



Euro News

The UK Network of Euro Info Centres
Issue 1 : December / January 2006

In this issue

Questions and Answers

Higher growth for SMEs

Free online databases for exporters
and importers

Grants in 2005

EU policy end-of-year review

Mind the age gap

Consultations

Information roundup

Questions and Answers

Question:

What does the 'e' mark mean on packaging and where can we find out more?



Answer:

The 'e' mark, found on packages next to the weight or volume, is there to guarantee the weight or volume of the product. The specifications for this 'e' mark is outlined in Annex 1 of Directive 76/211/EEC on the approximation of the laws of the Member States relating to the marking-up by weight or by volume of certain pre-packaged products. When the 'e' mark is included on a product, the packer or the importer is guaranteeing that the pre-packaged product meets the requirements of Directive 76/211/EEC. According to the Directive, the small 'e' must be 'at least 3mm high, placed in the same field of vision as the indication of the nominal weight or nominal volume'.

In the UK, the Directive is implemented by Annex 5 of the Weight and Measures Act 1985 and the Weight and Measures (packaged goods) Regulations 1986.

For more information on this mark, see Trading Standards guidance leaflets on weights and measures, website: <http://www.tradingstandards.gov.uk/cgi-bin/bgllist.cgi#mt> or contact your local trading standards office.

Higher Growth for SME's

SMEs will now be able to find their way more easily through the jungle of European services. Europe just came that much closer to SMEs with the creation of 15 regional b2europe alliances, bringing together business support organisations to provide them with all-inclusive support services.



Spearheaded by a new partnership between Euro Info Centres (EICs) and Innovation Relay Centres (IRCs), which will increase cooperation between the two networks, b2europe will make it that much easier for SMEs to expand their business, obtain technologies, and find business partners or funding opportunities. In the UK, Centres in the East of England and in the South of England have created new b2europe single access points.

Commission Vice-President Günter Verheugen responsible for enterprise and industry policy said: 'SMEs have a crucial role to play in creating new jobs in the EU. But their size often prevents them from reaping the full benefits of the European arena. These new partnerships will help SMEs overcome these challenges and unleash their full potential for growth and innovation.'

Contact clarified

This initiative will help dispel any confusion among SMEs of where to turn to for assistance in their region. SME managers do not have the time to contact three or four different offices to find the right solution. The new regional b2europe alliances will generate a better understanding between regional business support actors, and leverage their services more fully to the benefit of local companies through increased co-operation, sharing of experiences, information and good practice examples, and better targeted referral of clients.

Higher Growth for SME's

A decorative graphic on the left side of the page consisting of several yellow and grey stars of varying sizes, arranged in a pattern that suggests the European Union flag, set against a light blue background with a subtle arrow shape.

The EICs, IRCs and other organisations have signed a Charter that commits their partnership to a Code of Conduct guaranteeing highly professional services and full transparency. The alliances will develop ways of making Europe easier for SMEs, for example by setting up regional website portals consolidating access to all European services and organising events to create greater awareness of the opportunities offered by the internal market and cross-border collaboration.

The partnerships build on b2europe, the Commission initiative to rationalise and streamline EU business support networks. The new partnerships constitute a major step towards establishing an effective one-stop-shop approach to business support for European SMEs, which the Commission sees as essential in boosting growth and innovation. It is expected that in the future alliances will be set up in more than 100 regions across Europe.

In the East of England, b2europe will fit seamlessly into a longstanding regional partnership Gateway2Innovate (G2I) involving the St. Albans EIC, the East of England IRC, East of England Regional Development Agency and other organisations.

The Southern Area EIC based in Southampton and the Innovation Relay Centre, together with local partners such as Business Link, the Chambers of Commerce and the local authorities of Hampshire, Southampton, Portsmouth and Bournemouth have developed a new website aimed at helping small business win large public tenders. The site now receives over a thousand visits a month from small companies in the local area eager to find out more about the opportunities available from public bodies such as local authorities and the NHS.

