

PUBLIC SECTOR INFORMATION

In our experience as information intermediaries we have to consider two main approaches to the theme of public sector information. One regards the public information in each member-state and the other the public information at an European level. The first must be dealt by each member-state having in mind the context in which the information is produced, the dissemination processes more adequate to reach the target audience, and the contents that must be adequate to the level of understanding of the common target audience.

As regards the European level things became more difficult as each member-state tends to disseminate its information in their own language. For some languages that is not a problem but, as in the case of the Portuguese, that can constitute a barrier to access. How many times have we not received questions regarding a subject that is easily accessible by internet in a site maintained by a public institution but only in Portuguese? How many people throughout Europe can understand it? The same goes for Greek, Finnish, Swedish,... Accessible does not necessary means useful or understandable.

Regarding the questions posed we will try to answer them but it should be noted that it will be from a national point of view, i.e., from a certain reality that is the Portuguese one.

9) To what extension are the policies pursued by the EU institutions in the field of access and dissemination of information adequate? In what way can the policies pursued by the EU institutions in the field of access and dissemination of information be improved?

Speaking as an information officer from an EIC, the dissemination of information from the EU institutions have improved a lot, mainly due to the use of the internet. A lot of information is there to be collected and processed, unfortunately mainly in English. However, the access to internet is still in an early stage in Portugal, so far as SME and citizens are concerned – speaking mainly for the persons in the labour market, not for the younger generations. That means that the information intermediary is still necessary to collect and disseminate the information, not only because of the media (internet) but also because the information is mainly in English and the translation and interpretation is needed.

But by far the most effective way in which to carry out our work of disseminating EU matters are the networks established by the Commission, which the EIC is one. With special interlocutors and the right media/tools we are able to succeed in obtaining most of the data needed to answer our questions. We are in a privileged situation regarding the normal citizens or entrepreneurs as we have a special unit to which we can address our questions and be sure to receive an answer even the subject of the question it is not in their scope of activity.

However, granted the effort made by the EU institutions during the last years to improve the access and dissemination of information we would like to underline some difficulties that have been put to us by SMEs:

- the site *europa.eu.int* is now too huge to be accessible by everyone. People tend to be discouraged by it, as they cannot navigate through it easily. Sometimes they even know that a document is there but they are not able to retrieve it.
However, specific sites like *Inforegio*, *Dialogue with Citizens and Business* and *Dialogue with Business* are very useful. They are directed to specific target groups with specific needs and with all available information, and contributions from all member-states and, moreover, in the several official languages.
- statistics have become more expensive to obtain as Eurostat has put into practice a policy of paying for the information. More data of a general scope should be accessible, free of charge, to the general public.

- the other concern for enterprises in general deals with public tenders (OJ S). More and more demands of this journal are made to us as the entities that have sent the tender to be published do not receive a copy of the publication where the public tender appears.

10) Which actions should be given priority attention at European level?

The maintenance of the several community languages, because if not a large number of persons will be excluded from the EU knowledge.

The inclusion in the education programmes, at an early stage, of awareness themes regarding the European Union (treaties, institutions, work, legislation are some of the possible subjects to be addressed.)

4) What bearing do different pricing policies have on the access to and exploitation of public information? Does the impact of different pricing policies on access to and exploitation of public information create differences in opportunities for citizens and businesses at European level?

According to the experience we have, public in general tend not to be willing to pay for information, specially if it is raw material. However, for value-added information business people are willing to pay if it is essential to their core business.

In Portugal the discussion surrounding the access to public information tends to establish three main types of information: raw material of a general scope should be free of charge; value-added information should have a market price; and a third intermediary level – information of a public interest but not a generalised one, should have a cost-price. Thus in Portugal the European pattern is being followed as described in the Green Paper. The problem will arise when these concepts will be put into practice by each institution/member-state. Will there be an European recommendation; will each member-state adopt its own concepts for the whole country or it will be up to each public institution to have a pricing policy?

3) Could the establishment of European meta-data (information on the information that is available) help the European citizens and businesses in finding their way in the public sector information throughout Europe? If so how could this best be realised? What categories of content should directories of public sector information resources contain?

The more information available the more meta-data is needed. As already referred, the establishment of specific internet sites have helped a lot the search for information in key areas like businesses and citizens. However the electronic means is not a tool available to everybody. Meta-data should also be available in paper source, containing the pertinent information with addresses and telephone/fax contacts, a way of communication much used still in Portugal. Maybe the contents could be adapted according to the the structure of governments of the member-states. They could give the main areas of activities and the main institutions where to find information – preferably with the name of the institutions and their main activities translated.

5) To what extent and under what conditions could activities of public sector bodies on the information market create unfair competition at European level?

Public institutions have access and collect a lot of raw material/data related to their business activities. Sometimes that information is treated and is disseminated through printing without giving access to the raw material. Thus these restrictions to access (administrative or price ones) will create unfair competition in a market level. For instance, in Portugal, it is necessary for enterprises, each and every year, to send to the Ministry of Work the “Quadros de Pessoal” – special files containing all data regarding enterprises. That makes the public institution the only source of all that data. Statistical inquiries regarding that data can be demanded upon a prize.

In conclusion, public institutions have access to data, their gathering being enforced by law. However their information policies are not normally well defined, so it makes it difficult for private entities to compete in the value-added information market.