



SEE DESIGN

Sharing Experience
on Design Support
for SMEs

Case Study of Good Design Support Practice

This case study is a snapshot of activities taking place during the lifespan of the SEEdesign project from 2005 to 2007. For updated information please contact the organisations directly.

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**PROJECT PART-FINANCED
BY THE EUROPEAN UNION**

Design Start Programme

Ministry of Trade and Industry

The Design Start Programme is a development programme for design in Finland. It is an initiative created by the Ministry of Trade and Industry in association with the Employment and Economic Development Centre (TE Centre).

The basis for the programme was defined in 1993 when a survey developed by Design Forum Finland investigated the awareness and use of design in Finnish enterprises. Among other findings, the study identified the following issues: lack of awareness of costs related to design consultancy; general misunderstanding of the designers' role and the range of know-how they can provide to clients; limited number of consultancies in the North and East regions and resistance of companies located in these regions to commission consultancies in South Finland due to cultural and cost issues; limited financing and other support systems for design in the country.

In response to this report, the Design Start programme was developed and launched in 1999, financed by the Finnish Ministry of Trade and Industry (60%) and the European Social Fund (40%).

The objective, as stated in the programme's brochure, is

"to consolidate enterprise competitiveness by emphasising in design those product characteristics considered most important by the company's clients. Such characteristics may include e.g. the appearance and ease of operation of a product. Design Start offers companies the opportunity to use design professionals in the development of their products or graphic profiles."

The programme is targeted at companies in Finland, in particular small and medium sized, including manufacturing enterprises, service businesses and start-ups. It covers all the fields of design and all industry sectors.

Design Start is delivered in two stages, the '1+3 days' model, and is usually completed over a three-month period. The first stage is a single day of

consultancy, when a designer visits the company in order to understand the demands of the business and identify opportunities for design to improve their products, service or image. This visit and the findings are put into a report, which is then discussed with the company and the TE Centre's product manager until it is acceptable to both of them. The report includes realistic proposals in-line with the resources available to the company and a time schedule for the project. Once the company approves this report, the project goes into the second stage, which includes the actual development of the project opportunities identified in the first stage.

The client company is responsible for selecting the design consultancy from a list of agencies provided by the TE Centre. This decision takes into consideration the consultancy's profile and the rapport between them and the client. The project budget is the same for every consultancy, which is agreed with the consultancy when they join the programme. For these consultancies, the Design Start Programme provides a good opportunity to meet new clients.

The designer is responsible for delivering concrete results in the form of hand-drawn sketches, scale models or computer simulations of the product concept or corporate identity by the end of the process. The final report includes this material and is delivered to the client company with another copy sent to the TE Centre project manager.

The Design Start programme subsidises the cost of the project for Finnish companies. The cost to the companies is determined by how long they have been in business: EUR 420 for a start-up and EUR 840 for companies which have been operating for more than 3 years. Five extra days of consultancy can

be provided to the companies at the rate of EUR 165 per day for start-ups and EUR 300 per day for established businesses.

The programme is designed to give the company an experience or 'taste' of the potential of design. It is recognised that 3 days of consultancy is a very short period of time, hence the project is called Design Start.

The programme is maintained by a management staff of two people working part-time. A Steering Group at the Ministry of Trade and Industry is responsible for the development and improvement of the programme. Project managers at the TE Centres are constantly monitoring the relationships between companies and consultancies.

Design Start is a great opportunity for Finnish companies and in particular start-ups, to access quality design services. Besides the financial aid, companies learn how to manage the design process, how to commission a designer, and where to find this kind of professional. This service specifically aims to benefit businesses in the North and East of Finland.

As indicative of the programme's success, the management team highlights the number of participant companies and their satisfaction with the outcomes achieved which include concrete results in their business (e.g. increased turnover and productivity) and a more competitive position in the market.

Evaluation is made on two levels: the impact of projects within individual companies and impact of the programme as a whole. The first is made through direct communication with the participating companies. The second is made by an external consultancy and through a systematic process. One of the aims of this process is to "assess the programme's importance as an SME policy instrument in relation to similar publicly funded services for SMEs". The latest evaluation took place in 2006 and highlighted the benefits that the programme is generating for the design sector. It emphasises the fact that the programme has been utilised mostly for graphic and corporate identity projects, which can misrepresent the potential of the service for other design disciplines with a vision on longer-term competitiveness. Moreover, the evaluation report lists 10 critical factors that have resulted in the success of the Design Start service:

- Customer orientated (the service can be tailored)
- Versatile and updated supply of products

- Competent, certified experts
- Comprehensive network of product manager persons and experts
- Image (good quality feedback)
- Flexible, nationwide and supervised method of implementation
- Possibility to build up chains of service production
- Continuous development based on customer feedback and evaluation investigations
- Matching a market deficit in the development of SMEs and lower the companies' barrier to use external expertise
- Price/quality relation

The programme's management team also points to these factors for the programme's success:

Regionalised organisation of the programme, which allows project managers to know client companies and local consultancies

The fact that the programme is managed and delivered by the Ministry of Trade and Industry rather than by a design organisation. This allows the programme to benefit from the wider business network and utilises the fact that this institution is closer to entrepreneurs than design agencies.

In 2006, 383 companies received support from the Design Start programme. This is already a good achievement, but there is still room for improvement. In the future the programme intends to enhance the network, mainly through communication and strategic cooperation with other support programmes and Finnish institutions.