

COST
SME
overview

cooper
ing schools
scientific missions
strategic workshops
human potential



Overview | COST & SMEs

This document aims to provide an overview of SME involvement in COST, and COST's vision for increasing SME participation in COST Actions.

About COST

COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) is Europe's longest-running intergovernmental framework for science and technology cooperation. COST is a unique programme in the European Research Area (ERA) – successfully funding COST Actions for over 40 years, bringing together communities of researchers, allowing innovative ideas to flourish, and adapting to evolving societal and scientific challenges.

Supported by the EU's 7th Framework Programme, COST provides funding for research networking projects called 'COST Actions'. These networks bring together universities, public and private research institutions, industry and SMEs, to jointly develop ideas, exchange and transfer knowledge across all scientific disciplines.

COST's mission is to enable breakthrough scientific developments leading to new concepts and products, and thereby contribute to strengthening Europe's research and innovation capacities.

SME Participation in COST Actions

Ever since COST was founded, it has been operating one main instrument: the COST Action. COST Actions are science and technology networks with a four-year duration, a minimum participation of five COST Countries, and operates through a range of networking tools, such as workshops, conferences, training schools, short-term scientific missions (STSMs) and dissemination activities.

COST Actions are:

- **Pan-European:** the COST intergovernmental framework spans 36 countries;
- **Bottom-up:** both in terms of topics and objectives proposed, as well as work organisation;
- **Open:** COST Actions can grow in size throughout their lifetime and are open to all sorts of science and technology participants;
- **Unique:** COST Actions are a platform to coordinate national research funding within a lightweight framework;
- **Interdisciplinary:** bridging different research communities across all scientific Domains;
- **Future-oriented:** COST Actions actively promote the participation of the next generation of researchers;
- **Globally connected:** international participants may join on the basis of mutual interest.

SMEs in COST

SMEs, as well as other industry players, provide invaluable partnership and knowledge in COST Actions. Several European SMEs currently participate in COST Actions in a wide range of scientific Domains, and in highly multidisciplinary networks. COST Domains and Actions lists can be found at this page: http://www.cost.eu/domains_actions.



SME representatives can participate in COST Actions in two ways: they can, within a network of proposers, submit a proposal for a COST Action; alternatively, they can join an existing COST Action.

COST operates a continuous Open Call for Proposals, with collection dates twice a year: in March and September. To learn more about the COST Open Call and Collection Dates, please visit: http://www.cost.eu/participate/open_call.

In order to submit a proposal for a new COST Action, researchers or experts in a science and technology field have to gather and coordinate a network of at least five proposers affiliated with legal entities based in at least five different COST Countries.

Within a COST Action, SME representatives will have the opportunity to network together with fellow **COST Actions participants from:**

- Government Organisations, except Intergovernmental Organisations
- Higher Education and Associated Organisations
- Business Enterprises (ranging from multinational companies to SMEs)
- Private Non-Profit Organisations and NGOs
- Standards Organisations

From:

- 
- COST Country Institution
 - Near-Neighbour Country Institution
 - Non-COST Country Institution

As well as:

- EU Institution or Body
- European RTD Organisation
- International Organisation
- Independent Researchers or Experts

To learn more about how to join an existing COST Action, please visit this page: http://www.cost.eu/participate/join_action.

COST continuously strives to open networking opportunities to a growing number of SMEs, in order to increasingly extend its benefits to Europe's economic driving force, and facilitate their collaboration with universities and research centres.





COST & SMEs

COST Actions connect researchers from universities, institutions, with participants from the private sector. COST already has a substantial number of SMEs participating in COST Actions working on issues that range from environmental issues to nanotechnology.

air-pollution control
environmental
sustainability
biology & biomimetics
weather prediction
flooding
innovative materials
wireless technologies
3D multimedia
nanotechnology

TECHNOLOGY



COST is supported
by the EU Framework Programme



ESF provides the COST Office
through a European Commission contract



SMEs in Europe: a Snapshot

SMEs play a key role in Europe's economy: in 2012 they represented 99.8% of non-financial services enterprises in the EU in 2012, providing 67.4% of all jobs in non-financial sectors. We are talking of about 20 million businesses.

99.8% of non-financial services enterprises in the EU

67.4% of all jobs in non-financial sectors in the EU

20m businesses



Ensuring competitiveness

Approximately one fifth of European SMEs provides the so-called Knowledge Intensive Services (KIS). These services range from media and consultancies, to legal, accounting and R&D services.

KIS SMEs are an insurance policy on our future: they provide higher employment growth than other SMEs and higher gross value added growth. In short, they make Europe more competitive.

20% Knowledge Intensive Services

media, consultancies, legal, accounting and R&D services



SMEs: the High-Tech Potential

The same would be true for SMEs focusing on high-tech manufacturing, like pharmaceuticals, chemicals or electronics. However, these are only a meager 2.3% of all EU SMEs. This sector is the niche where COST sees an immense potential to be unlocked.

