

# MENTORING PROJECTS



**An innovative way to  
stimulate the  
professionalisation of  
SME's**

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## **1 Introduction**

Mentoring projects are project where CEO's of enterprises regular meet during a certain period. These meetings are organised under the leadership of a mentor. The mentors are experienced entrepreneurs or staff members of other companies. During the meetings they exchange experience on business conduct and management. The central aim of this exchange is the professionalisation of the participating companies.

Mentoring projects initially focus only on CEO's of SME's. Starting point are the divers obstacles for which entrepreneurs of SME's rarely participate in training. Most of the time they prefer other ways of gaining knowledge, such as experience exchange. Mentoring projects can adapt on this by offering an efficient alternative to training sessions with a focus on management professionalisation.

The first mentoring projects started at the end of the eighties in Limburg and Turnhout, 2 European Impulse areas. In 1991 the Flemish government approved the stimulation programme "Implementation of selective measures in the impulse areas". This formed an incentive for several mentoring projects in the impulse areas during the period 1991-1994.

Because the extinction of the programme jeopardised the continuation of some projects and the results of the mentoring projects were positive, the Flemish Government initiated a regulation for the approval and funding of mentoring projects. This regulation increased the number of mentoring projects for small enterprises, covering the whole territory of Flanders.

Between 2000 and 2001 the policy of mentoring projects was screened and evaluated. This screening proved that mentoring projects offered a real benefit to the participating companies. Participation in mentoring projects resulted in more professional company guidance, broader attention for strategic thinking and increased knowledge of the participants.

Over a decade about 4.600 SME's participated in mentoring projects.

Based on the evaluation of 2001 the opportunities for mentoring projects were broadened in 2003. This opened the door to the creation of mono-thematic projects and cross group initiatives. The funding rules were adjusted and the number of participants decreased from 80 to 60.

The new funding regulation intended to increase the role of the coordinator. He had to support the networking activities of all participants, during and after the project. The evaluation of 2001 made clear that it was necessary to make a better use of the created networks.

Mentoring projects are organised in project calls. Since the new regulation calls were launched in 2003, 2004, 2006, 2007 en 2008. The demand exceeds the funding possibilities. During the project selection 3 criteria are used: (1) quality and competences of the applicant; (2) content and procedure of the project; (3) expected social-economic effects. Sometimes the complementarities of the different projects and the geographical spread are also taken into account.

In this brochure we focus on all different aspects of mentoring projects. The introduction offer an overview of the historical evolution. In the following parts we'll focus on the regulation, the profile of mentors and participants, effects of mentoring projects, examples and good practices from participants.

## 2 Regulation for mentoring projects

### 2.1 General objectives

The Government of Flanders' 5 September 2003 decision on mentorship projects has paved the way for granting financial support to mentorship project organisers.

The Authorities of Flanders are anxious for these grants to offer organisers of mentorship projects spread throughout Flanders more encouragement to develop worthy mentorship projects that take account of the Authorities of Flanders' aims as much as possible.

What these aims involve is explained below. The extent to which a project helps attain these objectives is also factored into the assessment (see selection criteria).

#### **The Authorities of Flanders's mentorship projects policy aspires to achieve the following objectives:**

- ✓ make business operators more aware of the opportunities for professionalisation, networking and, in particular, participation in mentorship projects;
- ✓ promote a broad range of mentorship projects, while taking account of all managerial dimensions and reaching out to a large number of business operators;
- ✓ boost the number of companies taking part in mentorship projects;

*The Authorities of Flanders are keen to increase the percentage of business operators involved in a mentorship project. A key target group continues to be heads of small businesses which do not have their own structures and the resources required to opt for professionalisation and networking.*

- ✓ adopt a more active approach to deploying the network of business operators who have already taken part in a mentorship project;

*Mentorship projects are used to develop a network of business operators. The existing network has to be vitalised more to guarantee a better return on the investments made in the network. The coordinator has an active part to play in various ways, such as putting business operators from the network in touch with each other against the background of a specific issue.*

- ✓ publicise new and existing public initiatives for business operators in a more effective and targeted fashion;

*The mentoring network has to be used more so as to inform business operators about public initiatives being promoted for their benefit.*

- ✓ promote the mentorship project as the start of a process.

