



October 2012

BUSINESSEUROPE contribution on the future development of the EEN (Enterprise Europe Network)

INTRODUCTION

The European Commission is seeking views on the strategic development of the Enterprise Europe Network (EEN), based on feedback on the evolving needs and concerns of the business community, especially SMEs. To that end, the Commission has produced guiding questions to be considered by the EEN Consultative Forum, of which BUSINESSEUROPE is a member.

The present document is the contribution of BUSINESSEUROPE to that enquiry.

TOPIC I. PROMOTING THE EEN NETWORK TO SMEs

Issue description by the Commission

This is a key priority for the European Commission. Increased visibility will benefit potential clients of the Network in terms of transparency and simplicity. There is also a legal obligation to ensure that the Network is sufficiently visible to SMEs, as Network services are partially funded via the EU budget.

Promotion of the Network and its activities is not intended to compete with the promotion of host organisations which make an important contribution to the services of the network. Host organisations and other partners should therefore continue to promote their services in conjunction with the Network. However, they should ensure that the Network is sufficiently visible and that the benefits for SMEs are promoted in a clear way.

Questions

Q1. Do you have any suggestions for improving the visibility of the network?

A1. Response

In the future, enhancing the future visibility of the network will require contracts to be signed with hosts and EEN under an approach that takes account of the full range of



business services provided or planned at local, regional and national level. It is important to ensure that EEN service offers do not overlap with existing services and are smartly articulated with them. This should be done through closer cooperation between EEN managers and authorities. Such an approach should facilitate cross-referencing between EEN services and local, regional and national services, thereby upgrading the visibility of EEN services.

It is important to make a mapping of the full range of business services provided at local, regional and national level with a view to achieving the required smart articulation of EEN services with existing services.

TOPIC II. TARGET GROUP FOR THE NETWORK'S SERVICES

Issue description by the Commission

Positions of the forum on the range/number of businesses to be targeted by the network's services varied. One point of view considers that the network should target the vast majority of mainstream SMEs, but that it fails to reach enough of the 23 million EU businesses. Another opinion, often expressed by more specialised forum members, considers that there is a need to focus on a specific subset of businesses with specialised and high added-value services.

Questions

Q.2.1 Do you have any specific comments and suggestions on the target group of SMEs that the Network should aim to provide services to?

A2.1. Response

The Network should have two types of target groups:

- Broad target groups receiving basic services (basic information services, first line assistance services, ...)
- Target groups defined on a narrower basis, receiving specialised information services, guidance for finding specialised expertise, tailor-made assistance services, etc.

The broad target groups and these narrower ones should be defined primarily with respect to the cohort of growth-oriented SMEs which actually need the services provided by EEN most. Growth-oriented SMEs often focus more on export activities, access to funding, business opportunities on new markets etc.

Q.2.2 Do you have any specific comments on possible quantitative objectives to reach a specific number or percentage of SMEs (eventually for specific target groups)?



A2.2. Response

Setting quantitative objectives might be a somewhat artificial exercise as long as the issue of the Network range of services has not been settled. It seems also difficult to implement such objectives given the mix of services that will presumably be offered by each centre.

TOPIC III. RANGE OF SERVICES

Issue description by the Commission

The Network currently provides a range of services in support of business and innovation to SMEs:

- Information relating to the functioning and opportunities of the internal market;
- Support for business cooperation (partner search), internationalisation, innovation and technology transfer;
- Services encouraging the participation of SMEs in the Seventh Framework Programme for RTD.

There is consensus on the role of the network for providing information and advice on the internal market, EU legislation and EU programmes. One point of view is to continue offering more specialised services in specific areas. Another point of view is to first deepen the current services and address quality issues before expanding into new service areas.

Questions

Q3.1 In addition to the current service range of the Enterprise Europe Network do you have any suggestions for other activities that the network should move into as part of the integrated services offered to SMEs, bearing in mind the need to ensure additionality and EU added value?

A3.1. Response

BUSINESSEUROPE attaches great importance to the continuation of existing core activities of EEN, in particular:

Services related to the internal market and markets outside the EU

- (a) disseminating information relating to the functioning and opportunities of the internal market for goods and services, including relevant Union law, standards and public procurement opportunities
- (b) assisting SMEs to develop cross-border activities (inside and outside the internal market) and international networks,



- (c) supporting SMEs to find relevant partners from the private or public sectors through appropriate tools

Services for innovation

- (d) providing brokerage services for technology and know-how transfer, and for partnership building between all kinds of innovation actors
- (e) facilitating linkage to other innovation services including intellectual property related services.

Services encouraging the participation of SMEs in the EU RTD framework Programmes (FPs)

- (f) raising awareness among SMEs regarding FPs,
- (g) helping SMEs to identify their research and technological development needs and to find relevant partners,
- (h) assisting SMEs in the preparation and coordination of project proposals.

