



TRANSNATIONAL RESEARCH REPORT

O1 - WINN customization methodology

Organisation: UNIVERSITATEA DIN PITESTI (UPIT) | Romania



E&D
Knowledge
Consulting



HANSE-PARLAMENT
Network for Small and Medium Enterprises

PROJECT N°: 2020-1-RO01-KA204-079799

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1. Executive Summary

This Transnational Research report is developed in the framework of the project “**WINN: Workouts for innovation leaders**” with reference no. 2020-1-RO01-KA204-079799, a project financed through the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Commission and implemented by a consortium of 6 organisations from 5 EU countries – Romania, Portugal, Spain, Poland and Germany.

The goal of the WINN project is to ensure that SMEs managers in no/low tech industries are prepared to lead for innovation, by developing proper mind-set and adapting their behaviours and beliefs to allow authentic innovation leadership.

In order to support the achievement of this ambitious goal and to gather information for the development of the other main intellectual outcomes of WINN project, the partnership performed at the beginning of the project implementation a research to determine and understand the innovation mind-set in each of the 5 countries involved in this project.

The research that led to the drafting of this transnational report was **field-based** and was achieved through a questionnaire applied to SMEs managers/owners from no/low-tech industries and interviews with representatives from SME support organisations. As a project task, each partner organisation had to apply the questionnaire to a minimum of **25 persons** belonging to the target group mentioned above, from no/low-tech industries, and implement **one interview** with a SME-support organisation. The results were transposed into the national research reports, which, in their turn, have served as foundation for this transnational report.

In order to adequately reflect the innovation mindset in each of the 5 countries participating in the project, the transnational report comprises 3 main sections:

1. **Executive Summary** - presenting the purpose of Transnational Research Report and briefly describing the main parts of the reports and the research methodology
2. **Findings from field-based research in partner countries** summarising transversally the identified trends across national context (and eventually most relevant similarities/differences), as resulted from the national research reports prepared by partners.
3. **Conclusion** making more obvious the area(s) where the research findings suggest that there is a need for change and improvement.

2. Findings from field-based research in partner countries

Overall, there were 189 respondents that filled in the IO1 WINN questionnaire. The statistics regarding the number of **respondents and their organisations** that served as starting point for this report, cumulated for **all 5 countries of the consortium**, are presented as tables below:

<i>Total number of respondents</i>	189
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<i>Age of the youngest respondent</i>	<i>Age of the eldest respondent</i>	<i>Average age (from all respondents)</i>
22	72	47

<i>Number of SME managers</i>	<i>Number of SME owners</i>
89	100

<i>Shortest length of service</i>	<i>Longest length of service</i>	<i>Average length of service (from all respondents)</i>
1	35	12

<i>Number of employees</i>	<i>Less than 10</i>	<i>10 - 50</i>	<i>50 – 250</i>	<i>More than 250</i>
	115	57	15	2

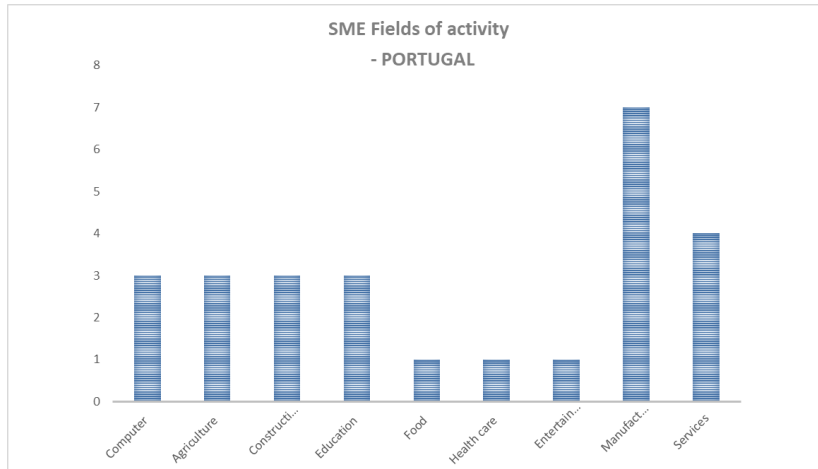
<i>Number of organisations located in urban areas</i>	<i>Number of organisations located in rural areas</i>
132 (69.8%)	25 (13.22%)

<i>Number of organisations concerned about innovation, in general</i>	174 (92.06%)
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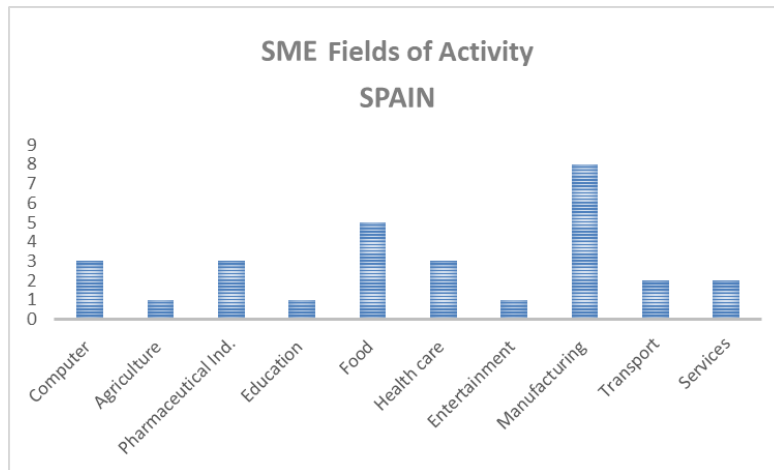
<i>Number of respondents that promote innovation leadership</i>	161 (85.18%)
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The organisations belong to various **fields of activity**, which will be presented on a country-by-country basis below, according to the industrial branch they may be linked with:

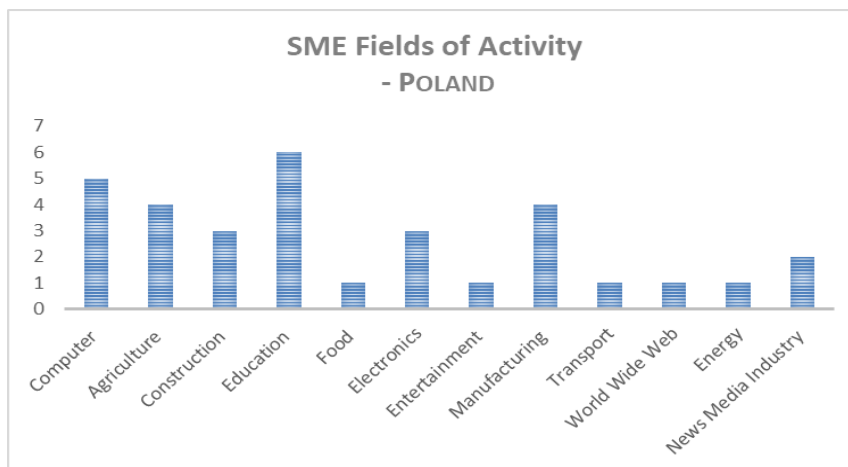
Portugal



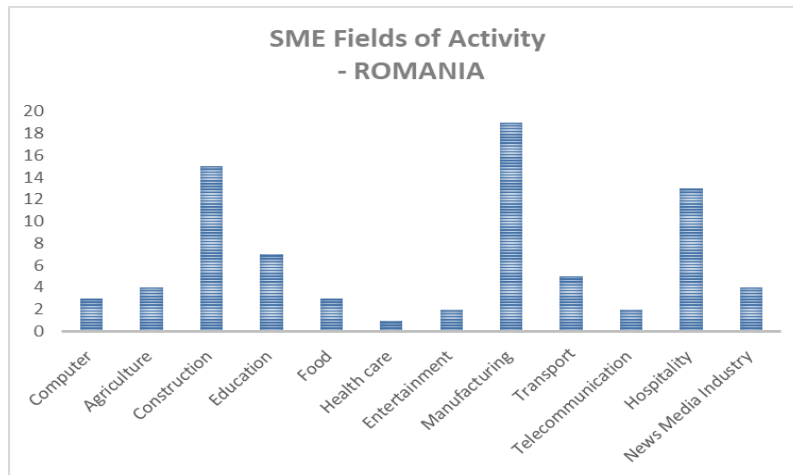
Spain



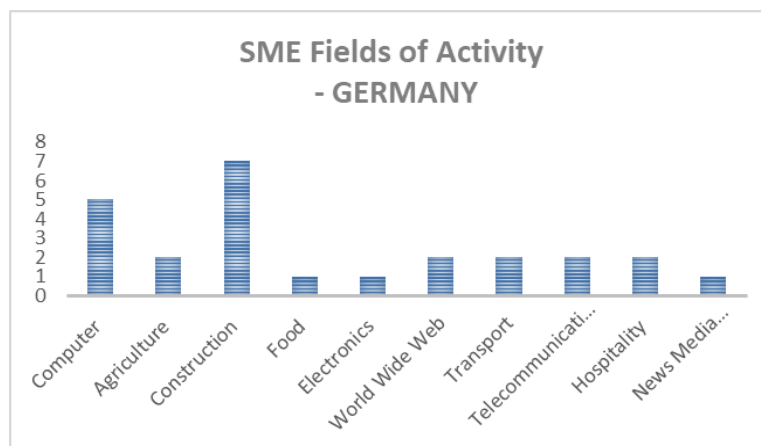
Poland



Romania

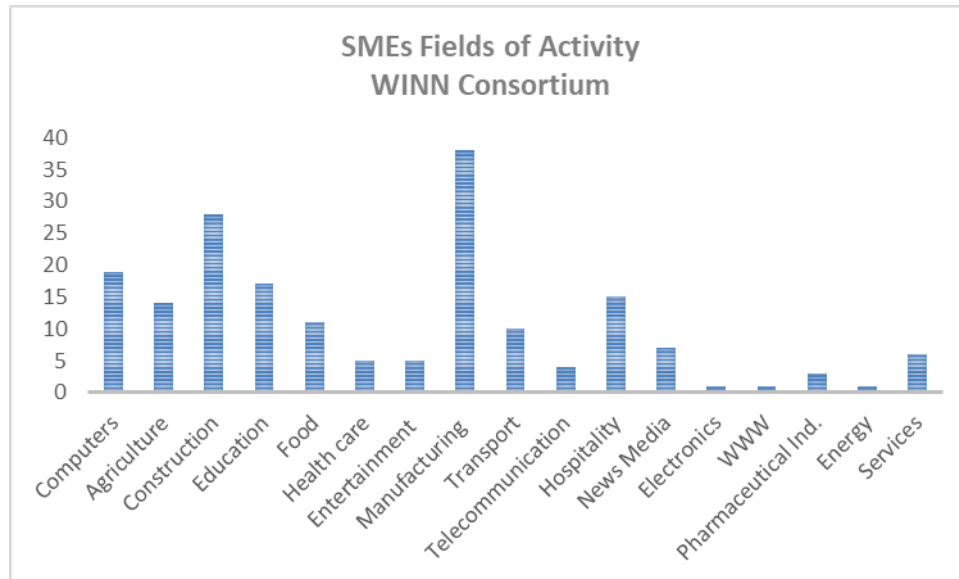


Germany



As a general observation for all countries, in addition to the industry branches the generic category “Services” was added as a means of covering the provision of various services that cannot be directly included in the above-mentioned categories (for instance, personal care services).

At the level of the consortium, the fields of activity of the SMEs whose members answered the survey are presented in the graph below, from where it can be noted that the first position is held by Manufacturing, while the last ones are occupied by Energy, WWW or Electronics.



QUESTIONNAIRE FINDINGS

➤ When asked to speak about **Activities/actions that they currently implement (or they would be interested to implement) in order to support and promote innovation in their professional activity or work**, the respondents from the 5 countries mentioned a large number of activities related to their business field. The **Portuguese** respondents mainly noted *acquisition of new equipment and software, team building activities, reinforcement of networking and new partnerships, development of HR pool of skills*. The **Spanish** participants mentioned some of the actions they currently implement in their companies and also actions they want to put in practice: *Formation of Lean Management and Data analysis, formation of teamwork and leadership, meetings for sharing new ideas or opinions, website and online sales, reaching new clients through social networks, recruiting through social networks, recycling and sustainable development, introduction to the international market, improvement of technology, selecting and testing of new materials*. The **Polish** respondents mentioned the following actions as innovation-fostering: *involvement of employees⁹ in decision-making, open discussions with employees, funding of selected development ideas, promoting cross-departmental cooperation, sending employees to participate in trade fairs/conferences, collaboration with universities, white papers*. The **Romanian** respondents referred to: *establishing and communicating the vision of the company to the employees; involvement of employees in company-related decisions; organising WhatsApp or work groups for certain projects or for controlling activities in real time; encouraging employees to discuss the innovative ideas of colleagues, choosing and implementing the best proposed solutions; rewarding those who propose innovative solutions*. The **German** respondents referred to *websites, testing of new materials, formation of purchasing syndicates, recruiting through social networks, new and environmentally friendly processes*.

Overall, the SME managers and owners who responded to the questionnaire in all 5 countries listed a significant number of activities that are currently implemented, or they would like to implement, as a means of promoting innovation in their professional activity. When thinking of these activities, respondents demonstrated they are aware of the specific needs of their activity field (and provided examples accordingly) and able to find various ways to innovation

fostering. What is very important, they proved to be willing to encourage innovation as a factor that could improve their business in terms of outcomes, efficiency and team well-being.