*Mentorship projects act as an ideal starting point for informing business operators about professionalisation and networking activities and encouraging them to embrace such initiatives. Hence the projects should not be looked upon as the final destination for business operators but as the start of a process where they can continue to professionalise their management and intensify their networking in the light of their needs. Thus the coordinator has a role to play in offering them encouragement towards this end. During or at the end of a project, the coordinator has to offer business operators guidance in their search for the best initiatives available for professionalising their management.*

## 2.2 Concept and methodology of a mentorship project

In order to qualify for financial support a project proposal should at the very least meet the conditions laid down in the Government of Flanders' 5 September 2003 decision on mentorship projects.

Further details about some of these conditions and their implications are featured below.

Against the background of the Government of Flanders' 5 September 2003 decision, a mentorship project is defined as follows:

*"a project where a) decision-makers in participating companies are regularly supervised in groups during a specific period by one or more mentors so as to professionalise the management of the participating companies via exchanges of experience and b) business-based activities are organised to facilitate networking and exchanges of experience s between all the participating companies and mentors".*

Mentor (m/f) is understood to mean:

*"a senior executive or senior manager who undertakes to make his/her experience available to the participants free of charge during a mentorship project and also to provide guidance to a group of participants".*

In order to qualify for financial support a mentorship project must at least have the following characteristics:

- ✓ Exchanges of experience between business operators should be a central component of the entire project.
- ✓ The exchanges of experience should make a contribution to the professionalisation of the management practices of the participating companies.
- ✓ A period should be decided upon when business operators should meet within a group on a regular basis under the supervision of a mentor or mentors for the purpose of exchanging experiences.
- ✓ Each group should be assigned at least one mentor to supervise and make his/her knowledge and experience available to the group.
- ✓ The networking and exchanges of experience between all the participating companies, across the groups, should be fostered via business-related activities.
- ✓ The exchanges of experience between participants and mentors should be organised at least once a month.

These characteristics are examined further on in this guide under the headings of selection and minimum quality requirements.

## What does a company mean?

A mentorship project has to be focused on companies.

The Government of Flanders' 5 September 2003 decision on mentorship projects defines a company as:

*"natural persons who are business operators or are classed as liberal professionals, undertakings that have adopted the legal form of a commercial enterprise, a European Economic Interest Grouping if they have a place of business in the Flemish Region or are committed to setting up a place of business towards this end in the Flemish Region".*

## What does a company decision-maker mean?

A mentorship project has to be focused on company decision-makers.

A decision-maker is directly responsible for determining a company's strategy. In the case of small companies the decision-maker is often defined as the business operator and owner, whereas medium and large-sized companies often have several people taking final decisions about the business' strategic options.

Those taking part in a mentorship project are therefore a business operator-owner, an executive director or a member of a company's administrative board.

When a company's decision-maker is anxious for a member of staff to participate in the mentorship project, even though the employee is not a decision-maker, the latter may take part as a second participant but the decision-maker also has to be involved in the project. In exceptional cases, a colleague may be sent to specific meetings.

## Eligible sectors

Companies from a number of sectors are excluded from taking part in a mentorship project.

A list of acceptable NACE Codes may be consulted on the website [www.vlaanderen.be/peterschapsprojecten](http://www.vlaanderen.be/peterschapsprojecten) or requested from the Agency for the Economy.

During the course of the project a check is made to see if this condition is met.

The minimum number of participating companies is decided on the basis of the number of companies where at least one decision-maker has participated and the period for which the registration fee is paid.

In other words:

- Solely the company is taken into consideration for determining the participation limit of 60, not the number of people.
- The company must have paid a contribution
- When a company participates only in one part of a project the participation is based on the period for which the company is registered and a contribution being paid.

The company obviously has to meet the conditions laid down in the Government of Flanders' 5 September 2003 decision.

Until the project is underway and the financial support has been granted it is unclear whether this condition has actually been met. If it is discovered in the end that the minimum number of participating companies has not been reached, some of the financial support will be withheld. This may also affect any future project proposals.

## **Regular group meetings mean?**

One of the conditions for qualifying as a mentorship project is the need for the business operators to participate in regular group meetings during a specific period of time, under the leadership of one or more mentors, for the purpose of exchanging experiences.

These exchanges of experience between participants and mentors must be organised at least once a month on average to be regarded as regular. This applies to each participant separately.

Exceptions may be allowed during the summer months and in the light of sectoral or project-specific considerations.

