



Mobile People | Mobile Enterprises | Mobile Europe

MobiliseSME in practice

Results & lessons from the project

MobiliseSME 

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Introduction - about the project

This report, based on the mid-2017 final evaluation of the MobiliseSME pilot project by Technopolis and Henningsen Consult and the 2016 MobiliseSME Intermediate Report, is made jointly by the evaluators and European Entrepreneurs CEA-PME, who commissioned the evaluation. The purpose of the report is to present an overview of the implementation and results of the mobility project, with recommendations regarding any future similar EU-wide exchange programme for eligible SME personnel.

The background to the project

The fundamental contribution of SMEs to the European economy is self-evident. In the EU-28, SMEs make up 99.8 per cent of all enterprises, 57.4 per cent of value added, and 66.8 per cent of employment. In 2015, just under 23 million SMEs in the non-financial business sector generated €3.9 trillion of value added and employed 90 million people.¹ Hence, the health, dynamism and competitiveness of European SMEs are vitally important to the maintenance and sustained growth of European employment and wealth creation in a global market environment.

One little-researched aspect of SME performance is how the intra-EU inter-company mobility of experienced professional and qualified personnel might benefit mobile employees and host/sending firms. Possible benefits might be, for example, the cross-fertilisation of ideas, experience and market awareness. While EU programmes such as EURES and EaSI promote labour mobility and so might benefit SMEs, and Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs focuses on benefit to the young participants and their prospective enterprises, there is not yet an equivalent programme catering for the generality of SMEs and their professional and qualified staff.

The project

Hence, the project **MobiliseSME** (Mobilities for professionals and qualified employees of MSMEs) – devised and led by European Entrepreneurs CEA-PME and funded by the EU-programme Employment and Social Innovation, PROGRESS, 2016-2017 – set out to analyse opportunities for the cross-border mobility of eligible employees of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in the EU and to identify possible related benefits. The aim of the project was to assess the feasibility of the idea and to potentially open the way for a broader European mobility scheme for MSME employees similar to the Erasmus Programme for university students.

MobiliseSME was **launched in April 2016** with these sequential features:

- 1) An assessment of the feasibility of the idea of MobiliseSME by consulting MSMEs from 20 countries and territories with the means of a survey and focus groups to learn about their ideas, needs and possible benefits of such a scheme. The research also included a mapping of over 70 mobility schemes and more than 80 qualitative interviews with managers of mobility schemes and key stakeholders to gather their views and experiences, but also to assess if there are similar mobility schemes already in place. It was complemented by research on legal frameworks for mobility.
- 2) Execution of a pilot mobility scheme, building on learning from the preceding stages, to implement a pilot intra-EU and inter-company mobility programme for professional and qualified SME personnel. The pilot scheme proposed an online database and appropriate technology to facilitate match-making among hosting and sending MSMEs, with the practical assistance of project partners.
- 3) The evaluation of the pilot scheme, reporting on the overall MobiliseSME project and dissemination of the results.

The evaluation

The evaluation of MobiliseSME's effectiveness as a pilot is an essential step in providing an understanding of how the scheme has worked and whether it might provide a platform for a more extensive SME mobility programme. European Entrepreneurs CEA-PME contracted a team of independent evaluators from Technopolis and Henningsen Consulting to undertake a rigorous review of the project's operations, beginning with an assessment of the initial idea and concluding with the final evaluation focusing on the operation of the mobility activity itself. Both substantially form the basis of this report.

¹ All data from European Commission Annual Report on European SMEs 2015/2016
https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/sites/jrcsh/files/annual_report_-_eu_smes_2015-16.pdf

Assessing the feasibility of MobiliseSME

The central task of the MobiliseSME project was to explore whether and, if so, under what conditions, there is a need and an appetite for a scheme for a cross-border labour mobility experience for employees of one MSME to work for a period of 1–2 months in another MSME in a different Member State. The assessment of the feasibility of the MobiliseSME concept was carefully phased through a structured approach. The assessment of the potential demand for such a scheme in a minimum of 20 EU Member States involved:

- Examining the state of play and the need for action at European level and the situation of companies
- Exploring the possible options for a future EU intervention in this area, possible benefits and obstacles

As a first step, following information gathering across the selected countries and a demand analysis by Technopolis and Henningsen Consulting, an intermediate report was presented to European Entrepreneurs CEA-PME in October 2016.² This document, an essential pre-cursor to the implementation of any proposed pilot exchange activity, reported:

