

Community Talk with: Irina Fiegenbaum

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Irina Fiegenbaum hails originally from Russia and holds a PhD in Innovation Management. As well as working as an independent consultant, Irina is currently coordinating the ISPIIM (International Society for Professional Innovation Management) component of the TACIT (Teaching and Coaching Innovation & Entrepreneurship InnovaTively) project. Before that she spent just over six years at Lappeenranta University of Technology in Finland as project manager (innovation projects) and researcher, preparing project applications, both national (e.g. Tekes) and international (e.g. ITEA) and coordinating with industry. Her research focus is innovation management, innovation strategies, open innovation, national innovation systems (especially Russia) and her teaching encompasses topics like strategic entrepreneurship, innovation management and open innovation. At the risk of repetition, there is one word that stands out here: innovation.

Getting innovation to market

“My main task is to help get results to market

and to help companies develop innovation processes,” Irina explains. “Innovation is my passion and it gives me a great sense of fulfilment when I can enable companies to innovate. At the moment I am taking maternity leave and in this period I’m acting as a consultant to help SMEs prepare for European projects like those of ITEA. And I must say that of the projects I have managed over the years the ITEA projects have been real highlights for me. The ACCELERATE project, which is nearing completion, has been really fascinating and right up my street, as it were. Innovation is about more than just creating technology. Many companies are searching for new ways to rapidly validate the match between the market and their innovative ICT-intensive technology, so we want to develop services that will enable massive adoption of acceleration knowhow by the European technology industry. Unfortunately, because of my job change and maternity leave, I am currently on the sidelines of the project but I am eagerly awaiting the final results. I can categorically say that this project



has been a game-changer for me – personally, in terms of my network, my career prospects and my learning path. I’m really grateful for the opportunities ITEA has given me through this project.”

Love at first sight

So how was it that you became involved in the ITEA Community in the first place? “At Lappeenranta University of Technology I was working in the Department of Industrial Management within the Innovation track and we came across ITEA, which seemed to have a number of interesting projects from our point of view. It was ‘love at first sight’! And it’s a relationship that is still going strong. In terms of my own role, I suppose you could say that I have gone from being an observer to being more of a strategist and an expert, but that’s a

process that most regular project participants tend to go through. Over the years I have witnessed various changes on the practical side but these have enhanced the marriage from my point of view. A lot of the administration has got easier. There is less of a burden in that sense now than there was when I started. It is also quite apparent that the smaller companies are increasingly becoming an integral part of the community and feeling more at home; they do not seem to be overawed or overwhelmed by their large counterparts. And, of course, growth. With the arrival of countries such as Canada, South Korea, South Africa and others, ITEA is cooperating on a really global front. That can only have a positive effect, especially in terms of creating opportunities for consortium partners and the economic and societal impact that projects can have worldwide. But there is

also one less pleasing development, and that is a decrease in national funding. While this is out of the control of ITEA, it nevertheless puts a bit of a spanner in the works of a number of good project ideas that can’t get off the ground due to a lack of funding. So that is maybe something that could be looked at. For example, having some kind of tacit agreement with national (public) authorities on a minimum commitment.”

Research genius and business acumen

“We should not underestimate the importance of ITEA projects. No-one can compete alone these days. Innovation cycles are fast and companies need the consortiums, ecosystems and support afforded by ITEA and other EUREKA Clusters to get their products and services to market and benefit the world. What you have is a fantastic mix of research genius and business acumen, and it is the combination of this that gets innovation to market. This is the formula that makes ITEA what it is, and a formula that will enable European industry to be competitive and seize the high ground. Being the leader has attracted global interest, too – you just have to look at the country expansion I mentioned earlier. It would be nice if my native Russia could be part of the ITEA Community – I think there are many ways each could benefit the other. But that depends not only on good technology and business relationships ... What is certain, though, is that the ITEA formula will continue to be essential to European industry’s ambitions for the coming decade. Exciting times ahead.”

Brilliant constellation of stars

“And happy times, too. We should be happy with the results that we achieve in ITEA projects. Happy about the benefits they bring. I’ve noticed myself how many happy faces there are in the projects, especially when there is a catalyst in the person of a very capable and inspirational manager. And when the participants are happy, the end users can be happy. Happy consortium = happy end user. Looking at my own happiness, I turn again to the ACCELERATE project. The people I met there – all these unique characters that came together like a brilliant constellation of stars to create something really outstanding and of great value. I’m sure when the final results are published, this will make me very happy indeed.”