justice therefore both to the interrelated nature of the issues that arose and to the consistency in the responses of support organisations and public policy, the cases presented below are ordered according to theme rather than according to the event in which they were presented. In this way, the strong messages that are apparent in the recurring themes from several different events can be presented more forcefully.

⁽⁶⁾ Commission Staff Working Paper 'Creating top-class business support services' SEC(2001) 1937. Text available at: http://europa.eu.int/comm/enterprise/entrepreneurship/support_measures/index.htm

An initial message is that growing enterprises have needs that are different in important respects from those of businesses in other phases of their development. They need to identify and remedy weaknesses in established practices. They need to identify new opportunities and the possibilities in new or expanding markets. They often need to take much greater account of the pressures of the modern economy, the implications of changing technology, processes of global competition and the complexities of relationships with business partners and other influences on the environment in which they operate. They generally need to develop a much more strategic approach to their management.

The examples of good practice presented below illustrate how many agencies involved in business support are providing services that can help enterprises manage issues that are particularly characteristic of the growth phase. None the less, in the course of the work identifying good practice, there was constant reference to an underlying approach or methodology that applies generally to support services for any kind of enterprise. This approach emphasised the importance of providing consistent and coherent support focused on helping enterprises to build their capacity to manage their development and growth. In many respects this means that business advisers, working for or with the support agencies, need to take on a role that is closer to that of a tutor or trainer than has been the case in the past. It also means taking a broad view of the 'health' of an enterprise rather than exclusively concentrating on the immediate problem. There are, therefore, a number of cases presented, particularly in Section 1, that illustrate these new core services that focus on management capacity building.

Clearly though, with the major changes taking place in the nature and structure of the modern 'new' economy, many of the cases presented as good practice relate to very topical issues that successful modern firms have to address, from the effective use of ICT to more effective networking. Even here, however, the effective integration of core and specialised services should be noted.

Finally, support organisations are increasingly seeing their activity in the context of general economic development, particularly at a regional level. In some senses their role is getting closer to that of regional development agencies, but however this is perceived the cases in the final section illustrate, business support organisations can certainly play a role in promoting economic development by cooperating effectively with other development agencies.

The challenge to business support organisations

The cases set out in this publication are deliberately presented as 'good practice', that is, practice that appears to illustrate an approach to a current development in business support that deserves the attention and interest of practitioners. The cases have been nominated by Member State authorities or by other professionals and have been considered and discussed by an informed audience at one of the events organised for this purpose. They are not necessarily 'best practice', in the sense of a practice that objectively out-performs all others, when measured against agreed criteria. Indeed their purpose is to inspire further change and 'better practice' among business support professionals who increasingly appreciate that they have to judge their own performance by looking beyond local circumstances, and even national boundaries, to that achieved by their counterparts elsewhere in the world. To improve performance by constantly making comparisons with the performance of others — that is the challenge to business support organisations. The purpose of this document is to facilitate a response to this challenge.



26 examples of good practice

Developing support services to provide real help for growing enterprises begins with improvements in the core advice and information services of support agencies. Increasingly, advice is provided on the basis of a more systematic and consistent approach that aims to help enterprises to continuously strengthen their own management capacity. This is supported by information provision that takes advantage of the latest technology.

The next step is to ensure that enterprise development can be supported by appropriate training and that access to finance is facilitated on the right terms. Support agencies must then make certain that they are keeping abreast of the changing business environment in which enterprises operate and developing new aspects of their services that can help their clients to strengthen their competitive position in areas that are characteristic of a modern economy, such as using information technology effectively, developing their networks or addressing the question of intangibles.

Finally, effective support of growing enterprises increasingly requires recognition of the beneficial interdependence of enterprises, in supply chain relationships, for instance, or in activity clusters. By developing services for groups of enterprises, support agencies are making an increasing contribution to general economic development, particularly at a regional level.

The following examples from across Europe illustrate in practical terms how business support organisations are rising to the challenge of providing coherent and high-quality support services for growing enterprises in the four areas just outlined.



Dissemination of good practice results

Developing the core services of business support organisations

Cases of good practice presented in the events organised by the European Commission and the Member State authorities made it clear that a restructuring of support services was taking place in a number of European countries with the aim of providing a more coherent set of services that can be delivered more consistently. Frequently this was based on the conception that such services should attempt to help enterprises to build within their management the range of core competencies that are necessary for running successful modern businesses.

At the same time there are clearly important advances taking place in the provision of information — the other central activity of many business support organisations. In a world where business information is both more necessary and more abundant, providing efficient access to accurate sources of such information is a task of considerable importance.

1. Integrated support services

Issue

Support service providers are moving beyond the concept of the 'one-stop-shop' to a real and coherent integration of the full range of support services, based on a more strategic perception of clients' needs and on the aim of offering global solutions to their problems.