- **Currently, there are no mobility schemes exactly similar to the idea of MobiliseSME**, i.e. a mobility scheme organising international, business-to-business exchanges with the purpose of educating the exchanged employee, targeting specifically SMEs operating on a European scale. Those schemes most similar to the idea of MobiliseSME, usually realise fewer than 30 exchanges per year.
- **Existing mobility schemes target a wide variety of people as regards age, seniority, qualification and function.** Many schemes focus on highly qualified people or young people. As existing schemes cover a wide variety of target groups for exchange and each follows a certain market need, for MobiliseSME, there seems to be no reason to narrow the target group down with regard to age, level of qualification, or function.
- **There is no optimal length of exchange**, but a wide variety of arrangements possible. While exchanges of a few days occur relatively often, exchanges would seldom take longer than six months. It seems that a reasonable learning effect can be achieved with just a short-term visit.
- **In general, mobility of employees, be it in the private or public sector, is seen as positive** and organisations use it for educational purposes regarding the employee, the host and the sending organisations.
- **Mobile employees usually learn** about new methods or technologies and develop new skills or competencies during their stay. Furthermore, they are said to gain soft skills such as intercultural competencies and general knowledge about how the host organisations work, or how business is done in the host country.
- **The host organisations and their staff** also learn from the hosted employee, regarding the sending company's (business) habits, organisational aspects, and general culture. The organisation also expects to strengthen existing or future relations with the sending organisation
- **The sending organisation benefits** from the better-trained employee returning from the exchange. The individual is thought to return with better knowledge, new skills, and a larger network – all also of use to the employer. Furthermore, the sender got to know the host organisation better in the wake of and during the exchange. Senders also expect to establish or strengthen relationships with the host organisation.

The intermediate report concluded that the benefits described for employee, host organisation and sending organisation would also apply to MobiliseSME, though with caveats regarding such drawbacks as the language barrier and human resource difficulties associated with absent staff in sending companies.

² MobiliseSME – Report on the demand, state of play, opportunities and obstacles for a 'Mobility for professionals' scheme. Technopolis Group/Henningsen Consulting, October 2016.

Who is interested in MobiliseSME?

Generally, MobiliseSME could be attractive for those companies that are export-oriented SMEs or SMEs more internationally active. There is no clear indication on attractiveness of the scheme to certain industry sectors.

Enterprises willing and interested in hosting employees from other Member States/countries, are looking for skilled staff with a completed higher/university education or (to a lesser extent a VET background). Unskilled staff and staff with general secondary education are little in demand.

Individuals seeking to go on secondment are quite flexible in terms of expectations. Demand is concentrated on western and northern EU Member States – Germany and the UK in particular. None of the EU-13 figure in the top 12 “most wanted” list.

A key question facing MobiliseSME from the outset was how many and what type of SME and employee might be attracted to participate in such an exchange scheme? The October 2016 intermediate report analysed the results of the research undertaken, noting:

- Feedback collected from survey participants and focus group participants indicates that the attractiveness of MobiliseSME to the companies participating was considered to be high. Most respondents to the survey indicated that they are interested in the scheme (40.5%) or might be interested (45%). Only 14.5 per cent indicated that they are not interested. Focus group participants saw the scheme even more positively.
- The qualitative feedback further suggests that the scheme is generally attractive as it targets SMEs and because it can also be seen as being complementary to the EEN programme (based on matching/partnerships between companies), and to EYE. At the same time, it focuses on more mature companies and is therefore without the limit of targeting entrepreneurs to a time when they are likely to have no time to go on an exchange abroad.
- In cases where the mobility scheme was considered to be less attractive, this was attributed either to a specific economic situation (e.g. in Germany currently with a thriving economy) or because it is difficult to realise an exchange for start-ups and small companies with only a few employees while being unnecessary for bigger SMEs that were said to be able to organise an exchange on their own if interested.
- Regarding the 50 per cent of interviewees seeing an attractiveness for some SMEs, they mostly stressed that an exchange programme like MobiliseSME could be attractive for those companies that are export-oriented companies or companies more internationally active in general. Furthermore, smaller companies might have trouble in sparing an employee for the time of exchange, which would make MobiliseSME more attractive for companies of a certain size.
- The feedback on the general attractiveness of the scheme was distributed as relatively similar across the types of interviewees. Around a third of Enterprise Europe Network stakeholders, other stakeholders and EYE considered MobiliseSME to be generally attractive. The strongest category for those three types of interviewee was “attractive only if/for”, while only a few considered MobiliseSME to be generally not interesting. Only scheme managers assessed MobiliseSME more often to be in general attractive when compared with the other types of interviewees, with the assessment of being attractive only if/for some SMEs following second.

What are the potential benefits of MobiliseSME?

Inherent in the concept of MobiliseSME is the notion of mutual benefit, a **so-called 'win-win-win' formula** in which sending and hosting SMEs – together with the exchange personnel themselves – derive value from the project.

The Technopolis/Henningsen Consulting research team asked SME respondents how they viewed the potential benefits of the proposed exchange scheme. This SME survey showed that the main perceived benefit of a potential secondment system is – by far – that of **learning**. In this respect, data appear to suggest that a secondment scheme potentially may contribute significantly to learning within the host organisation – subject to the right match.

Respondents – prospective hosts, senders and employees – were asked to indicate important potential benefits which they would expect to gain from a secondment scheme. Generally, respondents point to several benefits. In terms of importance however, **skills and competence development-related benefits** are those most frequently mentioned by potential sender and host enterprises – and those are seen as being most important in terms of weight.

Another set of important benefits relates to **internationalisation opportunities** i.e. new international contacts; business development in country of the host, and new market intelligence. Development of host and sender relationships is mentioned less.

