

MANAGEMENT ENTERPRISE NETWORK



*Today's business must be technologically nimble. But the real knowledge resides with **people**, not machines**

This was the main theme of the MENET Project launch which took place at the Cyberia Cybercafe in London on 27th May 1999. Bill Hill, chair of the project encouraged SME's to join the initiative. Other speakers included Kevin Butler of AutoByTel, the first web based car sales company.

CONTEXT

The Management Enterprise Network (MENET) project was developed as a response to the needs of the SME population. The UK government White Paper on E-Commerce in September 1999 therefore gave a clear signal to Small Business managers that there was a need to not only be aware of the new and emerging technologies, but to also use the services of the Business Links and DTI-ISI to ensure that they too would become competitive. According to one of the conclusions of the '*International Benchmarking study*' DTI 1999, it claimed that in the UK '*despite the growth in Internet access, the UK continues to lag behind Germany and Japan*'. The project offered to the SME managers the support of an IT Advisor from the Business Link partners and Management Development Advisor from METO. The MENET project covered

four geographical regions with partners of the Business Links networks across England in Wigan, Leeds, Dorset West London.

OBJECTIVES

METO has a strategic objective to provide the necessary management development standards as it relates to all business operations, from marketing to sales, retail and the like. The rapid proliferation of IT applications into the commercial market has brought some changes to the way business is transacted, and will continue to do so in the future.

METO therefore had to have a response for assisting business managers to understand the changes that are taking place with IT. This would enable good analysis of the applications that are best suited to SME needs. The intended results therefore was development of the **IT Action Plan** by the SME managers for their business.

For MENET project the objectives were clear;

- (a) To raise the awareness of new and emerging technologies with regard to electronic commerce amongst the **8000 SME managers** across England. Of this number **400** SME managers attended 8 seminars and resulted in the final **40** SME managers signed up for

the project.

- (b) To support basic training and improve the general level of IT competence of SME Managers. In so doing SME managers supported to work on their '*IT Action Plan*' for their companies.
- (c) To offer a networking approach to sharing good models of practice and experience in relation to other EPSILON projects

PROCESS

The project activities came under three main categories

- Awareness raising
- Basic training for SME managers to develop their Action Plans
- Networking with the project and with the other EPSILON projects across the member states

The awareness raising activities included mail shots, press coverage in local papers and seminars. SME Managers were encourage to attend one of the two seminars which were offered in the regions.

For example **Leeds Business Link** offered a 'Business Breakfast' and provided speakers from the local Web design company, and a local company which had actually used its web site to sell customised cigars and pipes to customers world-wide.

West London Business Link offered evening

receptions with cheeses and wine. The winner of the 'Inter Forum Award', namely **Teddington Cheeses** representative gave a demonstration of their web site and the client list of customers world-wide and the challenges for doing business on the web.

In contrast, **Wigan Business Link** created a local business to business fair, with exhibitors from the local ISP, ICT resellers, Training and research consultancies. This was a day event. At these seminars there was a demonstration from the National Engineering Laboratory.

Dorset Business Link opted for the seminars as mid-morning events and the demonstration by the National Engineering Laboratories (NEL). This simulated customised key ring manufacturer. The process from the initial telephone enquiry, the order, design and the invoicing to the customer. The simulation was captured on the overhead screen for full viewing by SME managers.

Once the SME managers had signed up for the project they were appointed an **IT Advisor** - to advise on technical issues and a **Management Development Advisor** - to advise on the general management and human resources issues. Together they agreed the *IT Work Schedule* and the timing of the work to be covered and the final output of the *IT Action Plan*. The Action Plans were developed using 'action learning' methodology with the support of the IT Advisor and MDA.. It included a business audit and review, the types of technologies suitable for the business, impact on human resource, implementation process, and the budget.

The development of the **IT Diagnostics** tool therefore is another approach to assist the SME Manager to quickly analyse the business, clarify the IT requirements and then make a valued judgement. The Diagnostics were developed as the 'check list' route for achieving a faster and simpler form of the IT Action Plan, as an introductory tool for SME managers.

RESULTS

8000 SME managers were contacted through mailshots using the databases of the Business Links in Dorset, Leeds, Wigan and West London.

400 SME managers attended 8 seminars in the above regions.

40 SME managers elected to sign up for the MENET programme and all participants completed their **IT Action Plans** by December 31st 1999.

MENET also created and tested the **IT Diagnostic** tool with SME Managers on the project.

IMPACT and ACHIEVEMENTS

- the 'action learning' methodology put the manager at the centre of the development process
- The **IT Action Plan** is a clear statement about the company, its use of IT applications, the impact on business operations and human resources, and the budget.
- Action Plan is a *practical method* for moving the SME manager through the IT related processes of the company
- Increased the Business Link's *credibility with SME's*

- Business Links have seen an increase in the Clients requesting support with IT issues
- The *business review* or *SWOT* coupled with the *IT Action Plan* is fully integrated into the rest of the Business Links services to SME managers

CONTACT DETAILS

METO
12 Russell Square
London England
WC1B 5BZ
UK
Tel(44) 171 872 9000
Fax(44) 171 872 9099
Email
nfmcd_mci@compuserve.com

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Project participants

METO
Dorset Business Links
West London
Wigan Business Link
Leeds Business Link
Project Co-ordinator
Luna Frank-Riley

METO
12 Russell Square
London England
WC1B 5BZ, UK
Tel(44) 171 872 9000
Fax(44) 171 872 9099
Email:menetlfr@aol.com

*Prof. Tom Cannon author of 'The Third Industrial Revolution'