Don Spalinger spoke of his wide-ranging experience in bringing both products of his own devising, and also other peoples’ inventions to the market, noting both the successes and failures as important steps in this process. He characterised the ‘valley of death’, and other more localised features in the funding and development landscape, and the importance of smaller and start-up companies being aware early-on of the problems and challenges they may encounter. He described how making a success of innovation and invention can be a combination of time and the external environment, as well as the quality and effectiveness of the products or its associated companies. He emphasised that an important consideration is ensuring that the management team of any company is well suited to the task – it is often not enough to let the academic researchers or original inventors take the lead once a product moves into the commercial arena.

Dr Reader gave an outline of the extensive support that the Technology Strategy Board offers to businesses, ranging from the Knowledge Transfer Networks (KTNs) and Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP) programmes to the newly-created ‘Catapult’ centres. The KTNs aim to bring companies together along sector lines, offering advice and targeted support. As an example of the sector specific roles that the KTNs play, Dr Reader discussed the unique problems that are encountered by companies in the nanotechnology sector, particular areas of risk and regulation around nanoparticles, which the Nano KTN has taken a lead on. He noted that one area often neglected in companies hoping to expand from small-to-medium-to-large is the need for a sustainable and scalable supply chain. The Nano KTN uses its position and contacts to work with smaller businesses to develop such inter-company arrangements.

Sandra Sassow, CEO of SEaB Energy, an innovative micro-generation start-up, outlined her experiences in getting the company off the ground in tough economic times. Sassow spoke of the challenges faced by innovative companies that operate away from the pack. In her specific example, SEaB isn’t easily classified as either an energy company or a waste management company, and has significantly different challenges and issues from the majority of the companies in each of these sectors. On-site, small-scale power generation is very different from centralised power generation or off-site recycling centres and the company needed to find its own voice. Sassow described the benefits of targeted,
independent lobbying of local MPs and other agencies and emphasised the benefits of networking. Businesses such as SEaB can also present a challenge to supporting agencies: SEaB was created as a 'market-driven' company, rather than a traditional invention and product-driven high-tech manufacturing businesses which meant they didn't 'fit' many of the funding streams. Noting the current economic challenges, and the impact they have had on opportunities for investment, Sassow noted that SEaB also received valuable non-financial support from many agencies, with a particular focus in developing grant applications and funding strategy.

The forum discussion focussed on the support structures and funding opportunities available to smaller and start-up companies. As a new feature on the UK’s innovation landscape, the role of the recently-introduced Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) was discussed. It was noted that there is currently much variation in the levels of engagement, and particularly budgets, of LEPs. Some, including many of those in the North East of England have been able to take advantage of existing regional structures and funding opportunities, while others are still without any significant funding. It was commented that the bulk of the funding and direction the LEPs must come from the businesses that typically make up the majority of the governing boards. That the majority of these businesses are from sectors other than high-technology was pointed to as a reason for those LEPs that are spending money, spend it on infrastructure projects rather than directly supporting research and development or innovation.

The subject of European funding sources was raised, with a comment that the successor to the Framework Programmes, “Horizon 2020”, will have a stated aim of engaging with SMEs, rather than larger companies, and will attempt to focus on higher ‘Technology Readiness Level’ areas. The European Regional Development Fund was cited as a relatively untapped resource for supporting innovation, with a caveat that the majority of the funding currently goes to what might be regarded as ‘traditional’ regional development. But it was noted that this is not a reason why a properly-crafted specification strategy could not be successful – if a region’s strength is in its innovation and technology, then support for these areas could be described as supporting the development of that region. Taking the more general point about how to acquire grants and funding, the discussion emphasised that “answering the question” is something that all businesses should focus on – something not always done at present.

Finally, on the topic of how companies can find and develop newer technologies and innovations that have not yet been commercialised, it was suggested that for companies to source and exploit technologies developed in other organisations, they need to send their engineers out into the field, not just their sales or business development teams. It is the engineers that could and should act as knowledgeable consumers and champions of technology.

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