➤ As regards the contributions of the respondents in point of **Practices that encourage the employees the most to be proactive or contribute ideas**, the ideas formulated by the respondents in the 5 countries were as follows: the **Portuguese** participants identified the following practices they put in place for proactivity purposes: organization culture: collaboration, teamwork, acceptance of error, establishment of goals and objectives, rewarding and recognition, responsibilities, active listening, opportunities to expand horizons, pleasant work environment, sense of belonging, guidance and follow-up, training, pressure. The **Spanish** respondents stated that employees have to feel listened to and understood in the work environment. The managers and owners added that it is important to listen actively to them and value their work, as well as to give them responsibilities related with innovation and to promote constructive feedback. In order for that to happen, they stated they resort to different tools, such as the use of “the online suggestion box”, brainstorming meetings, free workshops and modules to the employees for them to achieved more innovation skills and knowledge, organizing formations and events with other companies where the innovation led to success. The **Polish** respondents also mentioned a variety of practices that encourage innovation, ranging from casual work atmosphere, building a good and open atmosphere, performance acknowledgment, (co-)financing of staff training, the existence of all the necessary resources to do their jobs, providing an environment in which employees have a real impact on performance, providing a work-life balance and ensuring appropriate rest time to an environment without undue stress and worry about position, and , finally, lack of a "rat race". The **Romanian** respondents identified the following practices: a good collaboration with various employees on their lines of work within the company and involving them in the process of modernising and directing the company’s activity, encouraging employees to express their opinions and ideas in an open manner, promoting a constructive dialogue between employees and manager and between colleagues, providing bonuses / non-financial rewards for innovation and efficiency according to some pre-established criteria, continuous staff training, setting up of mixed work teams with old and new employees and employees are encouraged to come up with solutions to various issues. The **German** respondents underlined the ideas of positive attitude towards the company and their job, open communication, empathy, openness to the new, as well as taking responsibility for certain processes/outcomes in their company. Moreover, employees should be actively listened to, trusted and provided feedback on a regular basis. As a synthesis to be derived from the answers of the respondents from all 5 countries, employees need to be encouraged to be actively involved in the development of the company through a variety of practices, as have been mentioned above. They should be able to communicate openly, to express ideas, to feel they have an impact on performance, to be provided feedback and to continue to search for solutions that may eventually lead to the company’s openness to innovative actions.

➤ In point of **Beliefs that respondents have regarding innovation leadership**, the **Portuguese** respondents expressed the following opinions on what innovation-encouraging leadership implies: work to be the best, follow market trends, ambition and drive, resilience and perseverance, network and partnerships, collaboration. The **Spanish** respondents consider that a rigid leadership style does not help employees to feel that they can contribute ideas; compartmentalisation of work helps employees to focus more on the projects they are involved in; and knowing the reality of each employee helps to focus leadership in the company on process innovation. As practices in this direction, they mention trust in the employees, delegating, active

listening, not being afraid of failure, being up to date with the consumer trends, encouraging communication and a good atmosphere in the workplace, openness. The **Polish** participants mainly related to individual approach to employees, a certain amount of employee freedom in decision-making, openness to changes, a less formal approach, innovation oriented and based on passion, encouraging diversity, as well as delegation of tasks (confidence in employees' abilities). The **Romanian** respondents focused on recognition of individual contribution and appreciation for creative ideas, encouraging a certain amount of employee freedom when designing organising something, a pleasant work atmosphere, delegation and transfer of responsibilities as well as granting of bonuses / benefits: material (financial bonuses) or emotional (praise in front of the whole team) or practical (a day off). As a response to what they consider innovation leadership should represent, the **German** participants mentioned encouragement of the employees' working independently, a strategy laying on challenge- encourage-reward, flat hierarchies, openness, cooperation and trust. The manager should sometimes step back a bit and let the employees work.

➤ As regards **Behaviours that respondents can practice to encourage and support their employees' openness to contribute their ideas/proactivity/willingness to engage in innovation activities OR Behaviours that respondents find relevant for engagement and valuable contribution to (implement) innovation**, the respondents in all 5 countries gave their opinion in the questionnaires they filled in. The Portuguese respondents outlined the following behaviours as encouraging involvement in innovation activities, i.e. establishment of goals and objectives, rewarding and recognition, collaboration culture, motivation, autonomy, style of leadership (work with employees, to give an example). The Spanish participants referred to the following behaviours as relevant for innovation fostering: Setting employees in leadership situations to assess their readiness for leadership and giving them as much information as possible about the objectives in order to be able to develop this process effectively; Give recognition not only to employees whose ideas are implemented, but also to those who actively participate in proposing ideas; apply techniques and practices to connect with workers; encourage training through workshops, online courses, etc.; Inclusiveness, collaboration and teamwork; active listening to their ideas and putting them into practice; to be accessible to them. In their turn, Polish respondents were of the opinion that the behaviours that follow can encourage and support innovation in the employees: support employees in finding innovative solutions; Providing employees with the resources and courses necessary for their development; Providing employees with a sense of meaning and mission in their work; Rewarding the team as the company grows; Motivating employees to make changes; Openness to change. Romanian respondents mainly mentioned the list of behaviours that follows: Problems in the company are both for the management and the employees; Public recognition and financial and non-financial rewards; Constructive feedback; Always be open to any idea, no matter how crazy or doomed to failure it may seem; Supporting new ideas and their experimentation; Assuming joint responsibility in case of failure; Organizing events or meetings with employees where they are encouraged to come up with ideas; Empathy, respect and trust. German participants reflected on the actions/activities listed in what follows: Work should be a part of their personal purpose of life; creative free space; to not only take up suggestions from employees, but also implement them promptly; take wishes from employees seriously; trust the employees and have a good interpersonal relationship.

In terms of **Areas that respondents consider as the most important and that they believe WINN Toolkit and Training Programme should envisage**, the following ideas were extracted from the questionnaires and will be presented in two ways below. Firstly, the information is structured in terms of areas and, secondly, in terms of country.

Areas - Synthesis by category

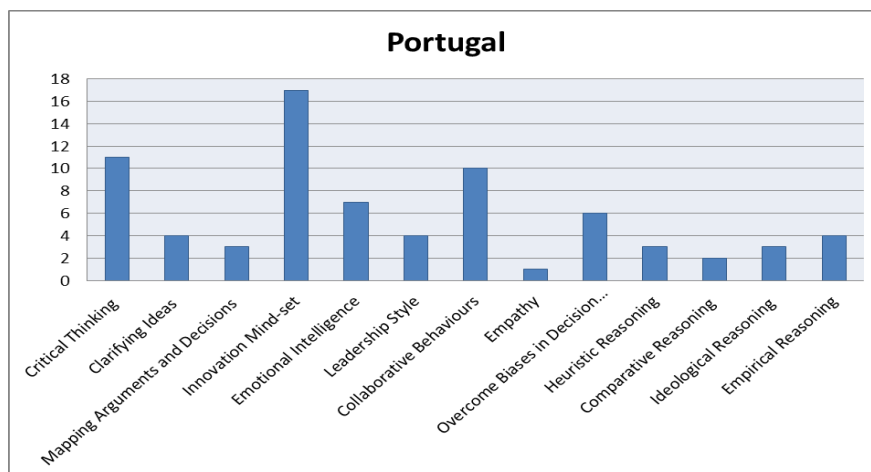
Area	No of respondents/percentage
Critical Thinking	Portugal: 11/25, i.e. 44%
	Spain: 15/29, i.e. 51.7%
	Poland: 14/32, i.e. 43.7%
	Romania: 16/78, i.e. 20.5%
	Germany: 7/25, i.e. 28%
Clarifying Ideas	Portugal: 4/25, i.e. 16%
	Spain: 1/29, i.e. 3.44%
	Poland: 11/32, i.e. 34.3%
	Romania: 29/78, i.e. 37.1%
	Germany: 7/25, i.e. 28%
Mapping Arguments and Decisions	Portugal: 3/25, i.e. 12%
	Spain: 5/29, i.e. 17.2%
	Poland: 5/32, i.e. 15.6%
	Romania: 6/78, i.e. 7.6%
	Germany: 2/25, i.e. 8%
Innovative Mindset	Portugal: 17/25, i.e. 68%
	Spain: 18/29, i.e. 62 %
	Poland: 11/32, i.e. 34.3%
	Romania: 48/78, i.e. 61.5%
	Germany: 14/25, i.e. 56%
Emotional Intelligence	Portugal: 7/25, i.e. 28%
	Spain: 8/29, i.e. 27.5 %
	Poland: 6/32, i.e. 18.7%
	Romania: 18/78, i.e. 23%
	Germany: 8/25, i.e. 32%
Leadership Styles	Portugal: 4/25, i.e. 16%
	Spain: 10/29, i.e. 34.4 %
	Poland: 13/32, i.e. 40.6%
	Romania: 36/78, i.e. 46.1%
	Germany: 6/25, i.e. 24%
Collaborative Behaviours	Portugal: 10/25, i.e. 40%
	Spain: 13/29, i.e. 44.8 %
	Poland: 3/32, i.e. 9.3%
	Romania: 28/78, i.e. 35.8%
	Germany: 16/25, i.e. 64%
Empathy	Portugal: 1/25, i.e. 4%
	Spain: 5/29, i.e. 17.2 %
	Poland: 7/32, i.e. 21.8%
	Romania: 15/78, i.e. 19.2%
	Germany: 7/25, i.e. 28%
Overcoming Biases in the decision-making process	Portugal: 6/25, i.e. 24%
	Spain: 4/29, i.e. 13.7 %
	Poland: 3/32, i.e. 9.3%
	Romania: 26/78, i.e. 33.33%
	Germany: 4/25, i.e. 16%
Heuristic reasoning	Portugal: 3/25, i.e. 12%