Higher Growth for SME's

Useful contacts

For further information on b2europe access

<http://europa.eu.int/comm/enterprise/networks/>

For more information on the b2europe kick-off regions in the UK contact:

Ms Mathilde Murphy

European Information Manager

Euro Info Centre St Albans

EXEMPLAS LTD

Tel: +44 (0) 1727 813 693

email: mathildem@exemplas.com

Andrew Goldsbrough

East of England Innovation Relay Centre

St John's Innovation Centre

Cowley Road

Cambridge

CB4 0WS

Tel: +44 (0) 1223 421117

email: agoldsbrough@stjohns.co.uk

Mr Richard Hall

Southern Area Euro Info Centre

Northguild Civic Centre

S014 7LW Southampton

Tel.: 44 23 80832866

email: southarea.eic@southampton.gov.uk

Higher Growth for SME's

Launch regions

b2europe launch regions are as follows:

City	Region	Country
Plovdiv	Plovdiv	Bulgaria
Sandanski	Sandanski	Bulgaria
Sofia	Yugozapaden	Bulgaria
Rennes	Bretagne	France
Lyon / Grenoble	Rhône Alpes	France
Sligo	Border, Midland and Western Ireland	Ireland
Naples	Campania	Italy
Torino	Piemonte	Italy
Venice / Gorizia	Veneto	Italy
Kielce	Swietokrzyskie	Poland
Bialystok	Podlaskie	Poland
Bucharest	Bucuresti	Romania
Presov	Prešov	Slovakia
St. Albans	Hertfordshire	United Kingdom
Southampton	Hampshire	United Kingdom

Free Online Databases for Exporters and Importers

The European Commission recently launched new improved versions of the Export Helpdesk and Market Access databases. Both tools are accessible to UK businesses 24 hours a day and without registration or charge! Can you afford not to use them?

<http://mkaccdb.eu.int/>

This tool was specifically designed for EU exporters looking at expanding their business in global markets. You can use it to:

- Find out about export and investment conditions in non-EU countries and identify trade barriers affecting your product or your sector by individual countries.
- Check up-to-date information on duties and taxes applicable to your products, allowing you to calculate a landed cost.
- Check the import procedures and documents required for the import of a particular product by simply entering an HS code or product description.
- Access trade statistics, providing you with an invaluable overview of trade flows between the EU and non-EU countries for your product.
- Access in-depth market access studies referring to geographical areas, selected business sectors or relevant horizontal issues (e.g. labelling).

<http://export-help.cec.eu.int/>

Although this service was created for exporters from non-EU countries, it is clearly a very good tool for EU importers. From this database, a UK company can:

- Check the latest information on import tariffs, customs documents and rules of origin.
- Check up-to-date information about the UK and EU requirements when importing a specific product, including compliance with EU product legislation, labelling rules, VAT

Free Online Databases for Exporters and Importers

and excise duties.

- Access tailored trade statistics (value and quantities) between non EU countries and EU countries for specific products.
- Reply to exporters offers and post their business request on the market place section which provides a forum to facilitate deals between traders.

The Euro Info Centre will be happy to present the features of these databases to local businesses so that they can take best advantage of their extensive facilities. Do not hesitate to contact your local EIC for further information.

Grants in 2005

Peter Matthews looks at a few of the programmes on offer in November 2005.



There were 677 amendments to the schemes on the Grantfinder database in November 2005. The list below is just a small selection of this month's new programmes. There are over 2,600 programmes available in this database:

- European Enterprise Awards are being launched as an annual event for European business organisations on a regional and national basis. The award categories are: entrepreneurial trailblazer, enterprise support, red tape reduction, investment in people and responsible entrepreneurship. The deadline is 31 May 2006.
- Media Plus Training is the European Commission's support programme for the audiovisual industry. The priorities are the application of new technologies for the production and distribution of audiovisual programmes; economic, financial and commercial management; and script writing techniques. The deadline is 1 March 2006.
- The Marco Polo Programme for freight transport has a budget of €75 million and provides funding for international projects shifting freight from road to sea, rail, and waterways transport. The deadline for the receipt of proposals is 30 January 2006.
- Energy Globe Awards are international and available to all companies that show sustainable innovations under the categories of earth, fire (energy), water, air and youth. A first prize to a winner of €10,000 is to be awarded and there can be several for each category. The deadline is 12 May 2006.

Grants in 2005

- Pan London II will distribute approximately £35 million European Social Fund funding to projects of both regional and local scope.
- The URBAN's Clyde Waterfront programme is awarded through the European Regional Development Fund. There are three application cycles in 2006: 27 January, 25 May and 22 September.

