

Building relationships between
the worlds of VET and Business

Policy recommendations

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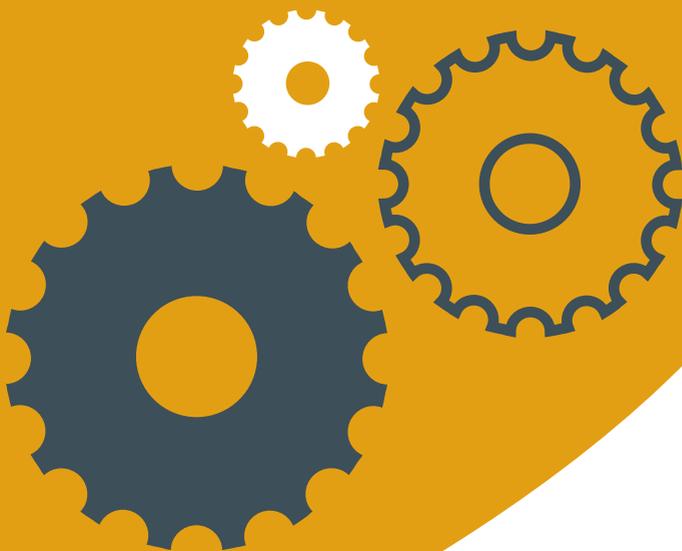


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1. Harnessing the Learning Assets within the SME Business Community

■ SYNERGY is an innovative project which aims to bring together Vocational Education and Training (VET) tutors and practitioners from across Europe in partnership with SME and micro-enterprise owners to explore the learning needs of business owners. Through the use of novel learning solutions the SYNERGY project created an online library of mini-learning resources for business owners. By working to reduce the 'real-world distance' between the training opportunities which VET offers micro-enterprise owners and the requirements of business owners in terms of training, development and up-skilling, the SYNERGY project aimed to offer an alternative form of learning that is currently not widely available within VET.

Beginning in September 2014, and supported by Léargas, the Irish National Agency, with funding from the Erasmus+ Programme, SYNERGY has been promoted by a project consortium of seven organisations from across Europe, namely Ireland, Italy, Romania, Cyprus, Greece, Germany and Finland.

	Meath Partnership (Co-ordinator)		
	CARDET		A.RE.S scarl.
	University of Paderborn		University of Peloponnese
	AOA Arges		Innoventum Oy

Table 1: SYNERGY consortium partners

Over the project lifetime, the consortium worked in partnership with local sub-groups, composed of representatives from the both VET and SME sectors in each partner country, to ensure that learning opportunities and exchanges were created and supported at a time and in a format that are suitable and appropriate to time-constrained business owners. Through the use of social networks, the SYNERGY project sought to bring together business owners, trainers, mentors and enterprise support agencies to foster a culture of learning within the micro-enterprise sector promoting smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. In consultation with small business owners across Europe, the project team has:

1. developed a series of mini-learning training courses;
2. provided free to use information resources;
3. facilitated online networking and mentoring;
4. addressed the real training needs of the micro-enterprise and SME sector.

To reach the project's ambitious aims, the consortium undertook several phases of activities collaborating with target group representatives throughout meaning that they had an active support role in the research and audit process as well as in the development, testing, dissemination and exploitation of all project outputs. This approach worked as a key quality assurance mechanism for the project as it validated the outputs of the project at each stage of their development; shaping the revision and reflection phases of the following key outputs:

1. National state-of-the-art and best practices research and audit reports documenting the learning needs and preferences of SMEs, which in turn acted as the evidence-base for the development work of the project;
2. A bespoke Train-the-Trainer curriculum with accompanying tutor manuals and learner workbooks, accredited at QQI Level 6 on the Irish National Framework of Qualifications, supporting the CPD of VET practitioners to create mini-learning resources;

3. Synergyexchange.eu: an online social networking and e-learning platform that provides enterprise owners and VET practitioners with the opportunity to network, and exchange knowledge, experiences and information;
4. The Induction to Pedagogy programme assisting micro-enterprise owners to use the SYNERGY Exchange platform, to engage in peer-to-peer learning opportunities and provide a sound understanding of the basics of: e-didactics; quality criteria of peer-learning; evaluation of online learning resources and online learning environments; and producing quality learning resources for peers.
5. A suite of online mini-learning training resources developed for business, using best practice in micro-learning and e-didactics.

