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**“SUPPORTING SME INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER
THROUGH INTERMEDIARIES: THE INTERNATIONAL NETWORK FOR
SMES - INSME”**

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ABSTRACT

The globalisation process is providing new challenges for SMEs' competitiveness. Intermediaries and their networks specialising in **innovation and technology transfer** can play a substantial role in supporting SMEs in the knowledge-based society. In this prospective, the following paper aims to present the **International Network for SMEs (INSME)**, an initiative promoted by the Italian Government aimed at setting up a world-wide Community of political and technical stakeholders in order to strengthen their cooperation, exchange know how and expertise in this field so as to maximise the mutual benefits and contribute to specialising, integrating and internationalising the offerings set of intermediaries.

INTRODUCTION

The process of **globalisation** together with the acceleration of technological progress, especially in the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) sector, poses new challenges and creates new opportunities for SMEs. In particular, access to innovation and technology becomes more and more a key-factor for SMEs to be competitive in the knowledge driven economy. In this view, it is important that public industrial policies contribute to facilitate SME access to information, technical assistance services and financial resources in order to develop and improve their products and industrial processes.

In the “**Bologna Charter on SME policies**” adopted in Bologna, Italy, in June 2000, Industry Ministers and Representatives of the Governments of the 50 countries participating in the first OECD Ministerial Conference on SMEs and globalisation, recognised the importance of improved access to information, financing and networking in facilitating the innovation process, including SME access to national and global innovation networks. On this occasion, Italy’s offer to finance and promote the carrying out of a Feasibility Study was welcomed. This study included a needs assessment for the development of an “**International Network for SMEs**” (INSME).

This international initiative is promoted and financed by the Italian **Ministry of Productive Activities** (MAP, www.minindustria.it) through the **Institute for Industrial Promotion** (IPI, www.ipi.it), its governmental agency for industrial policies.

INSME is to be considered as a mid to long term international process aimed at fostering the development of **public-private partnerships (PPP)** in order to stimulate SME's innovation processes by promoting and strengthening **innovation services** and **technology transfer (TT)** through **intermediary bodies and their networks**.

The importance of the role of intermediaries and their networks, and the need to support them, was one of the main outcomes of the Feasibility Study for the creation of the INSME, carried out in 2001 and 2002 by an independent consulting group in collaboration with IPI.

This paper deals with the following issues:

- the objectives and value added of INSME: its potential role as **promoter, catalyser and facilitator** for intermediaries and their networks;
- the background of the INSME: main achievements from 2000 to early 2003;
- the INSME Feasibility Study: a focus on existing networks and initiatives on innovation and TT;
- the roadmap for setting up the Network: future steps to move the process forward.

1. INSME’S VALUE ADDED

The INSME is about “**Community building**” and developing a multi-stakeholder partnership for improving the technology capacity of SMEs through intermediaries¹ and their networks in order to contribute to the creation of a more conducive business environment.

In particular INSME could act as a **facilitator, accelerator and multiplier of knowledge** in the field of innovation and TT, as a **promoter of cooperation and exchanges** among intermediaries and their networks as well as an **incubator of new initiatives**.

The objective pursued is to set up the INSME Network as a formal Community of **political and technical stakeholders** working in the field of innovation and TT. This network will foster the

¹ Examples of intermediaries are: Science and Technology Parks, Service Centres, IRC, BIC, Incubators, Research Centres/Universities (liaison offices), Economic Development Organisations, etc.

establishment of a permanent **political dialogue** among all actors involved in this area, with a view to improve the sharing of knowledge, the flow of information and encourage new activities, projects and financing specifically targeted to intermediaries and/or networks of intermediaries at international, regional, national and sub-national level.

It is proposed that the Network take the form of a **non profit legal entity, such as an Association**, with international members, and that it be set up by 2004. Its official launch could take place on the occasion of the second OECD Ministerial Conference on SMEs to be held in Istanbul in early June 2004 (**Bologna + 4**) also focussing on innovation related themes.

