



## EDITORIAL

### Moving times in Europe

The European Union is all about creating opportunities through free movement. This covers both goods and services, as most people are aware, but also, crucially, the free movement of labour. Despite the fact that freedom of movement is an enshrined right for all EU citizens, not enough Europeans choose to exercise it.

This year, 2006, has been named the European Year of Workers' Mobility to encourage more Europeans to seek employment in other parts of the EU. This provides benefits both for workers and employers, as it multiplies the chances that the right person will be placed in the right job. It also provides a richer cultural tapestry which can be stimulating for individuals and help companies find new and better ways of conducting business.

Labour mobility is not just confined to the heavy-hitters, such as multinational corporations and large organisations, SMEs can and do benefit from it. A large number of people who take up mobility opportunities abroad do so with SMEs, and more and more smaller enterprises are advertising their postings across the Union.

With modern communications technology and certain EU tools, recruiting from abroad need not be prohibitively costly for SMEs. For instance, the European Commission's EURES, the European Job Mobility Portal, is a free on-line forum matching prospective employers and employees. Your local Euro Info Centre can also provide you with valuable information on recruiting workers from other European countries, as well as the relevant regulation and legislation.

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#### More information:

European Year of Workers' Mobility:

[http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment\\_social/workersmobility\\_2006/index.cfm](http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/workersmobility_2006/index.cfm)

EURES: <http://europa.eu.int/eures/home.jsp?lang=en>

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## NEWS IN BRIEF

### **EIC mobility activities**

Numerous events connected with the European Year of Workers' Mobility are being organised by members of the EIC network. Below is a brief selection.

#### **Talking mobility**

The Euro Info Centre Jönköping in Sweden hosted a panel debate on issues related to labour mobility at the end of March. The discussion focused on the future difficulties that companies in the Gnosjö region may face in recruiting qualified, competent staff, across a wide range of sectors. The constructive gathering also shed light on the opportunities – as well as threats – that the mobility of labour, as well as goods and services, can bring. German and Polish representatives of EURES, which manages an EU-wide job mobility portal and runs a network of 700 advisers across Europe, also attended the event.

The EIC in Sandanski, Bulgaria, also organised a special seminar on labour mobility on 24 February 2006 as part of a wide range of activities on the topic. Meanwhile, the EIC in Bradford, the UK, plans to hold a half-day event in September 2006.

#### **Stop press!**

The EIC for the eastern Netherlands declared January its very own month of workers' mobility. The centre produced a special fact sheet and press article (which was distributed to the regional press) on the subject. The centre's presentations also cover the topic of labour mobility. The EIC in Brasov, Romania, has also launched a campaign in its own publications promoting the Year.

### **THE EIC NETWORK IN BRIEF**

Euro Info Centres (EICs) help small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) navigate the complex legislative and economic landscape that is today's European Union of 25 Member States and some 450 million citizens. Established in 1987 by the European Commission, the EIC network is made up of some 340 centres in 45 countries.

To learn more about the EIC network, please visit: <http://europa.eu.int/comm/enterprise/networks/eic/eic.html>

## LISTENING TO ENTERPRISE

### First SME panel on intellectual property rights and patent systems in Europe

The Enterprise and Industry DG has launched the first SME panel on intellectual property rights and patent systems in Europe. It aims to gather their views on one of the most important issues for the European Union's new industrial policy.

#### What is an SME panel?

An SME panel is a tool which allows the Commission to test out draft legislation or policy on a select panel of SMEs. The information collected with the support of EICs could be used in the policy-making process (strategy documents, guidelines, etc.)

#### How does the SME panel work?

If the subject is relevant to SMEs in their region, the participating EICs – over 170 from 19 countries – select a group of SMEs (from five to ten) willing to participate in the panel.

The EICs then have to explain the details of the proposal to the SMEs and ask them for their opinion, following the instructions provided. Each EIC will collect the SMEs' remarks and the EIC national coordinator will compile a brief national report summarising the information collected.

#### Target SMEs for the panel on IPR and patent systems

The target SMEs are:

- Current patent holders
- Those holding a patentable invention but have not sought a patent
- SMEs which have been sued by patent holders for patent infringement
- Any other SMEs which have had to deal with the patent system

The panel will have six weeks in which to gather information and produce results. **The reports should be received by the Commission by 5 June 2006.**

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### What is SME Feedback?

SME feedback is a tool managed by the Enterprise DG, and supported by the SME Envoy, aimed at identifying difficulties encountered by SMEs in the implementation of European legislation and/or policies, providing to Commission services and other final users valuable feedback in the regulation-shaping process.

Cases are reported by Euro Info Centres. In each centre, experts in European issues are responsible for collecting feedback from SMEs to ensure that the information reported is not too basic and is available in English or French.

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## Helping SMEs dig themselves out of legal loopholes

Exploiting legal loopholes is something at which scammers excel. One Spanish company has been targeting SMEs across Europe - some 35 000 in 30 countries have been hit so far - with a simple but effective scam. The firm sends out a form offering businesses the opportunity to appear in what it calls the European City Guide (ECG).