Area	No of respondents/percentage
	Spain: 2/29, i.e. 6.8 %
	Poland: 11/32, i.e. 18.7%
	Romania: 1/78, i.e. 1.28%
	Germany: 3/25, i.e. 12%
Comparative Reasoning	Portugal: 2/25, i.e. 8%
	Spain: 2/29, i.e. 6.8 %
	Poland: 2/32, i.e. 6.25%
	Romania: 4/78, i.e. 5.12%
Ideological Reasoning	Portugal: 3/25, i.e. 12%
	Poland: 7/32, i.e. 21.8%
	Romania: 7/78, i.e. 8.97%
Empirical Reasoning	Portugal: 4/25, i.e. 16%
	Spain: 4/29, i.e. 13.79 %
	Poland: 8/32, i.e.25%
	Romania: 7/78, i.e. 8.97%

Areas Synthesis by country

PORTUGAL

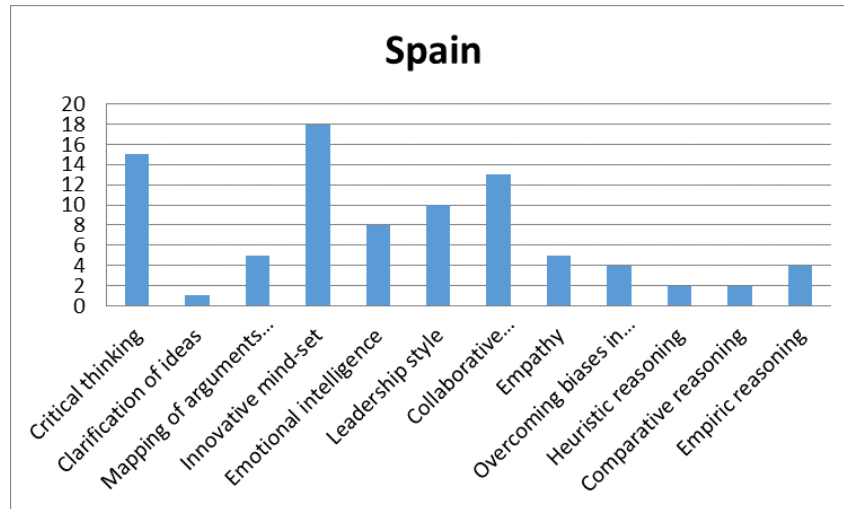
Portuguese respondents identified *Innovation Mind-set*, *Critical Thinking*, *Collaborative Behaviours*, *Emotional Intelligence*, among others, as important areas to be envisaged by WINN Toolkit and Training Programme. The full range is presented in the graph below, each bar representing the number of respondents that chose the respective area:



SPAIN

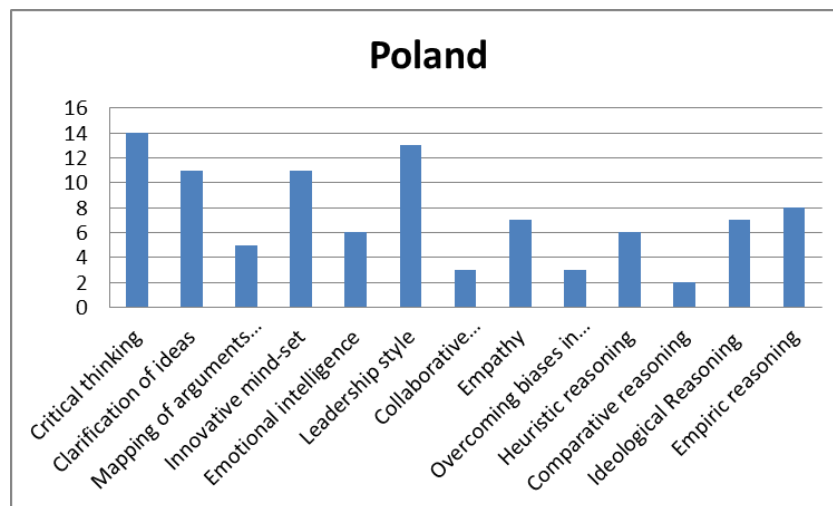
Spanish participants identified *Innovative mind-set*, *Critical thinking*, *Collaborative behaviours*, *Leadership style*, among others, as important areas to be envisaged by WINN Toolkit

and Training Programme. The full range is presented in the graph below, each bar representing the number of respondents that chose the respective area:



POLAND

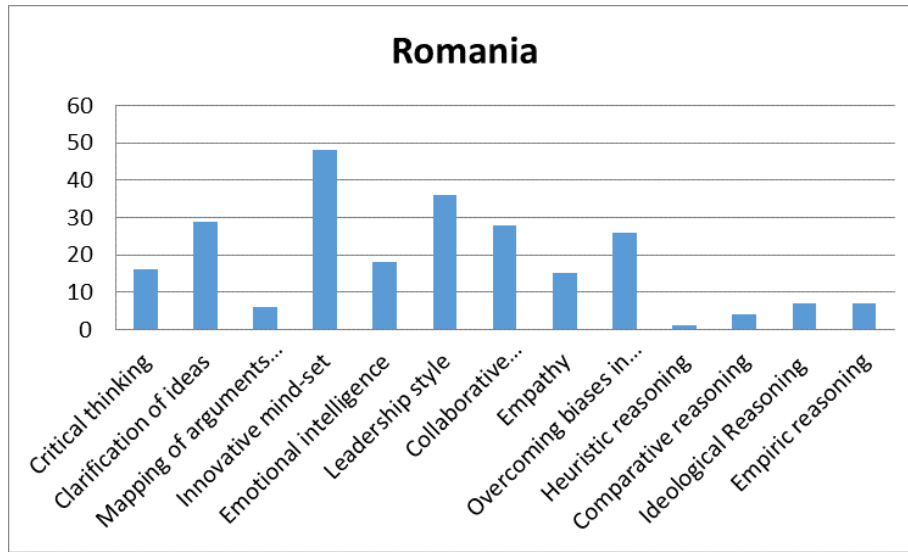
Polish participants mainly appreciated *Critical Thinking*, *Leadership style*, *Innovation mind-set*, *Clarifying Ideas* or *Empirical Reasoning*, among others, as important areas to be envisaged by WINN Toolkit and Training Programme. The full range is presented in the graph below, each bar representing the number of respondents that chose the respective area:



ROMANIA

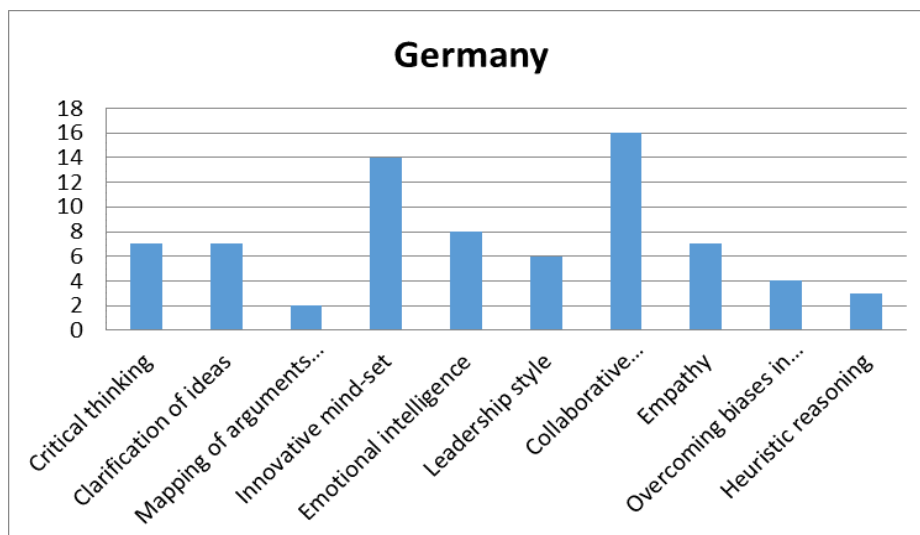
Romanian respondents mainly chose *Innovation mind-set*, *Leadership style*, *Clarifying ideas*, *Collaborative behaviours*, *Overcoming biases in the decision-making process* as important

areas to be envisaged by WINN Toolkit and Training Programme. The full range is presented below, each bar representing the number of respondents that chose the respective area:



GERMANY

German respondents felt the most important areas that should be envisaged by the WINN Toolkit and Training Programme are: *collaborative behaviours (active listening, constructive response to adversity, etc.), innovative mind-set, critical thinking, emotional intelligence, clarification of ideas* et al. The full range is presented in the graph below, each bar representing the number of respondents that chose the respective area:



As a common denominator in point of **areas means to function as innovation-fostering in the WINN products**, among the top 3 areas chosen by the respondents in all countries we can find *Critical thinking, Innovative mind-set or Leadership style*. There seems to be a common need

identified by all respondents, regardless of the countries they come from, for dialogue, openness and participation in the running of a business if that business is to have chances to become an innovative one. At the other end of the line, there were areas that respondents from a country appreciated more than respondents from other countries, such as Clarification of ideas, which the Polish (11) and the Romanian (29) favour more than the Spanish (1) or Portuguese (4); Overcoming biases in the decision-making process, which the Romanian (26) chose more than the Polish ones (3). Also, Empathy is more present in the answers from certain countries (Poland, Germany, Romania, Spain) than from others (Portugal). As for the 3 different types of Reasoning, the Polish respondents referred to them in a larger percentage than other respondents (Poland, Romania, Spain), to the point that German respondents only referred to only one type of reasoning in their responses, i.e. Heuristic, with no answers on the other 2. Moreover, if *Clarification of ideas* was chosen by a rather high percentage of participants in Poland, Romania, or Germany, it was selected by only 1 Spanish participant.

➤ **Innovative behaviours most necessary for an employee to become an innovative individual**

There follows a country-by-country presentation of the findings reached at in point of individual innovative behaviours, divided in 2 sides, i.e. behaviours leading to generation of ideas and behaviours leading to implementation/application of ideas. The information will be provided below, both by category of behaviour and by country.

Innovative behaviours - Synthesis by category

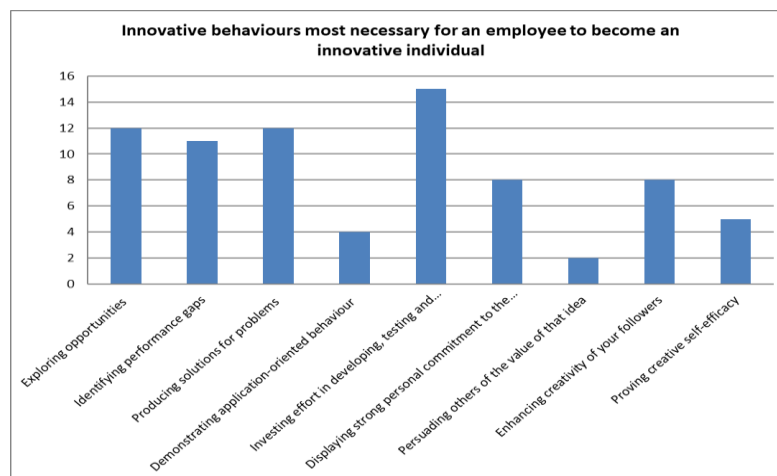
Behaviour	No of respondents/percentage
Exploring opportunities	Portugal: 12/25, i.e. 48%
	Spain: 17/29, i.e. 58.6%
	Poland: 11/32, i.e. 34.3%
	Romania: 46/78, i.e. 58.9%
	Germany: 19/25, i.e. 76%
Identifying performance gaps	Portugal: 11/25, i.e. 44%
	Spain: 15/29, i.e. 51.7%
	Poland: 15/32, i.e. 46.8%
	Romania: 24/78, i.e. 30.7%
	Germany: 5/25, i.e. 20%
Producing solutions for problems	Portugal: 12/25, i.e. 48%
	Spain: 16/29, i.e. 55.17%
	Poland: 17/32, i.e. 53.12%
	Romania: 36/78, i.e. 46.1%
	Germany: 8/25, i.e. 32%
Demonstrating application-oriented behaviour	Portugal: 4/25, i.e. 16%
	Spain: 11/29, i.e. 37.9 %
	Poland: 5/32, i.e. 15.6%
	Romania: 24/78, i.e. 30.7%
	Germany: 5/25, i.e. 20%
Investing effort in developing, testing and commercialising the idea	Portugal: 15/25, i.e. 60%
	Spain: 8/29, i.e. 27.5 %

Behaviour	No of respondents/percentage
	Poland: 11/32, i.e. 34.3%
	Romania: 24/78, i.e. 30.7%
	Germany: 4/25, i.e. 16%
Displaying strong personal commitment to the idea	Portugal: 8/25, i.e. 32%
	Spain: 13/29, i.e. 44.8 %
	Poland: 17/32, i.e. 53.12%
	Romania: 21/78, i.e. 26.9%
	Germany: 16/25, i.e. 64%
Persuading others of the value of that idea	Portugal: 2/25, i.e. 8%
	Spain: 4/29, i.e. 13.7 %
	Poland: 9/32, i.e. 28.1%
	Romania: 8/78, i.e. 10.2%
	Germany: 9/25, i.e. 36%
Enhancing creativity of your followers	Portugal: 8/25, i.e. 32%
	Spain: 13/29, i.e. 44.8 %
	Poland: 8/32, i.e. 25%
	Romania: 41/78, i.e. 52.5%
	Germany: 4/25, i.e. 32%
Proving creative self-efficacy	Portugal: 5/25, i.e. 20%
	Spain: 5/29, i.e. 17.24 %
	Poland: 3/32, i.e. 9.3%
	Romania: 21/78, i.e. 26.9%
	Germany: 4/25, i.e. 16%

