Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE

Co-funded by the European Union

SMERF

SMERF Handbook

A guide on how to get an SME ready for the future

Contents

List of Acronyms

BSO: Business Support Organisation

HEI: Higher Education Institution

IKB: Inspiration Knowledge Base

IM: Individual Mentoring

ISP: Individual Support Programme

RTO: Research and Technology Organisation

SDT: SMERF Diagnosis Tool

SME: Small and Medium-sized Enterprise

SMERF: Small and Medium Enterprises Ready for the Future

1. Introduction

In an ever-evolving world, companies need to face new challenges. As the market evolves with technological advances, companies must keep pace and adopt increasingly sophisticated, ever-changing strategies to adapt their approach. While large companies enjoy ample resources in terms of people, assets, and means, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) struggle to keep up, having to rely on significantly fewer resources. As they often represent the supply chains of larger companies, it is essential that they receive support to prepare them for the future; this support must be commensurate not only with the type of service or product these companies offer, but also with the regional context in which they operate.

This Handbook is a practical guide to supporting SMEs and is based on the outcomes of the three-year Interreg European project SMERF – Small and Medium Enterprises Ready for the Future.

1.1. About the SMERF Project

The SMERF project involved 8 regions from 7 countries from central Europe: Poland, Croatia, Austria, Germany, Hungary, Italy and Slovakia. The aim of this project is to study the needs of the SMEs in keeping up with the evolving market, framing the companies within four fundamental pillars**: Innovation Culture, Digital Manufacturing, Open Innovation & Sharing Economy, and Green & Circular Economy & Sustainability**.

Strong on a cross-regional collection of knowledge on the needs of the SMEs, the project's consortium developed a common knowledge base, a tool for SME's assessment, and implemented active actions toward the SMEs, as a first step for a concrete and effective support to such companies in enhancing their readiness for future challenges, and in filling the gap with big companies.

1.2. Key Concepts and Terminology

An **SME ready for the future (SMERF) is a company that gained a clear view not only of** the challenges to face, but also of its internal limitations and criticalities, and took precise and tailored actions to enhance its capabilities in terms of the four pillars, outlined in the following figure.

Innovation culture

- creating an innovation-friendly culture
- investing in research and development
- leaders having a clear vision of the future driven by innovation

Digital manufacturing

- adopting and integrating advanced technologies and digital solutions into its processes
- proactively adopting new technologies
- following industry trends to remain competitive

Open innovation 2.0 & sharing economy

- using a model of renting resources in order to reduce operating costs or the cost of the final product/service
- using and integrating ideas from many external sources

Green & circular economy & sustainability

- creating environmentally friendly and socially responsible products
- implementing new processes to minimise waste and ecological footprint, optimise resource use and maximise product durability

An **Innomediary** is an entity that supports SMEs or closely cooperates with SMEs on innovation development. Some examples are:

- **Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)** - Universities, Technical Schools, etc.
- **Business Support Organisations (BSOs)** – organisations that provide support to companies in innovation (technology transfer, training, consultation, and acceleration centres)
- Regional authorities that provide support and services to SMEs in innovation

1.3. Target audience and scope of the Handbook

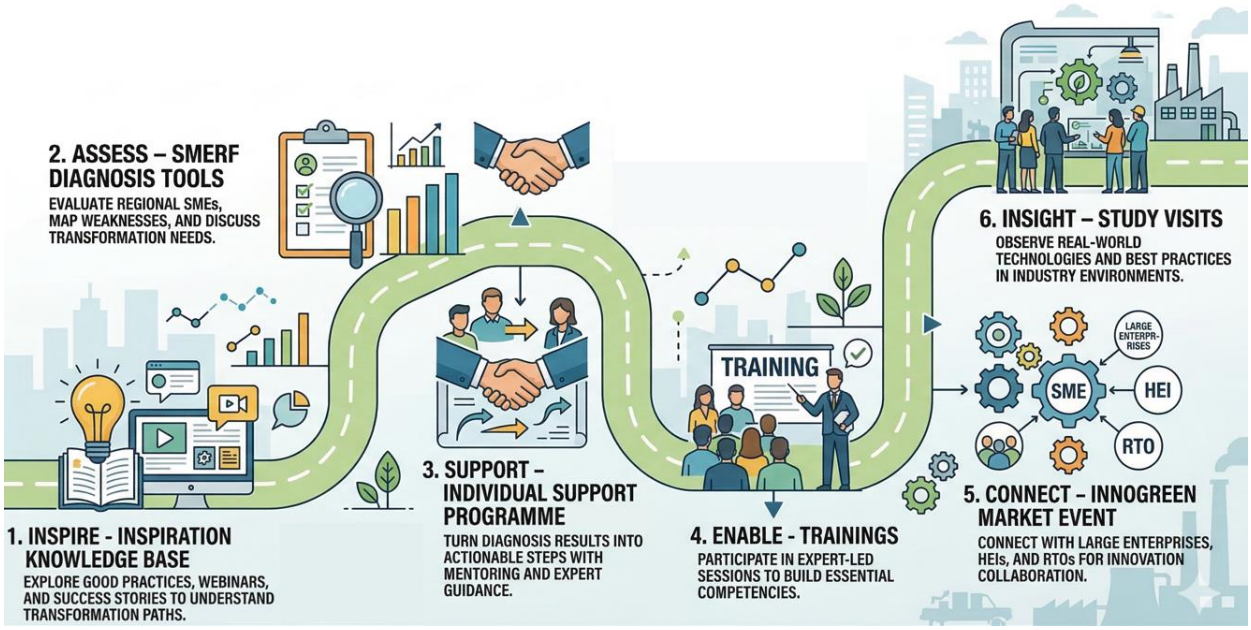
The SMERF Handbook is dedicated to Innomediaries/HEIs/regional/local authorities, as well as anyone involved in supporting SMEs in their transformation processes towards a company of the future.

The SMERF Handbook aims to collect the experience and the know-how gained by the consortium in a practical guide on how to support SMEs, and is structured as a ready-to-implement set of procedures for organisations wanting to use them in their daily business, enriched by the practical experience gained during actions taken by the consortium to actively support the SMEs.

1.4. How to use the Handbook to replicate the SMERF model

The SMERF methodology presented in this handbook is designed to be transferable and adaptable to different regional innovation ecosystems. Although the tools and activities described in the following chapters were developed and tested within the SMERF project across Central Europe, the overall approach can be replicated by organisations that support SMEs in their transformation towards future-ready business models.

The **SMERF model** is based on a **structured pathway** that combines diagnostic tools, targeted support, knowledge exchange and ecosystem engagement. Organisations wishing to replicate this approach do not need to reproduce every activity exactly as implemented in the project. Instead, they can adapt the methodology to their regional context, institutional capacities and the specific needs of local SMEs.



At its core, the SMERF approach follows six complementary stages that together create a coherent support framework:

1. **Inspire** - Inspiration Knowledge Base

Provide SMEs with access to practical examples, good practices and innovation-related knowledge through tools such as the Inspiration Knowledge Base (IKB).

2. **Assess** – SMERF Diagnosis Tools

Analyse the current level of SME readiness through diagnostic tools such as the SMERF Diagnosis Tool (SDT), which identifies strengths, weaknesses and priority areas for transformation.

3. **Support** – Individual Support Programme

Translate assessment results into concrete actions through mentoring and expert guidance, as implemented in the Individual Support Programme (ISP).

4. **Enable** - Training

Strengthen SME competencies through training sessions and knowledge-transfer activities covering innovation, digitalisation and sustainability topics.

5. **Connect** – InnoGreen Market event

Facilitate interaction among SMEs, large companies, research institutions, and other stakeholders through networking initiatives such as the InnoGreen Market.

6. **Insight** – Study Visits

Expose SMEs to real-world practices, technologies and market expectations through study visits and direct engagement with industrial and research environments.

Together, these stages form a practical framework that organisations such as business support organisations, higher education institutions, regional development agencies and innovation intermediaries can adopt and adapt. By implementing some or all these elements, regions can create structured support mechanisms that help SMEs better understand transformation challenges, build capabilities and strengthen their position in evolving markets.

The following chapters describe each component of this framework in detail and provide guidance, operational recommendations and practical roadmaps for organisations wishing to replicate the SMERF approach.

2. The SMERF Inspiration Knowledge Base (IKB)

2.1. About the Inspiration Knowledge Base

The **Inspiration Knowledge Base (IKB)** is a central outcome of the SMERF project, created to strengthen the innovation, digital transformation, and sustainability capacities of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) across Central Europe. The platform serves as an accessible, structured repository of knowledge that supports SMEs in adopting new practices, learning from regional examples, and deepening their engagement with the four SMERF transformation pillars described in Chapter 1.

The IKB (https://readyforfuture.eu/) is an online platform accessible via the SMERF project website. The platform aggregates curated knowledge resources, including good practices, innovation support services, webinars, training materials and policy-oriented discussions. Its structure allows SMEs and innovation intermediaries to easily browse, filter, and explore relevant content based on their interests and transformation priorities.

2.2. Purpose of the IKB

The IKB is developed in response to a clear and recurring need among SMEs: easy access to practical knowledge, real-world examples, and tools to help them navigate innovation and digitalisation. Many SMEs lack internal innovation capacity, face resource constraints, and require inspiration from peers who already work successfully in these fields. The IKB addresses this need by collecting high-quality information, best practices, expert content, and learning materials into a single, coherent resource.

2.3. Main objectives

The development of the IKB is guided by four core objectives derived from four SMERF pillars:

- **Strengthen innovation capacity:** Provide SMEs with tools, frameworks, and examples to build a sustainable innovation culture.
- **Facilitate digital transformation:** Share cases and resources demonstrating how digital technologies enhance productivity, efficiency, and competitiveness.
- **Promote collaborative innovation:** Encourage SMEs to engage in Open Innovation 2.0 and adopt collaborative models involving universities, research organisations, and peers.
- **Support sustainability and circularity:** Offer practical examples showing how green and circular economy principles can be meaningfully applied in SMEs.

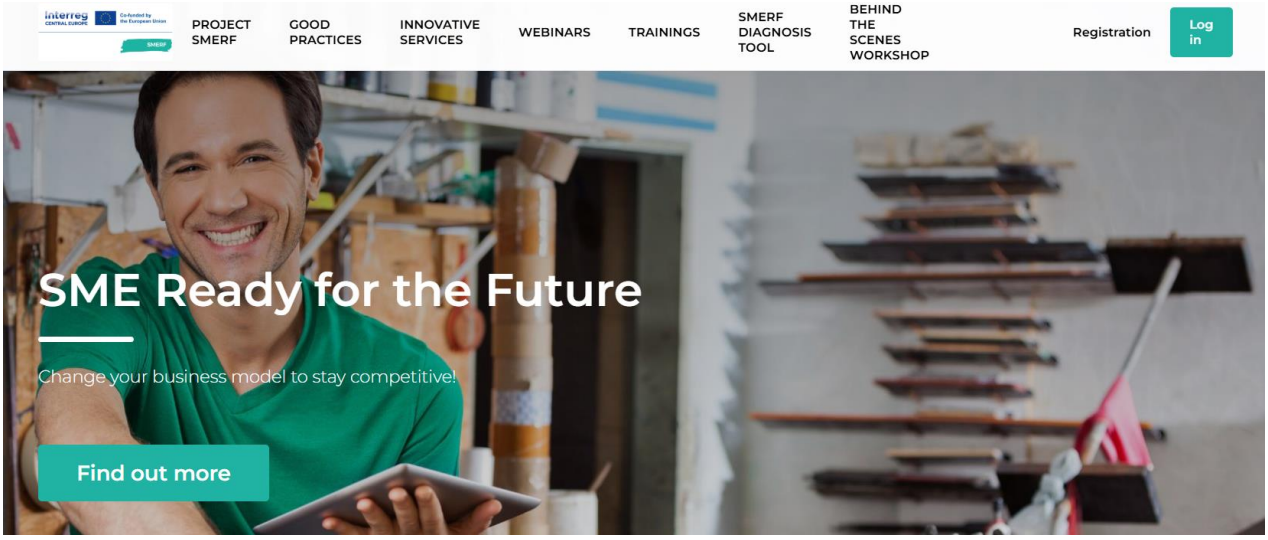
2.4. Target users

The IKB is intended for:

- SME representatives seeking knowledge and inspiration
- Innomediaries providing support services
- Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and Research and Technology Organisations (RTOs) active in technology transfer

2.5. Content Sections

The IKB is organised into the following sections.



