
© E.A. LYUBIMOVA, I.V. IGNATOVA

eal@list.ru

UDC 316.472

THE CONDITIONS OF DEVELOPMENT OF REGIONAL INNOVATIVE ENVIRONMENT: THE EXPERIENCE OF FOCUS-GROUP RESEARCH*

SUMMARY. This article deals with the analysis of the conditions of formation and development of innovative environment of the region. Innovative environment is seen as a fundamental source of innovation. The set of conditions for the development of the innovative environment of the region is studied by means of focus-group method, the author's interpretation of the program and the research instruments are offered. The most significant findings of the study include the description of the external and internal conditions relevant for the innovative environment of the region, and also positive and negative factors of the innovative environment in the Tyumen region are identified.

External conditions of the innovative environment in the region comprise scientific and industrial potential, personnel, financial and administrative resources, industrial demand for innovation. The main problems in the development of innovative environment of the region are the dual nature of innovations, the weakness of investment institutions, law enforcement practice, the absence of federal regulatory framework rationalization activities, lack of personnel professionalism, their reluctance in creation and implementation of innovations. In conclusion, the recommendations on the formation of favorable innovative environment in the region are formulated.

KEY WORDS: innovative environment, the region, the conditions for the development of the innovative environment in the region, a focus-group.

The current stage of development of the Russian society is characterized by efforts to build an innovative model, which is based on intellectual resources, high-tech and information technology. The innovative model involves a system of relationships of science, production and society in which innovations are the basis of effective social and economic development. Consequently, the cooperation of entrepreneurial, scientific environment and society provides a mechanism for the innovative development of the country and the region as its structural element. The process of innovative development depends on conditions created by the innovative environment.

The concept of "innovative environment" in this research is based on the view of M. Castells: "... a specific set of relations of production and management, based on

* The article is written with support of the Federal Target Program "Scientific and scientific-pedagogical personnel of innovative Russia", 2009-2013 (Research project "Design of a model and technology for indicative monitoring of innovative environment of the region", agreement №. 14.B37.21.0026).

the social organization, which generally separates the work culture and instrumental goals aimed at generating new knowledge, new processes and new products ... The specific character of innovative environment is determined precisely by its ability to generate synergy, i.e. the added value is not derived from the cumulative effect of the elements present in the environment, but from their interaction. Innovative environments are fundamental sources of innovation and creation of added value in manufacturing processes in the information age” [1].

We will consider a set of conditions for the development of innovative environment of the region that were pointed out by the research method of focus-groups. A focus-group study was used as a complementary tool of quantitative research [2]. This method allowed us to obtain more information on the topic studied, which lies outside the scope of hypotheses. This has been achieved due to the effect of group dynamics of focus-group discussion. The acquired additional information lets us improve the understanding of the issue studied, formulate new ideas and put forward an additional hypothesis [3].

We apply this method, because it is important to disclose individual opinions of the participants in the process of their mutual communication, rather than reaching a mutually acceptable solution for all. The focus-group has also enabled observation of the process of interactions during data collection. It provided not as much interaction with the moderator, as with the other participants, which reduced the impact of subordination and ensured equitable nature of the relationship [4].

The application of the focused interview was directed on a deliberately limited range of the discussed issues and the priority of their most in-depth consideration [5]. Therefore, the guide includes 12 questions designed to draw attention to the instances of perception of the subject matter. This technique provides the most complete range of subjective opinions, estimates, views necessary for better understanding and explanation of the phenomenon, revealing the inner motivation of respondents [6].

The research objective was achieved by holding four focus-groups to find new information and formulate a theoretical basis of the problem. The members of the first focus-group were innovation infrastructure authorities of the region, in the second group – officials of business entities attached to institutes of higher education according to the Federal Law №. 217-FZ of August 2, 2009 [8]. The third and the fourth groups comprised entrepreneurs of small and medium enterprises.

Now we are going to review the most significant results of the research. The first external condition* stimulating the development of innovative environment in the Tyumen Region that was named by the respondents was scientific resources: “... science should be present in academic, sectorial, and higher-education forms...”

