Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE

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CURIOST

Circular design and development of Sustainable products in 4 key sectors in Central Europe

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DEVELOPMENT OF CONCEPT FOR UPTAKE OF STRATEGY BY SMES AND SMALL MIDCAPS

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1. Initial situation and reference to joint strategy

Within CURIOST, project partners developed *D1.3.2 joint strategy for sustainable product development in SMEs and small midcaps*. As a next step, this strategic approach should contribute to promoting the uptake of sustainable product development practices among SMEs and small midcaps to foster a green transition through digital and circular product development.

Therefore, the partnership will implement strategy uptake workshops with least 140 SMEs and small mid-caps in seven countries, where the companies will be guided to develop specific measures for the strategy uptake in their own company. A separate session where companies from the same sector but from different partner regions work together will be included. This transnational approach should strengthen knowledge and experience exchange between companies.

2. Objectives of the uptake workshops

The primary goals of the uptake workshops are:

- To **change companies' mindset** and **motivate them to adopt strategic aspects** of digital and circular product development,
- to **emphasize the importance of the green transition** for competitiveness, market expansion, and environmental impact,
- to provide a **clear understanding of circular economic principles**,
- to identify **opportunities for implementing circular practices** throughout the product lifecycle,
- to **raise awareness** of the benefits of circular strategies,
- to **encourage innovative thinking** and the **development of new (digital) circular business models**.

The uptake workshops stand out due to their **tailored approach**, **addressing the specific needs of SMEs and small midcaps in seven partner regions and four manufacturing sectors**. Their **transnational format** enables valuable cross-border knowledge exchange, which is especially beneficial for smaller companies with limited international reach. By **focusing on digital and circular product development**, the workshops provide **expert insights into a complex field**, helping companies **adopt sustainable strategies**. Additionally, the workshops **foster international networking and cooperation**, opening up new opportunities for growth and collaboration.

3. Workshop concept

3.1. Organizational framework

The CURIOST partnership has jointly defined the following organizational framework (on-site and virtual) as part of the kick-off for the uptake workshops at the SC #2 meeting in Opatija (May 27th 2025) to ensure the greatest possible outcome and quality of the workshops:

The on-site workshops will be held in the respective national language. The advantages regarding this setting for participating companies and CURIOST are as following:

- Better Comprehension, especially for technical terms and the strategy itself,

- increased participation and interaction as there will be no language barriers,
- inclusion and equal opportunities for an active participation and the prevention of linguistic hurdles,
- more sustainable learning as it is easier to transfer knowledge in a familiar language,
- cultural relevance, as outcome can be better tailored to local realities,
- increased efficiency through less time for translations or explanations for the group.

With the organization of a transnational, virtual synergies exchange of SMEs and small midcaps, the partnership will bundle the results from the national level at the international level and, at the same time lay the base for the upcoming activities in CURIOST (D3.3.2 derivation of one action plan for policy level). The transnational, virtual synergies exchange will be organized after the regional on-site workshops in each country. Its aim is to ensure transnational exchange within the project framework and initiative for cross-border learning and cooperation as well as the consolidation of drivers and motivators and systemic obstacles for companies when uptaking circular business development into their strategies.

3.1.1. On-site national uptake workshops

Each on-site national uptake workshop will be scheduled to last a full day, typically from 9:00am to 5:00pm, and includes designated breaks for coffee and lunch to ensure a comfortable and productive environment for participants. The workshops are conducted in an on-site format, allowing national companies to attend in person.

Each session is designed to engage at least 20 companies per country, ideally representing all four targeted manufacturing sectors, with a minimum of two companies per sector to ensure diverse perspectives and sector-specific insights. These reference values depend on the respective target audience of the project partner(s) in the respective country.

Organizational framework - on-site national uptake workshops

🕒 full day, typically 9am – 5pm

☕🍽 coffee breaks and lunch

🗣 Ideally 1 table per sector

👥 **Ideally 4-6 internal stuff members** for table hosting, creativity methods, and moderation

To support the smooth facilitation of the workshop, a team of four to six staff members is assigned. This includes one moderator or trainer to guide the overall process, one to two table hosts per discussion group to facilitate sector-specific dialogue and an (external) expert for creativity methods.