➢ **GOOD PRACTICES**

This section presents structured examples of successful solutions implemented by SMEs across seven countries, organised by the four SMERF pillars. Cases are presented as concise "stories" with photos, links, interviews, and pillar-based categorisation.

Valuable features

- Standardised case template enabling easy comparison
- Country filters and pillar filters
- Practical insights into challenges, solutions, collaborators, and transferable elements
- Evidence-based results and links to additional materials
- Video interviews, where available

Link- https://readyforfuture.eu/good-practices?

➢ **INNOVATIVE SERVICES**

A catalogue of innovation-support services collected across eight regions, each described using a unified structure. These services help SMEs identify suitable support tools from service providers active in innovation, digitalisation, and sustainability.

Valuable features

- Unified service cards (focus, fees, duration, requirements, benefits)
- Direct contact details for each service provider

- Links to original websites and additional resources
- Categorisation by topic and region

Link - https://readyforfuture.eu/innovative-services

➢ **WEBINARS**

Recordings from four transnational webinars, each dedicated to one SMERF pillar and featuring external experts, interactive tools, and project presentations.

Valuable features

- Expert lectures explaining trends and practical approaches
- Video format accessible on demand
- Supplementary materials accompanying the recordings
- Insights from live discussions and quizzes

Link - https://readyforfuture.eu/webinars

➢ **TRAININGS**

A library of eight training sessions produced by each partner region. Each recording includes expert talks, practical examples, and tools that SMEs can use to deepen their knowledge in each SMERF pillar.

Valuable features

- Region-specific training experiences
- Video-Based learning available at any time
- Expert explanations of local challenges and solutions
- Consistent structure for easy orientation

Link - **https://readyforfuture.eu/trainings?**

➢ SMERF DIAGNOSIS TOOL (SDT)

This section provides direct access to the SDT, which evaluates an SME's maturity across the four transformation pillars.

Valuable features

- Clear explanation of how SDT supports SME self-assessment
- Direct link to the tool
- Consistent alignment between SDT results and IKB learning content

Link - https://readyforfuture.eu/smerf-diagnosis-tool

➢ BEHIND THE SCENES WORKSHOP

Recording of a high-level workshop for policymakers, showcasing expert panel discussions and presentations delivered by representatives from each participating region.

Valuable features

- Policy-oriented content complementing SME-focused material
- Video documentation of expert viewpoints
- Regional outlook on innovation and sustainability

Link - https://readyforfuture.eu/behind-the-scenes-workshop

3. SMERF Self-Assessment & Expert System

One of the main focuses of the SMERF project is its diagnostic capability: the ability to help Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) understand where they currently stand and where they need to go. This chapter presents the SMERF Self-Assessment and Expert System, operationalised through the SMERF Diagnosis Tool (SDT), and explains how Innomediaries, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), and regional authorities can deploy it effectively in their work with SMEs.

3.1. About the Self-Diagnosis Tool

The SDT is a free, online self-assessment platform developed within the SMERF project and co-funded by the European Union through the Interreg Central Europe programme. It is specifically designed to help SMEs evaluate their current level of advancement across four fundamental transformation pillars and receive a personalised set of recommendations to guide their development.

Unlike generic diagnostic instruments, the SDT integrates an expert system that analyses SME responses using advanced algorithms, simulating the decision-making process of a human expert. This allows the tool to go beyond simple scoring and produce genuinely tailored transformation scenarios, actionable guidance on training, mentoring, and expert consultation activities most relevant to each company's unique profile.

The tool is accessible **free of charge** to any SME across Europe and requires only a simple registration to get started.

The self-assessment is completed by an authorised representative of the SME, typically an owner, general manager, operations manager, innovation manager, digital transformation officer, or another senior staff member with a comprehensive understanding of the company’s strategic direction, operational processes, and development priorities. As the assessment requires informed responses across organisational, technological, and sustainability dimensions, it is recommended that the respondent either holds a cross-functional role or consults relevant internal stakeholders to ensure accurate and reliable input.

The SDT has been validated through a structured pilot involving **172 SMEs across 7 countries**, representing a wide range of sectors, company sizes, and levels of digital maturity. The results confirmed the tool's usability and added value: 93% of participating SMEs found it valuable in identifying areas for improvement, and 92% said they would recommend it to other businesses.

Key facts about the SDT:

Developed by: SMERF consortium (software by INCODE) | Access: Free of charge | Languages: English | Completion time: approximately 1 hour for both steps | Target users: SMEs across all sectors

Link: https://smerftool.eu/users/sign_up

3.2. Methodology and assessment areas

The SDT assesses SMEs across four thematic areas — referred to throughout the SMERF project as Pillars. Each pillar corresponds to a critical dimension of business competitiveness and future readiness:

1. **Pillar 1 - Innovation Culture:** Focuses on fostering creativity, managing ideas, and embedding innovation into daily operations. It assesses leadership capabilities, the organisation's openness to change, and the strategic allocation of resources to sustain innovation.
2. **Pillar 2 - Digital Manufacturing:** Evaluates the degree to which a company has adopted digital technologies to enhance efficiency and competitiveness, including automation, data management, and integration of digital tools in production processes.
3. **Pillar 3 - Open Innovation & Sharing Economy:** Assesses the SME's capacity to leverage external partnerships, co-create with customers, suppliers, and research institutions, and participate in shared platforms and resource-sharing initiatives.
4. **Pillar 4 - Green & Circular Economy & Sustainability**: Examines the company's commitment to environmentally friendly practices, circular processes, sustainable resource management, and the integration of social and environmental considerations into its value proposition.

The assessment is structured into two sequential steps, each with a distinct purpose and depth of analysis.

For detailed, step-by-step instructions on how to register, navigate the platform and complete the SDT online, users may refer to the dedicated **guide** available on the SDT homepage.

3.2.1. Step 1 - General Overview

Step 1 consists of approximately 40 multiple-choice questions covering all four Pillars. It is designed to give the SME - and any supporting Innomediary - a rapid, high-level overview of the company's readiness across all transformation dimensions. Before starting Step 1, users are asked to select the Pillars they want to include in the assessment. The estimated completion time is 15 to 20 minutes.

Before submitting their answers, users are shown a summary of all their responses and can edit them if needed, ensuring the accuracy of the final submission. A 'not applicable' option is available for questions that are not relevant to a specific industry or operational context; selecting it excludes these answers from the score calculation.

Each question is accompanied by information bubbles to clarify terminology and help SMEs answer with confidence, regardless of their level of familiarity with the topic.

Upon completion of Step 1, the tool generates:

- **A set of radar charts**, one per pillar, illustrating the SME's performance across the features assessed within each pillar, on a normalised 0-10 scale

- **An automatically generated descriptive summary** produced using an LLM-based API, that highlights the two strongest features, up to two medium-performing features, and up to two features most in need of improvement
- **A recommendation to proceed to Step 2**, with a suggestion of which pillar(s) to prioritise based on the Step 1 results

3.2.2. Step 2 – In-Depth Analysis

Step 2 offers a deeper, more targeted assessment. In Step 2, users may select one or more pillars for deeper analysis, but only among those previously selected in Step 1. Pillars that were not selected in Step 1 cannot be added later in Step 2. At the start of this step, the SME selects one or more pillars for further analysis. For each selected pillar, the tool presents 20 additional questions, up to 80 in total if all four pillars are chosen, with an estimated completion time of 30 to 40 minutes for a full four-pillar assessment.

The questions in Step 2 are more specific and operational, designed to surface root causes behind the performance gaps identified in Step 1. Answers are directly linked, through the tool's expert system logic, to specific recommended activities.

The expert system logic works as follows:

- **Each answer to each question carries a score (positive or negative),** contributing to the overall score of a given feature within a Pillar
- **The score of each feature is normalised on a 0–10 scale:** low-scoring features trigger essential activity recommendations, mid-scoring features trigger optional activity recommendations, and high-scoring features require no immediate intervention
- **The system identifies the answer(s) that most significantly lowered a feature's score** and uses these to determine which specific activities to recommend

The output of Step 2 includes:

- Updated **radar charts** integrating both Step 1 and Step 2 data
- A **list of essential activities** — directly addressing the lowest-scoring features — drawn from three categories: Training, Expert Consultation, and Mentoring
- **A list of optional activities** — targeting mid-scoring features — which are beneficial but not critical
- Notes on any **low-scoring feature** identified in Step 1 for pillars not selected for Step 2, ensuring no critical gaps go unnoticed
- A **downloadable PDF** report summarising all results and recommendations
- **Contact details** of SMERF Consortium Partners by country, enabling SMEs to seek further support locally

3.2.3. Activity Categories

All activities recommended by the SDT fall into one of three categories, which correspond to the types of support that SMEs can access through the SMERF project and its partners after the project ends:

- **Training:** Structured learning sessions aimed at building specific knowledge or skills in a defined area. Training activities are typically group-based and can be delivered in-person or online.

- **Expert consultation:** Specialised, one-to-one advice from a subject-matter expert, designed to address complex or highly context-specific challenges that require a higher level of technical intervention.
- **Mentoring:** Sustained, personalised guidance from an experienced professional who works with the SME over a period to support implementation of changes and build internal capacity.

3.3. User roles and access levels

It is possible to register on the platform with two roles.

- **USER**

This is the default profile assigned to all individuals registering on the SDT platform. Users can:

- complete Step 1 and Step 2 of the SDT questionnaire;
- review the generated results and transformation recommendations;
- **download their own assessment data**, including:
  - *User's answer points* (all questions and selected answers)
  - *User's pillar chart values* (feature-level and Pillar-level scores)

Standard Users can access only their own data and results. They cannot view submissions from other organisations nor access any administrative functionality.

- **MENTOR**

Any user may **request to become a Mentor** by marking the dedicated option in the registration form.
A Mentor can:

- view and filter the submissions of the companies assigned to them;
- **export the results of their mentees**, using the same export formats available to Users;

SMEs may **select a Mentor during registration**, choosing among those registered on the platform. Mentors **cannot** access any company not officially assigned to them.

3.4. Interpretation of the Results

For Innomediaries and support organisations using the SDT as part of their engagement with SMEs, understanding how to read and work with the tool's outputs is essential. This section provides guidance on interpreting the results and using them to inform the next steps of support.

3.4.1. Reading the SDT report

Once the SME completes the assessment, the tool generates a report presenting the results in a clear, actionable format. The report is structured around two main elements: radar charts and activity recommendations.

For each of the four pillars, a radar chart displays the numerical score (on a scale of 0 to 10) achieved for each feature within that pillar. These charts give an immediate visual impression of where the

company is performing well and where gaps exist: a feature score close to 10 indicates strong performance, while lower scores indicate areas requiring attention. The tool's internal scoring logic, which processes each answer and calculates its relative impact on a feature's score, runs in the background and is not visible to the user; the SME sees only the resulting numerical scores.

Alongside the charts, the report includes an automatically generated written summary based on the SME's responses. This summary highlights the company's strongest areas and its most critical challenges and offers an initial set of directions for improvement. It is designed to be readable and accessible, even for SME owners with no prior experience of self-assessment tools.

When reviewing the report together with an SME, Innomediaries should pay particular attention to the features with the lowest scores, as these are the areas the tool has identified as most in need of intervention and which will have driven the essential activity recommendations. High-scoring features can also be seen as strengths to build on or leverage in conversations about the company's overall strategic positioning.

3.4.2. Using the recommended activities

The activities recommended by the SDT are not generic suggestions: they are directly mapped to the specific answers that most negatively affected a feature's score. This means that each recommended activity targets a clearly identified root cause of underperformance. Innomediaries should use these recommendations as a starting point for structuring the Individual Support Programme (described in Chapter 4) or for directing the SME to appropriate training and consultation resources.

The distinction between essential and optional activities is significant:

- **Essential activities** (linked to red features) should be treated as priorities. They address critical gaps that, if left unaddressed, may limit the SME's overall transformation capacity.
- **Optional activities** (linked to mid-scoring features) are valuable additions that can enhance performance in areas that are already partially developed. They may become essential in a subsequent assessment cycle.

