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SWIFT SME IO4: GUIDELINES FOR SWIFT UPTAKE

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROJECT TRAINING MATERIALS AND RESULTS

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1. INTRODUCTION

SWIFT SME (Smart Working: Innovative & Flexible Training for SME) is a strategic partnership for vocational education and training project co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme, covered in five countries by six partners representing the world of VET, enterprise, and ICT, under the coordination of CIT – Centrum für Innovation und Technologie GmbH in Germany.

The aim of this project is to overcome the pressing need to equip SMEs and empower their staff to implement Smart Working. To give context, EU SMEs are the most exposed to the risk of not being able to ensure business continuity and be resilient in times of crisis. More importantly, they are less prone to reaping the benefits that Smart Working can bring due to the lack of guidelines on the most suitable ICT solutions and practices to implement Smart Working and of mechanisms to manage Smart Working and telecommuting. As such, this is confirmed by relevant EU position papers and studies: EU Commission, “An SME Strategy for Sustainable and Digital EU”, March 2020 and Eurofound/ILO “Working anytime, anywhere: The effects on the world of work” 2017.

One of the objectives of SWIFT SME is to increase the growth and competitiveness of EU SMEs through more relevant and timely training to empower them with the operational tools and equip them with the skills to be more resilient, flexible and competitive. Therefore, the Consortium developed a set of tools and trainings for Smart Working adoption through the Third Intellectual Output, applicable to all SMEs across EU which can access for free, without restriction and in full Open Access mode all the SWIFT content. The total of ten modules have been developed to address the following topics:

- i. Digital and online communication
- ii. Self-well being
- iii. “How to boost your team productivity from home?”
- iv. Agile Management by Objectives
- v. “Smart” self-efficacy
- vi. Teleworking: a selection of digital tools to manage your business

Each course provides a series of resources including but not limited to best practices, handouts, case studies, operational tools and quizzes.

It is worth mentioning that a significant amount of work has been put in the development of the training materials so that they are easy to follow and ready to use by all the prospective instructors who present an interest in the SWIFT SME project.



Moreover, to come to the relief of the prospective instructors and streamline the overall process, an implementation pilot test was conducted throughout Q2 2022 in which training was delivered to 120 people who fall in the project's target groups. The piloting provided the project partners with valuable feedback along various factors for a great delivery of the courses.

In this manner, the gathered inputs are now being translated into guidelines for implementation and use of the project tools and instruments that outline the operational lessons learned from the perspective of what worked and what could have been improved on the basis of the execution and deployment of the SWIFT training. In other words, the present document, called 'The Uptake Guidelines' stands as a sum of operational strategies for other operators of the education and training ecosystem concerned and deeply interested in the exploitation and valorisation of Smart Working models/frameworks to better sustain the digitalization process of EU SMEs.

A wide range of topics embody the content of the present document, starting from organisation of training to suggestions for assertive and effective communication with the participants, and even recruitment tips and classroom management. The main focus was set on the blended learning and experiences gathered through online broadcasting of training. In an ever-changing, unpredictable environment, lessons learned from training delivery during challenging periods (COVID-19 Pandemic) or in groups where the participants join remotely are vital and worth mentioning. Furthermore, the guidelines capture a series of valuable advice on how to gain and maintain the learners' motivation and how to collect feedback from them and integrate it accordingly.

Whilst the Uptake is providing a starting point, it is essential to bear in mind that these guidelines are just a set of recommendations for a streamlined implementation of the SWIFT SME trainings, and we encourage the facilitators to be open to experiment.

THE SWIFT SME CONSORTIUM



2. ORGANISATION OF THE TRAINING

In order to make it easier for the facilitators, the SWIFT SME courses were developed in such manner that they can be applied in both traditional classroom and blended learning (online) formats.

Throughout the pilot testing, the training was delivered in a blended format, containing both self-learning activities (OER platform) and instructor-led face-to-face or virtual workshops (actual practice on the skills) – the gathered experience suggests that self-learning is made at the own pace of each participant and the workshops come handy to wrap-up the knowledge gathered from the e-learning, so that the focus is oriented to hands-on practice and open debate sessions, for addressing questions, reflections, concerns and to share valuable insight or personal experiences with digital tools for telecommuting and smart working, remote project management, co-operation and calibration with work colleagues.

