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Printed in Italy



GRAPHIC DESIGN: STUDIOELIOS.IT

editorial

Successful stories of DISTRICT subprojects in Saxony

Cornelia Kanna
Saxony Secretariat

Being responsible for the DISTRICT Thematic Component 3 and cooperating with the Research and Development Centre at the Kiel University of Applied Sciences, the Saxony Economic Development Corporation has conducted an evaluation of sub-project achievements. This served the cross-border generation of methods in technology transfer for SMEs and resulted in publishing a study called "The Challenge of Technology Transfer - Perspectives for Economic Capability".

After its 18-months term, all of the eleven DISTRICT sub-projects have successfully been completed by 30 November 2007. Having held the overall responsibility towards the EU and at a total budget of EUR 1.4 million, the Saxony Economic Development Corporation accompanied and topically coordinated a total of eight Saxon institutions that were responsible for or involved in the projects as partners. Apart from joint Saxon initiatives in engineering (VEMAS) and in technical textiles (InnTex), the Saxony Economic Development Corporation also supported research institutions in their project work, such as the STFI, the TU Chemnitz, Fraunhofer IKTS or SAXEED, but also facilities of the regional industry (IMREG, RKW).

As a result of that and by means of numerous presentations at cross-regional branch events in Sweden, the UK and Italy, DISTRICT has been able to improve the image of Saxony as an industrial location. In the field of engineering, of support to young technological businesses evolving from universities, of applying new materials in the automotive industry or medical technology, new possibilities of cooperation in all participating DISTRICT regions have been established for SMEs from Saxony, in the form of study visits, workshops and experts' conferences. The multilingual online platforms that have been installed enable five hundred companies and research facilities from both engineering and technical textiles to get in touch with each other.

Via DISTRICT and by means of knowledge exchange, studies and panel discussions, the Saxon partners in the branch-oriented projects TechnologyMall, InTechTex, RICE, Serious Games, the network projects ETI-NET and CLINIC and the cross-disciplinary projects between university and industry, such as STIM-SME and SEARCH, have contributed to raise specialist competence in the various fields.

A respective project assessment has resulted in the recommendation to continue orchestrated work on the topics.

Focus on: Technical Textiles

After its eighteen months of activities, the DISTRICT Project "InTechTex" under the direction of the Saxon Textile Research Institute (Sächsisches Textilforschungsinstitut e.V.) and coordinated by the Saxony Economic Development Corporation came to an end at the final conference "European Regional Strategy for Innovation in Technical Textiles" held in Dresden on 8th October 2007. Expert speakers representing textile research facilities, entrepreneurial associations and joint initiatives published the results achieved in the international DISTRICT cooperation, which include the following especially worth being noted: 1) the InTechTex website, 2) the InTechTex four-language databases of 412 SME and 49 textile research facilities from four countries, 3) the InTechTex technology exchange "RTC" (Research, Testing, Certifying) including search functions for research topics, products and test methods. Also, studies, documents and information materials regarding the topic have been prepared for interested textile companies. The project partners from Italy, England, Sweden and Saxony, but also invited guests from the Czech Republic, made use of the conference in order to discuss innovative markets for the textile branch, which, due to structural change, increasingly focus on technological innovation of technical textiles. This also includes interdisciplinary cooperation in the building, automotive and medical technologies. By means of the InTechTex Project, successful synergies could be established towards networks and initiatives, such as the TEXTRANET, NETFINTEX and towards the European textile platform "EUROTEXTIL". In a presentation, the WFS GmbH introduced future strategies in the field of EU activities, and it is going to continue to support the STFI.

Focus on Innovation:
Saxony Economic Development Corporation Presents Practical Examples in Innovation Management
Invited by the Saxony Economic Development Corporation, 130 Saxon "networkers" from industry, research and administrative institutions convened for a network panel meeting at the Dresden Bioinnovation Centre (Dresdner

BioinnovationsZentrum) on 30 January 2008. Experiences in innovation management were introduced under the motto of "Branches - Clusters - Networks". This initiative shall serve to establish new partnerships in research and development and to promote cross-regional contacts within the scope of the EU Structural Fund period extending until 2013. Dr. Jan Hofmann, Deutsche Bank Research, lectured on "Germany in 2020 - New Challenges to a Country Gone on an Expedition". The structural change in German economy is in a decisive phase. In the future, successful products can only be developed if multiple fields of knowledge combine and unite. At the same time, product lifecycles are getting shorter thus reducing the period during which companies can make a profit. Therefore, specialists need to enter into flexible cooperation. Further presentations about the challenges and chances of innovation management were given by Clemens Froewin from the business consultancy HLP Hirzel, Leder & Partner, by Dr. Hartmut Freitag from Xenon Automation Technology in Dresden and other representatives of companies. The Saxony Economic Development Corporation participates in the project "Best Practice in Innovation Management" of the Federal Ministry of Research. The Saxon DISTRICT project partners took part in the network panel meeting, too. The event was documented by Business TV Saxony (Wirtschaftsfernsehen Sachsen).