Good practice

Since 1998, Enterprise Ireland has brought together the functions of three former national agencies to offer an integrated service to SMEs. Clients are encouraged to develop a global view of their operations by analysing all the dimensions of their business (marketing, finance, human resources, technical aspects, etc.) in a comprehensive way. In this, the emphasis is on identifying and delivering solutions by building competencies rather than on the provision of piecemeal support. Specialist staff in human relations, marketing, engineering, etc. play a supportive role in achieving an overall solution. The approach is reinforced by strong links with other agencies and educational institutions at a regional level and strategic measures to improve the business environment of the regions.

Organisation

Enterprise Ireland

Sources of further information

Report: 'The Irish experience'
Final report of Athens seminar on
'Best practices in strategic support services
for SMEs'

Internet: <http://www.enterprise-ireland.com>

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2. Consistent application of the management capacity building approach

Issue

Upgrading management capacity has to be continued as an ongoing process.

Good practice

PIPE2000 is a major initiative coordinated by the Spanish Import-Export Institute (ICEX) and the Council of the Spanish Chambers of Commerce and supported by the central and regional governments. The aim of the initiative is to improve Spanish export performance by helping first-time exporters to upgrade their management capacity. The intention is to establish this as an ongoing process. There is a rigorous selection of firms entering the scheme which begins with a training schedule based on an assisted self-learning programme and experience sharing with other firms. In the second stage a consultant is attached to the company for a total of 80 hours over eight months in order to stimulate the development of the firm's strategic capacity. In the final phase enterprises concentrate on an increase in foreign sales.

Organisation

Spanish Import-Export Institute (ICEX) and the Council of the Spanish Chambers of Commerce

Sources of further information

Report: 'The Pipe2000 Programme'
Final report of the Copenhagen seminar
'SME support services in the face of
globalisation'

Internet: <http://www.icex.es/pipe2000.html>

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3. Targeted services for particular types of SME

Issue

A comprehensive provision of support does not mean a uniform provision. On the contrary, it allows better targeting of services to take account of the differing situations of different kinds of SME.

Good practice

Technologisk Innovation, supported by the Danish Agency for Trade and Industry, operates a technology incubator initiative across Denmark that helps innovative, knowledge-based entrepreneurs to launch and rapidly develop their businesses. The support provided is highly focused on the needs of such businesses by offering a full range of services, including business and technical advice, access to finance that is appropriate to the different stages of development, significant networking opportunities, specialised training and mentoring.

Organisation

Technologisk Innovation A/S

Sources of further information

Report: 'Technology incubators'
Final report of the Athens seminar on 'Best practices in strategic support services for SMEs'

Internet: <http://www.tekinno.dk>

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4. The benefits to be derived from restructuring services

Issue

A coherent restructuring of support agencies can achieve greater focus in the services provided, raise their profile and take-up and increase efficiency, but the process needs to be sustained with adequate resources for re-training staff.

Good practice

TE Centres (employment and economic development centres) in Finland have merged the business support services of three ministries (Trade and Industry, Labour, and Agriculture and Forestry) reducing the number of outlets from 77 area units to 15 regional centres. This has enabled them to reorganise their services on the basis of customer needs and client segmentation and to achieve a major increase in take-up. At the same time, the centres are aiming to achieve significant cost savings. In order to bring about these changes an intensive programme of staff training has been undertaken.

Organisation

Ministry of Trade and Industry, Finland;
Employment and Economic development Centre for Pirkanmaa
Tampere, Finland

Sources of further information

Report: 'Business service points in the employment and economic development centres (TE centres) — the case of Finland'
Final report of the Athens seminar on 'Best practices in strategic support services for SMEs'

Internet: <http://www.vn.fi/ktm/>
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5. Business intelligence as a competitive tool

Issue

In the knowledge economy, business intelligence is highly important as a competitive tool, especially for rapidly growing enterprises. Support organisations need to promote its use and radically change the nature of their own services in this area.

Good practice

The Assembly of French Chambers of Commerce and Industry has implemented a strategy to promote the more intensive use of business intelligence in a range of high-tech industries. The information concerned relates particularly to technical developments in products and processes, the business profiles of clients and competitors and other market, economic and strategic considerations. In association with the Agency for the Dissemination of Information Technology (ADIT), national and local authorities, the regional chambers and private experts, regional economic intelligence systems have been created and programmes encouraged that raise awareness of this issue, evaluate information needs in firms, provide appropriate training and help enterprises in target sectors by providing experts to 'accompany' them during the implementation phase. In this way the traditional function of information provision by the chambers is developing a much more proactive character.

Organisation

Assemblée des Chambres Françaises de Commerce et d'Industrie

Sources of further information

Report: 'Business intelligence as a competitive tool'
Final report of the Helsinki SME Forum 'Rapid growth and competitiveness through technology'

Internet: <http://www.acfi.cci.fr>

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6. Tailoring online information to meet SME needs

Issue

Good information has to be delivered effectively and be well tailored to the individual needs of growing enterprises.