As for individuals, skills and competence development in the core business area is likewise important. However, for this group expectations are also closely related to **"getting new inspiration" and development of personal skills** (e.g. language abilities, new professional network, working in a different cultural environment, discovering a new culture etc.).

The survey feedback was supported by interviews. Most often mentioned by interviewees was the development of competencies of the sent employee. Both for the employee and the companies, **networking and new contacts** were mentioned as a benefit, as well as the **sharing of knowledge and experience**. For companies, benefits stated were **access to new markets or market intelligence** or economic benefits.

With regard to **learning** – seen above to be by far the most important expected benefit – this was imagined to mean more **technical skills, ideas about products**, services or organisational aspects, but also **language or cultural skills**. Apart from learning, companies expect employees to make **new international contacts** or gather **market intelligence**.

Successively, the employee is then expected to transfer this learning results to the sending company. A share of 77 per cent of companies expect to be introduced to new technical skills this way, which is considered by 43 per cent to be the most important benefit of the exchange. Another 73 per cent of senders consider **new ideas/approaches to product/services or organisational development** to be a benefit of the scheme, with a share of 35 per cent prioritising this benefit. Further company benefits were the **consolidation of business relationship** with the hosting company (59% overall, 26% first priority) and the possibility to **expand or develop business** in another country (58% overall, 23% first priority). Other benefits seen by senders were the opportunity to raise the company's attractiveness as an employer or the possibility to bridge a period with a smaller workload with a mobility exchange.

Methodological information with regard to the 2016 MobiliseSME intermediate report

The Technopolis/Henningsen Consulting intermediate report relied inter alia on information gathering amongst:

- *35 managers of mobility schemes, plus 18 Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs (EYE) local contact points*
- *30 key stakeholders – national Enterprise Europe Network (EEN) coordinators or business organisations*
- *1,130 SMEs based in Europe via a survey*
- *150 SMEs from Austria, Belgium, Estonia, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Spain and Turkey, in focus groups*

MobiliseSME in practice - Erasmus for employees

Following the completion of information gathering/analysis phases of the project, the MobiliseSME pilot exchange scheme itself was launched in Brussels in November 2016, with a conference providing background papers and an introduction to the mechanics of the scheme. Conference publicity stated:

The MobiliseSME project aims to test the viability of a mobility plan for the employees of SMEs in the EU like the Erasmus Programme is for university students. This EU-funded project is currently evaluating the potential for cross-border staff exchange and the benefits SMEs will gain by joining in the scheme. The most important among those are creating opportunities for international business and encouraging growth, new revenue and more jobs.

The MobiliseSME scheme was announced with the following central principles:

Purpose of the scheme: The exchanges are intended only for learning purposes. Filling manpower gaps and postings are explicitly excluded from the exchanges organised.

Type of companies and sectors: The target companies for the scheme are micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises (MSME). One-man enterprises are allowed to participate if they are incorporated into a legal entity and have a VAT number. Other forms of self-employment are excluded. However, the scheme also caters for a set of liberal professions.³ Large companies (+500 employees) can participate but only as host companies. All sectors are in principle allowed to participate.⁴

Eligible countries: Companies from EU Member States, candidate and potential candidate and EFTA countries can participate.

Employees: In order to be eligible employees⁵ must have at least 5 years of professional work experience. Alternatively, employees must have at least 3 years of professional work experience and a technical high school or a university degree.

Length of the exchanges: In view of the pilot nature of the scheme, and the limited period of implementation, only four lengths of exchanges are possible: 2 weeks, 1 month, 1.5 months and 2 months.

Learning agreement: As to be eligible for the scheme a tripartite agreement must be signed. The agreement includes a learning agreement which is to specify the purpose and expected learning outcomes for all parties.

Funding: Employees participating in the exchange must keep receiving salaries from their employers (the sending company) and cannot be on paid or unpaid leave, sick leave, maternal or parental leave.

The scheme provides funding for additional travel, accommodation, and subsistence costs. The amounts of maximum financial support available per exchange have been designed on the basis of the funding available for the "Erasmus for Entrepreneurs" scheme. Top up funding however, has been made available – especially for shorter stays (40% monthly rate increase for 2 weeks, a 20% increase for a month and a 10% increase for 1.5 months), reflecting expected higher costs for short term exchanges. Actual support ranges from €567 to €1170 for a two-week exchange, €756 to €1560 for a 4 weeks/month exchange and €1008 to €2080 for a 1.5 months exchange. Funding for two months exchange ranges from €1,260 to €2,600.

Multiple participation: The scheme explicitly excludes any employee participating more than once. Moreover, each sending company can at maximum have two employees participating in an exchange and receiving funding in the framework of the project. Host companies, which do not benefit from funding can participate several times.

³ Lawyers, notaries, tax accountants, certified financial auditors, medical doctors, pharmacists, psychologists, architects, engineers.

⁴ However, in tourism and agricultural sectors only employees in management positions can participate. As to avoid any potential issues with posting and filling employee gaps, job agencies, HR consultancies and other professional intermediary services that deliver work power to third parties are not admitted.

