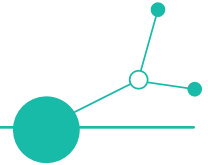


Guidebook on how to use SMERF Diagnosis Tool

D2.4.2



Version 1

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1. Introduction

The rapidly evolving business landscape requires small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to continuously adapt their strategies, operations, and digital capabilities in order to remain competitive. In this context, the SMERF Diagnosis Tool (SDT) has been developed as a practical self-assessment instrument that supports SMEs in evaluating their current level of advancement across four key transformation pillars: Innovation Culture, Digital Manufacturing, Open Innovation 2.0 & Sharing Economy, and Green & Circular Economy & Sustainability.

By answering a structured set of questions, SMEs are able to identify their strengths, highlight potential areas for improvement, and receive tailored transformation recommendations. The tool represents the first step in a broader support framework offered within the SMERF project, which also includes activities such as training programmes, mentorship opportunities, and study visits to leading multinational companies.

This guidebook has been developed by the SMERF Consortium and is available on the homepage of the tool, ready for users' download and consultation. Its purpose is to support users in navigating the registration process and completing the self-assessment activity, providing clear guidance on how the tool works and how to interpret its results.



2. The SMERF Diagnosis Tool (SDT)

2.1. Purpose of the tool

The SMERF Diagnosis Tool (SDT) is designed to assist Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in evaluating their level of advancement across four fundamental pillars of business transformation.

These four pillars are:

- **Innovation Culture**
 - Focuses on fostering creativity and innovation within the organization.
 - Assesses leadership capabilities and the organization's openness to new ideas.
 - Evaluates market orientation and the ability to adapt to changing demands.
- **Digital Manufacturing**
 - Emphasizes the adoption of advanced technologies to enhance efficiency and competitiveness.
 - Includes operational optimization strategies, such as automation and predictive maintenance.
 - Examines the integration of digital tools in manufacturing processes.
- **Open Innovation & Sharing Economy**
 - Encourages collaboration between SMEs and external stakeholders, including partners, customers, and academia.
 - Assesses the organization's ability to leverage external ideas and resources to drive innovation.
 - Explores participation in shared platforms and resource-sharing initiatives.
- **Green & Circular Economy & Sustainability**
 - Highlights the adoption of eco-friendly practices and sustainable resource management.
 - Assesses the SME's commitment to reducing environmental impact and creating circular processes.
 - Evaluates the potential for cost savings and new market opportunities through sustainable strategies.

The structure and contents of the tool have been designed based on the analysis previously performed on available existing tools for companies' self-assessment (D.1.3.2 - Report on available audit tools for assessing companies' level of advancement in 4 pillars).

Unlike other mapped instruments, the SMERF self-assessment tool provides a structured evaluation of an SME's current capabilities and generates personalized transformation scenarios based on their responses.

The SDT enables SMEs to:

- Identify strengths and weaknesses within the four core transformation pillars.
- Receive automatically generated transformation scenarios with actionable recommendations.
- Support strategic decision-making and continuous improvement efforts.



By leveraging this tool, SMEs can develop a clear roadmap for their transformation journey and enhance their competitiveness in an evolving business landscape.

2.2. Target audience

The SDT is designed to support various stakeholders involved in the growth and evolution of SMEs. Its purpose is to provide a structured framework for assessing key aspects of a business's readiness for change and innovation. The tool offers value to different groups in distinct ways:

1. SME owners and executives

- Structured self-assessment: Gain a clear and organized evaluation of their company's digital, strategic, and operational readiness.
- Expert-driven, AI-based recommendations: Access actionable insights powered by advanced algorithms to guide decision-making.
- Prioritized initiative planning: Identify and focus on high-impact actions that will drive the most significant improvements.
- Efficient diagnostic process: Benefit from a straightforward, user-friendly assessment that delivers immediate results.

2. Business consultants and advisors

- Structured client assessments: Conduct comprehensive evaluations of client businesses using a structured framework.
- Data-driven insights: Obtain clear, evidence-based insights that reveal strengths, weaknesses, and key opportunities for growth.
- Preliminary transformation plans: Receive an initial tailored action plan that outlines strategic steps, which can be further refined and integrated into broader consulting strategies.

3. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and innovation Intermediaries (Innomediaries)

- Gap identification: Pinpoint areas where SMEs require targeted support, such as technology adoption, innovation readiness, or strategic development.
- Partnership opportunities: Identify potential collaborations between SMEs and academic or research institutions to foster innovation and industry growth.
- Tailored growth programs: Develop customized support programs for SMEs by building on insights provided by the SDT, ensuring resources are effectively allocated to meet specific needs.



3. How the tool works

Once registered, users gain access to their personal dashboard, where they can manage their questionnaire submissions. From this area, users can start a new assessment, resume a previously started questionnaire, or review and delete earlier submissions.

If all previous submissions are deleted, the system will automatically generate a new empty submission so that the user can begin a new assessment. This ensures that the self-assessment process can always be restarted if necessary.

The screenshot shows a user dashboard with a dark navigation bar at the top containing the Interreg logo, 'Co-funded by the European Union', and menu items: EXPORT, SUBMISSIONS, LOGOUT, and a PROFILE icon. Below the navigation bar, there is a 'Pending Questionnaires' section with a printer icon and the text 'There are no pending Questionnaires yet.' and a 'Create Submission' button. The 'Submitted Questionnaire' section features a table with the following data:

QUESTIONNAIRE	LAST MODIFIED	STATUS	STEPS
Questionnaire 1	January 29, 2026 13:23	Filled	Step 1 (checked) — Step 2 (checked)

Figure 1: Screenshot of the submission page

The self-assessment is structured into two main steps, which are described in detail in the following sections.

3.1. Company details and Step 1

During the first submission, users are asked to complete a short form that collects basic information about the company and the respondent’s role within the organisation. This information helps contextualise the assessment results and ensures that the generated recommendations better reflect the company’s profile and operational environment.



Company Details

Before getting started, please enter your company details.

Company size *

Select an option

Company age *

Select an option

Industry sector *

Select an option

Other

Annual revenue *

Select an option

R&D investment *

Select an option

Geographic location *

Address

Street name 123, Zipcode City

Country

Select a country

Market orientation *

Select an option

Ownership structure *

Select an option

Role in company *

Select an option

Other

Save and continue

Figure 2: Screenshot of the company details form

3.2. Overall performance

The first step of the SMERF Diagnosis Tool provides an initial overview of the company's performance across the four transformation pillars previously introduced. Through a structured set of questions, SMEs are invited to reflect on their current practices, strategies, and level of digital and organisational development.



Users can select which pillars they wish to assess during this phase of the questionnaire. Pillars that are not selected cannot be activated later in the same submission; however, users may start a new submission at any time if they wish to assess additional areas.

In the first stage, the user must select at least 1 pillar. For the same reason, at least 1 pillar (one that has been previously selected) must be flagged in the second stage.



Figure 3: Screenshot of the pillars selection section

Step 1 consists of multiple-choice questions designed to provide a general overview of the company’s strategic orientation, digital adoption, and operational practices. Completing this section typically requires approximately 15-20 minutes.

To support users during the questionnaire, information icons are available next to both questions and answer options. By clicking on these icons, users can access short explanations that clarify specific terms or concepts used in the assessment. This feature is available in both steps of the self-assessment.

In addition, the option “Not applicable” is included to account for the diversity of SMEs using the tool. Since companies operate in different sectors and organisational contexts, certain questions may not be relevant to all respondents. When this option is selected, the response is excluded from the overall score calculation so that the final results accurately reflect only the applicable aspects of the company’s activities.

Before submitting their answers, users have the possibility to review and modify their responses.



Step1

Review your answers before submitting. If you need to make any changes, click 'Edit' next to the corresponding answer.

To what extent does your company encourage employees to explore new ideas and try new approaches in their work?
D - Highly encouraged Edit

What amount of time is typically allocated company-wide for employees to explore and develop innovative ideas?
B - Some time is allocated, but it is not sufficient. Edit

Evaluate the effectiveness of the company's strategies or methods in attracting employees with diverse innovation skills and capabilities.
C - Effective. Edit

Evaluate your company's strategies for fostering employee skills development, when it comes to enhancing and accelerating innovation.