The second condition was financing, “because you cannot innovate without money.” Innovation is supported by federal and local authorities: “... The Innovation Policy Committee of the Tyumen Region supports small innovative enterprises; <...>

* As the grounds for studying inner and outer conditions, stimulating innovative processes and innovative activity in the region, the research conducted by H. Neubauer [9] was applied, this research being added and adjusted by the authors to the topic of the present article.

there are business entity support programs: a financial one, i.e. refund of expenses; grants for development <...>; state grants: Fund for the Promotion of the Development of Small Forms of Enterprises in the Scientific and Technical Sphere (Bortnik Fund), <...> the well-known program “Start”, <...> active innovative enterprises, <...> which motivate their employees to participate in the program UMNIK.”

The next factor, influencing the organization of the innovative environment of the region, is administrative resources: “we have good will <...>, a political one”. “Concerning the regions, <...> it is up to the governor in many respects. But it mostly depends on the prosperity of the region: if there is money to be given, the region is innovative, otherwise – no innovations.”

The next factor is productive potential. The participants named eight most important economic spheres of the Tyumen Region: oil and gas, petrochemical, building, agrarian-industrial, meat production, machinery construction, medical, and ecologic spheres. In each sphere, the basis for innovation development is scientific and productive potentials intertwined: “if you start from scratch, you either lack scientific or productive potential.”

Large-scale industry demand for innovations is the fifth factor named by the experts. According to the basic principles of market economy, demand is stimulated by competition: “...demand needs a competitive environment.”

The participants consider monopoly to be an obstacle to a normal competition: “...there should be no monopolies, like the ones we see in some sectors in the region, such as fuel and energy...” It makes the realization of some innovative projects more complicated: “...we realize that getting an innovation in some major oil company is nearly impossible, because the monopoly dictates its own terms.”

The sixth factor of the development of the innovative environment of the region is the staff resource: “the personnel that should be educated in our higher education institutes, as well as in sectorial institutes...”

The focus-groups participants note that the classic Soviet educational system prepared specialists with more general-oriented skills than the Western system. The expansion of specialization stimulates creativity: “...a person sees more horizons”. Thus, it is necessary «...to improve higher education and help it prepare specialists to meet the country’s needs...”

But the federal modernization of the educational system cut down the opportunity to use advantages of the Soviet professional education system: “...the government has already drawn a decision on the educational issue. There will be the academic degree of a bachelor – highly-focused non-specialist, <...> the government has already made the choice, <...> being ignorant of the limits of the Western system. It’s all over.”

The lack of highly-qualified specialists able to solve irregular problems has been noted: “...the hardest thing was to find an appropriate specialist, <...> many offer their service, but it is either costly, or <...> poorly skilled.

All are ready to perform typical operations, but if they get a more complicated task, the job becomes too difficult for them.”

The participants also named some negative factors, as well as positive, influencing the development of the innovative environment of the region. The first group of factors

includes competitions. "There are plenty of competitions stimulating innovation activity, <...> for example, the program UMNİK, educational courses and programs, <...> "Klub umnikov Tyumenskoj oblasti"..." Such programs help "...present and future innovators" find their line of development and motivate them financially. The innovation activities of the youth of the Tyumen Region are highly financed by such basic programs as UMNİK and "Start".

Another stimulating factor is "constructing public organizations, which would popularize the development of the innovative activities <...> – young scientists' councils..." The experts presume that the creation of such an elite community in the region will "...stimulate promotion of their innovative projects..." The membership in such a social community should indicate the social status of the innovator: "the man who pursues science, innovations <...> (should realize) what is really prestigious..."

The next significant factor is a high level of qualification of personnel. "...If a person is into some interesting profession, he or she tries to improve it. Such desire to improve brings new ideas. <...> New ideas are created by those <...> who know their profession well." "The profound awareness of the issue and the ability to fulfill a task quickly..." and the combination of different directions of activities contribute to creation of an innovative mechanism: "...I have three jobs: teaching, business, and production. This gives me new ideas, <...> I bind my work to innovations..."

Another factor, contributing to the development of the innovative environment, is conferences, experience interchange between specialists "...from different regions, different institutes, different countries. You have a conversation, you see that their idea is better, and you start to develop that idea."

