The EBN
Quality & Benchmarking Services

How EBN provides quality assurance and advanced benchmarking to the EC-BICs and the innovation-based incubation industry
The EBN Technical Note is a publication designed to inform Business Innovation Centers (BICs) around Europe about the trends shaping their markets.

The publication is also intended to create awareness among policymakers at European and national level, of the value of BICS in creating a dynamic and entrepreneurial spirit in Europe.

© EBN, Brussels 2013.

Reproduction is authorized provided that the reference acknowledged.

Environmental production. This publication is printed according to high environmental standards.

Design: Arctik
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01</td>
<td>Background</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02</td>
<td>The BIC Quality Mark Criteria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03</td>
<td>The ‘Typical’ BIC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>04</td>
<td>The EBN Benchmarking services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>From Quality Assurance to Benchmarking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Benchmarking Reports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Peer-to-Peer Review Report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tailored technical assistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05</td>
<td>The EC-BIC Quality Process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Becoming a “candidate BIC”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Questionnaire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Evaluation Visit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The BIC Quality Mark Committee (BQMC)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06</td>
<td>Conclusions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07</td>
<td>Further information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Documents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>08</td>
<td>Credits</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The story starts in 1984 when the first EC-BIC (European Commission Business and Innovation Centre), Socran (now CIDE Socran), was created in Liege, Belgium through a pilot project initiated and supported by the European Commission (DG Regional Policy). This innovative solution was meant to provide an answer to the need to boost job creation through the generation of sustainable European start-ups and SMEs and to help the regions build their competitive advantages through innovation at all levels.

The current panorama of BICs shows that each one is distinct, and the single story behind each BIC has been different, with different actors involved in the different European territories. Of course, this is not a surprise as BICs were initially conceived as place-based organisations and therefore need to fit within their own ecosystem. Despite of this diversity, BICs share a common set of values and of core competencies.

BICs fall into the wide set of business and innovation support organisations; incubators, accelerators, entrepreneurship centers, science and technology parks, university technology transfer offices, chambers of commerce and industry, clusters just to name a few. But what makes BICs unique? What are the distinctive features that gives them, in their own field of action, their recognition as fundamental players when it comes to jobs and firms creation?

The identity of a BIC, no matter the shape of the BIC itself and its always-evolving patterns, has always remained intact: the BIC is and has always been the local entrepreneurial support centre endowed with a mission to create innovative companies and support the introduction of innovation/modernisation in existing SMEs of its catchment area. BICs are local innovation-based incubators and accelerators. They turn initial enquiries into solid companies, they provide companies with new energies, new ideas, new processes and products. Why then focus on a BIC to get assistance? It is all a matter of reputation, and reputation goes along with quality. And BICs are indeed quality-based reputed generators of emerging innovation-oriented entrepreneurs.
1984 was also the year of birth of the European BIC Network (EBN), which over time has managed to pass from a European Commission funded organisation to a membership-driven association. EBN is a Brussels-based network of Business and Innovation Centers and holds the central function to manage the EC-BIC quality system on behalf of the European Commission. For EBN, managing this quality system, and the associated BIC trademark, is about building reputation in the innovation-based incubation/acceleration industry in Europe and beyond.

Since more than 10 years, through the management of the EBN Quality System, BICs have been systematically screened for their compliance to the BIC Quality Mark Criteria and new organisations have been accredited. EBN is an open and living network and each year new organisations have gained the license to use the EC-BIC trademark, while existing BICs have lost that very same privilege. The quality system is based on an annual web-based, self-assessment questionnaire and a peer-to-peer audit system. Each year the standards are brought to a higher level requiring continuous reassessment of tools used for verifying quality compliance as well as a review of the BIC quality mark criteria. These criteria are the pillars of the whole system as they enable to clearly characterize a BIC’s functional identity and to differentiate its mission within the territorial ecosystem.

The management of the quality system makes EBN the holder of a unique dataset on the European incubation industry, data that is used for many purposes over and above quality assurance. EBN produces yearly observatories (at network, country and regional levels) and delivers sophisticated benchmarking reports used by the BICs to spot their weaknesses, learn best practices and to install a true continuous improvement mind-set. This dataset, and the EC-BIC quality methodology has recently been used also by the European Court of Auditors to produce a benchmarking report of 60 incubators who have been operating in six European countries and that have received income from the EC structural funds during the 2007-2013 programming period.