DISTRICT Study Tour West Midlands - New developments towards a knowledge-based economy: Rural and City projects in West Midlands

The study tour, organized by the West Midlands DISTRICT Secretariat, on the 24th and 25th April 2007, included visits to Rural and City projects in the region, to give a flavour of new development in the region towards a knowledge based economy. Some examples show the transferable use of existing buildings to bring them forward into economic usage, where others showcase complete redevelopment of an area, as the Upper Twyford, the Longbridge Technology Park and the Birmingham's world famous Jewellery Quarter.

Upper Twyford demonstrates the potential for derelict farm buildings in Herefordshire to be transformed into environmentally friendly sustainable high quality workspaces. Ledbury and Area Development Trust ensure the economic regeneration of the region's Market Towns.

Longbridge Technology Park is the first step in the long-term plans to regenerate several hundred acres of the former MG Rover works to provide accommodation for new or growing technology-based businesses. Stoneleigh Park is set to become the "Home of Rural Excellence" and a central hub for transfer of knowledge and communication of information, initiatives and best practice.

Newman Brothers coffin works in Birmingham's world famous

Jewellery Quarter will create a unique new visitor attraction and five commercial units will also be created to the rear of the works to help local jewellery companies stay in the area. Ventureast, the groundbreaking £45 million development in Eastside represents one of the biggest regeneration schemes in Europe and is set to create 5,000 jobs on the outskirts of Birmingham City Centre. The aim is to bring forward a one million sq ft high quality, sustainable mixed-use scheme which will boost the wider regeneration of Birmingham's Eastside.

The tour also included the opportunity to attend an Innovation Event at Birmingham University, named "Finding Innovation - Funding Innovation" which comprised of an exhibition and themed seminars and provided an excellent showcase of Birmingham Universities research expertise, including specialist sector sessions.

DISTRICT spin out projects

The strong DISTRICT partnership and the positive three years experience of the Operation have led three of the four DISTRICT partners - West Midlands, Vastra Gotalands and Tuscany - to cooperate in 2 Lifelong Learning projects: TOPTech - "Training European Professionals for Innovation & Technology linked to Business & Competency Development" and "Design the Key".

The TOPTech project provides a platform for vocational learning between professionals involved in the Science City Initiative in the West Midlands and the Vastra Gotalands

Region. Generally it is to assist and support improvements in quality and innovation in institutions/practices in the West Midlands. West Midlands's businesses have a good performance in product innovation but investment in R&D and commercialization of the knowledge base in Universities could be improved. Therefore, bridging the gap between university research and industry is a significant theme of the Regional Economic Strategy and Regional Innovation Strategy for the West Midlands.

The West Midlands' partner organisation in Vastra Gotalands has been the Chalmers University - a top technical university in Sweden with significant research activities and facilities - and Lead Partner of the DISTRICT SEARCH Subproject.

TOPTech provided placements for 17 professionals involved in the Science City Initiative for one week. The placements involved visits to university research centres, innovation centres, and incubation units. This enabled participants to learn about good practices in knowledge and innovation transfer from university laboratories to companies for commercial use from seasoned Swedish professionals. Ultimately the aim of the project was to identify new approaches and best practises qualified through robust economic measures, and to see which structures work and why. It should bring another perspective to assist participants in looking at and to support improvements in quality and innovation in organisation and institutions in the West Midlands.

The project, started the 19 November, ends in April

2008 after participants have completed a report and made presentations on their conclusions - ideas that will help add value to the advancement of the Science City agenda and more widely suggestions/opportunities that will help towards realising the West Midlands Economic Strategy.

The Design the Key project provides a platform for vocational learning between the 14 design professionals involved in a regional design forum, employed in a business or training environment to plan professional development in the West Midlands. The main aim is to support improvements in the commercial performance and ability to use regional design resources by innovative companies in the West Midlands. WM's companies benefit from a perceived historical design led culture. The Regional Economic Strategy and Innovation Strategy develop a sustainable vehicle to return design into the companies agenda to maximise their competitiveness and delivery of innovation by adding value to their products. Participants learned - through visits to Tuscany partners and companies - from seasoned professionals about how they have improved/developed approaches for design intervention and the stimulation of new ideas. The focus has been on robust economic successes.

The DISTRICT Secretariat arranged a week-long study visit in Tuscany from the 20th to 25th of January 2008 with 14 people attending from the West Midlands delegation.