The Commission has presented ideas for developing new EEN's services inter alia in the following two documents:

- Communication "Small business, big world- A new partnership to help SMEs seize global opportunities";
- Proposed action plan to improve access to finance for SMEs (Doc. COM 2011-870).

BUSINESSEUROPE encourages the Commission to explore creatively what new services EEN could offer in these two areas. But designing new services should meet the following two criteria:

- Avoid new services duplicating existing activities at regional, national or European level;
- Optimise synergies between the existing services and the new services, in a given thematic area.

The principle that EEN services must represent true European value added is very important and should be reaffirmed for EEN II.

The difficult upcoming negotiations regarding the Multi-annual Financial Framework suggest the need to be selective regarding any widening of EEN's current package of core tasks.

More detailed comments are given under Q.3.3. and Q.3.4.

The future offer of EEN services should take account of the fact that technology has evolved since the network was created, when the Euro-Info Centres were launched. Basic services which were distributed in the past on a local basis can now be centrally distributed. Thought should therefore be given to introducing web-based services that do not need excessive staff involvement.



It would be very helpful that the EEN provides assistance for accessing EU programmes in a broad range of areas.

Should the service range of EEN be significantly broadened, it would be useful to provide a list of consultants active in the various relevant domains of expertise, who would be certified in terms of credibility and quality.

Q.3.2 Do you have any other suggestions that can help maximize the relevance to SMEs of services provided by the network?

A3.2. Response

Smart integration of EEN services with existing business support services based on the definition of distinct and complementary tasks would definitely maximize the relevance to the SMEs. Such integration should facilitate implementation of the “no wrong door” principle and secure that the SMEs can get professional business support concerning opportunities within the internal market – even though they have contacted their regional or local business support provider in the first place. The ability to provide the necessary integration of business support services at various levels should therefore be explicitly prioritised in the Commission’s selection of future EEN partners in the new call for proposals.

In certain countries, the need is felt for a bigger accent on:

- Support for the development of SME sales strategies (1. basic services, like general market information, importers and distributors, contract preparation; 2. specific services: market access and technical regulations, competition intelligence, IPR).
- SMEs capacity building, including consulting/coaching. The UK model of the “experience bank” is interesting in this regard.

Q.3.3 Do you have any specific comments on activities in the area of internationalization? Please also give comments on the conditions under which more specialised internationalization services could/should be provided (limitation to specialized members, measures to improve signposting, measures to train network members, etc.)?

A3.3. Response

The issue of the future EEN services in the area of support to SME internationalisation SME needs to be looked at in the broader context of the need to optimise the current EU portfolio of business support for SMEs in non-EU countries. BUSINESSEUROPE insists that the Commission, as planned, assesses this portfolio on the basis of best practice, with a view to optimising it. This assessment should include the EU SME Centres, the Enterprise Europe Network offices outside the EU, other EU business support programmes for brokerage events (such as Invest in Med, East Invest, AL-INVEST), cluster collaboration initiatives (such as the European Cluster Collaboration Platform and the European Club of Cluster Managers), and networking and individual



training programmes in the EU (such as Gateway to Japan/South Korea or the Executive Training Programme).

A detailed assessment of the current portfolio of EU support instruments for SME internationalisation should clarify whether and where the conditions are met for taking new initiatives under the EEN umbrella for promoting SME internationalisation.

The current mapping exercise, launched by the Commission, of existing local/regional/national services in the area of support to SME internationalisation should also help in assessing the need for new EEN services in this area. BUSINESSEUROPE generally supports the concept of a new division of labour¹ proposed in the communication “Small business, big world” for improving information on the regulatory framework in non-EU countries. The mapping should help to see if this concept can be implemented with the help of the EEN. Areas where the need for advanced EEN services should be assessed (for markets outside Europe) include market access, partners matching, competitive intelligence, reliability of partners, legal support, collection of debts.

In connection with this overall assessment of needs and opportunities, it is desirable to explore which role the EEN might play with regard to the planned EU online portal bringing together relevant information about doing business in certain markets. This instrument should not be too far removed from SMEs. This could be avoided by having an EU portal with national focal points (which could be national or regional business organisations) or the local contact points of the EEN. Involving a larger number of business representative organisations in the management of EEN partners’ initiatives (e.g. through the creation of partnerships) would ensure more services to a wider number of companies.

If the mapping exercise and the EU portal project do not show a serious need for initiatives involving the EEN, the scope of EEN activities should be focused on information about the international aspects of EU policies (Free trade agreements, international aspects of energy policy, etc.).

Q.3.4 Do you have any specific ideas on the type of services that Network members could provide in the area of innovation and R&D? Please also give comments on the conditions under which more specialised innovation and R&D services could be provided (limitation to specialized members, measures to improve signposting, measures to train network members, etc...).