This Technical Note therefore aims at providing a snapshot of the BIC quality mark criteria, explaining the quality system and the processes behind it, and describing the benchmarking opportunities developed by EBN to support the qualitative growth of the BICs and of the innovation-based incubators and accelerators in Europe and beyond.
The BIC Quality mark criteria are described in a 4-page document downloadable from the EBN website\(^1\). Updated in 2004 and revised in 2008, they have been approved by the governing body of the EC-BIC Quality System, the BIC Quality Mark Committee (BQMC). These criteria are rigid in the sense that all the organisations holding the BIC label have to respect them globally. However, they have been designed to be applicable to many different types of organisation. Indeed, many different models co-exist among the EBN full members (the accredited EC-BICs), working with different ownership structures, different budgets, different size of operations, different internal organisation and altogether different business models. The criteria are designed to accommodate such a range of varied circumstances.

The criteria are divided in 5 sections, each one dealing with a specific aspect of the organisation:

**General mission** - the organisation needs to be focused on innovation and to have defined the strategic sectors in which innovation can actually lead to higher competitive advantages and more sustainable companies and, consequentially, jobs. A BIC therefore needs to concentrate on supporting the creation of new innovative companies and/or on the introduction of innovation in existing companies, specifically SMEs.

**Organisation** - a BIC needs to be fully and adequately resourced to fulfil its mission. It should be a properly funded and sustainable organisation, with sufficient staff engaged in entrepreneurship guidance and support. It should be independent and autonomously managed. It should make sure that it is an acknowledged part of the larger territorial innovation ecosystem in which it operates, ensuring that a private-public partnership is actually engaged while conducting its operations.

**Services** - in the case where the BIC is dealing with start-ups and new potential entrepreneurs the appropriate services need to be in place, such as: training, business planning, business modelling, fund raising. The overall pre-incubation and incubation services are delivered with sound processes and tools. In the case where the BIC is dealing with existing SMEs, services such as innovation diagnostics, commercialisation, internationalisation, spin-
off creation, financing, will need to be in place, also here with the adequate methodologies and tools. Signposting is a key service of a BIC: where a specific service is already being delivered by a third party, the BIC will signpost its clients to this party, making sure that services are not duplicated by the BIC.

**Activity measurement** - continuous improvement is an axiom that the BICs must always bear in mind when operating. This calls for the need to set up a performance measurement system where indicators are collected from the client base, as well for the need of assessing customer satisfaction on a constant basis.

**Quality** - respecting the criteria detailed in the first 4 points is imperative, of course, as is the respect of the EC-BIC quality process, which in practical terms means filling the online questionnaire every year with deadline 31st March and to accommodate auditors if selected for an evaluation visit.

“Since the beginning, in 1987, NET BIC Porto was created to be an EC-BIC. At the time it was extremely important for the Region and the local shareholders to have an entity working with a sound and certified methodology, successfully adopted by many, to support the creation of a new generation of innovative firms and helping existing companies to modernize and innovate. The EC-BIC label provided and still provides such a guarantee. During the years, local actors and stakeholders have changed, but the missions has not changed as well as the need to conform to serious quality standards. The fact that the Certification Quality Program managed by EBN is actually issued by the European Commission reinforces the strength of the program itself and adds much value to the label”.

**José Martins**, Director of NET Porto², Portugal

“The BIC quality mark criteria impact our operations at various levels. Most of all they give us the possibility to improve our functioning as we have now the possibility to benchmark our results with other BICs. The EBN quality questionnaire has indeed helped us to think about our own expectations in terms of performances and internal organisation. Furthermore, within the framework of the Slovene Technology Parks and Incubators Association we are putting much effort to lobby for a better regulation of the industry, and the criteria provide us much help to frame this action coherently.”

**Stojan Gorup**, Director of BIC Inkubator Sezana³, Slovenia

² www.net.pt - ³ www.inkubator.sl
By extrapolating and aggregating data from a single year’s database it is possible to provide an indication of how the ‘typical’ BIC appears to have operated in that given year. Let’s take a look at 2012.

In 2012 there were over 150 certified EC-BICs operating in 40 different countries contributing to wealth, firm and job creation through the support of innovative start-ups and SMEs mostly in the ICT, energy and environment, life science and engineering sectors.

In 2012, the typical BIC had 14 staff members supporting 79 existing SMEs and providing assistance for the start-up of 28 new businesses which created 57 jobs. It could depend on a budget of roughly Euro 1.5m, approximately 60% from public funds and the balance from the private sector.