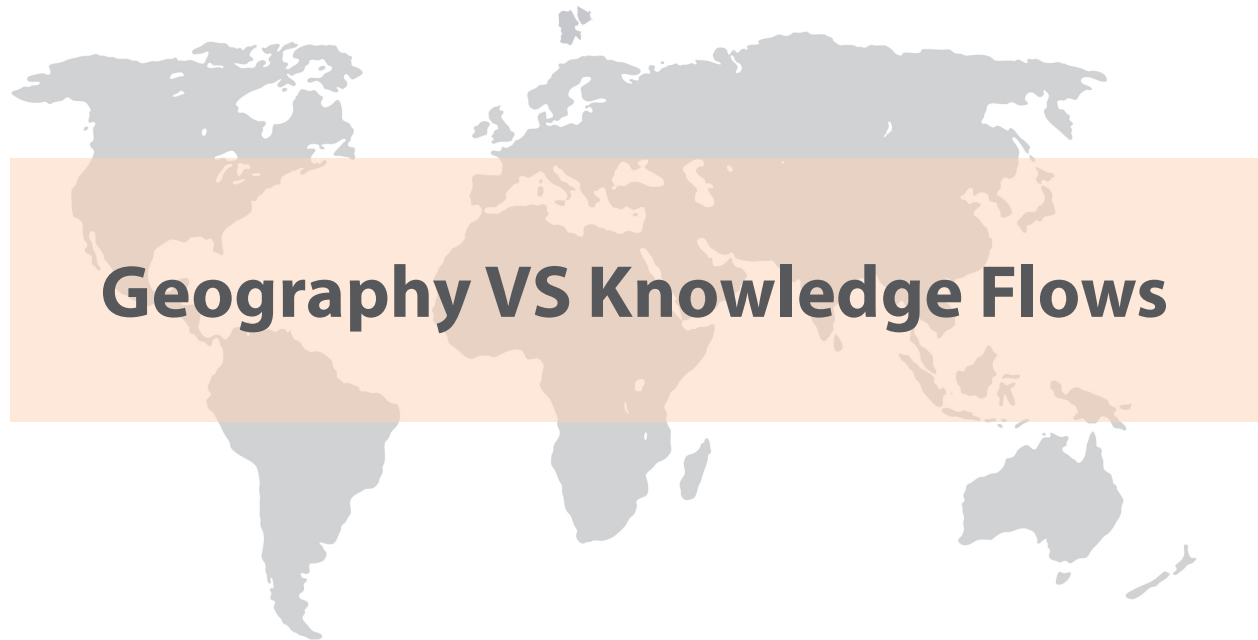
2.3% high-tech
manufacturing

pharmaceuticals, chemicals
or electronics...

High-Tech Manufacturing: Untapped Potential?

Is the SME high-tech manufacturing sector confined to a niche - due to the need for higher investments in this field - or is this a signal that there is untapped potential that policy-makers can help unlock?





The presence of KIS and high-tech SMEs still depends too much on geography: the presence of regional clusters or manufacturers also explains the presence of high-tech or knowledge-intensive SMEs.

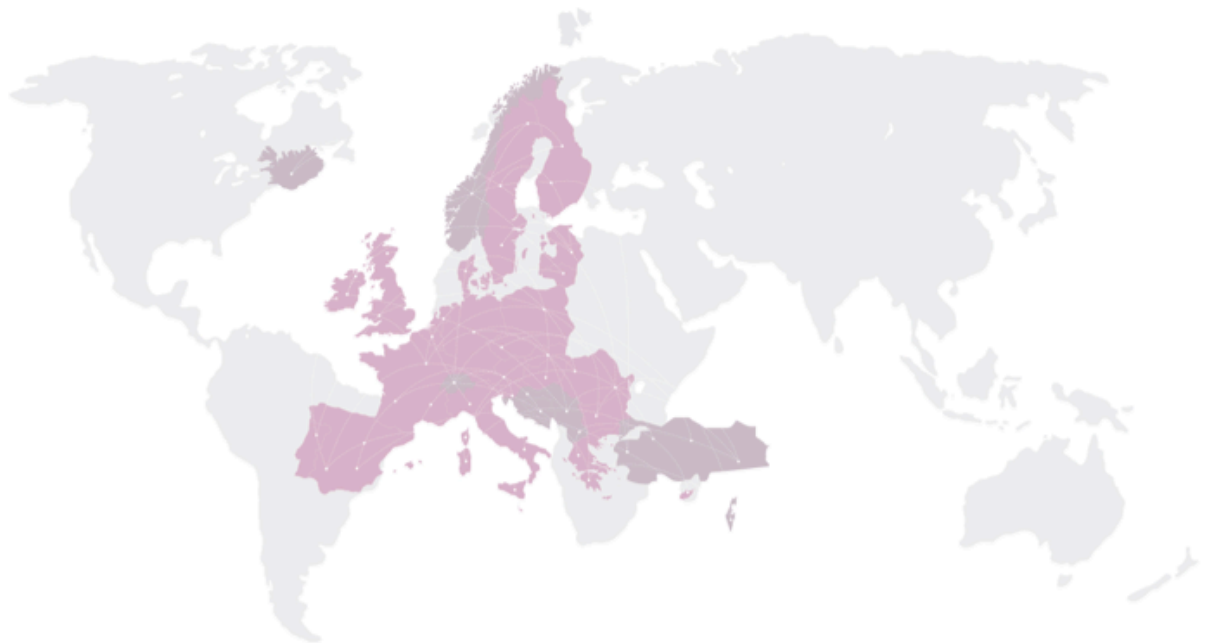
COST believes in the ambition to increase the presence of more competitive SMEs across the whole of Europe.

