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# Introducing the job profile of the Work Innovation Manager

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## 1. Introduction

The literature review defines "Workplace Innovation" as a combination of structural and cultural practices that enable employees to participate in organisational change and renewal (Oeij et al., 2016). The drivers of Workplace Innovation (WI) implementation can be categorized into two main groups: enhancing economic objectives and performance quality, and improving the quality of working life and employee engagement.

Additionally, WI facilitates companies to remain innovative and adaptable, enhancing both job quality and organizational performance. Moreover, WI's impact on SMEs includes providing insights into technological transformation, studying its effects on labor dynamics and skills, and shaping policy options for inclusive growth. Leadership is highlighted as crucial for fostering innovative environment and behaviours within organizations.

### 1.1 Overall workplace innovation rate

A rising trend in European countries involves the development of policy interventions and programs to promote Workplace Innovation (WI), aiming to align improved business performance with enhanced working life quality. At EU policy level, the notion of 'social innovation' or 'workplace innovation' has become a significant component in realizing the EU2020 Strategy objectives of "smart and inclusive growth" within organizations. The main countries that have joined the Workplace Innovation promotion are:

- Bulgaria;
- Greece;
- Germany;
- Hungary;
- Slovenia.

### 1.2 Relevant methods and tools to promote workplace innovation

Workplace Innovation (WI) practices encompass structural approaches like job redesign to enhance employee autonomy, and cultural initiatives such as dialogue to boost engagement. HR practices cover recruitment, training, and initiative to improve workers health, while 'other' interventions include IT systems and lean management. Studies emphasize the importance of flexible work models and SMEs' capacity for step-by-step innovations, but note weaknesses in formal processes and resource limitations. They highlight the need for explicit innovation strategies, a supportive organizational culture, and professionalized management to drive SME innovation effectively. The promotion of workplace innovation involves two main areas: management and digitalization. Strategies such as regular staff meetings and brainstorming sessions enhance team spirit and productivity, as well as digital tools. In various countries such as Greece and Germany, emphasis is placed on employee well-being and technology-driven initiatives, aligned with the broader trend towards digitalization, research and development. Pedagogical approaches and innovative technologies like Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality are also becoming increasingly common, fostering vocational and soft skill development. Additionally, attention to workspace design and ergonomics contributes to employee well-being and performance. In Slovenia, the adoption of project management tools and efforts towards creating a less stressful work environment and flexible schedules highlight a growing awareness

of the benefits of digitalization and employee-centered workplace practices.

### **1.3 Necessary skills for the workplace innovation**

Competencies and skills are crucial in navigating the complexities of innovation, particularly in the digital age. Training and education must adapt to evolving needs, focusing on digital technologies and fostering self-driven learning. Workplace Innovation prioritizes integration, collaboration, and the development of diverse skills, including self-organization and digital literacy. Additionally, green skills are increasingly essential for aligning SMEs with global sustainability goals and enhancing economic value.

### **1.4 Current workplace innovation skills level in each partner country.**

- Bulgaria: its Innovation Index ranks second to last in the EU-28 at 0.235, with the COVID-19 pandemic driving significant workplace digitalization improvements, yet many SMEs lag behind in digital competences and green practices.
- Greece: Overall, workplace innovation is lacking except in a few cases, focusing primarily on employee well-being, technological advancement, and policy development, highlighting the urgent need to educate managers on fostering employee-friendly environments, diversity integration, and leveraging individual strengths for collective success.
- Germany: Germany's economic future relies on leveraging key technologies, with the Federal Government aiming to enhance its tech leadership through the High-Tech Strategy. Yet, global research highlights the need to integrate social innovations for a successful transition to a knowledge and service-based society.
- Hungary: In 2020, Hungary lagged behind the European average in digital skills, with only a quarter of the population possessing above basic proficiency, a decrease from 2017. Additionally, 49% had basic skills. By 2021, the gap narrowed to around 3% below the EU average.
- Slovenia: Amid the pandemic, many companies have significantly advanced workplace digitalization to ensure safety and reduce stress. In Slovenia, efforts are underway to digitize SMEs, with the green transition posing challenges. Data on workplace innovation skills are limited, but feedback from 10 SMEs suggests average proficiency, rated between 3 and 4 on a scale of 1 to 5.

