Lab puts human potential to high-tech test

Dr Ken Haase, acting director of Dublin-based technology research hothouse Media Lab Europe, explains its role and evolution to TOM LYONS

EXPANDING human potential through innovation is quite a task for any organisation to set itself.

But meeting this challenge, even in the face of an economic downturn, is still one that Dr Ken Haase, acting director of technology research hothouse Media Lab Europe (MLE), contends can be met.

Heading a team of 75-100 full and part-time researchers, Mr Haase believes MLE, an alliance between MIT in Boston, corporate partners and the Government, will at least double in size within five years to between 200-250 researchers.

And at the same time it aims to forge strong relationships with enough corporate partners to put it on a sustainable footing.

Supporting evidence for this claim has begun to emerge since the beginning of the year, with Media Lab researchers unveiling a string of projects and initiatives.

Most recently, at a World Health Organisation summit, one of the Lab's research groups revealed an initial prototype of a device capable of measuring the damage caused by passive smoking called 'smoke rings'.

A clutch of other projects geared to use technology to help children has also begun to break through.

These include the 'Butterfly project', developed with the Central Remedial Clinic to allow disabled children interact across the world via a virtual world; so-called 'Wellness Windows' to help cancer patients relax, and the 'Relax-to-Win' interactive game for helping children manage stress.

Each of the projects, Mr Haase explains, is designed to reflect Media Lab Europe's more human-centric ethos than its more broadly- focused sister centre in Boston.

"An overarching theme for us is the notion of expanding human potential through invention," Mr Haase says.

"We are looking at human potential in three core areas. One is the way that humans know or understand; the other is the way humans sense, and the third is the way humans connect with each other.

"We are looking at technologies that enhance all of those areas, and these three areas would categorise 80pc of what we are doing," he continued.

"Another important strand of MLE is that in contrast to a lot of other research labs, there is a focus on being commercially engaged.

"That does not mean that we do work for industry directly, but that we engage corporate sponsors actively in the research project. We have them come in to talk about their problems and their business, and also to criticise the things that we build. As a result, people that come through here are commercially aware."

Mr Haase says that as encouraging as recent successes are, Media Lab's recent recruitment drive to attract the next wave of research students is what has given him most personal encouragement, with 250 students globally applying for ten places in the Lab.

"What I have tried to establish here over the last seven months (since he took the job) is to create an experience that people are drawn to. This could be seen when we put out a call for the next wave of research fellows and had an overwhelming response," he claims.

Attracting additional corporate sponsors, however, has proved tough in the current technology slowdown.

MLE has scaled back its initial tripartite plans to focus on the core area of creating a world-class research facility.

"When MLE was envisioned, it was thought of in three parts — one was a research lab, one was a business incubator, and the third was a venture capital organisation.

"It is harder than we would like, and certainly harder than anybody expected when the American stock markets were hitting the roof and some venture capitalists would spend money on anybody with a napkin with 12 buzzwords on it.

"It is a different climate now, and so the focus at present is on the research lab.

"Part of what I have been doing has been deepening the research activity, extending and strengthening contacts with industry and academia, and contacts with government European-wide."

However, Mr Haase says that although attracting investment has been tough, MLE is on track towards creating an entity that is largely self-sustaining.

At present, MLE has secured 35pc of its revenue from external funding, with the bulk of this coming from multi-year deals with companies such as Ericsson, Intel and Eircom.

MLE is set to achieve €1m-plus in new funding this year, or €3m over three years, which puts it on target, Mr Haase says, to become a self-sustaining organisation by 2006-2007 with all operational costs being met by external sources.

"My goal is that MLE would be 75pc privately-funded and 25pc-funded publicly or from other sources. The plan for MLE when it was launched was to be self-sustaining within ten years, but we now think that may be possible within five to six years," he says.

Dr Ken Haase of Media Lab Europe: "An overarching theme for us is the notion of expanding human potential through invention"

Mr Haase claims MLE still makes a compelling case to potential investors, and this is perhaps more the case than ever in relatively cash-strapped times.

"There are several things that are working in our favour. Organisations still understand the importance of looking ahead of the next quarter, but the problem is that this is very expensive for a company to do.

"For our corporate partners in Europe, being involved in MLE costs less than having a senior researcher on staff.

"For your investment you get access to all of our researchers, all of our research staff plus the intellectual property in the background. So in that sense it can be very compelling.

"The idea of MLE is based on this consortia model of pooling the risk of high risk research where anybody who sponsors any bit of the research gets access to all of the research."

Two projects that are in the pipeline to be commercialised will provide forthcoming proof of this argument, Mr Haase claims. Mr Haase also says MLE is working on a new engagement model which will allow small to medium enterprises access to the Lab's research using a broker agency.

An artificial intelligence specialist, Mr Haase says that although MLE's primary mission is research, it is also seeking to engage with the local community around it and connect with academic institutions.

Last week it opened a high-tech computer clubhouse for local youth groups in conjunction with Intel. And it has also built up links with six universities to work on 22 projects, as well as taking on university students on a part-time basis.

A philosophy graduate with what he terms a 'knack' for computers that eventually led him to a Phd in computer engineering and science from MIT, Mr Haase converted to being a Quaker in 1980 during his first year in college.

He claims that his religion has given him important insights which have helped him during his time with MLE.

"There is an idea in the Quaker tradition that wisdom comes from listening to a plurality of voices.

"I think that part of the creative and sustainable character of MLE is that it is a place where there is a plurality of voices and ideas."