INSME will mainly target **intermediaries** and their **networks, Governmental bodies, International Organisations and NGOs** dealing with innovation and TT (these represent the INSME members, partners and sponsors) in any interested geographical area. SMEs will only be indirect beneficiaries of the INSME process.

The Network will act as an **international hub, a multiplier and incubator** of activities and projects targeting intermediaries and their networks providing innovation services and TT to SMEs. Through the set up of a dedicated information platform (the INSME Portal www.insme.info), including an **Observatory on policies, projects and financing instruments for intermediaries**, INSME will contribute to encourage the benchmarking and the diffusion of good practices, promote the development of synergies, partnerships and linkages in this field, with a view, in particular, to fostering “**North-South**“ **cooperation** among members.

The Network could also contribute to increase at political level **the awareness of the importance of renewing public funds** to support intermediaries and their networks and also represent an arena for the start up of bilateral and multilateral pilot projects between members.

The potential roles for INSME are summed as follow:

- INSME could stimulate the **rationalisation, specialisation, integration, digitisation and internationalisation** of intermediaries;
- INSME could encourage the **networking between intermediaries and other bodies** that are concerned with the promotion of technology transfer to SMEs, extending and maximising the impact of already existing initiatives;
- INSME could act as a **clearing house** for the collection, analysis and diffusion of Good Practice policies, programmes and projects aimed at promoting technological innovation in enterprises, in particular transregional and transnational technology transfer (**TTT**);
- INSME could operate as a **hub** to facilitate **the search of suitable expertise and know how** for intermediaries as well as **financing sources** to tackle specific issues raised by SMEs;
- INSME could assist the intermediaries in the **identification of new markets**, above all in less developed Countries, promoting the carrying out of joint projects through public and private partner search at international level, and offering support for the acquisition of the financial resources needed for their implementation.

The **potential services** that INSME could provide to intermediaries and policy makers might include:

- **Information services** (including the diffusion of good practices, seminars, co-operation opportunities between intermediaries);

- **Technical assistance** on project development (planning of centres, set up of networks, etc.)
- **Partner scouting** (identification of skilled partners for the undertaking of joint projects, acquisition of know how, etc.);
- **Financial sourcing** (public contributions and private capitals) for carrying out projects and initiatives;
- Implementation of **transnational projects** on behalf of International Organisations and bilateral co-operation agencies;
- **Training** (organisation of training courses, including on-line);
- **Marketing** (identification of the explicit and implicit demand for innovation, etc.);
- **Commercial services** (promotion of the services provided by the centres that are members of the network, promotion of the digitisation of intermediaries by providing them with a website/portal prototype and low cost);
- Organisation of **thematic working groups** to focus on specific issues related to the intermediaries and their networks with a view to also identify the best intermediaries (best and good practices) so as to certify the quality of their services for SMEs.

Information and services will be offered by INSME through its portal in **English** and **for free** (only in the first stage) and the range of services provided (standard or personalised) will depend on the public funds available to support this initiative.

2. BACKGROUND OF INSME

INSME is part of the "**Bologna Process**" within the framework of the OECD. The term "Bologna Process" refers to the international initiatives being carried out to take forward the political recommendations included in the "Bologna Charter on SME Policies", the final declaration adopted by Industry Ministers at the first OECD Ministerial Conference on "**Enhancing the Competitiveness of SMEs in the Global Economy**" held in Bologna, Italy, in June 2000.

The first step of the INSME process saw the establishment, in late 2000, of an international **Steering Group** which played a key role in collaborating with IPI in the strategic orientation of the initiative and in the definition of the INSME focus, mission and business model.

At present the following **33 OECD and non-OECD countries** are represented as full members of the **INSME Steering Group**: Argentina, Australia, Austria, Brazil, Chile, Chinese Taipei, Czech Republic, Egypt, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, India, Israel, Italy, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, Pakistan, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Korea, Romania, Russia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tunisia, Turkey and Vietnam.

