

SOFTWARE HELP-LINE

The European Software Institute in Bilbao hopes to establish itself as an essential help-line for Europe's builders of business applications. **John Parry** takes a look.



Gunther Koch

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ESI services

- Software benchmarking
- Advice on new technology development
- Training
- Workshops and conferences
- Technology Shelf: an information service covering software methodologies, tools, techniques and best practices
- On demand press summaries of software & services
- Reports covering a range of subjects from best practices to the 'Euromethod' procurement guide

Northern Spain may not be the first place that springs to the mind when a company needs to seek advice about improving its use and management of information. But for the last two years, a pan-European initiative has begun to put the Basque Country on the technology map.

The European Software Institute (ESI), established in 1994 on a greenfield site at the Zamudio technology park near Bilbao, Spain, aims to help Europe's managers meet today's key strategic information and technology challenges – and give them a place to turn to with doubts or questions about their software needs.

Headed by German software specialist Gunter Koch, the Institute now boasts 60 member companies, from KPMG and Lloyds Bank to Bull and Cap Gemini Sogeti, and focuses specifically on the practical aspects of software use in European business. "Software has become the number one competitiveness factor,"

argues Koch.

An admirable ambition, but does it really help? Nato became a member of the ESI last year, although it had contacts with the Institute six months before, explains Ulrich Maassen, quality assurance manager for software issues at Nato's Mission Support Wing, Geilenkirchen, Germany. "They are trying very hard, but they need to build up their professional expertise," he notes.

Nevertheless he is now exploring ESI training schemes and believes he gets essential access to the Institute's information service on the development of the Spice (software process improvement and capability) international standard. "This future standard is very important to us and the ESI tells us about progress so we know what's going on in the field," says Maassen. "We don't want to bet on the wrong horse."

The ESI's role can be much more active for other members. It is currently working with Siemens-Nixdorf to develop a web-based system for the engineering sector called the Global Engineering Network, which will allow engineers to exchange



technical drawings over the Internet. The Institute is also developing a method to evaluate the quality of software suppliers for international accountants KPMG's Spanish and German subsidiaries. Other partners include Arthur Andersen, Olivetti, Thompson CSF and Ericsson.

Following the leader

"Once we get a leading player in a sector to join, the rest start to follow," says Koch, who expects to see growing interest among financial institutions in the near future. Banks are sometimes five years behind other industrial companies in terms of the sophistication of their use of software, he argues, although the financial sector's awareness of the need to sharpen up is growing.

It's not cheap to be part of the ESI club though. Membership costs Ecu 50,000 (\$57,100) a year including consultancy, while Ecu 5,000 (\$5,710) buys off-the-shelf reports and information. The ESI runs regular seminars to let prospective members find out what the Institute is all about.

But Koch believes the pay-offs for companies determined to improve their software quality and effectiveness can be considerable. Over a two year period he reckons most organisations can shave delivery times by 30%, double productivity and save 75% of the costs of inefficient and faulty programs. These are the levels of improvement Koch says he achieved using smart development methods during his career at Bosch, Deutsche Telecom, Citibank, Austria's Graz University and German software company, 2i.

One thing Koch brought with him to the Institute from 2i was a passion for benchmarking software processes to measure performance and quality, to expose a company's real productivity factors, and to assess how well a company uses software and

information resources compared to its rivals. He also brought a product – a self-assessment software benchmarking tool called 'Bootcheck' which now forms one of the ESI's services offered to member organisations.

Koch also believes the future of software lies in the use – and re-use – of standard interfaces, objects and components, but with the flexibility to add new ideas, functions and new modules off the Internet. "We think that prefabricated software, in terms of universal building blocks is unlikely to be successful," he says. "Instead, we believe in re-using many different variations. That approach has a very high potential."

As the world's key software suppliers like Microsoft launch a new wave of component and object software tools this month, Koch hopes to find more European companies on the ESI's doorstep as they seek a helping hand to create their business software systems for the future.

The ESI can be contacted on the web at www.esi.es

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Benchmarking for better software

How good is your company's business software? The ESI reckons it can help you find out. Its Bootcheck self-assessment benchmarking tool asks managers a series of 46 questions about their software processes – covering management responsibility, quality control, statistical techniques, design control, purchasing, internal quality audits, storage, packaging and delivery, inspection and testing, process control, product identification and traceability, and design control.

Across a range of different operations, Bootcheck will then tell them where they are on the scale from underused ('immature') to better used ('mature') software.

The more mature, or the greater the percentage use of software modules in all these operations, the better the company is employing its software resources.