1.1 Purpose of the Policy Paper

The primary purpose of this Policy Paper is to demonstrate how these outcomes are relevant to the project target groups and to the wider European community, and providing recommendations for future activities in this field.

In this vein, this Paper delivers arguments based on a review of recent literature, scientific evidence and the experiences of the SYNERGY project team, local subgroup members and associated stakeholders. From our experience of working with the VET and SME sectors, the SYNERGY project team wanted to bring about change in two primary areas concerning VET policy and practice in terms of providing education and training opportunities for SMEs. Based on our experience of delivering the SYNERGY project, the partners agreed on two primary policy recommendations:

1. Peer-to-peer learning, e-learning and micro-learning techniques should be fostered to make VET provision more accessible, relevant and suitable to the needs of the SME business community;

2. Initial and continuing education for VET professionals should include coaching in e-didactics, so that comprehensive, concise and industry-relevant training courses and resources can be developed by VET professionals as part of their mainstream service offering.

This paper addresses both national and European policy makers, as well as practitioners working in both the VET and SME sectors; and reflects the experiences of this project consortium in attempting to put into practice these innovative policy objectives.

2. Rationale: Responding to the Training Needs of Europe's SMEs

■ Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are the backbone of the European Union's economy and society. They represent 99.8%, or 22.3 million, of EU28 enterprises; contributing to the overall Gross Value Added with 57.5%; ranging from 50.1% in Poland to 74.9% in Estonia. On average, every km² of the land surface of the European Union houses five SMEs. In contrast to large enterprises, SMEs are primarily active in the service sector.

In 2012, these enterprises employed in average 67% of the full-time workforce; ranging from 53% in the United Kingdom up to 86.5% in Greece. In the same year, 2.3 million new enterprises were founded in the EU, with 70.8% of these enterprises established as sole entrepreneurs (see Muller, P. et al. 2015, p. 3-5; Eurostat 2015 [1] [2]). These figures underline the significance of SMEs to the European economy and to the wealth and prosperity of its citizens. It is because of their impact on the future economic sustainability of Europe that safeguarding the well-being, innovativeness and competitiveness of SMEs is of utmost importance. In

According to the EU recommendation 2003/361 SMEs are enterprises with a staff headcount <250, and a turnover ≤ €50m. Thereby, with the term 'SMEs' we are referring to the group of micro-enterprises (staff headcount <10; turnover ≤ €2m), small enterprises (<50, ≤ €10m), and medium sized-enterprises (<250, ≤ €50m). Moreover, it is important to note that the statistics always exclude the financial sector.

a knowledge-based, smart economy, such as the one that has been cultivated in Europe, the need to ensure the provision of relevant and quality up-skilling opportunities to the SME sector is paramount. For this reason, policies developed and implemented by the European Union and the European Commission have been tasked with the promotion of entrepreneurship and the development of entrepreneurial skills, knowledge and competences amongst European citizens (see Eurostat 2015 [2]).

Continuous training and development activities positively affect both businesses and employees. Relevant and timely up-skilling opportunities are necessary to improve performance, to achieve competitive advantages, to foster employability and to increase earning. In contrast, a low level of participation in continuous training and development activities hinders progress, innovation and the creation of competitive advantages. Moreover, not providing training and development opportunities to employees, could negatively impact on their job satisfaction and organisational commitment.

Although the importance of training and development is widely accepted, “several studies have shown that the barriers to invest[ing] in training and development are more substantial for SME's as compared to larger organisations.” (de Vos, A./ Willemse, I. 2011, p. 15). With regard to formal training, recent literature and studies identified, amongst others, the following barriers that vary only slightly between different European countries (see de Vos, A/ Willemse, I. 2011 p.15, 17, 35; Susomrith, P./ Coetzer, A. J. 2013, p. 226f.):

1. Attending training is too time- and/or cost-intensive – investment in formal training is disproportionately higher for smaller enterprises than it is for larger organisations;
2. Attending training can see a drop in production – it can be difficult for a company to counter-balance the drop in production when the employee is off-site attending training;
3. Suitable training and development opportunities are lacking and insufficiently adapted to the training needs of employees and owners – disparity between

the needs of real business owners and employees, and the content and delivery methodology of current training offerings;

4. Lack of consideration with regard to the topic – there is a lack of awareness regarding existing needs, and also a lack of consideration of the negative attitudes of owner-managers towards training and development;
5. Risk of poaching medium and high skilled workers if they are up-skilled by their current employer – also there is the possibility for the SME in question to recruit skilled workers instead of taking on to up-skill current employees.