Other countries that participate as **Observers** are: Algeria, Denmark, Luxembourg, Paraguay, Syria and United Kingdom.

The following **International Organisations and NGOs** also participate in the process: European Commission-DG Enterprise, Interamerican Development Bank, UNCTAD, UNIDO, World Bank-IFC SME Department, Global Development Gateway, Association Dirigeantes, Eurada, Eurochambres, UEAPME, UNICE, WASME.

The second step of the process saw the carrying out of a **Feasibility Study**, in 2001-2002, for the creation of the INSME to define the objectives, the potential configuration (business

models) and the target clients of the Network. The Study was completed in **November 2002**. It had a geographical coverage of 37 countries².

3. MAIN OUTCOMES OF THE INSME FEASIBILITY STUDY (2000-2002)

The INSME Feasibility Study, as introduced in the previous paragraph, included several parts. First, **Demand and Supply Analyses** of innovation services for SMEs were carried out. The analyses focused on those business support organisation, programmes and initiatives that are being carried out and promoted by Governments, International Organisations, NGOs or intermediaries for the promotion of innovation and TT for SMEs, especially TTT. One of the most interesting outcomes of the research is that many of the public initiatives identified directly assist (through services) enterprises and rarely the intermediaries, who are the target clients of INSME's services. Moreover, the activities that promote networking between intermediaries within countries or between countries, at present, are concentrated in single geographic areas (mostly in Europe, thanks to the European Commission's commitment to the stimulation of networking among EU and Accession Countries). However, there is currently a low level of activities that aim at assisting and setting up networks between intermediaries of diverse geographic areas and promoting collaboration and linkages between the existing networks in order to share know how, expertise and create economies of scale.

In addition, the Feasibility Study outlined a number of **gaps in the market**. The Study showed that intermediaries' interaction with SMEs is still weak, that they operate within a limited local or national framework, only rarely adopt a regional or transnational perspective and their networks often play a merely representative role (lobbying). Moreover, in the lesser developed countries, it was found that there is an insufficient number of facilities offering TT and innovation services to SMEs. As a result of the Feasibility Study it was concluded that INSME could contribute to the reduction of these problems through activities that strengthen, specialise and rationalise the services offered to SMEs through intermediaries and their networks.

Furthermore, the Feasibility Study considered the role played by existing International Organisations to avoid overlap with existing programmes and networking activities. With this goal in mind, it was concluded that within the process of creating and implementing INSME, complementarities and synergies with already existing initiatives in this field will be sought so as to maximise the efforts on common issues. Some potential areas of cooperation could be: strategic consolidation of initiatives, outsourcing of services during the project cycle phases, validation of network branding, etc. INSME could in turn have comparative advantages, such as a service focus on North/South and East/West TT, an eventual global network and a flexible business model that allows scalability over time.

Within the INSME Feasibility Study a **Good Practice analysis** was carried out and over 40 intermediaries, networks and initiatives were selected as relevant case studies at sub-national, national, regional and international level. In particular, the analysis was focused on the following three main aspects: **Technology and innovation service supply; Network System; Market orientation**. Most of the selected initiatives were found to be structured as **non profit organisations** and were launched and developed thanks to the financial support provided by public bodies. However, public financing is gradually being integrated with **private funds** so as to ensure the intermediary's continuity over time in the dissemination of TT services and in

² The feasibility study was carried out in a geographical area of 37 countries: Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Chile, Czech Republic, Denmark, Egypt, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, India, Ireland, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, Mexico, Morocco, Pakistan, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Korea, Romania, Russia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, The Netherlands, Tunisia, Turkey, United Kingdom and Vietnam. Countries considered only for the Good Practice analysis: Canada, Chinese Taipei, Israel and United States.

providing economic self-sustainability for the initiative in the market. As a matter of fact, a key success factor that emerged from the Good Practice analysis is the intermediaries' capabilities of launching self-financed activities and developing partnerships with the private sector (large enterprises, business associations, the banking system, etc.).

