

European Union Grants Advisor Czech Republic

Training Grants Package Provides the Key to Greater Business Agility for SMEs

Of the former communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, the Czech Republic has one of the most developed and industrialised economies, with a well-educated population and a developed infrastructure. The Czech Republic became a European Union (EU) member country on May 1, 2004, which gave further impetus and direction to structural reform.

The country's strategic location in the heart of Europe, as well as its highly-skilled work force, has supported growth in recent years due to increased exports to the EU, primarily to Germany, and a strong recovery of foreign and domestic investment. This investment is rapidly modernising its industrial base and increasing productivity, as well as helping small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

However free trade in services, as well as stronger regulation, will mean tougher competition for SMEs. Independent software vendors (ISVs) Aquasoft and Future Engineering are not immune to the challenges posed by these changing country backdrops.

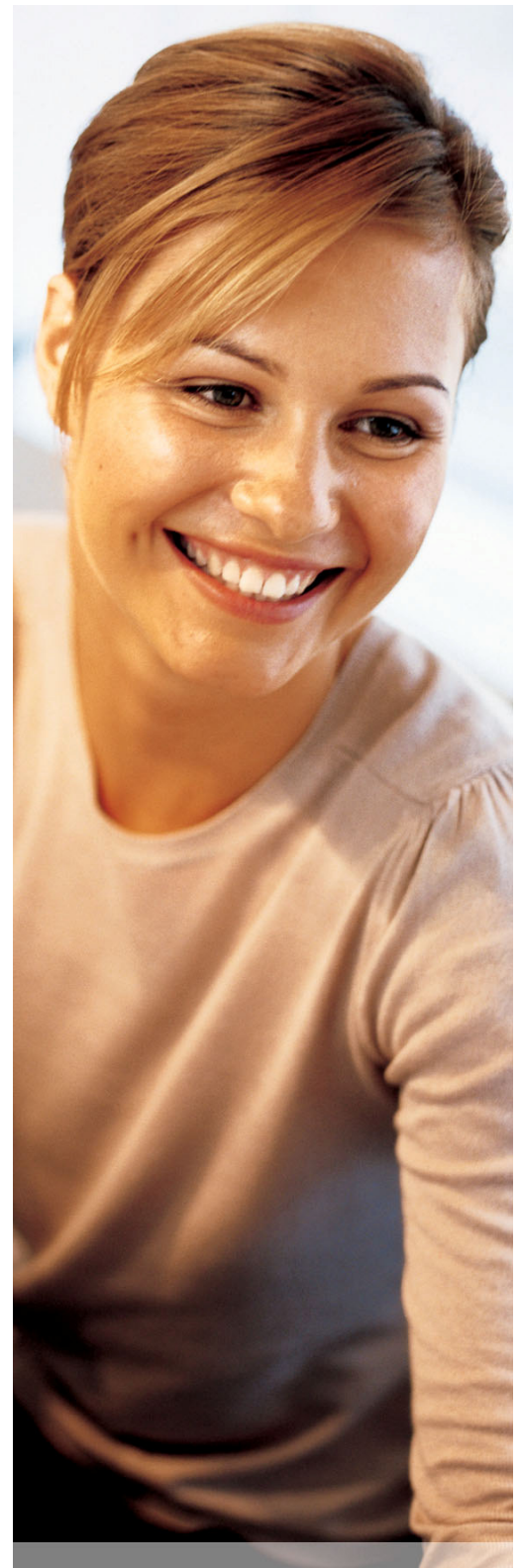
Much funding had already been made available to strengthen European businesses, transport, architecture, and services. But the EU recognised that, if it is to meet the Lisbon Agenda goal of creating the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-driven economy by 2010, it needed to open up additional financial assistance that is purely dedicated to technological investment. As part of this strategy the EU, as well as national, regional, and local governments, have set up thousands of grants to channel funds to SMEs. In total, an estimated €117 billion

(U.S.\$141 billion) is available to SMEs across the region for technology-related projects. The overall objective is to assist SMEs in realising their untapped potential, while enhancing employment opportunities, and driving economic growth.

However, despite the availability of funding, many European SMEs are unaware of its existence or remain baffled as to whether they are eligible or not. According to research, out of the 22 million SMEs in Europe, just 45 per cent are aware of the financial assistance available to them. Of that percentage, just four per cent go on to apply for funding and just one per cent are successful. It is believed that this small acceptance level is largely due to the complex criteria.

The EU Grants Advisor (EUGA) programme was created to redress the balance and ensure that SMEs can take advantage of the assistance available to them. It is driven by a consortium of organisations including HP, Intel and Microsoft, with additional local consortium partners depending on the nature of each project. EUGA aims to increase SME and local and regional governments' (LRGs') awareness and understanding of funding schemes available through the EU, as well as providing a simpler application process.

