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EURON

European Robotics Research Network

Network of Excellence

Information Society Technologies Priority

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Annual Report on EURON—Year 3

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1 Overview

This document *evaluates* the workings of the Network, from the point of view of the technical coordinator: How has the network been doing the last year? What were its successes and failures? What are its challenges? What are the new trends it has to cope with?

2 How does EURON do?

Year 3 of EURON was most significantly marked by *transitions*: the transition within EURON to a new Coordinator, and the transition at the European Commission towards a new Directorate General in charge of the project.

The change of Coordinator took too much time, because no candidates were found to take over from Henrik Christensen, who was generally perceived as being irreplaceable. A first candidate, Antonio Bicchi, eventually resigned from the mission, mainly because of the practical hurdles that was the legal structure of the network, where a transfer of full coordinatorship would also involve the transfer of all legal contracts with the founding partners. In addition, the daily administrative support for the network was done by Jeanna Ayoubi from KTH, Stockholm. Only around November 2006, a new Coordinator was found, after a vote between Board members.

Around this time, the transition towards a new Directorate General became clear, which introduced delays in decision making about, among other things, the new Description of Work, and the new directions the network was supposed to move in.

However, all these organisational and managerial problems did not hinder the working of EURON as a member network: the information dissemination between members, and between EURON and international organisations remained at a very high level. The network is considered to be successful by its members (at least as a network, much less so as a machinery to distribute research money), and by the international robotics community (no similar organisation exist elsewhere in the world).

The last months of Year 3, many informal contacts have taken place between EURON representatives and representatives from EUROP and EU-nited. The motivation is large to start doing more and more things in common, not only because the EC stimulates this integration (as in the case of the Strategic Research Agenda), but also because both communities see the added value in cooperation at the level of, for example, training, annual meetings, stimulation of technology transfer, accessibility of robotics research platforms, etc.

3 What are its challenges?

The new coordinator started an open discussion with the members (both at the Annual Meeting and via the mailing list) in order to solicit comments and remarks on the workings and the future of the network. Here is a summary of what the members perceive as challenges:

- The difference between a handful of big labs and the majority of small labs gives rise to a feeling of partiality of the EURON Board and EURON activities.
- All partners want to keep the network active in at least the following domains: web and mailinglist; annual meeting; summer schools; special interest groups; interfacing to the EC with respect to research project Calls.

- Almost none of the members have reacted with concrete suggestions about the future of the network after the EU funding stops.
- The newly structured *Prospective Research Projects* have a rather large success, compared to the previous efforts in this direction of stimulating small-scale, high-risk research projects.
- The concept of *Special Interest Groups* still remains less appealing, judged from the number of submissions.
- The participation of members from the “new membership countries” of the EU is still below par, in submitted PRP projects, active participation to events (summer schools, Annual Meeting, ...), discussion in the future of EURON, etc.

4 What are the new trends?

The network is confronted with the following new trends, that are perceived by some as opportunities, by others as threats:

- The merge of Cognitive Science and Robotics in the new EC Directorate General: *many* members reacted rather defensively against this new ecosystem, at least in the beginning.
- The closer integration between the industrial and the academic robotics networks: many members perceive the current push by the EC in this direction as a threat to the independence of their research activities, in the sense that they fear that research money will only be available for very directly application-oriented projects.

It is important to realize that the perception of threat coming from these trends is to some extent just created by the novelty of the new situation, and is seldom supported by concrete data.