Businesses are asked to update their contact details and return the form as soon as possible. The form does not make clear that inclusion in the guide requires payment. However, if the business signs the bottom of the contact details form, ECG considers it to have placed an order worth €937 annually over three years. Attempts to cancel this order are generally rejected and those who refuse to pay are dealt with by a team of debt collecting agencies, based in Switzerland and Austria.

Following a series of complaints and court judgements, the ECG was closed down in September 2003 by the Catalonian Government and fined €300 000 which it has yet to pay. However, the company has since relocated to Valencia and has altered its form so that it is accepted as legal by the local Spanish authorities.

### **EIC legal aid**

EICs in Ireland have been actively pursuing this issue for some time now. They issued a warning on the subject and have been providing local businesses with legal support. "An increasing number of businesses have contacted [us] to complain and to seek advice on how to deal with the ECG," said Neasa Carroll, the manager of the Cork centre.

The Irish network invariably tells its clients not to pay and to keep a record of all contact with the ECG. However, with their legal position in Valencia, they might use this loophole in the Internal Market to extract money from Irish businesses.

Irish MEP, Mairead McGuinness has taken up the issue at the European Parliament and with the European Commission. Commissioner for Health and Consumer Protection Markos Kyprianou has referred the issue to the Spanish ombudsman to see why the company is not being investigated under misleading advertising legislation, explained Anne Neville of EIC Dublin.

"European legislation provides comprehensive protection for consumers against misleading advertising but it does not protect SMEs, which do not often have the resources to protect themselves," she noted.

Valencia EIC has located an English-speaking lawyer from the biggest law firm in Spain who is based in Valencia and is prepared to represent all the Irish clients of ECG, either collectively or individually.

## SPOTLIGHT ON IRELAND

### **Waterford EIC defends the Services Directive**

Waterford EIC participated in a discussion on the proposed Services Directive earlier this month. Organised by the European Commission Office in Dublin, the event aimed to highlight the benefits and address the reservations held on the contentious issue of removing barriers to trade in the Internal Market. The discussion centred on the motion, “the EU Services Directive is a blank cheque for exploiting workers and ripping off consumers”. The general consensus from the speakers was that this will not be the case, particularly with the publication of the amended Directive, issued on 4 April.

### **Cork EIC seeks companies for pilot testing of tender system**

Cork EIC is working with other EICs across the EU to develop a European Tender Information System which will help overcome the restrictions for businesses in accessing public tender information by developing an internet-based tender database, focusing particularly on sub-threshold tenders, which can be extremely difficult to access. Funded under the Commission e-Content fund, the programme is currently testing the system with Irish companies, who receive free tender alert service for six months in return for their participation. When fully up and running, the service will be a great benefit to SMEs, as it will make tendering for public contracts more straightforward.

### **Galway EIC broadcasts home from Brussels**

In association with Galway Bay FM, Galway EIC broadcast two live morning shows from the European Parliament in Brussels. The broadcasts were part of the Info25 initiative. This EU-wide initiative aims to raise awareness of European issues and help make the Union more tangible to everybody. The radio programmes included interviews with Irish MEPs, Galway people living and working in Brussels, the Irish Minister for European Affairs Noel Treacy and Deputy Prime-Minister Mary Harney. To coincide with the live broadcast, Galway Euro Info Centre together with Galway Chamber arranged a delegation of local council members to travel to Brussels and meet with EuroChambres, Schuman Associates and the Belgian Federation of Chambers.

### **Dublin EIC tailors response to standards difficulty**

Dublin EIC was involved in a major case over several months concerning an Irish company, Cascade Designs, whose product (plastic bottle used by hikers for carrying water) was withdrawn from the German market after police intervention. The EIC translated the police report for the client and helped them to try to gain recognition for the product in the German market. “We checked to see whether its American Food and Drug and Administration (FDA) approval could be recognised in the EU and whether the product could get the CE mark,” explained Ann Neville of Dublin EIC. “We checked to see if there was any EU standard for the product. We found that there was an Irish one, but no EU-wide one.” The EIC then transferred the case to SOLVIT, the EU’s on-line problem-solving tool for the Internal Market, and the client engaged a German lawyer and a medical laboratory to test the product. The Irish firm agreed to change the labelling on the product and, on this basis, was permitted to sell it in Germany.

### **Sligo EIC co-operates on cross-border dispute**

An Irish catering company contacted Sligo EIC after purchasing equipment for their business online from a German company. Ten months after the transaction was conducted the Irish company was still waiting for the goods to be delivered, despite numerous attempts to contact the German firm. Sligo EIC contacted their colleagues in Erfurt EIC who contacted the relevant authorities in Germany to discuss the case. Erfurt EIC also made direct contact with the German company. Within ten days of contacting the EIC network, the matter was resolved and the equipment was delivered. The Irish company was most impressed with how quickly the EIC resolved the case.

Want to know more about the EICs in Ireland? Visit their national website: <http://www.eic.ie/>