

Business often does know best – and should be encouraged to show it

Kari-Pekka Estola, chairman of the EUREKA Advisory Committee (EAC), believes strongly in the need for constructive cooperation between private and public authority partners in bottom-up public research programmes – and the need for business to take the lead once the ground rules have been established, as emphasised by the success of the major EUREKA Clusters. Estola has been chairman of the EAC since April 2006. This group, which consists of senior European industrial and scientific representatives, provides a structural dialogue between project participants and representatives of EUREKA, and advises on the activities and policy of the Initiative.

What do you see as the main challenges for public research programmes?

A key need is to build a constructive environment where public authorities and companies speak the same language, and it is clear what is being put on the table by both sides. Sometimes, public authorities and companies appear to understand each other but their expectations are not the same, especially where those involved are not yet familiar enough with each other. This can be a problem politically, especially if promises are not being kept.

In addition, companies need to know where they are within a reasonable time frame – for example, it is still not clear what exactly is being offered by the Joint Technology Initiatives (JTIs), and when something will actually start.

How can public organisations understand business needs and wants better?

This is often a question of the instruments that could be used, which are being used and those that are successful. The way the EUREKA information and communications technology (ICT) Clusters built and launched their programmes demonstrates the best approach that public authorities can take and how they involved both companies and their customers from the beginning. However, it is crucial that, once such frameworks are operational,

the public authorities step back and let businesses run them.

The ICT Clusters are an important achievement, offering the strategies and constructive environments needed in areas of crucial importance to the European economy. Regular programme statements, good sharing of information and inputs from many sources have all contributed to their success.

Not only should people come to the table with the right 'win-win' attitude, but good dialogue should be promoted with clear decisions that are then followed.

How can SMEs benefit from participation in public programmes?

The statistics show Clusters are now the biggest part of EUREKA and that individual initiatives have been dropping. SMEs can benefit from participating in Clusters as

it enables them to see more of the value chain in their industries – and particularly how the end customer operates – rather than just interfacing with their immediate client, often a large organisation.

Initiatives such as the Eurostars Programme offer a different type of approach, focused directly on SMEs. We must make every effort to ensure that this programme is successful by involving all EUREKA member countries and ensuring that there is a positive spirit circulating.

What do you see as the key issues facing EUREKA itself?

A major issue is how to encourage new Clusters. These bottom-up initiatives offer centres of expertise that fit well in the EUREKA strategy and can work effectively. The question now perhaps is how can we extend this approach to nourish new areas? →

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Kari-Pekka Estola



Why for example are there no Clusters in biotechnology? Is the business environment or are the companies so different from the ICT sector where Clusters such as ITEA 2 or MEDEA+ have been doing so well?

We need to understand why Clusters work in some areas but not in others which have more individual ways of working. If Clusters do not fit, then these sectors will miss out on the 'virtuous circles' found in the ICT area, where MEDEA and ITEA are stronger and stronger every year.

How can public programmes do better overall?

It is possible there are now too many initiatives underway – from the Framework Programme through JTIs to regional developments. From the SME point of view, it is not obvious which initiatives are going to be successful and in which they should be taking part. This is equally a problem for

big companies, where usually a handful of people take part in all the initiatives and are now becoming overloaded.

Is it easier to start a new initiative rather than to carry it out? I am not saying there should be no new initiatives but any new programme needs to have a strong strategy behind it and must be implemented and executed within a clear timeframe – it should not be open ended. However this may be easier said than done as there are now so many different parties involved at both European and global levels.

Certainly EUREKA itself has an important continuing role. However, it is a brand that needs more brand building in a period of rapid change, particularly political change. Moreover, we need to take time to look at some of the underlying issues that are coming to the fore in day-to-day operations.

Who is Kari-Pekka Estola?

This Finnish computer science expert brings a wide range of experience in academia, big and small companies, and public research programmes to his role as EAC chairman. Estola has been a professor and director of the Electronics Laboratory at the Technical Research Centre of Finland and was until recently Vice President and head of Technology Exploration at mobile phone manufacturer Nokia's research centre. He has participated in both the MEDEA+ microelectronics and ITEA embedded software Clusters, and has been a member of the Bureau of the European Research Advisory Board (EURAB) and the IST Advisory Group (ISTAG). He now operates as a 'business angel', providing private equity for technological SMEs.