Sixth Framework Programme - In Support of International Co-operation (INCO) still has calls open for supporting actions in developing countries, Mediterranean partner countries, Russia and multicultural coordination of national RTD policies and activities.

Peter Matthews worked for the European Commission and now advises on how to complete applications for Grantfinder projects. He also specialises in global trade and investment funding support and soft loans from the EU into Eastern Europe, Northern and Sub Saharan Africa and South East Asia.

Please contact your local Euro Info Centre for more information on these programmes. A one-page summary of the programmes generated from Grantfinder will be sent to you for free.

EU Policy End-of-year Review



The sobering findings of the 2000-10 Lisbon Strategy mid-term review early in the year formed the backdrop to the EU institutions' work during 2005. It also provided the catalyst for a refocusing of the policy agenda onto the creation of jobs and growth. Now, at the turn of the year, it is worth looking back at specific EU policy developments during 2005 and those that lie ahead in 2006 to assess whether such broad, pro-business brush strokes bear closer scrutiny.

The commission introduced several regulatory reform initiatives during 2005 that are essential to creating jobs and growth, notably the revised impact assessment guidelines, the latest exercise to simplify existing legislation and the withdrawal of a number of obsolete or inappropriate pending proposals. However, a considerable culture change across the executive's services is still required if these commendable developments are to have an effect on the institution's day-to-day operations.

The Presidency of the EU was held first by Luxembourg and then the UK during 2005. The first half of the year was dominated by the national referenda on the draft EU constitutional treaty, which scuppered attempts by Luxembourg to secure agreement on the EU budget. The UK's term was launched in a blaze of publicity following a dynamic performance by Prime Minister Blair in the European Parliament in June. Subsequent delivery during the presidency has been hindered by the fallout from the Dutch and French 'no' votes, the German election saga and the ongoing dispute over the budget and many observers believe that the UK has missed an opportunity to oversee much needed reform.

However, in mid-December, the Council succeeded in reaching a political agreement on one of the most complex and contentious pieces of EU legislation ever, the REACH chemicals legislation. Despite improvements for SMEs, particularly in the registration phase, some concessions were made to environmental groups.

EU Policy End-of-year Review


UK SMEs will now look towards the council to improve those parts of the proposal which, in their current form, could prove problematic.

Meanwhile, the European Parliament's Internal Market & Consumer Protection Committee made progress on the Services Directive, a cornerstone of the Lisbon Strategy. After lengthy debate, the committee refrained from significant amendments to the underlying principals behind the commission's proposal. UK SMEs will be working hard to ensure a similar outcome at plenary in early 2006.

More generally in 2006, the SME community will be seeking evidence that the positive commission reforms to the regulatory process are being translated into more business-friendly outcomes. The commission's annual work programme is slimmer than in recent years. One of the key items for the UK SME community will in fact be a non-legislative initiative: a green paper consultation on the evolution of labour law. Other entries in the work programme that are of relevance to SMEs include public procurement, access to finance and health & safety at work.

Beyond the work programme, the commission will continue to contribute to a number of ongoing policy proposals from recent years. Of these, the statutory review of the 1993 Working Time Directive remains of great significance to the UK SME community, for whom the crux of the issue is whether the opt-out from the 48-hour maximum average working week will be retained. The parliament voted on the commission's proposed revision in May, calling for the opt-out to be phased out. The evolution of this dossier now depends largely on the member states and the volition and stance of the Austrian and Finnish governments during their six month EU Presidencies.

EU Policy End-of-year Review

A decorative graphic on the left side of the page consisting of several yellow and grey stars of varying sizes, arranged in a pattern that suggests the European Union flag. The stars are set against a light blue background that also features a large, faint arrow pointing upwards and to the right.

Priorities for the Austrians and Finns include the single market (notably finalisation of the Services Directive), further progress on impact assessment and simplification and finalisation of the Competitiveness & Innovation Programme. The Austrian Presidency, in particular, is demonstrating a strong awareness of the views and requirements of SMEs, which augurs well.

UK SMEs will remain keen to support the work of the European Commission's SME Envoy, Maive Rute, in ensuring that all services of the commission are systematically taking into account the small business dimension when drafting policy. The success Ms Rute enjoys in meeting this challenge is central to the development of a more enterprise friendly European policy environment and she will need constructive, ongoing input from business representatives.

