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### Innovation Relay Centres (IRC) Network in Central and Eastern Europe

Jacek Gulinski<sup>a</sup>, Berenika M. Marciniak<sup>a</sup> & Agnieszka Wolniewicz<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Innovation Relay Centre West Poland, Science and Technology Park in Poznan, Poland, Rubiez 46, Poznan, 61612, Poland

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## Innovation Relay Centres (IRC) Network in Central and Eastern Europe

JACEK GULINSKI, BERENIKA M. MARCINIEC and  
AGNIESZKA WOLNIEWICZ

*Innovation Relay Centre West Poland, Science and  
Technology Park in Poznan, Poland, Rubiez 46, 61612 Poznan, Poland*

The paper describes the Innovation Relay Centres Network (IRC) activity which is to support trans-national technology transfer among European countries. IRCs help especially small and medium-sized companies (SMEs) to access the European technology market by promoting their technologies across Europe and by identifying and importing technological solutions.

**Keywords:** technology transfer, innovation promotion, research results

### INTRODUCTION

“Innovation is more than an attempt at a creative application of technology. It is about people and how they translate technical ideas into products and services that the market wants”. This statement is the main philosophy behind the activity of the IRCs. It is that activity which drives the effective transfer of innovations and technologies into industrial practice.

The effective transfer of innovations and technologies poses a strategic challenge for the economies of Central and Eastern Europe. The ongoing economic and scientific integration, coupled with the necessity for accelerated growth of small and medium-sized companies on the continent, makes it necessary to engage in international scientific cooperation as well as innovation and technology transfer across borders. Especially effective in that respect are network undertakings,

such as the Innovation Relay Centres Network, whose aim is the promotion of innovations and the exchange of research results between organisations.

## GOAL AND ORGANIZATION

**The Innovation Relay Centres (IRC) were established by the European Commission, under the INNOVATION Programme, which is a part of the European Union's Fourth Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development.** Since their creation in 1995, the IRCs have become a leading European network for the promotion of technology partnerships. The network spans 30 countries including the EU, Iceland, Norway, Switzerland, Cyprus, Israel and, since 1 July, 2000, ten countries of Central and Eastern Europe. New IRCs are located in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland (3 IRCs), Romania, the Slovak Republic and Slovenia. All these regions are covered in sum by 68 IRCs. Frequently, an IRC forms a consortium covering several regions through a network of locally established partners. Altogether 245 organisations are involved in this project.

The IRCs are set up as independent business and technology consulting organizations. Most of the centres consist of a consortium moderator and various partner units, thus ensuring transparency in organizational structure and easy accessibility through the European network system. Each centre has been selected in an open competition, as the best one in its region. The units range from small independent companies, to departments of local government agencies. This structure ensures that each centre understands and responds to the particular set of economic and industrial conditions prevalent in a region that it serves. **The goal of the IRC network is to promote innovation, to**

**encourage the exchange of research results between organizations across Europe, and to provide advice, consulting and training support which meets the specific needs of each company and its local industrial situation.** The IRC network is a service for companies, especially for Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs). However universities and research institutes may also benefit from its services for transferring their results to industry.

The first priority is to help companies identify technology transfer needs and promote new technological development in the various regions through internal/inward technology transfer. In addition, local industry is assisted in the identification of suitable technologies eligible for transfer to other regions or industries, thus building the basis for outward technology transfer. To do this, the IRCs encourage the circulation of European research results in every local industrial community involved and offer training and consulting services at the request of local companies. The IRCs are also a direct link for SMEs to benefit from Community research programmes.

The IRCs provide technological consultancy and trans-national technological cooperation services. Generally, the IRC network performs services in three main areas. The first of them refers to the **trans-national INWARD technology transfer**, where the IRCs help local companies to identify their technological needs and to select those network partners who can provide the technology necessary to improve competitiveness of the companies involved. The second area involves **trans-national OUTWARD technology transfer** services. Through the agency of the IRC network, local companies which have developed an innovative technology can identify foreign partners potentially interested in its application. In both these fields, IRCs provide

assistance at the stage of negotiating agreements between the technology provider and the recipient. They can also assist in the implementation of technology transfer into practice.

