



COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES

Brussels, 10.1.2007
SEC(2007) 37

COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT

**eBSN – The European eBusiness Support Network for SMEs - 2003-2005:
Achievements and the way forward**

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1. INTRODUCTION

Investing in information and communication technology (ICT) is seen as a key factor in business competitiveness and overall economic growth. A wider and productive use of ICT has the potential to revolutionise and maximise business processes and organisations. Data since 1980 show that ICT investment in EU-15 has been consistently lower than in the USA. Comparative figures for 2004, for instance, show ICT investment in the USA running at 4,1% of GDP, with EU-15 averaging less than 2,5%. And ICT investment produces growth: 0,8% of the 3,4% GDP growth in the USA is attributed to ICT capital growth. ICT capital contribution to overall economic growth in EU-15 amounted to 0,5% of a much more modest GDP growth of 2,1%. Productivity growth in the US has been mostly driven by the ICT-using sectors, while ICT-using sectors in Europe have not been in a position to capitalise on their investments in terms of productivity growth. According to recent studies¹, the overall contribution to labour productivity growth from ICT investments and from technical progress in the production of ICT goods and services, accounted for about 40% of EU labour productivity growth over the second half of the 1990s, compared with 60% in the US. And there are big differences among the EU-15 states, with Sweden, Denmark, Belgium and the UK in a relatively strong position, but France, Germany, Netherlands, Greece, Italy and Spain lagging behind. The general picture, then, is that since 1980, the USA has consistently invested more in ICTs and has thereby derived more benefit than the EU countries from the effects of ICT capital on economic growth. Europe needs to act; ICTs and eBusiness² models can make business processes more efficient and boost overall competitiveness.

According to the *eBusiness W@tch* Report 2005, large firms continue to drive eBusiness development. SMEs are the ones suffering most from limited understanding of ICTs and their potential, limited budget for ICT investments and difficulty in recruiting ICT professionals. Fixed costs for technology implementation and maintenance tend to be relatively high for small companies.

For these reasons, European governments have paid particular attention to SMEs, devising policies to promote the uptake and productive use of ICTs by their SMEs. Many successful policy initiatives have been developed at national, regional or local level, and they could be made more successful still by networking, learning from each other, sharing good practice and coordinating action to achieve a broader and stronger impact.

In 2003 the Commission established the eBSN (European eBusiness Support Network for SMEs, www.e-bsn.org) in response to this need. The eBSN is a virtual network of decision-makers and public policy networks, a tool to make existing eBusiness policies more joined-up. It is part of the Enterprise and Industry Directorate General's Multi-annual Programme for SMEs (MAP), and its underlying objectives are to:

- bring together decision makers in the field of eBusiness to share information and to discuss strategic policy direction;

¹ The EU Economy: 2003 review from Directorate General for Economic and Financial Affairs – European Commission

² eBusiness is the digitisation of all business processes (both intra and inter-firm) over computer mediated networks (OECD)

- validate existing eBusiness policies and agree on targets for future eBusiness policies;
- provide a "one-stop-shop" for information about regional, national and European eBusiness initiatives and funding opportunities for SMEs;
- organise meetings of governmental eBusiness experts to share practical experience and to identify future challenges.

The running of the eBSN network is carried out on a continuous basis, with yearly defined topics. This allows for very flexible and fluent forms of cooperation. No Community funding has been used for these purposes, apart from meeting costs and technical assistance related to the operation of the eBSN portal.

The eBSN has been part of the eEurope 2005 Action Plan. Its political context remains valid. Facilitating the spread and effective use of ICT lies right at the heart of the renewed Lisbon strategy³ and eBSN can be a useful tool to exchange good practice in eBusiness policies within this framework.

The Communication on fostering structural change in an enlarged Europe⁴ also stressed that *the successful integration of ICT in all aspects of production and business processes is a key factor to productivity growth* which, in turn, determines economic development. Hence, the need for co-ordinated policies and action in support of European businesses, especially SMEs.

Under its i2010⁵ policy framework, the European Commission's aim is to strengthen innovation and investment in ICT as a means of promoting economic growth and jobs. It recognises that the benefits of ICTs come from embedding them into products and services and encouraging firms to embrace new business models, organisational change and skills. The eEurope Advisory Group report "*Making i2010 work: creating value from research and innovation*" proposes a detailed six-point strategy: "*SME Networks involving both research organisations and industry specialists should be considered as strategic building blocks for connecting businesses, knowledge-intensive institutions, people and creativity.*"

The Competitiveness Council Conclusions of 13 May 2003 underlined "*the need to assist SMEs, in particular, to identify eBusiness opportunities and to implement successfully their transformation towards eBusiness*", invited Member States and Acceding Countries "*to actively engage in the European eBusiness Support Network for SMEs (eBSN)*", and invited the Commission to report to the Council and the European Parliament on the progress made on the various initiatives to support eBusiness for SMEs and on making it easier for firms to use ICT and eBusiness services.

This report takes stock of the progress made with the eBSN over the past two and a half years. Chapter 2 is devoted to the main achievements of the eBSN, both tangible and intangible, addressing its four main objectives; it is underpinned by the results of an on-line questionnaire (Annex 2) sent to eBSN members, as well as on discussions held at the eBSN workshop, at

³ Integrated Guidelines (IG) for Growth and Jobs (2005-2008) – IG n° 9 - Recommendations adopted by the Council, 12 July 2005

⁴ Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament on "Fostering Structural Change: an Industrial Policy for an enlarged Europe", COM(2004) 274 final, 20 April 2004.

⁵ Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament on "i2010 – A European Information Society for growth and employment", COM(2005) 229 final, 1 June 2005

several EPMC (Enterprise Policy Management Committee) meetings and at the EPG (Enterprise Policy Group) meeting in February 2006. The questionnaire and discussions sought to collect detailed information on the concrete benefits accruing to eBSN members through their participation in the network, to learn more about the synergies and cross-fertilisation among policy initiatives, to assess how the eBSN was working and make suggestions on operational improvements and future policy orientations. Chapter 3 covers the future challenges for the eBSN, including new priorities, as well as suggestions on how to improve its operations. Last but not least, chapter 4 summarises the document and highlights its main conclusions.

2. MAIN ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE eBSN

2.1. Sharing information and best practices on eBusiness policies in Europe

The eBSN brought together decision makers in the field of eBusiness, to share information and to discuss strategic policy direction.

Since it was set up by the European Commission in 2003, the eBSN has involved 190 representatives of public or private-public organisations from 29 countries in Europe. The balance between national (representing 55% of the members) and regional (45% of the members) initiatives is satisfactory. But further efforts need to be made in order to improve the involvement from some old Member States and from the new Member States and Candidate Countries (only 10% of the current eBSN members).

