

INTERVIEW

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Dr. Petra Püchner

Keynote Speaker at International EWMD Conference 2008 in Lisbon



Dr. Petra Püchner is Managing Director of Steinbeis-Europa-Zentrum. She holds a degree in Biology and a PhD in Engineering. Since 1995 she has worked as an SME consultant for innovation and technology transfer at Steinbeis-Europa-Zentrum. She lectures innovation management in Universities of Applied Sciences, i.e. for the MBA in business transfer. She coordinated the Innovation Relay Centre Stuttgart-Erfurt-Zurich from 1995 - 2008 and has vast experience in technology transfer mechanisms.

She oversaw Baden-Württemberg's proposal in the transition from the Innovation Relay Centre network to the enterprise europe network membership.

“If you want the new – you need to be open”

Interview with Dr. Petra Püchner, Steinbeis Institute, about Innovation

EWMD: You are an expert in Innovation in Europe. What is your role in the process?

PÜCHNER: I am the managing director of Steinbeis-Europa-Zentrum, which is a company based on the foundation of Steinbeis that has the business concept of connecting Knowledge with users. The long tradition behind it is to build the bridge between researchers and Universities and SMEs – small and medium sized companies, who could use this new research. Our service is free of charge and we are paid from EU money to support innovation within Europe.

EWMD: How does this work? Is there a platform for innovators in the net?

PÜCHNER: There is a big network of people and more than 100 institutions within Europe. We know each other well and use the same tools and thinking. We have a standard in profiles, how to document an idea, how to analyze the SMEs and we have all this in a database. All EU connected institutes have access and can find the right partner.

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EWMD: What is the biggest challenge for companies to innovate?

PÜCHNER: This is a knowledge issue. Most of the companies are only networking within their reach, their own suppliers and their business logic. But they have no connections to researchers from other fields. Within innovation, most of the NEW is generated by opening the horizon, talking to somebody very different from you, find the link where no link was so far. Example: We did consultancy for an SME in Germany and they wanted to adapt for the future. So their project leader for research went out in the world and was looking for a lot of new things. But this was more or less random – without a plan or strategy. His idea was to invest in a big project to recycle biological waste to plastic. Well – luckily this was exactly my expertise field from my PhD and the research on this will go on the next 20 years before they reach the moment for a real product. His attitude to the new was far too optimistic and would not have had an economic effect on a product for this SME. So we did a clear analyze of what would support their growth strategy and could make a search on all the new ideas published in Europe and found a partner in Spain. Our job was finding the right partner – like a broker – and this we did. The partnership worked out very successfully and both would not have found each other

EWMD: What gives you the power to work in this field?

PÜCHNER: First of all my own history. My parents had their own business and they worked as SME. My father was a hairdresser. This is not the traditional basis for a future biologist. But I proved: You can do it.

EWMD: You told me that you did your PhD in Engineering – how is that possible?

PÜCHNER: Yes this is not the standard, you are right. I am Biologist and understand behavior of organic waste. This knowledge is necessary in water logistic and recycling, health and community planning. I worked at the University in this field but with engineers. After more than 5 years I had the new knowledge. All this went into my PhD on water waste management. This was a classical step into the junction of two fields and I created know knowledge. I use this experience to help others to do this step.

“Go out und talk to people you do not know” (Lässt sich das Zitat irgendwie gestalten: in einen Kasten setzen und etwas versetzt in den Text einrücken?)

EWMD: What are the biggest obstacles that stop innovation?

PÜCHNER: If you want the new – you need to be open and go out and talk to people you do not know. If you do not leave the comfort zone, it is more difficult to find new ideas. It is the culture of the individual owner of a company and his people that make the difference.

EWMD: So what is the right culture for a company to innovate?

