

Big thinking for small business

Small Business Act

Interviews in the Baltic countries

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KYAMK

University of Applied Sciences

BIG THINKING FOR SMALL BUSINESSES

SMALL BUSINESS ACT

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I. THE BOAT PROJECT

The BOAT project promotes co-operation in a network of higher education institutions and companies in the Baltic Sea region. The emphasis is on the technology industry and its importance for improving the employment rate and social well-being throughout the Baltic Sea region. The project aims to develop means for the promotion of entrepreneurship and the advancement of innovation and internationalisation in SMEs.

The project looks at established co-operation models between higher education institutions and companies in the Baltic Sea region. Information about these models is disseminated across the project region. The project aims to develop and strengthen an extensive international co-operation network for innovation and internationalisation, particularly in the Baltic Sea region.

The result of the project will be an international innovation network environment for Finnish companies. The innovation environment will include efficient forums for participation, useful information channels and effective innovation systems, with inspired and active participants whose interaction with each other is uncomplicated.

HAMK University of Applied Sciences is the project co-ordinator. The project partners are Kymenlaakso University of Applied Sciences, Laurea University of Applied Sciences and Turku University of Applied Sciences. The project duration is from 1 January 2012 to 30 June 2014.

2. THE SMALL BUSINESS ACT INITIATIVE

The Small Business Act (SBA) Initiative is the EU's flagship policy initiative to support small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). It comprises a set of policy measures organised around ten principles. These principles range from 'entrepreneurship' and 'responsive administration' to 'internationalisation'. In order to improve the governance of the SBA, the 2011 review of the Act called for improved monitoring. SBA Fact Sheets are published annually in order to improve understanding of recent trends and national policies affecting SMEs. Since 2011, each EU Member State has appointed a high-ranking government official as its national SME envoy. SME envoys spearhead the implementation of the SBA agenda in their respective countries.

The ten principles included in the Small Business Act are intended as a guide to the design and implementation of policies at EU and Member State Level. These essential principles create added value at the EU level, create equal operating conditions for SMEs and improve the legal and administrative environment throughout the EU. The principles are as follows:

- 1) To create an environment in which entrepreneurs and family businesses can thrive and entrepreneurship is rewarded
- 2) To ensure that honest entrepreneurs who have previously faced bankruptcy quickly get a second chance
- 3) To design rules according to the 'Think Small First' principle
- 4) To make public administrations responsive to the needs of SMEs
- 5) To adapt public policy tools to SMEs' needs: to facilitate SMEs' participation in public procurement and better use state aid opportunities for SMEs
- 6) To facilitate SMEs' access to finance and develop a legal and business environment that supports timely payment in commercial transactions
- 7) To help SMEs to benefit from the opportunities provided by the Single Market
- 8) To promote the upgrading of skills and all forms of innovation in SMEs
- 9) To help SMEs to turn environmental challenges into opportunities
- 10) To encourage and support SMEs to benefit from the growth of markets (EUR-Lex 2008.)

2.1 Small and medium-sized enterprises

Small and medium-sized enterprises are independent of large enterprises and have fewer than 250 employees. Their sales do not exceed EUR 50 million or their annual balance sheet does not exceed EUR 43 million. Small and medium-sized enterprises are essential for the recovery of the EU economy, which is why they should be supported whenever possible. This is exactly what the Small Business Act aims for, by facilitating SMEs' access to funding and reducing their administrative burden.