The eBSN has however now progressed to the point where its members can move on from exchanging information to swapping policy proposals and developing joint policy initiatives. Members say they are very happy with the way they can use the eBSN to network and gather valuable information on policy developments in Europe, and are unanimous in calling for the Network to be made still more effective.

First and foremost, **the eBSN has stimulated policy and action**. It has shifted the focus of public policies to coaching businesses to integrate ICTs into their overall business strategy. There is now more innovative cooperation between government, the business community and academia, at European, national and regional/local level. The eBSN has helped shift the attention of public policies from more generic initiatives like encouraging SMEs to acquire Internet access and technical infrastructure, to specific measures focusing on helping businesses to re-design their business processes and embrace ICTs as part of their overall business strategy. In addition, it has helped draw the attention of ICT suppliers and the software development community to the needs of SMEs and to engage them in more collaborative eBusiness solution development schemes.

Many policy initiatives, European or national, have become widely known through the eBSN initiative and have inspired others, for example:

- The recent **French TIC-PME2010** initiative launched by the Economics Ministry to get SMEs to invest more in enhanced ICT and to harmonise in-house processes in specific sectors of the economy (e.g. aeronautics, transport, tourism, agriculture) was inspired by the main political messages spread through the eBSN: competitive underperformance linked to underinvestment in ICT, and the consequent need for more ICT in industrial and services processes.
- In preparation for the "**eTIC Label**", a **Belgian initiative** launched last year, policy experts had discussions on how to set up and manage an accreditation scheme for eBusiness advisers under the eBSN umbrella. The resultant "eTIC" Label is a professional code of ethics and practice supported by local and national professional federations and associations, and has now been signed by more than 150 Belgian specialist undertakings.
- The eBSN involvement helped the **National Business-to-Business Centre, a West Midlands Region SME e-Adoption Programme**, to shape its current activities as well as the next phase of development from April 2006 to March 2008. For example, mutually

beneficial learning exchanges have been initiated with the MFG Baden-Württemberg ebigo.be initiative on identifying SME Best Practice and eBusiness Portal.

- The **Portuguese initiative “Internationalisation of SMEs in External Electronic Markets”**, to be launched by the **Economics** Ministry, is a training and support campaign for SMEs on the use of e-methods in international markets, techniques for penetrating foreign markets and the appropriate marketplaces in which to do eBusiness. This initiative adopted many recommendations and techniques from case-studies of good eBusiness policies as analysed by the eBSN.
- **“The Future of eBusiness – Trends, Driving Forces and Impacts” in Portugal** is a unique worldwide training course to help managers analyse the impact of ICT on their business, and to brief them on consumer and market organisation trends within the eBusiness area. The training material is based on case studies and best practices from the eBSN network, as well as other EU projects, more particularly the ELEAS project on legal issues of eBusiness. This initiative was implemented with great success in Germany, Hungary, Denmark and Portugal, and the eBSN can help other European regions follow suit.
- Numerous **ideas for initiatives and events are reported as spin-offs from eBSN workshops**, e.g. in Slovenia, the Bled eConference panels in 2004 and 2005, and the Business & Government Executives meetings in 2004-2005.

Moreover, the **eBSN is good at creating synergies**, so much needed in the eBusiness environment, where the important thing is to break down borders of industries or sectors.

- The **AchatVille initiative in France** started in Grenoble in 2000. Its goal is to raise awareness among SMEs (local retailers) of the benefits of using eBusiness tools. Following its labeling by the European Commission as “European good practice” in 2002, further financial support has been granted to facilitate synergies between Chambers of Commerce in France, with a view to spread this successful policy and to further develop the Achatville model. 20 towns are now in the network, with more due to join. European Commission recognition served to create a virtuous circle attracting more and more stakeholders into the programme.
- The **Finland & Slovenia “eInvoicing LivingLab”** initiative is a successful bilateral partnership, under the eBSN umbrella, in the field of eBusiness. Promoting eInvoicing by SMEs, a very practical eBusiness initiative running under Finnish regional policy in South Karelia, was successfully transferred to Slovenia, thus demonstrating that transferability of best practices in eBusiness is feasible. This in turn quickly triggered a new series of cross-border joint policy initiatives, between Slovenia, Italy, Croatia, Hungary and Austria. In parallel, the Finnish regional eInvoicing initiative expanded into cross-border exchanges with Sweden and Denmark.

During 2005 the eBSN decided to focus policy exchanges and action on the following four eBusiness related policy priorities:

- **E-invoicing/e-procurement**: starting from the regional policy initiative in South Karelia, in Finland (described above), eInvoicing became a key policy issue and gave rise to pilot initiatives in Slovenia, Italy, Croatia, Hungary, Austria, Sweden and Denmark. **Sector-specific policy approaches**: sectoral initiatives can be more effective than broader generic

strategies when it comes to promoting SME uptake of eBusiness. The on-going national and regional sectoral eBusiness policy initiatives promote business opportunities and creation of partnership networks within individual sectors at regional level. They produce more sector-specific solutions, training and instructions to increase skills within individual sectors. They usually support sectors that are lagging in eBusiness readiness, or that national governments recognise as having potential to add value to the economies of their countries. They allow sharing of experiences and information at sectoral and cross-sectoral level. Although some Member States have realised the importance of sectoral policy approaches in promoting eBusiness for SMEs, it seems that there is not sufficient knowledge of those policies and other private-public partnerships that may exist in this field. The Enterprise and Industry Directorate General therefore intends to launch a benchmarking study in 2006 to analyse and assess existing sectoral eBusiness policy initiatives and the lessons to be learnt.

- **Improving eBusiness solutions availability for SMEs and eBusiness for micro-enterprises:** SMEs have different needs with respect to ICT and eBusiness applications than do large companies. The difficulty they may have in recruiting ICT professionals, as suggested by the *eBusiness w@tch* results, as well as their sometimes limited budget for ICT related purchases, makes it all the more important to find integrated and interoperable eBusiness applications. In the first phase of the eBSN (2003 – 2005), there was an evident lack of affordable ICT solutions adapted to the needs of micro, small and medium size enterprises. Therefore, Member States and the Commission alike took steps to enhance collaboration between ICT suppliers and SMEs.
- However, the ICT market has evolved and ICT suppliers are increasingly focusing their attention on SMEs, by offering adapted solutions and services. As a result, at the latest eBSN workshop in Cambridge in December 2005, the need to improve the availability of eBusiness solutions for SMEs, through policy action at EU level, seemed no longer to apply. What is still needed, though, is better marketing of the available solutions, as well as awareness about their characteristics and gearing them to specific SME business processes and needs. The Enterprise and Industry Directorate General therefore intends to launch a benchmarking study in 2006 to collect information and assess available eBusiness solutions and services addressing the needs of SMEs in particular.