Moreover, through direct meetings with the intermediaries' representatives, the Good Practice analysis has allowed the gathering of some initial positive feedback on INSME's aims and ideas for its potential services.

From the interviews with the intermediaries, additional **services** that INSME could offer were suggested, such as:

- **Technology Ranking:** Very often SMEs are not able to clearly identify their technology needs. The intermediaries do not always have the necessary international exposure to support them. In some cases, the producers from the most technologically advanced countries sell obsolete technologies to their customers; in other cases, intermediaries try to transfer leading edge technologies to countries that have a less advanced level of technology. To help solve these problems, INSME could conduct a Technology Ranking Service that defines the evolving trends of technologies within the more technological advanced countries in order to adapt these (technologies) to the less technological advanced countries.
- **Standard qualified intermediaries:** Today, intermediaries looking for partners for international projects have difficulties in finding their homologues in their target countries and, at the same time, they are not being able to evaluate their reliability. INSME could contribute through the identification of standards to the selection of qualified intermediaries.

Below are summarised the main considerations following the analysis carried out on 31 international and regional networks operating in the area of innovation and TT:

- 100% of the networks analysed offer **general, non personalised services** such as an information platform, newsletters and publications. 67% offer these services for free to all (such as IASP – International Association of Science Parks), 17% offer these services for free only to members (such as NBIA - National Business Incubation Association) and 17% have a mixed approach, offering some of these services for free to all and some for free only to members (such as the European network RINNO - a Resource for Regional Innovation & Technology Transfer).
- 43% of the networks analysed also offer **personalised, value added services** such as consulting, query-response services and assistance in TT. Of this group 13% offer their value added services for free (such as ICS-UNIDO - International Centre for Science and High Technology), 13% offer their value added services for a fee (such as TIPS - Trade and Technological Information Promotion System), 10% offer their value added services for free only to members (such as TAFTIE - The Association for Technology Implementation in Europe) and 3% have a mixed approach (such as APCTT - Asian and Pacific Centre for Transfer of Technology), offering some value added services for free to all, some for free to members and some for a fee.
- 61% of the networks analysed have a database³ (such as SPICE Group - Science Park and Innovation Centre Expert Group) or a directory that only contains information about their members (such as ASTP - Association of European Science & Technology Transfer Professionals).

³ The database may contain information that is not solely a list of members contacts but include relevant reports, searchable lists of policies and programmes and technology offers and requests.

Table 1 – Networks Analysed in the INSME Feasibility Study (2001-2002)

International
1. IASP – International Association of Science Parks
2. NBIA - National Business Incubation Association
3. RIN - Réseau Innovation Network (Smart Practices Innovation Network)
4. SPICE Group - Science Park and Innovation Centre Expert Group
5. TIPS - Trade and Technological Information Promotion System
6. ICS - UNIDO - International Centre for Science and High Technology
Regional - Asia Pacific
7. APCTT - Asian and Pacific Centre for Transfer of Technology
8. NTPI - Network of Technology Parks and Technology Incubators
Regional - Europe
9. ASTP - Association of European Science & Technology Transfer Professionals
10. BLUEPRINT - Network for the integration of Science, Technology and Environmental Policy
11. E-POWER - Powering eEurope's Regional Economy
12. EARTO - European Association of Research and Technology Organisation
13. ESTO - European Science and Technology Observatory
14. ICECE WG - International Work Group of Innovation Centres in Eastern and Central Europe
15. INNOBA-SME - Overcoming Innovation Barriers in SMEs
16. Innovation Showcase - Communication and information platform
17. IRC - Innovation Relay Centres Network
18. IRE - The Network of Innovating Regions in Europe
19. ONLI - On-line Innovation - Virtual European Network of Technology Parks for Innovative Services
20. RINNO - A Resource for Regional Innovation & Technology Transfer
21. TAFTIE - The Association for Technology Implementation in Europe
22. TII - Technology Innovation Information
23. TriCo - Trilateral Conference, Austria- Italy- Slovenia
Regional - Euro-Mediterranean
24. Arc Méditerranéen des Technologies
25. Mediterranean Network of Technology Business Incubators
Regional - Latin America
26. CYTED - Science and Technology for the Development
27. FUNDES - Foundation for Sustainable Development in Latin America
28. PROCISUR - The Cooperative Program for the Agro-alimentary and Agro-industrial Technological Development of the Southern Cone
29. RITLA/LATIN - Latin America Technology Information Network
30. SIPROMICRO - Information System on Micro enterprise in Central America