The organiser is expected to seek other options so that exchanges of experience between participants and mentors can be organised as much as possible during these exceptional periods. Under this heading, consideration may be given to a web-based tool, a practical research contract or further individual exchanges of experience, etc.

Activities involving the various groups together and largely focused on networking are a key component of a project but are not factored in for determining the regularity of the meetings.

However, activities involving a section of the group so as to promote more intensive exchanges of experience with the mentor may be taken into account for determining the regularity of the meetings, on the assumption that these activities are reported in the same way as other group meetings and the group meetings are still held regularly enough to guarantee a maximum number of exchanges of experience among the participants.

Organisers are normally free to choose the project theme, but with due regard to the following restrictions.

- ✓ The project has to be focused entirely on the professionalisation of the management, thus implying, for example, that projects concentrating on improving professional knowledge representing a company's key activity do not qualify.
- ✓ A mentorship project should not be focused on technological innovation, for which separate funding opportunities are available (see IWT - Institute for the Promotion of Innovation by Science and Technology in Flanders).

## **What items have a key positive impact on the quality of a mentorship project?**

Research has shown that apart from the basic items that have to be featured in a project proposal, the following factors have a clear impact on the quality of a mentorship project:

- ✓ the rules governing the group composition;
- ✓ the level of public involvement in the choice of themes;
- ✓ the estimate of the participants' needs;
- ✓ transparency between participants;
- ✓ the commitment of the mentors;
- ✓ the mentor's knowledge and experience;
- ✓ the support for the mentor via the organiser in terms of content and logistics;
- ✓ the opportunities for individual guidance via the mentor or mentor company.

These and other items are taken into account for assessing the project proposal.



## What activities can a mentorship project involve (non-exhaustive list)?

The following list offers an overview of the activities that may be regarded as part of a mentorship project, provided they are focused on (potential) mentorship project participants, so that the costs incurred may be covered by the financial support earmarked for the project.

- ✓ making business operators more aware of the importance of the professionalisation of management and the value-adding opportunities created by mentorship projects;
- ✓ recruitment and selection of companies for a mentorship project;
- ✓ recruitment and selection of mentor companies and mentors;
- ✓ training and guidance for mentors concerning their role in a project;
- ✓ monthly exchanges of experience between mentors and participants (x);
- ✓ regular meetings of a group of participating companies and mentors, where the focus is on exchanges of experience (x);
- ✓ company visits so as to make business operators more aware of exchanges of experience and the role mentorship projects can play under this heading;
- ✓ information dissemination (such as providing information about public initiatives to mentorship project participants );
- ✓ flanking activities :
- ✓ creating a database featuring information about participating companies to ensure the development and maintenance of the network;
- ✓ keeping the database up-to-date;
- ✓ sending newsletters to participants;
- ✓ creating and distributing brochures and folders for awareness-raising and recruitment purposes;
- ✓ individual guidance by mentors (on top of the group meetings):
- ✓ answering participating companies' questions;
- ✓ referring participating companies to specialist organisations;
- ✓ networking:
- ✓ common business-related activities for all project participants (x);
- ✓ common business-related activities with participants in other mentorship projects;
- ✓ Common business-related activities to put participants in touch with other business operators in the network (such as previous participants).

The aforementioned activities shown with (x) are vital in order to qualify for financial support.

## What activities are definitely excluded from a mentorship project?

A mentorship project does not cover activities if they are not exclusively focused on the network of participants and previous participants in mentorship projects, hence the cost of the activities cannot be covered with the financial support awarded for the organisation of a project.

Activities for recruiting and selecting mentorship project participants are the only exception to this rule.

*Examples of activities that do not qualify are:*

- ✓ *participants' involvement in workshops and meeting days for business operators not belonging to the mentoring network;*
- ✓ *any activities accessible to a public apart from mentoring network participants (activities for recruiting and selecting mentorship project participants are the only exception to this rule).*



## **2.3 Application**

### **Who can apply for financial support?**

Legal persons governed by public and private law are entitled to make a request for a grant.

The knowledge and experience of the organiser and the staff deployed in terms of the target group and the theme have an impact on the quality of the mentorship project due to be carried out, hence these factors are reflected in the assessment (see also selection).

### **How can you make an application?**

The application form specifically designed for this call should be used for presenting an application.