In addition, in 2005 and 2006, the Enterprise and Industry Directorate General launched a number of specific measures, under the Multi-annual Programme for SMEs (MAP), which are expected to deliver results within 2007:

- **A study to assess the impact of ten national or regional eBusiness policies.** The policy initiatives that were assessed were selected by the eBSN Steering Group, mostly from the 19 examples of good eBusiness policy practices identified by the benchmarking study of national and regional policies in support of eBusiness for SMEs. The study was completed in January 2006 and an impact assessment of these policies – eAskel (FN), Opportunity Wales (UK), AchatVille (FR), Go on-line (GR), SVEA (SW), eCommerce Leveraging Center Galicia (SP), PRISM II (IR), Shortcut to eBusiness (DN), South Karelia eInvoicing initiative (FN), VerDI (NO) – will be available on the eBSN portal.
- A call for grant applications to **“Support best practice exchange of eBusiness policies for SMEs”**, the objective being to support the exchange of eBusiness policies and improve synergies between eBusiness policy stakeholders in the EU.

- a call for grants on “**Enhancing the cooperation between SMEs and ICT suppliers**”, aiming at promoting closer collaboration and mutual understanding between ICT suppliers and SMEs with a view to improving the availability of eBusiness solutions adapted to the needs of SMEs.
- a call for grants on “**Train the trainer: educating independent business advisors**”, whose objective is to promote world-class training for independent eBusiness advisors through SME support networks.
- A study on “**benchmarking sectoral policy initiatives in support of eBusiness for SMEs**” with a view to collecting information and assessing key existing sectoral policy initiatives and public-private partnerships promoting eBusiness for SMEs at national and regional level, notably in the EU-25 countries, EEA countries, the USA, Canada, China, India and South Korea.
- A study on “**benchmarking commercially available eBusiness solutions for SMEs**”, aimed at collecting information and assessing the various commercially available products and services that address the eBusiness needs of SMEs.
- A call for tenders on “**Technical assistance for the eBSN**”, taking the form of the collection and presentation of information material about existing eBusiness policy initiatives, as well as the management and maintenance of the eBSN portal, under the Commission’s Europa server.
- A call for grant applications on “**Reinforcing synergies between public policies in support of eBusiness for SMEs**”. The objective here is to support and facilitate the exchange of best policy practices between eBusiness policy makers and/or SME support networks, **within and outside the EU**. 2.2. Validating existing eBusiness policies and agreeing on targets for future eBusiness policies

The second eBSN objective is to validate current eBusiness policies, and to lead the process of having the EU Member States setting SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, **Realistic**, **Tangible**) targets for their eBusiness policies for SMEs.

The eBSN provides a **platform for presentation and validation of relevant eBusiness policies and assessment of their results**.

The debate on **setting targets for eBusiness Policies** was launched with the first eBSN workshop in Athens in January 2003. A broad consensus was achieved among all Member States representatives on the need to set concrete, measurable, quantitative targets for eBusiness policies, provided that Member States could select those targets that comply with their own policy priorities. Only by setting SMART targets at national level would monitoring and assessment of the eBusiness activities, their output and impact, be feasible in the near future. It was made clear that the success of this initiative will depend on the **willingness and strong commitment of the Member States to set their own targets within the suggested policy framework and to closely monitor achievements**.

The e target-setting process proceeded with the second eBSN workshop on “Good targets for eBusiness policies” in Brussels, May 2003, where certain Member States and acceding countries’ representatives **presented their own programmes, priorities and examples of SMART targets for specific eBusiness policies for SMEs**. Despite the broad consensus on

the need to improve the efficiency of eBusiness policies by setting SMART targets and measuring achievements, most Member States did not feel ready to enter into commitments in this direction, at that moment, and preferred to use the eBSN as a platform for knowledge exchange and validation of their eBusiness policies.

The necessity and value of setting clear, realistic and measurable targets for eBusiness policies for SMEs at national level was reiterated at the latest eBSN workshop in Cambridge, in December 2005, as an important step towards concrete achievements: *“There is no better way of achieving things than having them measured”*.

The conclusion has to be that the huge potential for eBusiness policy improvement, through national target-setting and open policy co-ordination, still remains to be exploited.

2.3. A "one-stop-shop" for information about regional, national and European eBusiness initiatives and funding possibilities for SMEs

The eBSN portal (www.e-bsn.org) is the backbone of the eBSN, an electronic communication platform for sharing information and enabling dialogue between eBSN members. It has become the focal point for information on eBusiness initiatives, for links with related Community policies such as the Charter for small enterprises, Information Society initiatives and for launching support schemes. These include benchmarking, impact assessment and calls for grant applications on specific themes of interest.

The portal includes a section open to the public, including SMEs, together with an area with restricted access for eBSN members. It provides information on the following themes:

- eBSN aim and structure;
- Presentation of and links to the regional, national and European eBSN members;
- eBusiness policy initiatives at European and national/regional level;
- Workshop results and presentations;
- Articles and background documents;
- Statistical data and surveys on eBusiness take-up by European SMEs. There are statistics at European level from Eurostat and also statistics at national and regional level;
- Examples of best practices;
- News / Announcements;
- Quarterly eBSN newsletters

Moreover, the eBSN portal provides useful links to relevant European information platforms such as the eBusiness Watch, the eSkills Forum, or the B2B marketplaces portal. There is also a forums section, where each eBSN member can share views and information with the other members.

Four active forums, reflecting the four thematic priorities of the eBSN, are currently active at the eBSN portal:

- **Sector-specific approaches:** its objective is to identify which sectors are most promising, whether some sectoral policy initiatives are more effective than others, with a view to drawing up recommendations on potential cross-sectoral initiatives.
- **eBusiness for micro-enterprises:** its objective is to discuss which issues are relevant when talking about eBusiness for micro-enterprises, what policies have already been devised in this field and what should be the way forward.
- **Improving eBusiness solutions availability for SMEs:** its objective is to discuss/review the needs of SMEs, to identify good policy practices in helping SMEs find appropriate solutions and to recommend new policy action at European, national and/or regional level.
- **e-invoicing/e-procurement:** its objective is to identify public policies and public-private partnerships which promote the effective use of e-procurement and e-invoicing in SMEs.

There is another active forum on:

- **eBusiness self-assessment tools and training toolkits:** this forum is concerned with collecting links and descriptions to available material and tools like e-maturity self-assessment tools.