N.B. Please see “References” for the websites of these networks.

4. THE ROADMAP FOR SETTING UP INSME (2003-2004)

Based on the results of the Feasibility Study and the recommendations of the INSME Steering Group, 2003-2004 will see the consolidation and expansion of the Community of governmental and non-governmental bodies in developed and developing countries involved in building the INSME, with the aim to promote its creation in the legal form of a non profit Association. The goal is to set up a virtual and physical **network system among Governmental bodies, International Organisations and interested NGOs**, equipped with a connection centre providing its members with information and services through the setting up of an appropriate structure with specialised staff (the **INSME Secretariat**). The Association will transform the

work of the INSME Steering Group members, that until now has been informal, into permanent and institutionalised activities, that have their own rules of conduct.

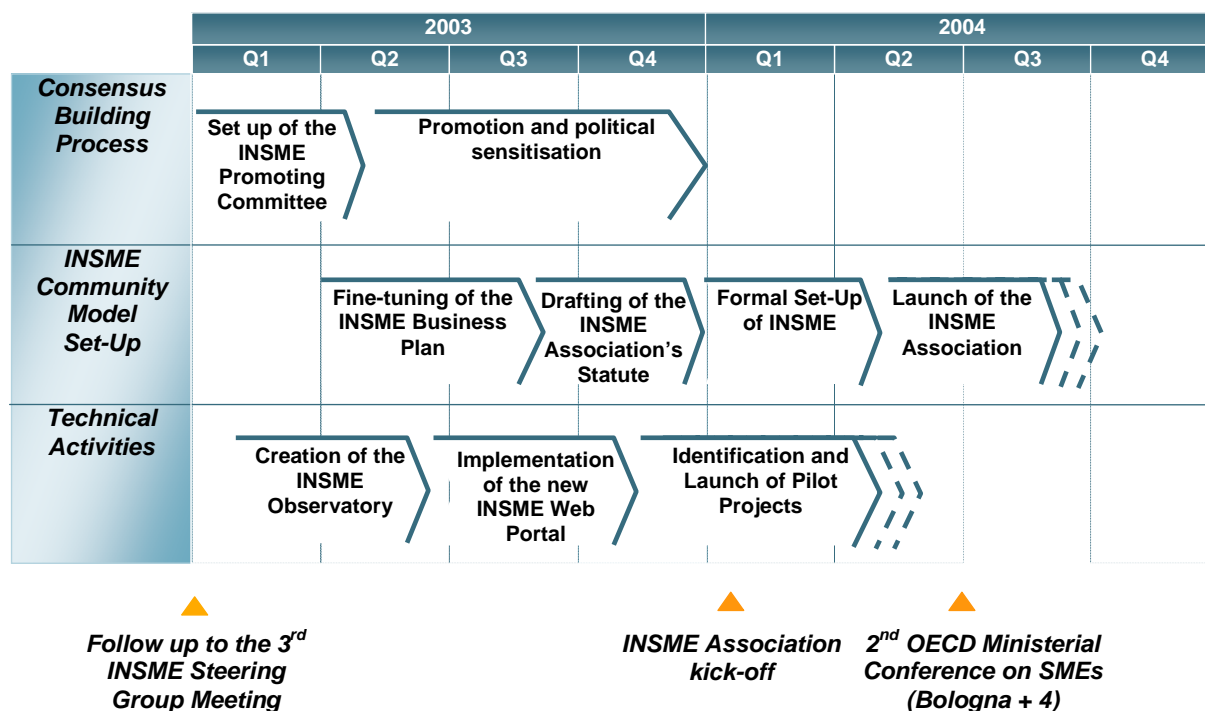
With a view to establishing the INSME Association, a restricted **Promoting Committee** will be set up in the course of 2003 on a **voluntary basis** in order to support the INSME Secretariat, hosted by IPI in Rome and Milan, in setting up the INSME international hub and to identifying, in detail, the organisational structure and services of the Association, drafting its Statute and finding founding members, sponsors and partners. In parallel, some pilot projects will be launched in order to test the application of the Network and its functioning on a smaller geographical area and in specific sectors.

