eEurope 2002

"An information society for all"

*e*Europe, an information society for all

The information society is a key driver of growth and employment: it is becoming a major contributor to Europe's economic and social development. In December 1999, the European Commission launched a new political initiative, *e*Europe, to speed Europe's transition to the knowledge-based economy and synchronise the pace of development in the individual Member States of the European Union (EU). Approved by the European Council in June 2000, the *e*Europe 2002 Action Plan has three main objectives:

- to ensure that Europe exploits the potential of the Internet and digital technologies in full, in order to promote competitiveness and long-term, sustainable growth;

- to give every individual, home and school, every business and administration access to the Internet and the new digital technologies;

- to ensure that the Internet and the new technologies promote social integration, in particular of the weakest members of society.

The *e*Europe initiative is largely based on existing policies at both European and national level, which it aims to build on and integrate. The action plan therefore identifies common objectives, linked to specific measures that will be carried out by 2002. The benchmarking of progress achieved at national level will ensure effective monitoring.

The action taken comes under three headings:

A CHEAPER, FASTER AND MORE SECURE INTERNET

* *Cheaper Internet access.*

This objective hinges on introducing more competition into local communications. Although telecommunications in the EU were liberalised in 1998, resulting in much lower tariffs for international and long-distance communications, the incumbent telecom operators still have a virtual monopoly in the local network. To enter the local communications market, new entrants basically have to duplicate the traditional telephone network, which involves a disproportionately high level of investment. The *e*Europe initiative therefore proposed enabling new entrants to use the incumbent operator's local network on equitable terms - the technical term is "unbundling of the local loop". This measure has been effective since 1 January 2001. The competition generated in this way will lead to a reduction in prices for Internet access. It will also stimulate the fast Internet market, where DSL technology offers high speeds on the traditional telephone network and flat-rate tariffs for unlimited use.

* *Internet access for researchers and students.*

In order to increase the level of Internet use by researchers and students in general, the Information Society Technologies programme (IST) is funding the Géant project to the tune of 80 million euros. The main aim of this project is to increase the transmission capacity of the trans-European communications infrastructure linking national research centres.

* *More secure electronic access.*

Lower prices on their own will not be enough to fuel the growth of the Internet and e-commerce, as it is also vital to improve the security of networks and privacy on the Internet. Appropriate technologies do exist. A legal framework conducive to the development of these technologies must therefore be set up so that Internet users everywhere can rely on their protection. From the summer of 2001, Member States will have provision for mutual recognition of electronic signatures, which will protect the integrity of electronic data and authenticate their originator. Trade in encryption products

(which guarantee the confidentiality of electronic data) is now free between EU countries and facilitated with its principal trading partners. The use of smart cards, in particular for access to networks, health services, on-line payments, pay-TV, etc. also needs to be promoted. For this purpose, common standards and specifications will have to be produced at the European level.

INVESTING IN PEOPLE AND SKILLS

* Living and working in the information Society.

The Internet and digital technologies are permeating all areas of human activity. Each and every one of us will therefore have to become "digitally literate" in order to benefit fully from the new digital tools. Much is at stake for the citizens of Europe: it is not only about working in the knowledge-based economy, but also about being an active citizen and, more generally, personal development. Young people will have to acquire new skills at school. Schools therefore need to have enough computers and fast Internet connections. Teachers will have to be trained in using the new teaching tools and how to access knowledge (*e*Learning). For people already on the employment market, considerable efforts will have to be devoted to training if businesses are to find the necessary qualified staff.

* An information Society for all.

Growing inequality and the appearance of new forms of exclusion - the "digital divide" - must be avoided at all cost. Particular attention must be paid to certain sectors of society that are already victims of exclusion or socially marginalised, such as the unemployed or people at risk of unemployment, the sick, disabled and the elderly. Measures are being taken in this area, such as providing more Internet access points, particularly in disadvantaged parts of cities or areas, or developing more user-friendly technologies in the framework of the IST programme.

ENCOURAGING INTERNET USE

* Improving the regulatory framework for e-commerce.

A regulatory framework designed to boost consumer and business confidence must be set up to underpin the development of e-commerce in Europe. The security of electronic transactions must be ensured, and all obstacles to the provision of cross-border electronic services removed by completing the internal market for e-commerce.
To avoid legislative overload, the EU is confining itself to putting in place the essential common rules in certain key areas: data protection, control of illegal content, copyright, liability, taxation, etc. As regulation is a difficult tool to use in a rapidly changing technological environment, it is supplemented by the creation of mechanisms for industry self-regulation, e.g. codes of conduct or on-line dispute settlement procedures. Finally, the *e*Europe Action Plan provides for the creation of an ".eu" top level domain, by which it will be possible to identify businesses and institutions as European.

* Promoting Internet use in areas of public interest: administration, health, transport.

- g*overnment on-line*: Internet use by public authorities must give citizens access to the main basic services (on-line public data: administrative, legal, cultural, etc) and simplify relations between citizens and the authorities. The emphasis must be on developing access to public data and on improving the quality and user-friendliness of the services provided;

- *health on-line*: *e*Europe aims to promote the creation of an integrated health system linking hospitals, laboratories, pharmacies, health centres and retirement homes. In addition, small clinics or those situated in remote areas will have access to the expertise of more specialised medical centres. *e*Europe also supports the definition of common standards

for electronic health tools (health cards, information networks) and encourages the development of technological tools for disease prevention and treatment;

- *transport*: digital technologies can be used to develop "intelligent" transport systems for land, sea, river or air transport, such as road or air traffic management systems, real-time road traffic data or satellite tracking of vehicles and ships (Galileo system). A great deal is at stake, in terms of safety and comfort, pollution control and cut-backs in the use of oil products.

** Producing European digital content for the Internet.*

Europeans must be able to find quality content in their own language on the Internet, both to preserve and promote cultural and linguistic diversity in Europe and for commercial reasons. Multimedia content is becoming an increasingly important economic and employment factor. The *e*Content programme adopted in the framework of *e*Europe will above all aim to promote the use of public sector data, develop multilingual content and stimulate the digital content market.

For additional information: http://europa.eu.int/eeurope/