



## Minister: firms hold key to SMEs

**Despite setbacks,** e-commerce minister recognises central role accountants play in promoting use of technology among SMEs, writes Kevin Reed

**technology** Accountants have been praised by the government for the vital work they do to encourage SMEs to make better use of IT, despite evidence that suggests IT advice is less of a business priority than it used to be.

Stephen Timms, minister of state for energy, e-commerce and postal services, said at the launch of the sixth annual DTI/InterForum E-commerce Awards, sponsored by *Accountancy Age*, that accountants were important to the business community.

'Since I served at the Treasury, it has become very clear to me that accountants are the key communications channel for getting important messages through to small businesses around the country,' he said.

Despite this, the latest *Accountancy Age/Sage* IT survey revealed that accountants are less confident in the

importance of offering IT advice to clients than in the past.

Just 59% of respondents felt it was important, compared to 69% in 2002 and 83% in 2001. But the survey also found that 40% of accountants currently resell software as part of their services to clients.

The awards, which are also sponsored by the Royal Bank of Scotland and *The Sunday Times*, recognise and reward innovation in how information technology is used to improve the business performance of SMEs.

They are open to any business with up to 250 employees and are run at both a regional and national level. Applicants must be able to demonstrate business transformation in a variety of categories.

This year two new awards will focus on teleworking and e-business in a rural environment.

'Once again the awards have been enhanced and adapted to reflect the



**Support: Stephen Timms at the launch of the DTI/InterForum E-commerce awards**

changing abilities and needs of UK businesses through the introduction of categories for teleworking and rural businesses,' said Timms.

Timms also defended the recent failure of the DTI's UK Online for Business project, which had set the target of getting one million SMEs online by 2003, but reached only 450,000.

'In a way, it was a reflection of the way our understanding has evolved over the years,' he said.

'At the start it was a case of getting as many businesses online as possible. What became increasingly clear was that it wasn't about chasing that partic-

ular target. We shifted our focus to concentrate on the uses that businesses were making of the technology.'

The full list of award categories is: e-business start-ups; e-trading; e-business; best use of broadband; best use of teleworking; best use of rural e-business; best use of mobile and wireless technology; and advanced supply chain integration.

The overall national winner, which will be selected from the regional winners, will receive a total prize of over £40,000. ●

For full details on the awards, see: [www.ecommerce-awards.co.uk](http://www.ecommerce-awards.co.uk)