Good practice

A prime initial aim of Sweden's SME-link project was to provide better access to business information by structuring what was available from the Internet. Based on a detailed examination of the requirements of some 700 Swedish firms, in a project financed by the Wallenberg Foundation, the system now provides structured access to 15 different categories of information. In part, a portal is offered to valuable sources of information available elsewhere on the web, but a considerable amount of information is now provided directly. Thousands of Swedish enterprises have been helped to integrate the use of Smelink into their strategic management through a scheme delivered by university students.

Organisation

Smelink Ab

Sources of further information

Report: 'Smelink'
Final report of the Helsinki SME forum
'Rapid growth and competitiveness through technology'

Internet: <http://www.smelink.se>

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7. The integration of new services

Issue

The importance of design has long been acknowledged. Its increased significance as a characteristic element of the knowledge economy is also readily admitted. However, the promotion of the application of design in businesses is still usually divorced from the general services of support organisations. This undermines the effectiveness of both support services and design promotion. In developing new services to meet the needs of enterprises in a modern economy, it is important that they should really be integrated into existing provision.

Good practice

Although in the past the British Design Council had the task of directly promoting design within enterprises, many Business Links in the UK have now engaged design counsellors as part of their range of support provision. This leaves the Design Council with the more strategic role of being a campaigning organisation, an advisory body and a centre of new thinking.

At 'Business link Essex', for instance, design management is offered as a specialist service, in a way that effectively complements the core advice and support provided by 'personal business advisers'. Generalist advisers frequently refer clients for advice on design questions and, conversely, examination of design issues can highlight questions concerning the general management strategy of an enterprise. Clients are encouraged to see design as an integral part of managing a business. Case analysis shows that the focus required for addressing design problems can help articulate the aims, objectives and aspirations of enterprises and also contribute to staff motivation. Essentially, integrated organisational arrangements in support agencies can help in addressing the interrelated nature of the issues under consideration.

Organisation

Business Link Essex
Design Council

Sources of further information

Report: 'Design policy in Great Britain'
Final report of the Växjö forum
'Entrepreneurship for the future'

Internet: <http://www.essex.businesslink.co.uk>
<http://www.designcouncil.org.uk>

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8. The evaluation of support services

Issue

Building up top-class business support services requires continuous evaluation.

Good practice

The Swedish Agency, ALMI Business Partner Ltd, and its 21 subsidiaries in the regions, offer services to new and growing enterprises that combine access to finance with advice and development support. Annual client surveys and evaluations have demonstrated considerably better performance for ALMI's clients than comparable groups, in terms of survival, turnover growth and the creation of sustainable employment.

Organisation

ALMI Business Partner Ltd (ALMI Företagspartner AB), Sweden

Sources of further information

Report: 'The Swedish Agency, ALMI Business Partner Ltd'

Final report of the Athens seminar on 'Best practices in strategic support services for SMEs'

'Customer 99' and 'Customer 2000' the ALMI client attitude survey are available on demand

Internet: <http://www.almi.se>

<http://www.naring.regeringen.se/tillvaxt/avtal/inenglish.htm>

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Dissemination of good practice results

Assisting access to training and finance

Most training for SMEs focuses on the start-up phase. A good start is clearly important, but there is also a need for enterprise training geared to the needs of growing firms. This can be especially important in the early years after start-up when failure most threatens but equally where growth rates can be most dramatic.

The development of entrepreneurial competencies, however, continues to be required throughout the entire life cycle of an enterprise. In short, a life-long learning approach has to be applied. This must be more than the occasional seminar for growing and mature SMEs. New and highly innovative methods of delivery have to be developed. Cases presented at the Baden Forum and subsequently illustrate that advances are being made in this area.

Support agencies frequently work closely with organisations that provide finance. There is scope for even closer cooperation, not least in working on the elements that effect the demand for the different forms of finance that are increasingly being made available to enterprises. The capacity for the effective management of finance is clearly one of the core competencies that support organisations which are helping enterprises to develop.

2

1. Starting early with training for growth

Issue

Training for growth should start as soon as the enterprise is established.

Good practice

The Viennese Chamber of Commerce, in conjunction with other Austrian chambers, offers a series of services to young and developing enterprises. The 'problem-oriented consulting for young entrepreneurs' scheme, for instance, provides up to 40 hours of subsidised consultancy for entrepreneurs in the first or second year of their business, allowing them to address general business and economic, marketing or organisational questions. 'Young entrepreneur coaching' assists with problems concerning planning, control, finance, cost accounting, computing, marketing and leadership. In addition, young entrepreneurs are supported in attending external training courses or they can develop their own internal training together with the internal training unit ('FIT — Firmeninternes training').

