Deputy Director General of the Enterprise and Innovation Department at the Ministry of Economic Affairs Jaani Heinonen describes Team Finland’s aspirations to help the country become a more innovative and economically advanced nation.
Can you provide a brief history of Team Finland and outline its core aims and objectives?

Team Finland is both a network and a process to support international organisations, export and growth of the Finnish industry (especially SMEs), and to provide skills and expertise to Finnish companies. It was set up by the Finnish business community in the private sector, which thought that the Government’s services should be reorganised and so we launched Team Finland in autumn 2012. Team Finland was then implemented into the Prime Minister’s office and the first strategy for Team Finland was adopted by the Government in summer 2013, with the first implementation beginning in September of that year. So we have been efficiently running for the past two years, and you will see the network has been intensifying especially over the past year.

What is your role within the network, and how has your previous experience prepared you for this work?

We have a structure in which the Team Finland office is coordinating work across the Government from the Prime Minister’s office. In my administration, I am Director General of the Enterprise and Innovation Department at the Ministry of Economic Affairs. My role is to lead Team Finland’s work related to this ministry, especially focusing on how we are implementing work in related agencies; for example, the Funding Agency for Technology and Innovation, the export and investment promotion agency, and our export loan and guarantee organisation. These are the core organisations we work with, but there are several other key organisations that have certain Team Finland responsibilities in the Ministry of Economic Affairs administration, and I am basically leading this work.

I have been working closely with international R&D and innovation corporations for most of my career. I spent two years in East Asia, and was also based in Shanghai in China for eight years, from 2004-12, where Finland’s first Innovation Centre abroad was developed. During this time I also worked for Tekes, the National Technology and Innovation Agency, and FinNode China Innovation Network, and so I know the key functions of this network inside out.

A crucial aspect of Team Finland’s operating model is its collaboration with both publicly funded bodies and the private sector. How does this cooperation work?

It’s quite interesting that we have this model of having a Team Finland Network and process. This was initiated and strongly directed by the private sector. We have a steering board for Team Finland that comprises private sector members within a variety of leading fields and is chaired by the Prime Minister and all the key ministers, such as the Minister of Economic Affairs, the Minister for Foreign Trade and the Minister of Education and Culture. Therefore, the private sector has an influence on how we are changing the operating model within the government – it’s a close collaboration with the private sector. When we look at how we are developing our work both internationally in our country teams and in our regional teams, we have a strong partnership with publicly funded bodies and also private sector bodies such as the Chambers of Commerce and other chambers of different country teams. It is a public-private partnership, so on one side of the network is the publicly funded bodies and on the other side are the companies and private organisations – the two sides together form the Team Finland Network.

In what ways does Team Finland encourage Finnish businesses and enterprises to enter the international market? Can you give a recent example of an SME that – with support from the network – has successfully gone global?

We have just launched our Team Finland service areas, publicly funded international organisational services, which the network has put together as one unifying process for the first time. This hasn’t been done before, and until now the services have been scattered around different administrations, agencies and operations. Now, organisations do not need to worry about which agency to approach about their specific interests, as we provide services for companies who want to go international. We encourage and support them to move to the international market by having a clear service offering for companies. We can also provide them with more exact information on potential business opportunities and offer advice, training, networks, official contacts and funding. We try to encourage them to enter the international market by providing clear services and trying to understand how these services should be developed to be more efficient in the future.

Six service areas for Finnish businesses and enterprises:

- Market opportunities
- Advice and training
- Financing
- Networks
- Official contacts
- Visibility

Example: Supercell has been using the Finpro services and funding. They have received a US $1.5 billion investment from Japan last year. Read more at www.supercell.net

How is the country investing in and supporting STEM disciplines in order to advance research and boost innovation?

Finland is obviously known for a strong engineering culture and the focus and extended interest in this area has never been a problem; however, what we do need to focus more on is how we can bridge that gap between research and the market.

