

SMEs require support in standardization

World Standards Day was marked on 21 October 2008 by a European conference in Paris under the heading "Standardisation and SMEs". The event, which was broadcast live on the Internet, was devoted to the political strategies and specific measures by which the development and application of standards could be made easier for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

"The implementation of the Small Business Act¹ is one of the priorities of the French EU Council Presidency," declared the Secretary of State responsible for SMEs, Hervé Novelli of the French Ministry for the Economy, Industry and Employment. An important aspect of this document is the call to the EU Member States and standards organizations to give greater consideration to the interests of SMEs in standardization activity.

On behalf of the European Commission, Françoise Le Bail, Deputy Director-General of the DG Enterprise and Industry, emphasized that as a consequence of the Council Conclusions on standardisation and innovation² adopted in September 2008 by the European Council, a high-ranking group of experts is to be appointed to map out the future of standardization over the coming ten years.

Study into access to standards development

The scope for the various stakeholders to participate in the standards development process is currently being evaluated in a study commissioned by the European Commission. Koos van Elk from EIM, the Dutch body conducting the study, emphasized that the first and most important step must be for SMEs to recognize the importance of standards for themselves. Other problems experienced by SMEs, such as poor information and their lack of time and financial resources, could then be addressed. Renate Weissenhorn, head of the unit responsible for standardization policy in the Enterprise and Industry Directorate-General, explained that the Council Conclusions call upon the standards organizations to make summaries of standards available free of charge. The creation of an advice centre on standardization issues for SMEs is also under consideration. Ms Weissenhorn underlined that industry associations, standards organizations and the state have a joint responsibility for creating the conditions under which greater consideration is given to the interests of SMEs.

Case studies and good-practice examples

With reference to real-case examples, representatives of SMEs from a number of Member States illustrated how their companies benefit from participation in the development of standards and in their application. Advantages during canvassing for orders, on both domestic and in-

ternational markets, were considered to be the most important aspect.

In addition to the case studies, selected examples of good practice were presented. Great interest was expressed in KAN's support for SMEs in the form of brochures, seminars and the NoRA standards search tool, and in KAN's influence upon designers, even at the training stage, through tuition materials. The balanced composition of KAN, comprising employers' and employees' representatives, the state, the statutory accident insurance institutions and DIN, was considered very constructive for effective representation of stakeholder interests in standardization.

In Finland, the state subsidizes the travel costs for attendance of European and international standards committee meetings by approximately 230 experts from SMEs, research institutions and public authorities each year. The experts are selected on the basis of their personal qualifications and also strategic considerations such as the innovative potential and economic significance of the sector concerned.

Standardization must be simplified

Several conference delegates indicated that the purchase costs of standards are not the chief problem for SMEs. Of much greater importance is that the standardization process be organized in a way which enables SMEs to present their concerns more easily. In the opinion of Loucas Gourtsoyannis of NORMAPME, the European lobby for SMEs within standardization, a more balanced membership of the standards committees is also required for this purpose. Jean-Vincent Boussiquet, Chairman of CCNA, the French standardization and trades focus committee, called for standards to be made more readable and for content to be presented with the greatest possible brevity: "A drawing is often better than ten pages of text in a standard."

Werner Sterk
sterk@kan.de

¹ Priority for SMEs – The "Small Business Act" for Europe
http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/entrepreneurship/sba_en.htm

² Council Conclusions on standardisation and innovation
http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/standards_policy/standardisation_innovation/index.htm