It is therefore EBN’s committed role, entrusted by its members, to support the EC-BICs of Europe and beyond, to increase their performance over time, and to try hard to make the BIC of tomorrow better than the BIC of today. To this end, a fully-fledged benchmarking approach has been engineered into a comprehensive service to members.
There are around 150 qualified EC-BICs in 40 countries contributing to wealth and job creation through the support of innovative start-ups and SMEs. This is the typical BIC.

www.ebn.eu

4,700m²

14 STAFF

263 enquiries
79 feasibility studies
44 business plans
28 start-ups

DEAL FLOW

Energy environment
Business services
ICT
Engineering
Life sciences
Others

CLIENT SECTORS

57 NEW JOBS IN START-UPS

€1.5M INCOME
€0 EXPENSES

0% 100%

Client Survival Rate after 3 years

BIC 88%
Other 61%

20 companies ready for investment

€1,650,000 INVESTMENT RAISED

79 SMEs supported

SOURCES OF FUNDING

Venture Capital
Business Angels
Seed Funding
Other

26% 18% 21% 36%
The EBN Benchmarking services

From Quality Assurance to Benchmarking

Networking and quality assurance are the most powerful tools available to the incubation industry worldwide enabling the industry to be better prepared to support the entrepreneurs of today and tomorrow.

The practice of benchmarking through data and best practices has been carried forward by the community of BICs ever since the BIC Quality Mark Criteria were established. Indeed there has always been a tendency to push the standards higher each year, and this has caused the creation of a Benchmarking Service. EBN Full members can use most of this service without cost as it is included in their annual membership fees. However, it is open on a commercial basis, to any non-EBN member incubator who wishes to benchmark its KPIs and Value for Money ratios in their quest for continuous improvement.

The European BIC Network has structured its benchmarking services on two pillars: the 10-year database of BIC surveys, and the networking, enabling best-practice transfers.

The structural database contains 10 years of data of the European innovation-based incubation industry, acquired through the implementation of the quality process. Indeed the possibility of structuring a credible benchmarking service cannot be done without previously collecting and validating data. This database gives the opportunity to understand how an individual BIC performs in terms of deal-flow, jobs generated, funding raised, IP support, awareness raising, training delivered, value for money, etc. It generates a first good impression on whether an incubator is efficient in the delivery of its services.

The benchmarking service of EBN is conceived as a 4-step process which starts from a first analysis of the basic information of an incubator and then, through a step-by-step process, goes further in details adding layers of sophistication to the initial report and then through the implementation of peer reviews, which can take place in various forms.
Benchmarking Reports

All benchmarking reports take as benchmarks the whole EC-BIC universe in a given year and some of its sub-groups. An incubator’s indicators are therefore compared against those of the overall EC-BICs, of the community of BICs in its own country (if available), and against a group of 10 incubators similar in size (staff range) and income. Following these simple generic rules two different types of reports have been developed, but while the first one is a non-customizable report, the second one can be customized to accommodate other more relevant selection criteria on a case to case basis.

Three quick questions to Desmond Fahey, CEO of Dublin BIC

How come Dublin BIC has engaged in such a sophisticated benchmarking analysis?

We ask our clients to be open-minded. Dublin BIC as a transparent learning organisation feels benchmarking against the best in class is good practice for us as BICs are sharing knowledge between each other.

How difficult was it to engage the BIC in such a process?

The greatest difficulty was to ensure definitions and descriptions were standardised as much as possible locally, nationally and internationally to ensure comparisons were practical and useful.

What advantages have stemmed out of the overall exercise, and what has actually changed in the BIC thanks to it?

Our own team better understand why recording of actual support provided to clients is important. It has assisted us on an annual basis to refine and fine tune the completion of the Questionnaire giving us a better understanding of the Quality system.
Feasibility Studies

Benchmark Median

France Median

Business Plans

EBN Median

proper selection of the benchmarks and the elaboration of the report itself. In order to enable EBN to prepare a 12KPI report, the incubator needs to compare to the aforementioned groups. receive a short 4-page report which will provide a first glance of its results system. Providing simple information it will be possible for the incubator to that wants to have a first taste of the benchmarking capabilities of the EBN important as we use it in several ways. First of all this document is an integral element of it in our argumentations and was instrumental to enlarge the scope of SMEs of our area. Hence, we implemented a lobbying action to raise enough resources to comparison with other BICs, was the service chain of support provided to the existing "For example", explains Christophe "we have realized that our weak point, in

indicators (including, among others, indicators on innovation, intellectual property, fund ownership, services provided, financial assessment), a wider set of key performance comparison, including a thorough profiling of the incubator (from its structure, sections.

