

Preface

Recent studies supported by the European Commission have reported that half of the small and mid-sized enterprises (SMEs) cooperate with other SMEs, with a traditionally large diffusion of collaborative agreements in countries such as Italy, Denmark, Norway, Finland, an increasing diffusion of similar arrangements also in France, Germany and in some new EU countries of Eastern Europe, such as Hungary (see the report “SMEs and Cooperation”, published by the Observatory of European SMEs in 2003). A frequent motivation for SME cooperation is to have better access to larger markets, a cheaper supply of materials and components, but also a reduction of costs for various services and a smooth and assured meeting of client demands. The same report shows that the size of the enterprise can influence the type and scope of the cooperation: the main goal of mid-scale enterprises is to have long-term agreements, whilst small-scale enterprises want to have short-term benefits, mainly through market-oriented coordination. On the other hand, some obstacles exist: foremost, each SME wants to maintain its independence, and this barrier is an evident cultural motivation, difficult to eradicate. However, in spite of some obstacles, the idea of SME aggregations into clusters and networks, and an increasing trust in these groupings, is growing in all European countries. More research recently published by the Directorate General Enterprise and Industry of the European Commission gives a clear insight in the dissemination of regional/local clusters, which are being recognized as important tools for industrial development (see “Innovation Clusters: A Statistical Analysis and Overview of Current Policy Support”, 2007, at <http://ec.eurpa.eu/enterprise/newsroom/cf>). A SME cluster can now be clearly identified as an aggregation of co-located producers and service providers, often including educational and research institutions as well as financial services and also public institutions. The 2007 report presents a statistical picture of clusters in Europe, and shows how they are becoming real drivers of growth, mainly to enhance not only cooperation among firms but also to strengthen links with the knowledge infrastructure to push innovation. However both reports stress the need for a more precise conceptualisation of what constitutes a SME cluster and which main phenomena characterize its

evolution, i.e. their desired cultivation but also their collapse. Research and study efforts to accurately identify the industrial body “SME cluster and network”, together with analyses of the real causes of weakness or strength, appear to be mandatory not only for supporting both the design and implementation of new cluster-oriented policies, but also for giving suggestions and criteria for the constitution of new SME aggregations, and for driving an effective organization of SME interaction and cooperation.

The EU-funded Coordination Action CODESNET (COllaborative DEmand and Supply NETworks), developed during the 6th Framework Programme, has been developed in order to promote a dissemination of these ideas, with the contributions of 22 industrial enterprises and academic institutions of 11 European countries. Theoretical considerations and a wide collection of SME networks from the partners offered a promising ground on which a new methodology for analysing these networked industrial bodies, such as evaluating their performance, can be developed. The collaborative actions done during the project generated a preliminary version of a method for comparing different SME networks and identifying the best characteristics of each. Potential applications of this method have been validated by implementing it through a specific web portal (see the address: <http://www.codesnet.polito.it>). This book aims to spread the project ideas and tools of CODESNET, putting them at the disposal of any industrial analyst interested in promoting these very important bodies: the SMEs and their cooperation opportunities. To this extent the book, whose contents have been planned during the final period of the project development, includes contributions from several project partners. Starting with a summary of the main motivations, which suggests the promotion of research and studies on SME aggregations, it presents a view of SME clusters and networks in a number of European countries, together with suggestions and hints towards a better diffusion of these collaborative industrial bodies. The CODESNET models and concepts for the networks performance evaluation are then addressed, oriented in a comprehensible form for industrial end users.



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Networks

Towards Collaborative Innovation

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