

# Virtual consultancy to foster business innovation

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(PhysOrg.com) -- An advanced semantics-based software platform is helping companies in the east of Europe develop the knowledge, skills and expertise they need to innovate.

“Innovate or die” has become the mantra of today’s fast-moving business world. However, the potential for innovation is underexploited in central and eastern Europe, particularly among small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

Many smaller firms in this part of Europe lack access to the necessary resources and knowledge to improve their business processes. Entrepreneurs are often heavily involved in day-to-day operations, giving them less time to dedicate to developing new skills, boosting efficiency or researching new products and ideas. Moreover, paying a consultant to do that for them is usually prohibitively expensive.

But what if that consultant is a free or low-cost software platform that can provide effective solutions by drawing on best-practice cases and international business expertise? The result, argue researchers behind the EU-funded PIM project, would be to give wings to innovation among SMEs.

“Our semantics-based knowledge management platform is a kind of virtual consultancy,” says Daniela Guarnieri, a researcher at Milan Technical University and the PIM project manager. “It gives SMEs the chance to research their ideas, find solutions to problems and locate

experts who can help them without spending too much time, effort or money.”

The PIM platform, which has been tested by more than a hundred SMEs in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovenia, uses semantic information to make business cases, innovation studies and best-practice reports accessible regardless of language or format. Ontologies – conceptual vocabularies that give semantic information a standard meaning – were developed from scratch by the PIM team.

“By using semantics, searches return results that are more meaningful to the person doing the searching, and it also allows us to cross language and technological barriers,” Guarnieri says. “The technology itself is well known, the real innovation is in the services we have developed and how we are using them,” she adds.

Users can search for information, uploaded to the PIM platform by other companies, business schools and universities, to find solutions to problems and research new ideas. They can also use the platform to find other users and companies with expertise in a certain field and go on to establish virtual communities for collaboration.

## **Real benefits for real companies**

For example, an online electronics retailer, CI Zeto from Poland, used the PIM system to find information and participate in virtual workshops on how to implement internet-based customer relationship management (CRM) solutions.

Another trial participant, Romanian advertising firm Avantgarde Production, used the PIM system to find studies and best practice reports that would help it improve its quality management process. It was also able to get in touch with a local expert in the field.

“The trials resulted in several success stories and scenarios in which users were able to obtain real benefits from the PIM platform,” Guarnieri says.

One of the key tools to help businesses make use of the PIM system is a semantic search engine that does considerably more than simply find content and contact details based on keywords.

If someone needed to find an expert in customer relations, searching for that term would not just return a list of everyone using the PIM system with customer relations experience. Instead, as Guarnieri explains, it would ‘discover’ those whose profiles, interests, experience and location closely match the person or organisation initiating the search.

A technology firm looking for help in dealing with clients would therefore be matched with customer relations experts whose profile shows experience in the technology sector above those with experience in manufacturing, for example.

For the trials, SMEs were enlisted through the certification authorities of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovenia who were partners in the project. Guarnieri expects a similar model to be used as the PIM team try to expand the platform to western European countries.

She envisages the platform being maintained through a combination of advertising by sponsors and through a credit system in which companies could purchase credits to be able to use the system and also earn credits by helping others and uploading information.

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Provided by [ICT Results](#)

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