### **1.5 Measuring workplace innovation impact.**

Kibowski et al. (2018) propose a holistic system for measuring Workplace Innovation (WI), identifying four key elements: Organization, Structure, Learning, and Partnership. They emphasize the importance of integrating diverse practices and fostering employee empowerment, learning, and collaboration. Additionally, they suggest key performance indicators (KPIs) for measuring WI impact, including staff time allocation, competency levels, innovation project submissions, and leadership involvement. This approach underscores the complex, social nature of WI and the need for continuous reflection and improvement.

### **1.6 Definition of the target group**



Bulgaria: The target group for Balkan Bridge in Bulgaria comprises small and medium enterprises (SMEs), with a focus on those with less than 15 employees/staff members, meeting specific financial criteria.

- Greece: SMEs grapple with workload and challenges in enhancing reputation and revenue, with minimal emphasis on workplace innovation from authorities and entrepreneurs. The main target group comprises SME administrative staff, managers, and the public sector.
- Germany: While larger companies have embraced workplace innovation, smaller enterprises, particularly micro and small businesses, face budget constraints and prioritize other aspects over workplace innovation, often lacking dedicated HR managers. Targeting these smaller companies, especially those existing for longer periods, is crucial as they stand to benefit the most but may be the most challenging to engage due to limited resources and time constraints. Tailoring training to be short and flexible is essential in addressing their needs effectively.
- Hungary: Hungary follows EU criteria, defining SMEs as enterprises with fewer than 250 employees and annual turnover below EUR 50 million. SMEs include medium-sized, small, and micro-businesses, distinguished by turnover and employee count. Representatives from the employer's side are owners, presidents, managers, or supervisors, while employees are those with unlimited-duration contracts after passing the trial period.
- Slovenia: In Slovenia, MIITR and SSGZ prioritize small and medium enterprises (SMEs) with less than 15 employees. Companies are categorized as micro, small, medium-sized, or large based on employee count, turnover, and asset value. The Workplace Innovation Survey focuses on SMEs, although the largest sample comes from medium and large companies. Representatives from the employer's side within SMEs include managers or supervisors, while employees must have at least 6 months of work experience in the company.

## 2. Existing Programs in Each Partner Country

A comprehensive overview of existing programmes reveals a rich tapestry of initiatives, each tailored to meet distinct national objectives and economic landscapes. Initiatives include pioneering digital transformation endeavours and those centred around empowering employees. The methodologies and impacts of these programmes reflect diverse strategies aimed at fostering innovation in the workplace. This introductory paragraph provides an overview of the diverse approaches employed within each country, highlighting not only their objectives but also the broader implications for organisational dynamics and national competitiveness.

The following table presents a summary of the existing programmes:

<b>Bulgaria</b>	Innovation and Business Support Program Innovation Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria Operational Programme Innovations and Competitiveness Bulgaria
<b>Greece</b>	Entrepreneurship of Western Greece Action 3a.1.4.1.1 Hellenic Republic Region of Thessaly
<b>Germany</b>	KMU- Innovativ Förderdatenbank Mittelstand Innovativ & Digital
<b>Hungary</b>	

	Economic Development and Innovation Operational Programme NKFIH Hungary
<b>Slovenia</b>	ZAP FITCORP Innovation Barometer Inovativni management v turizmu SMEmpower Efficiency - A comprehensive approach to energy efficiency in SMEs SRIP - Circular Economy Strategic Innovation Development Partnership, Innovation Cluster

### 3. Professional Development Target Group

The following section presents the target groups for professional development related to workplace innovation, with a focus on managerial roles. This section also identifies the specific training needs and preferred learning formats, such as seminars and workshops, that are crucial to fostering leadership skills that promote innovative work environments.