Whilst this is particularly true for formal training and development opportunities, a review of recent literature indicates that more attention should be paid to informal training opportunities to overcome the barriers and obstacles to learning, mentioned above (cf. de Vos, A/ Willemse, I. 2011, p. 17). “Informal learning is as important as formal learning” (ibid. p.14), and it can help to overcome the aforementioned barriers, as informal measures are often more time- and cost-efficient. Therefore, micro-enterprise owners in particular can benefit from informal learning opportunities when developing the skills required in their workforce.

Co-workers can be a primary source of informal learning opportunities for employees with a skills deficit; however, a review of recent literature shows that informal networks are also seen as highly important (ibid. p. 37). It is from this standpoint, that the SYNERGY project team undertook to develop, populate with content and disseminate Synergyexchange.eu as our bespoke online learning and social networking platform; purpose-built to foster networking and to allow the exchange of knowledge between co-workers, peers and experts, both internal and external to Europe’s SMEs. This platform allows for the establishment of mentoring relationships among groups of participants; providing interactive learning opportunities and knowledge exchange between VET professionals and actors in the SME community, the use of bespoke online course creation tools to create innovative new content, and allowing all SYNERGY target group members to access relevant, bite-sized training courses (cf. Summary Audit Report, p. 17).

3. The SYNERGY Approach: Mini-Learning for SMEs, Training for Trainers and Micro-Social Networks

■ Developing a learning culture among micro-enterprises has been a real challenge that still requires concerted interventions at practice and policy levels. In a rapidly developing and changing global market the need for appropriate, on-going interaction between businesses and VET providers is critical. Based on the rationale that micro-enterprise owners have frequently identified course and even lesson duration as one of the key inhibiting factors preventing their engagement with education and training, the consortium partners aimed to improve the quality and relevance of training provision to this target group by producing a suite of research-informed 'mini-learning' resources that use audio-visual based training to address identified gaps in existing learning content provision.

While the focus of current education and training for the SME sector might be on cultivating skills, the SYNERGY project team believes it is also important to cultivate attitudes towards engaging with VET. To encourage this change in attitude, the SYNERGY consortium identified and developed an innovative, multi-faceted model which provides a novel and attractive approach to education and training in the micro-enterprise sector; brought to life on Synergyexchange.eu. At the same time, the consortium also recognised the challenges that faced VET providers moving from traditional educational environments to these more flexible and open learning environments. To support their new role as e-tutors, the SYNERGY consortium developed and delivered a bespoke in-service training programme for vocational education staff; helping them to better understand the world of business from a micro-enterprise perspective and supporting them to work in these new on-line learning environments without a loss of esteem or status.

To implement its innovative approach in tackling the issue of inadequate VET provision for the European SME community, the project consortium conducted research, designed a guideline for producing mini-learning resources, and developed Synergyexchange.eu bringing SMEs and trainers together.

3.1 Mini-Learning Format Resources

Our research and audit findings, available in full on www.projectsynergy.eu, clearly show that SME owners and their employees have a limited amount of time to dedicate to training. Therefore, training has to address their learning needs in a timely and effective manner. To respond to this need, the project team decided to rely on a so-called bite-sized format for the learning resources, which are characterised by their narrow thematic focus and their short, concise nature.

Bite-sized learning resources are usually designed as video-based courses, distributed via online platforms or learning management systems and typically have a length of up to 15 minutes. In February 2016, Meath Partnership hosted a group of 21 VET tutors from across the consortium to deliver the first iteration of the bespoke SYNERGY Train-the-Trainer Curriculum. During this training, it emerged that this length might be too long; and that an audio-visual learning resource with a length between six and eight minutes would be most suitable to the needs of businesses. With such a limited timeframe to deliver training, and to ensure a common quality standard across all mini-learning resources produced, it was necessary to create

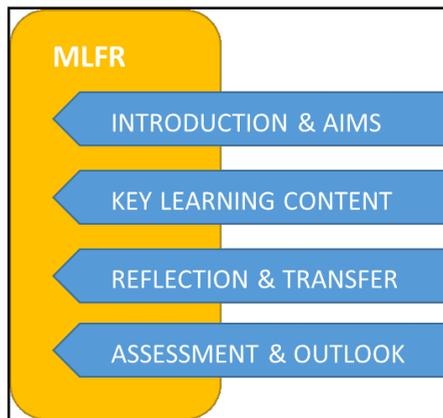


Figure 1: Mini learning format structure

a sound didactical structure on which authors of learning content could rely, when creating their own mini-learning resources. Therefore, the partners worked out a structure (see Figure 1) based on a constructivist understanding of learning; whilst drawing on the theories of adult learning and learning preferences. This model ensured that the learning resources had a practically-oriented focus, included reflection and transfer phases, and supported the self-evaluation of the learning by integrating assessment tasks.