Organisation

Wirtschaftsförderungsinstitut Wien (WIFI Vienna)
Wirtschaftskammer Österreich (Austrian Federal Economic Chamber)

Sources of further information

Report: 'Support of young entrepreneurs through training and consulting'
Final report of the Baden Forum 'SME in the growth phase — key factors in improving competitiveness'

Internet: <http://www.wifiwien.at/uns>
<http://www.wifiwien.at/fit>

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2. The considerable scope for improvement in training provision for growing enterprises

Issue

Training for growing enterprises must move away from a system consisting largely of the occasional seminar. The lifelong learning approach has to be applied. This requires innovative thinking and more 'tailor-made' provision. It can be achieved through such initiatives as self-training in networks, cooperation between providers with different know-how in 'regional competency centres' and better coordination and integration with other business support services.

Good practice

The TE.MA (technological and market development of craft-trade enterprises) project in Italy has operated through a regional network of 14 specially designed centres created by local task forces, building their services from the bottom up in close cooperation with local agencies and enterprises. Enterprises and associations of entrepreneurs, in fact, have acted as co-designers of training projects, adapting course content to the characteristics of specific craft activity. They were supported through links with the local authorities, business organisations, research centres and universities and have been integrated into other initiatives. The analysis of feedback played a fundamental part in the continuous redesigning and reshaping of interventions.

Organisation

Istituto Guglielmo Tagliacarne

Sources of further information

Report: 'Network policies to support small and medium-sized enterprises — policy and programmes in Italy'
Final report of the Baden Forum 'SME in the growth phase — key factors in improving competitiveness'

Internet: <http://www.tagliacarne.it>

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3. Improving the visibility and competencies of trainers

Issue

Developing trainers' competencies and improving their facilities is a crucial part of improving the overall training provision for growing enterprises. This has to be accompanied by an effective promotion of training and support among target client groups.

Good practice

In Denmark the programme for management, organisation and competencies (LOK), established through cooperation between four ministries (Business and Industry, Education, Research and Development, and Labour) and assisted by representatives from the business world, the labour market and academics, aims to promote flexibility in Danish enterprises.

In order to achieve this objective, sub-programmes promote the development of quality counselling through courses in process counselling for consultants, the establishment of local one-stop shops for in-service training and a forum (a centre without walls) for research in management and organisation. Networks of enterprises, which may include public institutions are promoted in order to support the development of SME management, competencies and internal organisation. Finally, information campaigns and information systems for users of the consultants' services are supported.

Organisation

Danish Agency for Trade and Industry

Sources of further information

Report: 'Small and medium-sized enterprises in Denmark — policies and programmes' Final report of the Baden Forum 'SME in the growth phase — key factors in improving competitiveness'

Internet: <http://www.efsk.dk>

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4. Ensuring access to venture capital

Issue

Access to equity capital is vital for enterprises with an ambition to grow. Problems affecting access to capital, however, should not only be tackled from the supply side but also by addressing managerial capabilities, the continuing aversion to equity capital and the problems in information flows and communication.

Good practice

Enterprise Ireland's seed and venture capital scheme has made an important contribution to the success of the Irish economy with its annual growth rate of over 9 %. The scheme, which includes European investment funding, gives equity to SMEs on the basis of a 50-50 per cent private-public funding. The private funding comes from venture capital (VC) companies and banks. Funds are managed by private sector fund managers, on strict commercial criteria. An interesting characteristic has been the dual approach where both the supply side (increasing the flow of capital) and the demand side (convincing SMEs) has been tackled. On the supply side, the VC companies have been convinced to take small-scale equity deals. On the demand side, Enterprise Ireland used its company counsellors to point out the opportunities of equity capital to entrepreneurs and to address managerial problems and perceptions.

Organisation

Enterprise Ireland, investment services

Sources of further information

Report: 'Equity capital — an ambitious access?'
Final report of the Baden Forum 'SME in the growth phase — key factors in improving competitiveness'

Internet: <http://www.enterprise-ireland.com/services-details.asp?section=solutions&subsection=solutions-finance&id=101>

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5. Online access to venture capital

Issue

Problems with access to venture capital are widely regarded as a continuing issue for hi-tech enterprises. Innovative ways of facilitating this access can make an important contribution to addressing these problems.

Good practice

The Venture Management Services Internet platform, created by the Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau (KfW) in Germany, in conjunction with the German Stock Exchange and with the support of the Federal Ministry of Economics and Technology, aims to create more efficient capital markets and to provide easier access to informal sources of capital. A virtual market place allows investors and SMEs to present themselves and easily get in touch with each other. A special segment of the site — the Business Angel Forum — allows new and innovative firms especially to address business angels. In this way transparency is increased in a capital market that includes both formal and informal sources of investment, through a system that is fast, easy to use and low-cost.

Organisation

KfW Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau

Sources of further information

Report: 'Venture Management Services'
Final report of the Helsinki SME forum 'Rapid growth and competitiveness through technology'

Internet: <http://www.venture-management-services.de>

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Dissemination of good practice results

Helping SMEs operate in a modern economy

The aim of developing more coherent support services has to be reconciled with that of being able to help enterprises respond to the circumstances of the modern economy. Many examples exist where this reconciliation has been achieved, in particular where a longer-term and more strategic approach is encouraged in enterprise management. This facilitates the integration of services promoting responses to an extraordinarily wide range of challenges, generated by a modern economy, ranging from the effective use of ICT to a better understanding of the importance of networking and the potential significance of accounting for the intangible aspects of an enterprise's activities.