The **financial resources** for setting up the Network will mainly be made available in 2003-2004 by the Italian Government, through IPI, that will continue its role as promoter and sustainer of the INSME Secretariat and coordinator of all activities. In the mid-term financing will come from membership fees, in-kind contributions from Countries/Organisations and service fees.

The INSME **Information Hub** will be launched in July 2003 in order to promote, among the INSME Community members, the exchange of information, methodologies, good practices and value added experiences related to intermediaries and their networks for innovation and TT to SMEs. It will represent a showcase for the members' activities and will be structured as a hub of existing portals and networks. The INSME Portal will target 3 communities of users: Policy makers, Intermediaries and SMEs.

The formal establishment of INSME could be presented at the second **OECD Ministerial Conference on SMEs** in Istanbul, on 3-4 June, **2004**. On that occasion, Ministers will be invited to recognise the achievements of the INSME process. To this aim, IPI is working in close collaboration with the OECD Secretariat and the Turkish authorities for the preparation of the conference (please see Figure 1 for the full Work Plan of 2003-2004).

Figure 1 – The INSME Work Plan for 2003-2004



CONCLUSION

The following conclusions can be drawn.

First, it is generally recognised that globalisation, the acceleration of technological change and innovation create opportunities for SMEs but also involve transition costs and new challenges. The first OECD Bologna Conference on SMEs in 2000 acknowledged that SME competitiveness could benefit from encouraged multilateral exchange of experience and best practice policies, in particular with a view to developing “**partnerships for innovation**” between the private and public sector, within countries and between developed and developing countries.

Since then, following the Italian proposal for setting up INSME, ideas on the opportunity to set up a global network to contribute to attain this goal and considerations on its value added and its potential configurations have been under discussion within the OECD and at international level.

Second, the INSME **network of multi-stakeholders** dealing with knowledge sharing on innovation and TT is already operational informally and virtually. Participation and interest from different geographical areas is growing over time and can be recognised in the enlargement of the international Steering Group.

The INSME will offer a new framework to boost the process of information and good practice dissemination, cooperation and partnership between actors involved in innovation diffusion to SMEs, by maximising, extending and linking already existing initiatives in this field and promoting the launch of new projects.

Third, the **consensus building process** to establish INSME is still underway and will foster the relationships between the "North" and "South" of the globe. Intermediaries and their networks are the direct beneficiaries of this initiative. Therefore, their participation in this early stage of the process is fundamental for the success of the project in order to consider their priorities, key-areas amplify their voice and respond to their needs to the indirect final benefit of SMEs.

Finally, the availability of public funds at national and international level and the political willingness and commitment from the policy makers to create and maintain the INSME remain crucial for the sustainability of the Network.

