

RECAP smE-MPOWER Pilot Training Event 10 – 15 March 2009, Visperterminen, Swiss Alps

smE-MPOWER is a holistic approach for empowering SMEs towards business innovation. It puts the SME in the driver seat of development projects and helps universities, research centres, consultants and intermediaries support the company's business interest without loosing out on their own. smE-MPOWER takes into account the whole system. It provides tools for coaching workshops, training for cooperation coaches and suggestions for a winning configuration of regional innovation systems.

In November 2008, ten intermediary organisations from eight Europe countries launched the **smE-MPOWER Community** providing the space and relationships for shared learning and profitable collaboration. The community is by invitation only, financed by annual membership fees, and highly interested in adding new members sharing the same passion for excellence in coaching SME cooperations.

On the backbone of the smE-MPOWER knowledge library with over 100 practice tools and expert contacts, and following the explicit interest of the community members, the **first training workshop** was held in March 2009. The subjects covered helping companies identify options for business innovation, supporting their choice of strategic partnerships and facilitating the conception and set-up of collaborative projects which might then finally be matched with various funding mechanisms. Intense action learning in the mornings and evenings was nicely balanced by afternoon skiing and joint cooking. The panorama of the Swiss Alps and a great community spirit let the time fly by much too fast.



Magic moments in the smE-MPOWER community

The training focused on key tasks of the smE-MPOWER approach to cooperation coaching:

- ☞ First, all projects driving **business innovation** in SMEs need to be deeply rooted in the corporate strategy. Identifying possible options and opportunities in light of their strategic importance is therefore the fundamental key to any further decision about collaboration, internationalisation or project development! Based on a thorough understanding of the business innovation concept, the training introduced, exercised and validated some of the simple practice-proven Excel-tools of the smE-MPOWER knowledge base – like the “Innovation Radar Tool” and the “Needs & Opportunities Analysis Tool”.
- ☞ Secondly, collaborative projects for SMEs need a very clear definition of complementary **strategic partnerships**. smE-MPOWER methods and tools – including the “Alliance Assessment Tool” – support the process of building partnerships around the business concept of a chosen innovation option. Again, different strategies driving the collaboration interest must be taken into account, in order to guide the client SME the appropriate way!
- ☞ Once a core partnership is assembled around a business innovation option, the challenge of developing a consistent, fair and well thought through **project concept** appears. Configuring strategy based projects with potentially conflicting interests requires the coach to be able to deal with a whole series of critical issues. Defining a shared Intellectual Property Rights policy is a major one. Others like a systemic project organisation, budgeting or risk assessment can be easily underestimated at this stage! While some of these aspects are strongly supported by smE-MPOWER tools – like the “Project Budgeting Tool” or the “Risk Assessment Tool” – others still rely primarily on the tacit knowledge gained through coaching experience alone.

smE-MPOWER is a **knowledge community**. We share high value knowledge objects for use at client’s site. These include concise documents, PowerPoint slides and Excel-tools, all simply crafted and unprotected in order to allow for adaptation and further improvement. Such tools have the potential to encapsulate a complex logic in a simplified way, offer visualisations and decision frameworks and provide immediately tangible results when printed. Tools can help. They can, however, never substitute experience and background knowledge. Which is exactly why **real cases** – and the action learning that comes with (anonymized) sharing, debriefing, re-enacting and learning – lie at the heart of our learning community. As such we will keep building our knowledge base and be happy to share this increasing asset under a Creative Commons licence with our clients and colleagues.