## **2.4 Selection**

All applications are first of all reviewed in the light of their eligibility and formal requirements.

A check is then made to ensure the eligible project proposals meet the basic quality requirements. Projects that pass the review process are then compared and ranked.

The various components of the selection procedure and the criteria applied are examined below.

### **Eligibility of the application**

Once received by the Agency for the Economy each application is assessed in the light of the following criteria (satisfying all of them):

- ✓ Was the application submitted in good time?
- ✓ Was the application submitted using the standard forms
- ✓ Is the application form completely filled in and signed?
  - Application forms featuring unanswered questions are regarded as incomplete and therefore ineligible.
- ✓ Does the applicant have a legal personality?
- ✓ Is the project focused on at least 60 companies with a place of business in the Flemish Region or companies committed to establishing a place of business in the Flemish Region towards this end?

Rather than implying any judgement, the assessment in terms of eligibility is merely a check to ensure compliance with the participation conditions.

Ineligible projects are excluded from the rest of the selection procedure.

## Basic quality requirements

The eligible project proposals are first and foremost assessed in the light of the basic quality requirements, as listed in article 15 of the Government of Flanders' 5 September 2003 decision on mentorship projects.

Consequently, a project proposal should at the very least meet the following conditions:

- ✓ The project should be focused on the decision-makers in participating companies.
- ✓ The project should seek to professionalise the management of the participating companies, while promoting networking between the companies.
- ✓ During a specific period of time the participants should be regularly guided in a group by senior executives or senior managers from other companies who undertake to make their knowledge and experience available to the participants.
- ✓ Several business-related actions have to be undertaken to facilitate networking and exchanges of experience between participants and mentors across the groups.
- ✓ The key methodology in the case of all actions is exchanges of experience between companies.

Projects failing to meet all the basic quality requirements are not included in the ranking process and hence fail to qualify for financial support.

## Further quality criteria

Eligible project proposals that also meet the basic quality requirements are compared with each other and assessed in the light of the following criteria:

- ✓ the expertise of the organiser and implementers;

The following are some of the factors taken into account under this heading:

- Do the organisers have knowledge and experience of the target group?
- Do the organisers have knowledge and experience of the theme?
- Are people with experience or knowledge recruited?
- Are the organisers experienced in developing and maintaining a network of business operators?
- How good is the implementers' cooperation if this exists?
- What are the outcomes of any earlier projects?

- ✓ the quality and feasibility of the project proposal;

The following are some of the factors taken into account under this heading:

- *Is the project clearly described and effectively substantiated?*
- *Is the project suitably organised with a relevant and feasible approach?*
- *Are the required progress control indicators incorporated?*
- *How are exchanges of experience guaranteed?*
- *Is there a clear, specific timetable for the activities?*
- *Is there an effective relationship between the preparation time and the actual implementation of the project?*
- *Is the choice of the target group substantiated?*
- *To what extent does the project cater for the specific needs of the target group and the participants in particular?*
- *Are the companies involved in the themes due to be addressed during the sessions?*
- *How good is the recruitment, selection and group composition of the participants?*

- *How are the mentors and mentor companies selected?*
  - *Is the expertise of the mentors and mentor companies consistent with the theme to be addressed and the needs of the participating companies?*
  - *Is there any training organised for mentors?*
  - *How good is the training for mentors?*
  - *What commitment are the mentors and mentor companies expected to give?*
  - *Is there an opportunity for individual advice and guidance via mentors or mentor companies?*
  - *What is the anticipated number of small and medium-sized companies in the total number of participants?*
- ✓ the scope and quality of the mentoring network that exists, is extended or encouraged under the project;

The following are some of the factors taken into account under this heading:

- *Has the organiser already developed a mentoring network (network of business operators that are participating or have participated in a mentorship project)?*
  - *What is the scope and quality of the network?*
  - *How is the network deployed or promoted (in the past and the timetable for the current project period)?*
  - *What is the organiser's role in this context?*
  - *What activities are undertaken to promote the network, and also when the mentorship project has been completed?*
  - *How far is the network used to publicise (targeted) public initiatives?*
  - *What value-adding opportunities does the network offer for the companies and the participants in the mentorship project in particular?*
- ✓ an efficient deployment of the resources;

The following are some of the factors taken into account under this heading:

- *What is the anticipated outcome in relation to the (public) resources deployed?*
  - *What is the relationship between the public resources deployed and the private resources?*
  - *What share of the project budget does the organiser finance with the registration fees?*
  - *What share does the organiser finance with the grant?*
- ✓ the extent to which the project caters for the Minister's specific policy objectives for mentorship projects, as specified in the call;
- ✓ the innovative character of the range of activities;

The following are some of the factors taken into account under this heading:

- *Does the proposal feature any innovations compared with the existing range of activities for the target group in the Flemish Region?*
  - *How far are these innovations substantiated?*
- ✓ The motivating character of the financial support and the potential social-economic impact of the project.