3.1.2. Virtual transnational synergies exchange

This workshop will bring together companies that already participated in the national on-site workshops to review key findings from the uptake workshops across all four sectors and seven countries. It will be organized by activity leader Biz-Up together with the CURIOST partnership via MS Teams and a duration of around two hours. One break is planned in order to maintain concentration.

Participants are SMEs and small midcaps from all four sectors and seven countries that have already participated in the national on-site workshops to ensure a transnational exchange. This virtual workshop therefore contributes to cross-border learning and cooperation for the manufacturing sectors. Its aim is to complete and deepen the results of the on-site workshops by focusing on the international aspects of the strategy uptake.

Organizational framework - virtual transnational synergies exchange

~ 2 hours

virtual, MS Teams

1 break

companies from all four sectors and seven countries who already participated in the national on-site workshops

CURIOST partnership joins actively for presentation of outcomes of national workshops and further exchange with companies

3.2. Suggested Workshop Agenda

The workshop agenda is structured to guide participants through a comprehensive and interactive experience focused on the strategic uptake of (digital) circular product development.

3.2.1. On-site national uptake workshops

The workshop starts with an introduction to the CURIOST project and a presentation of the jointly developed strategy. Participants then engage in sector-specific group work to develop practical measures for implementing the strategy. The agenda also includes presentations of group results, discussions on key drivers and motivators for adopting circular approaches and concludes with a summary of key insights and an outlook on the next steps in the project.

This workshop setting offers several key advantages that enhance both the learning experience and the practical outcomes for participating companies. The full-day format allows for in-depth exploration of strategic topics, while the inclusion of breaks ensures participants remain engaged and energized.

Suggested Workshop Agenda

on-site, national

1. Introduction to CURIOST project
2. Presentation of the joint strategy
3. Sector-specific group work to develop strategic measures
4. Presentation of group results
5. Identification of drivers and motivators for adopting circular strategies
6. Summary and feedback collection
7. Outlook on next steps in CURIOST project

Coffee breaks and lunch time needs to be planned by hosting partner.

Highly recommended: Design Thinking incl. Circular Business Model Canvas, Nightmare Competitor, 10R Framework

By involving a diverse group of companies from different sectors and regions, the workshops foster cross-sectoral learning. This diversity encourages innovative thinking and the sharing of best practices. The structured group work and expert facilitation ensure that discussions are focused and productive, leading to actionable outcomes. Additionally, the presence of trained moderators and hosts ensures smooth coordination and meaningful engagement for participants.

3.2.2. Virtual transnational synergies exchange

The synergies exchange workshop should highlight the main challenges and motivators for sustainable product development in SMEs and small midcaps. Common drivers and systemic obstacles will be identified during a joint sectoral exchange. The CURIOST partnership joins actively for the presentation of the outcomes of the national workshops and a further exchange with companies across all sectors and countries. The workshop will be concluded with a wrap-up and an outlook on the next steps in the CURIOST project.

Suggested Workshop Agenda

virtual, transnational

8. Welcome of participating companies
9. Presentation of main outcomes of the Uptake Workshops per sector and country to focus on the common drivers and motivators of each sector
10. Joint exchange per sector: Identification of persistent systemic obstacles to achieve sustainable product development
11. Wrap-up and conclusion
12. Outlook on next steps in CURIOST project

One break will be included.

3.3. Methodology and tools for on-site national workshops

The on-site national workshops will highly recommend the use of the **Design Thinking Methodology**, particularly the Double Diamond model. Within *D2.1.1 Design-thinking trainings* the partnership has already been trained in the method to be able to guide local companies through the pilot action and to influence them by changing their product development process.

Therefore, this methodology is well-suited for the workshop because it provides a structured yet flexible framework that encourages both critical analysis and creative problem-solving. The methodology guides participants through a clear process of identifying challenges (problem space) and developing actionable solutions (solution space).

By focusing on a central question e.g. “How might we transform our business model to support circularity?” the workshop ensures relevance to real business needs. It also accounts for the fact that many SMEs do not clearly distinguish between vision, mission, strategy, and business model, and that value propositions differ across customer groups.