Among negative factors, influencing the development of the innovative environment of the region, the participants considered the following: lack of innovators: "...such deficit has always been present in all regions, and it will always be there...", "the situation abroad is the same, otherwise there would be no brain drain." Nevertheless, in comparison with other regions, the Tyumen Region is in better luck here, as it is shown by the direction of social mobility. Thus, qualified specialists are coming to our region from the neighboring Kurgan and Omsk Regions. Yet, we can observe IT specialists leaving the Tyumen Region for Moscow and abroad. "We are not so good in some spheres, but in most of them we are more advanced than other regions." "...Our neighbors have almost nothing of the kind. They do have some separate elements, but there is no integrated structure there." The respondents consider the level of the development of innovative environment in the Tyumen Region to be quite high, at the same level with the Tatarstan, Novosibirsk and Tomsk Regions.

The second negative factor is an objective characteristic of innovation – duality. It is considered a kind of an obstacle to the development of the innovative environment: "...speaking of innovations, one should as well consider the other side of the problem. Innovations lead to higher labor productivity, reduction of jobs, and it is important to find new jobs for those people..."

The third factor that reduces the efficiency of the innovative environment is the investment sphere. The formation of the innovative sphere of the region is stimulated

by “mechanisms of innovative processes”, such as investment institutions. Assessing the development of the mechanisms, the participants note that, “...our region <...> does not have enough investment institutions”, and this drawback is not specific just for the Tyumen Region: “...they are poorly developed in the country as a whole”. Banks, that can serve as investment institutions, “...are mainly unwilling to participate”. It is necessary to revise the implementing legislation to involve more banks in the innovative environment of the region and of the country as a whole: “... we need corresponding laws and investment mechanisms to be developed; <...> today they (banks) have terrible interest rates, which are not appropriate for small and medium enterprises”.

The fourth factor is the accessibility of innovative programs. The present innovative projects, such as Bortnik Fund, are considered difficult to access for most of the considered entities: “...if you look at the rules of the game in this fund, you will see that they are not so simple and accessible for small and medium enterprises”.

The fifth factor is the legal framework that forms specific aspects of the development of the Russian innovative environment. “There is another obstacle, a more influential one – our legislation, <...> the law on tendering” (Federal Law No. 94-FZ of July 21, 2005 [10]). In this case, law enforcement practice causes the level of corruption to rise, experts say: “...all these tenders caused this very corruption, which is present in the country today, and which is attempted to be fought, but it is not going anywhere until we get rid of the law”; “...corruption is cultivated legally, but it is being attempted to be fought by prosecution authorities. So we need a good law, and the prosecution offices will not have to chase bribery-takers.”

On the one hand, the law, considered above, affects the technical aspect of innovative projects’ realization.

According to this law, “...the enterprise which proposes a smaller price (poor equipment always costs less) wins; <...> as a result, the enterprise gets out-of-date equipment, <...> which causes an initially efficient project to become inefficient, as it loses efficient equipment.”

On the other hand, the law supposes “...the absence of financial aspect of innovations”, which is caused by objective characteristics of innovative products. “Innovative production implies great R&D expenses, thus innovative products <...> are more expensive than traditional ones, though the quality is higher. While the price is the only criterion, innovative products, the cost price of which is higher due to R&D, are consequently noncompetitive.” Also, the law does not consider the reduction of operational costs, achieved by innovation: “...only the price is concerned, and the costs reduction is not.”

Assessing the condition of rationalization activity in the Russian Federation, experts marked that “...it is completely removed from the Russian legal framework; <...> it was all regulated in details in the USSR...”

At the federal level, there is a legislative gap, which is partially filled up by local regulations, “...and the stimulation can be found <...> in each particular enterprise.” For example, “Gazprom” and “Russian Railways” have developed their own inventive and labour-saving standards. Since the issue is not fixed at the federal

level “<...> there is no further development or stimulation, and small enterprises usually ignore it.”

One of the problems of realization of an innovative project mentioned by the focus-group was “...the qualified personnel issue, lack of personnel or their poor skills, the absence of motivation. Their lack of understanding importance of their professional development and working efficiency <...> Many ideas have not been realized because they had no one to be developed by, and not because they were bad.” The participants of the survey note that innovative activities are complicated by “certain inactivity of labour resources”. The necessity of staff training makes innovation difficult: “...in order to innovate, it is necessary to implement different methods: from persuasion to economic motivation”, “...the Russians are mentally inert to innovation...”