⁵ An employee is defined as a person who works full-time under an employment contract of indeterminate duration. However, management/owners and self-employed meeting the criteria set out for companies are not excluded.

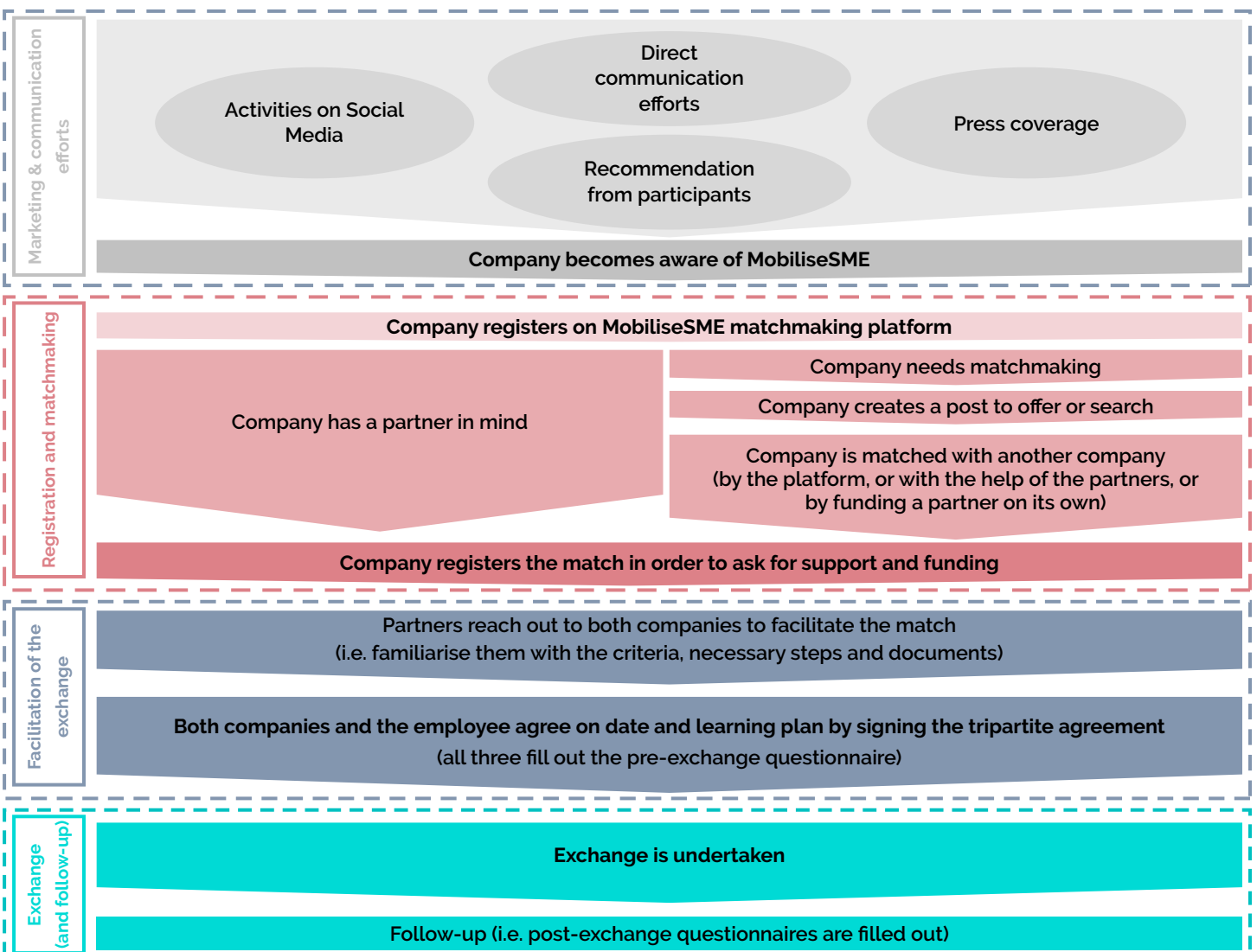
MobiliseSME - the process in practice

The first step of the implementation process was the active promotion and advertising of the scheme, and a wide number of communication activities were undertaken by project partners. All partners relied more or less on the same tools and activities: emails/newsletters, social media, news articles, events and most importantly, the personal contacts of the coordinators. The main approach was to recruit potential sending companies first, and get these subscribed in the database.

To be able to facilitate company matches in an efficient way, the project consortium set up a matchmaking platform with the aim of matching interested sending companies and their employees to host companies also interested in an exchange. On this platform, companies could register and post either 'offers' to host or 'search' for host companies and would then be presented with possible matches to contact. They then would partner up and reach out to the respective country partner to seek assistance with the next steps, i.e. with finding the right administrative documents and handing them in, finding the right time span of the exchange, drafting the learning agreement and so on. The idea of a matchmaking platform was to have a way of automatically generated matches thus minimising the effort a person might need to put into matchmaking.

Following matchmaking, the tripartite agreement was the one important legally-binding contractual document that all three parties of an exchange needed to sign.