Innovative behaviours - Synthesis by country

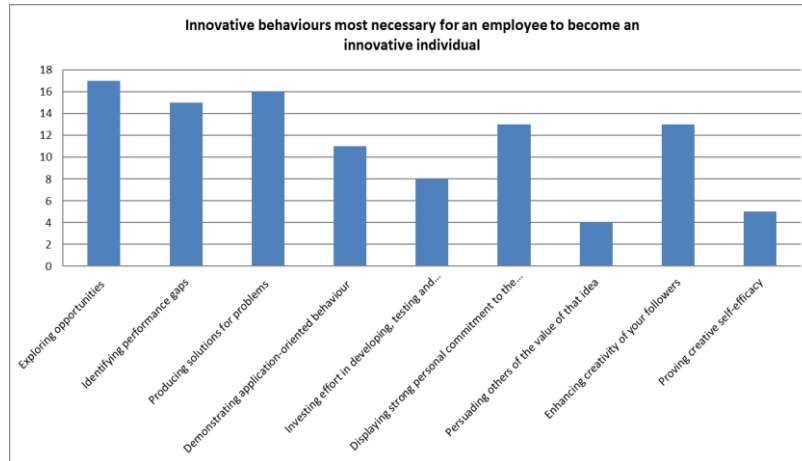
PORTUGAL

The graph below presents the Portuguese participants' answers related to the idea of innovative behaviours, with the first 3 entries allotted to generation of ideas and the others to implementation of ideas.



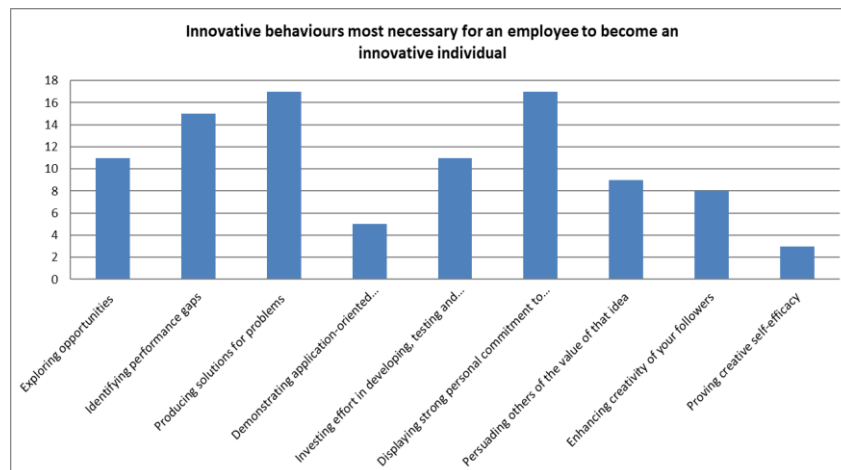
SPAIN

The graph below presents the Spanish participants' answers related to the idea of innovative behaviours, with the first 3 entries allotted to generation of ideas and the others to implementation of ideas.



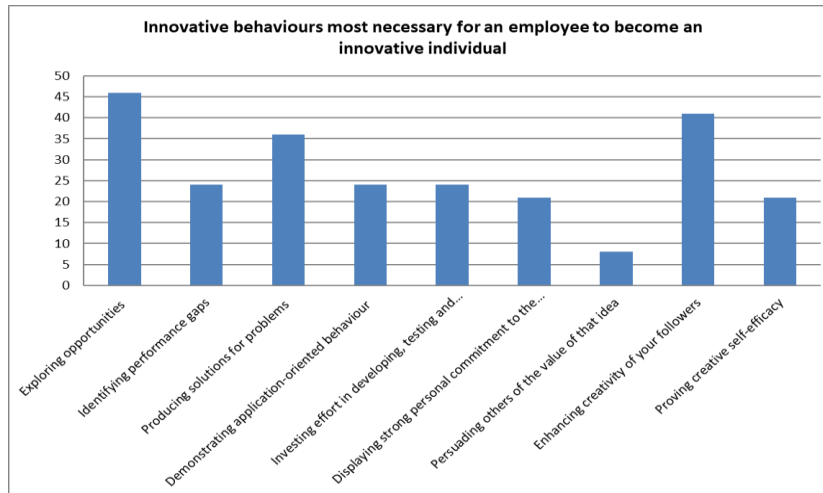
POLAND

The graph below presents the Polish participants' answers related to the idea of innovative behaviours, with the first 3 entries allotted to generation of ideas and the others to implementation of ideas.



ROMANIA

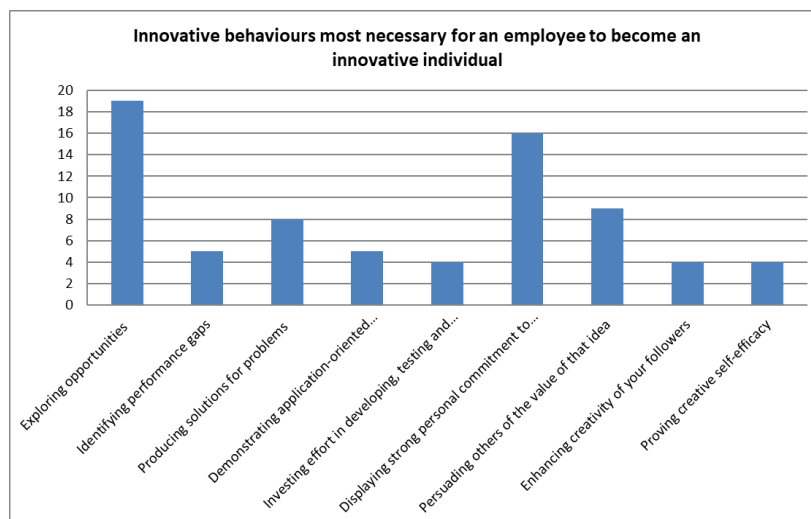
The graph below presents the Romanian participants' answers related to the idea of innovative behaviours, with the first 3 entries allotted to generation of ideas and the others to implementation of ideas.



In addition, Romanian respondents also noted other behaviours in their questionnaires, such as employees' interest in this purpose, the power of personal example, public appreciation or rewarding of innovative results.

GERMANY

The graph below presents the German participants' answers related to the idea of innovative behaviours, with the first 3 entries allotted to generation of ideas and the others to implementation of ideas.



For the **Idea generation** rubric, respondents from Portugal and Spain appreciated *Exploring opportunities* on an equal footing with *Producing solutions for problems*, while Romanian and German respondents insisted more on *Exploring opportunities* as the most innovative behaviour leading to idea-generation, and Polish respondents on *Producing solutions for problems* as the first choice.