Difficulties in realization of an innovative project are caused by perception barriers: “when you are introducing some new program <...>, you inevitably face the issue of translating the process to the language of employees for them to understand it, <...> this is a translation problem.”

Participating entrepreneurs say that they feel a lack of awareness about innovative programs in the region: “...many do not even know about such programs. Maybe, some informational programs should be created for entrepreneurs to make them more aware of what is going on there”.

The review of the focus-group research data provides us with the following conclusion. Despite the strengthening of the role of innovation in the development of modern society, the participants do not consider it to be the main factor in organizations’ functioning.

The respondents see the advisable ratio of tradition and innovation in business activities differently. On the one hand, innovation is viewed as a top-priority direction of modern social development: “all spheres need innovations, the whole world works this way today.” On the other hand, we observe the necessity to keep and efficiently use traditional forms of labour which maintain good results (“...there is no need to invent a square-wheeled bicycle if you have one with round wheels...”). Respondents note that innovating should be gradual, systematic, well thought-out, considering the positive experience of the world community.

The most preferable external sources of new ideas for our respondents are the deliberate need for innovations realization, the state’s innovation initiatives (government orders for innovations), conferences, experience interchange between specialists from other spheres and regions.

The participants named the following external conditions of formation and development of innovative environment of the region: scientific and productive potential, personnel resources, financial resources (federal and regional support), administrative resources (“political good will”), large-scale industry demand for innovations.

The main problems of the development of the innovative environment of the region, suggested by the respondents, are the following: the duality of innovations, which is considered “an obstacle on the path of the development of innovative

environment”; the impotence of investment institutions, which finance creation and realization of innovations; the law enforcement practice, which cultivates corruption and obstructs the realization of innovative projects; the absence of federal legal framework for rationalization; personnel’s poor professional skills, as well as their passive attitude to realization of innovations.

To create a favorable innovative environment, the region needs the following:

— a rational combination of principles of market economy and government regulation;

— a consistent state policy for the development of small and medium enterprises;

— revision of the Russian innovation legal frameworks;

— personnel training and development of professional communities, stimulating specialists’ skill improvement;

— accessibility of innovative projects financing;

— development of public organizations, popularizing innovative activities of the population;

— a rise in interregional demand for innovative products, creation of centralized production areas;

— expansion of public awareness about innovative activities in the region; change of the population’s attitude to creation and realization of innovations.

REFERENCES

1. Castells M. The Information Age: Economy, society and culture. Moscow: SI - VSHE, 2001 // <http://www.urban-club.ru/?p=122>

2. Yadov V.A. The strategy of social research: description, explanation, understanding of social reality / V.A. Yadov, V.V. Semenova. Moscow: Dobrosvet, 2001. 596 p.

3. Belanovsky S.A. The method of focus-groups. Moscow: Magistr, 1996. 272 p. // http://sbiblio.com/biblio/archive/belanovski_metod/00.aspx

4. Dmitrieva E.V. Focus-groups in marketing and sociology. Moscow: Center, 1998. 144 p.

5. Vlasova M. How to avoid tricks with focus groups // http://www.engec.ru/sites/default/files/download/m.vlasova_-_fokus-gruppy.pdf

6. Merton R. A focused Interview / R. Merton, M. Fiske, P. Kendal. Moscow: Institute for Youth, 1991. 165 p.

7. Guremina N.V. Experience in creation of business entities in universities: a regional perspective, problems and development prospects // Science and Economics, 2011. № 1 (5). Pp. 64-66.

8. The Federal Law of 02.08.2009 № 217 -FL «On Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation on the establishment of budget scientific and educational institutions, business entities with a view to practical application (implementation) of the results of intellectual activity» // [http://base.consultant.ru/cons/cgi/online.cgi?req=doc; base=LAW; n=90201](http://base.consultant.ru/cons/cgi/online.cgi?req=doc;base=LAW;n=90201)

9. Neubauer H. Innovation activity in Small and Medium Enterprises // Problems of theory and practice of management. 2002. № 3. Pp. 63-66.

10. The Federal Law of 21.07.2005 N 94- FL «On placing orders for goods, works and services for state and municipal needs» // <http://base.consultant.ru>