The visit first focused on the Pontedera area, covering the Pont-Tech Consortium,

the Sant'Anna Valdera Campus - hosting a number of laboratories designed for cutting-edge scientific and technological research in various sectors- and the Piaggio Group - one of the world's top manufacturers of two-wheel motor vehicles. Piaggio's pursuit of excellence is based on anticipating client needs and creating products that are technically, stylistically and functionally innovative. The Group's aim is to be the world leader as regards "Made in Italy" light mobility, in terms of design, creativity and tradition, and internationally recognised as the reference company in Europe. The delegation then visited the Piaggio Museum, a real homage to the culture of mobility, that allows to discover the history of the company together with the development of industry, economy and society. Participants discussed design issues with Polimoda, the top fashion design and fashion marketing school in Italy. Based in Florence, Polimoda Fashion School offers many programs in the fashion design industry to create the next generation of top fashion designers in Italy and internationally. On the same day, participants also visited Patrizia Pepe Firenze, a leading group in the clothing sector.

The West Midlands professionals visited Tecnotessile (www.tecnotex.it), a private non-profit research company established in Prato since 1972 - a reference point in Italy for research and technological innovation in textile processing. Tecnotessile focuses its activities on: planning and development of applied research in the textile, machinery, automation and material sectors; services for chemical testing in the textile sector; consulting services for

Quality System development; planning and provision of training courses in the textile and textile machinery sectors. Tecnotessile successfully participated, as sub-contractor of Sviluppo Italia Toscana, to the InTechTex DISTRICT Subproject. WM participants also visited the Textile Museum of Prato: the first museum in Italy dedicated to the textile art and technology with different tasks such as the preservation, care, consultation and exposition of the textile collections, valorisation and research in the fields of innovation training, and creativity providing services available to textile operators at the national and international level. The museum holds regular contacts with the economic context. On the final day of the visit, the WM delegation discussed administrative and economic issues with the Prato Industrial Association and the PIN University - a former partner in the CLINIC, INNOTRAD and SEARCH DISTRICT Subprojects.

Development, growth and a winning concept in Skövde

Our regional DISTRICT programme partners from Tuscany, the West Midlands and Sachsen spent two chilly days in Västra Götaland on the 17th and 18th of October 2007. The focus was on visiting companies and Universities outside Gothenburg, to see how they work together in developing methods of knowledge transfer. We studied how networks are established and expanded between universities and companies, how different technology institutes work collaboratively to communicate and turn each other's knowledge to support innovation services for the regions SMEs, and also how the different regional universities work together to reach out to the regions SMEs.

One important purpose of the study visit was to study the ideas behind our various projects in the region. But equally important is the time spent socialising in the evenings, an opportunity to get to know one another better and forge relationships that create a positive climate of collaboration. This time, we visited the 1700-century East Indiaman Götheborg, which has recently returned from its long voyage to China. Our Regional Development Director, Bertil Törsäter, was part of the crew on the voyage between London and Gothenburg and he joined us for the evening to guide us round and tell us about the life on board.

We travelled by high-speed train from Gothenburg to Skövde and Gothia Science Park, a journey of just one hour. The sun was out and the countryside looked beautiful in its autumnal splendour. We spent the day at Gothia Science Park, a technology park that offers excellent opportunities for development and growth thanks to its good facilities and professional business counselling. Gothia Science Park is located in the vicinity of the University of Skövde. Before travelling back to Gothenburg, we were able to study several successful knowledge transfer projects. We also enjoyed a delicious lunch in the University canteen, which is a former military building.

Better Concept

Daniel Yar Hamidi, who works at the Centre for Entrepreneurship and Business Design at the University of Borås, informed us about the Better concept. A concept of distance learning for employees at SMEs, courses that award university credit points. The objective of the Better Concept programme is to act as a stimulus and incentive for business development in the region, to bring it up to industrial world-class standards.

The Better Concept is the Universities no-cost response to the needs companies have for skills development. The courses are tailored to meet the companies' needs and the skills are strived for a direct incorporation. The Better Concept clearly shows that academia wants to be part of real life, and companies taking part in the Better Concept are emerging as winners because of the active participation of their employees in the courses.

The 15-week-long courses are being run in collaboration between the three neighbouring universities. The courses focus on:

- production
- business design
- automation
- leadership
- Better HEL – health, economy and leadership.

Since time is an expensive resource for professional business people, the Better courses are designed to allow for flexibility and are offered as distance learning courses, all students also have access to tutors, however, to provide them with the support they need.

Lectures and course information are sent over the Internet. Almost every municipality has a learning centre where the participants meet one afternoon a week. The course tutor attends these meetings in person or via videoconference, and the participants discuss and apply each weekly theme to their own business or professional field. The participants have also a support of a platform on the Internet that

they can use to communicate with one another between videoconferences.