Elsewhere, UK SME representatives and other stakeholders will be pressing the European Parliament and member states to convert their positive words on regulatory reform into deeds, notably by referring to impact assessments when amending commission proposals. There are some signs of improvement, but the parliament and council remain a long way behind the commission in this process.

On 10 November 2005, leading UK SME representatives travelled to Brussels for a meeting with European Commission Vice-President, Günther Verheugen. This date also marked the launch of the commission's new SME policy communication and the message from the representatives to the vice-president was one of support for his emerging efforts to develop a more business friendly policy environment. In 2006, the UK SME community will be working more closely than ever with EU politicians and officials to ensure that they build on these positive developments and work towards a framework that enables smaller businesses to create the jobs and growth that Europe needs.

EU Policy End-of-year Review

This article was written by smallbusiness|europe.

Details on many of the issues mentioned can be found on smallbusiness|europe's EU issue tracker:
www.smallbusinesseurope.org/Issues/

Mind the Age Gap



Here, Emmanuelle Ries, Employment Partner at Miller Rosenfalck, looks at the draft regulations implementing the European Framework Directive on Equal Treatment and explains why employers should be preparing now for age discrimination legislation.

Subject to Parliamentary approval, the Government's proposals to legislate on age discrimination will now come into force on 1 October 2006. In summary the new regulations will:

- Prohibit contractual retirement age below the default age of 65 (unless objectively justified).
- Prohibit unjustified age discrimination and harassment in employment and vocational training.
- Require employers to inform employees in writing at least six months in advance, of their intended retirement date.
- Introduce a new duty that employers consider an employee's request to work beyond the age of 65.
- Remove the upper age limit for unfair dismissal and redundancy rights.

The draft regulations are the result of a long consultation period and looking closer at the principles outlined above reveals a number of exceptions to the new rules which allow some flexibility to the application of this new concept in practice.

A new default retirement age of 65

Retirement below the age of 65 will be unlawful - except where it can be objectively justified.

When the employee is aged 65, the employer will be entitled to compulsorily retire him or her without having to justify this decision provided the employer has considered the employee's

Mind the Age Gap

request to work beyond retirement.

The employer is under a continuing Duty to Inform of Intention to Retire up to 14 days before the dismissal. Once informed, the employee can request extended employment any time up to six weeks before the dismissal. The employer must then hold a meeting with the employee and give a written decision to the employee within two weeks (but no reasons need be given). The employee then has two weeks to consider the situation. If the employer has agreed to an extension of the retirement age, then the Duty to Inform (and consider any request) recurs in relation to agreed extensions.

At present only 30% of people are in employment by the age of 65. Due to falling population rates, this will have to change. The government is committed to reviewing the default retirement age in 2011 and it is anticipated that it will be increased or dispensed with altogether.

Direct and indirect age discrimination

It will be direct discrimination to use age as a reason for different treatment in a comparable situation - unless there is an objective justification.

It will be indirect discrimination where a provision, criteria or practice disadvantages a particular category of person because of his or her age, even if this effect is unintentional - unless the provision, criterion or practice is a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim.

As an example, requiring applicants to pass a health or fitness test for recruitment or promotion would not constitute direct age discrimination. However it might be indirect age discrimination if people of certain ages were less likely to pass this test than other age groups (in which case the employer would have to

Mind the Age Gap

objectively justify it. Note that using a health test will be justifiable if the test is set at a level necessary to indicate whether someone was capable of doing the job.

Justifying age discrimination

Age discrimination will be potentially justifiable in three circumstances:

1. where the job falls within the scope of a genuine occupational requirement; or
2. where there is a difference in treatment on grounds of age, but that age based treatment is demonstrated to fall within a justification allowed by the Regulations (see below); or
3. where there is a provision, criterion or practice which is not based on age, but which places those in a particular age group at a disadvantage, so that the employer must justify the practice in terms of proportionality.

Direct and indirect age discrimination will be justified and lawful if it is a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim. The government has said that the test of objective justification will not be an easy one to satisfy and the principle remains that different treatment on the ground of age will be unlawful: treating people differently on the ground of age will be possible but only exceptionally and only for good reasons.