If the SME has not selected a particular pillar for the Step 2 analysis, but low-scoring features were flagged in Step 1, they are still reported in the Step 2 output. Innomediaries should draw the SME's attention to these and consider whether they warrant inclusion in the support plan.

3.4.3. Practical tips for Innomediaries

Based on the SMERF consortium's experience of piloting the SDT with over 160 SMEs across seven countries, the following practical recommendations are offered to organisations deploying the tool:

BEFORE THE ASSESSMENT — PREPARE THE SME

Contact the SME and explain the tool's purpose and structure before they begin. Share the registration link (https://smerftool.eu/users/sign_up) and encourage them to set aside enough uninterrupted time to complete both steps in one or two sessions. It is helpful to briefly introduce the four pillars in advance, so the SME can start reflecting on their situation before answering the questions. SMEs that understand the framework tend to answer more accurately and engage more meaningfully with the results.

DURING THE ASSESSMENT — BE AVAILABLE

Let the SME know they can reach out if they have doubts about specific questions. The tool includes information bubbles to clarify terminology, but an Innomediary who is reachable during the process can help prevent drop-off and ensure the SME completes both steps rather than stopping after Step 1.

BE AWARE OF SECTOR RELEVANCE

Some questions, particularly within the Digital Manufacturing pillar, may feel less relevant to service-based or micro-sized SMEs. If the SME raises doubts about the applicability of certain questions, reassure them that the "not applicable" option is available and that using it will not distort the overall results.

SUPPORT COMPLETION OF BOTH STEPS

While Step 1 alone provides useful insights, the full value of the SDT — including personalised activity recommendations - is unlocked only upon completion of Step 2. Encourage SMEs to select at least the pillar(s) most relevant to their strategic priorities.

AFTER THE ASSESSMENT — COLLECT THE REPORT

Ask the SME to download the PDF report generated by the tool and share it with you, or, if you are assigned as their Mentor on the platform, access it directly through your Mentor dashboard. This report is the Innomediary's primary working document and the starting point for all subsequent support activities.

REVIEW RESULTS TOGETHER

Schedule a debrief session with the SME after the assessment to walk through the radar charts and recommended activities. This joint interpretation exercise greatly increases the likelihood that the SME will act on the results.

CONTEXTUALISE THE RESULTS FOR THE SME'S PROFILE

When discussing the report, keep the SME's sector, size, and digital maturity in mind. A micro-enterprise with no R&D investment will need a different conversation than a mid-sized manufacturing company. The tool's recommendations are a starting point - the Innomediary's role is to help prioritise and contextualise them based on the company's specific reality.

USE THE PDF REPORT AS A REFERENCE DOCUMENT
The downloadable report provides a structured record of the assessment that the SME can share internally, use in strategic planning, or refer to in future assessment cycles.

USE THE REPORT AS AN INTERNAL COMMUNICATION TOOL FOR THE SME
Encourage the SME to share the report with their leadership team or relevant staff. In companies where the assessment was completed by a single person (e.g., the CEO or a manager), broadening internal awareness of the results can help build organisational buy-in for the transformation actions that follow.

CONNECT THE SDT OUTPUT TO BROADER SUPPORT PATHWAYS
The recommended activities are the bridge between the diagnosis and the support. Use them to design or tailor the Individual Support Programme (Chapter 4), identify relevant training topics (Chapter 5), or plan participation in InnoGreen Market events or Study visits (Chapter 6).

ENCOURAGE RE-ASSESSMENT
The SDT is designed to be used more than once. A follow-up assessment after 12 to 18 months can measure the impact of interventions and identify new priorities, making it a tool for continuous improvement rather than a one-time exercise.

3.4.4. Data Security and Privacy

The SDT collects and processes personal data in full compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Users are required to provide informed consent prior to submitting data, and all processing activities adhere to the principles of transparency, purpose limitation, and data minimisation. The data controller is the Wroclaw University of Science and Technology, and any data protection enquiries can be directed to the Data Protection Officer at gdpr@crit-research.it.

SMEs retain full control over their data and may request access, rectification, restriction of processing, or erasure at any time. Personal data is retained for a maximum of five years after the conclusion of the SMERF project, after which it is deleted or fully anonymised. Anonymised data may be used in scientific publications related to the project.

The platform is hosted on professional third-party servers and has been developed in accordance with industry best practices for secure software development, including role-based access controls, data encryption, and continuous security monitoring.

4. The Individual Support Programme (ISP)

4.1. About the ISP

The Individual Support Programme (ISP) aims to assist the Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) in taking concrete steps toward the transformation. Through the SMERF Diagnosis Tool (SDT), SMEs receive a diagnosis of their status, along with practical suggestions on where transformation actions are needed. Suggestions for targeted training, expert consultations, or mentorship are a fundamental source of innovation but may not be sufficient on their own.

The objective of an ISP is to provide external support, targeting SMEs with tailored solutions to strengthen their performance across the most critical pillars. The SDT, as an assessment tool, provides a picture of the company's status, highlighting its strengths and weaknesses. Relying on such a view, it is possible to deeply analyse the company's needs and propose feasible actions that consider not only the company's lack, but also its actual capabilities in terms of human and economic resources and available means.

The ISP integrates the know-how developed by the consortium, the deep introspective view gained by an assessment tool, and a direct support action; it also represents a powerful push forward for an SME, which is not capable on its own to exploit the three elements previously outlined, but may take advantage of them with an aimed and direct external intervention.

In a regional context, such interventions are essential. Innomediaries, regional authorities, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), and Business Support Organisations (BSOs) possess a broader understanding of market needs and play a key role in providing effective support to SMEs.

In practice, the ISP is typically implemented by innovation intermediaries such as business support organisations, regional development agencies, higher education institutions or cluster organisations. These actors coordinate the mentoring process, connect SMEs with relevant experts and ensure that transformation activities remain aligned with regional innovation priorities.

4.2. Objectives and Target

An ISP has the following objectives:

- **Provide tailored support based on the SME's assessment results**, using the SDT outputs to identify the weakest pillars and propose targeted transformation actions
- **Guide SMEs through the first steps of their transformation journey**, ensuring that suggested actions are feasible and aligned with their internal capacities in terms of skills, resources, and organisational readiness
- **Strengthen the connection between SMEs and Innomediaries**, fostering collaboration with HEIs, BSOs, regional authorities, and experts to validate and implement innovation-related actions
- **Empower the regional innovation ecosystem** by enabling Innomediaries to gain deeper insight into SME needs and design more effective support services in the future

The target of the ISP is **the SMEs that lack in the four pillars**. With a low score in the self-assessment, such SMEs demonstrate the need to recognise the importance of the different aspects of readiness and to take concrete steps toward the future.

4.3. Actors involved

➢ **PROVIDER**

The **provider** is the Innomediary responsible for offering the ISP (HEI, BSO or regional authority). It coordinates the programme, selects mentors and experts, and ensures the process remains consistent with regional priorities.

In practice, the provider must also guarantee that SMEs receive clear communication, realistic timelines, and support proportionate to their internal capacity.

➢ **MENTOR**

The mentor is a figure with transversal expertise across the four pillars of the SMERF framework. Their role is central to the ISP, as they connect diagnostic outputs with concrete transformation actions. Their responsibilities include:

- **Assessing the company based on SDT results**. The mentor interprets both numerical scores and specific answers, identifying the most urgent weaknesses and transforming them into clear priorities. They ensure the SME understands what each low-scoring area implies in practice, preventing misinterpretations or unfocused efforts.
- **Drafting a preliminary transformation plan**. The mentor selects relevant SDT suggestions and integrates them with their own experience. The resulting draft avoids unrealistic actions and focuses on what the SME can realistically implement, taking into account available time, skills, internal structure, and resources. The plan remains sufficiently detailed to guide action, yet flexible enough to be adapted during later discussion.
- **Discussing feasibility and finalising a co-designed plan**. The mentor presents the draft to the SME and jointly reviews priorities, timelines, and expected outcomes. They simplify technical aspects when necessary and help the SME understand the sequence of steps. This phase prevents overcommitment and ensures alignment between ambition and capacity.
- **Targeting SMEs requiring additional mentoring support**. Companies showing limited readiness or reduced internal capacity may require closer, more frequent support. Here, the mentor structures a sequence of follow-up meetings to gradually guide the SME through the implementation process.
- **Suggesting experts for specific consultations**. When the SME encounters highly technical or sector-specific challenges, the mentor identifies appropriate experts. This avoids dispersing attention on unnecessary themes and ensures that deeper analysis is provided only when relevant.

ⓘ Operational note
Throughout the entire ISP, the mentor acts as a “translator” of complexity. They convert diagnostics into actionable steps, ensure proportionality between proposed actions and internal capacity, and maintain a manageable pace for the SME.

➢ **EXPERT**

Experts provide specialised knowledge in one or more pillars. They support the SME in analysing specific challenges, clarifying technical doubts, and refining or validating certain actions within the plan.

To be effective, the expert's contribution must remain focused, clearly targeted, and compatible with the SME's resources. Their interventions should add precision without overwhelming the company with overly complex solutions.

4.4. Structure of the ISP

Here is the suggested structure of an ISP, based on the consortium's experience, presented in phases. Operational notes are provided based on real-case feedback collected after the first implementation of such a programme.

A filled ISP protocol developed and used by the consortium during the SMERF Project is reported in the Appendix **Appendix - Example of an Individual Support** Programme Protocol.

The following appendix provides a complete example of an Individual Support Programme (ISP) protocol, compiled in accordance with the methodology presented in Chapter 4. It illustrates how the different phases of the ISP can be applied in practice—from the initial assessment based on the SMERF Diagnosis Tool to the development of a tailored transformation plan and the implementation of mentoring and expert support. This real-case example is intended to help providers and Innomediaries understand how to operationalise the SMERF approach in their own regional context.

. Here, the reader can find a real example of the implementation of such a programme.

4.4.1. Entry Tool: the SMERF Diagnosis Tool

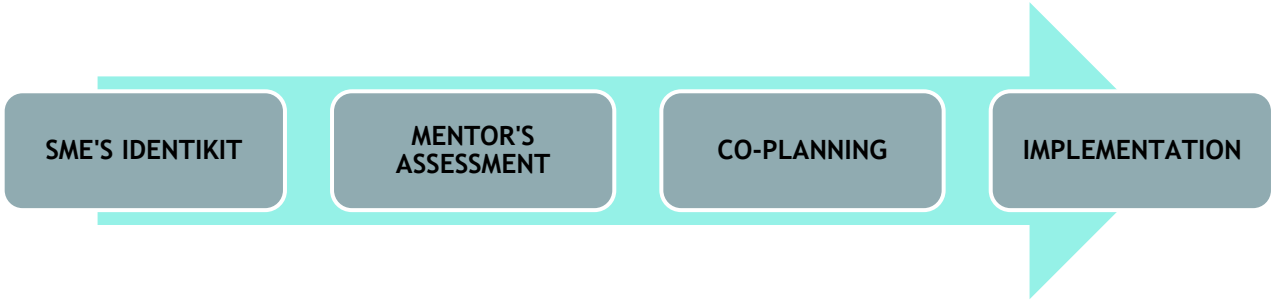
The SDT is the entry point of the ISP.
It provides:

- a **numerical assessment** of the SME across the four pillars
- a **set of tailored suggestions** derived from specific answers
- an **overview of strengths, weaknesses, and priority areas**

This initial mapping allows mentors to understand where intervention is most urgent and feasible.

4.4.2. Implementation phases

The ISP process follows a linear sequence, in which each phase builds on the outcomes of the previous one, ensuring coherence and continuity.



1. SME'S IDENTIKIT

The process starts by establishing a complete picture of the SME. Collecting additional information, such as size, age, sector, annual revenue, R&D investment, ownership, and market orientation, helps define the SME's actual capacity to engage in transformation activities.

Understanding this structure early prevents the mentor from proposing actions that are too demanding or unsuitable for the company's level of maturity.

Operational note
Many SMEs face internal constraints-limited staff, limited time, restricted budgets. A solid identikit allows the mentor to anticipate these constraints and shape feasible recommendations.

2. MENTOR'S ASSESSMENT

The mentor reviews the SDT's two main outputs:

- **Numerical scores**, highlighting weak pillars and specific features requiring attention
- **Verbose suggestions**, providing contextual guidance and initial ideas for improvement

The mentor integrates these elements into a prioritised analysis, determining where intervention is both most urgent and most feasible.

