

A race against time

The launch of the new Helsinki-based European Chemicals Agency, or ECHA, will be a carefully timed operation. The process will start formally on June 1, when the agency opens, and everything needs to be fully operational 12 months later to meet the needs of the new REACH regulatory framework. Detailed advanced planning will be essential, according to the organisation's Interim Executive Director, Geert Dancet.

**Text: Arto Jokinen
Photos: Connie Heik-Jokinen**

The European Chemicals Agency is preparing the start-up of its operations as thoroughly as an athlete training for a major international competition. Staff have already attended team-building sessions at the Viurumäki Sports Institute north of Helsinki. People from the European Chemicals Bureau in Ispra in Italy will be bringing their own 'high-altitude mountain expertise', and the European Commission will lend 39 high-calibre players on an 18-month secondment.

The start-up will be a race against time, as REACH requires the agency to be fully functional by June 1, 2008.

"This means planning and preparing everything in advance in great detail," says the ECHA's Interim Executive Director, **Geert Dancet**.

Experience essential

Experience has been one of the main criteria when recruiting the team to get the agency off the ground, as its members will be expected to play an important role in training the bulk of the permanent staff.

The selection round organised by EPSO, the recruitment office of the European Institutions, that concluded in March attracted 1,800 applications, of whom 210 will be selected for the reserve list.

Although Dancet has not checked the statistics, he assumes that the applicants represented a similar distribution of nationalities to that seen during the previous recruitment round, when 30 specialists were hired from 800 applicants last year to develop the computerised data handling system and other systems. A quarter of these were Finns.

The ECHA will hire another 100 people in 2008. The idea is that the agency's 'old hands' will train the new recruits, and modern training facilities for the purpose have already been allocated in the agency's new home in the Tilgmann Building on Annankatu 18.

Dancet does not believe that the ECHA recruitment process will cause a brain drain

in other EU organisations or industry. In fact, he believes that the process will have a positive impact.

"The European Chemical Bureau in Ispra, for example, will now be able to concentrate on its main mission – research. The transfer of legislative responsibilities will only clarify Ispra's role as a research organisation.

"At the same time, I've been positively surprised by the fact that so many experts from Ispra have decided to join the ECHA."

IT is the key

The ECHA's first priority will be to set up its information systems, which is why IT specialists will be the first members of staff to work at ECHA's headquarters in Helsinki.

Implementation guidance will be a key part of ECHA's work, as REACH is a very comprehensive and exhaustive piece of legislation that could prove particularly difficult for small and medium-sized companies to navigate through. The first version of the guidance documentation is due to be published in June when the ECHA officially opens its doors.

These documents have already been subject to similar criticism to that REACH itself has been subject to, especially because of their length.

"Simply counting the number of pages involved does not make much sense, though," says Dancet, as no one is required to read them from cover to cover, and their length is a direct result of the complicated nature of the regulation. The best way to access the material, he says, will be to use an Internet browser, which will guide users to the right piece of detailed information using a 'question and answer' technique.

Dancet is aware of the difficulties some small companies will face all the same, because of their lack of adequate analytical facilities and skills, despite the efforts made to take account of the needs of small and medium-sized companies when drawing up the

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regulation. Some small companies do have significant know-how resources, however, and will find things easier. All companies are being encouraged to cooperate to reduce unnecessary administrative complications and pressure, he says.

“REACH is an important piece of legislation, and the Commission could not please all the stakeholders involved. Given the relatively mild criticism we’ve seen, the Commission should be congratulated for finding a workable compromise between different interests.”

Two particularly difficult problems that the Commission faced when drafting REACH was the need to take existing legislation into account and how to resolve the question of chemical testing.

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Time-consuming processes and procedures

Geert Dancet underlines the priority that has been given to transparency in all aspects, including the recruitment of the ECHA’s permanent Executive Director. The European Commission and ECHA Management Board will be involved in the process, and the candidate selected will be required to visit the European Parliament before the final decision is taken. As a result, he does not expect the recruitment process to be a fast one.

Another slow-moving area, according to Dancet, is likely to be organising and managing the ECHA’s budgetary process.

Budgeting is a very well-known problem for European Union agencies. The use of tight framework budgets and the strict monitoring of budget funds do not allow the type of flexibility needed to manage an organisation in unforeseeable or turbulent conditions.

The situation is even more difficult for the ECHA, which has had to be set up in a very short space of time with no previous specific experience to rely on. Dancet says that meticulous forward planning will be essential.

“We must plan everything at least two years ahead. If things turn out differently than expected, the ECHA’s management could face major problems, as it cannot change pre-agreed budgeted sums, only adjust spending within an agreed budgetary framework.”

Assessing the likely future workload of the agency will be one of the most ECHA’s most important managerial challenges. This will not be easy, as the business environment is likely to be turbulent. The fast start-up and the amount of work ahead will call for a lot of flexibility on the part of the European Chemicals Agency and its staff. □

Preparing for the start-up

The ECHA prepared for the start-up in June by sending a 70-person team on a week-long ‘scouting mission’ in March to get people acquainted with Finland and Helsinki in particular. This proved very successful, says Geert Dancet.

“We organised visits to schools, different residential areas, and other places of interest together with the City of Helsinki. As ECHA staff members will bring their families with them, finding suitable schools was one of the priorities.

“As Helsinki has schools that offer education in French, English, and German, families shouldn’t have a problem finding a school for their needs,” says Dancet.

The City of Helsinki has also set up a special website to assist ECHA staff in their move to Helsinki, with details on contacts and assistance covering a wide

range of everyday situations.

The city has also appointed relocation and housing experts to help ECHA staff through the maze of paperwork, particularly that related to lease agreements, as these are normally in Finnish.

“Thanks to this assistance, we’ll get the agreements in English, so we’ll know what we’re signing,” laughs Dancet.

The March scouting mission was very valuable overall, says Dancet.

“The first people to visit will set the tone for the whole operation. Had they perceived Helsinki and the new ECHA offices negatively, the agency would have had serious recruitment problems. Luckily, everyone was very pleased with what they saw. The Tilgmann building is an old one, but it has been renovated and the quality of the offices there is very high.”

Cycling to work

Geert Dancet is looking forward to his two-year stay in Finland. He will move to Finland together with his linguist wife, who intends to include Finnish on her list of languages. As his assignment is a fixed-term one, he will keep his primary home in Belgium, and his adult children will not join the couple in Helsinki.

Dancet is looking forward to continuing two of his main hobbies in Helsinki, cycling and jogging, and has been pleased to find that an extensive network of cycle paths covers the Helsinki Metropolitan Region. He is also planning to take advantage of the opportunity to visit the other countries of northern Europe while he is based in Helsinki.

Geert Dancet studied economics, econometrics, and philosophy at the University of Louvain in Belgium, and after a brief academic career and an assignment in Latin America for UNIDO joined the European Commission in 1986. After serving in various administrative positions, he was appointed head of the REACH Unit in the Enterprise Directorate General in March 2004. He was appointed Interim Executive Director of the European Chemicals Agency by the European Commission in January 2007.

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