Regardless of the delivery method, in-person or online, the workshop sessions started with a brief speech or a short presentation on the motivation behind the project, relevant information and some ‘fun facts’ retrieved from the data analysis run through the project mapping (IO2).

Prospective facilitators can opt for a very agile, friendly and transparent approach in their delivery, but nonetheless highly professional and reliable. The aim is to establish a climate that could favour the exchange among participants of anecdotes that could reflect their perception of working from remote while still remaining highly productive and efficient.

In terms of tools and delivery mechanisms and instruments, the OER platform should be used as a reference for the topics under analysis and discussion. You can rely on the platform and its contents to pinpoint the main coordinates of the given topics as an introduction to the new lecture cycle, but also to extrapolate and highlight key takeaways from that specific content’ section.

Facilitators are encouraged to use icebreakers, PPT materials, handouts, case studies, gamified activities or quizzes, Mentimeter, Jamboard, Google Forms and focus groups – the last 4 are very efficient for collecting feedback and questions, in case the participants are rather shy to address them in the training room.

Tip: in order to reduce the effort of travelling for the participants, you can opt for a blended format (2 in-person sessions: the first one – so the participants can get to know each other



and the last one – for debriefing purposes, while the rest of workshops could be delivered online) or go fully remote, should this be a choice of convenience.

3. RECRUITMENT/ENROLMENT

The recruitment of the participants can take place through multiple channels, such as:

- your own organisation, should the topic be relevant for yourselves
- reaching out to your own network of associated partners and/or organisations, for a more targeted approach
- using your website/social media accounts for the call-out, for general purposes – works faster for a wide dissemination
- regional chambers of commerce, boards of trade or development agencies
- through classes or optional courses in VET Schools
- a more direct approach and word of mouth

Regardless of the chosen channel, if the participants are exposed to the right amount of information during the call-out, the overall reactions should be positive. Ensure to send out concise information about the project and be specific with the implementation stage, indicating the ration and motivation for the involvement of external people, benefit of their engagement, and what will be the impact of their contributions. When shaping the training groups, it is advisable to safeguard a heterogenous, balanced layout, so that everyone can benefit and learn from each other and maximise the quality of delivery.

For example, one of the approaches to recruit participants during the pilot testing of SWIFT SME involved reaching out to the internal network of associated partners and organisations. Potential participants were introduced very briefly to the context and background of the initiative so that they can have a better sense on the WHYS of their involvement, what is the environmental setting addressed by the project, and more in general, what is the true matter of what trainers are offering. This small exercise helped them to put things into perspective and have a better frame of the content in its technicalities, scale and scope.

Finally, SWIFT SME trainings can be organised adjacent to other events whose participants may be invited as well – the lessons might be seen as a good chance to learn something new.



4. COMMUNICATION WITH TARGET GROUPS AND POTENTIAL ATTENDEES

In order to catch the interest of the participants and establish a balance in the training room, it is essential to create a convenient climate from the very beginning. Thus, it is beneficial to administer some ice-breaker techniques for a pleasant time in company of the people sharing this space. For example, roundups for introduction of the participants are efficient so that they get to know each other, check-in sessions before a workshop will determine everyone to get involved and so on.

In case of an online delivery, we suggest another icebreaker: prior to starting the first workshop, create a list of 'housekeeping' rules and encourage the attendees to add their own as well. For example, establish a 'mindset for today', define roles: the coach, the day's observer, the timekeeper, define a time for short-breaks, reinforce that everyone should stay on 'mute' unless they aren't speaking or to 'raise their hand' when they want to speak up and 'unmute' only when the other person finished talking, encourage to open up their cameras, disable notifications/alerts during the delivery, use the chat if their microphone is acting up and so on. This way, you ensure that most 'inconveniences' are eliminated and there are alternatives for technical issues, so that everyone is stays engaged in a calm, welcoming and relaxed environment and the overall interaction is comfortable, efficient and effective.

Of course, the aforementioned icebreaker can be a great instrument for an in-person delivery, but it has to be adapted accordingly.

Regarding the communication within the classroom, a direct and close communication with the participants is encouraged from the beginning of the training and should be kept as such throughout the session's end.