The following are some of the factors taken into account under this heading:

- *Has the project received any financial support from the authorities before?*
- *To what extent is a grant required to complete the project?*
- *Does the project contribute to sustainable economic development?*
- *Does the project contribute to other policy objectives of the Authorities of Flanders?*

## Ranking the applications

The projects are first of all ranked in the light of the aforementioned criteria. When, on the basis of the aforementioned criteria, serious doubts are expressed about the feasibility of projects and their implementation according to high standards, they are automatically consigned to the bottom of the pile.

When the ranking process is undertaken, account is also taken of the following criteria:

- ✓ seeking a geographical distribution of the range of activities in the Flemish Region;
- ✓ seeking diversity and a complementary relationship in the mentorship projects on offer.

## Awarding financial support

The minister is required to share out the financial support available to the most outstanding applications, in descending order.

In some cases the minister may nonetheless, issue a negative decision or set additional conditions for an application for financial support.

*"These cases are specified in the decision of the Government of Flanders, art. 18:*

*1° if the financial standing of the applicant or any partners in the project is insufficient for the implementation or success thereof;*

*2° if the applicant or partners in the project fail to comply with any other obligations or authorisations on account of the authorities;*

*3° if the applicant or partners in the project have shown evidence of incorrect behaviour as a result of earlier applications, particularly in the case of the provision of information, substantive and financial obligations and reporting;*

*4° If, during earlier mentorship projects where financial support was awarded under this decision, the applicant was unable to meet the participation limit of 60 participating companies*

Strictly speaking the discovery of an earlier project from the applicant where the participation limit was not reached or the substantial obligations were not observed is enough to make any new proposal from the applicant ineligible for financial support or for additional conditions to be set.

This remains valid but does not mean that an applicant who had disappointing results earlier on may not qualify for further financial support in practice in the context of this call. The main focus during the assessment will be on trying to evaluate the risk of this no longer occurring in the case of the latest proposal to be submitted.

An examination is made below of what happens when applicants had fewer than 60 participating companies in earlier projects. In the past this has most commonly resulted in additional conditions or a negative decision.

The main emphasis during an assessment of such an application will be on weighing up the feasibility of the new proposal. Should there be any reservations about the feasibility the project will not normally be included in the ranking process. If the budget is appropriate, the project may be funded after all but subject to certain conditions.

A feasibility assessment takes account of several items, such as.

- ✓ the outcome of the applicant's earlier mentorship projects and primarily those most comparable with the new proposal;
- ✓ should the organiser have organised several (comparable) projects account is taken of the average results within the context of the various projects;
- ✓ possibly the results of other organisers' projects when the proposed approach or proposed changes bear very close resemblances
- ✓ the changes the applicant proposes and how far the new approach is expected to make the project feasible, in the light of experiences with mentorship projects;
- ✓ other projects due to enjoy financial support during this period and how far these would adversely affect the feasibility of your proposal

Disappointing results combined with one of the other reasons listed in article 18 are obviously regarded as an aggravating factor.

This is why an applicant who did not always succeed in achieving the participation limit of 60 participating companies, or did not always observe the substantial obligations in the past, must ensure the application pays sufficient heed to factors the applicant believes guarantee the participation of a minimum of 60 participating companies or the full implementation of the proposal the applicant submitted.

## **2.5 Financial Support**

No more than one financial grant may be awarded for a three-year period. The costs taken into consideration for calculating the financial support are limited.

### **Start and period of time covered by the grant period**

The grant period may last no longer than three years. All the costs incurred during this time qualify for financial support.

The application form makes a distinction between the project period and the grant period. The project period is the entire period during which the project is carried out. The grant period is the period when costs qualify for financial support. The two periods generally coincide but not invariably so. The grant period may also be shorter than the project period but it may not be longer than the project period.