Submit your answers

Figure 4: Screenshot of the answers review section

Output:

- Real-time score based on responses.
- Visual representation (e.g., bar chart or radar chart) of SME strengths and weaknesses.
- Immediate feedback with actionable insights for improvement.
- Direct links to the Inspiration Knowledge Base (IKB), an online repository with several resources to improve and learn more about the pillars.



Great Job! Step1 Is Complete.

Your results:

According to your responses, your company faces challenges in implementing a circular approach and adopting environmentally friendly practices, which are crucial for sustainability and compliance with regulatory frameworks. Additionally, there's room for improvement in building networks of partners and start-ups, as well as open innovation initiatives, which are vital for fostering collaboration and accessing new ideas. To address these challenges, consider developing concrete strategies for waste reduction and resource recycling while incentivizing partnerships with other organizations to enhance innovation and shared insights. On a positive note, you have demonstrated strengths in knowledge and learning as well as human resources development, which are essential for nurturing talent and fostering a proactive workforce. To build on these strengths, continue investing in training programs and knowledge-sharing opportunities that leverage your existing capabilities and encourage innovation throughout the organization.

I encourage you to complete the full questionnaire for more tailored advice regarding your performance and areas for improvement. This will help identify specific actions you can take to enhance your company's overall performance and competitiveness.

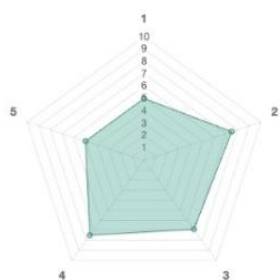
To receive a deeper analysis and tailored advice, we encourage you to continue with the full questionnaire selecting: **Innovation Culture, Open innovation & sharing economy, Green & circular economy & sustainability**

Please note that selecting at least one pillar is required to proceed. Once one or more pillars have been selected, no additional pillars can be added for this specific questionnaire.

Visual Insight:

The following charts represent the recorded values for the four pillars and the features associated with each pillar. Each chart reports the values for the features linked to its respective pillar. Please note that the feature names are represented by numbers in the charts.

INNOVATION CULTURE



- 1 - Innovative Thinking & Creativity: 5
- 2 - Human Resources Development: 7.5
- 3 - Knowledge & Learning: 6.9
- 4 - Collaboration & Communication: 7.5
- 5 - Leadership & Relations: 5

INSPIRATION KNOWLEDGE BASE

- Webinar on IKB
- Good Practices on IKB
- Interviews on youtube

Figure 5: Screenshot of the step 1 output

Below the Step 1 output, users will find the button to proceed to the second step of the questionnaire.

3.3. In-depth analysis and Step 2

The second step of the SMERF Diagnosis Tool is designed to provide a deeper analysis of the company's situation. Building on the results obtained in step 1, this stage explores the selected transformation pillars in greater detail in order to refine the company's transformation roadmap.

During this phase, companies can choose one or more pillars for further assessment among those previously selected in step 1. The duration of this step depends on the number of pillars chosen. If all four pillars are selected, the completion time is approximately 30-40 minutes.

The questions in this section focus on more detailed aspects of organisational practices, including strategic planning, digital adoption goals, and operational development.

As in the first step, users are given the opportunity to review and modify their answers before submitting the final questionnaire.



Please select at least one pillar

Editing Questionnaire instance

This second section is intended to provide a more in-depth analysis of each pillar. As mentioned earlier, we recommend focusing on the following pillars: **Innovation Culture, Digital Manufacturing, Open innovation & sharing economy, Green & circular economy & sustainability**

Pillars

- Innovation Culture
- Digital Manufacturing
- Open innovation & sharing economy
- Green & circular economy & sustainability

Update Quiz instance

Figure 6: Screenshot of the pillar selection (step 2)

Output:

- Personalized transformation scenarios tailored to SME's goals.
- Strategic roadmap with detailed recommendations and estimated impacts.
- Suggested improvement activities such as mentorship, training programs, or expert support.

The details of the second output will be further elaborated in Chapter 4 of this document.



4. Getting started

4.1. Homepage and navigation

The SDT homepage provides a short project introduction at the top of the page, including:

- Overview of the SMERF project and its pillars
- Instructions for the Tool use

Welcome to the SMERF Diagnosis Tool
Empowering SMEs for Future Readiness in Innovation, Digitalization, and Sustainability

WHO IS IT FOR?
The SMERF Diagnosis Tool is designed for European small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Whether you're just beginning your transformation journey or looking to enhance an existing strategy, this tool adapts to your specific needs.