Operational note
SDT results can be difficult for SMEs to interpret. The mentor's assessment transforms raw data into a practical starting point, preventing confusion or misaligned expectations.

3. CO-PLANNING

The co-planning is articulated in three sub-phases.

➢ Preliminary plan of transformation

With the identikit and the assessment in hand, the mentor prepares a preliminary plan. This includes selected SDT suggestions, a limited set of targeted actions, and any additional recommendations based on the mentor's experience.
The plan describes *what* should be done, *why*, and *in which order*, while consciously avoiding overly broad or long-term proposals unlikely to be implemented.

Operational note
A focused and realistic draft increases the SME's ability to engage and prevents the common issue of producing plans that are too general or too ambitious to be used in practice.

➢ Discussion with the SME

The mentor and SME meet to discuss and refine the preliminary plan. This phase has three purposes:

- **Validate priorities** and ensure they align with the SME's strategic direction
- **Adapt actions** to operational constraints, available personnel, and timing
- **Ensure the SME clearly understands** each proposed activity and its expected benefit

Operational note
This discussion is essential to prevent overwhelm. SMEs often need support in breaking down actions into manageable steps and understanding the sequence in which they should be implemented.

➢ Final plan of transformation and implementation

After the discussion, the mentor finalises the plan. The final version typically includes:

- **Selected transformation actions**
- **Training opportunities**
- **Consultations with experts** when needed
- Access to **cross-regional services**
- For the most fragile SMEs**, a structured individual mentoring schedule**

Operational note
The final plan must align with the SME's actual capacity. Concentrating on a few well-chosen actions dramatically increases the likelihood of successful implementation.

4. IMPLEMENTATION

In the final stage of the ISP, additional support instruments are activated to complement and strengthen the SME's transformation pathway. These elements are used only when they add clear value and when the SME is ready to benefit from them. They represent three distinct but interconnected types of support:

➢ Expert consultation

When the SME faces a specific technical, organisational or sector-related challenge, a targeted consultation with an expert can provide deeper insight.

The expert clarifies issues beyond the mentor's transversal perspective and helps refine or validate specific actions within the plan.
This support must remain focused and proportionate: the aim is not to overload the SME with complexity, but to provide a precise contribution that resolves a specific need.

- **Cross-regional services**

Cross-regional services expose SMEs to additional resources, tools, infrastructures or practices available beyond their local context.
These services broaden the SME's opportunities by connecting it with structured organisations, innovation ecosystems, and support networks from other regions.
Used appropriately, cross-regional services create continuity between regional experiences and allow the SME to benefit from solutions that might not otherwise be accessible.

- **Individual mentoring (IM)**

For SMEs requiring closer follow-up, the IM provides a structured sequence of meetings.
This format allows the mentor to guide the SME step by step, verify progress over time, and adjust actions when needed.
The IM ensures continuity throughout implementation, particularly when the SME has limited internal capacity or when the transformation plan includes multiple stages that require supervision.

Operational note
These three elements function as reinforcement modules. They are not mandatory for all SMEs; they are activated only when they strengthen the plan's impact, maintain feasibility, and provide specific advantages that the SME would not obtain through the basic ISP pathway alone.

4.5. Main challenges

ENGAGEMENT AND TIME CONSTRAINTS

Challenge:

- SMEs often struggle to dedicate time to mentoring due to limited staff, daily workload, and ad hoc operational issues

Mitigation:

- Use short, focused meetings (30–45 minutes) and pre-schedule a micro-calendar
- Keep asynchronous tasks lightweight (materials exchange, clarifications, brief updates)

ALIGNMENT OF EXPECTATIONS

Challenge:

- Ambition and feasibility do not always align; SMEs may overestimate capacity or underestimate implementation effort

Mitigation:

- Present three depth levels of engagement (light/standard/extended) and co-select the one that matches resources and readiness

- Clarify deliverables and limits of support from the beginning

VARIABILITY IN TECHNOLOGICAL MATURITY

Challenge:

- Some SMEs handle advanced concepts easily, while others struggle with basic digital or organisational practices

Mitigation:

- Provide "scaled versions" of actions: pilot version, simplified prototype, or proof of concept before full deployment
- Prioritise low-risk, high-learning activities to build confidence

OVERLY BROAD OR UNFOCUSED PLANS

Challenge:

- Extensive lists of recommendations tend to remain unimplemented

Mitigation:

- Limit the transformation plan to a small number of prioritised actions
- Assign clear ownership, estimated effort, success criteria, and checkpoints

LACK OF INTERNAL OWNERSHIP

Challenge:

- Without a designated person inside the SME, progress slows or stalls

Mitigation:

- Appoint an internal "Action Owner" for each activity, with explicit responsibilities and protected time

BUDGET AND PROCUREMENT LIMITATIONS

Challenge:

- Financial constraints and long procurement cycles can block implementation

Mitigation:

- Break actions into incremental phases with increasing cost only if earlier steps succeed
- Highlight low-cost or no-cost alternatives (open-source tools, short training)

TERMINOLOGY AND LANGUAGE BARRIERS

Challenge:

- Technical terminology can create misunderstandings or slow decision-making

Mitigation:

- Use short, plain language summaries after each meeting
- Provide a minimal glossary for recurring terms

DATA COMPLETENESS

Challenge:

- Incomplete SDT data reduces the accuracy of the assessment and the mentor's recommendations

Mitigation:

- Use a "Minimum Data Set" checklist before starting the analysis to ensure reliable inputs

MAINTAINING MOMENTUM

Challenge:

- Without structured follow-up, SMEs tend to lose focus and revert to routine operations

Mitigation:

- Schedule IM checkpoints at +30 / +60 / +90 days after the start of implementation
- Keep progress visible with short status updates and simple tracking

4.6. Roadmap for the implementation of an ISP

PHASE 1 - IDENTIFICATION OF THE SME

The first step is to identify a group of SMEs that align with the regional priorities and the provider's strategic focus. At this stage, the provider explains the purpose of the ISP, the type of support offered, and the level of engagement expected from the SME. Clear communication at the outset ensures that companies join the programme with full awareness of the process and the commitment required.

PHASE 2 - ASSESSING THE SMEs

Once SMEs express interest, they undergo an assessment through a tool such as the SDT. This tool should provide both a numerical overview of their performance across the four pillars and qualitative suggestions based on their answers. The assessment offers a reliable picture of the SME's strengths and weaknesses, highlighting the most urgent areas for intervention. This phase is essential to ensure that the ISP targets the companies that can benefit most from personalised support.

PHASE 3 - ENGAGEMENT WITH THE MENTOR

After the assessment, each SME is matched with a mentor. The initial engagement meeting clarifies expectations, operational constraints, communication methods, and timelines. Establishing simple working rules at this stage helps maintain a smooth collaboration and avoids misunderstandings. It also

ensures that the mentor can adapt the pace and intensity of the support to the SME's actual availability and readiness.

PHASE 4 – DESIGN OF A TRANSFORMATION PLAN

Based on the SDT results and the SME's characteristics, the mentor prepares a preliminary transformation plan. This draft contains a focused set of proposed actions, selected for their relevance and feasibility. The mentor and the SME then discuss the draft together, refining priorities, adjusting activities to internal resources and clarifying expected outcomes. The result is a final transformation and implementation plan that includes well-defined actions, realistic timelines, and guidance on whether expert consultations, training opportunities, cross-regional services or IM sessions are required.

PHASE 5 – FOLLOW-UP AND IMPLEMENTATION

Once the plan is agreed upon, the SME begins its transformation journey. The mentor supports the company throughout implementation, helping address operational barriers, maintaining momentum and ensuring that actions follow a logical sequence. When needed, specialised experts are involved, and cross-regional services are activated to provide additional value beyond what is available locally. IM sessions ensure regular follow-up, guide the SME step by step and consolidate progress over time.

PHASE 6 – FEEDBACK

At the end of the implementation cycle, the mentor and the SME review the experience together. They evaluate which actions were successfully implemented, where difficulties emerged, and what conditions facilitated progress. This structured feedback improves the quality of future ISP cycles and strengthens the provider's understanding of SME needs. The insights gathered also help refine the methodology, enhance the ISP's overall effectiveness, and add value to the wider regional innovation ecosystem.

If these measures are not enough, again, personal contact is the most effective way to obtain feedback from stakeholders.

4.7. Expected impact and results

The ISP delivers value at the SME level by turning diagnostic outputs into a concrete, paced action plan. SMEs gain clarity on priorities, understand the operational implications of their weaker pillars, and receive a feasible plan that they can start. Participation in experience-based activities further amplifies this effect: event-driven exchanges, such as the InnoGreen Market, enhance exposure, feedback, business opportunities, industry insights, **and international cooperation**, accelerating learning and opening collaboration channels that would be difficult to activate on their own. In parallel, study visits provide **first-hand market understanding, access to best practices and targeted networking with HEIs/RTOs and large companies**, strengthening SMEs' ability to position their solutions and to identify concrete improvement areas. Regular IM sessions sustain momentum during implementation, allowing step-by-step progress checks and timely course corrections when constraints emerge, particularly for SMEs with limited internal capacity.

For providers and Innomediaries, the ISP sharpens situational awareness of the regional SME landscape. Direct engagement across multiple cases provides a comparative picture of strengths, weaknesses, and recurring needs, while close collaboration with companies strengthens relationships, fosters trust, and consolidates vertical networking capabilities for future initiatives. This learning loop improves service design over time, making subsequent support cycles more targeted and efficient.

At the ecosystem level, the ISP promotes knowledge circulation and cross-regional **connectivity**. Cross-regional services extend SMEs' reach to infrastructures, practices and support networks beyond their local context, linking regional experiences and broadening access to specialised resources. Knowledge transfer is reinforced through structured follow-up after activities—post-event feedback and consolidated reports preserve lessons learned and diffuse reusable patterns across regions. Study visits, reporting, and dissemination further embed insights into the regional fabric, enabling stakeholders to compare approaches and replicate high-value formats. When combined, these mechanisms strengthen local value chains and support broader strategic objectives across innovation, digital transformation, open collaboration and sustainability.

In practical terms, the **near-term results include finalised transformation plans, initiated actions, expert consultations where needed, access to cross-regional** services and a cadence of IM sessions that keeps implementation on track. Over the **medium term**, providers and SMEs can observe higher completion rates for prioritised actions, early adoption of tools or processes to address the weakest features, and measurable improvements in readiness across the targeted pillars. This outcome-focused monitoring aligns with the ISP's operational spirit: concentrate on a manageable set of actions, document evidence of progress, and iterate the plan to maintain feasibility and impact.

5. The SMERF Training Programme

5.1. About the SMERF Training Programme

The SMERF Training Programme provides a series of online training sessions, each dedicated to a specific topic within the project's four thematic pillars: Innovation Culture, Digital Manufacturing, Open Innovation & Sharing Economy, Green & Circular Economy & Sustainability.

The training sessions are meant to be a **first step in the transformation process**, enabling Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) to acquire basic knowledge of the four pillars and to build a foundation for making informed decisions on which area of the business strategy is suitable for transformation in each SME's case. Therefore, the objective of the training is to encourage companies to start a transformation by providing a low-inhibition threshold of short, dedicated courses that SMEs can take with minimal effort and monetary expense.

The training sessions are mainly aimed at the companies themselves, but other stakeholders such as higher education institutions (HEIs), Innomediaries, regional authorities, Business Support Organisation (BSOs) could also profit from the format by either receiving a basic lecture about topics that they are not familiar with or being made aware of the topics industrial partners may struggle with in a cooperation scenario.

Either way, the training is a good measure to either provide companies with the knowledge or facilitate the understanding and communication of potential partners in a cooperation scenario, which can most likely create an environment for easier implementation of transformation measures.

5.2. Objectives and Target

The training sessions have the following objectives:

- **Provide know-how** and knowledge on possible transformation topics, sourced from external experts for each topic; depending on the topics, follow-up training can be provided for more specific topics within the same field.
- **Create a starting point for transformation** by building a knowledge base for SMEs to draw on at the outset of their transformation.
- **Involve all potential stakeholders** to foster communication and potential collaboration in the early steps of a potential transformation.
- **Supply regional insight** to allow participants to take advantage of lessons learned in other central European regions and adapt them for their own needs to facilitate a faster and more focused implementation of measures.