You should specify in the application form when you would like a grant period to start and how long it lasts. Towards this end, account has to be taken of the following factors:

- ✓ The grant period may not start any earlier than the starting date for the project, hence no earlier than the start of the activities that may qualify for financial support under a mentorship project.
- ✓ The activities for participating companies have to get underway within a reasonable period of time after the start of the grant period. Should the proposed time be found to be unreasonable, the authorities awarding the financial support will limit the time to what is considered reasonable and have the grant period start at a later date. What is reasonable is decided on the basis of a comparison with comparable project proposals and due regard to the relationship between the duration of the grant period before the activities of the participants get underway and the total duration of the grant period.
- ✓ Under this call, the grant period must in any event start before 1 August 2009.

However, should you decide to start the project during the time that elapses between submitting the application and the final decision about awarding the grant you will do so at your own risk. You should therefore be aware of the possibility that no financial support will be awarded for your project.

## **Calculating the level of financial support**

The financial support is equal to a maximum 80% of the staff and operating costs. The costs taken into account when calculating the financial support are nonetheless limited.

The following limits are taken into consideration for the calculation of the grant in the context of this call.

### **Human resources limit**

The calculation of the grant takes account solely of the coordinator's staff costs in the light of the time the coordinator is involved in the project.

A maximum of one full-time equivalent (FTE) coordinator is eligible per project for the calculation of the grant on offer.

### **Staff costs limit**

Staff costs cover direct gross salaries or wages, including statutory employees' and employers' contributions and statutory insurance.

The calculation of the grant takes account solely of the coordinator's staff costs in the light of the time the coordinator is involved in the project, subject to a maximum of 1 FTE

For a full-time equivalent a maximum annual sum of Euro 55,000 for staff costs is taken as the basis for calculating the grant.

When various people hold the position of coordinator, this limit applies for each member of staff. When the actual staff costs are lower, the basis is the actual costs per member of staff.

### **Operating costs limit**

The basis for calculating the financial support for the operating costs is a maximum annual sum of Euro 10,000 for each FTE coordinator qualifying for the grant.

As the calculation of the financial support is based on a maximum of one FTE coordinator, a maximum of Euro 10,000 a year may be taken into account as a basis for calculating the grant.

### **Maximum annual grant**

The maximum level of financial support that may be awarded to an organiser every year for a mentorship project is Euro 52,000 or 80% of (Euro 55,000 + Euro 10,000).

One project may receive financial support for a maximum of three years.

## **2.6 Accreditation as a mentoring project organiser**

Organisers qualifying for financial support in the context of this call are also accredited as a mentoring project organiser throughout the grant period.

Consequently, they are entitled to present themselves as accredited mentoring project organisers in the case of the mentorship project but the accreditation is confined to the project for which the financial support is awarded.

This means accreditation as a mentoring project organiser does not automatically lead to accreditation in the 'entrepreneurial portfolio' (BEA – Budget for Economic Advice) system. An organiser keen on being accredited as a service provider within the context of BEA on this basis may do so via a short straightforward procedure. Further details are available at [www.BEAweb.be](http://www.BEAweb.be) or [www.vlaanderen.be/mentorship\\_projects](http://www.vlaanderen.be/mentorship_projects) in the 'information for organisers' section.

## **2.7 Legal Framework**

- ✓ the Government of Flanders' 5 September 2003 decision on mentorship projects
- ✓ the Ministerial Decision of 24 October 2003 for the implementation of the Government of Flanders' 5 September 2003 decision on mentorship projects
- ✓ the Ministerial Decision of concerning the 2008 call for the presentation of mentorship projects



### **3 Profile of mentors and participants**

Participants in mentoring projects are managers of SME's rooted in a very broad portfolio of different economic sectors, most of the time their companies are in expansion. Around 40% of the participants are the manager of a company which exists for at least 20 years.

Projects are divided in 3 groups: (1) projects organised by VOKA<sup>1</sup>, (2) projects organised by Unizo<sup>2</sup>, (3) projects organised by other promoters<sup>3</sup>.

The profile of the participants differs of the promoter. The UNIZO-group is composed of companies that are average smaller. VOKA-projects include more industrial companies. The diversity in the third group is much bigger. Most of them haven't participated to mentoring projects in the past.