The draft regulations set out a non-exhaustive list of situations where direct age discrimination may, depending on the circumstances, pursue a legitimate aim. These are:

- the setting of requirements as to age in order to ensure the protection or promote the vocational integration of people in a particular age group;
- the fixing of a minimum age to qualify for certain advantages linked to employment or occupation in order to recruit or

Mind the Age Gap

retain older people; and

- the fixing of a maximum age for recruitment or promotion which is based on the training requirements of the post in question or the need for a reasonable period of employment before retirement.

In addition both direct and indirect discrimination may be justified in circumstances involving:


- health, welfare and safety (including protection of young or older people)
- facilitation of employment planning
- particular training requirements
- encouraging and rewarding loyalty
- the need for a reasonable period of employment before retirement; and
- recruiting or retaining older people.

Note however that the legitimate aim cannot be related to age discrimination itself. For example, it would not be lawful for a retailer of trendy fashion items to employ young shop assistants because it believes that this will further its aim of targeting young buyers. Trying to attract a young target group will not be a legitimate aim, because this has an age-discriminatory aspect.

Service-related pay and benefits

Many employers require staff to have completed a certain length of service before a benefit is given or increased. This is seen to reward loyalty. Benefits include matters such as annual leave and a company car. Once the new age rules are in force, this will often amount to indirect age discrimination because some age groups are more likely to have completed the required length of service than others.

Mind the Age Gap

A decorative graphic on the left side of the page consisting of several yellow and grey stars of varying sizes, arranged in a pattern that suggests the European Union flag.

The draft regulations contain a number of specific provisions dealing with the use of length of service in employment benefits. If an age-related criterion, provision or practice meets the requirements of the legislation it will be lawful - an employer will not have to justify it. The Government's Age Matters consultation last year proposed that age discrimination in employment benefits should be allowed if employers could justify it under the general objective justification test (described above). This approach met with resistance from employers, who argued that it would not be helpful to have to provide individual justification for a wide range of service-related benefits, the protection of which was generally regarded as desirable by most respondents to the consultation.

Consequently the result is that the draft regulations contain a general provision and two specific exemptions on employment benefits, all of which cover the use of length of service as a criterion for awarding or increasing benefits in specified circumstances. These exemptions cover pay and non-pay benefits, such as annual leave and company cars. This will cover all instances of use of length of service for all types of employment benefits. It provides that such use is lawful if:

- awarding or increasing the benefit is meant to reflect the higher level of experience of the employee, or to reward the loyalty of the employee, or to increase or maintain the motivation of the employee;
- the employer has reasonably concluded that there will be a business benefit resulting from the higher level of experience of staff or from rewarding staff loyalty or increasing or maintaining staff motivation; and
- the employer applies the length-of-service criterion similarly to staff in similar situations.

Mind the Age Gap

Two specific exemptions


The age regulations also contain two specific exemptions:

1. any length-of-service requirement of five years or less will be exempted and will be able to continue (the 'five-year-exemption'). The employer must apply the length-of-service criterion to staff in similar situations
2. any length-of-service requirement that mirrors a similar requirement in a statutory benefit (such as redundancy) will be exempted and will be able to continue.

Service requirements of longer than five years may still be justifiable but not automatically so.

October 2006 is around the corner

Age discrimination claims by employees in the US where age discrimination legislation has been in place for decades are commonplace and one of the most costly for employers there. When age discrimination legislation is on place here, it is almost certain that British employees will follow suit and, as with any type of discrimination awards, there will be no ceiling as to damages. Employers who ignore the coming cultural sea change will do so at their financial peril. It is therefore important to start looking at your company's policies as to recruitment, promotion, rewards and termination now in order to be compliant by October 2006.

A decorative graphic of several yellow and grey stars of varying sizes, arranged in a diagonal pattern from the top left towards the center of the page.

To discuss the above further, please contact Emmanuelle Ries at Miller Rosenfalck (Tel: 0207 553 9938; email er@europeanbusinesslawyers.com).

Miller Rosenfalck is a law firm comprising solicitors and other European lawyers. Miller Rosenfalck provides advice in English, Danish, Swedish, German and French on all areas of law relevant to internationally focused businesses, specialising in the fields of company and commercial law, mergers and acquisitions, employment, intellectual property, and business immigration law.