To enable the EBN quality team to prepare a Comprehensive Incubator Benchmarking

contributed per job created and KPIs per full-time equivalent). 16 basic data that will be kept confidential, which will allow a proper selection of the benchmarks and the elaboration of the report itself.

The second benchmarking report is the Comprehensive Incubator Benchmarking Report, which is much more sophisticated going much deeper into the elements of

Figure 2: content of the 12KPI report

The 12-KPI report is a simple report that EBN provides to any organisation that wants to have a first taste of the benchmarking capabilities of the EBN system. Providing simple information it will be possible for the incubator to receive a short 4-page report which will provide a first glance of its results compared to the aforementioned groups.

In order to enable EBN to prepare a 12KPI report, the incubator needs to provide a set of 16 basic data that will be kept confidential, which will allow a proper selection of the benchmarks and the elaboration of the report itself.

Figure 3: the deal-flow as presented in the EBN benchmarking reports
deeper into the elements of comparison, including a thorough profiling of the incubator (from its structure, ownership, services provided, financial assessment), a wider set of key performance indicators (including, among others, indicators on innovation, intellectual property, fund raising, training) and of economic efficiency indicators (such as public financial contribution per job created and KPIs per full-time equivalent).

To enable the EBN quality team to prepare a Comprehensive Incubator Benchmarking Report, EBN needs to receive and validate the full EC-BIC questionnaire in all its sections.

“The publication of the benchmarking report is particularly important as we use it in several ways. First of all this document is an integral element of our quality policies. It is indeed:

• commented and then transmitted to our shareholders,

• integrated within our communication strategies,

• redesigned and made public through the media.

On a professional level it helps us to adjust our strategies and action plans.

For example, we have realized that our weak point, in comparison with other BICs, was the service chain of support provided to the existing SMEs of our area. Hence, we implemented a lobbying action to raise enough resources to start the deployment of such services. The benchmarking report was useful as we integrated the findings in our argumentations and was instrumental to enlarge the scope of the «ACCET-Val d'Oise Technopole» as it now has encompassed the important mission of engineering innovation within the existing SMEs. The analysis stemming out from the BIC benchmarking report has strongly influenced the decision.”

**Christophe Poupard**, Managing Director of ACCET Val d'Oise⁴, Cergy-Pontoise, France

---

**The Peer-to-Peer Review Report**

The peer-to-peer review report culminates in a one-day visit from an EC-BIC expert and experienced BIC director. It enables the visited incubator to receive a full day of technical assistance pinning down the weaknesses and the strengths of the incubator versus the quality standards of the EC-BIC Quality Mark Criteria.

The advantages of such a report come from the possibility to receive insightful technical knowledge and new ideas on how to improve, for example, the internal processes, the methodologies or tools used for interacting with customers, the skillset of the staff, and other features that most likely have an impact on the incubator’s performance and efficiency. Furthermore this report, which remains confidential, can support the incubator in its positioning efforts within the business support service market of the area and can be used to inform relevant stakeholders about the needs in terms of resources if the strategy is to scale up towards the BIC model.

Figure 4: content of the Comprehensive Incubator Benchmarking Report

Figure 5: the peer-to-peer review process
Tailored technical assistance

Comprehensive incubator benchmarking reports and peer reviews are powerful tools to spot both the strengths and the weaknesses of an innovation-based incubator and can lead to the development of a tailor-made technical assistance plan. This is aimed at empowering the organization in overcoming its weaknesses, embarking new practices and accelerating its compliance to the EC-BIC quality mark criteria.

Technical assistance can be activated also if the incubator has not gone through the initial benchmarking steps, although having completed the EC-BIC quality questionnaire is advised, as it provides a first picture of where the organization stands. If this is the case, then a 1-day visit to the incubator of the EBN Quality Team will need to be organized to assess its needs and to fine-tune the goal of the exercise of upgrading and upscaling.

A customized technical assistance proposal will then be elaborated by EBN and submitted for approval to the requesting organization. The technical consultancies will then be carried out by the accredited EC-BIC experts, by the EBN Quality team, or by other relevant and experienced professionals within the European innovation-based incubation industry.

EBN has assisted the modelling of many BICs and incubators in Europe and beyond and has provided support in most segments of the incubation chain such as in the development of specific incubation and acceleration components, in the definition of incubator business models, in the re-positioning of the incubator within the regional eco-system. Furthermore support was provided in the upgrading of specific services for example building local opportunities to involve entrepreneurs in specific projects, or increasing the capacity to provide soft-landing services. All these actions have supported, where possible, the alignment of the organization to the EC-BIC quality mark criteria, accrediting, in some cases, new incubators with the EC-BIC label.