The third area of the IRC activity concerns **ADVISORY services** and promotion of the application and dissemination of scientific results throughout the industry. IRCs identify results relevant to the needs of their local industries and promote them in their region. Moreover, IRCs provide consulting services on intellectual property rights, licensing strategies, innovation financing, and venture capital, including international joint ventures. Innovation Relay Centres also provide such services as technology audits for SMEs, training in technology transfer, information on EU research programmes, calls for proposals and assistance in their preparation.

**The current IRCs in Central Europe were selected through the European Commission Open Call for Proposals issued in 1999. In order to qualify as an IRC, each organisation or consortium had to meet specific criteria, such as for example: to have an experienced staff with intimate knowledge of the regional industrial needs, with backgrounds in research, business and/or industry, and to have solid technological expertise. All new IRCs were awarded a two-year contract (July 1, 2000 – June 1, 2002).**

The ten IRCs in Central and Eastern Europe are operating under a set of very specific economical and political conditions. Some of those conditions may become determining characteristics as far as the development of new technologies and innovations is concerned. This holds true also for the situation of IRCs in Poland, where one of the positive characteristics is an advanced scientific development and a relatively high level of outlays for innovations. It is also worth

emphasizing that SMEs in these countries produce more than 50% of the GDP. On the negative side is a lack of pro-innovation awareness among SMEs, which results in a low level of innovations in industry. That means that the implementation of scientific research results into the economy is also limited. Additionally, there are few strong R&D units and technology transfer institutions in these countries, and the implementation of the science and technology park model is very slow. But the most important obstacle on the way to permanent and effective innovation development in these countries is a very low level of outlays for R&D in their national budgets. That, in short, is the situation that the new IRCs in Eastern Europe have to contend with. In Poland there are three locations of the Innovation Relay Centres Network (IRC East Poland, IRC South Poland and IRC West Poland). Each of these centres consists of one consortium moderator and 1 or 2 partners.

### **MISSION OF POLISH IRC**

**The mission of Polish IRCs is to strengthen the competitiveness of Polish enterprises through international technology transfer and to be a force driving an active technology and innovation policy in support of the regional growth of industry.** Their most important goal is to foster awareness of the innovative process and international technological co-operation. The goal is realised through helping local companies in identifying their technological needs and offering them assistance in implementing new technologies in the innovation process.

Poznań Science & Technology Park is the only partner of the consortium moderator - Wrocław Centre of Technology Transfer (TT); the two form one of three new IRCs in Poland – the **IRC West Poland**.

The main activities of the IRC West Poland include consultation and assistance in TT negotiation agreements, technological audits, promotion of technology offers abroad, and TT partner matching. Moreover, the IRC West Poland provides information about technology transfer potential (a catalogue of offers, informational web-site), and organises specialised events, such as Technology Transfer Days, trade missions, technological fairs, brokerage events, etc. These events have proven to be very effective tools in promoting contacts between companies.

The overall effects of the IRCs Network since 1997 inspire mixed feelings. On the one hand, only 700 contracts have been signed in all of Europe as a result of its efforts.. On the other, the IRCs Network has assisted in 5 negotiation processes and has provided service for as many as 50,000 clients. The IRC network has proven to be a smoothly operating system for enhancing trans-national technology transfer throughout Europe. Initially, its role as an efficient broker for European technology was reflected in the growing number of success stories. However the European Commission has recently critically reviewed the operation of the IRCs Network in Europe. The conclusion was that the network's effectiveness as measured with the number of contracted technology transfer agreements was insufficient. Nevertheless, in Central and Eastern Europe the network does provide one more important tool for fostering innovation friendly behaviours on the part of both the Research and Development sector and managerial cadres of small- and medium- sized enterprises.