As the authors are typically neither training nor technical experts, the project team also created an Induction to Pedagogy programme; which qualifies business owners to create learning resources, using the user-friendly course creation tools which Innoventum Oy, the technical project partner, integrated into the structure of Synergyexchange.eu. Here, a video-format can be created by combining a set of PowerPoint Presentation slides with an audio file, recorded separately by the author of the learning resource. The SYNERGY Exchange platform provides users with a toolbox that helps them to synchronize their slides and their audio file. The SYNERGY Exchange platform offers the opportunity to either create stand-alone courses with a narrow thematic focus, or resource suites consisting of two or more courses that build upon one another but follow the same structure as shown in Figure 1.

3.2 Micro Social Networks: The SYNERGY Exchange

The SYNERGY Exchange platform has been designed as a peer-to-peer online environment, which aims to foster the exchange of information, experiences and knowledge either within a business or organisation, between businesses and between businesses and training professionals.

Micro Social Networks are organisational structures that allow enterprise-owners and VET professionals to gather online in groups, depending on the industry sector, the topic of training to be delivered or the geographic location of the group, etc. Within these groups, the members, whom we termed 'peers', can exchange information and experiences using a private discussion forum; and can also upload, adapt, share and circulate learning resources to each other,

without making them accessible to the public. It is, of course, possible to be a member of different groups, or networks, at the same time.

An advantage of these networks is that the peers can freely articulate their learning needs, so that another peer can provide matching resources and give learning support. Furthermore, the peers can discuss different case studies, for example, and can give and receive feedback in the form of a peer-assessment by the other members. The benefit for VET professionals is that they will become familiar with the needs of the SMEs, their target group, and they can use the shared information and resources to shape their own training offering to this group of learners.

4. Quality Assurance: Collaborating with the Target Groups

■ The SYNERGY project concept is based on the strong belief that theory and practice needs to be brought together to safeguard quality, relevance, and usability of the created outputs. Feedback from one's future target group is of utmost importance for the same reason. Therefore, local sub-groups consisting of SME owners, managers and employees and VET professionals were established in each of six of the partner countries namely, Ireland, Germany, Italy, Romania, Greece and Cyprus.

All partners established their local sub-groups in the initial phase of the project. These groups consisted of SME owners and VET professionals who helped to shape the project outcomes and safeguarded quality. By involving members of the project target group from this early stage, project partners avoided having to make costly changes to outputs produced at a later stage in the project; as they received constant and consistent feedback from local sub-group members at each stage of the project.

The involvement of SME owners and managers in the design and development of

the SYNERGY Exchange platform and the production of the Mini-Learning Format Resources was essential to achieving quality project outputs which were relevant to the needs of this target group.

In addition to assuring the quality of project outputs, collaborating with target group representatives and conducting training events with them helped to recruit new users for the local micro-social networks. The micro-social networks were designed as peer-to-peer networks; meaning that individuals who share the same interests can be brought together without a formal hierarchy; however site moderators could keep track of and steer their interactions. The discussions and opportunities for peer-learning and assessment, hosted through the SYNERGY Exchange, constitute a valuable source of learning for both SME and VET communities.

5. Policy Recommendations and Assessment

■ SYNERGY – Harnessing the Learning Assets with the SME Business Community was an ambitious project which undertook to trial a new method to support the way in which the SME and VET sectors interact with each other. The project also aimed to transform the way in which vocational education and training opportunities are designed for and delivered to the business community in Europe, with the aim of up-skilling VET practitioners to better respond to the needs of businesses, and in turn, reducing the risk of business failure. While the project has largely been a success, with such an ambitious undertaking, the project team accepts that there will always be room for improvement. At the beginning of this Paper, we made the following policy recommendations:

1. Peer-to-peer learning, e-learning and micro-learning techniques should be fostered to make VET provision more accessible, relevant and suitable to the needs of the SME business community;

2. Initial and continuing education for VET professionals should include coaching in e-didactics, so that comprehensive, concise and industry-relevant training courses and resources can be developed by VET professionals as part of their mainstream service offering.

