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A Vein of Young Entrepreneurs

"Start Up Rome, Italy." An article by Luca Macario published in 2000 about Centro ELIS and the impact it is making on an impoverished district in Rome.

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Its backers prefer to speak of a seedbed, rather than incubator, of new businesses. In any case a cooperative venture called "Bic Lazio Elis (BLE)" is a model of synergy between the private and public

sectors. Result? A new crop of corporations launched by young adults in the lower half of Italy.

BLE has spawned a string of multimedia Web-based services headed by young men. It has three partners: Telecom Italia, Business Innovation Center in Lazio province and Rome's non-profit center ELIS, long active in launching careers.

So far, thanks to seed funding from Telecom, BLE itself and the national TV chain, a dozen firms have found their legs in less than 24 months, each with some five, six pioneers schooled in the Internet. Most of the youthful founders are from south Italy. They're palpable proof of the big opportunities opened up by the New Economy.

ELIS: more than 10,000 grads in 35 years

ELIS began in November, 1965; the acronym stands for education, labor, instruction and sports. It's been a hotbed of educational and social initiatives. Pope Paul VI inaugurated the Opus Dei-sponsored center, located in what was 35 years ago one of Rome's sorest spots.

The complex sits on some eight acres. It can house 120 technicians in training. Classrooms and laboratories produce mechanics, electricians, watchmakers and jewelers on the one hand and, on the other, experts in the new technology, for both day and boarding students. BLE also has its headquarters here. As if that weren't enough, there's another division training young women in hospitality skills, plus a 400-student sports club for 400 neighborhood youths.

Successful launches

Imagining (www.imagining.it) is one of the new enterprises. Its officers are the four founders; it employs 15 others. The consultants specialize in analyzing computing needs and coming up with cyber-solutions for companies. They also sell on-line both software and hardware. In the most recent year revenues reached nearly half a million dollars.

Two others are Itas europrojects (www.itaseuroprojects.com) and Italiaviva (www.italiaviva.net), offering various computer services. Itas, employing a dozen hands, is an international fund-raiser for non-profits engaged in developmental projects in so far a dozen countries. The six-man Italiaviva, reinforced by a dozen collaborators, facilitates South American tourism.

Insulae (www.insulae.com) is a singular case. Billings for the first three months were nearly \$370,000

for the three-man architectural team. They harness the new technologies to project construction plans.

The Incubator Project

The latest project to jump out of the incubator is an attempt to link up similar "skunk works" in various technical and professional training institutes. Backers include such new-economy enterprises as HP, Nokia; Italy's Telecom Italia, Tin, RAI and Telespazio; Cisco, EDS, Nortel, Ericsson and Siemens. The first project is to pool data from throughout Italy to calculate the total outlays of regional economies.

Besides the participating companies, additional funding comes from Italia lavoro and a foundation of the Bank of Rome. The first phase is slated to cost some four and a half million dollars and will set up ELIS's "incubator" as a model to be replicated in other incubators set up

over the next two years at other institutes. The other three will be located in Rome, Bari and Milan.

To understand in depth this latest project, it would be helpful to have some background on ELIS, which over the past 35 years has trained 10,000 young men.

In cooperation with large corporations, since 1992 ELIS has been responding to personnel needs of the new economy by upgrading the skills of the already employed. Intensive, short-term courses have been offered in such areas as maintenance engineering; communication management; multimedia languages and technologies; wireless, Intranet and Internet technologies.

Media Explosion

In the past two years, the marketplace has been clamoring for

specialists in the areas of telecommunications, audio-visual and information technology. ELIS came to the rescue. It set up a new-technology department accredited by the multinational Cisco. Graduates go forth with a CCNA certificate (Cisco certified networking associate). Each year 300 students, joined by 90 distance-learning others, take the rigorous courses. There's a media library containing over 1500 hours of class- and homework available on the Internet. Participants are encouraged to start micro-enterprises. ELIS has also set up a network of some 60 technical institutes, to which it supplies distance learning, professional placement and other services.

Training first

Convinced of the need for both technical and human training, ELIS has been working overtime to launch

and upgrade programs. For example, from both ELIS alumni and others eager to enroll in the incubator project, flock participants in a course called New Ideas for Enterprise. Specialists in the new technologies, these young technicians and professionals are given the further chance to try their hand at enterprise. Besides classwork, students develop their pet ideas under the wing of sponsoring corporations.

Some of the most promising projects deal with: profiling systems for laptops B2C (tin.it); the architecture for offering distance-learning courses (Telecom Italia); Internet via satellite (Telespazio); handling a multi-channel portal (RAI); caching and multicast with stream video (Telecom and HP); and data transmission over wireless networks (Tim, Nokia).

How the incubator works

Flush with their pet projects and steeped in the ways of technology leaders, the young would-be entrepreneurs enter a second stage: the incubator itself. This is an ensemble of various ELIS services: 15 offices complete with personal computers, fax, telephones; high-speed connection with the Internet; and general secretarial services. Meanwhile, they're encouraged to attend over the course of a year some 80 hours of relevant seminars. The idea is to remain in the incubator a year and a half. After the first six months, they're expected to reimburse ELIS partially for these services (\$100/month).

Some eight enterprises are currently about to leave the incubator. Linfa, for example, specializes in streaming, Internet sites, e-commerce and off-line.

Freereservation offers free data on and reservations at hotels, bed and breakfasts, hostels and rentals apartments in Rome.

The non-profit sector

One of the ambitions of this entrepreneurial beehive is to reach the non-profit area with companies specializing in personal services for the aged, sick and handicapped. Backed by two foundations, ELIS is gathering seedbed funds for such initiatives, too often overlooked by both banks and investors.