Finally, the eBSN portal has a chat-room area where the eBSN members can organise on-line discussions on various issues.

2.4. Organisation of thematic workshops to share practical experience and to identify future challenges

With a view to facilitating the diffusion and validation of good examples of eBusiness policies and to encourage cross-border co-operation among eBSN members, **eight eBSN thematic workshops were organised in the period 2003-2005**. A broad range of topics were discussed, including quantitative targets for eBusiness policies, linkage between national, regional and sectoral eBusiness policies, extending the eBSN to new Member States, strategies for training SMEs in the field of eBusiness and ways of improving the availability of eBusiness solutions for SMEs. The most recent eBSN workshop in Cambridge, in December 2005, took stock of the main policy developments and achievements of the eBSN so far. A full list of the eBSN workshops with links to their results is annexed to this report (Annex 3).

One of the important points to emerge from these workshops was that new policy priorities set by many Member States, regions, business associations or business support organisations **reflect the shift in focus from general promotion of the use of eBusiness tools to facilitating business re-engineering by the efficient use of ICT**. Special attention to SME start-ups has been identified as an important potential priority.

Beyond the consensus on the catalytic role for competitiveness in the efficient use of eBusiness, it has also been largely recognised that managerial innovation and entrepreneurial spirit are as important as technological breakthroughs. More and more, **the concept of “business process innovation” is becoming an intrinsic part of eBusiness**; in fact “business process innovation” is the keyword for the development of new eBusiness strategies and models. Therefore, coordination between the relevant policy instruments, for instance

through integrated support programmes, has clearly emerged as necessary during the eBSN workshops.

The **importance of the sectoral approach on eBusiness promotion has also been largely confirmed**. A categorization of sectors regarding their eBusiness usage has even been devised: e-champions (like the ICT sector), e-intensive sectors (like banking / leasing or the media & printing sectors), e-specific sectors (like tourism or chemical industries) and late e-adopters (like metal products industries or health and social services).

Implementing an eBusiness solution in a company typically requires the selection and set-up of the appropriate ICT infrastructure (network, hardware, software) as well as getting the right advice to align the technical solution with the specific business objectives. SMEs usually need guidance and business consultancy services in order to properly transform their business processes and integrate ICTs. This is a domain where **local SME support organisations can bring value, as independent advisers, trusted by the local SMEs**. The Commission has launched specific support schemes, as described in section 2.1 above.

3. WHAT FUTURE FOR THE EBSN?

The eBSN has achieved EU-wide recognition as an efficient policy coordination mechanism in the area of eBusiness for SMEs. It should pursue its work, retaining its established focus priorities while deepening its activities in those areas. The Enterprise and Industry Directorate General intends to launch in 2006:

- a benchmarking study of existing sectoral eBusiness policy initiatives at national and regional level and of the lessons to be learnt;
- a benchmarking study of market-available eBusiness solutions and services addressing the needs of SMEs in particular

In parallel, the responses to the on-line survey contained some very interesting reflections and suggestions about the future direction of the network. These concern both new ideas for areas to be addressed by the Network and suggestions to improve the operation, visibility and promotion of the eBSN.

3.1. New thematic areas to be explored by the eBSN

The eBSN members expressed an interest in certain new themes, mostly in terms of being kept informed on progress in these areas at EU level. It is suggested to the eBSN members to take up the following themes under the networks activities:

- **Fostering standardisation and interoperability in eBusiness:**

Follow-up: Standardisation in the eBusiness arena is a big and complex issue, e.g. CEN/ISSS has established a working group on eBusiness interoperability and standards for eBusiness. This initiative is supported by the Enterprise DG and participation is open to all interested parties. However, there are other important standardisation-related activities. It is suggested that a thematic workshop be organised in 2006 on this issue, where representatives of the various eBusiness related EU standardisation initiatives would brief the eBSN members on the state of play. Any eBSN members seeking further involvement would be invited to join the relevant standardisation working groups.

- Tackling the legal aspects of eBusiness:

Follow-up: The Enterprise DG has launched a number of studies and consultation exercises with legal experts on a range of legal issues, mostly with regard to cross-border trade facilitation, B2B e-marketplaces, etc. In parallel, other Commission departments, such as the Information Society, the Internal Market and the Health and Consumer Protection Directorates General are also dealing with the legal aspects of eBusiness, from different perspectives. It is suggested that a themed workshop be organised to give an in-depth presentation of current EU activities and status on this theme. Any eBSN members with a particular interest in these issues would be invited to join the relevant working structures.

- Promoting use by SMEs of eGovernment solutions related to eBusiness:

Follow-up: The appropriate Commission departments are tackling eGovernment issues: the IDABC eGovernment Observatory is a reference information source on e-government issues and developments across Europe: (<http://europa.eu.int/idabc/egovo>)

In addition, eBSN members can exchange experience on promoting the use of eGovernment solutions which enable firms, including SMEs, to make use of the available eGovernment facilities such as:

- Social security contributions for employees,
- Corporation Tax: declaration, notification,
- VAT: declaration, notification,
- Registration of a new company
- Submission of data to statistical offices
- Customs declaration
- Environment-related permits
- Public procurement

It is therefore suggested that a thematic workshop be organised on current EU activities with regard to business-related eGovernment practices. Again, any eBSN members with a particular interest in these issues will be invited to join the relevant working structures, at national level.

- Technology foresight:

Follow-up: The Information Society and Media Directorate General covers a broad spectrum of technology foresight issues, including eBusiness aspects. Themed workshops could be organised focusing on the approach fostered by Digital Business Ecosystems (DBEs), as well as the open-source solutions already made available for SMEs.

3.2. Improving the operation of the eBSN

The eBSN is seen as an efficient policy-networking instrument for exchanging information and building policy synergies to promote the uptake of eBusiness by SMEs, but there is still great potential to further improvement. The responses to the on-line questionnaire helped to identify certain weaknesses that need to be addressed, as well as suggesting ideas for extending eBSN outreach.

3.2.1. *Improving the current operations of the eBSN*

- **Stronger commitment by the participating countries:** eBSN members participate on a voluntary basis, against competing demands on their time and on top of their national priorities. The best way to strengthen commitment is to ensure the value of its work. That, in turn, depends on the commitment of its members.

Follow-up: A higher, EU-wide profile should be given to eBSN success stories, using electronic media, local or sectoral websites and the press.

- **Participation of high-level government officials:** National and regional authorities can help spread the success stories of the eBSN. The participation of high-ranking officials at certain eBSN events would be a sign of political backing.

Follow-up: The work of the eBSN should continue to be presented regularly at the EPG (Enterprise Policy Group – at the level of Directors General of Ministries) and EPMC (Enterprise Policy Management Committee).