In assessing the merits and challenges faced when implementing these policy recommendations, the project team has collectively reviewed our experiences of developing and delivering SYNERGY over the past 24 months. Below is a summary of what we have learned through our involvement in the SYNERGY project, and what we would do differently if we were delivering this project again.

5.1 Lessons Learned from the SYNERGY Project

The lessons learned can be divided into two different categories. Firstly partners reflected on what we have learned from managing and implementing such an ambitious project, and secondly we have reviewed what we have learned from working with the two project target groups, micro-enterprise owners and managers and VET professionals, specifically addressing our policy recommendations.

In the following paragraphs you will see that our project offered multiple opportunities to learn valuable lessons which could be of assistance to succeeding projects; either developed by this project team as part of 'SYNERGY 2.0', or to other project consortia interested in the field of VET for small and medium-sized enterprises.

5.1.1. Managing and Delivering an Erasmus+ Project and Consortium

The SYNERGY project consortium was composed of partners with varying sets of skills, competences, experiences and expertise. Further to this, the remit of the partner organisations varied greatly, from universities and research centres with theoretical expertise to local training and service providers who had the practical expertise and also more direct access to target groups; all supported by an expert technical partner with significant experience of developing websites with e-learning and networking capabilities. This was considered an asset of the consortium; with the different perspectives on the same topic leading to quality

and productive discussions. Consortia that exist of theoretically oriented partners only may lack the practical expertise and contacts to reach the project target group; similarly, and those with solely practically oriented or technical partners might lack the theoretical foundation for their products and outputs. The SYNERGY consortium found the right balance between both perspectives, and with the successful delivery of project objectives, we would recommend a similar composition of consortium partners if this project was to be developed again.

In terms of the working phases designed when the application was written, we began working on SYNERGY with field- and desk-based research and audit processes, which ran concurrently and which made the most of the theoretical and practical expertise we had around the table. These processes were significant to the successful implementation of the project; in that they allowed us to get an overview of the status quo with regard to vocational education and training offers for SMEs in each partner country, the training needs of VETs and best practices in this field. The findings from these processes acted as the evidence base for the future development work of the project, and it shaped our approach to working with the SME and VET communities. Looking back, we can say that this was a good approach to follow for the simple reason that it helped us to better understand the problems facing micro-enterprise owners in terms of accessing training and up-skilling opportunities, and it was vitally important that we understood the problem from their perspective if we were to be successful in finding a solution to it.

5.1.2. Collaborating with SME and VET Professionals on a local level

It was a key element of the SYNERGY project to involve local micro-enterprise owners and VET professionals in this project; from initial planning and research tasks, to the development and testing of resources to the final stages of the project concerned with the dissemination and exploitation of outputs. In retrospect, and considering our aim to establish a community of learning with an active learning culture, involving members of the target group through the local sub-groups was the correct approach to take, and we would recommend future consortia to adopt this approach.

As well as acting as a sounding board for our ideas and plans for developing the project outputs, these sub-groups had a practical function when the project moved into its implementation phase; in that each partner had a ready-made test group and direct access to a wider target audience to help us with training resources, to deliver training programmes and to get people networking online through the SYNERGY Exchange.

Reflecting on the experiences of working with the target group in each partner country, we can agree that those countries where updates on the project status were more frequent and where partners actively requested participation and involvement from the target audience were more satisfied with the co-operation with the target groups. To secure this level of buy-in from the target groups, it is necessary to nurture their interest in the project by maintaining open and regular communication with them. There is a balance to be found between being too demanding that the individual will feel overwhelmed and withdraw from the project or being too lackadaisical that they lose interest. However, what we have learned from our experience is that as long as business owners and VET professionals continue to see the benefit of their involvement in the project, they will be willing to support project activities; this was particularly the case for those business owners who created their own learning mini-learning resources after completing the Induction to Pedagogy training and for those VET professionals who attended the transnational training event in Ireland and the subsequent national iterations of the training in partner countries.