3

1. A strategic approach to helping SMEs make use of ICT

Issue

The effective application of ICT is an important part of any modern growth strategy. But it requires technical skills that many SMEs do not have and cannot afford to employ. The problems that this causes need systematic analysis and imaginative solutions.

Good practice

The Prisme project of the Henri Tudor Public Research Centre in Luxembourg has progressively grouped together a series of innovation services with the aim of encouraging the use of information and communication technologies in SMEs that do not employ ICT specialists. Based on a developing analysis of SMEs' needs in this area, these services first help SME managers to see ICT applications as part of their business strategy. Subsequently they provide training for staff and make available the expertise of ICT specialists. Working with ICT suppliers, the centre has also developed innovative solutions that work for SMEs, including teleservices, such as telemaintenance and the provision online of model contract conditions, case studies and success stories. In addition, extranet systems help SMEs network.

Organisation

Centre de Recherche Public Henri Tudor

Sources of further information

Report: 'Prisme — Platform: a set of public teleservices to help SMEs entering the information society'
Final report of the Helsinki SME forum 'Rapid growth and competitiveness through technology'

Internet: <http://www.cordis.lu/lux/src/tudor-en.htm>

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2. Bridging the information gap between ICT service providers and their SME clients

Issue

There is a role for the public authorities in bridging the information gap between small businesses and ICT service providers, by defining a reference framework designed to ensure that SMEs get sound commercial advice.

Good practice

In the UK, in order to address the problem that ICT providers and consultants often do not provide impartial and informed advice, a network of skilled ICT business advisers has been created, with the support of the Department of Trade and Industry. SMEs are assured of the competence and impartiality of these advisers by an accreditation scheme operated by the Institute of Management. This scheme requires advisers to combine knowledge of ICT with that of business development and to demonstrate a set of appropriate competencies.

Organisation

Foundation for SME Development, University of Durham

Sources of further information

Report: 'Standards and training/accreditation for business ICT advisers'
Final report of the Helsinki SME forum 'Rapid growth and competitiveness through technology'

Internet: <http://www.dur.ac.uk/ted.fuller>

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3. New ICT services from chambers of commerce

Issue

The services offered by traditional support organisations such as chambers of commerce and industry are adjusting rapidly to ICT developments.

Good practice

The MediaMit initiative, developed by the DIHT, the National Association of German Chambers of Commerce and Industry in conjunction with the 82 regional and local chambers, regional development agencies, financial and media organisations and ICT suppliers, represents a coordinated and global approach to the promotion of the use of ICT by German SMEs. The initiative provides a framework for raising awareness and for promoting simplification and user-orientation. It also helps the development of SME-tailored training and the demonstration of visible and tangible best practice cases. Issues addressed include e-commerce and online marketing, electronic banking, teleworking and access to online services and databases. Part of these services are presented directly in a way that makes good use of multimedia technologies, but they are mainly delivered in conjunction with local chambers of Commerce and their partners. In this way local business support agencies are assisted to update the services they provide for their clients.

Organisation

Mediamit Promotion

Sources of further information

Report: 'MediaMit — A networking initiative to transfer new business cooperations and technology throughout Germany'
Final report of the Helsinki SME forum 'Rapid growth and competitiveness through technology'

Internet: <http://www.ihk.de>
<http://www.mediamit.de>

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4. Hiving-off activities from an existing enterprise

Issue

To hive-off an activity from an existing enterprise is to create a new business based on an innovative idea, technology or product that has an identifiable development potential but has not yet been exploited commercially. Support agencies can actively promote such hiving-off activity.

Good practice

The European Business and Innovation Centres in Wallonia (operating in a network) offer personalised assistance to any enterprise, laboratory or research organisation that wishes to exploit a 'dormant' project. A formal agreement specifies the scope of the support provided.

The assistance consists of the following: an evaluation of the management skills of the people creating the new business, putting together a 'win-win' partnership between the original and the new firm, getting a credible business strategy down on paper (business plan, strategic analysis, a marketing and finance plan), providing training in management and assuring access to finance. More than half the projects result in the creation of new business activity.

Organisation

Centres Européens d'Entreprise et d'Innovation de Wallonie

Sources of further information

Internet: <http://www.ceeiwallons.be/>
<http://www.socran.be>

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5. Promoting networking among high-technology firms

Issue

Promoting networking among high-technology firms encourages a 'cross-fertilisation' and enhances their efficiency and competitiveness, especially in international markets.