The most recent EBN technical interventions have taken place in Europe, of course (France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Belgium, Czech Republic), but also in North Africa and the Middle East (Tunisia, Jordan, Palestine), in Russia and Ukraine, in the Western Balkans (Croatia, Serbia), in Latin America (Chile) and in Asia (China, Taiwan).
Becoming a “candidate BIC”

The process towards EC-BIC accreditation always starts with becoming an EBN associate member as a “candidate BIC”. The application form can also be downloaded from the EBN website, and by making sure the box “Candidate BIC” is ticked.

As soon as the membership is approved by the EBN Board of Directors (through an on-line consultation which lasts two/three weeks), the Quality Team will open a position on the EBN Quality Portal, and will provide login and password to access the online self-assessment questionnaire.

The Questionnaire

The online self-assessment questionnaire is the first tool used by the EBN Quality team to assess the compliance to the EC-BIC quality mark criteria providing a first in-depth picture of the candidate in terms of profiling and of performances indicators. The questionnaire is composed of approximately 170 questions divided into 9 sections. Over time the questions have changed, following both an attempt to rationalize and simplify the questionnaire itself,
and the need to collect data of the utmost importance to fully provide a picture of a single BIC, for quality assurance purposes, and to get a picture of the innovation-based incubation industry across Europe. Capturing trends to anticipate opportunities and challenges is certainly one of the aims of the implementation of the quality system.

There are some practical tips:

- EBN has produced a detailed “guidance note”, to be read before starting.
- The questionnaire is in English, a language spoken only by 2 countries in the EU. Translations are available in some languages, but anyway some interpretation issues may rise. The EBN helpdesk is fully available if needed.
- Filling the questionnaire may raise many questions about the candidate organisation, questions one may not have thought about before. This exercise is useful to re-think some of your activities, strategies, plans, processes and more. EBN’s quality team as well as the experience of some other BIC in this exercise, are also available upon request.

“During the process of our BIC capacity building, it was very important for us to align our services and internal procedures in such a way that we could easily and objectively measure the progress and success of the BIC activity over time. We decided that we had to implement a universally recognized quality assessment and KPI system that corresponded to those already used in established similar organisations. EBN’s system was the one to adopt. When we faced the EBN questionnaire for the first time, we had almost no significant difficulties or confusions in providing the relevant information. Probably only a few clarifications were necessary related with the exact understanding of the requested information, but the EBN quality team was very helpful in assisting us throughout the whole process.

“The questionnaire itself – states Milen - has been a very useful tool to support the thinking behind the process of the establishment of the BIC within the Ruse Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Indeed, the whole accreditation process was a sort of ‘incubation process of the BIC itself within a host organisation, allowing it to operate as fully independent entity.”

Milen Dobrev, CEO of Innobridge, BIC of Ruse, Bulgaria

7 http://www.rcci.bg/en
Section 1.1: Creation of the BIC
Section 1.2: Legal Status of the BIC and/or of the Hosting Organisation
Section 1.3: Shareholders and Stakeholders

SECTION 2: ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT
Section 2.1 BIC Strategic Alliances (structural and formal agreements)
Section 2.2: BIC Human Resources (team)
Section 2.3 Catchment area
Section 2.4 EBN Talent Pool

SECTION 3: FINANCIAL ASSESSMENT (INCOME & EXPENDITURE)
Section 3.1: Income 2012
Section 3.2: Expenditure 2012 (BIC or BIC cost centre inside hosting organisation)
Section 3.3: Assets / Property

SECTION 4: GENERAL INTEREST BIC MISSIONS
Section 4.1: Promotion of Innovation / Entrepreneurship
Section 4.2: Events, Programmes and Activities

SECTION 5: SERVICES TO NEW ENTREPRENEURS
Section 5.1: Evaluation/Strategic Guidance/Coaching tools & process in 2012
Section 5.2: Housing
Section 5.3: Training Activities

SECTION 6: SERVICES TO EXISTING SMEs

SECTION 7: SIGNPOSTING TO PARTNER ORGANISATIONS

SECTION 8: QUALITY
Section 8.1: General
Section 8.2: Transferable best practice

SECTION 9: PERFORMANCE AND EFFICIENCY
Section 9.1: Enterprise creation
Section 9.2: Enterprises supported (existing)
Section 9.3: Breakdown by nature and sector

SECTION 10: EBN SERVICES, CUSTOMER SATISFACTION SURVEY
Section 10.1: Quality
Section 10.2: Projects
Section 10.3: Events
Section 10.4: Communication
Section 10.5: Staff
Once the questionnaire is submitted, EBN’s quality team will review it and might want to ask some specific follow-up questions. When the questionnaires submitted by the candidate BIC is considered satisfactory, it will be validated. At this point EBN will indicate to the candidate BIC whether things seem ready to organize the evaluation visit, and what might be the most likely outcome. It remains up to the candidate BIC to take the final decision on whether to undertake an audit or not. In some cases, EBN suggests to proceed to a preliminary on-site visit, prior to the formal audit.

