



HEADLINES

EU / Luxembourg Presidency: The Presidency's Priorities

Luxembourg took over the Presidency of the EU on 1 January 2005. Among its top priorities it has named the Mid-term review of the Lisbon Agenda and Economic and Social Affairs and the Internal Market.

The strategic objective of the Lisbon Agenda is to ensure the EU becomes “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion”. The March 2005 European Council will carry out the Mid-term review of the Lisbon process based on a Commission orientation report due out in early February. The Luxembourg Presidency will use this Mid-term review to:

- Take stock of the strategy
- Refocus priorities
- Improve the governance and implementation of the strategy
- Implement a specific communication strategy by target groups

The Presidency proposes to confirm the target of 2010 as the date by which member states as a whole will have implemented the necessary reforms. In terms of governance of the strategy and rationalisation of existing processes, the Presidency wishes to further develop one of the main ideas in the Kok report and create national action programmes.

In the area of Economic and Social Affairs and the Internal Market the Luxembourg Presidency intends to continue and reinforce the integrated approach of competitiveness and growth with the support of a European Commission reorganised to achieve this aim. The Presidency also intends to continue the work begun a year ago in the area commonly known as “better regulation”. In the preliminary stage its action will concentrate on the legislative simplification of existing EU law and on impact assessment of legislation in preparation and/or under negotiation.

The Luxembourg Presidency will also endeavour to re-examine the controversial proposal for a directive on the internal market for services in a more objective light, delimiting the scope of the directive and specifying the range of the principle of the country of origin within this context.

Regarding Employment and Social Policy, the Presidency will attach particular importance to the new Social Agenda (2006-2010) which the Commission will submit in early 2005 and which will be closely linked with the Mid-term review of the Lisbon Strategy. It will continue the work of the Dutch presidency in the area of working conditions and will do its utmost to reach an agreement on the “working time” directive.

Luxembourg Presidency website: <http://www.eu2005.lu/>

Read the Presidency's Priorities in full:

http://www.eu2005.lu/en/presidence/priorites_et_pgm/priorites/index.html

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EU / SMEs: New EU definitions

From 1 January 2005 new definitions of micro, small and medium sized enterprises will be in use throughout the EU. The new definitions retain the staff number thresholds used to determine SME sizes since 1996, but substantially raise the financial ceilings to take into account inflation and productivity of growth.

The category of SMEs will be made up of enterprises which employ fewer than 250 persons and which have an annual turnover not exceeding 50 million euros, and/or a balance sheet total not exceeding 43 million euros.

The new definitions aim to ensure that the benefit of access to national SME support mechanisms and European programmes supporting SMEs is reserved exclusively for those enterprises which have the characteristics of real SMEs (without the economic strength of larger groupings).

More information: <http://www.europa.eu.int/scadplus/leg/en/lvb/n26026.htm>

EU / SMEs: New EU Finance Programme

The European Commission has started a new 36 million euro programme to provide finance to small businesses through local banks and other credit institutions, with a particular emphasis on the EU's new member states. The "preparatory action on support for SMEs in the new financial environment" programme seeks to help SMEs with their difficulties in attracting finance. The assistance will be channelled through a number of international financial institutions, including the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the European Investment Bank (EIB), the European Investment Fund (EIF) and the Council of Europe Bank together with KfW (Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau). An initial 6 million euros of annual funding of technical assistance and capacity building in EU countries with low levels of bank lending will be supplemented by a further 30 million euros from the participating financial institutions own funds.

Günter Verheugen, Commissioner for Enterprise and Industry said the initiative will help entrepreneurs create and develop businesses and jobs.

Further information:
http://europa.eu.int/comm/enterprise/entrepreneurship/financing/preparatory_actions.htm

IN BRIEF

EU / UN: 2005 - The year of microcredit

The UN has declared 2005 the International Year of Microcredit. They aim to make financial services more accessible to poor and low-income people, raise public awareness about microcredit and microfinance and promote innovative partnerships among governments, donors, international organisations, non-governmental organisations, the private sector, academia and microfinance clients.