Geography matters not only for the location of SMEs, but also for knowledge flows. People are more likely to collaborate if they are geographically close.





COST: Knowledge Flows



Policy-makers can play a major role in facilitating formal and informal knowledge flows.

COST takes on this challenge, by:

- Supporting knowledge flows across regions and boundaries
- Building knowledge
- Investing on human capital
- Increasing the exposure, use and re-use of publicly-funded research.

COST Actions: **Free, Flexible and Lightweight**



COST provides a networking platform that builds trans-national knowledge communities. These communities – the COST Actions – are:

- Focused on specific topics
- Open, throughout the whole duration of the funding
- Capable of adapting their work plans as they progress
- Free to engage in collective learning and to include new participants as soon as a need for it arises
- Easy for participants to join: the administration is lightweight.

In other words, COST Actions can offer a knowledge-exchange platform for SMEs in a way that other programmes cannot.



Here is a match:

**SMEs
need:**

easy access to
knowledge &
infrastructure

**COST
offers:**

knowledge
communities
across Europe

Several studies show the importance of networking for collaborations, and COST would like to highlight some aspects that may be relevant for supporting innovative SMEs.

Geography matters for ease of collaboration. COST provides a platform with country quotas, ensuring that geography matters less and knowledge relevance more. Potentially, COST can function as a knowledge infrastructure for those SMEs located in regions where businesses are less innovative.

Most collaborations start with informal contacts. COST makes it easy for people to participate and establish such contacts. Its lightweight rules and openness allow participants to engage in very efficient networking on a continental scale. Such networking is key to kick-start collaborations between public sector researchers and businesses.

Surveys show that informal contacts are the principal means to learn about a line of research, to acquire knowledge and to obtain access to scientific instrumentation.

Expertise can be very specific, even more so if it is linked to practical aspects and applications. Often, expertise escapes the typical methods of expert profile-hunting. However, with over 230 Actions running each year, COST essentially provides expertise pools in the topics of its Actions. Hidden expertise can be dug out by establishing contacts with Action participants. The Working Group structure of Actions further facilitates the identification of relevant professional profiles in very specific matters.



COST

SME Specificities

- Limited staff
- Limited resources
- Limited time
- Fast-paced
- Local

- Informal contacts
- Readily-available knowledge pools
- Increased use of funded research
- Pan-European

COST Specificities

Innovative SMEs may not have the staff or the resources to participate to broad, formal projects, and much less to win them.

At the same time, they may be interested in building a network of contacts, in closely following up on the findings of a particular technological community, in borrowing infrastructures or obtaining specific advice and feedback – without necessarily entering into formal contracts or collaborations.

Indeed, access to finance as well as administrative burdens are a significant challenge for micro and small SMEs. Moreover, the life of an SME is often fast-paced and not well-suited for time-sheet filling. If an opportunity for knowledge exchange or collaboration is spotted, timing becomes essential.

In this respect, COST can address a specific and complementary policy need thanks to its design.

Too much knowledge Too little time



Human networks are instrumental to catalyse specialised knowledge in competitive timeframes and R&D environments.

Data shows that lower impact journals have very few readers. This means that without a human network, most relevant knowledge can go unnoticed and unused.

SMEs are even less likely to be up-to-date on research published in non-top journals. COST's networks can provide helicopter views across specific sectors, thanks to bottom-up, pan-European knowledge exchange opportunities.



COST is keen on favouring the involvement of SMEs in COST Actions and finding ways to actively encourage SME participation.

Benefits will be typically indirect, long-term and hardly measurable. But this is not a good reason to underestimate the impact. Only 2.3% of the SMEs are in sectors that can benefit most from COST. Moreover, every year there are only 500 university spin-offs in the whole of Europe.

However, if an SME participates in a COST Action, it will be because it is gaining something very valuable out of it. The best selection criterion is given by the limited time and resources that SMEs have at their disposal.

How far there is untapped potential for Europe's SMEs? How can COST and other instruments create synergies and provide an ideal ecosystem for innovative SMEs?

Networking, is COST's answer. More than ever, COST is open to innovative ideas: share yours with us.

This document was produced by the COST Office in January 2013 and aims to provide COST's position and opinion on SME participation in COST Actions.

For further information please contact:

Ms Alessandra Paccamiccio
Public Relations and
Communications Officer
COST Office
Brussels, Belgium
+32 (0)2 533 3854
alessandra.paccamiccio@cost.eu