The main target audience for the training is SMEs willing to start their transformation process, but other stakeholders are also involved. Training sessions are offered to all SMEs regardless of their score in the self-assessment tool and is provided in an online format or as recorded sessions.

5.3. Actors involved

➢ **ORGANISER**

The organiser of the training session can be a HEI, a BSO, or a company. The organiser chooses the training course topic, coordinates the advertising campaign and invitation process for all participants, and selects a suitable expert to provide the training. In addition, the organiser is responsible for moderating

the training session, providing an introductory presentation, and managing additional segments, such as Q&A sessions. Finally, collecting feedback on the training is also part of the organisers' role.

➢ **EXPERT**

The expert is the central figure in the actual training session. The expert will manage the main portion of the training session by creating and delivering a presentation on the specific topic covered, and by planning the format in close cooperation with the organiser. Their main tasks in the training are:

- **Determining the exact topics covered in the training session**. In close cooperation with the organisers, the expert will determine the session topic, selecting the content covered, the presentation type, the level of interactivity, and the level of detail for each individual topic within the training.
- **Providing the organiser with an outline of the training**. After initial planning and understanding the training's intended purpose, the expert will draft the training session, including potential interactive activities, the type of interactivity, and the expected outcomes and benefits for participants. This helps to adapt the content to the expectations of both organiser and potential participants, as well as determine the technical needs for the session.
- **Delivering the training session**. The expert is delivering the training session, again in close collaboration with the organiser, according to the preliminary outline and agreed schedule. In a dedicated Q&A session, the expert should be available to answer participants' upcoming questions.
- **Providing additional material for participants**. If possible, the expert provides additional material for participants who plan to deepen their knowledge of the topic covered in the training session. This material could include literature, websites, software solutions, or checklists that companies can use to integrate or expand the knowledge they have acquired in the training.

ℹ Operational note

When setting up a training session, clear and honest communication between the organiser and the expert is a key factor in its successful implementation. Constructive collaboration, a shared understanding of the training's goal, and a clear picture of the potential participants' backgrounds are the basis for creating an inspiring and successful training program.

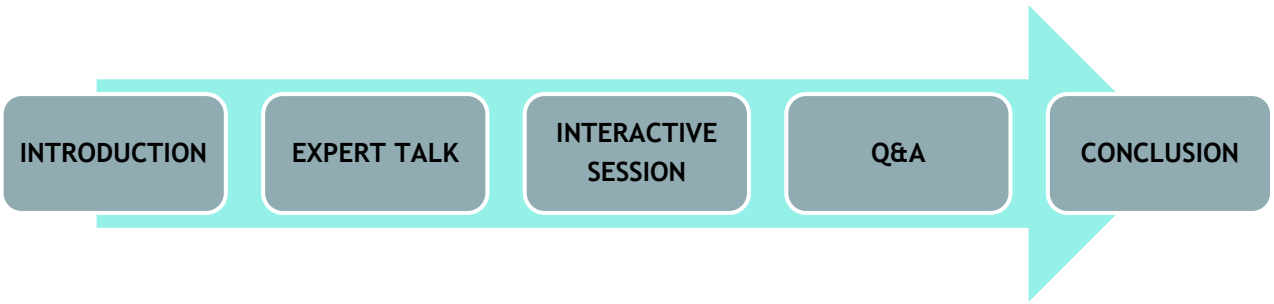
➢ **RECIPIENT**

The recipients are the participants of the training sessions. Organisers are targeting recipients in their promotional campaign, but first and foremost, recipients are seen as customers for whom the training is provided and as beneficiaries of the overall training program.

Therefore, the training content should always be adapted by the organiser and the expert to the actual recipients' needs, without losing focus on the most suitable way to support potential participants on their path towards a successful transformation.

5.4. Suggested Structure of a Training Session

Based on experiences gathered during the project's runtime and from conducting 8 training sessions, each run by one of the project partners, a clear training structure can be proposed.



1. INTRODUCTION: THE BIG PICTURE

To pick up participants and guide them to the actual content of each session, it is very helpful to provide them with a big-picture view of the area in which each specific topic is embedded. In the case of a funded project, this is typically characterised by the following:

- **An overall goal** of the project, including the stakeholders involved
- **A set of actions** being carried out by the project partners throughout the project runtime
- **An overview of the advantages** the project strives to deliver to its stakeholders
- **The current status** of the project

This introductory section explains what participants are dealing with, what they can expect from the project, and the benefits they may receive from further engagement. The introduction should also contain an outline of the session.

2. EXPERT TALK

The main part of each training is an expert talk on a specific topic within the project's framework. As mentioned above, the talk should not be **a deep dive into a very narrow area of the topic, but rather a more basic introduction to a** specific area. For example, one training session for the pillar "Digital Manufacturing" focused on the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in this area. The training was not focused on **a single software tool to demonstrate its capabilities, but rather on introducing the topic, the different types of AI currently under development, and how they can be used across** different use cases.

The expert talk should give stakeholders a basic understanding of the concepts covered, enabling them to make an informed decision on which measures to use in their day-to-day operations.

3. INTERACTIVE SESSIONS

Participant engagement is a crucial aspect for the success of a training session. Without interaction, training can feel like basic lectures in HEIs, often leaving an aftertaste of boredom and wasted time. In addition, interactive segments help encode important information into participants' long-term memory.

Throughout the sessions held within this project, the design of interactive elements was left largely to the experts, as it makes it easier to integrate the type of interaction into the overall flow of their presentation. However, it should be discussed in advance what is planned to avoid any intellectual property or personal

rights issues, especially if the training session will be made available via another channel, e.g., YouTube, after it has been conducted.

Some measures used for interactive parts can be:

- Quizzes
- Live polls
- Word Clouds
- Interactive Challenges
- Q&A segments
- Etc.

For all these different types of interaction, a variety of online/software tools are available. Within the project, Kahoot (Kahoot.it), Mentimeter (www.mentimeter.com) and Miro (miro.com) have been used frequently and with great outcomes.

4. QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

At the end of each training, some time should be dedicated to potential audience questions. Especially when covering new and upcoming technologies and participants from a wide variety of backgrounds and technological advancement levels, it is to be expected that previous experiences with such topics differ greatly within the audience. The organising body should expect several questions on the topic and should plan at least a dedicated Q&A session in advance within the time allocated to the session. The questions can focus on the expert talk and the overall project, so both the expert and the organiser should be prepared to answer questions during the training session.

5. CONCLUSION

The training session should conclude with an overall summary of the main topics covered, including the most important takeaways for stakeholders. The organiser should also highlight upcoming activities during the project runtime (additional training sessions, further actions involving stakeholders, and the promotion of upcoming events the consortium is planning or taking part in) to foster further cooperation among participants with the project.

5.5. Main challenges

ENGAGEMENT OF STAKEHOLDERS

Challenge:

- Making a successful promotional campaign to convince potential participants to take part in the training

Mitigation:

- Clear communication of the topics covered in the training to ensure that the stakeholders understand the potential benefit of the topic for their company
- Direct approach of stakeholders does not rely on social media posts, general newsletters or addressing a broad audience with a widespread campaign only
- Send at least two reminders for the training session: one 2-4 weeks ahead of the session, one two days before

BUDGET FOR EXPERTS

Challenge:

- Costs for experts can be very high depending on the experience, current relevance of the topic and the extent of planned content

Mitigation:

- Have a clear vision of how the training should be structured and the content; clear communication with the expert so the effort for preparation can be minimised
- If possible, use personal contacts to HEIs; actual researchers in the field are often happy to present their field to new audiences, and be sure that it still has practical relevance to the stakeholders in their daily business

TIME CONSTRAINTS OF PARTICIPANTS

Challenge:

- The justification to dedicate time to training can be difficult, especially for smaller businesses

Mitigation:

- Limit the timeframe of the training session to about 1-2 hours max. The training should provide a concise overview of the topic, highlighting selected details. Interested participants can be provided with additional sources for further engagement with the topic
- Select a time that is more convenient for potential participants to join a training session. Shortly before or after lunchtime proved to be a convenient time slot

ALIGNMENT OF EXPECTATIONS

Challenge:

- Possible gap between the training content and the expectations of the participants being invoked by the training announcement

Mitigation:

- Clear communication of training contents; participants should have a clear idea of what they can expect to learn in the training session
- Clarify the level of detail covered in the session

VARIABILITY IN STAKEHOLDER EXPERIENCES

Challenge:

- Training participants come from different levels of experience with the topic covered, as well as highly differing industry sectors

Mitigation:

- The training content should cover the topic in a way that is applicable to a wide variety of sectors; if possible, examples in different sectors should be provided

- During the promotion, the level of detail should be clearly communicated so that potential participants can make an educated decision on the usefulness of the training in their specific situation

5.6. Roadmap for organising a training session

PHASE 1 – IDENTIFICATION OF THE TOPIC TO BE COVERED

Typically, each potential training topic can be divided into sub-topics. Given time constraints, variability in participants' experience, and the availability of experts in each field, it is necessary to have a clear vision of the topics the training is intended to cover. Before taking any further steps, the specific topic and the limitations should be clearly identified and discussed with the organising team, ensuring there is no, or only minimal, overlap with other training sessions planned. Also, if a gradual approach is envisioned, follow-up training should be considered, and the topics selected accordingly.

PHASE 2 – FINDING THE EXPERT & DISCUSSION

Once the topics are set, finding the right expert is key to the attractiveness and success of a training session. Experts can be found through specialised agencies offering keynote speakers across different technical areas, or through direct engagement with experts, whether personally known to members of the consortium or more publicly recognised through media appearances.

PHASE 3 – MARKETING & ADMINISTRATIVE PREPARATION

To promote the training, a broad multi-channel campaign is advised. In this project, the promotion was carried out through the project website, social media channels, a newsletter, and the personal contacts of project partners via email and phone.

For registration, a website (via Google Forms) can be set up that includes a short introduction to the training format. The registration system can also collect basic information about registered users, including contact details, institution type, and position within the institution. Such information can be used for a statistical assessment of the training for reporting.

The registration can also be used to obtain participants' approval for data handling and recording during the training session. It is, however, advised to activate the recording notification in each training session (if conducted online) to ensure the lawful processing of user data.

PHASE 4 – EXECUTION

Training sessions can be conducted using various online meeting tools; for the SMERF project, Microsoft Teams was chosen. MS Teams enables recording meetings and a direct transcription function, which can be used for further assessment of individual training after completion.

The training outline should remain similar across all training sessions in a series, though a slight divergence is advised to avoid boring participants who join not only one but several training series.

c

PHASE 5 – FEEDBACK

Collecting feedback is crucial for creating successful training, even during the runtime of a series of training events. It is advisable to use different strategies for receiving feedback.

Creating an online form (e.g., via Google Forms) is an easy way to make feedback available immediately after the session ends. Participants should be made aware of the feedback form at the end of the training (e.g., via a QR Code on the last presentation slide or a message in the chat), and via an email sent to each participant shortly after the training ends.

If these measures are not enough, again, personal contact is the most effective way to obtain feedback from stakeholders.

5.7. Expected Impact and Results

As stated initially, the goal of the training is to teach basics and/or intermediate knowledge on specific topics in the context of the project. Participating SMEs should be enabled to apply the knowledge gained in a training session to their own benefit, in this case, to transform their business model, strategy, or production processes for greater effectiveness, innovation, or sustainability.

Training supports this by delivering first-hand knowledge and experience from an acknowledged expert across different fields, which can be easily translated into actual actions within the company. In combination with other measures in this project, such as the inspiration knowledge base (IKB), the self-assessment tool, the InnoGreen Market Event, Study visits, and, of course, **the individual support program (ISP).** Other institutions, such as Innomediaries, business support organisations, or HEIs, can benefit from the training by either participating in the sessions themselves or presenting themselves as experts, thereby gaining new contacts and collaboration opportunities.

Finally, receiving expert insights from across Central Europe can benefit all stakeholders by enabling new opportunities to implement actions, learn about different approaches in other countries, and even explore possible collaboration scenarios within the regions represented in the project.

To summarise, the near-term results of the training include imparting knowledge to stakeholders about specific topics, which should enable a mid-term setup of a transformation strategy and a long-term implementation and stepwise transformation of companies towards an SME ready for the future.