Key considerations include:

- Clearer distinctions between vision, mission, strategy, and business model
- Variation of value propositions across customer groups (e.g., end-users, dealers)

Using **Circular Business Model Canvas** further supports this approach by helping participants explore all key aspects of their business, from partners and resources to customer relationships and environmental impacts, making the methodology both comprehensive and practical.

It es ideal for this workshop by helping participants clearly map out and rethink their business models with a focus on circularity. It simplifies complex concepts, making it easier for SMEs to identify where sustainable

practices can be integrated. The canvas also encourages a holistic view, including environmental and social impacts, which aligns perfectly with the goals of circular product development.

The Circular Business Model Canvas will be used to explore:

- Key partners, activities, and resources
- Customer segments, relationships, and channels
- Value propositions, cost structure, and revenue streams
- Environmental and social impacts

The **Nightmare Competitor tool** could be valuable for the problem space within the Design Thinking Method because it challenges participants to think critically about their business vulnerabilities by imagining a competitor that could completely disrupt their model. It is especially useful for sustainable product development because it pushes companies to think beyond incremental improvements and confront the risks of not adapting.

By imagining a competitor that fully embraces linear, unsustainable practices participants can better understand the urgency of transitioning to sustainable models. By confronting these threats, companies are better equipped to innovate, strengthen their strategies, and proactively adapt their business models for a circular economy. This method helps identify weak points in current strategies and inspires innovative, future-proof solutions that align with circular economic principles.

Key questions include:

- What would a competitor do to completely disrupt our business model using unsustainable or highly linear practices?
- Which weaknesses in our current approach could such a competitor exploit?
- What must we change to stay competitive in a market increasingly shaped by circular and sustainable solutions?

In this context, companies are asked to envision a scenario where circular economic principles are entirely abandoned, helping them understand the risks of not adapting.

The **10R Framework** could be valuable for the solution space within the Design Thinking Method because it shifts the focus from just solving user problems to solving them sustainably.

The 10R Framework outlines strategies to extend product lifecycles and reduce resource consumption, ranked from most to least circular.

1. **Refuse** - Avoid unnecessary products or materials
2. **Rethink** - Innovate product use or design for efficiency
3. **Reduce** - Minimize resource use and waste
4. **Reuse** - Use products again for the same purpose
5. **Repair** - Fix broken items to extend their life
6. **Refurbish** - Restore old products to good condition
7. **Remanufacture** - Rebuild products using reused parts
8. **Repurpose** - Use items for a new function
9. **Recycle** - Process materials to make new products
10. **Recover** - Extract energy or materials from waste

In the solution phase of Design Thinking, the 10R Framework helps to…

- …generate sustainable ideas by guiding brainstorming toward circular solutions.
- …challenge assumptions about product lifecycles and resource use
- …prioritize impact by choosing solutions that reduce waste and extend value.

- …align with Environmental, Social, and Governance goals and circular economy principles
- …innovate responsibly by embedding environmental thinking into design choices

3.4. Documentation and follow-up

Each workshop (on-site and virtual) must be documented to ensure consistent quality, capture key insights, and provide participants with valuable materials for continued learning and implementation.

Requirements include:

- An internal list of participants with contact details
- Photographic documentation of workshop results and participants
- A photo protocol with descriptions
- Distribution of the photo protocol and presentation materials to all participants
- Optional additional documentation as needed by the host

4. Timeline for the implementation and next steps

The key upcoming steps and deliverables that will drive the implementation of the uptake workshops are:

- D1.4.2: An awareness-raising campaign (online and print) to highlight the economic benefits of adopting circular strategies, June – November 2025:
- D1.4.3: Execution of uptake workshops (on-site) and transnational synergy exchange (virtual) between June and November 2025, totaling seven workshops and involving 140 SMEs and small midcaps from all four sectors and seven countries.

In the next period, the partnership focuses on the preparation, coordination, and execution of the uptake workshops, as well as the supporting activities such as awareness-raising campaign incl. invitation of SMEs and small midcaps and indirect state aid submissions. These future deliverables are essential to ensure the successful rollout and impact of the strategy uptake across all partner regions and sectors and the derivation of an action plan for policy level (D3.3.2).

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