WHAT DOES IT DO?
This self-assessment tool enables SMEs to evaluate their current level of transformation readiness and receive a customized development roadmap based on their strengths and areas for improvement.

HOW IT HELPS?
The SMERF tool supports the transition of SMEs – particularly those in low- and medium-tech sectors – towards future readiness. It assesses innovation capacity across four strategic transformation pillars:

- Innovation Culture
- Digital Manufacturing
- Open Innovation 2.0 & Sharing Economy
- Green & Circular Economy & Sustainability

About the Project
The SMERF Diagnosis Tool was developed as part of the SMERF – SME Ready for the Future project, a transnational initiative co-funded by the Interreg Central Europe Programme. It serves as a key component of SMERF's integrated support services for SMEs.

Why Participate?
By completing the SMERF self-assessment, your organization gains access to:

- 1. A Tailored Transformation Roadmap**
Your input triggers an intelligent, step-by-step analysis powered by a structured expert system. The tool maps your answers to practical, personalized recommendations grouped into three actionable categories:
[Training](#)
[Expert Consultation](#)
[Marketing](#)
- 2. Visual Insights and Clear Priorities**
Through the solar charts displayed at the end of Steps 1 and 2, the tool provides intuitive diagnostics on your company's status across each pillar and its underlying features. You'll easily see where your business is excelling—and where targeted support could drive the greatest impact.
- 3. Access to the SMERF Knowledge Base**
Explore curated resources, including best practices, case studies, webinars, and success stories aligned with each transformation pillar.
- 4. Future Support Opportunities**
Participants may be eligible for further support (see eligibility), including transnational study visits, specialized training, and mentoring from expert partners across Europe.

Figure 7: Screenshot of the tool's homepage



In the second part of the page, the priority is given to the registration form, to immediately draw users' attention to the self-assessment functionality.

4.2. Registration and Login process

To access the SMERF Diagnosis Tool, users must first create an account on the platform. The registration process is simple and requires the user to provide basic information, including their name, email address, company name, and a password. During registration, users are also asked to select a Mentor from the available pool or indicate that they wish to act as a Mentor themselves.

After submitting the registration form, users will receive a confirmation email containing an activation link. By clicking on the link, the account is activated, and the user can access the platform and begin using the self-assessment tool.

Get Started – It's Free of charge!

Join the SMERF community today. Complete your self-assessment to unlock your transformation potential and access targeted strategies that drive innovation, competitiveness, and sustainability.

Get started now

Start now by registering or logging into your account.

Your company email address

Choose a password
(6 characters minimum)

Confirm password chosen

First name

Last name

Company

Select your mentor

or

Request to be a Mentor

Register

[Already have an account? Log in](#)

[Didn't receive confirmation instructions?](#)

[Didn't receive unlock instructions?](#)

Figure 8: Screenshot of the registration form

Figure 8 depicts the procedure for registering and selecting an already existing Mentor: the standard user can easily select the chosen Mentor from the drop-down menu.

So far, the depicted procedure referred to a standard user: the company representative who is willing to discover the performance and positioning of their firm with reference to the 4 pillars.

A different purpose and set of competencies are attributed to another type of user: the **mentor**.

Within the SMERF ecosystem, mentors play an important role in supporting companies throughout the diagnostic process. A Mentor is an experienced professional from one of the project partners who can assist SMEs in completing the questionnaire and interpreting the results generated by the tool. In addition to providing guidance during the assessment phase, mentors can help companies identify suitable next steps and facilitate connections with experts whose knowledge aligns with the company's specific needs. Companies may select a mentor from the available list or request the involvement of an expert with whom they already collaborate. The mentor can autonomously download the full output of questionnaires from the companies that have selected him/her as an expert.



As shown in Figure 8, the procedure for registering as a mentor is the same as the standard one; the only difference for the expert is the flag option “Request to be a Mentor” (Figure 8).

Once registered, returning users can access the platform at any time by entering their registered email address and password in the login section (Figure 9). After logging in, users are directed to their personal dashboard, where they can start a new self-assessment, continue a previously saved questionnaire, or review their previous submissions.