6. InnoGreen Market

The InnoGreen Market Event is an initiative under the SMERF project to foster collaboration between Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) and large companies across Central Europe. The overarching purpose of the event is to bridge the gap between service and product providers (SMEs) and service and product takers (large enterprises), facilitating meaningful exchanges that support innovation, sustainability, and digital transformation. By aligning with the four SMERF transformation pillars described earlier in this handbook, the event aims to lay a foundation for joint projects and long-term partnerships.

6.1. Objectives and Target Group

The event has multiple goals:

- Provide SMEs with **visibility and access to industry leaders**
- Enable large companies to discover **innovative solutions from agile start-ups**
- Promote **cross-sectoral and cross-border cooperation**
- Offer participants **insights into current industrial trends, challenges, and opportunities** for transformation

Target groups include SMEs and start-ups, large enterprises, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), Research and Technology Organisations (RTOs), Business Support Organisations (BSOs), and sectoral agencies. Each group brings unique perspectives and expertise, contributing to a rich and diverse dialogue.

6.2. Event Organisation

The theme of the InnoGreen Market event should focus on preparing SMEs for the evolving industrial landscape through innovation and sustainability. The event can be organised either as a standalone activity or as part of a larger event, with the aim of attracting a broader range of participants. In the case of the SMERF project, Biz-Up (the project partner responsible for the organisation) strategically chose to participate with a parallel session at the well-established full-day event, Innovationsforum Industrie 2025, which proved to be an effective solution.

Taking part in a large event ensures a high-quality audience and broader reach. For example, Innovationsforum Industrie attracts over 100 participants each year from industry, academia, and business support organisations. A standalone event would likely be less effective in terms of audience quality and reach, while also requiring greater effort and potentially higher costs. The chosen format enables the initiative to benefit from an established platform and existing networks.

The external event should align with the objectives of the project that you are implementing, and offer a full day of expert presentations, parallel sessions, and networking activities. The preferred approach is to have presentations delivered by representatives of large companies. Where this is not possible, SMEs or innovative start-ups can also contribute, ensuring a diversity of perspectives.

To fully meet the requirements of the activity, a separate session focused solely on the needs and challenges faced by SMEs should be organised. Two to three speakers should be invited to address topics relevant to the event's objectives. In the case of the SMERF project, these were: sustainable cooperation opportunities in Europe, the importance of digitalisation in decision-making, and an innovation culture in an uncertain world. Simultaneous translation should be provided to accommodate international participants (e.g., non-German-speaking participants).

The event should encourage interaction and networking. After each presentation block, participants should engage in brief discussions with peers and can speak directly with the presenters. This structure promotes active engagement and facilitates connections among like-minded individuals.

6.3. Main challenges

AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT AND ACCESSIBILITY

Challenge:

- Engaging a diverse audience across industries, regions, and languages

Mitigation:

- Provide translation services during presentations and panel discussions to overcome language barriers

INCLUSIVE NETWORKING AND INTERACTION

Challenge:

- Ensuring inclusive interaction among participants with different language backgrounds

Mitigation:

- Conduct networking activities and Q&A sessions in English to facilitate broader participation and communication

STRATEGIC COORDINATION WITH EVENT ORGANISERS

Challenge:

- Aligning project objectives with the host event's goals when participating in an established event

Mitigation:

- Maintain close coordination with the main event organiser
- Negotiate where necessary to ensure the project vision aligns with the overall event objectives

TRAVEL AND LOGISTICS COORDINATION

Challenge:

- Coordinating travel and logistics for participants

Mitigation:

- Organise transportation and coordinate closely with project partners and individual participants to ensure everyone arrives at the destination on time

6.4. Roadmap for organising similar events

By aligning the goals of an event with those of existing, well-established events, organisers can benefit from built-in audiences and reduced logistical complexity. This approach supports strategic objectives such as

promoting sustainability and innovation, while enabling targeted networking, international participation, and the creation of an organisational roadmap that can be replicated in future initiatives.

PHASE 1 – STRATEGIC PLANNING

The process begins by clearly defining the goals you want to achieve and identifying the target audience, along with the specific benefits for each participant group. The event should have a well-defined purpose that aligns with these goals and engages a diverse audience relevant to the topic. Clear objectives should be established early in the planning phase, such as boosting visibility, fostering networking, sharing knowledge, and promoting international collaboration. An initial budget estimate should also be developed at this stage to ensure that the event's ambitions are financially feasible and aligned with available resources.

PHASE 2 – METHODOLOGY & PREPARATION

A clear methodology should be developed for organising the event. This includes finalising the event format, which may feature presentations, panel discussions, and topic-based networking sessions. Invitations and promotional materials should be prepared to ensure broad participation and visibility.

At the same time, it is necessary to begin coordinating the logistical aspects of the event, including contacting suitable external venues and gathering offers. Additionally, speakers from relevant organisations or companies should be identified and invited to provide expert insights. It is also important to arrange translation services if the event will be held in the local language rather than the project's working language.

Prior to the event, promotional activities should be intensified through social media and partner communication channels to attract relevant SMEs and other participants.

PHASE 3 – MARKETING & COMMUNICATION PLAN

Marketing and communication efforts must be coordinated by the activity lead and align with the project's branding. The event should be actively promoted through partner networks, social media channels, and, if integrated into a larger initiative, the hosting event's platform. Invitations can be sent to SMEs, HEIs, RTOs, and other stakeholders, accompanied by a newsletter campaign and personal phone calls.

Promotional materials should emphasise the event's themes, speakers, international scope, and networking opportunities across social media channels, partner communications, and dedicated platforms. The event webpage and program should be published online to guarantee open access and transparency for all interested parties.

PHASE 4 – EXECUTION

The execution phase focuses on delivering the event smoothly and actively engaging participants. On the day of the event, speakers should remain available for questions and networking after their presentations. Moderators should coordinate structured networking and facilitate introductions to encourage meaningful connections. Additionally, simultaneous translation must be provided to support international participants and ensure full inclusivity.

PHASE 5 – FOLLOW-UP & KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

Feedback from participants and project partners who attended the project's session must be collected. It may be more effective to collect feedback during the event, as responses after the event can be challenging to obtain. Feedback can be collected during the event through individual discussions or a questionnaire available during breaks via a QR code. The feedback should be thoroughly analysed to identify lessons learned and areas for improvement. A summary report detailing key outcomes and insights should be prepared to document the event.

After the event, follow-up posts are published on the organiser's official social media channels and website. Post-event communication may also include an article in a regional magazine to formally document the event's results and key insights.

This process helps to ensure that lessons learned are preserved, that best practices are highlighted and that the event's impact extends beyond its immediate participants.

6.5. Expected Impact and Benefits of the Event

An event such as the InnoGreen Market proved highly beneficial for all participants.

The expected **impact for SMEs** is:

- **Exposure and visibility:** Connect with large companies, experts, and peers.
- **Feedback and knowledge exchange:** Receive input on products and services, and learn from industry best practices.
- **Business growth and opportunities:** Identify new markets, partnerships, and growth channels.
- **Industry insights:** Understand current and future market demands and challenges.
- **Innovation and competitiveness:** Benchmark against industry standards and explore ways to improve.
- **International cooperation:** Build cross-border partnerships and expand into new markets.

The **impact for large companies** includes:

- **Strategic collaboration:** Identify and initiate partnerships with innovative SMEs offering relevant solutions.

Market insights: Gain access to emerging trends and SME-driven innovations.

- **Knowledge exchange:** Participate in discussions and panels to share challenges and learn from others' experiences.
- **Innovation and sustainability:** Discover sustainable and digital solutions that can be integrated into corporate strategies.
- **Business growth:** Explore new business models and service offerings through SME collaboration.
- **International cooperation:** Connect with SMEs and stakeholders across Central Europe to expand international networks.

7. Study visits

Study visits are short, structured company visits where Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) visit large companies, Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs), Research and Technology Organisations (RTOs), or sectoral agencies to gain exposure to operational practices, innovative technologies, market expectations, and state-of-the-art research. They serve as an experiential learning format connecting service/product providers (SMEs) with service/product takers (large industry), as well as academic and research ecosystems.

During study visits, SMEs gain a clear understanding of market expectations and future demands. This exposure helps them align their offerings with industry needs and better prepare for market challenges. This awareness enables them to adopt innovative practices and technologies, enhancing their competitiveness. The visits also create opportunities to build networks with researchers, corporate representatives, and other stakeholders, fostering potential collaborations and business partnerships.

Large companies and host organisations are involved as facilitators and ecosystem leaders, showcasing their operations, sharing challenges, and engaging with SMEs as potential suppliers or innovation partners. This interaction fosters collaboration, strengthens value chains, and encourages knowledge transfer between industry and research actors.

Within the SMERF methodology, study visits complement diagnostic and mentoring activities by exposing SMEs to practical examples of innovation, digitalisation and sustainability in real operational environments. While tools such as the SMERF Diagnosis Tool (SDT) and the Individual Support Programme (ISP) focus on analysing and planning transformation actions, study visits allow SMEs to observe how similar challenges are addressed in practice, thereby reinforcing learning and stimulating new ideas for implementation.

7.1. Objectives and Target Group

Study visits aim to:

- **Provide SMEs first-hand insights** into industrial requirements, technological trends and future market directions
- **Strengthen cross-regional cooperation** among SMEs, large companies, research organisations and sectoral agencies
- **Enable SMEs** to observe best practices and advanced technologies directly in operational environments
- **Stimulate innovation adoption**, new partnerships and potential joint projects
- **Facilitate knowledge transfer** aligned with SMERF pillars
- **Build SMEs' capacity** to anticipate and respond to future challenges

The effectiveness of the study visits could be enhanced by targeting SMEs based on their sectors or specific interests. In the SMERF project, the targets were SMEs operating in sectors such as automation, environmental technologies, Industry 4.0, mobility, logistics, energy and sustainable food production.

Hosts include large companies, HEIs, RTOs, and sectoral agencies. The role of the host is to provide demonstrations, share challenges and market expectations, showcase examples of innovation, and identify potential SMEs for future cooperation.

SMEs gain direct exposure to operational excellence and emerging technologies, while hosts identify innovative solutions and potential partners, fostering long-term collaboration and cross-sectoral learning.

7.2. Actors involved

- **ORGANISER**

The visit organiser (typically an Innomediary, HEI, or Business Support Organisation (BSO)) is responsible for planning and executing the study visit. They define the visit's thematic objectives in line with the SMERF pillars, identify and secure a suitable host organisation, and manage all logistical and communication aspects with the participants. During the event, the organiser serves as a facilitator, guiding interactions between the host and SMEs to ensure a highly engaging experience that translates into actionable takeaways.

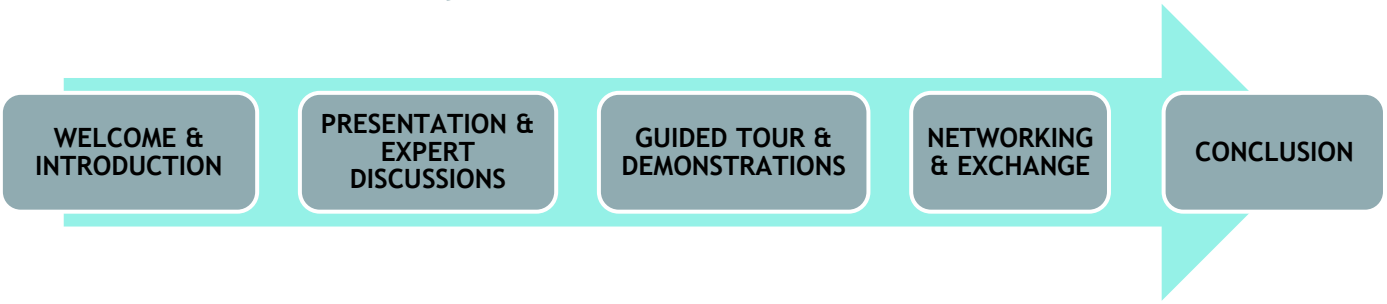
- **HOST**

The host organisation is typically a large enterprise, an RTO, a HEI, or a sectoral agency that opens its doors to the visiting SMEs. It provides access to its facilities, operational environments, and expert staff. By demonstrating state-of-the-art technologies, sharing best practices, and openly discussing market expectations and challenges, the host offers participants a tangible, real-world perspective on innovation, digitalisation, and sustainability.