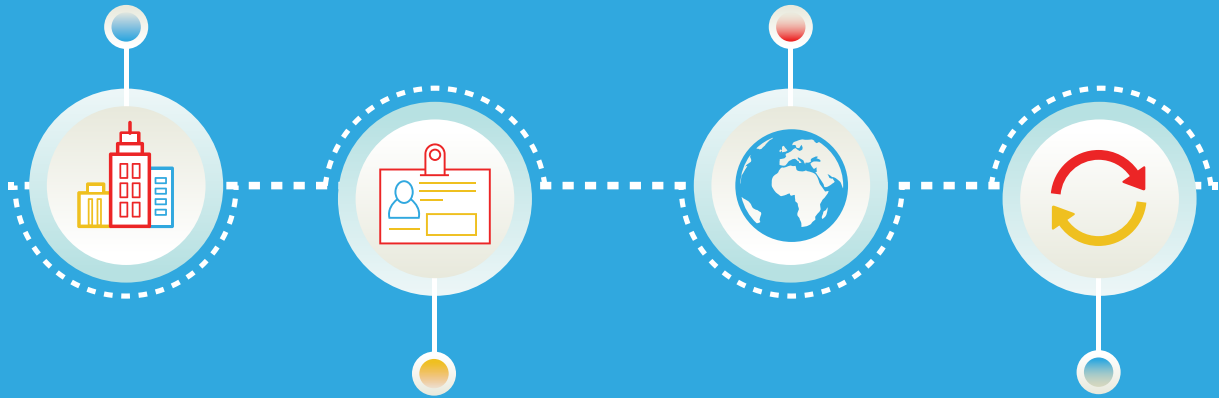
A key aspect of the tripartite agreement was the learning plan, which defined the expected learning and main activities of the exchange. Sending and hosting partners most commonly regarded the learning plan to be of high importance to their participation. Once the agreement was signed, the exchange itself could take place.



MobiliseSME in numbers

59 individual companies participated from 23 different sectors

17 different Countries participating (16EU plus TUR) in the scheme, most actively Germany (15x), Spain (13x), Hungary (10x) and Estonia (8)



Most active sectors were ICT, communication & marketing, consultancy, accountancy

82% of exchanges lasted two weeks; another 14% 4 weeks

24

24 Men participated

20

20 Women participated

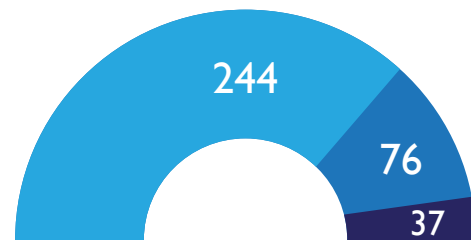
MATCHMAKING PLATFORM

357

By the 30th June, 357 companies were registered in the database.

102

102 companies published a post looking for an exchange.



● Micro-enterprises or Self-employed ● Small Enterprises ● Medium Enterprises

ATTRACTIVE TO EMPLOYEES

78%

Highly educated with 78% university degrees

64%

CEO, directors or high-level managers

60%

In their 30ies or 40ies

MARKETING

55

55 Articles were published talking about MobiliseSME

>24

More than 24 Promotional events organised

>1000

More than 100 Companies reached

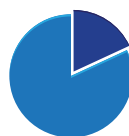
>26000

More than 26,000 Newsletter recipients

RESULTS

All hosts and senders stated that

- the scheme had benefitted their skills development,
- had allowed them to gain of new ideas or approaches for product, services or organisational development
- and had brought them market intelligence and new contacts.



More than four of five companies expect cross border business to develop positively thanks to the exchange organised

Visiting employees were particularly positive about

- the opportunities to gain new skills
- new ideas and inspiration and
- to improve their professional network.

A majority of companies participating expect to develop new services or products or practices as a result of the project

MobiliseSME case study - Best practice

MobiliseSME is helping to create new Scottish-Hungarian partnership

Sending company	GRANTiCON Kft. (Gárdony, Hungary)
Host company	Ideas Ltd. (Glasgow, Scotland, UK)
Date	May 2017 – June 2017

GRANTiCON Kft. is a small SME located in the town of Gárdony, 55 km from the Hungarian capital Budapest. Since 2004, when Hungary joined the EU, the company has offered consultancy services in the field of EU funding.

"I learned about the implementation of EU projects. This would not have happened without the MobiliseSME"

Based in Glasgow, Scotland, **Ideas Ltd.** is an economic development and environmental consultancy which operates at the interface of the economy and the environment. The company provides consultancy advice, undertakes feasibility studies and environmental assessments and reviews.

Both companies became connected via the **MobiliseSME's** matchmaking platform

and in May 2017, István Gödör (top left in picture), CEO of GRANTiCON, left for Scotland, benefiting from the **MobiliseSME's** support. He was hosted by Steve Taylor (in the second picture) from Ideas. The main motivation for a secondment in Ideas was to learn about the Scottish funding instruments for national development and the future of these instruments after 2020.

"This was an investment into myself and my professional development."