Consultations

Listening to Businesses

The European Commission is currently looking for businesses' views on the following policy areas:



- The developments in the European postal services and the future direction of the European policy on postal services. The consultation is open until 27 January 2006. Further information on the consultation can be found on http://europa.eu.int/comm/internal_market/post/consultations_en.htm
- Council Regulation (2560/2001) on Cross-border Payments in Euro. The consultation is open until 6 January 2006. Further information on the consultation can be found on http://europa.eu.int/comm/internal_market/payments/crossborder/index_en.htm#consultation

Public register of expert groups

The European Commission has also set up a public register of expert groups, both formal and informal advisory bodies, to help it prepare legislative proposals and policy initiatives. Participants are classified in broad categories, e.g. academics, industry and NGOs, but the register does not contain any information on individual experts because of data protection and privacy reasons. Information on how to register is available at http://europa.eu.int/comm/secretariat_general/regexp/faq/faq.cfm?aide=1

Promoting gender equality

In the UK, the Department of Trade and Industry is seeking views on its proposals to introduce a public sector duty to promote gender equality. These proposals will require public authorities to eliminate discrimination and promote equality of

Consultations

opportunity between men and women. The consultation is open until 12 January 2006. Further information on the consultation can be found on <http://www.dti.gov.uk/consultations/consultation-1540.html>

Information Roundup

Austria takes over the Presidency

The key themes for the next 12 months that are of interest to businesses are:



1. The Future of the European Union - Austria will report on the wide-ranging dialogue set up by each EU country during 2005, in order to identify issues of concern and policy areas where the Union activities are regarded as necessary to meet future challenges.
2. Financing the EU, including business support initiatives - Within the current budget discussions, the future support to EU businesses is at stake. The Competitiveness and Innovation framework Programme (CIP) will be running from 2007 to 2013, and it proposes a budget of more than 4 billion euros over the seven-year period. This still needs to be approved by the EU institutions and the final approval is expected in March 2006.
3. Growth and jobs in Europe - As an essential element for enhancing economic dynamism in Europe, the Presidencies will pay special attention to the completion of the Internal Market, especially for services, telecommunications, energy and financial services. Special emphasis will also be placed on creating a supportive framework for research and development. The Austrian EU Presidency will work towards the conclusions of negotiations on the new Framework Programme, which is due to start at the beginning of 2007. This is also linked to the adoption of the EU budget.
4. Better regulation - As part of the objective of strengthening the competitiveness of the EU, particular priority will be given to implementing the agenda of better regulation. This aims at making the working environment of businesses (legislative requirements, administrative burdens) less burdensome.

Information Roundup

5. Preparing for the next enlargement of the Union in 2007 - In 2006, the monitoring of Bulgaria and Romania's performance will be stepped up as part of the preparations of their accession scheduled for 2007. In addition, Croatia and Turkey will continue their negotiations towards accession.

The programme of activities has been drawn up by both Austria and Finland, who will take over the presidency in July next year. The new website of the presidency is already published and can be accessed for up-coming events: www.eu2006.at/

International customs operation 'FAKE'

Results from the first joint operation by the 25 EU member states, coordinated by the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF), has revealed counterfeit goods deprive manufacturers of between 200 and 300 billion euros throughout the world. Public authorities also lose substantial tax revenue, mainly VAT but also customs duties, through an underground economy that directly affects the EU's own resources and finances organised crime. The percentage of counterfeit goods is constantly rising and accounts from between 5% and 9% of world trade.

Counterfeit products of Chinese origin were the target of the joint customs operation codenamed FAKE carried out between 17 and 27 May 2005 and involving more than 250 customs officers across the EU. The results of the operation, combined with the fact that there has been over a 1000% rise (between 1998 and 2004) in the number of objects seized by EU customs officials, the Directorate General responsible for taxation and customs union has launched an action plan to combat counterfeiting and piracy.

Information Roundup

Tunis summit on internet control

The EU, backed by a number of countries worldwide, failed in gaining greater control over the internet at the UN summit on information in Tunis, Tunisia. The internet was invented in the US and is still managed by the California-based, not-for-profit Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) on behalf of the entire world. The organisation operates under a contract with the US Department of Commerce, which will run out by the end of 2006. Internet users in the entire world must request ICANN before inserting new top level domains, such as the .eu domain which is shortly to be opened for registration. The allocation system of internet protocol addresses (IP numbers) is also handled by ICANN, while all disputes with ICANN fall under Californian law.