When the profiles of participants are compared over time we see that the international dimension of participants increased, the average dimension of the participating companies expanded, participation of industrial companies in mentoring projects augmented.

Most of the participants take part in projects for 2 to 3 years.

The background of the mentors is very divers. The industrial representation is even stronger here then it is with the project participants. There is a positive evolution in the number of company owners that takes up a mentor role. Since most mentors only take up this job for a few years, there is a need for a constant stream of new mentors.

### **4 Results of mentoring projects**

An evaluation of the mentoring concept illustrates that mentoring projects in the first place have an impact on the individual development of the participant (competences, attitude ...). This effect is bigger than the impact on the participant's company.

Participating entrepreneurs develop problem solving skills, increase management knowledge, build up self-confidence and broaden their personal and commercial contacts.

One of the outcomes of the mentoring projects is the increased network activity of participating companies. This is translated in more contacts with fellow company owners, giving advice and feedback to network members, participation in activities of federations, following training.

Mentoring projects contribute to the skills that are necessary for the formation of networks. Other attitudes that are affected by the projects are taking confidence in others, being prepared to help other network members, getting fluently in contact with others, being open minded and wanting to listen to others.

As a result of the project participants of mentoring projects take more attention for stakeholders.

The projects contribute to the broadening and the deepening of their existing networks.

Learning and developing effects of mentoring projects are high. Participants say that the project contributed to: knowing where to find information, learning of the mistakes of others, getting important information easy, replenish internal know how and expertise.

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<sup>1</sup> VOKA is the Flemish Chamber of Commerce. It's a service organization for companies. They represent medium and big enterprises in Flanders

<sup>2</sup> Unizo is the Union of Self Employed Entrepreneurs. They represent self employed entrepreneurs in Flanders

<sup>3</sup> Examples of other promoters are the Federation of Construction Companies, The Federation of Life Sciences, Universities, the Federation of Architects

Mentoring projects are a robust formula which contributes strongly to the professionalisation and network formation of participating entrepreneurs. The formula works for companies of a diverse scale and of diverse economic sectors. The conditions for this are an engaged coordinator, motivated mentors, a balanced composition of the group of participants and good external keynote experts.

Mentoring projects have a specific place in the Flemish entrepreneurship policy, more specific in the policy for stimulating the cooperation between different companies.

## 5 Examples and good practices of participants

**Dimitri Heirbaut (participant, AIM group):** "Mentoring Projects should be obliged. It's a must for every company that wants to grow. Since PLATO It's a relief to see that many of my problems are Universal. Now I can release more and I can surround myself with competent people who can take up the necessary responsibilities."

**Paul Busschaert (mentor, DesleeClama):** "PLATO is the best remedy against company blindness. You can broaden your horizon by sharing expertise in all different aspects of entrepreneurship. Moreover as a mentor it is very pleasing and challenging to give some of your knowledge to other companies, no matter if it is on recruiting strategies, e-marketing or lean manufacturing."

**Catherine Claus (participant, Amazing Products nv/sa – Professionails):** "As a manager it enjoys my heart to feel that there are people who are willing to formulate answers on questions and give full support afterwards."

**Anne Saveyn (mentor, Agfa-Gevaert):** "For me PLATO was an enrichment because it mends a win-win situation for everybody. As a mentor I can learn a lot of the obsessed entrepreneurs. Besides it I can share a lot of knowledge and offer a lot of networking support, based on my year-long HR-experience."

**Johan Peeters (participant, Country chef):** "In the network I met people who are day in day out confronted with same problems and chances as me, but I saw that they approached them in another way. It was the ideal benchmark."

**Peter Mees (participant, Picco Bello):** "PLATO grasped me that I was not the only one facing problems. The project taught me to overtake my own ego and fears and let me discover that I can solve everything with study, communication and network forming. Knowledge and will brought the company in a flow."

**Yves Struyve (participant, Trislot):** "The time that all companies lived on a small island and knew everything better has passed by for years. You can learn a lot by analysing the approach of others. It really broadens your view. If this can be validated with interesting contacts and cooperation it forms a nice surplus."

**Ivan Desender (participant, Happy Old People) about PLATO Financial:** "Which successful entrepreneur has the guts to admit that he can hardly read the balance of his concurrent? Who know how to best finance growing pains? Who knows how to choose an accountant? During our mentoring meetings we all found a clear and understandable answer on all these questions."