- **Better promotion and dissemination of results (through brochures, newsletters, international benchmarking indicators, etc.)** The eBSN would benefit from further dissemination of its work and achievements. A substantial amount of work has been achieved and a pool of valuable knowledge and information gathered: this needs to be made more widely known.

Follow-up: Details of eBSN results and achievements, as well as individual success stories, should be circulated widely, using electronic media, local or sectoral websites and the press, based on a clear communication plan.

3.2.2. *Extending eBSN outreach:*

- **Bringing the eBSN closer to sectoral industry associations:** So far, the eBSN has been open to public funded policy initiatives promoting eBusiness for SMEs, as well as to public-private partnerships. Sectoral industry associations are fully eligible to participate as long as they are involved in implementing a public policy (at national, regional or local level) to support eBusiness in a particular sector. The issue becomes one of awareness of the merits of joining the eBSN community.

Follow-up: Targeted awareness measures, e.g. e-mail alerts to a list of European Sectoral Industry associations, and specific sectoral events should be sufficient to raise interest and active participation in the eBSN.

- **Extending participation to IT industry representatives:** Policy and decision makers and SME support organisations cannot act in isolation, without a sound understanding not only

of the real needs of SMEs, but also of what eBusiness solutions and services are available in the market. ICT suppliers are increasingly focusing their attention on SMEs, by offering adapted solutions and services, either on a private commercial basis, or in partnerships with regional and local governments. What is still needed, however, is an awareness of the available solutions, including the open-source based eBusiness solutions, their characteristics and what specific SME business processes and needs they address and how.

Follow-up: The eBSN is open to IT industry representative bodies (e.g. associations like ESA, EICTA, OSI, etc.). Targeted themed workshops on the availability of eBusiness solutions for SMEs, where IT suppliers would be invited to present their initiatives, should be organised. The Enterprise and Industry Directorate General intends to commission a benchmarking study on commercially available eBusiness solution and services for SMEs, in the second half of 2006.

- **Extending participation to non-EU countries:** Many eBSN members feel the Network would benefit from opening participation to non-EU countries, in particular countries with an advanced IT culture, such as the US, Canada, Japan, India, China, Singapore, etc.

Follow-up: So far, the Enterprise Directorate General has invited representatives from Canada and Korea to participate in eBSN workshops and present their national policy initiatives. Other initiatives of this type could be foreseen in the future. The Enterprise Directorate General has also launched a call for proposals, in 2006, on synergies between eBusiness initiatives in EU and non-EU countries.

3.2.3. Future eBSN thematic workshops

In 2006 the eBSN has already organised two thematic workshops, one on “Cross-border eInvoicing”, 5-7 June 2006 in Bled, as part of the Bled conference on eValues; and the second one on “Successful business models, especially measures to support the uptake of eBusiness by SMEs”, Vienna, 13-14 June 2006, under the Austrian Presidency, as part of the Conference of the European Charter for Small Enterprises. The third one on “eBusiness solutions for SMEs” will take place in Oulu, 7-8 December 2006, under the Finnish Presidency.

To complete the mid-term eBSN work programme 2007-2008, the Enterprise and Industry Directorate General launched a call for expressions of interest in February 2006 in hosting an eBSN thematic workshop or conference, at the eBSN portal (<http://www.e-bsn.org/portal/content.do?page=newsItem26>). The main objective of the eBSN workshops and conferences is to present the state of play in policy making and market developments in the relevant eBusiness fields, to share experience and stimulate innovative partnerships among policy makers, business representatives and academia, and to highlight success stories and their impact on the EU economy.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The policy shift, from promoting ICT connectivity to taking a more holistic view of eBusiness, and focusing on the need for firms to incorporate ICTs into their overall business strategy, has been confirmed and backed up by a wide range of eBusiness policies at European, national and regional level. With such initiatives strongly on the increase, there is an attendant need for greater policy coordination capacity in this field.

The eBSN (European eBusiness Support Network for SMEs) has established itself as a successful policy coordination platform, bringing together a broad network of policy makers in the eBusiness arena. By facilitating the exchange of good practice, eBSN has stimulated policy and action, has generated synergies and has inspired new eBusiness policies.

The important thing now is to build on the achievements of the eBSN and provide more backing for the mechanisms of eBusiness diffusion in European companies. Specific efforts will be made to foster cooperation with eBusiness policy makers in the ten new Member States and beyond.

Particular emphasis will be given to the four priority themes of the eBSN, namely reinforcing eProcurement, analysing the effectiveness of sectoral policy approaches, and assessing and matching market-available eBusiness solutions and services for SMEs, and the relevant policy challenges and responses at European, national, and regional level.

In parallel, steps will be taken to improve the way the eBSN operates, with stronger commitment on the part of its members and better promotion and dissemination of results, and to extend the scheme's outreach.

5. ANNEX 1: THE BACKGROUND OF THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE EBSN

The Go Digital initiative⁶ had clearly demonstrated the increased interest of SMEs in the opportunities offered by eBusiness but also the existing barriers in the uptake of eBusiness by SMEs. With the objective to better assist SMEs in increasing their involvement into eBusiness, many efficient policies have been developed at national, regional or local level. Several of these eBusiness policies have been effectively implemented with concrete results, notably for SMEs.⁷ However, their efficiency could be further enhanced by learning from each other and sharing best practise and information.

On 6 June 2002, the Industry Council⁸ invited the Member States and the Commission notably to *“intensify dialogue, exchange experience regularly, identify specific goals for eBusiness policies and share best practices”*, as well as to *“foster measures to encourage the use of ICT especially by SMEs in all business processes and in those sectors which currently do not make full use of them, including traditional sectors;”*

In response, the eEurope 2005 Action Plan, as adopted by the Commission on 28 May 2002 and endorsed by the European Summit in Seville on 21 June 2002, foresaw the establishment of *“an European eBusiness support network (eBSN), federating existing European, national and regional players in this field with a view to strengthening and co-ordinating actions in support of SMEs in the field of eBusiness”*

⁶ Commission Communication, Helping SMEs Go Digital, COM(2001)136, 13 March 2001
http://europa.eu.int/eur-lex/en/com/cnc/2001/com2001_013en01.pdf

⁷ ‘Benchmarking study on national and regional policies in support of eBusiness for SMEs’, Final Report of the EBusiness policy Group, 28 June 2002
<http://europa.eu.int/comm/enterprise/ict/policy/benchmarking/final-report.pdf>

⁸ Conclusions of the Industry Council 9938/02, of 6 June 2002
<http://europa.eu.int/comm/enterprise/ict/policy/ind-cou-20020606.pdf>

On this basis the European Commission established the eBSN and invited eBusiness experts representing various eBusiness policy initiatives in Europe to join the network and to share experience and good practice in support of eBusiness for SMEs. The eBSN is a tool to improve co-operation among existing eBusiness policy initiatives in Europe and to better use synergies between them.