However, a new international Internet Governance Forum (IGF) will be created to follow issues related to internet governance, according to a last-minute deal reached ahead of the opening of the summit on 16 November. Crucially though, the IGF will not have any oversight powers.

SMEs are key to a thriving economy

European Small and Middle-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) are key to deliver stronger growth and more and better jobs. There are some 23 million SMEs in the EU, providing around 75 million jobs and accounting for 99% of all enterprises. SMEs are also a key part of European industry, as they contribute up to 80% of employment in some industrial sectors, such as textiles, construction or furniture.

To make sure that SMEs reach their full potential, on 10 November the European Commission tabled a new, more pragmatic, comprehensive and inclusive policy. 'We must help them by creating the right conditions to thrive, and by promoting

Information Roundup

A decorative graphic on the left side of the page consisting of several yellow and grey stars of varying sizes, arranged in a pattern that suggests the European Union flag. The stars are set against a light blue background that also features a large, faint arrow pointing upwards and to the right.

a culture so that more people start up their own companies,' said Enterprise and Industry Commissioner Günter Verheugen. The Commission proposes to integrate the 'Think Small First Principle' into all policies both at the national and EU level. It plans to systematically consult and cooperate with SME stakeholders to involve them in the policy-making process as early as possible.

In concrete terms, the Commission plans to create a quick and easy-to-use consultation mechanism ('SME panel') via the Euro Info Centre network to get views from SMEs in specific areas of policy making.

Better regulation ties in closely with the 'Think Small First Principle'. The Commission is committed to simplifying the rules and legislation, for example related to State aids or SMEs' participation in EU programmes.

Bidding Effectively with the EU

Companies are being offered a unique opportunity to learn more about bidding effectively for the European Union's annual 10 billion euro aid programme on 15 February 2006.

This one-day workshop presented by Schuman Associates and run by Birmingham Chamber of Commerce & Industry will promote successful bidding/tendering techniques for aid-funded contracts. The workshop will offer an excellent insight into boosting participating companies' chances of winning aid-funded business, focusing on subjects including tender preparation techniques and essential marketing activities.

The workshop will be of particular use to those responsible for developing their company's international export strategy. The event will provide detailed practical advice and will be of great help to companies in addressing a difficult process. Delegates

Information Roundup

will also discover the worldwide opportunities available through EU external aid funding, which in total are worth some 10 billion euros annually.

The workshop is designed to demystify European Union external aid programmes and to offer practical advice and assistance on how to win business through making well prepared bids.

Topics will include:

- Up-to-date advice about current tendering procedures, with a handbook packed with information to take away for future reference
- Insiders' hints and tips including how projects are evaluated
- A practical exercise on a mock tender
- Up-to-date advice about current programmes, PHARE, TACIS, EDF etc.

The workshop will also examine the processes required to tender for projects ranging from providing infrastructure (such as highways) power plants, irrigation systems to rural development projects, to training services, tourism, capacity building (transferring professional expertise) private sector development and SME support.

The participation fee for this event is £55.00 + VAT (£64.63) per delegate for members of the Midlands World Trade Forum or £65.00 + VAT (£76.38) for others. To register your interest for this event please contact Claire Gamage on 0121 607 1759 or email c.gamage@birminghamchamber.org.uk

EU legislation alert service

For any company doing business in Europe, one of the most challenging tasks is to keep abreast of new EU legislation, policy and other developments. Whether the subject relates to the

Information Roundup

environment, employment, health and safety or general trading issues most companies simply do not have the time to monitor new legislation.

Through a tailored EU Legislation alert service the European Information Centre (EIC) will send companies details of any new legislation on their selected topics by email. The EIC will provide a list of topics and companies can choose those that are most relevant.

Based at Birmingham Chamber of Commerce, the European Information Centre is part of a European Commission funded network of similar organisations across the EU.

The cost for this service is £80.00 + VAT per annum for Birmingham Chamber and MWTF members, and £100.00 + VAT to non-members.

Contact Sophia Shemar or Cathy Davies on 0121 455 0268 or e-mail eic@birminghamchamber.org.uk