PÜCHNER: This is easier to say than to be done:



1. You need to have an open culture, to let in new ideas, find and create situations for people to meet and talk. You need to sit together with strangers and you need to listen what they say, even when you do not like it or if you do not understand it. You need to learn that the strange in the other is just different, but not against you. So there is no need to defend yourself. If you have the energy to play around with ideas, or just see the strange as neutral., you use it and absorb it for something new.
2. Most of the companies big or small learned one lesson so far: Innovation cycles are very short these days and if the competitor is quicker than you are you might be out of business, as you cannot follow up. So if you do not actively drive innovation, you could be too late.
3. Innovation is more and more expensive and one little company cannot pay for the infrastructure and people, perhaps they would not even get them as talents as they are unknown.
4. Companies that know this find the way to strategic partnerships. These partnerships need to me more than supplier networks. I talk about bringing Biology to Engineers. Yes – sorry, but we area technology driven Innovators.
5. Companies need to do market research and know the trends and scenarios. It is not a miracle that we will have problems with oil and water, it is just the question when does it hit the ground and change consumer habits. So to know the trends is very important to avoid investing in an old technology or in a direction, where laws will lead the way.

EWMD: When you find companies with such a culture how do you help them?

PÜCHNER: We know the trends, we know the different researches, more or less we know who and where somebody works on this and that. We can even find pilot tester and direct-technology, which is the missing link.

EWMD: Is there a difference between SME concerning gender behavior?

“Women do not see themselves as Innovators – even if they are.”

PÜCHNER: I think there is, as women are only interested in innovation if we ask them directly. Some need an invitation for “Women Entrepreneurs and Innovation” – that triggers them, not a standard invitation. Women do not see themselves as Innovators – even if they are, this is my experience.

EWMD: You mean that this is an issue of language?

PÜCHNER: Language or mental models. If women are not explicitly mentioned as target group they do not feel invited, they think the initiative is only for men, It has to do with involvement and this starts with communication and language.



EWMD: You have just returned from a new Initiative for Women in Norway, what was it about and what makes you so excited about it?

PÜCHNER: The meeting was fantastic, so many different women from all over the world: Uganda, Canada, Australia and Europe. This group works on Gender and Policy and we are very lucky to be there in the right time. The spirit in Norway is clearly promoting women (Remember the initiative Women on Board). So the Norwegian government took the responsibility and financed the first three years of this initiative. It is hosted in an office in Norway and is a kind of incubator: The right climate for something new to grow.

EWMD: What are the issues in Uganda?

PÜCHNER: Innovation needs the basic structure of communication. That is simply said in Europe. But in Uganda, women told us, we need to communicate differently to them in order to be effective and not getting frustrated. If we communicate with our partners in Uganda, we need to send them an SMS saying: Check e-mails. As the mobile phones are in every hand and payable, but Internet is in some places only. So they go to the Internet hub only once a week to check e-mails. You need to know that to work together, if they do not respond they are not lazy, but just do not have the e-mail. We learned a lot in these meetings and like to share this experience too.

“The US Culture is open, quick and result oriented.”

EWMD: What is the difference in culture of innovation, like US to Europe?

PÜCHNER: I think there is a very different culture to innovate. The US Culture is open, quick and result oriented. They do not need to innovate themselves – this is what they call open innovation. They go out, find knowledge and companies with knowledge, buy them, take what they need and sell the rest. In Europe we are much more interested to build up lasting relations and create something together. We also like to do it ourselves, to have the right quality. This creates a different way to innovate, it might take a bit longer but may last longer and create better results on the long run. Unfortunately we are not quick this way/. US companies have a much higher speed and they are not afraid of failure – like we are in Europe. US culture is still very much that of pioneers who take risk. In Europe we try to integrate, cooperate and live together like a big family.

EWMD: What makes innovation made by women different and why do governments invest?

PÜCHNER: In Europe government needs to keep the technology and the companies in the country, to create the growth with their own people and to keep the profit near by. A lot of SME and entrepreneurs, who are run by men, go abroad to the US and try to make it there, if they are successful. So governments like Iceland found out, it makes more sense to support SME that are founded by women. They stay, they grow very organic and are sometimes more sustainable. Women lack the vision to grow and they lack the money to do so. This is where we



find the angle for consulting and support. Financing Innovation, strategic perspective and growth plans – that is what women need.

“Like a big knowledge tank.”

EWMD: How does this platform work?

PÜCHNER: Like a big knowledge tank, a bit like brokerage for hotels. But our input is to prepare for a real search – it is not just using a database.

EWMD: Thank you very much for this interesting interview and see you in Lisbon.

The interview was done with Claudia Schmitz for EWMD and Dr. Petra Puechner from Steinbeis GmbH. More information please follow the link www.steinbeis.de