- **PARTICIPANTS**

The participants are primarily the SMEs participating in the study visit, though other regional stakeholders may also join. For SMEs, the visit is an experiential learning opportunity to step outside their daily operations, observe advanced practices firsthand, and benchmark their own readiness. The ultimate goal for the recipient is to gather practical inspiration, identify concrete improvement opportunities, and establish valuable networking connections for future collaborations with both the host and fellow participants.

7.3. Recommended Study Visit Structure



Study visits are organised as 2 to 5-hour interactive sessions and can be conducted in the local language to ensure clarity and engagement.

1. **WELCOME & INTRODUCTION (≈ 20 min)**

The organiser welcomes the participants to the study visit by introducing themselves. They may also give participants in the study the opportunity to briefly introduce themselves.

The organiser outlines the day's schedule, explaining the objectives and expected outcomes of the study visit. This helps participants understand the purpose of each activity and what they can gain from the experience.

2. **PRESENTATIONS & EXPERT DISCUSSIONS (≈ 60 min)**

- **Introduction of the host organisation**

The host introduces the organisation and its key areas of expertise, providing the context for the rest of the visit.

- **Presentation of best practices and innovative solutions**

Experts from the host organisation share insights into their best practices and innovative solutions related to the four pillars of the SMERF project. Presentations include real-world examples and case studies that demonstrate successful implementation and practical impact.

- **Discussion of future market requirements and trends**

The organiser and the host share their perspective on emerging trends and future market demands. This helps participants understand the evolving landscape and how they can adapt their strategies to stay competitive.

3. GUIDED TOUR & DEMONSTRATIONS (≈ 60 min)

Participants take a guided tour of the host's facilities, gaining a behind-the-scenes view of operations and infrastructure. They observe demonstrations of key technologies and processes in action, providing a hands-on understanding of how theoretical concepts are applied in real-world settings.

4. NETWORKING & EXCHANGE (≈ 60 min)

- **Targeted networking activities**

Structured sessions encourage meaningful interactions between participants and facilitate the sharing of ideas and experiences.

- **Q&A and discussion of challenges**

SMEs can ask questions and receive advice on their specific challenges, gaining valuable insights and potential solutions tailored to their needs.

5. CONCLUSION AND FEEDBACK

The visit concludes with a feedback session in which participants share their thoughts on the day's activities. This helps the organisers improve future visits and ensures that participants leave with a clear understanding of the key takeaways.

7.4. Main challenges

PARTICIPANT AND HOST ENGAGEMENT

Challenge:

- SMEs struggle to participate due to limited staff and competing business priorities
- Large companies, HEIs, and RTOs face tight schedules and complex procedures that make planning difficult

Mitigation:

- Ensure the availability and commitment of both sides in advance
- Plan schedules and prepare content that accommodates participants' time constraints

DIVERSITY OF EXPECTATIONS AND TECHNOLOGICAL MATURITY

Challenge:

- Participants may have varying levels of familiarity with technology
- Advanced solutions may seem unrealistic for SMEs, leading to a perception of topics being "too advanced."

Mitigation:

- Guide SMEs on how to scale down or adapt high-level innovations to their operations
- Ensure the visit balances ambition with practical relevance

LIMITED INTERACTION DURING VISITS

Challenge:

- Study visits that are purely presentation-based can reduce engagement

Mitigation:

- Design study visits to be interactive and dialogue-driven
- Include opportunities for open exchange, questions, informal networking, and discussion alongside demonstrations

LACK OF CONTINUITY AND FOLLOW-UP

Challenge:

- SMEs may make initial contacts during visits, but the impact can fade without follow-up

Mitigation:

- Provide follow-up measures: sharing contact lists, offering post-event consultations, or facilitating matchmaking sessions

7.5. Roadmap for Organising Study Visits

PHASE 1 – STRATEGIC PLANNING

The organisation of a study visit begins with a clear strategic plan. The responsible organisation or coordinating partner first defines the purpose of the visit and ensures it is relevant to key thematic priorities. Within the SMERF project, study visits focused on innovation practices, digital technologies, collaborative innovation, and sustainable and circular economic models. During this stage, the partner identifies the target SMEs and considers the specific benefits they are expected to gain from participating. In parallel, potential hosts are discussed and selected based on their expertise and alignment with the visit's thematic goals.

At this stage, it is also important to estimate the expected size of the participant group. A study visit should involve at least two to three SMEs to facilitate interaction and networking, but larger groups of up

to 50 participants may also be appropriate, depending on the host organisation's capacity and the objectives of the event. Ensuring a diverse group of participants maximises learning opportunities and allows SMEs to benefit from a range of perspectives and experiences.

Strategic planning further includes assessing the internal resources required to ensure smooth execution of the study visit. This involves allocating responsibilities for tasks such as liaising with hosts, finalising organisational details, managing communications, and providing moderation or on-site support during the visit.

PHASE 2 – PREPARATION

- **Contact and confirm suitable hosts**

Once strategic priorities are defined, the preparation phase begins with contacting the selected hosts whose activities align with the planned focus areas. Partners reach out to these organisations to confirm their interest and availability, and to ensure they can provide meaningful insights and demonstrations for the participating SMEs.

- **Development of Agenda**

After securing a host, the agenda is developed in cooperation with them and structured according to the standard visit format, which includes an introduction, knowledge-sharing presentations, a guided tour, and networking opportunities.

- **Communication Materials**

Communication materials are also prepared at this stage. These include invitation letters, programme descriptions, visitor guidelines, and short explanations of the SMERF project. All materials should be distributed well in advance to ensure that participants are fully informed.

PHASE 3 – ATTRACTION OF SMES

To attract SMEs, partners launch targeted communication activities through their established networks, such as clusters, BSOS, and sector-specific contact lists. Invitations can be distributed via email, newsletters, social media channels, and direct outreach. When promoting the event, it is essential to highlight the practical benefits for all participants, including access to real industrial environments, hands-on exposure to best practices, and opportunities to interact directly with experts and potential clients. Throughout this phase, the organiser maintains a registration list, provides confirmations, and ensures all participants receive timely updates before the event.

PHASE 4 – EXECUTION

Before the actual execution stage, the host and participating companies/SMEs receive final confirmations, logistical information, and any necessary safety instructions. The organiser prepares all materials required for the session, including agendas, name badges, and presentation slides.

On the day of the visit, the organiser ensures that the programme runs smoothly and on schedule. Together with the host, the organiser moderates the visit, encourages questions and discussions and supports interaction between hosts and SMEs. Documentation is also an important part of the execution. Photos, notes, and key observations should be recorded for reporting purposes, with the participants' consent. Before participants leave, the organiser should collect immediate feedback either through a short survey or an online form.

PHASE 5 – FOLLOW-UP & KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

After the visit, the organiser gathers and evaluates participant feedback to assess the event's relevance and effectiveness and identify best practices for future activities. This information supports continuous improvement and helps identify future collaboration opportunities.

Knowledge transfer continues beyond the event through the dissemination of insights to other SMEs, clusters, and stakeholders who may benefit from the findings. The information can also support wider activities such as policy development, innovation initiatives, and future strategic planning.

7.6. Expected Impact and Benefits of the Event

Benefits for SMEs:

- **Networking opportunities:** Engage in focused interactions with large companies and RTOs.
- **Market insights:** Observe firsthand the operational needs and expectations of large enterprises.
- **Knowledge exchange:** Gain exposure to advanced research and technologies at HEIs and RTOs.
- **Innovation and competitiveness:** Learn about state-of-the-art solutions and how to apply them.
- **Business growth:** Identify gaps and opportunities to tailor offerings to real-world industrial needs.

Benefits for big companies:

- **Collaboration:** Host SMEs and explore tailored solutions through direct interaction.
- **Market insights:** Understand how SMEs perceive and respond to large companies' solutions and expectations.
- **Knowledge exchange:** Engage in two-way learning by showcasing internal processes and receiving SME feedback.
- **Innovation and sustainability:** Inspire SMEs by demonstrating real-world applications of sustainable practices.
- **Business growth:** Identify SMEs with high potential for possible integration into your innovation ecosystems.

8. Conclusion and recommendations

The SMERF handbook presents a structured approach to supporting Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) in their transformation towards becoming **SMEs ready for the future**. The methodology developed within the project combines several complementary instruments designed to help SMEs better understand their current position, identify areas for improvement, and access targeted support for implementing transformation actions.

At the core of the SMERF approach is a structured support pathway that combines diagnostic tools, tailored guidance, knowledge exchange and ecosystem engagement. Rather than relying on a single intervention, the methodology integrates several complementary instruments that help SMEs understand their current level of readiness, identify priority areas for improvement and access targeted support for implementing transformation actions.

Together, these instruments create a comprehensive framework that addresses both the strategic and operational dimensions of SME transformation. By combining analysis, mentoring, learning opportunities and interaction with innovation ecosystems, the SMERF approach enables SMEs to gradually build the capabilities required to respond to technological, market and sustainability challenges.

Although the specific activities described in this handbook were developed within the SMERF project, the methodology itself is designed to be **transferable and adaptable**. Regions and organisations interested in replicating the approach can implement individual components of the model or adopt the full framework depending on their strategic priorities, available resources and the needs of their SME communities.

Appendix - Example of an Individual Support Programme Protocol.

The following appendix provides a complete example of an Individual Support Programme (ISP) protocol, compiled in accordance with the methodology presented in Chapter 4. It illustrates how the different phases of the ISP can be applied in practice—from the initial assessment based on the SMERF Diagnosis Tool to the development of a tailored transformation plan and the implementation of mentoring and expert support. This real-case example is intended to help providers and Innomediaries understand how to operationalise the SMERF approach in their own regional context.

1. INFORMATION

Mentor's information	
Name and surname	….
Organisation	Provider
Email address	….
SME's demographic	
Company name	SME
Representative's name and surname	….
Representative's role	Executive Leadership
Representative's email address	….
Company size	51-250
Company age	More than 10 years
Industry sector	Industrial production processes
Annual revenue	Over €10 million
R&D investment	1-5%
Market Orientation	Local market only
Ownership Structure	Family owned

MENTOR'S ASSESSMENT OF THE SME

According to the SMERF Diagnosis Tool, which pillars are considered most critical for the company?
Based on SDT results, the company has demonstrated strong performance in Pillar 1, "Innovation Culture," and Pillar 2, "Digital Manufacturing," achieving 8.35 points in Leadership and 9.15 in Digital Awareness. However, performance in Pillar 3, "Open Innovation & Sharing Economy," and Pillar 4, "Green & Circular Economy & Sustainability," remains inadequate. These are the pillars on which the company has agreed to deepen the analysis and start a more detailed improvement process.
In these pillars, what features are more critical for the company?
The analysis of specific features reveals significant critical points. Regarding Pillar 3, "Open Innovation," a key weakness emerges in Networks of Partners and Start-ups, which scores only 2.9. Notably, while the company demonstrates a reasonably strong "Open Innovation Mindset" (6.25), it struggles to translate this into concrete operational networks, effectively limiting access to external technological solutions. Pillar 4 "Green & Circular Economy & Sustainability" presents an even more critical situation. The scores achieved—0 for "Circular Approach in action" and 2.05 for "Sustainability in action" —clearly indicate a fundamental need to introduce green technology and circular economy principles, which are not yet integrated into the company's strategy.
Based on the most critical features, which actions, among those suggested in the generation transformation scenarios, could the company implement?
Addressing the underperforming pillars, the transformation scenarios specifically recommend: Training on green technologies to bridge the gap between digital awareness and sustainable application. Training on circular economy principles to enable management to establish sustainability goals. Mentoring to develop strategies for improving networking capabilities. However, given the low Networks score (2.9) despite high internal awareness, training alone is insufficient: the company must actively engage with the ecosystem. A Technology Scouting initiative, supported by a Technical Expert, is strongly recommended to identify innovative materials and green manufacturing processes, translating the "Open Innovation Mindset" into practical business activity in green technologies and the circular economy.
Are there any other actions that can be suggested to the company?
No.
What Pillars did the company decide to go deeper into?
☒ Pillar 1 - Innovation Culture ☐ Pillar 2 - Digital Manufacturing ☒ Pillar 3 - Open Innovation & Sharing Economy ☐ Pillar 4 - Green & Circular Economy & Sustainability