The eBSN is open to voluntary participation by all policy related initiatives in support of eBusiness for SMEs in the Member States, the Acceding and Candidate Countries and the EEA States, which are willing to share experience and information. Members of this network are:

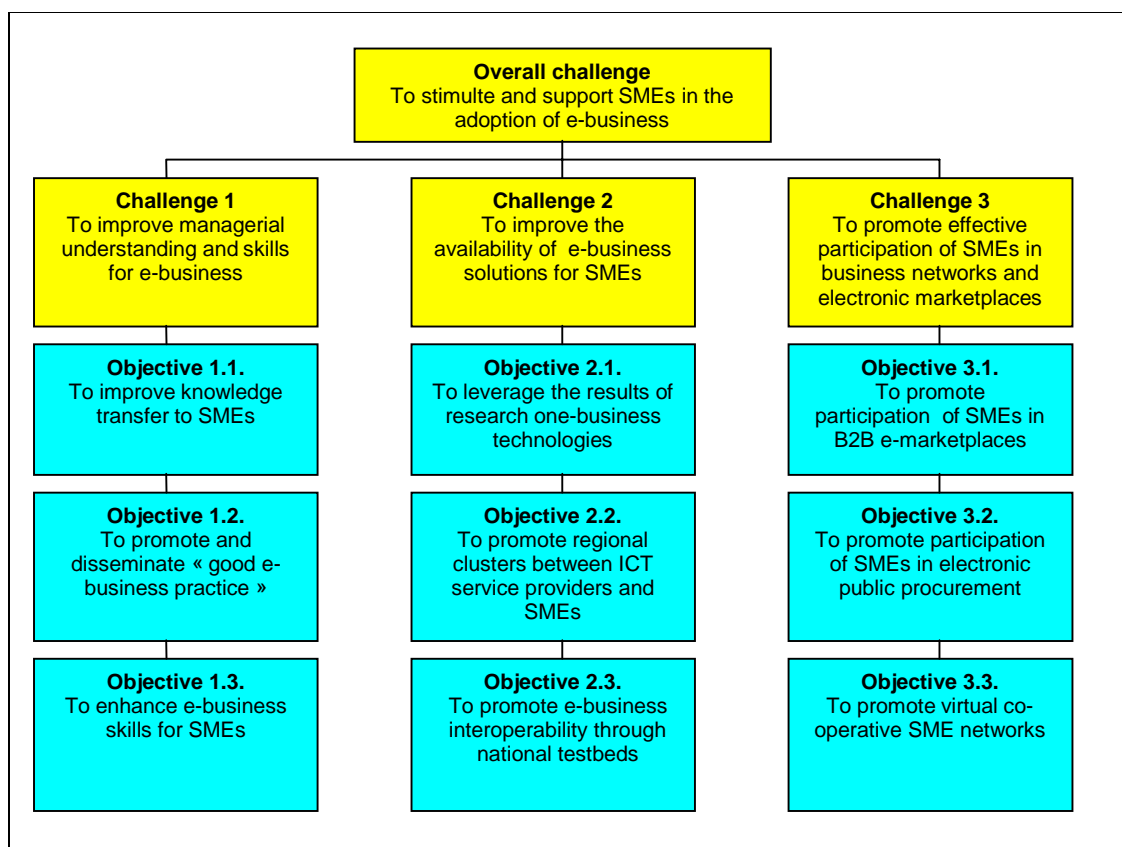
- eBusiness experts from public administrations in EU Member States, the EU acceding and candidate countries, the EEA countries and the European Commission;
- Representatives of European, national and regional initiatives, which provide support to SMEs with regard to the take-up of ICT and eBusiness (i.e. SMEs support networks, EICs, public-private partnerships, etc.). Only initiatives stemming from public policies, i.e. supported by public authorities, either directly or indirectly through public-private partnerships, are eligible to participate in the European eBusiness support network. This is motivated by the consideration that this network is primarily meant to inform policy makers about other successful initiatives in the area of ICT and eBusiness promotion and eventually to influence policy-making in this field.
- Academics, representatives of the business community and International organisations with special interest in policies in support of eBusiness for SMEs.

A standing invitation for expression of interest to join the eBSN is available on the eBSN portal (www.e-bsn.org). The eBSN is structured as follows:

- A **Steering Group**, consisting of representatives of the Commission, the participating countries, academics and the business community. The role of the Steering Group is to take strategic decisions on the objectives and modus operandi of the network, the practical arrangements to foster cooperation and to set the policy directions and priorities for action.
- The **virtual network**, namely the eBSN Portal (<http://www.e-bsn.org>) linking all identified stakeholders and initiatives, and providing information, statistical data, best business practice, etc. This virtual network has been established and managed by the Commission services (DG Enterprise), with the technical assistance of a contractor.
- **2 - 3 thematic workshops per year**, aiming at bringing together interested stakeholders to deepen the dialogue on specific issues of common interest. The workshops provide the opportunity for in-depth analysis of good policy practices, with a view to learning lessons from successful initiatives and to setting realistic targets for future policies in this area. The workshops are hosted and organised by eBSN members.

On 27 March 2003, the Commission adopted a Communication on [*“Adapting eBusiness policies in a changing environment”*](#), emphasising the change to the main policy challenge from getting SMEs connected to the Internet to the effective and productive integration of ICT into business processes (eBusiness). Furthermore, this Communication described the priorities and nine areas for future actions in order to further stimulate the transition towards the digital economy (see chart below).

Framework for SME specific eBusiness policies – Challenges and objectives



In the [Council Conclusions of 13 May 2003](#), the Competitiveness Council welcomed this Communication, underlined “*the need to assist SMEs, in particular, to identify eBusiness opportunities and to implement successfully their transformation towards eBusiness*”, and invited Member States and Acceding Countries “*to actively engage in the European eBusiness Support Network for SMEs (eBSN)*”.

The eBSN represents policies in the entire spectrum of this framework. Apparently, not all Member States, candidate countries or EEA States may face all of these policy challenges at the same time or in the same manner. This policy framework, however, is facilitating the re-orientation of eBusiness policies, thus responding better to the changing needs of enterprises.