As for the **Idea application or implementation behaviours**, the answers showed a slight variation between the respondents, some of them choosing Investing effort in developing, testing and commercialising the idea (PT), others Displaying strong personal commitment to the idea (Spain, Poland, Germany) or Enhancing the Creativity of your followers (Romania).

➤ When asked to give their opinion on the **Paths to innovation**, the respondents were able to identify a wide range of pathways that are able to lead to innovation, such as creativity, dialogue, test-trial short cycles, casual working atmosphere, employee training, ensuring work resources (time, tools), openness to change, receptiveness to all that is new and defeat of inertia, freedom of expression and thought, organising working groups, permanent evaluation of employees, accountability of team members, involvement of all employees, education and information, mobility, risk taking, promotion of digitalisation, proactivity, open thinking, vision of the future, communication, market intelligence, problem/challenge identification, look for existing solutions, partnerships for new solutions/look for new ideas inside the company, resources allocation, test of ideas.

➤ When referring to **Areas of required individual development**, the participants mainly pointed to the following individual development that they consider important when striving for innovation: openness, trust and cooperation, imagination, empathy, farsightedness, curiosity, personal competencies, personal commitment, sense of initiative, critical thinking, looking for solutions, self-development, management, leadership, leadership styles, emotional intelligence, marketing, organising teams and communication (team, customers) promotion, creativity, creative problem solving; resilience, empathy, active listening, and teamwork, digital training, being in control, intrinsic motivation, teamwork, proactivity, commitment, problem solving.

Main success factors: The SME managers and owners that responded to the questionnaire in all 5 countries were able to identify the following success factors that may encourage innovation within their business:

- A pleasant working environment,
- Positive attitude and success acknowledgment,
- Initiative,
- Allow mistakes and keep going,
- Added value for the customer and working innovations,
- Staff training,
- Collaboration with universities,
- Active search for innovation,
- Environment open to change,
- Autonomy of work,
- Consistency in looking for innovative solutions,
- Continuous communication with employees,
- Team selection and motivation,
- Flexibility in dealing with difficult situations,
- Being open to the new,
- Confidence in the success of the approach taken,
- Developing employees' loyalty,
- Involvement of all members of the company,

- Motivation of those who get involved,
- Multidisciplinary work,
- Increasing results/profits,
- Increased employee and customer satisfaction,
- Opportunities and strengths,
- Strategic orientation, change management, collaboration,
- Problem solving,
- Perseverance, leadership, market knowledge, costs/benefits ratio, customized products, customer satisfaction.

Challenges: There are a lot of challenges that the respondents identified when dealing with integrating innovation in their daily activity, the list of which is presented below:

- Coronavirus pandemic,
- Reluctance to change,
- The grounded mind-set of not being able to overcome various barriers inherited from predecessors,
- Lack of interest from employees who do not wish to step out of their comfort zone
- Approach to error/failure,
- Drop a project that is not working. → Sunk cost bias,
- Lack of sense of mission/purpose among employees,
- Lack of reaction to employee proactivity,
- No sense of community within the company,
- Lack of plan how to innovate and what to do with ideas,
- The convenience of following familiar paths and routine,
- Employees' resistance to the new, they are sometimes less willing to adapt ,
- The market as a whole,
- Economic instability,
- Financial constraints,
- Legislative unpredictability,
- Limiting beliefs and prejudices,
- Accelerated technological progress,
- To achieve and maintain a competitive level with respect to other companies in the sector,
- Creativity,
- Personal and economic challenges,
- Flexibility,
- Overcome the fear of incapacity, introduce products to the market that go beyond our usual lines, sustainability,
- Innovation awareness, investment (time and money), motivation, openness to deal with failure, constant market monitoring (customers, stakeholders, partners, competition).

A second part of the field-based research was represented by an interview with a representative of the SME support organisations in each country which was designed to enrich

the findings reached at through questionnaires and bring to the forefront the perspective of SME-support institutions on innovation and its status in each country as well.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE SUPPORTING INSTITUTION AND / OR INTERVIEWEE

There were **6 interviews** that were conducted in the 5 countries of the consortium, with the following SME-support organisations **representatives**:

- **Jorge Ramos** - CFO at **Associação Parkurbis Incubação**, a technology-based incubator located in the city of Covilhã. The incubator hosts a large number of new start-ups and works closely with new entrepreneurs in the development of their business ideas and creation of the company (Portugal)
- **Domingo Álvarez García** - management position at **Banco Sabadell** - a financial institution that supports the internationalisation of companies and financially supports all companies that present innovation projects (Spain)
- **Marek Duda, District Development Agency (RARR)** – Poland, Rzeszów, a public organisation meant to provide comprehensive development opportunities in the region and support SMEs, currently coordinating an initiative dedicated to this group of professional companies, recognizing their implementation of innovative solutions.
- **Mirela Săcăluș**, partner and senior consultant **@fonduri-structurale.ro**, co-founder and operational manager **@consolid8**. **fonduri-structurale.ro** was established in 2006 to provide assistance for SMEs, start-ups, social enterprises, NGOs, public authorities in identifying financing sources for their development and has had a significant evolution ever since (Romania)
- **Daniel Crișan**, project manager/ trainer/ specialised researcher within **AOA Arges (Arges County Businessmen Association)**, which is a non-governmental, non-profit, and apolitical organization, set up at the initiative of a group of important companies from Pitesti in order to effectively contribute to the development of the Arges economic environment (Romania).
- **Alexander Frevel**, managing partner of the Hamburg-based non-profit association **Arbeit und Zukunft e.V.**, founded in 2001, whose aim is the participation and empowerment of people in the design of working and living conditions through qualification, cooperation (chambers, associations, etc.), initiatives with industry to improve the transfer of results of labour research for companies and working people; holding colloquia, seminars and workshops; publications.

MAIN CONCLUSIONS FROM THE COMMENTARY ON THE RESEARCH RESULTS

The interviewees shared the opinion that innovation is essential in the nowadays climate and highly valued the WINN project for the intention to foster innovation. The existence of a high number of SME owners and managers concerned about innovation and involved in innovation activities is really good, especially in the context of the profound economic changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemics, when many SMEs have been forced to reconsider their activity and to find innovative solutions that would ensure their survival.

→ Overall, the interviewees expressed their satisfaction with the awareness of the group completing the questionnaire on the topic of innovation and, furthermore, also added some meaningful ideas related to it. Thus, on a general level, Mr. Ramos (Portugal) pointed out the importance of skills such as creativity, open mind to look for new solutions, critical thinking that help innovation culture develop and that should be fostered by the management alongside with a continuous open dialogue with all employees. In addition, mention was made of the role of the SME manager in fostering innovation within their business (Mr. Álvarez, Spain + Mr. Frevel, Germany), necessity of innovation is essential for survival and is interlinked with the development of some essential skills (such as creativity, open mind to look for new solutions, critical thinking) that need to be developed (Mr. Álvarez, Spain + Mr. Crişan, Romania). A SME manager must also have a proper behaviour and mind-set (leadership, awareness of the competition, motivator, organiser of working teams et al.) (Mr. Álvarez, Spain), as well as a “generalist” (possessor of wide knowledge on the market, product development future trends etc.) (Mr. Frevel, Germany). Mr. Duda (Poland) was also content on the answers provided by the respondents. A best practice on how to work on company innovations together (e.g., how the company should look like in 2025) is provided by Mr Álvarez, who describes in detail the teams that should be organised, the focus of each team and the steps to be undertaken for the teams to work properly (the key is a clear task repartition for the different teams, which the interviewee describes as follows: a team should propose or publicise changes in the offer detected by the competition; another team has to go deeper into the logistics of sales (which is crucial nowadays); another team must act on the networks, focused on the analysis of the "VALUATIONS" of the company or product; the purchasing team, in charge with efficient management of purchases and/or a change in suppliers, and not so much obsessed by sales increase).