PRELIMINARY PLAN OF TRANSFORMATION AND IMPLEMENTATION

(to be discussed with the SME)

Based on the company's specific needs, what kind of training would it need?* Please specify pillar and topic
Based on the diagnosis, the company could benefit from training that bridges the gap between strong Leadership (8.35) and the lower scores in Creative/Innovative Thinking (4.6) and Networking (2.9). • Pillar 1: Innovation Culture Training: "Innovation from the Outside In: Technology for a Customer-Driven Innovation Culture". The diagnosis shows that while leadership is strong, "Innovative Thinking & Creativity" is only moderate (4.6). This training is essential to shift the company's mindset from purely internal R&D to identifying innovation opportunities based on external customer needs and market signals. • Pillar 3: Open Innovation & Sharing Economy Training: "How to Make Use of Open Innovation for Your Company". This is critical to address the low score in "Networks of Partners" (2.9). The training focuses on knowledge transfer across organisations and on managing networks, providing the theoretical and practical framework that the company currently lacks for effective collaboration with external partners.
Based on the company's specific needs, what kind of expert consultation would it need? Please specify the pillar and the topic.
To translate the "Open Innovation Mindset" (Score: 6.25) into concrete results, the company requires operational support to identify the right technologies, as internal resources are currently not succeeding in this (indicated by the low "Competitive via Digital Technologies" score of 3.35). • Pillar 3: Open Innovation & Sharing Economy The company needs an external Technical Expert to perform a structured "Technology Scouting". Since the company lacks an established network (Score: 2.9), the expert will act as an extension of the company, identifying ready-to-implement innovative solutions (materials or processes) available on the market. This consultation is the practical "first step" to activate Open Innovation.
Are there any cross-regional services, among the ones proposed by the SMERF project, that could benefit the company?*
The company could extend its network by exploring the Synergy Infrastructure Sharing Platform. Given the diagnosis's highlighted weaknesses in "Sharing Economy Practices," registering on this platform would enable the company to connect with potential partners to share resources and access expensive machinery without full ownership. This approach would not only optimise costs but also foster valuable collaborative relationships.
Will the company be supported by the Individual Mentoring Programme (Only Low Tech SMEs are eligible)?
☒ Yes ☐ No

***** The cost of any suggested training and cross-regional service will not be covered by the SMERF consortium

PLAN OF TRANSFORMATION AND IMPLEMENTATION

(agreed with the SME)

Which pillars has the company chosen to focus on?
☐ Pillar 1 - Innovation Culture ☐ Pillar 2 - Digital Manufacturing ☒ Pillar 3 - Open Innovation & Sharing Economy ☐ Pillar 4 - Green & Circular Economy & Sustainability
What actions among the suggested ones did the SME agree to implement?*
After reviewing the Preliminary Plan for Transformation, the company agreed to pursue a three-stage plan: Step 1: Technology Scouting for Sustainable Materials An external expert will conduct in-depth technology research to identify innovative materials and processes that are both technologically advanced and environmentally friendly. This directly addresses the weak Networks score (2.9) by introducing external innovation while leveraging the high Proactive Tech Adoption potential (7.5) for green objectives. Step 2 (Medium Term): Competence Building & Integration Key staff will attend "Transformation towards a Sustainable & Circular Economy" training, enabling management to evaluate Step 1 scouting results and integrate selected green technologies into production flows, ensuring they translate into competitive advantage (improving the 3.35 score). Step 3 (Long Term): Circular Ecosystem Implementation By formalising relationships established during the scouting phase into long-term partnerships, the company can transition from a linear to a circular production model, permanently elevating sustainability performance and external networking capabilities.
Are there additional activities that the SME decided to implement as a result of the meeting?
No, so far.
If applicable, briefly describe the reason why certain activities have been excluded
The infrastructure sharing enabled by the Synergy platform was positively received. However, the company prefers to explore this opportunity after completing the agreed-upon transformation plan, believing that support from an expert would be better tailored to their specific needs.

***** The cost of any suggested training and cross-regional service will not be covered by the SMERF consortium

INDIVIDUAL MENTORING PROGRAMME

(for Low Tech SMEs only)

Please provide a plan of action that the company should implement

Program's starting date: 30/10/2025
Duration: 12 months
The proposed plan is divided into 3 main phases:

- Step 1: Technology Scouting for Sustainable Materials
- Step 2 (Medium Term): Competence Building & Integration
- Step 3 (Long Term): Circular Ecosystem Implementation

Activity		*Timeline*	*Services*	*Outcome*
1	Project Kick-off	Month 1	Scouting Expert consultation	Official start. Definition of the project perimeter and internal team.
2	Requirements	Month 2	Scouting Expert consultation	Technical Requirement Document finalised.
3	Technology Scouting	Month 3	Scouting Expert consultation	The Expert scouts the market (including startups and research centres) for innovative solutions.
4	Solution Selection	Month 4	Scouting Expert consultation	Presentation of the top 3-4 best candidates for testing.
5	Testing results	Month 6	Expert consultation	Evaluation of Proof of Concept results.
6	Competence Building & Integration	Month 7	Training	Innovation from the Outside In: Management aligned on Green Strategy.
7	Partnership Formalization	Month 8	Expert consultation	Transition from "Linear" to "Circular" model initiated, getting also a first experience in managing external innovation networks
8	Final Review	Month 12	Expert consultation	Assessment of production samples' impact and definition of a long-term strategy about circularity and open innovation

Please provide brief feedback on the outcome of the meetings with the SMEs

Meeting	Date	Meeting Outcome
1	02/10/2025	Preliminary meeting on SDT outcomes and engagement on the Individual Support Program
2	30/10/2025	Discussion and Agreement on Transformation and Implementation Plan Scouting framework defined
3	10/11/2025	Additional technical details provided by the company
4	22/12/2025	Technical scope confirmation with Expert Support. The perimeter definition has taken more time than planned (1 month delay)
5	15/01/2026	1st follow-up meeting on scouting activity: preliminary analysis presentation and agreement on next steps with Expert Support.

MENTOR'S FEEDBACK

RESULTS

What actions was the company able to implement?
The company successfully defined the technical perimeter for the "Technology Scouting" activity and engaged with the External Expert. They transitioned from a generic desire for sustainability to a structured search process for specific bio-based materials and low-impact processes. Additionally, they scheduled the training on "Innovation from the Outside In" to prepare the staff for adopting these external solutions.
What expert consultation did the SME benefit from?
The SME benefited from the consultation provided by a Technical Expert, graduated in Vehicle Engineering. This consultation was crucial to translate the company's high-level requirements into a technical "search profile" capable of identifying viable providers in the European market.
Did the SME benefit from any cross-regional service?
Yes, the Technology Scouting service was used to identify suppliers and research centres beyond their immediate local ecosystem. Through this service, the company gained access to a broader range of advanced sustainable solutions that were previously unknown to its internal R&D department.
How relevant have the transformation scenarios provided by the SDT been? Please elaborate.

They were highly relevant. The SDT highlighted a paradox: the company had high "Digital Awareness" and "Leadership" scores but a very low "Network" score (2.9). The scenario proposing Open Innovation to bridge this gap was immediately accepted. It validated the management's feeling that they were "isolated" despite their technological competence.

PILLAR-BASED REFLECTIONS

(Please answer only the relevant pillars)

Pillar 1 - Innovation Culture: How did the SME progress in this pillar? (main actions, barriers, improvements) What was your contribution?
The SME evolved from an engineering-driven, internal R&D focus to one that embraced open innovation. The main barrier was the technical team's resistance to external solutions, though management's strong support was instrumental in moving forward. As a mentor, I facilitated collaboration between the R&D team and external experts, helping shift perceptions so that external partners were seen not as competitors but as catalysts for knowledge growth and innovation acceleration.
Pillar 2 - Digital Manufacturing: How did the SME progress in this pillar? (main actions, barriers, improvements) What was your contribution?
not applicable
Pillar 3 - Open Innovation & Sharing Economy: How did the SME progress in this pillar? (main actions, barriers, improvements) What was your contribution?
This was the area of maximum impact. The SME moved from poor performance and a lack of strategy to engaging a technology scout and identifying potential international partners. The main barrier was the lack of trust at the beginning in sharing information with new partners. The main contribution as a mentor was supporting the definition of the Scouting Initial Framework.
Pillar 4 - Green & Circular Economy & Sustainability: How did the SME progress in this pillar? (main actions, barriers, improvements) What was your contribution?
Even if the company didn’t complete the second step of the SDT for Pillar 4, during the first meetings a clear will to search for specific green materials to replace legacy components emerged, with significant uncertainty about the performance of eco-friendly materials. My main contribution was to ensure the "sustainability" goal remained a driver of the scouting activity.

BEST PRACTICES & LESSONS LEARNT

Which best practices emerged during the mentoring process that could be valuable for other SMEs?
Instead of pushing Open Innovation as an abstract concept, we applied it to solve a specific, urgent problem (the need for green materials). This practical application made the concept of "Networking" immediately valuable to the SME. Connecting a theoretical gap (Pillar 3) to a tangible product need (Pillar 4) is a winning strategy.
What lessons learnt from this SME's transformation journey should be considered for future Individual Support Programme and Individual Mentoring Programme?
The company's high leadership score (8.35) was the key accelerator. In future programs, identifying the "internal champion" early on is crucial. If the leadership is strong, the mentor should focus on providing tools (such as scouting) rather than on motivation.

SME'S FEEDBACK

How effective were the actions implemented in bringing improvements to your company?
The actions were very effective because they were concrete. We didn't just talk about "innovation culture"; we launched a real search for materials. This delivered a tangible list of potential solutions and partners, effectively bridging the gap between our internal desire for sustainability and the lack of internal know-how.
To what extent did the expert consultations meet your expectations and provide useful insights?
The consultation met our expectations. We were initially cautious about whether an external expert could grasp the technical nuances of our machinery components. However, after a few alignment meetings, the expert provided a relevant selection of materials. The insight was useful mainly because it saved our internal team time, allowing them to focus on testing rather than searching.
In case your company accessed any cross-regional services, how valuable were they for your business development?
The Technology Scouting confirmed that we are not too far behind technologically, but we are lagging in terms of ecosystem integration. It was a valuable reality check.
How relevant and applicable were the transformation scenarios suggested by the SMERF Diagnosis Tool for your company's reality?
The scenarios were logically sound. The diagnosis correctly identified that our lack of networking was a bottleneck. While not all suggestions were immediately applicable due to sector-specific constraints, the core strategy of using Open Innovation to address our sustainability gap was practical and aligned with our needs. In the coming months, we will continue implementing activities from the transformation scenario and exploring national/regional alternatives to the proposed services.

PILLAR-BASED REFLECTIONS

(Please answer only the relevant pillars)

Pillar 1 - Innovation Culture: Is SMERF currently helping your company strengthen openness, creativity, or willingness to experiment? Please explain with examples.
We decided to investigate this Pillar in more detail with SDT because we are aware that we are making progress, but cultural change is slow. It's difficult to look outside rather than inside. It's a process that will take more than a few months.
Pillar 2 - Digital Manufacturing: Did the actions implemented during the support program (or by the SMERF project) contribute to the digitalisation or implementation of Industry 4.0 in the company? Did they improve efficiency, flexibility, or data use in your company?

not applicable
Pillar 3 - Open Innovation & Sharing Economy: Is SMERF helping your company to establish new collaborations or networks at this stage? If yes, which ones seem most relevant?
It has started the process. When we talk with providers identified by the scout, the main challenge will be managing the confidentiality agreements and IP issues, which are new for us. This activity will help us make the contacts, but building a solid partnership will depend on the steps we take in the future.
Pillar 4 - Green & Circular Economy & Sustainability: How relevant and applicable are the sustainability or circular economy practices suggested by SMERF for your company at this point?
not applicable

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE SME

What suggestions would you give to improve the Individual Support Programme for future SMEs?
The diagnosis tool was helpful, but the most value came from the direct interaction with the Provider's expert.
Only for Low Tech SMEs: What suggestions would you give to improve the Individual Mentoring Programme for future SMEs?
Focus on one problem at a time. For companies like ours, "Innovation" seems too abstract and far from our daily activities. Understanding it as "Problem Solving with external help" makes it much more understandable and acceptable for us.