The desired outcome is for small businesses in less developed countries to gain greater access to credit, savings, insurance, transfer remittance and other financial services. The UN hopes that this action will work towards achieving the Millennium Development Goal of halving the proportion of people living on less than 1 US dollar a day by 2015.

For more information see: <http://www.yearofmicrocredit.org/>

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EU / Minimum pay: Rises across Europe

Statutory minimum wage rates throughout Europe rose by an average of 9.2% at the beginning of 2005. 12 of the 26 European countries that operate legal minimum rates revised them on 1 January. In all of these countries, except Turkey, the changes were at the same or significantly higher than the level of annual price inflation. For example, in the Czech Republic, the minimum rate rose by 7.2% against an annual inflation of 2.6%

According to Robin Chater, Secretary General of the Federation of European Employers (FEEdE) which conducted the review of minimum wage rates, statutory minimum wage rates seem to have a stabilising affect on pay levels in countries where they are in force. However, the level of the pay safety net remains a controversial issue in most European countries.

FedEE review of minimum wage rates: <http://www.fedee.com/minwage.html>

EU / Innovation: 2004 Innobarometer assess take-up of public support programmes

The 2004 Innobarometer has found a mixed picture on the use of public innovation support by the private sector. The survey indicates that's 31% of innovative firms within the EU use at least one form of public support for their innovation activities, but only 12% take advantage of the public schemes for which they are eligible.

The survey interviewed managers from 4,500 firms, with between 20 and 500 employees, that had practiced innovative activities within the last 2 years, and sought to establish whether innovation support programmes are used more by highly innovative or less innovative firms. The results revealed that it is the most innovative firms that are more aware of the programmes, using an average of 1.6 programmes each, while the less innovative firms tend to use an average on one programme.

Further information: <http://trendchart.cordis.lu/innobarometer.cfm>

EU / Ireland: Launches e-business strategy for SMEs

Ireland's Minister for Trade and Commerce, Michael Ahern, has announced a new national e-business strategy aimed at encouraging SMEs outside the information communication technology (ICT) sector to use ICTs to maximise their competitive advantage.

The minister urged SMEs to adjust to changes which have seen increasing numbers of companies and private sector organisations buying online. When developing the new strategy, the government assessed current barriers to the effective usage of ICTs by SMEs and discovered a lack of appreciation of the contribution that ICTs can make to a business, a lack of ICT management skills and a lack of time to acquire them, as well as difficulties in assessing advice and costs. The strategy contains a series of recommendations aimed at overcoming these obstacles.

Further information: <http://www.entemp.ie/enterprise/support/ebusinessstrategy.htm>

EU / EU Wages: Internet pay comparison site launched

A new internet pay comparison website has been launched to help employees check the level of their pay against the average salary for their job in other regions and other EU member states. The website is partly funded by the European Commission under their socio-economic research programme FP6 and the ETUC. It forms part of the Woliweb Project 2004-2007.

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The database however still lack information on cost of living, tax, pensions, social contributions and comparative labour market protection and is more geared to helping inform employees about their entitlements.

Log on to the website: www.paywizard.org

EU / Patents: EPO launches new online service

The European Patents Office (EPO) has launched a “one-stop-shop” for access to information on patents. Register Plus provided bibliographical, procedural, legal and file information on patents, therefore putting patent details into the public domain.

Users are able to follow the patent application process for a particular submission and find information on other patent applications belonging to the same patent family.

The service is free of charge and open to anyone. Access it at: http://my.epoline.org/portal/public!/ut/p/.cmd/cs/.ce/7_0_A/.s/7_0_9K/s.7_0_A/7_0_9K

EU / INSME Experts Database: Call to register

The International Network for SMEs (INSME) is putting together an Experts Database for its members.

