

How to promote the effective Use of ICT in Clusters

Inter-firm business networks show a growing importance for the innovation strategy in the regions. Much attention has been given to the need to provide adequate information infrastructures so that such regional inter-firm clusters can flourish. The evidence regarding ICT usage and benefits in such clusters, both for internal coordination in the cluster and for contact with external markets (e.g. B2B and B2C e-commerce) is mixed.

Goal of the workshop was to explore the role of ICTs in clusters and business networks. The key questions were:

- ?? How can we foster the awareness/demand for ICT solutions?
- ?? How can we support the effective usage of e-business solutions?
- ?? What are the experiences respecting the "standardization" problem of ICT in Europe?

Following case studies provided the basis for the discussion of the four aspects, which was moderated by Anna Flavia Bianchi from Telekom Italia:

- ?? PRAI "FeNeSys" (Friuli-Venezia Giulia Region, Italy)
- ?? Promotion of the mobile solutions in the logistic cluster (Bremen, Germany)
- ?? The "Standardization" project for Prato textile district (Prato, Italy) and
- ?? Triple Helix – a strategy for sustainable development (Västerbotten, Sweden)

In the first step the participants discussed how to foster the awareness/demand for ICT solutions in SME. Point of departure for this discussion was the fact that many SME do not see the benefits of ICT solutions because they have a short term view on the effects which mean investments in infrastructure, time and human resources.

The group came to the conclusion that the role of technology transfer unit therefore must be to understand the usage and benefits of ICTs and show their options for implementation to entrepreneurs. In the context of awareness raising for ICT solutions following approach was discussed and illustrated by case studies:

- ?? Step 1: **technological clinic** - short consultation / help desk
- ?? Step 2: **organize the supply & demand side** - process analysis over 2 days
- ?? Step 3: **showing opportunities for subsidizing** - tutoring / accompanying the implementation through external consultants.

Goal of the "Technological Clinic" or "Project Center for e-/m-business" is to identify problems relevant to the firms, which can be solved by ICT solutions. Here, potential users of ICT, such as entrepreneurs in the logistic sector are interviewed in the framework of a workshop. Innovation managers from the technology transfer unit can then suggest them potential ICT providers. In the case of the "Project Center for e-/m business" in Bremen SMEs active in the "mobile solution group" are suggested to the workshop participants (www.ebiz-bremen.de). This can be an initial impulse to start a new innovative project in the region.

With respect to the effective usage of e-business solutions the approach of county Västerbotten underlined the importance of the collaboration between SME, university units and public authorities, the so called "Triple Helix". In order to achieve more efficiency in

introducing ICT solutions the county Västerbotten investigated common needs for e-business solutions of different sectors, such as e-Health, e-Government and test facilities. On the basis of the identified demands the municipalities, the hospitals and the private health care agreed to develop in joint action a communication tool called "TILLIT". The goal of the tool is to increase the well-being of citizens with the help of mobile devices, a 3G positioning system for patients and telemedicine applications at home. The objective is to commercialise the tool to foster regional economic growth. Following benefits for the involved actors were outlined:

- ?? The regional care system adds technical know-how in the tool
- ?? The municipality of Umea and the county council of Västerbotten adds knowledge of the healthcare system and
- ?? Both municipalities and hospital care are provided with a efficient tool to enhance the quality and collaboration in the area of health care.

Finally the question of European collaboration was raised within the workshop. The case study "Standardisation. A Project for the Textile District of Prato" (www.textilstandard.it) showed ICT can result in competitive advantages for SME. In general the question was raised: how ICT can become an opportunity for a large number of firms in Europe?

In this context the problem is that application services providers are accepted very differently throughout Europe. Either a large company sets ICT standards in an industrial district and its supplier network follows that given standards (the standard focuses very much on the region) or an ICT standard is developed in general for all interested firms – here the problem occurs that somebody has to pay the development costs.

The result of the discussion was that the first step to introduce joint ICT standards and systems in Europe is to work on the challenge to use confidentiality shared systems.