

RESTART: Resilience and Training for SMEs

Report on Mapping Results

(Project Result 2 - Task 2.4)

Findings from Seven RESTART

Project Partners

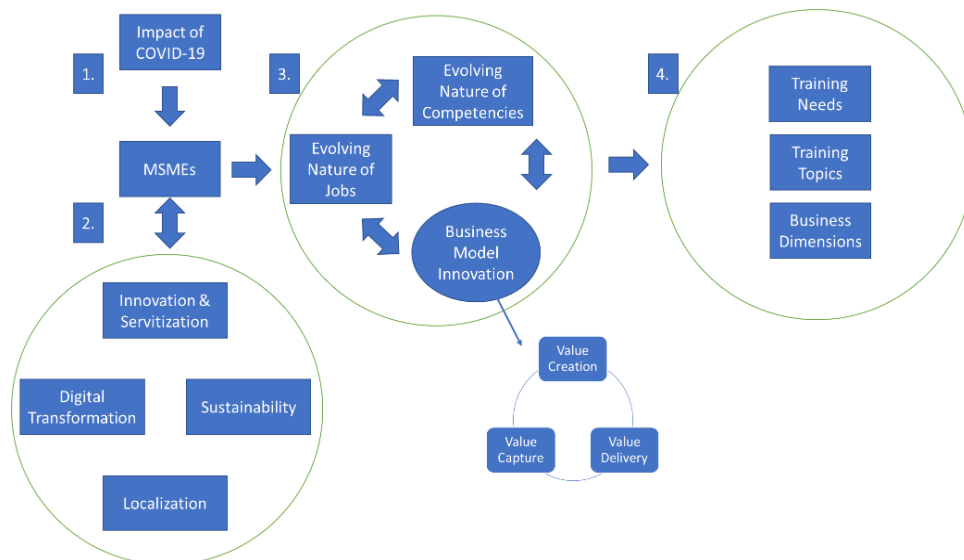
Introduction

This document, Report on Mapping Results, summarises the findings from six Mapping Inputs created by the RESTART project partners (Slovakia, Hungary, Spain, Croatia, Italy, European Union). It has been prepared within the RESTART Project Result 2, Task 2.4, "Define Evolving MSME Jobs in Post Pandemic". The report's main aim is to provide an overview of the emergence of new and evolving needs for training, upskilling, and retraining due to the impact of COVID-19 on MSMEs. RESTART project partners will use the informed insight in this report to prepare PR2 Task 2.3, "Match Innovative Biz Models and MSME needs", which will result in a core output for the project's next stage.

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The impact of COVID-19 on MSMEs: RESTART conceptual framework



Source: Own elaboration by authors.

The RESTART project partners decided to develop the RESTART conceptual framework to set up a structure for their secondary mapping, which resulted in the identification of new and evolving needs for training, upskilling and retraining for MSMEs. The RESTART conceptual framework is based on RESTART project partners' insights during brainstorming sessions and, to fulfil the principal aim, contains four essential topics:

1. **Impact of COVID-19 on MSMEs** – This topic includes inputs that provide underlying information about the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the MSMEs. It was essential to identify and understand the actual impacts of the pandemic and their magnitude in the respective countries to meet the objective. The inputs could be positive, negative, or relevant, answering the research question, "*How has COVID-19 impacted MSMEs?*"
2. **Impact of 4 megatrends on MSMEs** – The pre-project activities and analysis confirmed that MSMEs need to tackle the challenges of a completely transformed business setting and 4 megatrends for recovery emerged: 1. Innovation & Servitization; 2. Digital Transformation; 3. Localization; and 4. Sustainability. To be able to equip MSMEs with the necessary skills and training in these four areas, the RESTART project partners had to carry out a secondary mapping to understand the current situation, prospects, support among the authorities, public and private sector actors, initiatives, and country-specific impacts of 4 megatrends. This topic revolved around the following research question "*What has been the impact of four megatrends on MSMEs?*"
3. **Changes in business models, MSME's jobs, and entrepreneurial competencies** – To deepen RESTART project partners' understanding of MSMEs' needs, the third topic provides insights into their internal structures. The first area under investigation was Changes in business models where partners focused on value creation, value delivery, and value capture components and how they changed under the impact of COVID-19 and 4 megatrends. Next was Changes in MSME's jobs, where the investigation focused on employees - specific skills there is an increased demand for, the criteria for filling vacancies, and the needs for retraining and upskilling of MSMEs' staff. Finally, the last subtopic was focused on MSMEs' owner/managers, challenges for starting, nascent, and established entrepreneurs, competencies, skills, and characteristics currently increasingly crucial in business. The research question on this topic was "*What changes have occurred in business models, MSME jobs, and entrepreneurial competencies?*"
4. **Business dimensions, training needs, and training topics** – Based on secondary resources and previous findings, RESTART project partners formulated recommendations for business dimensions, training needs, and training topics. Business dimensions represent business-specific objects such as products, customers, employees, processes, strategies, finances, etc., that the training should be focused on. Training needs reflect on the most important challenges for either MSMEs' employees or owner-managers that were identified in the previous topics. Finally, training topics are a comprehensive outcome based on all the previous mapping components and represent the final RESTART project partners' suggestions for further elaboration in PR3 with the primary aim to equip MSMEs for growth and competitiveness in the new normal. The research question within this topic was, "*How have these changes affected business dimensions, training needs, and training topics for growth and competitiveness?*"