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- APCTT - Asian and Pacific Centre for Transfer of Technology, www.apctt.org
- Arc Méditerranéen des Technologies, www.arcmed.com/frservicios.html
- ASTP - Association of European Science & Technology Transfer Professionals, www.astp.net
- BLUEPRINT - Network for the integration of Science, Technology and Environmental Policy, www.blueprint-network.net

- CENTROCOT - Centre for Cotton Textiles and Clothing (Centro Tessile Cotoniero e Abbigliamento S.p.A.), www.centrocot.com
- CENTURIA - Science and Technology Park (Parco Scientifico Tecnologico CENTURIA S.cons.r.l.), www.centuria.org
- CERLabs - World Network of National Ceramic Laboratories, www.centroceramico.it/cerlabs.htm
- CYTED - Science and Technology for the Development, www.cyted.org/Nueva.asp
- CSIR - Council for Scientific and Industrial Research - South Africa, www.csir.co.za
- DEMOCENTER - Industrial Automation Services Centre, www.democenter.it
- EARTO - European Association of Research and Technology Organisation, www.earto.org
- Enterprise Ireland, www.enterprise-ireland.com
- E-POWER - Powering eEurope's Regional Economy, www.e-power.info
- ERVET System, www.ervet.it
- ESTO - European Science and Technology Observatory, <http://esto.jrc.es>
- EURATEX - The European Apparel and Textile Organisation, www.euratex.org
- EUTIST-AMI - European Take-up of Essential Information Technologies - Agents and Middleware, www.eutist-ami.org
- FUNDES - Foundation for Sustainable Development in Latin America, www.fundes.org
- FUSE - First User Action, www.fuse-network.com
- IASP - International Association of Science Parks, www.iasp.ws
- ICECE WG - International Work Group of Innovation Centres in Eastern and Central Europe, www.cic.dp.ua/icece.htm
- ICS - UNIDO - International Centre for Science and High Technology, www.ics.trieste.it
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- INNOBA-SME - Overcoming Innovation Barriers in SMEs, www.innoba.org
- Innovatienetwerk, www.innovatienetwerk.be
- Innovation Showcase - Communication and information platform www.innovation-showcase.net
- InnovaWood Initiative, www.innovawood.com
- IRC - Innovation Relay Centres Network, www.ircnet.lu and <http://irc.cordis.lu>
- IRE - The Network of Innovating Regions in Europe, www.innovating-regions.org
- Mediterranean Network of Technology Business Incubators, www.medinnov.com
- NBIA - National Business Incubation Association www.nbia.org
- NRC - National Research Council - Canada, www.nrc.ca/corporate/english/index.html
- NTPI - Network of Technology Parks and Technology Incubators, www.escwa.org.lb/ntpi/index.html

- ONLI - On-line Innovation - Virtual European Network of Technology Parks for Innovative Services, www.newventuretools.net
- PROCISUR - The Cooperative Program for the Agro-alimentary and Agro-industrial Technological Development of the Southern Cone, www.procisur.org.uy
- R2ITH - Réseau Industriel d'Innovation du Textile et de l'Habillement (Industrial Innovation Network of Textiles and clothing), www.r2ith.org
- REDIT - Network of Institutes of Technology in the Valencia Region, www.redit.es
- RIN - Réseau Innovation Network (Smart Practices Innovation Network), <http://rqsi.ulaval.ca>
- RINNO - A Resource for Regional Innovation & Technology Transfer, www.rinno.com
- RITLA - Technology Information Network in Latin America, <http://pub2.lncc.br/ritla/index.html>
- SIDO - Small Industries Development Organisation - India, www.smallindustryindia.com
- SIMTech - Singapore Institute of Manufacturing Technology, www.SIMTech.a-star.edu.sg
- SIPROMICRO - Information System on Microenterprise in Central America, www.sipromicro.org and www.galileo.or.cr
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- TAFTIE - The Association for Technology Implementation in Europe, www.taftie.org/index
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- The Asian and Pacific Centre for Transfer of Technology, www.apctt.org
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- TriCo - Trilateral Conference, Austria - Italy - Slovenia www.area.trieste.it/en/html/progetti/indextrico.htm
- VTT - Technical Research Centre of Finland, www.vtt.fi