István Gödör considers the mobility experience to be very useful for GRANTiCON but also for him personally. He acquired specific knowledge about environmental and low-carbon development projects, built and strengthened business relations with Ideas and was introduced to two concrete EU- and Scottish Government-funded development projects tackling climate challenges. The mobility exchange helped to create a partnership between the two companies that is likely to result in a joint project helping rural areas in the future. In addition, he learned about the Scottish grant funding system, gaining specific knowledge that he believes will be very useful for GRANTiCON when applying for funding in the future. There are challenges ahead linked to British withdrawal from the EU but there are also opportunities which could be further explored within the newly established partnerships.

Although not at the core of the mobility programme, cultural exchange was another important aspect of István's experience, and Scotland has a lot to offer.



There are several factors behind the success of István's mobility experience. First, the guidance he received on potential legal challenge and different legal forms of organisation was important. Second, the administrative and logistic support from the **MobiliseSME** project team provided before and during his stay. And finally, the Tripartite Agreement was very useful for all parties (the sending company, the host company and the person on mobility) to better clarify their expectations and purpose of the exchange.

Further partnerships created

Digital Commerce Exchange between Turkey and Belgium

With the help of the Belgian and Turkish national contact points, the digital agency Teknoza connected with the Turkish company Aklar Aydınlatma, an electronics and interior outfitting sales company which is planning to grow its market share in the digital commerce. Mr Burak Ak, a sales person from Aklar Aydınlatma, came to work at Teknoza headquarters for a month from February 22nd until March 22nd. Mr Ak is training Teknoza's staff in how to manage a sales portfolio of clients, ranging from marketing techniques to customer service.



Consulting in the Fashion Industry between Estonia and the United Kingdom

Mrs Tammearu of Triin Tammearu Konsult connected with Learn to Re-create Ltd., a British fashion education and production company set up as a social enterprise. Triin wanted to widen her world-view and have an experience outside her country. For her, the exchange superseded her expectations:

"It just happened that the week of the exchange was packed with events, like aid-funded business seminars organised by the UK Department for International Trade and a venture capital networking meeting, all of which I attended together with the staff of Learn to Re-create. There was also a local networking event hosted in the office building of the host company, which meant I was introduced to many new business angles and even a few contacts for my own activity."

Training in Beauty Care from Italy to Spain

Emanuele was on exchange between two Italian SMEs, D&D srl. – an Italian commercial activity in the same sector – and Art School soc. coop. – a training centre and academy for hairstylists:

"I really believe these experiences, both for those who teach and those who learn, are uniquely valuable exactly because of the morale boost they provide. It is superseding my expectations."



Learning About the EU between Belgium and Hungary

Hungarian trade association representing the employers in the hospitality and catering sector, VIMOSZ, saw it as a chance to get to learn more about the way in which the European Union works, particularly in relation to policies relevant to the activities of its members. Exchange Dóra Szarvas says:

"I am getting what I expect from this exchange. My colleagues here involve me in all their activities and meetings. I am not just getting acquainted with the functioning of Landmark Europe, but I am learning a lot about international relations, the European Union and the way political communication functions here"

Lessons from the pilot

Relevance of the scheme to enterprises and motivation to participate

- ❖ By September 2017, a total of 50 exchanges have been organised. 44 of these exchanges, involving in total 59 enterprises, were subject to the final evaluation. Some 350 companies showed interest in the project, while 101 companies published posts looking for partners.
- ❖ While a larger number of exchanges could be expected if the project were to be rolled out at a larger scale, most partners estimate that the annual number of exchanges that would be achievable in their countries would range between 10 and maximum 60.
- ❖ Calculating on an average number of 30 exchanges times 28 EU Member States, it may be estimated that the maximum potential would be below 1,000 exchanges/year. This estimation is based on the partner assumptions and therefore on the current characteristics and size of the partnership network carrying out this pilot.
- ❖ For a European exchange scheme between enterprises to be rolled out successfully and to increase efficiency, it will be necessary to mobilise and motivate more companies to participate in the exchanges – realising the expected potential.
- ❖ Most companies expressing an interest in the scheme are small micro-enterprises (<5 employees) or self-employed. However, companies actually participating are more likely to be small enterprises or "large" micro enterprises (>5 employees). This is most evident when comparing the share of companies with up to two employees registered on the matchmaking (42%) with share of this group participating (15%).
- ❖ No clear trends can be identified regarding the company sectors and no sector dominated. However, ICT, communication and marketing and business services appear to be the most promising company sectors for exchanges.
- ❖ Across companies, there is a stronger interest in sending than in hosting. There is also an asymmetric demand, with companies in the EU-12 keen to send, largely to the EU-15. However, there is seemingly no corresponding demand from EU-15 companies to send to EU-12 companies.
- ❖ 86% of the exchanges undertaken were between not-neighbouring countries and therefore, also did not involve bordering regions. At maximum 14% of the exchanges took place between bordering regions.
- ❖ Across participants, learning and skill development is the main motivation to participate. There is thus a high level of consistency between the pilot's stated objectives and the companies' reasons for participation.