Topic 1: Impact of COVID-19 on MSMEs

The review of secondary resources on the impact of COVID-19 on MSMEs in RESTART project countries revealed the following list of inputs:

- Differing effects on member states and business sectors
- Interruptions in MSMEs operations
- Decrease in gross production, sales, added value, and profit
- Disruption of supply chains
- Issues in human resource management
- Wider use of remote and smart working
- Low business resilience
- New governmental subsidies
- Increased discontinuation of enterprises
- Decrease in new business registrations and startups
- Accelerated digital transformation
- New opportunities

The COVID-19 pandemic impact on MSMEs during the first and subsequent waves was significant all over the RESTART project partners' countries. The list of partners' inputs is not exhaustive but represents a summary of key findings and general impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on MSMEs in the respective countries.

The pandemic did not have a universal impact at the level of European MSMEs. Some countries were more affected, and economic sectors suffered more than others. Generally, the sectors most affected by the pandemic were accommodation and catering, transport and storage, administrative and support services, arts and entertainment, recreation, sports, education, manufacturing and retail. On the other hand, some sectors have benefited from the situation, such as agriculture, e-commerce, finance and insurance, health and pharmaceuticals, and the information and telecommunication sector.

Many MSMEs have been on the brink of extinction. The lockdowns and anti-pandemic measures implemented extensively by many European countries have resulted in a considerable decline in sales, value-added, profit, and production of MSMEs, and even after the reopening, their situation was often not improving. Larger companies have been going through the pandemic easier than MSMEs, which are more susceptible.

A common problem has been a disruption of supply chains of MSMEs, caused by lockdowns and anti-pandemic measures, as they had not sufficiently protected themselves against possible risks. MSMEs mostly felt problems with procuring raw materials and intermediate goods, which mainly affected the processing industry, construction industry, partly wholesale and retail trade, and agriculture.

MSMEs have been hit hard by the pandemic outbreak. As a result, they have often cut their workforce, and the employment level in MSMEs has been affected. Even the international surveys showed that European MSMEs reported a growing drop in employment over the months. Most sectors reached the employees decline. During the pandemic, women, lower-wage workers, and those living in rural areas have been more likely to stop working. The impact on women has been disproportionately severe, as they tend to work more on unpaid and domestic care jobs than men.

The impact of the pandemic would have been even more widespread were it not for changes in how people work. Remote and smart working has become an option for many workers. Nevertheless, those were more likely possibilities for medium-sized and large companies' employees than micro and small companies. Often, working from home was not an option due to the nature of work. Furthermore,

European MSMEs were often unprepared to deal with this shift, and it was difficult for MSMEs to adopt forms of smart working compared to larger companies.

A significant number of MSMEs did not work during the pandemic due to the restrictions or the inability to organize an alternative operational model due to the specifics of the business. Generally, MSMEs have had difficulties coping with the changing environment due to low business resilience and adaptability.

The governments of RESTART project countries introduced new subsidies to mitigate the negative impact of the pandemic, lockdowns, and anti-pandemic measures. The mostly used measures included employee salaries subsidies, pay rent subsidies, remission of social security contributions, and compensation contribution for the loss of income. New credits usually did not cover investments but have been used for the survival of companies, current liquidity and employee salaries. Many MSMEs would not have survived without governmental help. Nevertheless, the pandemic has led to a significant decline in the number of MSMEs, and new business registrations and startups have decreased.