There are 23 million SMEs in Europe



They account for more than 98 % of European enterprises



Two thirds of private sector jobs are in SMEs



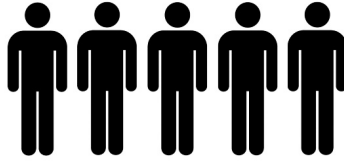
Approximately 80 % of new jobs created in the past five years are in SMEs



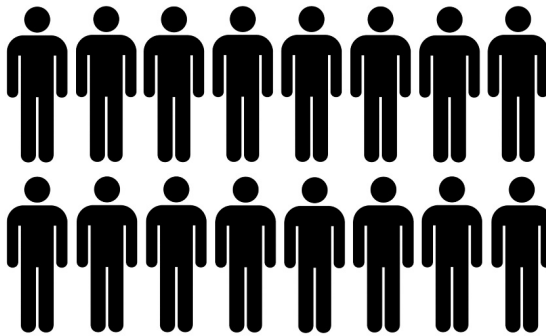
SMEs are vital for our economy

(ec.europa.eu. 2011)

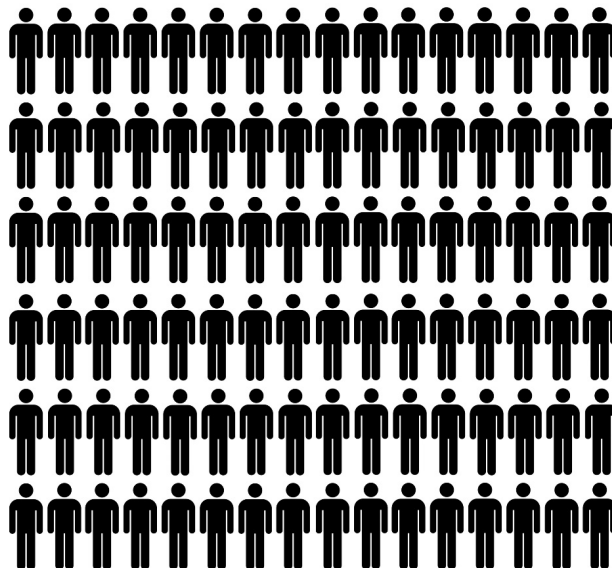
Small and medium-sized enterprises are divided into three categories:



micro-enterprise: fewer than 10 employees



small enterprise: 10 to 49 employees



medium enterprise: 50 to 249 employees

3. THE INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED IN THE BALTIC STATES

As part of the BOAT project, Kymenlaakso University of Applied Sciences conducted Small Business Act initiative-related interviews in the Baltic states. The Small Business Act (SBA) is the EU policy framework aimed at strengthening SMEs so that they can grow and create employment. Between 2008 and 2010, the Commission and EU Member States implemented actions set out in the SBA to alleviate administrative burden, facilitate SMEs' access to finance and support their access to new markets. Although most initiatives foreseen by the SBA have been initiated, a review of implementation so far reveals that more must be done to help SMEs. The main purpose of the interviews was to survey the level of SMEs' capacity, understanding and willingness to use support services provided by the EU. In association with this, services provided by the local public sector were surveyed. The interviews were strictly confidential, which is why no names of people or companies are mentioned in this report. The strict confidentiality ensured that interviewees talked freely and broached subjects they would not have discussed without anonymity.

3.1 Support measures provided by the public sector

The European Union (EU) promotes the development of European companies by providing special support services. Through these services, companies receive practical local-level advice and information in the start-up stage and the later stages of development. This support can be very useful, particularly for new enterprises. The services help to better understand the Community's legislative framework, find good practices at the EU level and succeed in business.

4. THE INTERVIEWS IN ESTONIA

The first interviews were conducted with Estonian companies. Our contact person in Tallinn arranged five interviews with companies. Two of them were conducted on 14 January and the other three on 15 March. The companies represented the metal, construction, media, accounting and ICT industries.

At first, we discussed the Estonian economy in general and the level of entrepreneur-friendliness in the country. The global economic recession starting in 2008 badly affected Estonia. Estonia's annual economic growth of 10 per cent crashed to minus 15 per cent in 2009. In 2010, however, the economy started to recover. After a couple of excellent years of growth, Estonia's economic growth has been declining again. The main reasons for the contracting growth rate have been the weak development of the logistics sector and construction industry and decreasing exports. Nevertheless, Estonian entrepreneurs seemed optimistic about the country's future. One of the reasons is the appealing tax rate that is attracting an increasing number of companies from Finland and other countries to Estonia. It is easy to establish a business in Estonia. The interviewed entrepreneurs appreciated the low corporate tax rate and the low level of red tape in the public sector. The income tax rate is 21% for everyone. The employer pays a 33% social tax, a 1% unemployment contribution and a 2% pension contribution. No tax is paid on income that has been reinvested in the company. Companies pay the 21% flat tax only when they take out profit as dividends.