Good practice

The 'Fast-growth fifty' network in Wales in the UK was established to help companies, often in different sectors, develop collaborative trade and business links. The aim was to establish role models that could encourage other firms in the Welsh economy. The activities of the network included research into best practice, mentoring, staff development, and access to the ideas and expertise of academics and specialists in the private sector. The initiative is a good example of partnership between an academic institution (University of Wales Bangor) and the private sector (KPMG, BT and Trinity Mirror Newspapers) working collaboratively to help develop a regional economy.

Organisation

Centre for Enterprise and Regional Development, University of Wales Bangor

Sources of further information

Report: 'How to support rapid growth within indigenous businesses — the fast-growth fifty project'
Final report of the Helsinki SME forum 'Rapid growth and competitiveness through technology'

Internet: <http://www.fg50.com>

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6. Linking national technology markets

Issue

National support for science and technology must be adapted to take account of the internationalisation of research and the transnational networking of enterprises that exploit it.

Good practice

Fraunhofer is Germany's leading organisation for applied research. It brings together 56 separate institutions that conduct contract research on behalf of industry, the service sector and the government. Customers are provided with rapid, economical and immediately applicable state-of-the-art solutions to technical and organisational problems. Playing an active role in promoting the private sector, the organisation participates in the foundation and ownership of technology-oriented spin-off companies. Through the Fraunhofer TEG Fraunhofer provides a special bridge between research and application by acting as a facilitator for the other institutions and bringing together researchers and enterprises. Fraunhofer TEG has now extended these operations to other countries and established a centre in the United Kingdom, where the TEG's approach and methodology is used in creating access to German expertise and finding new applications for earlier research through UK partners.

Organisation

Fraunhofer TEG

Sources of further information

Report: 'Linking national technology markets'
Final report of the Copenhagen seminar 'SME support services in the face of globalisation'

Internet: <http://www.teg.fhg.de>
<http://www.fhg.de>

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7. Dealing with intangibles

Issue

Making intangibles more visible can be a very real problem for enterprises and especially for some of those that operate in the most dynamic sectors of the knowledge economy. Innovative responses are needed from support agencies to help smaller enterprises address this problem.

Good practice

The Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs together with the organisation of accountants has developed 'MKBalans (SME accounts) — an interactive instrument that is available over the Internet. Enterprises can benchmark various aspects of their business activity, including the value of immaterial factors of production, against other companies and against their own past performance. A report is automatically generated, which as well as identifying strong and weak points, helps enterprises to develop their financial reporting on intangibles and enables them to provide comparative and hence more substantial data, which they can use, for instance, when approaching financial institutions. Moreover, enterprises are offered assistance and advice by the support agency Syntens in further developing their business performance.

Organisation

The Netherlands Ministry of Economic Affairs,
Royal Netherlands Organisation of Accountants (NIVRA)

Sources of further information

Report: 'The SME account — Discover your hidden capital'
Final report of the Växjö forum
'Entrepreneurship for the future'

Internet: <http://www.mkb balans.ez.nl>
<http://www.nivra.nl>

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Dissemination of good practice results

Promoting economic development

As well as helping individual enterprises to grow, support organisations are increasingly providing services to groups of enterprises and even whole sectors of the local economy. In this way their role is moving closer to that of economic development agencies, with which they are cooperating ever more closely. Cooperation includes support for benchmarking activities, promoting the development of supply-chain relationships and activity clusters and helping in responses to the problems of industrial change.

4

1. The benchmarking of small SMEs

Issue

Support agencies can help even small SMEs to undertake benchmarking exercises and to improve their competitiveness.

Good practice

Ecipar (Italy) carried out a benchmarking analysis on a sample of 101 micro-enterprises in two main sectors: textile-knitwear (47 %) and clothing (53 %) in the district of Carpi-Modena. A 'microscope' benchmarking tool was applied within a European Consortium 'Benchmarking for success' (UK,B,IRL,DK,S) with scientific and technical support by the London Business School and IBM Consulting. The tool is based on a European-wide databank and investigates aspects of production within a framework which values total quality, organisation, and corporate culture. The practice and performance analysis shows the strength and weakness points of the district companies. Excellence is mostly found in organisational aspects, e.g. the ability to manufacture small quantities, flexibility in production, and a specific vision of quality and strongly customer-oriented patterns.

Organisation

Ecipar/CNA of Emilia Romagna, Bologna, Italy

Sources of further information

Report: 'The textile-clothing district in Carpi-Modena (Italy)': a benchmarking analysis
Final report of the Athens Seminar on 'Best practices in strategic support services for SMEs'

Internet: <http://www.ecipar.it>
<http://www.benchmarking.it>

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2. Promoting supply chain development

Issue

A consensus on methodology is emerging in supply chain development. SMEs can be helped to achieve a strategic perception of the trends and developments in the sectors in which they operate, but they should also be assured that practical assistance is available to them to improve their competitive position. This can often be done in cooperation with other SMEs.