The feedback from our collective local VET sub-groups showed us that the accredited Train-the-Trainer programme created by the SYNERGY consortium addressed a real and contemporary gap in the skill sets of VET practitioners. Training on the topics of micro-learning or bite-sized learning, and the development of both pedagogic and technical skills to commission and create e-learning content, were shown to be in demand by this group; and these needs were both met by the bespoke Train-the-Trainer programme. Whilst there was some initial apprehension and reluctance from VET tutors to engage with e-learning and micro-learning techniques, the project's hands-on approach to

this innovative training helped to instill confidence in the tutors who completed the training; to such an extent that they were able to return home and produce their own enterprise-focused mini-learning format resources, and to train their peers in these new techniques also.

All the evidence shows that generic management and business skills are often lacking within the micro-enterprise sector; however business owners, from our experience, tend to be primarily motivated by training that offers a competitive advantage within their sector first, with the core business skills a secondary consideration and added value. From the outset of the project, we determined that we would target multi-sectoral business owners from within micro-enterprises and SMEs, and our experience would recommend that when introducing the concept of micro-learning and developing mini-learning resources for this target group, that a sectoral approach i.e. food, craft, services, ICT etc. might have been a more pragmatic and successful approach. Throughout the implementation phase, we worked with clusters of business interests and found that business owners from within certain business sectors shared common and similar training requirements.

If this sectoral approach had have been adopted from the start of the project, our portfolio of mini-learning resources might have been more targeted to specific business interests. While this would not have addressed the broader business needs, given the pilot and prototype nature of the project, it may have served as a more demonstrative example of the potential of SYNERGY for future purposes and uses. For this reason, we would advocate a sectoral approach to successive projects with similar aims to SYNERGY.

6. Conclusions and Final Recommendations for Future Projects

■ At the end of the SYNERGY project implementation, project partners consider fostering robust relationships with target group members as the single most effective means of ensuring buy-in from target audiences and achieving project objectives. Despite the efforts made by partners to reach these target group members and the success enjoyed in this sense, project partners agreed that the limited two-year lifespan of the project was simply not enough time to build the type of long-standing relationships that an innovative project like SYNERGY requires and deserves. The partners agreed that if we were to approach the target group members again to become involved in such a project, we would first design a framework which would govern the interaction with both micro-enterprise owners and VET professionals, and which would clearly outline the benefits and merits of their participation in the project for both parties.

Both micro-enterprise owners and VET professionals need to feel supported in their daily work and providing this support is the responsibility of the project partners. Such support was provided for by partners throughout the project implementation and included providing a broad suite of bespoke training materials, providing up-skilling opportunities to support target groups to adapt to each other's needs and providing technical support for using the SYNERGY Exchange platform. If we were to repeat this process however, the partners would recommend that the learning objectives of the training programmes should be designed in partnership between the partners and the target group members. This would safeguard the relevance of the training programmes, and foster a willingness from the target groups to participate in the training because it is responding directly to their needs.

Furthermore, partners agreed that training outlines, templates and handbooks should have been provided to VET professionals earlier in the project to support them to create their own mini-learning resources. In addition, we would

recommend that more workshops be delivered to VET professionals with a focus on familiarising tutors with best practices in e-learning and micro-learning techniques, and providing them with technical support for creating mini-learning format resources.

Through our work on developing resources with VET and SME professionals, we would recommend that the resources themselves should be created in constant communication with representatives from the micro-enterprise sector to ensure that the outputs are actually beneficial to the target group. Moreover, as much as possible, partners agree that resources should be localised and adapted to the needs of national target groups, as the members of our local sub-groups repeatedly highlighted the same priorities for their enterprises. Also, despite the commonalities in training needs of the SME sector across the consortium, we need to keep in mind that skill levels and training requirements might vary from country to country; so a continual cycle of training needs analysis should be adopted by project partners to safeguard the relevance of training materials to each national target audience. Such an approach would lead to a broader range of learning resources that would appeal to a wider cohort of business owners nationally.

Finally, with regard to the SYNERGY Exchange, when designing the platform in consultation with local sub-groups; and responding to the feedback from these groups across the consortium, we developed a solution that allows for closed groups of mini-networks with the wider micro-networks. Towards the end of the project, this allowed SYNERGY to offer sectoral clusters of businesses the opportunity to access micro-learning content, and to build local learning networks to interact and exchange tacit knowledge, sector by sector. To foster the exchange in-between the networks, and to augment the community of users on the SYNERGY Exchange, partners nominated network moderators, one per country, who will help to initiate such networking activities and will act as a contact point to any user requiring assistance. We would recommend that this approach is followed in future projects, as we see moderators as a key resource to ensuring quality future use of the SYNERGY Exchange.

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