



Contribution ID: 202

Type: **not specified**

A PROs-industry joined effort for the ITER construction: evaluating the impact

Friday, 21 September 2018 11:40 (40 minutes)

In modern innovation ecosystems, academic and practitioners' studies point out the importance of contracts and relationships between innovation actors. Among others, science-based partners, namely universities and Public Research Organizations (PROs), are valuable external sources of knowledge and fundamental pillars of the innovation ecosystems. Although consensus exists on the fact that linkages between science-based partners and industry are crucial for both parts, measuring their impact is still daunting. In this regard, the following research question arises: What is the impact for industry when collaborating for ITER?

A mixed methodology has been adopted to answer this question. The unit of analysis is the single firm that collaborates in the context of ITER project, also with the involvement of ENEA. A total of 26 Italian contractors and subcontractors were identified and analyzed. Data were collected among secondary sources for each firm (financial report and employment data available on AIDA, patent data available on Orbit database, macro data involving the economic and employment situation of the regions analyzed). At the same time, 6 case studies were conducted with selected firms, and were analyzed by content analysis. Case studies enable to drill down the correlations emerged with statistical analyses, suggest explanations for not significant correlations and provide further insights to detect impacts that cannot be grasped by secondary data.

Descriptive statistics and regression analyses show a positive correlation between the starting of the contract with the return on activities (ROA) and the net financial position. Descriptive statistics show the positive impact of the contracts for the financial performance EBITDA/Sales, not fully confirmed by linear regressions. As well, from general descriptive statistics, the impact on the employment growth appears, but linear regressions do not confirm this evidence. However, case studies support the correlations above, even those not confirmed by linear regressions, and bring into evidence other relevant dimensions of impact: market, innovation, learning, social impact. For SMEs, case studies point out an important strategic impact. The ITER project gives firms awareness of their "know-how" and of the need to stress their competencies and to diversify their businesses in a long-term view.

This contribution provides an overview of a scantily analyzed collaboration: PROs-industry at a firm-level dimension. Policy makers should consider the several dimensions of impact and support firms to transform their huge investment into a long-term value. As well, the study helps managers to be aware of the investments required and set a long-term vision on how to transform them in operative returns. Particularly for SMEs, the award of big ITER contracts implies the change of the vision because it offers the awareness to be competitive and the cash flow to invest also in other businesses.

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Session Classification: I6.5