The survived MSMEs have often implemented various digital solutions and undergone digital transformation. It has been stated that the COVID-19 pandemic has sped up Europe's digital transformation by seven years. As a result of the pandemic, many MSMEs have improved their level of digital skills and competencies, while others have exploited new opportunities created by the pandemic.

Topic 2: Impact of 4 megatrends on MSMEs

The review of secondary resources on the impact of 4 megatrends on MSMEs in RESTART project countries revealed the following list of inputs:

- Rather stagnant innovation performance
- Barriers to MSMEs' innovation
- Increasing trend of servitization
- Servitization as a way to increase employment, number of clients, revenues, and profit margin
- Most servitized sectors
- Adopting service-based business models
- The increased importance of networking in servitization
- Lack of service innovation support schemes
- Stagnation or slight improvement in digitalization
- Acceleration of digital transformation
- Increase in online selling
- Growth in new digital technologies
- Introduction of remote working
- Importance of mindset change and development of digital thinking
- Challenges in the digital transformation
- The growing trend of localization
- Increased awareness of localization
- Increase in “buying local”
- Promotion and growing focus on sustainability

The impacts of the 4 megatrends are evident in RESTART project countries, and the pandemic seems to have largely accelerated the changes that these trends have triggered in MSMEs.

In terms of innovation, all RESTART project countries performed below the European average according to European Innovation Scoreboard 2021. Slovakia, Hungary, and Croatia belong to the so-called emerging innovators group, while Spain and Italy belong to the moderate innovators' group. Generally, RESTART project countries have stagnated or slightly improved over the last couple of years but are still underperforming considering EU27.

MSMEs have had usually a modest budget for innovation. However, some increased their budget due to the pandemic, but an even more considerable portion reduced it. MSMEs find innovation difficult, perceive a lack of their available financial resources and often think it should be more supported by the authorities. Furthermore, the acquisition and retention of qualified employees are increasingly demanding. Other barriers that MSMEs have faced are low demand for innovation, high innovation costs, difficulties obtaining government subsidies or grants for innovation, and a lack of collaborative partners.

Servitization is another trend which has been visible in all sectors of industrial production. It has contributed significantly to countries' GDP and has recently increased rapidly. Service-oriented manufacturing MSMEs employ more workers to offer their clients additional support. Furthermore, servitization helps MSMEs increase the number of their customers, revenues, and profit margin.

The sectors with the highest implementation of servitization in manufacturing companies are usually those related to energy, machinery, automotive, trailers, furniture, heavy construction, and textile. Servitization is evident in large companies and MSMEs, which adapt their business models accordingly.

As one of the most significant potential barriers to the servitization of MSMEs, the lack of suitable business partners/suppliers to function in complex value chains emerged. The integration of services usually implies an expansion of existing value chains and, consequently, a need to identify, collaborate and rely on new business partners. Companies strive to form or join existing value chains and innovation clusters. Furthermore, it seems that there is a lack of service innovation support schemes at a national or regional level.

Next, considering digitalization, RESTART project countries are also underperforming according to DESI (2021), except for Spain. Hungary, Slovakia, Italy, and Croatia (ranked from worst to best) are performing below the EU27 average in digitalization. Spain performs best among RESTART countries, ranking 9th in the EU. Slovakia and Hungary are stagnating (progressing below the EU average), while Croatia, Italy and Spain are developing slightly faster than the EU average.

The world underwent a digital transformation that would typically have taken years. The pandemic accelerated the use of digital tools, and many MSMEs started or enhanced their online selling channels or implemented advanced digital technologies. Also, many MSMEs started or offered their employees an option (if possible) to work remotely. These trends introduced organizational changes in activities, processes, and human resources management.

Nevertheless, micro-enterprises tend to focus more on basic digital technologies while mid-sized businesses focus more on advanced digital technologies. Digitalization continues to pose challenges for MSMEs. MSMEs need to understand the power of technology and how it multiplies the range of business opportunities to create organizational flexibility, willingness to experiment and innovation required for future business survival. Companies that retain their old mindset can quickly fall behind.

