

OFE COMMENT - 29-09-2011

Last week's OFE Summit proved memorable for all attendees for two main reasons - the quality of the talks and debates, and secondly the difficulty many had in reaching the event as a result of the 'manifestations' (i.e. riots) which effectively closed down Brussels for most of the day. For those who had registered and didn't make it we can only say sorry but that really was beyond our control, but at least the presentations are already up on the website and the videos will follow shortly.

The initial three keynotes really set the trend for the whole event. Yet again Vice President Kroes impressed all with her commitment to an open approach within the Digital Agenda, reinforcing the progress made over the last year since she last spoke. The progress on ICT standardisation, the horizontal Guidelines, and the long awaited publication of the EIF - hmm, I won't dwell on that here! But open government data proved the focal point of her speech and she used the opportunity to not only encourage all governments to open up their data but make major announcements on the Commission's own plans. The EC will have its own data portal by early 2012 from which information can be accessed, while a second portal will be live by 2013 to give access to re-usable public sector data from across the EU. The later keynote from Severin Naudet, Director of France's own datagouv.fr programme emphasised the commitment from the top of French politics with speeches and statements from both the French President and Prime Minister (to whom Naudet reports). Coming on the heels of the UK announcements at last year's Summit, it appears we are in a 'Race for the Top' regarding open data, to quote the Conference Chair. I certainly hope so. Yet do I detect some subtle differences already in freeing up the data? I heard VP Kroes carefully recognise the differences in opinion on charging regimes, whereas I think most in the Open Data market are looking at genuinely free (as in beer) access to this data (which of course has already been paid for by the public in the form of taxes).

This really has the opportunity to be an Open Vision for Europe in action, recognising the global influence but maximising the innovative and entrepreneurial opportunity for SMEs and citizens in Europe. Like the Internet itself here is an opportunity for entrepreneurs to build new business and show creativity, using this freely available public sector information. Both the French and British have illustrated the opportunity if there is political will and determination, and later sessions at last week's Summit emphasised this in detail.

Finally, OFE used the Summit to disclose its latest data on monitoring public sector software procurements. Essentially no change; still 13% of tenders name trade marks, and too many resort to the use of negotiated procedures which can not only circumvent open tendering, but have the potential to maintain lock-in and miss out on new opportunities and potentially lower costs. We have heard ample evidence from Vice President Kroes of the intention to grow an open ICT market, and nobody doubts her commitment. The same thing is increasingly true at national level. But will actions match the encouraging words?

When it comes to public procurement, good practice will deliver the Digital Agenda goals across Europe. But bad practice will destroy it.

Graham Taylor – Chief Executive, OpenForum Europe