

ZENIT 25th Anniversary Celebrations

Representation of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia to the European Union

1 October 2009

Peter Wolfmeyer

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,
dear Colleagues

Being able to celebrate our company's birthday here with you today makes me very happy.

Our company was founded on 12 July 1984, so just over 25 years ago, as a regional innovation centre providing information, advice and consulting services for small and medium-sized enterprises.

For me, it is fascinating to remember how Europe looked at that time:

In 1984, the European Community comprised just ten countries. Spain and Portugal only joined at the beginning of 1986.

The Single Market was more theory than practice. The markets of the Member States were still mostly insular.

Schengen was still an unknown place somewhere in Europe. Thus when I drove to Brussels, I regularly had to pass through border control in Venlo or Aachen, which often meant an irritating delay.

Only a few thousand Community officials worked in Brussels, the number of lobbyists was also moderate.

The First Framework Programme for Research was just being born and there was absolutely no European SME policy.

And another important thing: In 1984, the Internet was almost exclusively the domain of a few universities and of the military in the United States. Only at the end of the 1980's and in the early 1990's with the launch of the World Wide Web (by the way, a European innovation) did we really start surfing. All correspondence was via telex, fax or telephone. 1984 was namely also the year when the very first email was received in Germany.

In short: Brussels was a long way from Mülheim. The European Community really only meant agriculture, or - for the Ruhr region - mining.

All this has changed dramatically, which makes me very happy to be able to look back today and say that "ZENIT and Europe" is a particularly successful example of

symbiosis and synergy. ZENIT would not be what it is today if we had not set our sights on Europe right back in the early days when ZENIT was founded. It was fortunate for us that our decision-makers at that time set the course early on to develop ZENIT from a firm which concentrated on internal regional issues to a centre open towards Europe and with a European focus.

Thus it can justifiably be said that we have been living and working for almost a quarter of a century according to the motto of today's event "25 years of ZENIT – 25 years in and for Europe" and this always in the well-understood interest of small and medium-sized enterprises in North Rhine-Westphalia. Being the "external task force" of these SMEs was and is the task with which our founding fathers entrusted us. And it fitted perfectly with the need to accompany SMEs into the European Single Market, and this in all its aspects and facets, such as market regulation, harmonisation of legislation, norms and standards, funding programmes, and so on.

An ideal opportunity presented itself when, in the mid 1980's, precisely in the first years after ZENIT was founded, the EU began to develop its own SME policy: Brussels recognized too that SMEs play a major role in growth, employment, and innovation in the Community. Whilst EU technology funding was still very strongly oriented towards large enterprises - out of earshot there was talk of the "12 gang mafia", the twelve large and at that time mostly national IT enterprises – in 1986 an "SME Task Force" was launched with the specific aim of supporting and improving the working and economic conditions of smaller enterprises in the Member States. One of the first measures was the setting up of an information and advice network for SMEs in existing local business support organisations. This took into account the situation of SMEs, which by nature only have limited personnel and financial resources at their disposal. They cannot normally afford special departments for information mining and project management tasks. And most have no foreign language skills. Thus EU expertise had to be made available locally and that is why the EICs were created.

It quickly became clear that this was not just an information channel between Brussels and SMEs at local level. At least as important was the networking of the EICs amongst themselves, which matured into a valuable support structure for SMEs interested in expanding their activities to other European countries. The EIC network developed into a successful instrument in preparing and creating the EU Single Market in the context of SMEs. Thousands of SMEs in Europe owe their foreign business in Europe today to the groundwork and mediation activities of the EICs. Similar applies for the IRC Network which supported pan-European technology transfer, and partly also the participation of SMEs in the EU's Framework Programmes and other European research programmes. With the fusion of these two predecessor networks at the beginning of last year, some new trails were blazed, whilst however tried and tested structures and methods were maintained. With the "No wrong door policy", SMEs now have easier access to information and assistance. At the same time, the objective of "Business support at your doorstep" continued unchanged, as in the early days of the EU's SME networks. What also seems important to us is that the European Commission is sticking to the principle of not creating any new structures, but instead is networking known and proven SME advice centres in the regions of Europe and entrusting them with the task of local contact point for all EU problems, questions and activities.

And what about the future? I would like to share with you our hopes.

First of all our vision: We anticipate that the Network will develop further into a source of information, advice and support which is well-known and much-used by SMEs.

Secondly, the Network will sharpen its focus on the needs of its clients, above all SMEs, for example by providing a truly integrated service portfolio and the early-stage information SMEs so greatly require. We will become more effective, efficient and professional, remembering that our clients will judge us on the results we achieve for them.

Thirdly, we would like to see a greater intensification of networking activities and would welcome greater visibility of the Enterprise Europe Network within the European Commission and a more extensive use of it by other directorate generals.

And lastly, in our own interest and in the interest of our clients, we at ZENIT will do all in our power to see that this vision becomes reality.

Before we cut the birthday cake, there are many people I would like to thank:

For our guest speakers I have a little present as an expression of our gratitude.

A big thank you to all our clients, in particular the regional government of North Rhine-Westphalia and the European Commission.

I also thank our network partners in the whole of Europe, especially those who sent us their good wishes or expressed a positive opinion about us in the form of a testimonial.

Thanks too to Mr. Stein and the personnel of the Representation for helping us organise this event here today.

And last but not least, I thank my team of highly motivated and professional ZENIT colleagues.

Thank you!