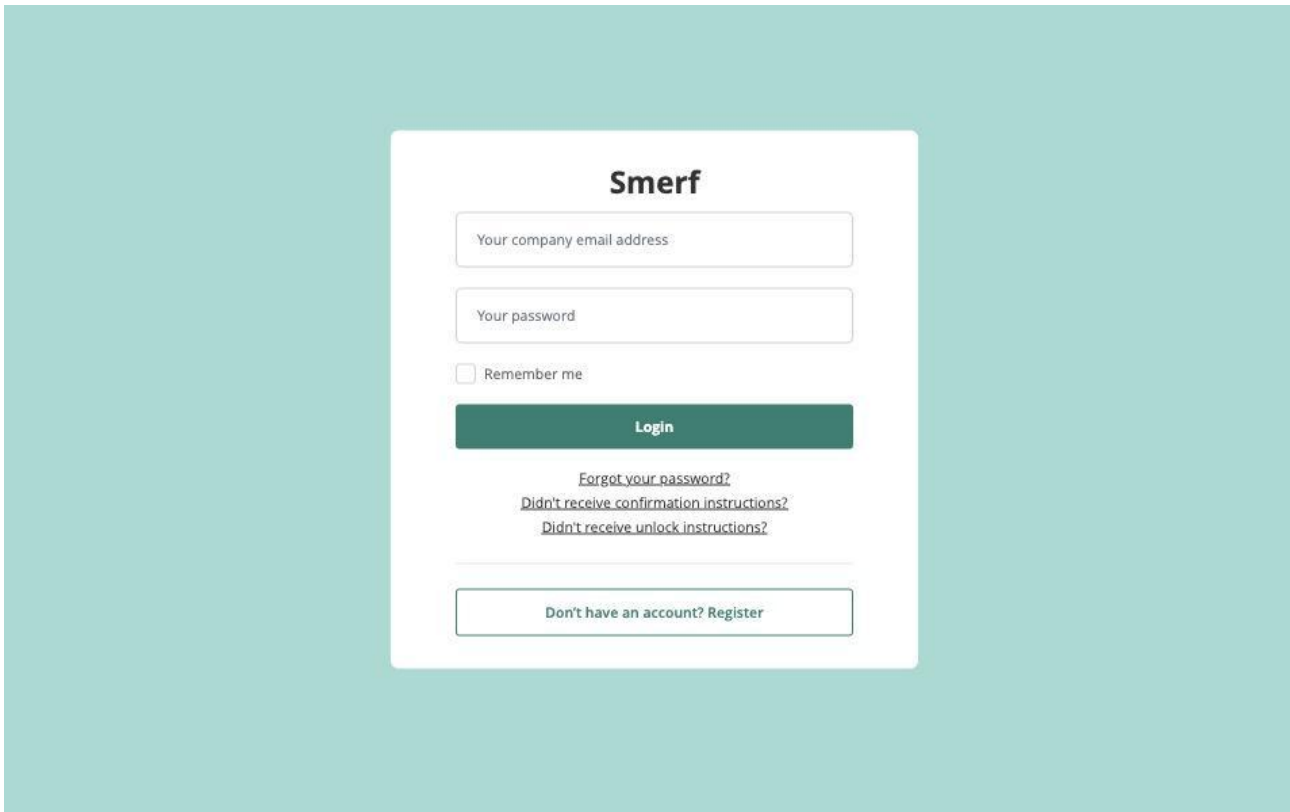


Figure 9: Screenshot of the login form



5. Results and Reporting

5.1. Assessment of results

Upon completion of the assessment, users receive a set of results designed to support strategic reflection and guide SMEs in their transformation journey. The output is presented in a clear and accessible format, allowing companies to easily interpret their performance and identify possible improvement actions.

As described in Chapter 2, the results from step 1 include a visual overview of the company's performance across the four transformation pillars. Each pillar is represented through graphical visualisations that summarise the responses provided in the questionnaire.

Visual Insight:

The following charts represent the recorded values for the four pillars and the features associated with each pillar. Each chart reports the values for the features linked to its respective pillar. Please note that the feature names are represented by numbers in the charts.