**The Evaluation Visit**

The on-site evaluation visit is a fundamental step of the overall BIC quality process, therefore make sure to organize it properly. A full detailed guide on how to prepare an audit can also be downloaded on the EBN website\(^8\).

Evaluation visits are organized for two purposes, the first one being to enable first time accreditations of candidate BICs, the second being to re-assess the compliance to the EC-BIC criteria to existing BICs. EBN indeed selects a number of existing BICs each year to be audited (approximately 10% of the network’s full members). Typically all the BICs who have failed to comply with the annual obligation to fill in the questionnaire will be inserted in the yearly evaluation program, together with BICs who are showing substantial drops in their Key Performance Indicators (as spotted through the developed EBN benchmarking tools). Three BICs will also be randomly selected.

The audit is carried out by one of the EBN accredited experts. These are all, or have been, BIC directors or senior BIC staff members. The choice of the auditor will be done according to the following criteria:

- The auditor should not be resident in the country where the audit will take place.
- As much as possible he/she will have an experience in a BIC with similar characteristics to the audited organisation (per size, catchment area, sectors, etc.).
- Although English is the official language of EBN, auditors will be chosen also according to their familiarity with the mother tongue of the country where the audited BIC is located.

Whether you are a candidate BIC, or an existing one selected within the evaluation program, an audit is a rare occasion to get reviewed by one of your peers, and therefore it should be welcomed as an occasion to share expertise and benchmark your incubation and acceleration programmes, tools, methodologies and indicators. Indeed the EBN evaluators are trained to come with a “technical assistance” mind-set added to the one of auditor.

\(^8\) [http://www.ebn.eu](http://www.ebn.eu)
“Becoming an auditor gives a unique opportunity to discover specific innovation-based incubators from the inside. These are organisations that are focused on the same mission as yours, and in most cases are involved in a strategic process of change. When you manage a BIC, you are immersed in your every-day work, with entrepreneurs and enterprises, and you don’t have enough time to look at your organisation from the outside. When you go to another organisation, and you explain them how you work, and analyse how the evaluated organisations works, you always learn a lot of things, and always bring home new ideas. Of course, from a professional point of view, it’s very satisfying to be able to give your opinion and advice to a motivated team on how to achieve all the criteria required by such a demanding label as the EC-BIC one.

Similarly, an audited organisation has many advantages to enrol in an audit process. In my experience as an EC-BIC expert, I have had the opportunity to audit both, organisations that wanted to get the BIC label for the first time, and organisations that needed to renew the label. In both cases, I’m sure, all of them identified areas of improvement and have innovated their services and products portfolio accordingly.

“Opportunities may arise as well during an audit. Indeed, for example, one of the BICs I have audited is now our partner in a European Interreg Project. Another audited BIC, instead, realizing that they needed much improvement to maintain the label, came to Asturias to visit us, to understand how we work. This visit was the start for a new stage in their strategic process, and allowed them to better orientate their plan, subsequently recovering the grant to use the EC-BIC label”.

Eva Pando, Director of BIC Asturias⁹, Spain

A national companion to the auditor can be present as well during the evaluation. Generally he/ she is selected by the EBN partner national network of innovation-based incubators, where available (e.g. RETIS in France, ANCES in Spain, ABICS in Portugal, etc.), and has the major role of supporting the auditor in getting more acquainted with the local and national reality. This national expert is behaving as an advisor and supports the auditor, not as an auditor himself.

The auditor will look into the candidate organisation, making sure that the criteria expressed in the 5 paragraphs of the EC-BIC criteria are actually met. To do this he/she will need to:
1. Talk to the shareholders and stakeholders of the BIC, to make sure it is fully supported/endorsed/acknowledged by all as the instrument through which innovation-based incubation/acceleration processes will be implemented.

2. Interview the staff of the BIC, to assess their qualifications and expertise and to see whether the human resources are adequate to undertake the tough job of BIC practitioners.

3. Assess the processes of support to new potential entrepreneurs and existing SMEs, the services delivered and their structure.