A3.4. Response

Supplying information through EEN on funding opportunities connected to EU RD Programmes seems to be a natural EEN task. The preparation of EEN II should however be seized to check whether in the past the synergy between the EEN and the National Contact Points (NCPs) of the 7th EU RD Framework Programme has been good, and whether any improvements/new approaches are needed.

¹ New division of labour between local communities, regions, countries and the EU



We propose setting up a working group of 4-5 NCPs and 2 associations to put together a proposal for how Network information services on Horizon 2020 could be organised. This might include specialized trainings for EEN experts followed by trainings for EEN clients; consulting on FP7, CIP, Horizon 2020 etc. A core range of services for delivery by all Network members could be defined. Each member would then have to agree with other organisations at local level on how to deliver these services.

The SME instrument integrated in the Horizon 2020 proposal makes provision to deploy coaching and mentoring schemes. The text of Horizon 2020 says that this is intended to take place through “existing networks”, without being very precise about what this notion covers.

BUSINESSEUROPE has no preconceived idea about the ideal delivery mechanism for deploying the coaching and mentoring schemes (delivery through EEN or a specific Horizon 2020 mechanism).

Here again, BUSINESSEUROPE suggests that the relevant associations in the EEN Consultative Forum and member state national contact points for FP7 sit down to examine the feasibility and the possible advantages of delivering coaching and mentoring services through EEN. Any such services delivered by EEN on behalf of Horizon 2020 should however be funded by Horizon 2020.

Regarding broader actions aiming at supporting innovation, more emphasis should be put on helping SMEs to commercialise innovations internationally.

TOPIC IV. QUALITY

Issue description by the Commission

Generally speaking, the Network delivers quality services to its clients, and this is reflected in its client benefit surveys. Nevertheless, a number of Network partners sometimes fall short of expected quality standards, and there is room for improvement.

Questions

Q.4.1 Please give concrete examples of the types of service / areas of activity where there are quality issues?

A4.1. Response

Quality issues have been reported in some countries for trainings, seminars and partner finding in particular.

At this moment in time, not all of the partners of the network appear equally qualified, not working either on the basis of the same quality standards or with similar dedicated resources to the project. Some ideas to address and improve the situation include:



- Improved qualification of the personnel involved in project activities (with greater attention to the background of the staff proposed during the presentation of the application), with particular regard to the experience in assisting companies, innovation and internationalisation. Guidelines should be produced regarding staff qualification.
- More training, with a broader standardisation in order to spread a work methodology as widely as possible within the network.
- Increased attention (and compulsory commitment) to a code of conduct, which will ensure sharing of common elements focusing on time / modalities/ ways of service management.

Q.4.2 Improving the quality of the integrated services offered to SMEs:

Q.4.2.1 Do you have any suggestions for improving/ensuring the quality of services?

A4.2.1.Response

There is a need to improve the approach used for assessing the quality of services. The assessment of activities and services should be based not only on broad quantitative (statistical) parameters (such as participation of people in events, quantity of workshops, partnerships, newsletters etc.) but also on more refined qualitative elements, helping to assess to which degree the services provided contributed to solving concrete SME problems. The statistical approach does not give sufficient information to provide ongoing improvements of the quality of the EEN network. Using a qualitative approach has started with the preparation of EEN client satisfaction surveys but further efforts should be made in that direction.

Improving the quality of the EEN network services needs to take into account how willing the SMEs are to recommend the network activities to other growth oriented businesses in their member state. The assessment methodology should include a “net promoter score” based on SMEs willingness to recommend EEN services to their business network at national level. This would give a better picture of the overall quality of the EEN services provided to SMEs at EU level.

In the case of EEN partners who are business associations: control by host organisation, direct communication between host CEO and appropriate DG Enterprise Director in the European Commission.

Q.4.2.2 Please give specific suggestions for improving/ensuring the quality of internationalization services

Follow up and feedback, focus on results and efficiency.

**Q.4.2.3 Please give specific suggestions for improving/ensuring quality of innovation and R&D services**

Adequate response to the SMEs needs; no R&D spending without clear idea about the final application. New tools for public-private partnerships are needed.

Q.4.3 Do you have any best practice to share for improving quality of services?

EEN partner and commercial operating entity jointly submit services (change in the financial rules needed).

TOPIC V. LOCAL ECOSYSTEM OF SMEs AND SIGNPOSTING**Issue description by the Commission**

Discussions at the Consultative Forum confirmed the need to improve cooperation at local level. The Commission suggested inviting Network members to describe clearly (in their responses to the forthcoming call for proposals) how they will mobilize and interact with local players.