- **Bulgaria:** training initiatives include conferences, events, and discussions focused on various topics relevant to targeted audiences. These gatherings feature distinguished speakers presenting on subjects such as digital transformation post-Covid-19, historical perspectives on technological advancements, workplace innovation, skill demands in evolving technology, the platform economy, and green practices. Additionally, efforts to enhance efficiency in time management and daily work processes involve interactive methods. Employees are encouraged to listen to podcasts during commute times, participate in weekly brainstorming sessions, and engage in role-playing activities where they temporarily assume managerial responsibilities. These strategies aim to foster skill development, productivity, and team cohesion.
- **Greece:** training initiatives include seminars and online programs tailored to the needs of workplace innovation managers. Thrive Greece organizes seminars on topics like emotional intelligence and effective communication for managers. These sessions focus on innovative methods for managing employees and improving workplace conditions. Additionally, short workshops, such as Crowd policy Open Innovation Bootcamps, introduce executives and teams to modern development methodologies like lean, design thinking, and agile. Participants collaborate to solve problems and integrate new technologies into their work, fostering innovation in business models and products.
- **Germany:** training formats encompass presence, hybrid, and online options, along with coaching. Focus areas include self-management, self-organization, and communication skills, crucial for the hybrid work environment prevalent in offices and home offices. Training also emphasizes the use of new software, updates, and apps. Additionally, there's a need to develop skills in organizing short training sessions or workshops to efficiently share knowledge among employees and coworkers.
- **Hungary:** training formats offered by the European Institute of Innovation and Technology include blended options covering various target groups such as MSc and Ph.D. education, postgraduate entrepreneurship skills, alumni and career management, summer universities, thematic workshops, and researcher exchanges. Corporate training programs in Budapest offer courses ranging from 5-day, 2-day, to 2-week formats,



including both in-person and online options. Topics covered include fleet safety management, strategic HR management, project planning, negotiation skills, and more.

- Slovenia: various training formats address managers and those in human resources roles. Blogs like those from Human Research Agency Poti offer online training suggestions for creating a better work environment. Seminars, workshops, and training sessions, often organized by HR companies or universities, cover topics such as ergonomics and stress management in the workplace. These events typically require a fee, ranging from approximately 200 EUR for a one-day session and upwards.

#### **4. Case Study In Each Partner Country**

This chapter presents a collection of case studies that have been meticulously curated to showcase workplace innovation across our partner countries. The studies, which are drawn from a diverse range of industries and settings, offer a detailed examination of innovative strategies in action.

##### **4.1 Bulgaria**

Five case studies of Bulgarian SMEs have been conducted during the months of April and May of 2022. The profile of the chosen SMEs includes two within the IT sector, one operating in the field of restaurant distribution and supplement, one company providing sport data and statistics and one self-starting company that provides coach training and consultancy services. The studies focused on assessing newly introduced innovative approaches aimed at improving business structures, enhancing employee productivity, and boosting managerial and staff effectiveness.

The WIN project gains value by incorporating digital revolution case studies into its training materials, highlighting the benefits of workplace innovation and digital transformation. For example, automatic access to bank account information streamlines processes, fosters artificial intelligence development, and enhances productivity and security. Additionally, embracing green practices, such as cupfee's edible cups, not only aligns SMEs with global trends but also contributes to environmental sustainability. Case studies demonstrating innovative home office setups and staff engagement activities further underscore the project's commitment to enhancing workplace well-being and productivity through innovative practices.

##### **4.2 Greece**

During the desk research, each Greek partner had to conduct five case studies. The analysis of the case studies was focused on the workplace innovation, the development of small and medium-sized enterprises, the establishment of innovative policies, and the digital transformation. Four of the companies are SMEs and they were selected due to the fact that they have already been awarded by Great Place to Work® Institute Hellas as Best Workplace.

Case studies varied in sector and size to ensure a comprehensive sample. They included an SME developing ship management software, KAFKAS in electronic equipment, an entrepreneur in the tobacco market, and a co-working space accommodating diverse professionals. Notable examples like a human-centered pasta industry and Citrix's diversity policies were analyzed alongside firms recognized for workplace innovation and human rights, such as AbbVie.

NetSteps, primarily female-staffed, and Vodafone Greece, a Top Employer, were also studied for their innovative approaches to training.