Good practice

Supply chain development projects conducted in the Netherlands, including the 'Outsourcing and supply' initiative in the region around Twente, carried out by Syntens (the Dutch Network of Innovation Centres) and TNO strategy, technology and policy and more recent work in the region of the Hague and Delft, have established a pattern. Characteristic phases are apparent: analysis of the industry or of the supply chain, the launch of an awareness programme, the bringing together of the companies (both suppliers and outsourcers), the development of solutions either internally in each firm or through alliances, groupings, associations, etc., and finally the implementation phase. To assist with the strategic positioning of firms, an analytical tool is used which highlights the competencies required to fulfil one or more of a range of different functions within a supply chain. Once gaps in competencies have been identified, they are addressed, either by investment and training or by the development of alliances with other suppliers.

Organisations

TNO Industrial Research, Eindhoven, the Netherlands
Syntens, The Hague, the Netherlands

Sources of further information

Report: 'Strategic positioning in supply chains; region The Hague/Delft, the Netherlands'
Final report of the Athens seminar on 'Best practices in strategic support services for SMEs'

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4

3. Cooperation and coordination in supply chain development

Issue

Supply chain development must be coordinated with other economic development measures. In particular there must be good relations and cooperation between business support organisations, including across the regions. Agencies specialising in supply chain development need to integrate their activities into the provision of general business support services.

Good practice

For a number of years the Regional Supply Offices (RSOs) in the UK have provided support for enterprises in the development of relationships within the supply chain. This has consisted both of identifying opportunities for suppliers and helping them to improve their competitive performance and of improving the procurement practices of purchasers. With the launch of the Small Business Service and the creation of regional development agencies, their work is increasingly being integrated into the strategic conception of their region's development, but also into the direct delivery of advice services to SMEs through the business links.

Organisation

Regional Supply Offices (RSOs), United Kingdom

Sources of further information

Report: 'Exploiting supply chains to drive up competitiveness'
Final report of the Athens seminar on 'Best practices in strategic support services for SMEs'

Internet: The business links:
<http://www.businesslink.org.uk>
Supply chain service: <http://www.rsn.org.uk>

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(44-20) 83 40 87 02)
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4. Cluster development

Issue

The development of clusters can help SMEs gain and retain competitive advantage in rapidly changing markets.

Good practice

The Greek Ministry of Development helped to launch the Athina cluster of small multimedia publishing companies by encouraging them to develop cooperation in relation to technical development, marketing and distribution. The enterprises have now developed a high degree of synergy in their activities and have succeeded in improving the quality and design of their products and gaining an international profile as a result of combining their different areas of specialisation.

Organisation

MLS Laserlock International Inc.

Sources of further information

Report: 'A cluster related to multimedia activities'
Final report of the Helsinki SME forum 'Rapid growth and competitiveness through technology'

Internet: <http://www.laserlock.com>

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5. Responding to structural changes in the regional economy

Issue

Public authorities can play a critical role in initiating a response to market and structural changes in the economy, by bringing outsourcers and suppliers together and encouraging a more strategic perception and in creating the opportunity for suppliers to group together and network.

Good practice

In the Bordeaux area of France, the public authorities, supported by two specialised groups of consultants, have helped suppliers to adapt to the changing requirements of a large motor manufacturing company. The action of the authorities was initiated in response to the threat of a substantial reduction in the number of local suppliers, but analysis of the situation revealed that there was considerable scope for the suppliers to react positively to the situation, by pooling their competencies and experience. Meetings with those concerned helped a more strategic view to be developed and co-operation to take place within five different working groups. Deficiencies in competitive performance (quality, training needs, etc.) were identified and addressed by a specialised agency according to an agreed plan. Improved competitiveness led the SMEs not only to meet the outsourcer's requirements, but to exploit new opportunities for business, involving new partners.

Organisation

DRIRE (Direction Régionale de l'Industrie, de la Recherche et de l'Environnement), Aquitaine

Sources of further information

Report: 'Regrouping maintenance providing SMEs into clusters'
Final report of the Athens seminar 'Best practices in strategic support services for SMEs'

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6. Supporting the revitalisation of traditional industries

Issue

The knowledge economy is not just a matter of developing new knowledge-based industries. Aspects of the knowledge economy can also help to reverse industrial decline and revitalise older industries, when brought into play by the coordinated implementation of support policies. This gives support agencies an important role.

Good practice

The glass district of Marinha Grande in Portugal has been revitalised by the concerted efforts of a number of players. After a number of years of decline, most of the glassware producing enterprises in the region have participated in an initiative, centred on a public-private partnership, known as Vitrocristal A.C.E., in which weaknesses in technology, marketing, design and finance have all been addressed. Vitrocristal conceived and developed this initiative, establishing the promotion of quality and design as its defining characteristics. This was achieved by setting standards for the use of a trademark and in delivering design and quality awareness campaigns and training. The Portuguese Design Centre cooperated in activities related to design, including training. With the support of the Small and Medium Enterprises Institute (Iapmei), the General Industry Board (DGI), the Investment, Tourism and Trade Institute (ICEP) and local agencies, other aspects of management and finance were addressed with the result that a new identity has been established, new markets have been created and the industry's turnover has started to increase appreciably.