The interviewees were asked about their use of support services provided by the public sector and about their knowledge of such services. In general, support services were rarely used, but some entrepreneurs knew at least something about them. Enterprise Estonia is the primary expert on EU funding in Estonia. The interviewees were asked about the Small Business Act, but none of them knew what it is. Some entrepreneurs found that co-operation projects between companies are problematic, because it is hard for competitors to work together. During the discussions, it

came up that co-operation culture is nonexistent in Estonia and the level of management skills is low. Entrepreneurs found that participation in EU projects is difficult and complicated. Clean-tech technology projects have had satisfactory access to EU funding in Estonia.

The entrepreneurs were content with the advanced electronic public services in Estonia. In these services, Estonia surpassed Finland a long time ago. Estonians are no longer using printed prescriptions, and remote voting is possible from the other side of the world on a laptop. An electronic ID card is mandatory for everyone. Using this card, Estonians can check what information the authorities have on them, and more than a hundred million documents have already been signed electronically. Estonia has become a model for others as a pioneer in electronic services. The United Kingdom and Estonia have signed a co-operation agreement on the development of electronic services. The British have not tried to conceal that they are learning from a small Baltic country.

4.1 Facts about Estonia

The 2008/2009 crisis has had a significant impact on the development of the Estonian business economy with all companies – big and small – experiencing slumps in terms of both employment and turnover or value added. SMEs seem to have been hit much harder than larger firms, their value added having plummeted by about a fifth. Benefitting from a friendly business environment and a strong and responsive administration, the SMEs have quickly started to recover, experiencing constantly positive growth rates after 2009. In fact, a full recovery to pre-crisis level is in foreseen in 2014. Estonia has a sophisticated business culture with good framework conditions for innovation and internationalization. The statistics on SMEs present an SBA profile which clearly exceeds the EU average in six out of ten areas. Estonia is lagging behind in entrepreneurship and offers less positive conditions for entrepreneurs having gone through bankruptcy. In addition, the generally recognized weaknesses of Estonian SMEs are the lack of qualified staff and engineers, as well as the limited access to venture capital and other less traditional sources of financing. However, Estonia tops a majority of EU countries in internationalization and in offering an administration responsive to the needs of small businesses.

Basic Figures - 2013

	Number of enterprises	Number of employees	Value added (Billion €)
Micro	45,696	107,852	2
Small	5,150	99,697	2
Medium sizes	1,024	94,293	2
Total SMEs	94,293	301,844	6

(ec.europa.eu. 2014)

5. THE INTERVIEWS IN LATVIA

The next set of interviews was conducted in Riga, Latvia on 3 and 4 March 2014. Interviews were conducted with three companies, representing consultation, brand building/communication development and logistics.

The interviews started with a discussion on the general economic situation in Latvia and the country's future outlook. After becoming independent in 1991, Latvia's population has decreased by 600,000. This is due to massive emigration, which was further accelerated by the economic recession of 2008–2010. As a result, the proportion of pensioners has increased sharply and the proportion of children and adolescents has dropped dramatically. Underdeveloped civil society is considered as one of the main problems in Latvia. This problem is accentuated by the emigration of educated people in active working age.

The economic crisis hit Latvia very hard. In 2009, Latvia's GDP dropped by more than 15 per cent. Vigorous recovery measures and cuts led to an upswing of the economy in the first part of 2011. The positive development continued throughout 2012, and the Latvian economy grew by 5.6 per cent. It was the fastest growing economy in Europe in 2012. However, there is a flip side to this development. As a result of the sharp cuts in spending, Latvia now has the widest income gap in the EU.