The case studies inform the WIN project's development of materials and techniques, helping identify WIN manager skills and responsibilities. The project aims to bridge SMEs' innovation gaps, establish Workplace Innovation Manager roles, and offer simple solutions to enhance employee productivity and well-being.

### **4.3 Germany**

Eight case studies, blending interviews and desk research across sectors like IT services, consulting, manufacturing, and the sanitary sector, with company sizes ranging from 25 to 250 employees, focused on workplace innovation efforts. These efforts included technological advancements, digitalization, healthy workplaces, and workforce flexibility. Employee involvement in innovation, such as in office design, directly impacted perceived workplace quality, with examples highlighting preferences for collaborative office environments. Customer involvement in innovation underscored the importance of a coherent approach to active involvement of both, internal and external stakeholders. Overall, the studies emphasized the need for a balanced mix of structural and cultural practices to facilitate organizational change and renewal.

The text highlights the promotion of radical innovations through mission-oriented approaches and emphasizes the importance of considering regulatory frameworks alongside research and innovation efforts. It underscores how innovation can boost employment and job quality but also exacerbate societal disparities, necessitating compensatory actions for social inclusion. Organizational culture emerges as crucial for workplace innovation, with direct workforce involvement enhancing workplace quality and competitiveness.

### **4.4 Hungary**

Three case studies were conducted on Hungarian small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in June and early July 2022. These studies focused on innovative approaches to improve business structures, enhance employee productivity, and increase managerial and staff effectiveness.

Key findings from the case studies revealed that implementing sustainable green solutions can not only protect but also enhance the reputation and success of organizations. Embracing sustainability involves actively managing environmental, social, and governance impacts along the value chain, aligning with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

Additionally, offering SMEs expert knowledge and capacity on a project basis, particularly in engineering, IT, HR, and marketing, can help them adopt digital solutions and elevate their performance. Establishing professional workshops, knowledge banks, and providing challenging projects for employees and partners can further enhance digital effectiveness and service quality.

### **4.5 Slovenia**

Six case studies of Slovenian SMEs were carried out between April and July 2022, focusing on innovative approaches to improve business structures, enhance employee productivity, and boost effectiveness. The studies covered various sectors and company sizes, including a healthy food and cosmetics provider, a passenger transport company, and a leading manufacturer of household appliances like Gorenje. These case studies demonstrated companies' willingness to





implement workplace innovations and highlighted good practices, such as Gorenje's "sparks" program for innovation participation.

The key learnings from these case studies suggest that the WIN project can fill the innovation gap in SMEs by creating a new post for innovation managers, contributing to further company development. Providing expert knowledge and capacity in areas like engineering, IT, HR, and marketing can equip SMEs with digital solutions to enhance productivity. Establishing professional workshops, knowledge banks, and offering challenging projects can further boost digital effectiveness and service quality.

## 5. Field of Research

The field research involved a detailed analysis across partner countries to assess the practical implementation of workplace innovation strategies. This method enabled the gathering of quantitative and qualitative data reflecting the effectiveness of different innovation practices in enhancing productivity and employee satisfaction.

On the whole, it was not an easy task to engage companies to participate in the survey and share their expertise. Important feedback received was on lack of time, heavy workload, and stress, and therefore no interest in participating in the survey.

While we think that it would be particularly essential for many micro and small enterprises to have a workplace innovation manager in the workplace in order to remain competitive in the marketplace, it is also they who, in most cases, have little or no time to devote to these tasks or positions. It will be difficult to convince them that this investment of time will pay off in the long run, as they do not have the time to begin with.

Most of the companies that answered the questionnaire were micro and small companies (10) and some were medium or big companies (2). Three quarters of them do not have an innovation strategy for the workplace. Nevertheless, all of them think the satisfaction level of their employees is very high, high or neither high nor low.

Since the answers received in the questionnaires are submitted to the subjectivity of the managers, it should be taken into account when evaluating the results that they might not reflect the reality, as managers often tend to evaluate the situation in their own company and the circumstances of their employees differently, or have divergent perspectives.