The crown jewels of the Better courses are the written reports. Participants have to apply what they have learned on the course in some form of analysis or development project in their own company. Not only do these written reports give the participants university credit points, they also bring savings, often up to six figures (SEK), to their companies.

Industriell Dynamik

Richard Berglund, from IVF Industrial Research and Development, enlightened us on regional innovation service and the transfer of knowledge to industrial SMEs through the program Industriell Dynamik (ID) programme. The industrial region situated outside of Göteborg contains lots of small and medium-sized entrepreneurs in the manufacturing industry. Many of the SMEs are keen to grow and improve their technology skills, but are not sure where to turn for help and support.

Industriell Dynamik is a coherent system of innovation support for industrial SMEs in Västra Götaland. The objective of the programme is to spur innovation, growth and competitiveness in existing companies.

The heart of the project is a network that currently comprises eleven universities, institutes and technology centres in the region. Innovation specialists within this network actively contact companies, conduct development discussions and needs assessments, provide advice and counselling, solve problems for the SMEs in the manufacturing industry and later on can evolve this service to the companies into a development project that the companies pays for. The visiting specialists represent the entire network and use an active listening approach rather than trying to get a company interested in a particular method or solution. It is the demand of the companies that is the determining factor, not the supply side.

A world-class innovation system consists of several attributes: availability, promptness, quality, flexibility, a long-term approach, continuity and confidence. The actors engaged in the Industriell Dynamik apply the entire network's knowledge, or bring in others as required. There is no bureaucracy affecting the companies and the various actors have experience solely from industry. Industriell Dynamik's winning concepts have been:

- evolving networks
- industrial experience
- knowledge about problems
- prompt solutions
- focus on listening and dialogue
- instead of selling
- network of actors
- continuity.

Its work is supported by a computer-based innovations index that has been developed for the programme. Everyone has access to this database where they can register companies, proposed activities and results that have been achieved.

Serious Games Cluster and business networks

The final presentation for the day was made by Per Backlund, from InGaMe Lab at the University of Skövde.

The military, Government, medical services and the industry are some examples using the concept that Serious Games offers. The object is to teach, train, rehabilitate, inform, recruit and marketing by using different skills in a four-dimensional cave, car simulator, office setting or home setting.

The concept they use is appropriate commercial and specifically-designed games. One of the games has been developed in collaboration with the Swedish Rescue Services and is for practising smoke-diving. It is a new cave-based interaction model designed for the training of trainee fire-fighters.

The game presents realistic situations and involves scanning smoke-filled buildings under great physical pressure to search for people. After the session, the trainees were given feedback on their performance. As an example, they learned to search everywhere

and not miss a single person (e.g. in wardrobes), and to be careful and trust their own ability. Most important of all, they learned to search methodically and to be totally sure that the entire building had been gone through.

More than thirty organisations have participated in Serious Games' many networks and workshops. Those taking part have included users and producers from industry, universities and decision-making organisations.



DISTRICT Final Conference

16th April 2008, Espace Monte Paschi Belgio, Brussels (BE)

The DISTRICT RFO is soon coming to its conclusion. DISTRICT's Final Conference will provide the occasion to share its results with other European regions.

The Conference will take place on the 16th April 2008 at the Espace Monte Paschi Belgio in Brussels and will mainly focus on good practices delivered by the project.

Attractive stories about most innovative ideas from major centres of excellence will be illustrated by a series of videos from the four partner regions.

The Conference will be open to all with a special invitation to regions from new Member States regions to participate.

The event will be preceded by a workshop on the 15th afternoon at the West Midlands in Europe premises in Brussels.

Outstanding representatives of the four partner regions and the European Commission will participate in this unique event.

The programme of the workshop is available for download on the DISTRICT's website www.district-rfo.eu.

Regions For Economic Change Sharing excellence

25-26th February, Brussels (BE)

The conference aimed to facilitate the exchange of good practices for pursuing the implementation of the Lisbon strategy at regional level through cohesion instruments. In particular, the event showcased examples of good practice and governance in European regional policy.

In nine workshops, experts debated strategies, experiences and projects around the process of cooperation and learning, in order to provide partners with practical examples of how they can cooperate and learn from one another as they start to implement the 2007-2013 programmes.

On the evening of 25th February, Mrs Danuta Hübner, European Commissioner for Regional Policy, presented the 2008 'RegioStars' awards which aim at seeking and disseminating good practice in European regional development.

The conference also included the launch of the 2009 'RegioStars' awards, and opportunities for networking.

http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/conferences/excellence/home_en.cfm?nmenu=1