Organisation

Vitrocristal A.C.E.
The Portuguese Design Centre

Sources of further information

Report: 'Design policy in Portugal'
Final report of the Växjö forum
'Entrepreneurship for the future'

Internet: <http://www.vitrocristal.pt>
<http://www.cpd.pt>

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More information on the Enterprise DG

Additional useful information on the work of Commissioner Erkki Liikanen and the Enterprise Directorate-General is available through printed publications and on the web.

Commissioner Erkki Liikanen, responsible for enterprise and the information society:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/commissioners/liikanen/index_en.htm

Enterprise DG on the web:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/dgs/enterprise/index_en.htm

CORDIS (Community Research and Development Information Service):

<http://www.cordis.lu>

Enterprise DG work programme:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/dgs/enterprise/work_programme_2001.htm

Enterprise DG's printed publications:

<http://europa.eu.int/comm/enterprise/library/index.htm>

Newsletters

Enterprise Europe is a free-of-charge newsletter published quarterly in the 11 Community languages by the Enterprise DG. It covers the whole range of Enterprise DG's work, announcing new initiatives as well as providing practical information:

<http://europa.eu.int/comm/enterprise/library/enterprise-europe/index.htm>

CORDIS focus is published twice a month in English, French, German, Italian and Spanish. It provides a review of the main developments in all aspects of European Union research and innovation activities, covering general policy developments, programme implementation, calls for tenders and results, events, legislative activities, and much more:

<http://www.cordis.lu/focus/en/src/focus.htm>

Innovation and Technology Transfer is published six times a year in English, French, German, Italian and Spanish by the European Commission's Innovation Programme, which aims to

promote innovation at Community level and encourages SME participation under the fifth research framework programme. The emphasis is on timely news relevant to these objectives and in-depth 'case studies' of successful projects:
<http://www.cordis.lu/itt/itt-en/home.html>

Euroabstracts is published six times a year in English by the 'Innovation and SMEs' programme, part of the European Commission's fifth research framework programme. The 'Innovation and SMEs' programme promotes innovation and encourages the participation of small and medium-sized enterprises in the framework programme:
<http://www.cordis.lu/euroabstracts/en/home.html>

European Trend Chart on Innovation newsletter. The 'Trend Chart' project develops practical tools for innovation policy-makers in Europe. It pursues the collection, regular updating and analysis of information on innovation policies at national and Community level. The newsletter is published quarterly in English, French and German. Further reports and studies are available on the web site:
<http://trendchart.cordis.lu/Reports/>

Enterprise Papers

Business impact assessment pilot project. Final report — Lessons learned and the way forward.
Enterprise Papers No 9, 2002.

European Commission. Luxembourg (EUR-OP), 2002. 40 pp. (EN). Cat. No NB-AE-02-002-EN-C

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Heli Koski. Luxembourg (EUR-OP), 2002. 46 pp. (EN). Cat. No NB-AE-02-001-EN-C

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A. Allansdottir, A. Bonaccorsi, A. Gambardella et al. Luxembourg (EUR-OP), 2002. 112 pp. (EN). Cat. No NB-40-01-690-EN-C

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Enterprise Papers No 6, 2001.

Europe Economics. Luxembourg (EUR-OP), 2001. 164 pp. (EN). Cat. No NB-40-01-608-EN-C

Innovation, technology and risk capital. Enterprise Papers No 5, 2001.

D. Steinbock. Luxembourg (EUR-OP), 2001. 48 pp. (EN). Cat. No NB-40-01-339-EN-C

Europe's position in quality competition. Enterprise Papers No 4, 2001.

K. Aiginger. Luxembourg (EUR-OP), 2001. 66 pp. (EN). Cat. No NB-38-01-964-EN-C

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M. Peneder, S. Kaniovski, B. Dachs. Luxembourg (EUR-OP), 2001. 36 pp. (EN). Cat. No NB-38-01-956-EN-C

The textile and clothing industry in the EU — A survey. Enterprise Papers No 2, 2001.

W. Stengg. Luxembourg (EUR-OP), 2001. 68 pp. (EN). Cat. No NB-38-01-770-EN-C

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21 University spin-outs in Europe — Overview and good practice

Luxembourg (EUR-OP), 2002. (EN). Cat. No NB-NA-17-046-EN-C

20 Assessment of the Community regional innovation and technology strategies

Luxembourg (EUR-OP), 2002. (EN). Cat. No NB-NA-17-028-EN-C

19 Corporation tax and Innovation

Luxembourg (EUR-OP), 2002. (EN). Cat. No NB-NA-17-035-EN-C

18 Innovation and enterprise creation: statistics and indicators

Luxembourg (EUR-OP), 2001. 300 pp. (EN). Cat. No NB-NA-17-038-EN-C

17 Innovation policy in Europe: European trend chart on innovation

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