All RESTART project partners stated that localization and short supply chains present enormous opportunities for MSMEs to increase their added value and profitability. Throughout respective countries, there are examples of local agriculture, tourism, and food industry businesses. Often, they produce and operate in ecological ways while local authorities are also involved. European consumers increasingly prefer to purchase more locally than before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Finally, sustainability is another trend visible in the RESTART project countries. MSMEs should develop their economic, environmental, and social sustainability, which results in higher resilience to external shocks. The actions include reducing materials used in paperless sales processes, optimizing delivery routes, using recycled and recyclable packaging, reducing packaging, and introducing corporate social responsibility strategies that fulfil social objectives. Various surveys show that customers prefer to buy different products for ethical and sustainable reasons. As a result, MSMEs are becoming more resource-efficient and environmentally and socially friendly after the pandemic.

Topic 3: Changes in business models, MSMEs' jobs, and entrepreneurial competencies

The review of secondary resources on changes in business models, MSMEs' jobs, and entrepreneurial competencies in RESTART project countries revealed the following list of inputs among the 3 subtopics:

Subtopic 1: Changes in business models

- Higher innovation of business models
- Development of business resilience
- Digitalization as a key competitive advantage
- The digitalization of processes
- Development of online sales channels
- Business authenticity
- Focus on human resources in business models
- Finding digital partners for new markets
- Zero-touch business models
- Trending business models
- New forms of communication

Under the impact of the pandemic and 4 megatrends, MSMEs had to adapt very quickly to the changing business environment. Changes often affected their very functioning and also their business models. Almost half of European MSMEs intend to innovate their business models, and even more believe they need to change their existing business models. In these turbulent times, business resilience has become very important for MSMEs to ensure their survival.

Digital sales channels have become a key advantage in many industries. Mobile banking, contactless payments, or the transfer of interactions from branches to virtual space have expanded significantly in the banking and financial sectors. Retail also reached online sales in sectors where it did not play a significant role before the pandemic.

Digital technology has been increasingly applied in organizational functions (production, marketing/sales, finance, research and development, etc.). Companies have adapted, using digitalization, many of their processes and adding new technologies to their daily activities, such as the cloud or increased cybersecurity.

Today's consumers also have a growing interest in seeking brand authenticity. Customers want companies to be interested in social and environmental issues and not just try to increase their profits. According to this trend, every organization or company should adjust their value proposition to serve a meaningful purpose and have a wide presence of local brands on the shelves.

The rapid transformation of digital technology throughout business models provides a competitive advantage. However, the focus should be on human resources as some obstacles are related to employee shortage, hiring, financing and low digital literacy. Also, MSMEs generally do not have all the necessary resources to hire experts to implement and ensure the use of digital tools. Instead, they try to overcome their weaknesses by blending into the digital technology ecosystem of their partners. However, this is considered a short-term solution and MSMEs need to respond adequately to emerging trends even though fostering close partnerships is also essential.

There has been a shift towards zero-touch business models. For example, restaurants have been promoting food delivery services over on-premise consumption. Food delivery was often the only way out for many restaurants because of the introduction of health and hygiene measures. The innovative business models often include also e-commerce, marketplace, franchise, and freemium.

Maintaining communication has become essential with the start of the pandemic, internally among employees and externally with customers. MSMEs have expanded their customer contact methods and integrated new internal collaboration and communication tools.

Subtopic 2: Changes in MSME's jobs

- Reduction of working people
- A decline in job vacancies
- Increase in smart working, remote working and flexible working hours
- Need for particular soft and hard skills
- Focus on health and security
- Life-long learning and vocational training

Generally, the number of working people worldwide decreased, with a higher negative impact for women than men. The pandemic negatively influenced all age categories besides people in retirement, but the most impacted were young people. Furthermore, the situation affected most professions dependent on customer support, such as restaurants or accommodation facilities. Higher qualified professionals had to worry about their positions less during a difficult period. These include specialists in IT, accounting and financial control, nursing, or technology.

The number of new jobs published online in OECD countries fell by an average of around 60% (by April 2020) virtually in all sectors of the economy. Croatia and Slovakia experienced one of the sharpest declines in new jobs published online. At the beginning of the pandemic, job losses were more pronounced for low-skilled jobs, while in later periods of the pandemic, it was for high-skilled jobs. On the contrary, the increase in the online job offers was recorded in logistics and distribution, as well as in the transport, mining, construction, and manufacturing sectors, which achieved the highest growth rates during the pandemic.