It is a known fact that a downside of online meetings is that the facilitator cannot always feel the exact atmosphere within the training room. To overcome this feeling, we suggest that you state clearly that the training room is a safe space and that they are supported to address any kind of questions or concerns they might have – there are no stupid questions, it's rather stupid not to address them – so that they can be discussed right away and to debate upon, if the case. In this way, the participant is involved in the training, and at the same time we, as facilitators, take into account the perspective of offering useful and applicable contents, where the attendee also feels comfortable to address questions and to give feedback at the end of the training session, and thus participate in the enrichment of the experience and therefore of the project itself.

Tip: for an effective administration of the icebreakers, you can use tools such as Mentimeter or Kahoot.



5. LEARNERS' MOTIVATION AND CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

The main factors motivating the participation of the trainees were the wish to receive training in a subject unknown to them, and the interest in the titles and content itself, taking into account the purpose of passing on knowledge to their own students, being the secondary audience, VET training providers and teachers the most interested on this occasion. A special mention to the completion of the training, as they recognised the material as interesting, relevant, and applicable in a wide variety of fields, as the SWIFT SME training contains relevant aspects such as cyber security, ICT tools and technical problem solving.

The engagement of the trainees was ensured through the content itself and the way it was presented, the multimedia support, and encouraging the trainees to participate and involving them in the training session was one of the keys. The students showed great interest and participated very actively in the activities, with questions and interventions that considerably enriched the training session.

There may be a risk that at the moment you will deliver the training, a lot to be already said about smart working and related resources. In order to diversify the offer, you might need to find new ways that could stimulate targets' interest from a different gateway like the ones described previously. In this sense, the content of the training might require to be readapted to the current contexts and to come up with more background information, with the intention to operationalise the content into real-life and practice scenario, helping learners to bridge the distance between theory and practice.

For example, a blended learning method might be the key to ensure the learners' engagement and the main driver in their motivation. The trainees will go through the e-learning at their own pace, having enough time to do side research and then they will already have the information settled through live meetings facilitated by the trainer.

The means to be used by the trainer are, as mentioned before, PPTs, icebreakers and live demos of the tools in which you can involve the trainees directly. This way, the participants are encouraged to address the things they did not understand from the e-learning and will already found common ground with their peers, since they learned that they are not alone in some cases. The ones who are eager to learn will have and show proactive attitudes, by being enthusiastic and involved in the sessions.

Another tool that helps to ensure the learners' engagement, is to allocate some time at the end of each training session to collect feedback and debrief, so that each participant can be open to share their honest opinion on how the training was delivered and to even share valuable insights from their own past experiences. Thus, the participants will understand their role in the training room and so they will show commitment during the next sessions.



6. LEARNERS' FEEDBACK

Our experience suggests, based on the learners' feedback, that the overall reactions are positive - most of the participants shown gratitude at the end of the courses, since they have learned a lot of new things and were eager to start to apply them within their Businesses or to apply the concept of transferability, in the teachers', trainers' and VET actors' case.

The participants have also expressed that OER materials were balanced in level – not too basic but not too sophisticated – relevant, qualitative and specific; they liked the concrete examples offered in each course and how easy it was for them to understand.

Regarding the OER platform, it was perceived as enjoyable, user friendly and functional, as it is easy to navigate through. Another element that has been seen as very positive is the possibility to get a certificate after finishing each course.

As aspects for improvement, most respondents did not highlight any specific one and a small number mentioned that the design can be slightly improved.

7. LESSONS LEARNED AND SUGGESTIONS ON HOW TO BEST DELIVER TRAINING IN DIVERSE OPERATIONAL SETTINGS

- The OER platform is user friendly and the courses are useful.
- Online training works well if there is a balanced group and the overall atmosphere is open and welcoming. Being brief and concise helps too.
- Work on a trust-based learning environment: avoid the lecturer-student relation.
- Additional tools and instruments (i.e. Mentimeter, Jamboard, PPTs, Kahoot) are highly effective to get the participants be more proactive and engaged.
- Icebreakers exist to start setting up a classroom's climate that is beneficial and a joke from time to time might be resourceful.
- Don't make the content too technical: anchor it down to practice and experience.
- Challenge their thoughts and judgement: put them in the condition to set things in motion and re-elaborate critically the knowledge shared by you.
- Live demos help the participants to better understand what each tool does and how should it be used.
- Video and PPT materials come handy in order to have a visual support and great use to better sediment an information.
- Formulate straight, easy, direct questions which answers are not obvious but neither too complicated.
- From time to time take a step back and use this moment to see what is going on around you.



- Certifications obtained at the end of a training are well received by the participants.

