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EDI-EUROPE CONFERENCE “EMPLOYEE DRIVEN INNOVATION AND WORKPLACE LEARNING

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Speaking Notes:

Global picture

- European growth and jobs largely depend of the ability of companies to operate globally: Europe is the world’s largest exporter of goods and services and our exports contribute to a large extent to growth and employment.
- Europe cannot compete with emerging countries in the production of low-cost and low-value added products nor can it rely on raw materials. But what we do have human capital. At the moment, we are well placed to benefit from globalisation because of the strong knowledge base of our economies and our specialisation in quality, high value-added products, but we have to be aware that emerging countries too are making major efforts in education and training, thereby enhancing their capacity to compete in higher value-added products.
- We need to promote productivity growth and modernise our economies by fostering innovation policies at all levels. The EU must rely on its innovative capacity and needs to focus more on its potential to develop new technology.
- Especially in times of economic crisis, the importance of innovation and technology for future economic growth is obvious. The results of investments in the innovative potential might not necessarily immediately be visible, but they have a medium to long term horizon. Without any doubt, they will continue to foster growth and productivity, and even more so when economic conditions improve after the current crisis.



Employee Driven Innovation & Workplace Learning

- Various facets of innovation need to be promoted, for innovation comes in many forms. In this respect, employee driven innovation and workplace learning is one important element of innovation. Workers possess often unique knowledge that is for instance based on own experience or on customer feedback. The contribution of their conceptions and ideas can play an important part in generating innovative ideas.
- Let me name you a few important ingredients that can promote innovation at the workplace:

- First and foremost, without education as a core policy, innovation will remain unsupported. Talent and creativity must be promoted from an early stage. Education is often the foundation for creative potential. At the end of the day a lot depends on the capacity of the individual to give input.

Skill and competence requirements vary greatly, according to the sectors, occupations, etc. Although different contexts call for different requirements, it is essential to equip individuals with transversal key competences. Innovation processes are often linked, multidisciplinary and problem-oriented. "Learning to learn" and lifelong learning are crucial in modern working life, not only to enhance employability. Soft skills are increasingly important for all types of innovation in all sectors.

- Let me name a few transversal key competences that are important in that respect: Literacy, scientific and mathematical competences, languages and social and cultural competences and digital literacy. Such competences are more conducive to employees who are adaptable and open to change, and who can also lead change.
- Complex and rapidly-changing circumstances increase the demand for creative problem solving. An entrepreneurial mindset and commercial awareness as key attributes are necessary for innovation-friendly societies.
- It is also important that the management is open to employee's ideas and creates the right atmosphere for innovation at the workplace, where possible and appropriate.



Such an innovation friendly environment could be encouraged by

- connecting different types of people/functions
 - flexible working arrangements (e.g. job sharing, diversity of task allocation)
 - encouraging knowledge sharing, building relationships outside of the company
 - performance-related pay
 - providing means for employee-feedback mechanism.
- Let me illustrate with a UK example:

Texperts, a small successful UK company based in Cambridge provides an information service via text messages. It has 12 permanent staff and a further 250 so-called “Texperts”. If you have a question, regardless of which kind, you text them from your mobile and the answer is then rapidly texted back to you.

This small company promotes relationship building between its employees and ‘clever brains’ located in the area from both academia and the entrepreneurial businesses community. They regularly hold brainstorming sessions, often taking place at the local pub, appreciating the value that a fresh or unusual view on the business can bring. The employees are also prepared to share their ideas and experiences freely with others.

- Increasing levels of workplace innovation can require changed behaviour, attitudes and mindsets in the workplace. Such a shift in attitude can contribute to improve productivity and profitability, customer service and service delivery, notably for SMEs.

Social dialogue

- The European Growth and Jobs Strategy puts emphasis on the social dialogue as further means to increase innovation and competitiveness.
- BUSINESSEUROPE is convinced that social partners are well placed to develop solutions that are best attuned with the changing realities of the world of work.



- However, when social partners agree on framework conditions that will govern behaviours at workplace level, it is important that they do not introduce unnecessary rigidities that will prevent innovation on the ground.

Conclusion & EYCI

- The future of EU competitiveness depends on better exploiting its innovation potential given the increasingly global competition for higher added-value activities. The European Year of Creativity and Innovation 2009 offers all actors concerned a good opportunity to contribute to and support the broad-based innovation strategy for the EU. In this context, this year can be used to intensify the dialogue on how employee driven innovation and workplace learning can be enhanced to foster innovative mindsets. BUSINESSEUROPE is determined to play an active role in the European Year of Creativity and Innovation.