Questions**Q.5.1 Do you have any comments on this suggestion?****A5.1. Response**

The mobilisation and interaction of (potential) EEN partners with local players must aim to ensure avoidance of duplication of EEN services with existing services at local / regional level. In future, when they respond to tender calls, it will be essential that host organisations demonstrate that the services they propose to deploy in the framework of EEN are not duplicating existing services, and that such services would be smartly articulated with any existing services. This is how BUSINESSEUROPE interpretes the idea of the Commission that “EEN services need to be well embedded into the overall regional business support landscape”.

Some hosts recommend that EEN may collaborate with local partners with practical experience and operating on commercial basis.

Q.5.2 Any other concrete suggestions on how to improve cooperation and signposting between Network members and other service providers in the local business support ecosystem?



A5.2. Response

As a general remark, we observe that few private players are involved in the network, and this represents a significant limitation that should be remedied. In particular, more consideration should be given to exploit the potential of business representative organisations and their service-providing subsidiaries.

The Commission should pursue the objective of broadening the involvement of private structures in EEN – this should probably be a condition included in the design of the call for EEN II proposals.

TOPIC VI. HOST ORGANISATIONS

Issue description by the Commission

Certain host organisations are less active or committed than others towards the network.

Questions

Q.6.1 Do you have concrete suggestions for how to ensure a high level of engagement/contribution of host organisations across the board?

A6.1. Response

EACI could support all national EEN network partners, national business organisations as well as the future management committee under COSME with a set of best practice examples of EEN activities across the member states, e.g. effective governance structures, information campaigns, partnership agreements, workshops. This would increase the visibility of opportunities within the EEN and inspire local EEN network partners to improve their business support services.

In addition, EACI should continue improving the statistical information developed on the different EEN business support service activities. More qualitative and valid information from the end users (SMEs) of the EEN business support services are needed.

The following should also be implemented:

- Communication at political level, articulation of the mutual benefits
- Higher EC co-financing rates under certain conditions
- Equal treatment of the EC and the host in visualisation, promotion materials and similar.

Furthermore, an effective way to increase the involvement of host structures could be to define, at the time of the launch of the new call for the establishment of EEN II, a



code of conduct aiming to show not only the advantages but also the commitments linked to participation in the EEN. Signature of this code would be required from the applicants. This approach would ensure the possibility to verify, from the application stage, the availability of host structures to fully engage in the process and not to commit to support the network only on a financial basis.

Q.6.2 Do you have any suggestion on how the service level and quality of the Network services provided by the host organisations can be monitored and enhanced across the Network?

A6.2. Response line proposed by BUSINESSEUROPE

- Soft measures like: staff exchange, good practice exchange, specific and focused 1-2 day monitoring visits;
- Direct interventions like: participation of EACI officer during consortium meetings and partners' events; feedback, questionnaires (simple!) sent by EACI directly to some EEN clients.

TOPIC VII. REDUCING THE ADMINISTRATIVE BURDEN ON NETWORK MEMBERS

Issue description by the Commission

Reducing the administrative burden on host organisations is a continuous quest for the Network. However, there is a legitimate need for measures to ensure the sound financial management of public funds and performance monitoring.

Questions

Q.7.1. Do you have any specific suggestions for reducing the administrative burden for network members?

A7.1. Response

- The Commission's communication "Small Business, Big World" stressed the need of a new governance structure of EEN, improving its functioning and collaboration with hosting organisations and stakeholders. This is probably the result from the common wish of the Commission and EEN host structures to practically respond the SMEs' needs in a flexible and integrated manner. EEN is an important tool to support host structures in their interaction with companies. Effective solutions go through less administration and fair communication procedures. Direct communication between DG ENTR + EACI and host organisation heads should be launched as well.
- EEN is huge and difficult to manage. Sometimes, members of Steering and Advisory Group (SAG) cannot give their contribution or opinion during SAG



meetings, because they are a lot. Solution for EEN partners: SAG meetings could be transmitted on-line (one-way connection) – EACI has enough experience, for example – ‘information days’ about a program. Solution for clients and stakeholders: following each SAG meeting there are ‘minutes’ and presentations, which could become publicly available (with some restrictions or registration, may be). Another option: SAG could be divided to lower and upper (much smaller) groups. Other possible option: providing for broadening the mandate of the newly established Consultative Forum and its participation during SAG meetings.

- EACI and host organisations should develop transparent contracts, working methodologies, guidelines and a financial manual. These documents would be obligatory both for hosts and EACI and should limit margins for interpretation and administration burdens as much as possible. It is very important that contracting and operational rules are totally clear and stable: during the last five years, some hosts have witnessed varying interpretations of contract terms, changes regarding reporting activities and eligibility rules for costs.
- National specifics (of partners) have to be taken into account; it should be possible to include them in the contract EACI – EEN partner.
- EACI needs more staff with practical experience from commercial entities.
