



Creating connections

The EU–Japan Centre for Industrial Cooperation is helping SMEs



As trade and business ties between the EU and Japan are set to strengthen with the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) now being implemented, there are initiatives being undertaken to try to ensure that smaller companies also share the benefits. One such measure is the Technology Transfer Helpdesk launched by the EU–Japan Centre for Industrial Cooperation, which last year added further support for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) looking to acquire or license intellectual property (IP) rights from universities and research institutions.

The EU–Japan Centre was started as a joint venture between the European Commission (EC) and the Japanese government in 1987 to promote industrial, trade and investment cooperation, with a particular focus on assisting SMEs from both sides. This includes delivering training programmes, disseminating information, attending trade fairs, organising networking events, supporting trade missions and providing a desk at the centre for SMEs to use short-term while establishing a presence in Japan.

Philippe de Taxis du Poët, EU-side general manager of the centre, recalls a recent example of the organisation’s work in facilitating cross-border business.

“We were recently approached by an Italian–Slovenian company that

participated in the Circular Economy Mission to Japan during the World Circular Economy Forum in Yokohama late last year – it wasn’t our event, but we attended and supported European companies there,” he says. “This company recycles 100% of the materials from used tires into new products; and they were in touch with us as they are now moving into the Japanese market.”

The Technology Transfer Helpdesk was launched in early 2016 to help match SMEs with technologies available to license and to generate awareness of other business opportunities, concentrating on potential tie-ups with academic institutions. The idea for the helpdesk came about through a policy report written by Luca Escoffier while on a Minerva Fellowship, a scheme operated by the centre to “support its research and policy analysis of EU–Japan economic and industrial issues,” according to its website.

The helpdesk is “run like a start-up” and “concentrates on patents and licensing opportunities”, notes Escoffier, who now heads the unit from the centre’s Japan office.

“We have a database that gives SMEs access to technologies available from universities and research centres, not com-

panies, so exclusively from an academic setting,” he explains.

The helpdesk offers all its services for free. These include, among others, providing fact-sheets and guides to relevant issues, such as the IP aspects of the EPA, as well as monthly webinars featuring experts from around the world.

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“We are partnering with a European start-up to add information to the database about projects funded by the EC, researchers, scientific publications and clinical trials,” adds Escoffier.

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Last September, the unit initiated the Intellectual Property Rights Support Programme designed to aid both inventors and companies looking for the best way to protect their innovations, though Escoffier says its scope is not limited to that and their approach is flexible.

“I’m now helping a Japanese precision engineering company that is looking for partners, distributors or agents in Europe – any way we can create connections,” says Escoffier.

For this initiative, the helpdesk has partnered with Sonoda & Kobayashi, an intellectual property law firm. They offer a free initial 30-minute consultation for inventors with a patent attorney, which can be done at the firm’s offices or online, to assess whether an invention can be protected and to explain the basics of IP rights and the relevant costs to protect them.

“Intentors often don’t know much about IP rights and can’t distinguish between the different categories of patents, trademarks, designs and utility models,” says Nicole Bigler, director of international affairs at Sonoda & Kobayashi.

The first consultations under the programme took place late last year and the firm is in the process of filing the first patent application from them.

One of the first companies to utilise the programme was Genuine Venture, a small start-up that operates in Tokyo and London.

“[Genuine Venture is] trying to change the way products are made and distributed,” says its founder Mimmo Cangiano Belcuore. “Sustainability of products is our key goal and we are developing partnerships with manufacturers.

“We are also a platform, which brands can use to change their current infrastructure,” he adds, stating that he is unable to go into more detail because the patent for the technology isn’t public yet.

“Being a start-up, we don’t have a lot of resources and the helpdesk has been a great help; it opened doors and put us on the right track for protecting our IP,” says Belcuore. “The process was pretty straightforward and from the initial screening to meeting the counterparty it only took about three weeks.”

“European start-ups can help develop products and services more quickly”

Another company to have benefited from the work of the helpdesk is the Italian start-up weAR (pronounced we-are). It delivers instructional information and user-generated manuals via wearable devices through an augmented and mixed reality app, according to CEO and founder Dr Emanuele Borasio. This allows, for example, senior workers to provide training remotely to new recruits on how to operate machinery and has also been employed by surgeons to prepare for operations.

“In Japan, a lot of technology is created by large corporations, which tend to move slowly, so European start-ups can help

develop products and services more quickly,” Borasio suggests.

The helpdesk provided his company with networking opportunities and introductions to entities in Japan, explains Borasio.

“There is a lot of interest in wearable devices in Japan,” he says. “Microsoft Japan has tried our application out with their HoloLens smart glasses, which we are currently talking to them about.”

Borasio believes there is significant potential for weAR’s products in Japan but acknowledges that it is a challenging market to crack, requiring patience and a local presence.

“This year we are planning to hire a representative in Japan,” he adds, “something we will be looking for help with from the EU–Japan Centre.” ●