For Aquasoft and Future Engineering, the training and development of employees is critical to ongoing success. Both companies wanted to attain a market-leading position as specialist developers of applications, yet lacked the funding required to kick-start this change.



“WE DON’T OFFER THE SAME SOLUTION FOR EVERYONE. WE APPROACH OUR CUSTOMERS INDIVIDUALLY, CREATIVELY, AND PROFESSIONALLY. OUR AIM IS TO DELIVER TANGIBLE BENEFITS TO OUR CUSTOMERS BY HARNESSING THE POWER OF NEW TECHNOLOGY. BUT WE CAN ONLY DO THIS IF OUR EMPLOYEES’ KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS SET IS UP TO DATE. WE NEEDED TO INVESTIGATE FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES TO HELP US CARRY OUT OUR TRAINING OBJECTIVES.”

Dagmar Mrkosová, HR Director, Aquasoft



Aquasoft wanted to be able to react swiftly to meet its public sector clients’ needs. As a result of its recent membership in the EU, Czech Republic government bodies are required to adjust many new principles and meet new regulations. The goal of Aquasoft is not only to understand clients’ current needs, but also to predict their future needs and react swiftly to meet new requirements. With 100 employees in its Praha headquarters in the Czech Republic, Aquasoft wanted to provide training in five main areas: IT education; management skills; personal management; finance; and English language skills.

Dagmar Mrkosová, HR Director, Aquasoft, says: “We don’t offer the same solution for everyone. We approach our customers individually, creatively, and professionally. Our aim is to deliver tangible benefits to our customers by harnessing the power of new technology. But we can only do this if our employees’ knowledge and skills set is up to date. We needed to investigate funding opportunities to help us carry out our training objectives.”

After cooperation with Microsoft agency Gopas, Aquasoft was informed about the funding opportunities for which it was eligible. The Microsoft agency assisted Aquasoft in applying for the grant, and also took the lead in negotiations with grant-awarding bodies. Future Engineering was in a similar position when it decided to implement a new financial system based on Microsoft Dynamics™-Navision, formerly Microsoft Business Solutions. The implementation involved improving the operational processes of the organisation. Furthermore, additional demands for application development and new trends in project management within the IT industry around client relationships made it essential that Future Engineering’s staff were trained in the latest developments.

Essentially, the ISV wanted to run its business and position itself as a leading provider of solutions, rather than just a software developer. The company wanted to demonstrate a better understanding of customer needs, and respond faster and more professionally to clients, as well as enhancing internal management and financial control. This required training staff in three main areas: IT; management and language skills; and finance management. However, in order to train its staff, like Aquasoft, Future Engineering required funding. Jana Mitrengová, HR Specialist, Future Engineering, says: “Our company’s vision is that our future rests on the future of our clients. It is our duty to help them succeed. We aim for the formation of long-term partnerships with customers focused on fulfilling the basic mission of our cooperation, which is to increase efficiency for both parties. We can only do so if our aims are supported by a comprehensive training programme.”

Through the EUGA programme, Future Engineering was informed about grant possibilities. An independent consultancy service explained the principles and supported the company through the application process. As a result, Future Engineering received a grant of €100,000 (U.S.\$120,517) to train 64 employees.

Since obtaining the EUGA grants, both companies have been able to service their clients much more quickly, aiding business agility and credibility. In addition, both Aquasoft and Future Engineering have been able to improve project management and internal management processes. Both companies are enjoying better cooperation with an extended customer base, which in turn can lead to a stronger economy for the region.

Contact:

For more information please contact Microsoft Corporate Affairs, or visit the Web site: www.microsoft.com/emea/euga

Fast Facts

URL

www.microsoft.com/cze/mojefirma/euga
www.aquasoft.cz/en
www.future.cz

Country

Czech Republic

Profile

Aquasoft provides information system integration for private and public sector clients, primarily those based in government. The ISV’s solutions are used by more than 7,500 users in more than 900 locations daily.

Founded in 1990, Future Engineering is a leading supplier of information and industrial automation systems. The company is active in both the Czech Republic and Slovakia, as well as international markets.

Situation

Both companies wanted to enhance and update employee training, to improve competitiveness and enhance services to clients.

Solution

Both companies successfully applied to the European Union Grants Advisor (EUGA).

EUGA is a programme developed by Microsoft through which SMEs and local and regional governments (LRGs) are able to increase their awareness of and understanding of EU funds, as well as take advantage of a streamlined application process should they wish to apply for funds for which they are eligible. Without the necessary and vital role the local consortium of partners play in the EUGA programme, such successes would not be possible.

Benefits

- IT training for employees.
- Greater business agility and more confident individuals.
- Opportunity to enhance language and management skills.
- SMEs help drive increased growth in local economies, establishing a solid foundation for future prosperity countrywide.