Smart working, remote working, and flexible working hours were the frequent forms of support from employers who significantly increased their use. In the post-lockdown period, there was a general decline in the distribution of these alternative ways of working. However, many companies retained them. MSMEs have not all adopted these forms of working in the same way. Generally, companies that use them less operate in the construction, automotive and fashion sectors.

According to experts and international documents, different soft and hard skills were required before the pandemic than now. Companies are looking for expertise, especially in data analytics, cyber security, and production technology and digitalization. Most in-demand soft skills include teamwork, empathy, communication skills, change adaptability, critical thinking and willingness to learn, problem-solving, resourcefulness, time management and dealing with uncertainty. Change adaptability and critical thinking are the most missing skills among the current employees, as well as creative thinking and flexibility.

According to The Future of Jobs Report by the World Economic Forum (2020), 50% of all employees will need reskilling by 2025, and 40% of current workers' core skills are expected to change in the next 5 years. This reskilling will be related to the jobs of the future, automation, industry 4.0, AI and machine learning.

In the post-covid environment, knowledge, skills, talents, and abilities will be crucial for economic success. Life-long learning is determined as one of the foundations to provide new vocational skills for the labour market and the foundation of education systems. Furthermore, vocational training is one of the most in-demand training.

Subtopic 3: Changes in entrepreneurial competencies of MSMEs' owner-managers

- Lack of managerial skills
- Need for the development of soft and hard skills
- Innovation competencies required

- Opportunity perception in the highly dynamic world
- Development of competencies/cooperation with the creative industry
- Skills in intellectual property protection
- Skills in sustainable entrepreneurship
- Need for financial skills of owners and managers
- Focus on agile management and work organization

The rapidly changing world placed different demands on the owners and managers of MSMEs. They should generally be equipped with managerial skills, which present one of the main problems for MSMEs when they often hold various positions in their business. Also, complex problem-solving skills, leadership, emotional intelligence, and strategic vision are needed by the owners/managers of MSMEs operating in the pandemic context. Innovation is a pending issue in RESTART project countries but, at the same time, presents an enormous opportunity. MSMEs' should foster innovation which in turn can improve their competitive position.

MSMEs owners/managers should seek the opportunities arising from Industrial Revolution 4.0, be familiar with the principles of the Smart Industry 4.0 concept, make innovative "smart" investments, and be active in introducing intelligently managed technologies and systems. The necessary competencies relate to implementing smart solutions on existing technologies, procuring new technologies needed for the implementation of smart solutions, and creating intelligently controlled, interconnected autonomous systems.

Next, MSME entrepreneurs should develop their competencies and collaborations in creative industries to help build innovation processes within their business. These can be reflected in advertising, marketing, architecture, ICT, and design.

One of the areas in which MSMEs are generally lagging is the protection of intellectual property rights (patent, trademark, design), which play an essential role in promoting innovation and protecting investment. At the same time, according to the EU Intellectual Property Office (EUIPO), businesses (especially MSMEs) that exploit intellectual property rights perform better.

Enormous opportunities are presented by the sustainable, green and social economy. On the one hand, they help create added value, increase profit margins, efficiency and innovative performance, expand the customer base, and expand activities beyond commercially oriented goals. There are many support schemes available that MSMEs owners/managers should learn to exploit (for innovation, digitalization, etc.).

MSMEs leaders need to learn the principles of agile management and teams in the digital age, e.g., self-organizing working groups of flexible professionals who know and can change approaches and methods of work on the go while pursuing the goal.

Topic 4: Business dimensions, training needs, and training topics

The review of secondary resources and previous findings for RESTART project countries revealed the following recommendations for business dimensions, training needs, and training topics.

Business dimensions

- Digital sales channels
- Cyber security
- Strategy and brand building
- The overall approach to further education and training
- Building social responsibility
- Internal communication and collaboration
- Communication with customers

- Funding and financing

The RESTART project partners identified important areas (so-called business dimensions) to be focused on during the subsequent project activities. As one of the most crucial business dimensions, digital sales channels emerged. Most interactions had moved from the physical to the online world. Hence, digital sales channels have become key in many industries and sectors that did not play a significant role before the pandemic.

Consequently, cyber security has been considered vital as there was an exponential increase in the use of digital technologies. Cybersecurity needs to be considered from an MSME perspective (e.g., cyber-attacks that can affect companies) and a consumer perspective (e.g., making safe online purchases).