6. ANNEX 2: QUESTIONNAIRE ON THE MAIN ACHIEVEMENTS AND THE FUTURE OF THE EBSN

The on-line questionnaire on the eBSN achievements and the future of the network was prepared, approved by the eBSN Steering Group and published at the beginning of July 2005 on the eBSN portal where it is still accessible. The aim was to collect detailed information on the concrete benefits eBSN members experienced through their participation in the network and to learn more about the synergies and cross-fertilisation among policy initiatives and to assess the functionality of the eBSN and the main expectations for future improvements. The questionnaire comprises the following questions:

- (1) Please specify the country/region you live in
- (2) Do you think that your eBSN participation has strengthened your country/region in the field of eBusiness policies?
- (3) What national/regional eBSN initiatives do you feel that are most appealing for your country/region profile?
- (4) Did the knowledge gained from other national and/or regional experiences and best practices inspire the generation of new initiatives and actions in your county/region? If so, please mention the main experiences and how they affected new initiatives and/or actions
- (5) Based on the contacts and exchanges through the eBSN, did you explore the opportunity for more targeted bilateral or multilateral synergies for joint policy actions? If so, can you describe them?
- (6) What other bilateral or multilateral synergies supported or established from eBSN are you aware of (such as the Finland-Slovenia Living Lab project)? Which countries participate in? Are there any published results?
- (7) In which eBusiness policy areas do you believe that eBSN has been most effective and which require more work?
- (8) How do you find the eBSN workshops so far? Do you think that helps in a way of bringing initiatives together and stimulating them in making synergies?
- (9) Would you encourage the continuation of the eBSN as a network of eBusiness policy makers?
- (10) What's your opinion about the overall operation of eBSN so far?
- (11) What are the strengths of the eBSN?
- (12) What are its weaknesses? What could be done better?
- (13) What are your suggestions about future eBSN actions? What new actions should be envisaged?

- (14) Please feel free to write down any additional comments/suggestions you may have regarding the eBSN (criticism, suggestions, etc).

7. ANNEX 3: THE EBSN WORKSHOPS AND THEIR MAIN RESULTS

1st eBSN workshop on setting quantitative targets for eBusiness policies organised by DG Enterprise and the Greek Presidency Athens, 16 – 17 January 2003

Setting targets for eBusiness policies is part of the wider Lisbon strategy to make the European Union the most competitive knowledge based society in the world by 2010. In this context, the objective of this workshop was to launch a debate on:

- the current situation in Europe, with regards to the efficient use of ICT and eBusiness by SMEs;
- the specific challenges for SMEs;
- the future priorities for public policy actions in this field;
- potential quantitative targets for specific eBusiness policies for SMEs.

More than 120 selected representatives from the public administrations of the Member States, the European Commission, the European Parliament, business associations and the academic community attended the one-and-a-half day workshop organised by the Greek Presidency, in close collaboration with DG Enterprise, in Athens, on 16-17 January 2003.

A broad consensus has been achieved, among all Member States representatives, on the need to set concrete measurable targets for future eBusiness policies, so that assessment of the activities, their output and impact would be feasible in the near future. Moreover, the need for changing policies in a changing eBusiness environment, continuously overhauling on-going policies and re-focusing targets has been underlined by many participants. New policy priorities set by some Member States reflect the shift of attention from general promotion of the use of ICT and eBusiness tools to tailor-made coaching of enterprises to totally transform to eBusinesses, i.e. to facilitating business re-engineering.

A detailed report on the main discussions and results of the workshop are published on the eBSN portal:

<http://www.e-bsn.org/portal/content.do?category=AboutEbsn&where=workshops&page=workshops>

2nd eBSN workshop on good targets for eBusiness policies organised by DG Enterprise, Brussels 26-27 May 2003

As a follow-up of the Go Digital initiative, the Commission adopted on 27 March 2003 the Communication “Adapting eBusiness policies in a changing environment”. This Communication is an important step to accelerate progress towards the Lisbon target of making Europe the world's most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy. It is alerting Member States to the need to shift the gear from e-commerce to eBusiness, i.e. to a holistic approach which includes not only buying and selling over the Internet but most

important, the efficient integration and productive use of ICT in internal and external business processes.

Moreover, this Communication calls upon Member States and regions to review their eBusiness strategies in support of SMEs and to adopt, on a voluntary basis, policy targets to accelerate the shift from e-commerce to eBusiness. In particular, public policies should be re-oriented at national and regional level towards measures, which have a direct or indirect impact on productivity. Namely, policies should assist enterprises in better managing the organisational changes required to reap the full benefits of ICT and eBusiness, and should set clear objectives and quantitative targets for assessing policies' progress and impact.

The Competitiveness Council of 13 May welcomed this Communication and invited the Member States and acceding countries to:

- further complete the Enterprise Policy Scoreboard, at general policy level;
- base specific eBusiness initiatives in favour of SMEs on clear quantitative and/or qualitative targets;
- actively engage in the eBSN – European eBusiness Support Network for SMEs.

The workshop objectives

In this context, the objective of the EU workshop on “Good targets for eBusiness policies” was to:

- Bring together eBSN members to further discuss future policy priorities;
- Present practical examples of quantitative and/or qualitative targets in different eBusiness policy areas, such as awareness, training, eBusiness solutions, interoperability and networking;
- Allow for an intensive dialogue among eBSN members and the exchange of practical experience.

About 80 selected representatives from the public administrations of the Member States, and acceding countries, the European Commission, business associations and the academic community attended the one-and-a-half day workshop organised by DG Enterprise, in Brussels, on 26-27 May 2003.

Member States and acceding country representatives presented their national policy priorities and concrete targets for eBusiness policies. Moreover, the panelists presented practical examples of SMART targets for specific eBusiness policies for SMEs, mainly in the area of awareness, e-skills, eBusiness solutions, networking and participation in e-marketplaces.

A detailed report on the main discussions and results of the workshop are published on the eBSN portal:

<http://www.e-bsn.org/portal/content.do?category=AboutEbsn&where=workshops&page=workshops>

3rd eBSN workshop on national, regional and sectorial eBusiness policies in favour of SMEs, organised by DG Enterprise and the French Ministry of Development, Paris 27-28 October 2003

This workshop was aimed at policy makers in the field of eBusiness for SMEs. Its general objective is:

- To take stock of recent developments in setting targets for eBusiness policies at national level ;
- To discuss and exchange best practise in the field of regional and sector specific eBusiness policy initiatives ;
- To facilitate personal contacts between representatives from regional, national and sectorial eBusiness initiatives, with the view to exchange best practise and to learn from experience.