To advance research in order to boost innovation, we have established the Aalto University – an innovation university here in Finland, which on a global scale was a courageous move in combining the Helsinki School of Technology, the Helsinki Business School and the Helsinki School of Arts, Design and Architecture. These are three very different disciplines and former independent universities that were joined together in the innovation university to enable cross-discipline collaboration. So far, the results from the university are very encouraging, and we are seeing increasingly more students applying and a larger number of courses available. For example, a student in the Business School who would have previously only studied business, would now have the opportunity to study one of the STEM disciplines or an art and design course. This university has boosted a strong start-up culture in Finland; many have become very entrepreneurial and created start-ups during or at the end of their studies.

Part of Team Finland’s work is the promotion of foreign investment. What key benefits can the country offer to companies worldwide?

In many ways, the country has turned into a hub of innovation. It is known for its mobile technology, of course, with the success story of Nokia. We are at a stage now where we can really be an excellent global base for...
any high-tech firm in the world. This is partly because Finland is a super power for education; our basic education in lower schools remains world leading, and companies like Nokia and Rovio Entertainment Ltd, which is famous for games such as Angry Birds, are now looking to fund learning. We are such a small country, so we have to be looking all the time for international opportunities. We are in a global position now where the tipping point in the economy and development is moving into East-Asia, and Finland is the hub of Eurasia, sitting in between the west and the east, with the connection between Helsinki and East Asia being most efficient.

Why is it important for the network to closely monitor and observe the EU's internal market? In what ways does Team Finland seek to influence trade policy?

One part of our service is to make sure that we provide a level playing field for companies not only in Finland but also internationally so that they can compete on equal terms with other companies around the world. The EU’s internal market is important for us because we have such a small home market. Furthermore, the development of the open digital market is very important for us; if Europe wants to compete on a global level, it needs a strong internal digital market in the future.

Is the country currently facing challenges as it strives to grow its global economy?

We have had a huge success story as being part of the global economy when we had our so-called mobile wonder years. We learnt a lot in the struggle that Nokia faced when their business model started to be strongly challenged. The main task now is to not only have one leading company, but to also have an avalanche of SMEs. However, companies here still need to better understand what the global demand is and how to respond to it. Team Finland wants to help our companies understand the economic requirements when they go global and to have sufficient support available to these companies.

On the 2014 Innovation Union Scoreboard, Finland is rated fourth in innovation performance in the EU. How is the country working to overtake Sweden, Denmark and Germany to become the top innovation leader in Europe?

It’s a continuous process, where Finland for many years was number one on that list, and when you are a leader in something the only way is down, so sometimes you have to go down to get new speed again. I think we know that we have a good opportunity to stay within the top four. We realised that many of the structures we had before were not flexible; however, Team Finland is working to provide more flexible and dynamic services for companies to internationalise. We also need governmental innovation, and currently we are thinking about what platform to do this on. We hopefully can be more competitive when we look at the whole chain of innovation – whether it is pure innovation funding or if it is the commercial side. Collaboration and communication is insufficient in some parts and that is why it is important for Team Finland to deliver a new platform for Finland.
What have been Team Finland’s biggest achievements to date?

You could say that there are a couple of small successes and a couple of bigger successes. One of the bigger achievements is related to putting together all the public international organisational services into one service offering. To combine all these services, build a joint understanding between our teams at home and abroad, and create a complete service offering is a big achievement, even if it’s only a starting point. Without this starting point, we wouldn’t be able to communicate and develop the process.

We have also been able to remodel our core organisation in internationalisation, Finpro, which has gone through a significant change over the 12 months, and as a result of that we have a totally new organisation that is able to build up new models of working with companies most efficiently. The new Finpro comprises three areas: Export Finland, Invest in Finland and Visit Finland. We are aiming to provide more into services and specific responsibilities within Finland. Finpro is now a public service that feeds into the private sector in a normal competitive model giving the consultative services to companies.

In terms of economy, technology and society, how do you envision Finland progressing in the future?

We have an opportunity to drive strong growth in Finland by promoting the country as a technological, innovative global platform for any company in the world. If you want to drive your innovations and solutions to the next level, you need to be in Finland. We are famous for being very innovative and a solution-based society, and this is something we are playing on quite strongly now; Finland is the best global base for innovation. Finland’s vision in these three core areas – economy, technology and society – is to be the best global innovation base for any company in the world.

http://team.finland.fi