Today, establishing a business in Latvia is easy and costs practically nothing. Recruitment of employees is uncomplicated and labour costs are relatively low. In 2013, the average monthly income was slightly over 700 euros. The interviewed entrepreneurs said that attitudes toward entrepreneurship are rather positive and the amount of red tape has decreased. Negative aspects included extensive and deeply rooted corruption in society. The 'old boy' network is a relic from the communist era. Belonging or not belonging to this network affects business operations in many ways. Tax dodging is very common. One interviewee said that it is like a national sport in Latvia.

Entrepreneurs prefer not to ask for advice from the public sector, because they cannot always be sure that the advice provided is in the entrepreneurs' best interest. Old-fashioned hierarchy may be one of the reasons for this. Positively, entrepreneurs mentioned the government's investment in business subsidies at the onset of the economic recession. Reorganisation programmes were also introduced at that time. Entrepreneurs said that online corporate reporting was a huge step forward compared with the bureaucracy related to printed documents. The interviewees were asked about the Small Business Act, but none of them had heard of it.

Companies rarely apply for EU funding themselves; the process is handled by specific consulting companies. The interviews gave the impression that fraud is common in EU projects and resources do not necessarily end up where they should. Interviewees explained that overinvoicing is common and there are even companies that specialise in selling fake sales receipts.

5.1 Facts about Latvia

SMEs are of notable importance for the business economy in Latvia, hiring about 79% of all private sector employees, and creating about 69% of the overall value added. Both SMEs and large enterprises were hard hit by the 2008/2009 economic crisis, with SMEs suffering more as their value added decreased more rapidly (~29%) between 2008 and 2012 than that by LEs (-17%). This difference was mainly driven by the poor performance of small enterprises as their value added shrank about 34%. The underlying reason for the underperformance of SMEs is of general nature, SMEs being more vulnerable toward the impacts of crisis. However, both small and large firms started to recover and showed positive growth between 2009 and 2012. The value added created by SMEs increased by about 10% between 2009 and 2012, while the growth of value added by LEs was only 4%. That illustrates an interesting fact: Although the drop during the crisis was larger for SMEs, they also recovered faster after the crisis. The Latvian SBA profile does not present a clear-cut picture. Latvia clearly beats the EU average in five areas (Access to finance, the Single market, State aid and public procurement, entrepreneurship and Responsive administration), lags behind in two (Skills and innovation, Environment), and performs in line with the average in the remaining ones. However, it improved in almost all areas in the past five years.

Basic Figures - 2013

	Number of enterprises	Number of employees	Value added (Billion €)
Micro	61,787	143,463	1
Small	6,899	140,962	2
Medium sizes	1,484	135,579	2
Total SMEs	70,172	420,005	5

(ec.europa.eu. 2014)

6. THE INTERVIEWS IN LITHUANIA

The final set of interviews was conducted in Vilnius, Lithuania on 5 and 6 March 2014. Two of the three companies represented the textile industry, which has a long history in Lithuania, and one company provided recruitment, personnel assessment and outplacement services.

Development and problems in Lithuania have been very similar to its neighbour Latvia. As a result of the global economic crisis, Lithuania's GDP decreased by 15 per cent and export by nearly 27 per cent in 2009. Emigration has been considerable. After becoming independent, Lithuania's population has dropped from 3.7 million to 3 million. Due to the sharp cuts in spending, it is expected that economic growth in Lithuania may be among the strongest in the EU. As many as 15,000 new businesses were established in Lithuania in 2013.

Interviewees said that establishing a business in Lithuania is easy and uncomplicated. They explained that the country's entrepreneur-friendly taxation is a great advantage. However, the cliquishness of Lithuanians complicates business operations for foreign entrepreneurs. Locals stick to their own, and the best sites and industrial properties change hands through the 'old boy' network. Corruption is very common, but some positive development has been seen in recent years in this respect.