Communication

- ❖ A key success factor for MobiliseSME is effective communication, attracting potential participants to the scheme. The MobiliseSME project partners have invested heavily in communicating and advertising the programme – using a multitude of face-to-face, online, social and traditional media channels. Most effective channels to raise awareness and motivate participants have been face-to-face channels (direct mails, calls and events).
- ❖ Overall, communication efforts have worked best at a local level, communicating directly from the local partners to prospective participants in their native language. All partners stated that it took time to achieve results by this means, and that it was complicated to communicate a new and relative complex idea like MobiliseSME. These factors contributed to a slow take-off of MobiliseSME.

Organisational efficiency

- ❖ The scheme was well designed and implemented. The eligibility requirements regarding companies and employees worked well and did not affect the attractiveness of the scheme in any substantive way. The tripartite agreement, including the learning plan, worked well supporting the organisation of exchanges.
- ❖ In practice, the matchmaking platform was not instrumental in generating most of the exchanges that took place within the pilot. In about three quarters of the cases, companies participating knew each other in advance, so matching was not necessary in those cases. In the remaining cases, partners facilitated the matches manually.
- ❖ Overall, the manual matchmaking support, and the detailed support and guidance provided to all parties participating to the exchange, implied that more HR resources from the project partners were needed. This made the overall implementation less efficient than anticipated. Nevertheless, all partners were positive about rolling out MobiliseSME and would like to be a future partner.

Lessons from the pilot

- ❖ The current options for exchanges (from two weeks to two month) seems to cater for a potential demand – and most participants were satisfied with the actual length of the exchanges. The decision to include two weeks exchanges appears to have worked well, as most exchanges in practice were of this length.
- ❖ Participants were very satisfied with the overall organisation, coordination and guidance received by the partners. Language was generally not an issue and most participants indicated that the budgetary support was sufficient to cover additional costs. There were however, occasional language challenges and a number of issues with sufficiency of the grants to cover travel and subsistence.

Cost efficiency

- ❖ MobiliseSME was a pilot undertaking and thus can be expected to have higher costs than programmes implemented for a long time. Especially the short implementation period of MobiliseSME was challenging.
- ❖ Total expenditure of MobiliseSME was around €1.42 million. This expenditure covers all costs including activities which are not related to the implementation of the pilot, such as conferences, research and evaluation, audit and travel cost.
- ❖ If costs for these other activities as well as 25% of costs for project management are disregarded, and when calculating 54 exchanges (50 successful ones and 4 cancelled last minute due to *force majeure*), then costs for realising exchanges were in average around €6,700 per exchange. If calculating with 50 exchanges, and including costs for project management, the average costs per exchange were €11,170.

Effectiveness

- ❖ The scheme has been **successful**, delivering on and mostly also exceeding the participants' own expectations. Matches between participants are well-regarded, the participating employees had the right qualifications and satisfaction with the work and tasks undertaken is high.
- ❖ Feedback is **very positive** on the results of the exchange. All hosts and senders stated that the scheme had benefited their skills development, had allowed them to gain new ideas or approaches for product, services or organisational development; and had brought them market intelligence and new contacts. Visiting employees were particularly positive about the opportunities to gain new skills, new ideas and inspiration and to improve their professional network.
- ❖ For most senders, hosts and employees, gains were above – or significantly above – expectations.
- ❖ In line with the expected results, skills and knowledge gathering – such as learning about new approaches or methods, experiencing different approaches – are the main results of the programme. This came through an interchange of working methods from employee to host, exchange of mutually beneficial information or more broadly through employees immersing themselves in a foreign environment. New international contacts were a second key result.
- ❖ Overall, both hosts and sending enterprises have high expectations regarding the impact on business. A majority of companies participating expect to develop new services or products or practices as a result of the project. Moreover, more than four of five companies expect cross border business to develop positively thanks to the exchange organised. These effects appear to be generated mainly through the consolidation or expansion of business relations with the partner company. Impacts on wider internationalisation efforts are seemingly smaller.
- ❖ There is no evidence to suggest that the exchange scheme has generated any substantive unintended impacts. Some challenges however, were experienced in the form of language barriers and the length of the exchange.

Added value

- ❖ A scheme supporting transnational exchanges between companies within the EU **brings EU added value at several levels**. There is evidence of both "input additionality" with the MobiliseSME scheme supporting exchanges which otherwise would not have been implemented, and "outcome additionality" – with exchanges supporting business development which otherwise was unlikely to have happened.
- ❖ Key to these benefits are the transnational aspects of the exchange scheme – allowing employees to work internationally, experiencing a foreign culture and foreign markets in the sector in which they had experience at home, and adopting a global outlook.

MobiliseSME - Applying the lessons learnt

The MobiliseSME scheme overall has **generated important learning benefits**, which can be expected to contribute positively to business and employee development among those participating. Reflecting the above considerations, listed below **are recommendations for a potential roll-out of a company-to-company mobility scheme**. The recommendations following are organised according to the main steps: marketing and communication, registration and matchmaking and implementation, together with considerations regarding organisational factors.