It would be interesting to have the opinion not only of managers but also of their own employees in order to expand the view of the actual conditions and to approach the facts of the case more closely. In addition, 66,7% of the participating companies apply the policy of BYOD (Bring Your Own Device).

The vast majority of the companies show that the major issues affecting daily business are related to the lack of planning skills, but at the same time other deficiencies are to be found in almost equal measure in technical knowledge, management improvement, level of productivity and business strategy. Furthermore, most of the companies agree with the fact that flexible work can improve employee stress levels, employee engagement and/or employee loyalty; and only the 16,7% of the companies participating in the questionnaire think that this factor is moderately important.

The percentage of responses related to the most effective elements for the daily work process is highly varied, even though e-platforms, Workflow Automation Software and collaboration tools are the most common answers.

Finally, concerning the companies' idea of the "perfect Manager", they gave different responses, but the common features are that a good Manager should have a cooperative leadership style, a good communication skill and innovativeness. A "perfect manager" should also be emphatic both with employees and clients, and should also be able to find a balance between the needs and demands of employees as well as the company's goals.

### **5.1 Win Training Course: Skills**

The WIN Training Course must address the diverse skills required in each country. For example, Bulgaria, Hungary and Slovenia must focus on technological innovation and improving working conditions, managerial skills, usage of digital tools, while Greece must work more on enhancing digital skills and address issues regarding the integration, diversity, flexible working hours and agile work. Germany, on the other hand, must address a number of additional areas, including self-directed and self-driven learning, employee empowerment and active involvement, cross-functional team building and team work, appreciation and promotion of diversity, creative problem solving, and so forth.

### **5.2 Win Training Course: format and learning approach**

In consideration of the needs of the target group, it has been determined that the optimal format will be a combination of online tools (MOOCs, quizzes, videos) and conferences in the form of workshops, either in person or online. In fact, short video lectures covering key concepts, interactive modules including quizzes and simulations, real-world case studies demonstrating successful strategies, downloadable resources, etc. provide practical, actionable guidance for SMEs looking to innovate in their businesses.

This hybrid learning approach integrates educational materials with hands-on opportunities to foster the development of digital skills among the target group, following the "learning by doing" methodology. Additionally, it offers flexibility by being accessible at all times, enabling participants to attend despite their busy work schedules.

### **5.3 Evaluation of the training material**

In order to guarantee the success of the WIN project, stakeholders and external evaluators will provide essential feedback on training materials and project strategies. Piloting and disseminating these materials, in conjunction with online questionnaires, will facilitate a comprehensive evaluation. Input from VET centres and SMEs will refine practices and policies. Leveraging the consortium's expertise, partners will collaboratively evaluate project outcomes, thereby ensuring continuous improvement throughout the project lifecycle.

## **6. Conclusion**

Although we are dealing with countries with very different realities in terms of WI, the issues that are important to each remain the same, but at different levels.

Investing in digitisation issues seems to be the most important point to promote WI, but also having workplaces that promote healthier practices and having more flexibility in terms of working hours and being able to work remotely.

In addition, it is important to consider the importance of corporate culture and work organisation, in particular to which extent employees and workers have had the possibility to be directly involved in workplace innovation through active participation, empowerment, and flat hierarchies.



It also emerges that the quality of the workplace as perceived by employees is directly related to the workplace innovation efforts made by companies.

It is also important to highlight the investment made in workplace innovation in terms of new devices, computers, screens, ergonomic workplaces, flexibility and training to keep up with the latest versions of software used by the company. These practices promote effectiveness and a sense of belonging to a team and a community. In many cases, due to good physical conditions in the office, employees prefer to go to the office instead of doing home-office.

In every instance, it is important above all to highlight the role of managers in promoting practices that allow people to feel comfortable at work, where everyone's voice is heard and where there is the possibility of learning and growth.

In conclusion it can be said that there is no single model, tool or method to achieve innovation in the workplace. Rather, there are different ways and means of achieving a healthy and effective mix of structural and cultural practices that enable employees to participate in organisational change and renewal and also invest in professional and personal development.