

Cross-Border Project Cafés

BORDER	France-Germany
TERRITORY	Strasbourg-Ortenau Eurodistrict
DURATION/DATE	Since November 2012
PARTNERS	Start Hop; Urban Community of Strasbourg, Strasbourg Jobs and Training Centre, Strasbourg-Ortenau Eurodistrict
OBJECTIVE	Business creation
MAIN ACTIVITY	Organisation of thematic “project cafés” bringing together budding entrepreneurs and heads of businesses to discuss setting up a business in the neighbouring country

WHAT DO THESE CROSS-BORDER PROJECT CAFÉS CONSIST OF?

The cross-border Project Cafés (“Cafés à Projets” in French) were initiated in November 2012 by Start Hop, a French cooperative based in Strasbourg and Offenburg that provides advice on business creation and is charged with promoting economic projects, in partnership with the Urban Community of Strasbourg, the Strasbourg Jobs and Training Centre (Maison de l’Emploi et de la Formation de Strasbourg) and the Strasbourg-Ortenau Eurodistrict.

Based on the observation that French and German entrepreneurs only rarely include the other side of the Rhine in their market studies and find it difficult to project themselves into the neighbouring territory, Start Hop’s aim is to promote business creation across the Strasbourg-Ortenau Eurodistrict by organising thematic “project cafés” to which people with business projects, business starters and young entrepreneurs are invited.

Experienced business owners also take part to contribute and exchange ideas about the way business creation works in the neighbouring country. Start Hop provides information to participants about the resources available in the region (networks, advisers, business-clubs, business incubators, etc.).

Since the project was launched, eight thematic Project Cafés have been held in Strasbourg, Kehl and Offenburg on:

- ↳ Financing
- ↳ How to develop one’s clientele
- ↳ Location
- ↳ Web-marketing and social media – differences and similarities between France and Germany
- ↳ Speed meeting: partnerships in the Eurodistrict
- ↳ Creativity and innovation in the Eurodistrict: one entrepreneur – one project
- ↳ Student entrepreneurship in the Eurodistrict
- ↳ Wirtschaftsforum – best practice: the players in innovation.

Each Project Café comprises around 50 participants on average, the majority of whom are French (68%), which is explained by the strong interest in business creation against a backdrop of high unemployment in Alsace, but also of development of tools to support business start-ups (incubators, cooperatives, etc.). People with business projects can have an individual consultation with Start Hop at the end of the meeting to better assess their needs (financing, premises, etc.) and to direct them where necessary to the appropriate players. Additional workshops for smaller groups of participants have also been offered in order to supplement the discussions initiated at the Project Cafés. An account of each thematic session is published on Start Hop’s blogs (novoeco.info, starthop.eu) and on the website of the Strasbourg Jobs and Training Centre.

WHAT ARE THE FIRST RESULTS?

The first meetings confirmed the interest of people with business projects in the initiative and identified some of the participants' wishes, which will probably be addressed by dedicated workshops in the future:

- Differences between France and Germany in terms of tax, the legal framework and the business environment
- Cultural aspects of customer relationships: purchases, Internet
- Networks, being put in contact with future investors/financiers or commercial partners.

The participants also stressed the potential usefulness of a cross-border web platform and a French-German incubator to strengthen the entrepreneurial fabric of the cross-border region.

An initial assessment estimates that around 60 business creations were facilitated by the cross-border Project Cafés scheme, of which 55% were in the services sector, 16% in ITC, 16% in the craft industry and 14% in commerce.¹⁴³

¹⁴³ Source: 2013 report on Project Cafés – Start Hop.



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WHAT FOLLOW-UP IS ENVISAGED?

The Urban Community of Strasbourg wishes to make permanent and develop the initiative by reinforcing its budget, which could happen via co-financing from INTERREG in the forthcoming programming period for structural funds.

The cross-border Project Cafés have already been bolstered by the setting-up in July 2014 of a co-working space for the Strasbourg-Ortenau Eurodistrict: known as KiosK Office, it has two sites, one located in the TPO (TechnologiePark d'Offenburg), a partner in the project, and the other in Strasbourg (to be set up by 2015).

Aimed at French and German business starters and entrepreneurs in the Upper Rhine, KiosK Office receives people with business projects in a dedicated space and for an adjustable period of time, provides them

with assistance with their administrative procedures in the neighbouring country and directs them to partner structures where necessary, while at the same time coordinating a cross-border economic network.

The services offered include:

- ✚ breakfast on Monday mornings with the presence of a coach
- ✚ technical workshops facilitated by specialists from both the public and private sectors (covering tax, law, marketing, financing, regional economic activity, etc.)
- ✚ professional language classes in small groups with role-plays
- ✚ meetings with business owners.



TO WHAT EXTENT CAN THIS GOOD PRACTICE BE ADOPTED IN OTHER CROSS-BORDER TERRITORIES?

Unfamiliarity with the “rules of the game” in the neighbouring country is a difficulty encountered by entrepreneurs in all cross-border territories, which highlights the inadequacy of the information and support for cross-border economic activity provided by the systems in place. The issue of technical incubators is becoming more important owing to the appeal of the business creation approach (in view of the economic climate), despite of its administrative complexity (the law, tax, financing, etc.).

The Project Cafés and the cross-border co-working spaces to some extent constitute a means of testing the needs and wishes of people with business projects at the local level – an interesting way of assessing more precisely the potential usefulness of a dedicated support structure such as a French-German business incubator, a project that would inevitably be more onerous in its implementation and management.

It should be noted that there is a similar programme, known as BRYO, on the French-Belgian border, led by the Greater Lille Chamber of Commerce and Industry, VOKA West-Vlaanderen and the Wallonie Picarde Chamber of Commerce and Industry, which particularly targets young entrepreneurs.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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