4. Interview the supported entrepreneurs and companies to assess the level of satisfaction as well as the qualitative and quantitative levels of support provided.

At the end of the day, the evaluator should have had access to all the information needed to compile the report. All who participated in the audit will have the possibility to write comments on the recommendations of the expert (i.e. the national companion and the audited organisation). The auditor will then prepare a comprehensive report based on a standard template, which is submitted to EBN as well as to the audited organization. The Head of Quality of the EC-BIC Quality System will also provide his inputs, in order to provide as much information as possible to the BIC Quality Mark Committee, who, in the end, is entrusted by the EBN Board of Directors and by the European Commission to take decisions on each specific case.

The BIC Quality Mark Committee (BQMC)

Quality assurance is not an easy task, and when it comes to assessing the compliance to the EC-BIC Quality Mark Criteria, it gets even more complicated. Indeed the criteria do not force a model upon organizations, as there are many organizational models that can be locally pursued while meeting the compliance with the criteria. The complexity of each different situation, varies along with the variety of the European, and recently extra-European, regions. Different actors, different ecosystems, different entrepreneurial communities, require different support models. Therefore we need to adopt an attitude which is both rigid, as the criteria need to be met, and open, as we need to acknowledge that there are many different ways through which the criteria can be met, and that we may very well bump in new ways every time we have a discussion”.

Lennard Drogendijk, Director of Business Development Friesland10, Netherlands

10 http://www.bdfriesland.nl
The BQMC, composed by BIC directors, external experts and the European Commission (DG Enterprise & Industry), is the guardian of the EC BIC label and is the body devoted to take a final decision on the granting (or not) of the label, and taking the right decision is therefore, not always a straightforward task.

Operatively the BQMC will take one of the following decisions:

1. The BQMC verifies the compliance of the candidate organisation to the BIC Quality Mark Criteria, therefore entrusts EBN to enter in a 3-year contract (automatically renewable unless quality assurance problems arise in the meantime) with the new BIC to grant the use of the EC-BIC trademark.

2. The BQMC verifies that the criteria are not met, therefore denies the use of the label.

3. The BQMC verifies that the organisation is almost compliant with the criteria and therefore entrusts EBN to enter in a 1-year contract to use the EC-BIC label. And sets some mandatory conditions that need to be met in a 1-year time.

Once the candidate BIC has been accepted in the EC-BIC club as full member, the only obligation it carries is to comply with the quality process filling the quality questionnaire within the deadline every year, and accommodate an audit if selected in the year’s evaluation program.
BICs were invented almost 30 years ago by the European Commission and by various private & public stakeholders, with the aim to boost the economic development and the innovation potential of European regions. The BICs’ core mission is to accelerate innovative entrepreneurship at territorial levels, through the customized delivery of a comprehensive range of professional support & incubation (pre-incubation, incubation, post-incubation) services addressed to innovative start-ups, spin-offs, entrepreneurs and SMEs. The BICs’ value chain is classically described as follows: “stimulate, detect, assess, select, incubate, mentor, cluster, accelerate, internationalize”.

EC-BICs services target, in priority, individual entrepreneurs and firms who show a clear case for innovation and growth. The standard method deployed by BICs in the accompaniment of these entrepreneurs, is customized case by case, and is usually intensive and on the long run. The services provided cover areas such as business ideas/projects assessment, business planning guidance, economic and technological intelligence, business modeling and financial simulation, ad-hoc training, seed and early-stage financing, personalized coaching, physical incubation infrastructure, international business development support, constitution and animation of clusters & communities of innovative firms, collaborative projects development.

EC-BICs are constantly seeking to improve by cultivating four principles:

(a) focusing on their core competences through the EC-BIC quality insurance system

(b) measuring their performances and impact thanks to an evidence-based approach

(c) enhancing their efficiency by adopting a true benchmarking culture and the EBN benchmarking tools

(d) convincing decision-makers about the value for money of the BICs’ mission
The EC-BICs experience and the EBN practice are very good examples on how to improve innovation ecosystems and how to respond to a major weakness of operational instruments. The core mission and the core competences are not focused, not precise enough (“yes the devil is still in the details”), the services are not well described and delivered, the perception of end-users on “who’s good at what” is confusing, there are still too many “superficial generalists” and specialists communicate badly on their distinctive assets & identities.