Figure 10: Screenshot of the chart section step 2 output

Step 2 expands this analysis by integrating the answers from both stages of the assessment. The tool updates the relevant pillar charts based on the additional information provided and generates more detailed recommendations tailored to the company's responses.

These suggested activities are designed to improve the company's performance in key areas and are organized into three distinct categories:

- **Training:** Structured sessions aimed at building specific skills and deepening knowledge across relevant areas.
- **Mentoring:** Personalized guidance and support from experienced professionals to foster growth and address challenges.



- **Expert Consultation:** Specialized advice and tailored solutions to tackle complex issues and unlock new opportunities for improvement.

-

Report Features:

- **Detailed assessment scores:** Comprehensive scoring across each pillar allows SMEs to understand their relative strengths and weaknesses.
- **Visual charts and graphs:** Intuitive visuals, such as radar charts and bar graphs, present insights in a clear and impactful manner, making complex data easy to digest.
- **Step-by-step recommendations:** The report outlines clear and actionable steps tailored to the SME's unique profile, ensuring they have practical guidance for their improvement journey.

Drawing from the provided information, we recommend the following **essential activities** as key steps to address and improve performance effectively:

Open innovation & sharing economy

MENTORING focused on:

- creating a culture of innovation. Mentors guide leaders in fostering a culture that supports innovation through creativity, risk-taking, and open communication, embedding these practices into the organizational DNA.
- exploring crowdsourcing: feasibility and implementation strategies. Mentors assess the feasibility of crowdsourcing, identify barriers, and provide practical steps to integrate it into innovation processes effectively.

TRAINING focused on:

- transitioning from irregular to regular knowledge exchange. This training should help organizations establish a consistent and systematic process for sharing knowledge. Participants should learn techniques for developing standardized knowledge-sharing routines, leveraging digital collaboration tools, and creating communities of practice. The training should enable employees to shift from occasional to structured knowledge exchange, fostering open innovation.

Figure 11: Screenshot of the essential activities recommended

Furthermore, we have identified a selection of **optional activities** for your consideration. These activities are focused on areas where minor issues or inefficiencies were detected, but they do not indicate serious concerns. Addressing these areas can help refine processes and enhance overall performance, building on the company's current strengths:

Open innovation & sharing economy

MENTORING focused on:

- enhancing use of intermediaries: expanding support for innovation. Mentors help organizations engage intermediaries effectively, identify additional valuable partners, and integrate external support into innovation processes.

EXPERT CONSULTATION focused on:

- maximizing the impact of sharing economy initiatives. Experts should evaluate the company's existing sharing economy programs and identify opportunities for improvement. The consultation should focus on integrating advanced technologies, fostering strategic partnerships, and leveraging data analytics to optimize resource sharing. Experts should also provide a roadmap for scaling sharing economy initiatives to ensure they align with innovation and business objectives.
- open innovation ecosystem development. Experts should guide the company in expanding its innovation ecosystem through strategic partnerships and external collaborations. The consultation should focus on identifying key innovation partners, integrating ecosystem thinking into the company's strategy, and fostering long-term collaboration networks. Experts should also provide best practices for structuring and managing external innovation ecosystems effectively.

Step 1 highlighted certain issues that warrant further attention. Although the corresponding pillars were not selected at the beginning of Step 2, it is important to consider these areas to ensure that potential opportunities for improvement are not overlooked.

Innovation Culture

MENTORING focused on:

- innovation sprints. Mentors should guide teams on how to use short, focused periods (innovation sprints) to generate ideas and rapidly develop innovative solutions, teaching them how to balance short-term and long-term thinking.
- leadership in failure management. Mentors with experience in managing failure-driven growth should work with leaders to develop skills in effectively responding to and learning from failures. The goal should be to guide leaders on how to create an environment where failure is accepted as part of the innovation process and used as a learning tool.

Figure 12: Figure 12: Screenshot of the optional activities suggested



Recommendations are provided exclusively for the weaker-performing features within each pillar, ensuring the suggested actions directly target the most critical areas for improvement. This focused approach helps SMEs prioritize their efforts effectively.

To further support the transformation journey, companies can engage with the SMERF consortium by reaching out to its partners for additional guidance and resources. This collaborative approach empowers SMEs to implement the recommended strategies successfully and achieve sustainable growth.