If you are a professional with proven experience and expertise in the fields of innovation, technology transfer and SME related issues (management, training, Information technology fields, etc.) seize this opportunity to be included and send the INSME Secretariat your CV.

Information on how to apply and details about the areas of expertise can be found at:

<http://www.insme.org/page.asp?IDArea=1&page=tenders&action=detail&IDObject=130&IDObjectTy pe=6>

(Deadline 15th January 2005)

CONSULTATIONS

Consultation on The Modernised Community Customs Codes

A questionnaire on the modernised Customs code Rev. 4 has been devised by the European Commission services in order to give all interested parties a final opportunity to submit comments on how the implementation of the modernised Customs Code will impact their business or administration

Closes 15 January 2005

Further information & access to the questionnaire:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/taxation_customs/common/consultations/customs/article_1507_en.htm

Air pollution – What do you Think?

The European Commission is holding an online consultation to receive input on the measures to be included in a new comprehensive European Action Plan to reduce air pollution

Closes 31 January 2005

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Further information: <http://europa.eu.int/yourvoice/forms/dispatch?form=356&lang=EN>

Stakeholder Consultation on the Framework programme for Competitiveness and Innovation (CIP)

The European Commission is seeking input on its ideas for a new framework programme for competitiveness and innovation, to run from 2007 until 2013. The programme would like to streamline and bring together actions in various policy fields to create a more comprehensive and coherent approach. Alongside instruments to encourage innovation, the programme would aim to increase the uptake and mastery of Information and Communication Technologies, enhance SMEs' access to finance and stimulate better framework conditions for business.

Closes 7 February 2005

Further information: http://europa.eu.int/comm/enterprise/enterprise_policy/cip/consultation.htm

COMING UP

EU Institutions: Important Dates

18 January	Economic and Financial Affairs Council, Brussels
19 January	European Parliament REACH Hearing
26-27 January	European Parliament Mini-Plenary Session, Brussels
31 January–1 February	General Affairs and External Relations Council, Brussels
17 February	Economics and Financial Affairs Council, Brussels
21 February	General Affairs and External Relations Council, Brussels
21-24 February	European Parliament Plenary Session, Strasbourg

Other SME related Events

14 January	Experts Seminar, "Presentation of the mid-term results of the feasibility study of a European statute for SMEs" - Brussels Organised by DG Enterprise - Further information : francois.becquart@cec.eu.int
20 January (Moved from 13 th January)	Civil Society Dialogue with Commissioner Peter Mandelson Charlemagne Conference Centre, Brussels - Organised by DG Trade Further information: http://trade-info.cec.eu.int/civil_soc/intro1.php
20 January	More energy for SMEs! – Conference in Budapest Organised by SME Union - Further information: http://www.sme-union.org/events/index.php?LAN=en&ID=75
25 January	2005 Symposium on SMEs and Transnational Co-operation "Boosting Innovation for a Competitive Europe – Implementing the Lisbon Agenda" - European Parliament, Brussels - Further information: http://www.sme-union.org/events/index.php?LAN=en&ID=76 <i>Register by 21 January 2005</i>
26-27 January	Small Business Day 05, Orebro, Sweden

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Organised by the Swedish Foundation for Small Business Research
See: www.fsf.se/sd05 for programme and to register online
Register by 14 January 2005

31 January-2 February Small and Medium Enterprises International Conference and
Exhibition, Dubai, United Arab Emirates
Organised by the Department of Economic Development, UAE; Seagull
Group; Council of Arab Business Women; WASME; INSME
Further information: <http://www.ismedubai.com/>

To subscribe / unsubscribe : email secretariat@esba-europe.org

ESBA Brussels Office - 54 rue Vautier - B-1050 Brussels
Tel: +32-2-639 62 31 - Fax: +32-2-644 90 17 - E-mail: secretariat@esba-europe.org
Web: <http://www.esba-europe.org>