

1. If we think back to 25 years ago we immediately understand how big the difference is between that period and today. The technological, economic, social and even political environment was totally different. Indeed, it was another world.

First of all, with regard to Europe, the European Economic Community counted only 10 member states, since Spain and Portugal joined the Community only on 1st January 1986 and one of the 6 founding states was still the Federal Republic of Germany and not simply Germany as it is now. We were just at the beginning of the Delors Commission “era”, the Single European Act Treaty was signed the year after, the Single Market and the EMU had yet to be drawn up.

Secondly, as far as concerns technologies and office automation, in 1985 telefax devices were just starting their market life; mobile phones didn't exist and neither did the internet.

PCs operated with 5.25 in. floppy disk (3.5 in. were about to be introduced on the market) and with Hard disks of about 10/20 Megabites.

The ordinary operating system for PCs was MS-DOS; PC screens were black&white, with very poor graphic applications. Laser Printers were just about to be introduced on the market as a high class product and very expensive. The first Apple Macintosh was marketed exactly that year.

Software applications for accounting, warehouse ect. were only tailor made and different for each hardware producer.

Modem operated at a speed of 9.600 bits/sec.

2. At that time we had to face the so called “de-industrialisation” crisis, a big challenge for our industrial organisation: manufacturers - thanks to process innovations - started to cut costs, firstly reducing their employees and as a result of concentration processes several plants across Europe were closed, e.g. heavy industries etc.

As an answer to that challenge the European Commission pushed forward the idea that endogenous development had to be valorised. Basically the idea was that the main agents (or stakeholders) in each local context had to be supported in finding new opportunities thanks to a different type of cooperation among them.

This consisted of a bottom-up approach to support local economies in taking the best from their resources, exploring new opportunities, mostly on the local markets.

The BICs were designed at that time exactly as a tool to promote local development and support enterprise creation. In the BIC's Vademecum the Commission published at that time, the slogan (catchline) was: “BIC, a company to create new companies and develop innovation projects”.

And the main operating tool for BICs - the incubator – was seen mainly in the framework of real estate restoration and conversion programmes, to provide basic services to start-ups

3. After 25 years, in a new era, facing new scenarios, BICs still exist. Why ? How is this possible ? I believe we have to consider the key factors characterising the BICs. The main key factor – the soul of BICs - is that of being public-private partnership organisations focussed on the promotion of new opportunities in local contexts.

This implies having a flexible approach and outlook and being organisations capable of evolving with the rapid progress of the surrounding environment. Different sets of services, continuously updated to the needs of client SMEs.

Over these 25 years some BICs have changed their core business, others have been established and others have moved on to deal with the increasing demands of new business. But for all of them the main ingredients are always the same:

professionalism and close connection with the local context demand. It is because of these ingredients that BICs continue to be important players in several different communities, in a rapidly changing economy.

BIC, a company to create new companies and develop innovation projects. That's true, we exist thanks to the services we deliver to our clients and to our local communities. Our network also – EBN – exists thanks to the services to BICs. Self-sustainability is not only a value, it is an engine that keeps the wheel moving into the future.

Definitely, the main reason why we exist is that we foster the growth of a new generation of small entrepreneurs, differently integrated in their value chains, with a growing attitude to developing networks and a broader vision of their market opportunities. At the same time being aware that in the global world they cannot survive only in small domestic markets.

Local but global.

Here we are instrument, as intermediaries, in creating relationships and networks in order to promote the continuous adaptation to the demands of the changing market.

A wide range of services to “incubate” new projects, to support their innovation, to support their internationalization. The triple “I”.

This is why our incubators are today totally different from what they were 20 years ago. Not only a physical space for new firms, but ad hoc laboratories for innovative ideas and projects with sophisticated sets of services and physical hubs for SME networks and clusters.

This is why our incubation services are not only focussed on start-ups, but they operate in the same way as accelerators of innovation project for existing SMEs, supporting the creation of links among fast-growing SMEs and their local context.

In a changing world, in the current crisis, BICs are the proper tool to face new challenges. A tool that allows the access to market opportunities mostly to new ideas, new energies, new blood.

BICs & EBN, a community of learning organisations to foster entrepreneurship and innovation Europe wide in the knowledge economy era.