



“The voice of SMEs in Europe”

Press Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

ICT sector crucial for better, faster, more competitive SMEs

Brussels, 5 March 2008. New technologies such as e-invoicing, the uptake of “e-skills” and SME-friendly standards are the main opportunities and challenges ahead in the ICT sector for Europe’s small companies, according to UEAPME, the European craft and SME employers’ organisation. Speaking today at a conference organised by UEAPME’s partner organisation PIN-SME at CeBIT, the world’s largest ICT trade fair, Secretary General **Andrea Benassi** stressed the need to promote ICT as a means to enable European SMEs to be better, faster and more competitive (1).

“Our presence today at CeBIT, the world’s most important event for all things digital, is a testimony of the growing role SMEs are playing in the ICT arena in Europe”, said Mr Benassi. *“However, much remains to be done to ensure that the benefits of ‘e-technologies’ are fully reaped and reach all SMEs, both those operating in the sector and those using, or likely to use, ICT in their daily production activities”,* continued Mr Benassi, who then went on to elaborate on the main policy issues for SMEs.

ICT solutions, stressed Mr Benassi, can become a modernisation driver and dramatically simplify some admin operations that tend to be noticeably more burdensome for smaller companies. “E-invoicing”, i.e. replacing paper invoices with electronic documents, is an excellent example in this respect. Recent surveys show that e-invoicing can cut costs by up to 90% compared to the existing paper-based techniques. However, e-invoicing will work only if standards used are interoperable across Europe, which is not the case at the moment although the EC has recently started working on the issue and involving all stakeholders, including UEAPME. Moreover, e-invoicing should not generate additional requirements in terms of hardware or create unreasonable extra costs, insisted Mr Benassi.

Secondly, “e-skills” must be further improved and promoted both for ICT practitioners and users. Despite a growing demand, European SMEs are often confronted with a scarce offer of ICT-qualified personnel, which hampers their potential to innovate, grow and create quality jobs. On the other hand, while SMEs operating in the ICT sector are usually the best placed to provide ICT training, this market segment is too often dominated by big multinationals providing integrated software-training solutions.

Thirdly, standardisation in the ICT sector is often seen as the best solution to support the deployment and marketing across Europe. This approach does indeed offer several advantages for small companies, said Mr Benassi, but it will succeed only if SMEs are properly involved in the drafting process, which should balance the interests of all stakeholders and check all outcomes against the needs of SMEs.

“SMEs must gain centre stage in the ICT policy debate, both at European and national level. The creation of PIN-SME, which we encouraged and supported, goes exactly in this direction. UEAPME will insist on the need for a better involvement of SMEs and for a closer and deeper look at their needs in all sectors, including ICT, and starting with the Small Business Act due to be published in June”, concluded Mr Benassi.

***** END *****

(1) Read more on the event: <http://www.pinsme.eu/2ndEuropeanExpertForum/tabid/92/Default.aspx>

EDITORS’ NOTES: UEAPME is the employers’ organisation representing crafts, trades and SMEs from the EU and accession countries at European level. UEAPME has 84 member organisations, which represent crafts and SMEs across Europe, covering over 12 million enterprises with 50 million employees. UEAPME is a European Social Partner. For further information: <http://www.ueapme.com/>

The Pan European ICT & eBusiness Network for SMEs (PIN-SME) aims at bringing ICT SMEs on the business and political scene, where so far large companies have dominated. Its founding members are national sectoral SME federations and ICT clusters from 8 EU countries, representing more than 50.000 enterprises employing around 200.000 people across Europe. For further information: <http://www.pin-sme.eu/>

Further information: Sebastiano Toffaletti, PIN-SME Secretary General, Email s.toffaletti@pin-sme.eu
Francesco Longu, Press and Communications Officer, Email: pressoffice@ueapme.com