



Joint Press Release

Digital Agenda for SMEs: towards simplification, enhanced cross-border trade and diversified access to finance but further legal clarity and awareness raising are needed

Brussels, 7 October 2011 - The digital agenda can help small enterprises take full advantage of the opportunities available in the Digital single market and be able to compete with international players. It is however crucial to raise further awareness of its benefits as its potential is still largely unexploited by this category of users. These were the conclusions of a roundtable on the benefits of the Digital agenda held in Brussels yesterday.

As part of the EU SME week that is taking place in Brussels and in all 27 member States, UEAPME (the European Association of Craft, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises) and ACCA (the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants) jointly organised on 6th October 2011 at the European Parliament a high level conference on the benefits of the Digital agenda for SMEs, during which the global accountancy body launched its report called ["A digital agenda for European SMEs"](#).

Hosted by Dr Paul Rübzig, MEP, the event showcased and shared best practices, illustrating that the digital agenda can be used as a tool to remove administrative burdens, help with cross-border trade, and remove access to finance barriers for SMEs. The event also debated how remaining obstacles could be removed and future policy options.

Dr Paul Rübzig, chair of the event said: *"We have to get more knowledge on ICT based solutions that are already - and will further - be offered by the Digital Single Market, not only in the short, but also in the long term. We need to be ready to change our habits and work altogether towards a fully interoperable e-environment that will allow European SMEs to take their fair share in cross-border trade"*.

The event started with a series of case studies covering a broad range of issues for which the Digital Agenda is impacting SMES. This included concrete examples of improved efficiency through cloud computing and software supporting compliance for EU SMEs, better access to cross-border trade through e-commerce and the interconnection of business registers, as well as better access to finance through online peer-to-peer lending.

All case studies highlighted that SMEs are currently under-exploiting the possibilities offered by the Digital Agenda and that technical and legal hurdles still remain. These range from data privacy and security to applications that are not user friendly; financial costs to lack of IT trained entrepreneurs and users; VAT and rates issues to rules of origins.

The most highlighted point was the lack of trust that results from lack of awareness and knowledge of the existing opportunities. The Commission and the European Parliament indicated that they are very committed to work towards a balanced and homogenous legal framework, especially in the field of e-business, e-invoicing, e-skills and access to finance, but stressed that they cannot do this alone; all stakeholders and a proper implementation at national level are needed to make this a reality. Decision makers were however warned to be careful not to over regulate and to propose only coherent and necessary measures.

All participants also stressed that the Digital Single Market, which is still very fragmented, will be a decisive tool to enhance EU SME's competitiveness and allow them to unleash their potential. It is already proven that SMEs are growing twice their size once they have embraced the Digital Agenda.

Speakers finally underlined the very important role that intermediaries and advisers such as accountants and small business associations had to play in terms of raising awareness amongst the SME community. Andrea Benassi, Secretary General of UEAPME, concluded: *“As highlighted in the ACCA report, today's event confirmed important gaps in awareness and confidence levels among the SME sector. We call on the European Commission, member state governments and the IT industry to actively engage with the advisory community if a critical mass of SMEs is going to be reached.”*

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About ACCA:

ACCA (the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants) is the global body for professional accountants. We aim to offer business-relevant, first-choice qualifications to people of application, ability and ambition around the world who seek a rewarding career in accountancy, finance and management. We support our 140,000 members and 404,000 students throughout their careers, providing services through a network of 83 offices and centres. Our global infrastructure means that exams and support are delivered – and reputation and influence developed – at a local level, directly benefiting stakeholders wherever they are based, or plan to move to, in pursuit of new career opportunities. www.accaglobal.com

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About UEAPME:

UEAPME is the employers' organisation representing exclusively crafts, trades and SMEs from the EU and accession countries at European level. UEAPME has 82 member organisations covering over 12 million enterprises with 55 million employees. UEAPME is a European Social Partner. For further information: www.ueapme.com