The workshop's programme and speeches are available on the eBSN portal:

<http://www.e-bsn.org/portal/content.do?category=AboutEbsn&where=workshops&page=workshops>

4th eBSN workshop on how to extend eBSN activities to Acceding countries organised by DG Enterprise and the Ministry of Economy and Transport of Hungary, Budapest, 25 February 2004

The 4th eBSN Workshop was addressed to policy makers and SME support organisations, notably coming from Acceding Countries, with practical experience in eBusiness. The goal was to better understand where eBusiness currently stands in terms of policy priority in Acceding Countries and to discuss ways of sharing experience and good practices in an enlarged Europe in the field of eBusiness policies for SMEs. The main objectives were:

- To take stock of the situation of eBusiness diffusion in Acceding Countries;
- To present and discuss eBusiness policies and their priorities for Acceding Countries;
- To identify local players (network, catalysts) and potential players;
- To discuss the way to extend eBSN activities to Acceding Countries

About 80 representatives from the public administrations of the Member States, and Acceding Countries, the European Commission, business associations and the academic community attended the workshop co-organised by the Ministry of Economy and Transport of Hungary and DG Enterprise, in Budapest, on 25 February 2004. The statistical picture of eBusiness diffusion in Acceding Countries showed that regional transfer of good policy practices is possible and confirmed the need for SME and sector specific support actions. Several examples of national policy priorities and specific targets for eBusiness policies in Acceding Countries were presented. Moreover, successful cooperation schemes between current and future Member States proved both the importance and the feasibility of best practices transferability in an enlarged Europe in the eBusiness field.

A detailed report on the main discussions and results of the workshop are published on the eBSN portal:

<http://www.e-bsn.org/portal/content.do?category=AboutEbsn&where=workshops&page=workshops>

5th eBSN workshop on how to train and coach SMEs organised by DG Enterprise, the Consortium for the Commercial Promotion of Catalonia and the Generalitat of Catalonia, Barcelona, 13 May 2004

The 5th eBSN Workshop was addressed to policy makers and SME support organizations with practical experience in training and coaching SMEs in the eBusiness field.

The main objectives were:

- To discuss the articulation between eBusiness and innovation policies;
- To identify good policy practices aiming at accompanying SMEs adopting eBusiness;
- To present ways of measuring the impact of eBusiness policies.

More than 400 representatives from the public administrations of the Member States, and Acceding Countries, the European Commission, business associations, the academic community and SMEs attended the workshop.

A large consensus emerged during the workshop, calling for a holistic policy approach exploiting synergies between eBusiness initiatives and those fostering managerial innovation and entrepreneurial spirit. Furthermore, several practical examples of initiatives helping SMEs to efficiently use eBusiness techniques were presented and raised the question of the necessity to have accredited e-advisors and self-assessment tools. Last but not least, the workshop stressed once again the importance of defining adequate statistical indicators for the measurement of eBusiness policies impact.

A detailed report on the main discussions and results of the workshop are published on the eBSN portal:

<http://www.e-bsn.org/portal/content.do?category=AboutEbsn&where=workshops&page=workshops>

6th eBSN workshop on improving the availability of eBusiness solutions for SMEs organised by DG Enterprise, the Consortium for the Commercial Promotion of Catalonia and the Generalitat of Catalonia, Rome, 19 November 2004

SMEs have different needs with respect to ICT applications as compared to large companies. Although ICT suppliers focus their attention more and more on SMEs, there is still a lack of affordable ICT solutions for micro, small and medium size enterprises. The goal of this workshop is to present some good practices in improving the availability of suitable eBusiness solutions for SMEs both from a European but also an international perspective, through the presentation of Canadian and Korean eBusiness policies. This workshop is primarily addressed to policy makers and business associations accompanying SMEs going digital. ICT companies interested in building applications or services tailored to SMEs needs also participated and benefited from the discussions.

The workshop's programme and speeches are available on the eBSN portal:

<http://www.e-bsn.org/portal/content.do?category=AboutEbsn&where=workshops&page=workshops>

7th eBSN workshop on eProcurement-eInvoicing: European experiences and trends organised by DG Enterprise, and the University of Maribor, in the frame of the Bled, eConference, Bled, 6-8 June 2005

This workshop aimed at providing an insight into the eProcurement / eInvoicing topic selected by the eBSN Steering Group. Its objectives were:

- To make clear the business case for the adoption of national and cross-border eProcurement / eInvoicing practices by businesses, in particular SMEs
- To take stock of the recent developments in this field (research, legislation, standardization, etc.)
- To review relevant benefits and legal and technical barriers
- To identify currently on-going initiatives within the eBSN
- To explore the possibilities for launching new cooperation initiatives
- To recommend complementary actions at European level if appropriate

This workshop presented current public policies aiming at promoting the diffusion of eInvoicing between SMEs, namely in Finland, Denmark, Austria, Sweden at national and regional level.

The presentations made clear the recent interesting developments with regards to the diffusion of eInvoicing in various regions in Europe. There are now concrete indications of the real cost savings expected by the diffusion of eInvoices. The frontrunner in this domain is Finland, where eInvoicing is currently the key eBusiness application and it is expected to save administrative costs of 2 billion Euros, under the assumption that there will 25% penetration of eInvoices in B2B transactions (currently is 8% but increasing rapidly).

A detailed report on the main discussions and results of the workshop are published on the eBSN portal:

<http://www.e-bsn.org/portal/content.do?category=AboutEbsn&where=workshops&page=workshops>

8th eBSN workshop on “Networking eBusiness Policy makers for SMEs (eBSN): achievements and new policy challenges”, organised by DG Enterprise and the EEDA, in the frame of the Cambridge eBusiness Conference, 5-6 Decemebr 2005

This workshop session aimed at taking stock of the main policy developments and achievements of the eBSN so far, as well as validating the options on future policy priorities. Soumitra Dutta, Dean of Executive Education at INSEAD moderated the panel discussion, initiated by five panellists, one representing the European SMEs community, and four eBSN members presenting the achievements in the various thematic focus areas of the eBSN, namely with regards to policy initiatives dealing with eProcurement–eInvoicing, sectoral policy approaches and improving the availability of eBusiness solutions for SMEs.

More than 70 participants attended the eBSN panel, mostly policy makers and experts responsible for the deployment and implementation of public-supported initiatives directed at reinforcing the uptake and efficient usage of eBusiness solutions by SMEs, as well as notable academics, representatives of the ICT industry and the business community.

The workshop reaffirmed the eBSN members satisfaction with the activities of the eBSN, highlighted the efficiency and effectiveness of the Network overall, and pled for its continuation and reinforcement of its results. Moreover, it validated key messages for improving the efficiency of eBusiness policies through the eBSN, as well as recommendations for the future of the eBSN.

A detailed report on the main discussions and results of the workshop are available at the Cambridge conference site:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/enterprise/ict/conferences/cambridge_panel3.htm