



Finding solutions together

Increasingly we see public and private parties working together to create innovation in the care sector, not only because this is a necessary condition for the award of grants, but more importantly because it produces results.

Slowly but surely, the collaboration between public and private parties has become the norm, rather than the exception with regard to innovation in the care sector. This is not only because many innovation initiatives rely on the application of new technologies that often come from start-ups, but also because complex solutions require the combined input of various disciplines and areas of expertise.

Thomas de Vos, of Mieloo & Alexander, a specialist in logistical technologies, has direct experience of the added value created by such a public-private partnership. His company develops the software and systems for 2PCS, a watch-like device for elderly people that includes a gps, and fall detection and heart rate sensors. In an emergency, the user can alert a call centre which will either make direct contact with the user, or warn a care provider where necessary.

Why a public-private partnership makes good sense

'Public-private partnership' are the magic words that open the purse strings for the financing of innovation. In reality, however, there are obstacles to overcome. For example, there will be a difference in focus: the general good versus a specific interest. Or a difference in style: public parties tend to act more cautiously and laboriously, whereas private parties will act more directly and substantively. The skill is in being able to recognize and exploit each other's best qualities. Companies have good reason to work in partnership. In the words of one CEO: 'It helps us to acquire legitimacy, we attach importance to the independent appraisal of the research; it benefits us, and increases our reputation.'

Smart linkage

Behind the 'watch face' is concealed a world of data, that needs to link together in a smart way so that it can adequately assist the user. De Vos: 'It's much more than a gadget that someone will soon be wearing on their wrist. We are working on a solution for a particular need of the older generation, namely a way to stay independent for longer and to remain mobile. Such a solution is by definition complex and requires an extensive range of knowledge and expertise.'

2PCS is being developed by a consortium of nine European public and private parties. De Vos: 'Each of these makes their own invaluable contribution. The University of Innsbruck is conducting the research, an Austrian care facility knows everything about what the clients need, and we are good in systems integration. And don't forget: we know how to bring a product to market. This expertise is something that is lacking in the academic world and care sector. In my experience, each of these different roles is very important in its own right.'



Benefit to society

Many private parties find the care sector (and indeed the academic world) hard to fathom out. What persuades a company to get involved in a public-private partnership with regard to innovation in the care sector? According to innovation consultant Hans Slijp: 'In my experience, you can bring private enterprise on board by emphasizing the benefit to society of an initiative. It enables you as a business to prove your credentials as a socially-responsible business. In addition, it offers growth prospects, especially in terms of the development of a complicated product. As a company, you can gain a technological advantage by taking part.' Naturally, there are also commercial benefits. A partnership that

Slijp took part in required significant investment from the participating companies, but this investment could be immediately recuperated in part thanks to other contracts.

Identifying differences

It is crucial to the effectiveness of a public-private partnership that the parties together identify their shared interest. Experience shows us that it is quite possible to have different goals: an SMB applies different measures for success than, for example a university researcher. That is not a bad thing, so long as you clearly identify those differences and at the same time spell out the joint interest you wish to serve within the framework of the project. To achieve this, you form a kind of coalition within which it hardly matters any more whether you are a public or a private party.

More tricky in practice

So, it's all a piece of cake, this kind of public-private partnership? Not entirely. In practice it often raises problems, especially if the project is to take several years. It is especially difficult for small private parties to guarantee the continuity of their input over a longer period, particularly if they are asked to make a significant investment. It is not unusual for the promised products or part products not to materialize, because a company pulls out or even goes into liquidation, and a consortium is forced to look for other solutions. Another problem is the differences in the 'outcomes' described above. In short: science research publishes papers, companies manufacture products, and the care sector provides services. The necessary efforts should be in proportion to the contributions sought from the partners by the partnership.

Different cultures

A related challenge within a public-private partnership is the sometimes difficult hurdle of differences in culture. De Vos: 'As a commercial company, we are accustomed to responding quickly. Within this project, however, we proceeded at a much slower speed. You realise that care facilities in particular need more time to reach a decision.' The skill lies mostly in the ability to exploit each other's strengths. On the one hand, the careful thought processes applied by the academic world and care sector can protect the partnership from hasty decisions. On the other hand, private parties – who are required to respond to urgent needs to produce a 'marketable' product – can give impetus to the process. Sooner or later there does come a time when you have to end the research phase and come up with a concrete application.



Aside from the challenges created by these differences in culture, it's just really enjoyable, says De Vos, to get to know the various worlds that come together in this process: 'And it's great to sometimes be able to do something that's very different from what we usually do – in this case, to save as many costs as possible by optimising systems. In this project we have been able to help people improve their mobility and gain greater independence so that they are able, for example, to shop for themselves. To be able to contribute to such achievements is very satisfying.'

