2 The EUREX Project

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The European Experience Exchange project (EUREX) was conceived, proposed, and carried out as an ESSI Dissemination Action (see Chapter 1). The overall objective of EUREX was to evaluate the experiences of several hundred ESSI Process Improvement Experiments (PIEs) and to make this experience accessible to a broad European audience in a convenient form. In particular, the goal was to collect and make available to interested practitioners information about Software Best Practice and its introduction in specific problem domains.

In the following sections, we briefly review the history of the EUREX project.

2.1 Target Audience and Motivation

Over 70% of the organisations that participated in events organised during the course of the ESPITI project (see section 1.3.2 below) were Small or Medium Enterprises (SMEs), and many of which had substantially fewer than 250 employees. This response rate demonstrated a significant interest on the part of SMEs in finding out more about Software Process Improvement (SPI). Therefore, the primary target audience for EUREX was those European SMEs, and small teams in the non-IT organisations, engaged in the activity of developing software. Within these organisations, the focus was on management and technical personnel in a position to make decisions to undertake process improvement activities.

The ESPITI User Survey presents a clear picture of the needs and requirements of SMEs concerning software process improvement. For example, 25% of those who responded requested participation in working groups for experience exchange. However, SMEs are faced with many difficulties when it comes to trying to implement improvement programmes.

For example, SMEs are generally less aware than larger companies of the benefits of business-driven software process improvement. It is perceived as being an expensive task and the standard examples that are quoted in an attempt to convince them otherwise are invariably drawn from larger U.S. organisations and therefore bear little relevance for European SMEs. ESSIgram No 11 also reported that “peer review of experiment work in progress and results would be helpful.”
Thus, SMEs need to see success among their peers, using moderate resources, before they are prepared to change their views and consider embarking upon SPI actions.

For those SMEs that are aware of the benefits of SPI, there are frequently other inhibitors that prevent anything useful being accomplished. Many SMEs realise that they should implement software process improvement actions but do not know how to do this. They do not have the necessary skills and knowledge to do it themselves and in many cases they do not have the financial resources to engage external experts to help them. Consequently, SPI actions get deferred or cancelled because other business priorities assume greater importance. Even those SMEs that do successfully initiate SPI programmes can find that these activities are not seen through to their natural completion stage because of operational or financial constraints.

Many of the concerns about the relevance of SPI for SMEs were addressed by EUREX in a series of workshops in which speakers from similarly characterised companies spoke about their experiences with SPI. The workshops were in integral part of the EUREX process and provided much of the data presented in this volume.

The Commission funded EUREX in large measure because the evaluation of approximately 300 PIEs was too costly for an independent endeavour. Even if some resource-rich organisation had undertaken this task, it is likely that the results would not have been disseminated, but would rather have been used to further competitive advantage. Commission support has insured that the results are widely and publicly distributed.

Many ESSI dissemination actions have been organised as conferences or workshops. PIE Users register in order to discharge their obligations to the Commission; however, the selection and qualification of contributions is often less than rigorous. In addition, many public conferences have added PIE presentation tracks with little organisation of their content. Small audiences are a consequence of the competition of that track with others in the conference. The common thread in these experiences is that organisation of the actions had been lacking or passive.

EUREX turned this model on its end. PIE Users were approached proactively to involve them in the process. In addition, the information exchange process was actively managed. The EUREX workshops were organised around several distinct problem domains and workshop attendees were supported with expert assistance to evaluate their situations and provide commentary on solutions from a broadly experienced perspective. (See chapter 3 for a detailed discussion of the domain selection process.) Participants were invited through press publications, the local chambers of commerce, the Regional Organisations of EUREX and through co-operation with other dissemination actions.

This approach provided a richer experience for attendees. Since the workshops were domain-oriented, the participants heard different approaches to the same issues and were presented with alternative experiences and solutions. This was a more informative experience than simply hearing a talk about experiences in a