The output has been carefully designed to be both clear and practical, ensuring that users can easily interpret their results and take meaningful action. Key features include:

- **Downloadable reports:** Users can download a comprehensive assessment report in PDF format, providing a structured overview of their performance across the assessed pillars. These reports serve as valuable reference materials for internal discussions, strategic planning, and future assessments, enabling SMEs to track their progress over time.
- **Direct access to experts:** For SMEs seeking additional guidance, the platform facilitates direct contact with experienced professionals from the **SMERF consortium**. These experts provide tailored advice and hands-on support to help businesses implement the recommended transformation strategies effectively.
- **Localized support:** To further support SMEs, the tool provides a comprehensive list of consortium partner emails, enabling users to connect directly with representatives from their own country. This ensures access to local expertise, cultural insights, and market-specific guidance, enhancing the effectiveness of transformation initiatives. Furthermore, a "Get in touch" button, developed based on the logged-in user's country, provides direct contact with the partner in that country.

By combining clear insights, accessible expert guidance, and localized support, the tool empowers SMEs to make informed decisions and drive impactful improvements in their organization.

5.2. Export results

Users have the possibility to export the results of their most recent completed submission in CSV format. Two export options are available.

The first file, "User's answer points", provides a complete list of the questionnaire questions together with the answers selected by the user. The second file, "User's pillar charts values", contains the numerical values associated with each pillar and its related features.

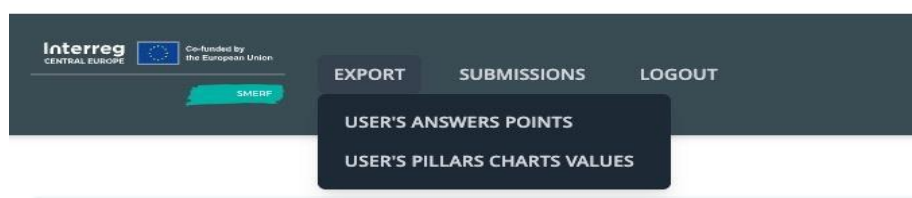


Figure 13: Screenshot of the export menu

These files can support a more detailed analysis of the company's performance and may also be shared with mentors, consultants, or external advisors who are supporting the company in interpreting the assessment results.



6. Data Security and Privacy

The SMERF Diagnostic Tool collects and processes personal data in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The data collection process is structured and transparent, ensuring that users are informed about how their data is used. The tool gathers identification data, such as first name, last name, job title, and company name, along with contact information like email address. Additionally, it records usage data, including interactions with the tool, login times, activity logs, and questionnaire responses.

The Terms & Conditions and Privacy Policy texts are available in a dedicated section of the self-assessment tool. If and when the Terms & Conditions are modified, whether before or after the project's completion, a communication will be shared to inform users of the updates.

The collected data serves multiple purposes:

- Ensuring access to the SMERF Diagnostic Tool, allowing users to fully benefit from its functionalities.
- Analysing SME responses to provide tailored recommendations, including training programs, mentoring opportunities, and expert consultations.
- Supporting users with inquiries and technical assistance to improve their experience and ensure smooth interactions with the tool.
- Refining functionalities and improving user experience based on collected data, ensuring that the tool evolves according to user needs and feedback.

To comply with GDPR, users must provide informed consent before submitting their data. This ensures that individuals understand the extent and purpose of data collection. Processing activities follow principles of transparency, purpose limitation, and data minimization, with structured processing. These principles align with GDPR's core requirements of ensuring that individuals are aware of how their data is collected, limiting processing to necessary purposes, and safeguarding personal data through strict operational protocols to prevent unauthorized access or misuse.



7. Conclusion

The SMERF Diagnosis Tool provides SMEs with a structured framework to reflect on their organizational practices, digital capabilities, and strategic orientation. Through a guided self-assessment process and tailored recommendations, the tool supports companies in identifying potential improvement areas and defining possible transformation pathways.

Beyond the diagnostic phase, the SMERF project offers additional support activities designed to help SMEs implement the recommended actions. These may include training programmes, mentorship sessions, and opportunities for knowledge exchange with larger companies and innovation actors.

By combining self-assessment, expert guidance, and learning opportunities, the SMERF initiative aims to support SMEs in strengthening their competitiveness and adapting to the evolving business environment.