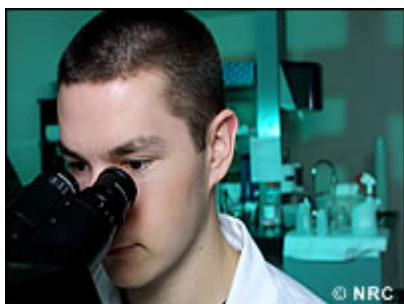


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IRC network reviews progress and discusses Commission's innovation strategy

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Lively discussion on the state of innovation and technology transfer in Europe characterised the seventh annual meeting of the Innovation Relay Centre (IRC) network in Nuremberg from 20 to 22 November. Leading officials from the European Commission's Enterprise DG gave some details of a new communication on Innovation Policy they are

preparing for release early next year and explored roads of excellence for the network.

Heinz Zourek, Deputy Director General of DG Enterprise, opened the conference by indicating that the forthcoming Commission communication will address some broad and fundamental questions regarding innovation. 'Is there a particular innovation model in Europe?' he asked. If so, is there one model or are there 15 or 25 models reflecting different traditions in the Member States and candidate countries? Is the European way different from that of the United States and Japan and if so, is this a disadvantage? How can the way to innovate in Europe be improved?

Following the publication of the communication early next year, the Commission will seek feedback on the ideas contained in the document. Mr Zourek urged IRCs to get involved in this process. Giulio Grata, Director of DG Enterprise's Innovation Directorate, hinted at the end goal of the forthcoming communication: 'We want to establish, in collaboration with Member States, an organic and integrated approach to innovation policy in Europe.'

The plenary sessions and parallel seminars at the conference reflected on the state of the IRC network, founded in 1995 with the support of the Commission, to facilitate innovation by supporting and organising the cross-border transfer of new technologies across Europe. Most IRCs are operated by a consortium of regional organisations, such as Chambers of Commerce, university technology centres and regional development agencies. Around 250 such partner organisations are involved in the 68 IRCs around Europe, ensuring a local presence in most regions.

Offering an overview of the IRCs' performance, Mark Schneider of the IRC central unit said that it had been a good year, with a 100 per cent increase in technology transfer agreements brokered by the network. Of these, they have increased the level of (those regarded as of particularly high quality) from 9 per cent to 12 per cent, and brokered more transnational deals than the previous year.

Various measures to improve the quality, competence and professionalism of IRCs were discussed. Yannis Tsilibaris, Acting Head of Unit for networks and services in DG Enterprise, said that everyone had benefited from the initiative of the IRCs themselves to be more actively involved in the governance of the entire network over the previous two years. Working groups and steering groups had contributed to the work of the IRC coordinating body, the IRC central unit, which reports directly to the Commission.

The seventh annual IRC meeting attracted 240 participants over three days.

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