**Ignace Degens (participant, Tailormate):** "Learning on a relaxing, company directed and interactive way of fellow-entrepreneurs offers a huge benefit for me and my company. Many of these colleagues became good friends."

**Dirk Laurent (participant, Vrydagh & Boriau):** "PLATO 5 offered me a reference which an entrepreneur sometimes lacks in his company. The input of fellow-entrepreneurs and professional keynote speakers forms every session and are a soil for self reflexion. This creates the motivation and inspiration to participate actively in the sessions. I'm looking forward to the rest of Plato 5. The agenda still has a wide variety to offer"

## SAPLATO: Launch of PLATO South-Africa



*On the 22nd and 23rd of February twelve South African mentors and three coordinators received an in deep training for the start of SAPLATO in Pretoria. SAPLATO is the cooperation programme which VOKA-Chamber of Commerce, with the financial support of the Flemish Government, started up with four partners in South Africa.*

When president Mbeki of South Africa visited Belgium in November 2005, he asked to focus the Flemish Economic Cooperation on the development of small, medium and micro Enterprises in South Africa. The Chamber of Commerce decided to export the very successful Plato Concept to South Africa. Since more than 10 years the Chamber is building a strong network in South Africa. Different South African visitors got the chance to learn more about Antwerp and Flanders and the functioning of the Chambers of Commerce.

During these meetings they got familiar with PLATO and the positive effect of this concept on the growth of SME's. Together with three South-African partners the Chamber decided to organise a pilot project. In meantime the South African governmental organisation SEDA, or Small enterprises Development Agency, wanted to participate and coordinate the different pilots.

In March 110 entrepreneurs started in different SAPLATO-groups.

On a two-day training course in Pretoria, Chamber member Jan Borremans got the chance to meet twelve mentors. "It's a brilliant group: enthusiastic, obsessed and well grounded. The coordinators have done an excellent job. During their visits in Antwerp they faired that mentors never would take up their task voluntarily. This seemed to be groundless. We've clearly chosen the right partners. This proves the importance of a well build network. (Ondernemers 4, April 2007)

## Entrepreneurs for Entrepreneurs (EfE)



EfE participants Katrin Van Bladel, Rogier Janssen and Monique Rotheut

*"With EfE we discover our borders as entrepreneur and as human being. Also during this tear of activity UNIZO-SME launches all over Flanders mentoring projects. Information and experience exchange are central. Some of them are so full of the concept; they start up their own EfE projects. We talk to some enthusiastic participants.*

*« Entrepreneurs support entrepreneurs by information and experience exchange »*

The principle of the EfE keeps the same: information provided by an expert on a self chooses aspect of company management, where less experienced entrepreneurs are guided by mentors with a very long experience, which results in a fruitful exchange of experience between "partners in misfortune". But for some of them it may be a little bit more.

An example of them is Katrin Van Bladel. She's vice-president of UNIZO- region Antwerp-Mechelen, UNIZO national board member and since more than 9 years EfE mentor. With here company nv Keycoaching she assists SME-entrepreneurs. "The classical formula of EfE is still very fruitful and I would recommend every starting entrepreneur to participate in such a group. After some years, some ask them selves how to go further in the group after they had all introductions on human resources, sales techniques, and environment? How to result in a more in deep personal development? That's why we started 3 years ago with Unizo Academy. Because in an SME the entrepreneur is the central turning point, there was a need to techniques for self coaching to know your own limits and define your responsibilities. What's your course as an entrepreneur? If you can obtain more transparency in these, you'll be better armed to corporate with clients, providers and employees."

*"Selfknowledge is a real relief"*

EfE-participant Monique Rothheut (manager of a lay-out- en publicity office): "After the participation in other EfE-meetings this group is a real enrichment that none of us want to miss. Discover how you function as a person is the foundation to take up another position as an entrepreneur. For example my daily planning: in the past I felt guilty when I sat down outside with my laptop on a nice summer day. Now I even dare to take a half day of when the weather is fine.

Katrin Van Bladel: "Because undertaking and private life are mixed up for an entrepreneur, EfE evenings can have all subjects, but most of the time our starting point is the daily company management: for example what to do with an employee who leaves the company or asks for a higher remuneration? It's not only about having a clear insight, but also about usable techniques. (Z.O.magazine 13, August 2007)



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