The interviewees had not used public sector support very much. They were not familiar with the Small Business Act initiative. Similar to Latvia, consulting companies handle the application process for EU funding. Two interviewees had heard their business acquaintances' experiences on EU funding. They criticised the rigidity of EU projects and the amount of red tape involved. Lithuania is so rife with corruption that chicanery is very common. The third entrepreneur had personal experience of applying for EU funding and carrying out a project. This interviewee said that the process was a positive experience and the result was very satisfying.

6.1 Facts about Lithuania

The small and medium sized enterprises are major players in the Lithuanian economy, owing to their significant contribution to the total added value (63.5%) and employment (75%) in the business economy. The 2008/2009 crisis has hit Lithuania's SMEs hard, resulting in significant

slumps in employment, and even more so in value added. SMEs were affected more than large companies, having experienced a one-third contraction in the economic activity, while large companies only reduced their activity by a fifth. This can be explained by the fact that SMEs activate particularly in sectors which are not export-oriented and thereby excessively dependent on domestic demand, which fell heavily when the crisis hit and government spending was reduced due to lower tax income and rising debt. However, the Lithuanian economy has proved to be very resilient, and both SMEs and larger firms have since recovered every year, albeit the growth flattened shortly in 2012. Full recovery to pre-crisis level will be achieved only after 2014. Lithuania has a positive SBA profile. The country does well on a number of areas, led by state aid & public procurement, responsive administration, second chance, and even access to finance. In general, it offers a business-friendly environment, backed up by an efficient administration responsive to the needs of businesses. Notwithstanding these positive elements, further enhancing Lithuania's profile will require significant improvements in research and innovation, as well as skills, where it still faces some challenges.

Basic Figures - 2013

	Number of enterprises	Number of employees	Value added (Billion €)
Micro	95,037	185,648	1
Small	10,655	214,024	2
Medium sizes	2,151	205,876	3
Total SMEs	107,843	605,548	6

(ec.europa.eu. 2014)

7. SUMMARY

In the light of these interviews, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have much in common. After gaining independence, the population has dropped dramatically in each country due to emigration (15% in Estonia, 24% in Latvia and 21% in Lithuania). The Baltic states were considered as European economic miracles in the 2000s. They faced serious economic problems in the latter half of 2008, when the global economic crisis hit them with exceptional force. To the surprise of many European countries, the Baltic states halted their economic tailspin through sharp cuts in spending and returned to a positive upward outlook.

In each of the three countries, interviewees mentioned the same positive aspects: entrepreneur-friendly taxation, reduced amount of red tape and the ease with which a business could be established. The salary level in these countries is relatively low, but the emigration of young, educated people has led to a labour shortage in many industries.

Unfortunately, corruption is deeply rooted in society in the Baltic states. The interviews indicated that the level of corruption is slightly lower in Estonia compared with Latvia and Lithuania. The 'old boy' network was mentioned in nearly every interview.

The interviewees did not know very much about public sector support services available to them. The lack of knowledge was evidently the main reason for not using these services. Some interviewees doubted the integrity of certain authorities. Company subsidies, reorganisation programmes and good availability of online services were mentioned as positives. Companies rarely apply for EU funding themselves; the process is handled by specific consulting companies. Some companies found that participation in EU projects is difficult and complicated. Interviewees told some incredible stories about fraud related to EU projects. For this reason, many entrepreneurs stressed that the EU should monitor projects much more strictly in order to prevent or at least reduce fraud. The opportunities available to SMEs are also restricted by the various classification systems enforced by the EU. All interviewees were asked about the Small Business Act, but none of them had heard of it. Interviewees called for more tangible measures to make the principles of the SBA initiative known to companies.

Finally, it should be stated that due to the limited number of interviewees, this report has no scientific basis. Nevertheless, it gives an overview of the situation. All interviewees had a good track record of entrepreneurship and they were thoroughly familiar with the circumstances in their respective countries.

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