Next, MSMEs moved from mitigating the impacts of the pandemic to building strategies to progress in the long term. MSMEs should consider accelerating digital transformation, addressing gaps in IT infrastructure, workforce planning, digital upskilling, and leveraging customers' impulses.

There is also a need to change education and training with the transformation of industry and commerce in the wake of the Industrial Revolution 4.0. MSME owners and their employees need up-to-date information and skills to stay competitive in the market. Business agility, resilience, adaptation to change, and learning organization are important trends.

The pandemic also accelerated social responsibility among MSMEs that supported health professionals, provided various discounts to the most vulnerable population groups, donated protective equipment, and provided mobile data or faster internet to families with children. Companies identified the crisis as an opportunity to strengthen their social responsibility and create trust. This difficult period is an ideal opportunity to demonstrate brand values and show that profit is not the company's only concern.

MSMEs adopted different tools for collaboration and teamwork, videoconferencing, or remote work. They also engaged with customers using social media and content creation tools, building a solid brand presence and identity.

Funding and financing was a prominent issue for many MSMEs, unaware they are eligible for many types of European or national support. The same applies to investment projects or initiatives to support the development of innovation and the implementation of digital solutions.

Training needs

- Hard skills acquisition and development
- Soft skills acquisition and development
- Raising awareness of new entrepreneurship trends
- Support and funding system
- Acquisition of cybersecurity capabilities
- Awareness about sustainability

The RESTART project partners have identified the following training needs. First, the acquisition and development of hard skills include data analytics, digital and technical skills, and creative competencies. Also, owners/managers must improve their managerial skills on-site and in remote working contexts.

Next, soft skills acquisition and development include leadership and interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence, communication, change adaptability, leadership, and flexibility. Teamwork is also essential and has gained a new dimension through virtual collaboration. Critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity and innovation are increasingly important in the post-pandemic era.

New entrepreneurship trends accelerated by the pandemic are, e.g., sustainability, green entrepreneurship, social entrepreneurship, servitization, and localization. Therefore, MSMEs need to be aware of them, have the necessary knowledge about these trends, and be able to exploit them in various contexts.

There is no functioning support system in some areas, e.g., servitization. On the other hand, MSMEs are not taking full advantage of some available support opportunities (in innovation and digitalization). Therefore, these opportunities need to be better communicated and presented.

MSMEs should be more aware of the importance of digital training and create training to improve the cybersecurity skills of employees. MSMEs are aware of digitalization's risks, such as cyber-attacks, but have paid little attention to it. MSME employees need to be trained to operate safely, maintain the confidentiality and integrity of MSME information, and defend themselves against the risks of cyberattacks.

Training topics

The RESTART project partners have, based on the information above, formulated the following training topics to be developed in the subsequent project activities:

- **Digitalization and digital transformation** – implementing digital solutions, acquiring digital skills, raising awareness of the benefits of new technologies such as IoT, blockchain, AI, etc.
- **Innovation and exploiting opportunities** – implementing innovative solutions, innovative strategies, innovation uptake and equipping both owner-managers and employees with the necessary competencies and skillsets.
- **Business model innovation and resilience** – providing a basis for business model innovation for the necessary changes to build thriving and agile organizations.
- **Green, sustainable, and social entrepreneurship** – raising awareness about relevant concepts accompanied by strong consumer preferences for environmentally friendly products and services.
- **Online business presence, marketing, and sales** – training in presenting a brand online, online presence, online marketing (marketing strategies), sales and related distribution and logistics issues.
- **Servitization** - equipping MSMEs with the necessary knowledge and skills related to servitization.
- **Localization** – raising awareness about localization and equipping MSMEs with the necessary skillset. Local/global supply chains.
- **Cybersecurity** – Empowering MSMEs with skills and competencies in cybersecurity.
- **Project Management** – Equipping the managers of MSMEs with management skills.
- **Financial/funding support** – Providing the competencies for the small business managers to find solutions to access finance.
- **Smart working, virtual communication, virtual team management** – Supporting the MSMEs to manage virtual teams and work in flexible contexts.
- **Internationalization of MSMEs** – Providing competencies for internationalization of MSMEs.

RESTART project partners will use the informed insight in this report to prepare PR2 Task 2.3 “Match Innovative Biz Models and MSME needs”, which will result in a core output for the project's next stage.”

List of references

The following list contains all references used by RESTART project partners to recognize all resources used to elaborate respective country's Mapping Inputs and this Report on Mapping Results.

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