In addition, it has been noted that the questionnaire answers show that there are clear signs of creativity being stimulated as an essential part of the innovation process and also, of interdisciplinarity – small, but interdisciplinary teams are being encouraged (it is the small teams that generate innovative ideas). However, more attention should be given to learning programs dedicated to the innovation process, to the setting up of dedicated departments or innovation managers in the structure of the responding companies – this lack makes those who innovate within companies insufficiently motivated (Ms. Săcăluş, Romania). Also, since the project idea is very challenging, it is essential that the products of such a project, for instance, the project platform, be available even after the project closes so that they could be accessed by SMEs managers and owners (Mr. Crişan, Romania).

→ As for the **Factors/behaviours/beliefs/aspects relevant for engagement and valuable contribution to innovation** listed by the survey participants, the 6 interviewees agreed with the results of the survey, as generated by the respondents in each country, and also added some more significant comments which mainly suggested that innovation should be seen as the result of the contribution of all and not just of the management and/or a specific team (Mr. Ramos, Portugal). They underlined the need for a strong connection between the management/leadership and all the company’s employees in order to foster innovation; rewarding, recognition, motivation and active listening of all employees presenting new ideas should be established as a practice to support the engagement (Mr. Ramos, Portugal). A good practice to foster innovation is provided by Spain, where Mr. Alvarez describes an internal circuit (BS IDEA) open to any employee to make any kind of suggestion to improve their products or their image. The proposals that end up being

implemented are the result of annual recognition and at the end of the year prizes of no small importance are awarded to those employees who have contributed the best ideas. In his opinion, there are two main characteristics to create a culture that facilitates the commitment of all employees to innovation: respect for the others' ideas/opinions and positive coping with mistakes and further reflection on them. Mr. Duda (Poland), on the other hand, discusses two of the important factors of innovation, that is collaboration with universities as part of a process of innovation implementation, but also with incubators and public institutions can support innovation activities carried out in a company by providing knowledge on new methods / processes / tools or by obtaining funding (for example from public authorities); secondly, an environment open to change and willing to take risks in this process. According to Mr. Duda, the environment should be open to both change and risk. Risk can, of course, be reduced by applying certain management and analysis techniques but it is impossible to eliminate it completely. Among the challenges, therefore, should be openness to risk and to all its consequences (for example: financial, reputational). The Romanian interviewees started from a focus on learning, entrepreneurial education and reached such other ideas as sources of funding for innovation, the need to turn ideas into projects in order to avoid a demotivation of the employees, need for efficient communication and relevant experience, use of various techniques (brainstorming) to foster innovative ideas (Gathering the team and asking them to contribute with an idea may eventually lead to the right solution). In addition, Mr. Frevel (Germany) started from the distinction between dialogue and discussion and added that for an innovative environment, the manager of an SME must be willing to engage in a dialogue (whose principles are equality, free flow of ideas, observance of the ethical/moral boundaries, but freedom of content; goals: conscious agreement and joint action.

→ With regards to **the role of the areas listed** in the questionnaire, the interviewees considered that all the areas listed are interconnected and particularly important, and the choice given to the respondents was very hard. To be more precise, the Spanish interviewee focused on the human capital and the need of each employee to feel important and listened to. The Polish interviewee mentioned Critical thinking and Leadership style, to which he added Collaborative behaviours, and Overcoming biases in decision-making process which are essential to the ability of employees to work together. He believes that this is fundamental when spreading the values of an open and friendly environment, and only such an environment can generate innovation. The 2 Romanian interviewees mentioned Innovation mind-set, open attitude towards innovation, clarifying ideas, receptiveness to learning collaborative behaviours (active listening, constructive reaction to adversity, etc.), Emotional intelligence, Leadership style Collaborative behaviours, Overcoming biases in decision making process. The German respondent focused on the leadership style, which should be participative, responsible and professional, adapted to the individual's working style, but also on the need of the manager to empower his employees so as to encourage them to bring forth ideas.

Relevant quotes from the interviews

“Many times, the best ideas come not from the management or from the teams responsible for innovation. The next big idea may come, many times, from any employee with a much more pragmatic vision of the problem/opportunity.” (PT)

“Innovation management is also about managing risk, stress and all that goes with it. The biggest responsibility falls on the shoulders of the boss/manager, but it can be felt by everyone. An environment of collaboration, common mission and a sense of connection among employees play a huge role here.” (PL)

“I believe that what company managers need to understand is that innovation within the company often does not bring short-term profit, but builds something sustainable in the long run.”

“Biases do not belong to the behaviour of a good manager. If the idea of a simple employee is better than yours, admit this, thank him/her and put it into practice.” (RO)

3. Conclusion

The present research, conducted in 5 EU countries, creates the image of a low or no tech SME sector as anchored in the realities of their fields of activity. According to the data collected and interpreted for the purposes of this transnational report, it is obvious that innovation is at the forefront of SME managers' and owners' priorities when it comes to efficiently developing a business in all 5 European countries of the consortium.

Both the 189 questionnaire respondents and the 6 interviewees were quite receptive to the idea of innovation and tried to shape a wide image of the phenomenon by focusing on attitudes, practices and actions meant to increase it and thus providing a clear picture on how innovation is approached in each country. Mention should be first made of the wide span of the report (as showed by the large range of low or no-tech fields of activity respondents came from – both major and smaller industry branches), which basically demonstrates that the WINN project was designed to respond to an increasing need, that of adapting to the requirements of an ever-changing socio-economic context.

As common denominators that can be reported from the answers of the respondents from all 5 countries, employees need to be encouraged to be actively involved in the development of the company through a variety of practices, as have been mentioned above. They should be able to communicate openly, to express ideas, to feel they have an impact on performance, to be provided feedback and to continue to search for solutions that may eventually lead to the company's openness to innovative actions. Related to that, innovation is encouraged by an attitude open to change and to risks, genuine dialogue/communication between the manager and the employees, mutual trust, good knowledge of the business environment and of the market, cooperation and sustainability.

The basic layer on which innovative behaviour is built is made up of three ingredients, according to the respondents in all countries, that is *Innovation mindset, Critical thinking and Collaborative behaviours*. There seems to be a common need identified by all respondents, regardless of the countries they come from, for dialogue, openness and participation in the running

of a business if innovation is desired. The paths to innovation, however, may take different forms in the 5 countries (extracted from the responses as focusing more on the company side or on the employee), from strategic planning to employees' education/training activities. Certain differences may also be noted in terms of idea generation and idea application behaviours, with some varieties between the countries (some of them choosing Investing effort in developing, testing and commercialising the idea (Portugal), others Displaying strong personal commitment to the idea (Spain, Poland, Germany) or Enhancing the Creativity of your followers (Romania)). Along the way, innovation has to survive challenges that may be of an economic, legislative, financial or human nature, as the respondents have indicated.

Innovation can be turned into a real culture, and the need to receive proper training in the field has been signalled by the participants in the field research as an important factor that needs some improvement and conditions success.