The EBN quality system helps EC-BICs & Innovation-Based Incubators (but also Technology parks, Accelerators, Clusters, and other Entrepreneurship Centres) to enable proper monitoring to take place. It gives them access to the power of benchmarking, it brings them tools for management, for reporting, for promotion, for strategic re-direction, for questioning their business models, for quality development, for partnerships, and obviously to enhance their performances and reach “communicable success-stories”

This is a route we at EBN have taken years ago. We have developed a “quality system” which comprises a compliance, a benchmarking and a branding component. This system is explained in this technical note: powered by a community-based self-assessment protocol, a routine web application, a combined set of both process & performance indicators, and a “peer-to-peer” audit system, this initiative has enabled the EC-BIC brand & label to be highly respected in private and public circles.

The EC-BIC label is becoming a standard of reference within and around the sector of incubating innovation-based entrepreneurs. An open standard, capable to respond to changes, thanks to its non-governmental operational dimension, and its adoption by governmental bodies, such as the European Commission, the European Space Agency, the European Investment Bank and, more recently, by the European Court of Auditors!
Documents
The following documentation can be downloaded on the EBN website (www.ebn.eu)

The Quality System
• EC-BIC Quality Mark Criteria
• EC-BIC Quality Questionnaire
• Introduction to the Quality System
• BIC Quality Mark Committee: Role, Composition and Regulations
• Sample of a Comprehensive Incubator Benchmarking Report

Other technical publications
• EBN Technical Notes #1, October 2012, “Coworking collaborative spaces for microentrepreneurs”
• European Commission, February 2010, “The Smart Guide to Innovation-Based Incubators”
• European Commission, February 2010, “20 Case studies : 10 Innovation-Based Incubators + 10 Innovative Start-Ups”
• BIC Observatory, June 2013, «EC-BIC Observatory 2013 and the 3 year trends»

Contacts
• Giordano Dichter, EBN Head of Quality and Technical Assistance
  Tel: +32 2 7611083
  Email: giordano.dichter@ebn.eu

• Valerio Leonardi, EBN Quality Senior Expert
  tel: + 32 2 761 10 94
  Email: Valerio.Leonardi@ebn.eu
Authors

Giordano Dichter, European BIC Network (gdi@ebn.eu)
Head of Quality and Technical Assistance at the European BIC Network. He is passionate about incubation and innovation and always seeks ways to introduce the latter in the former.

David Tee, Incubation Worldwide (david@theincubatormagazine.com)
Senior Consultant for Quality and Technical Assistance at EBN and publisher of “The Business Incubator Magazine”. He believes that supporting entrepreneurs is the best way to create wealth for an economy and jobs for its citizens.

Philippe Vanrie, European BIC Network (pva@ebn.eu)
CEO of the European BIC Network. A working life spent to vouch for the BICs and innovation-based incubation all across Europe and beyond.

Special thanks to
Milen Dobrev, director of BIC Ruse, Bulgaria.
Desmond Fahey, Director of Dublin BIC, Ireland.
Stojan Gorup, director of BIC Sezana, Slovenia.
Jose’ Martins, director of BIC Net Porto, Portugal.
Eva Pando, director of BIC Asturias, Oviedo, Spain.
Christophe Poupart, director of BIC ACCET Val D’Oise, Cergy-Pontoise, France.
THE EBN ORGANISATION: A PLATFORM FOR INSPIRATION, SERVICES AND OPPORTUNITIES!

EBN is a Brussels-based team delivering a full range of services, which includes a comprehensive set of accreditation & networking services to the BICs, as well as the deployment and coordination of EC-projects in relevant areas. EBN membership services are available upon the payment of an annual membership fee, and are classified in 5 categories:

- **Policy support & EU representation**: policy watch, tender watch, position papers, public sector visibility, participation to consultations & working groups

- **Quality & technical assistance services**: accreditation, benchmarking & statistics, case-studies, feasibility studies & on-site consultancy, study tours

- **Networking activities & events**: annual congress, conferences, workshops, thematic working groups/sub-networks, strategic partnerships

- **Projects & thematic networking development**: partner search, bid writing, contract/project coordination, EC-projects dissemination, guidance, training

- **Promotion activities**: websites, newsletters, publications, public relations, media support

EBN’s professional and integrated platform of services contributes to the rapid growth of the BICs’ industry, in quality and in quantity, across Europe, and beyond. This expertise is recognized as unique by both public and private sectors, at international national, regional and local levels.
EUROPEAN BIC NETWORK

AVENUE DE TERVUEREN
168 - BTE 25
B-1150 BRUSSELS

PHONE: +32 2 772 89 00

FAX: +32 2 772 95 74

E-MAIL: EBN@EBN.EU

WEB SITE: WWW.EBN.BE