Marketing and communication

For the scheme to attract more potential participants and generate its full potential, further **communication and marketing of the scheme will be key**. Attention should be given to the following issues and avenues for communication:

- ❖ Available communication resources should be concentrated on communication undertaken by local partners – maximising already available communication tools and instruments, and ensuring that communication is undertaken in the local language. Due to the complexity of the scheme, advertising and other forms of bought coverage are unlikely to generate engagement. Communication via business advisory services, including those supporting internationalisation of SMEs, in contrast, is likely to have significant potential.
- ❖ To concentrate resources on the most likely participants a strong communication focus should be placed on small enterprises, as they have the greatest matching potential (as opposed to self-employed and companies with only one or two employees). Furthermore, there might be benefits in targeting more proactively medium sized enterprises.
- ❖ Engaging hosts, overall, is more challenging than identifying potential senders. As hosting implies more effort, relatively more resources need to be given to communication to, and recruitment of, potential hosts.
- ❖ Both data on interest and actual participation data suggest that desired exchange flows are likely to go from East to West and West to West. The communication and recruitment strategy should consider such desired patterns and the countries which are of high "hosting" demand. If it is not possible to generate a relatively wide offer of hosts in countries of high demand, it is unlikely that the project can achieve its potential in a cost-efficient manner.
- ❖ The benefit of a transnational business-to-business exchange scheme are not immediately intuitive to interested companies, and therefore, such a scheme is not easy to communicate to potential participants. However, the scheme as implemented has generated substantive benefits for those engaged, and most participants would be keen to participate again. There seems therefore to be a significant potential to use the exchanges undertaken to showcase with real life examples how companies benefit from participating in an exchange. In this context participants might operate as potential ambassadors for the programme.

Registration and matchmaking

For participation and matchmaking to operate effectively and efficiently consideration needs to be given to the following aspects:

- ❖ Improvement of the matchmaking database. For matching to happen on a significant scale, some level of automation of the identification of potential partners will be necessary. Otherwise, there is a risk that only those already knowing a likely partner will participate or that substantive manual resources will be necessary to identify potential partners. For the matchmaking database to work, the database will need to be optimised, the user interface and functionalities improved and more company data will be needed. This will require more resource inputs into the design and testing of this tool.
 - ❖ While a user-friendly and comprehensive database provides a first step towards matching, manual support by the partners in the matching phase is likely still to be needed in many cases. To ensure uniform service delivery – but also to avoid unreasonable resources being spent on matching – there would be benefit in designing a "standard service level for matching" for potential participants. This may also help managing potential participants' expectations and maintain their interest.
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MobiliseSME - Applying the lessons learnt

Implementation

The main design choices and implementation mechanisms **have generally operated well**. Smaller adaptations however, could improve implementation and effectiveness. In view of these results there would be benefit in:

- ❖ Maintaining the tripartite agreement. Especially, the learning plans were instrumental to organising the exchanges and should stay obligatory.
- ❖ Maintaining the different employee requirements – but allowing for some flexibility in specific cases. The main reason for the experience and education provisions was to eliminate the possibility of the scheme being abused to post relatively cheap labour to another Member State. In practice however, this excluded family-owned businesses which would have liked to send young and relatively inexperienced family members to learn company management. As such it could be an improvement to exclude family members of family-owned business from the employee requirements. Similarly, more flexibility might be required, if the scheme is to cater more for staff not in management positions.
- ❖ Maintaining the financial support provided to participants on exchange. Providing funding for travel and subsistence is a necessary condition for participation of most companies. The funding ceilings provided are in most cases sufficient. However, there would be benefits in allowing for a top-up of up to €500 per exchange, as this would cater for most of the additional expenses currently paid for by the companies.
- ❖ Maintaining the current options for exchange length. While several participants noted that a longer exchange period could be beneficial, few in practice took up longer periods of secondment. As such a maximum of two months could seemingly cater for most needs. While some participants suggested that the exchange should be even shorter than two weeks, we recommend continuing to require a two weeks exchange, as shorter exchanges are unlikely to generate the desired learning potential.
- ❖ Finally, to ensure continued evaluation and follow up of the scheme, there would be benefits in requiring that the project partners collect regular feedback from the participants, based on a set of agreed indicators.

Organisation and management

It is beyond the scope of this evaluation to consider how a potential scheme might be funded in the future. However, if a consortium of partners were to be selected **for a roll-out, or for a second pilot**, there would be benefit in considering the following aspects:

- ❖ Country coverage of the partners managing the project. If participation is to be expanded covering all EU-28, country partners from each of these would be needed. It is not realistic to assume that partners in other countries could generate significant interest outside their home country.
 - ❖ Importance of membership. To maximise the likelihood that project partners can reach out to and engage potential participants the selection criteria should pay attention to membership – ensuring that organisations participating have a wide member base of small and medium sized enterprises.
 - ❖ Gradual expansion of the exchanges. To increase the likelihood of a match, there would be benefit in gradually expanding the exchange scheme in different sectors – starting with those where there is seemingly the largest potential. Judging by the actual matches, communication and marketing, ICT and business services appear to be the most promising company sectors for exchanges.
 - ❖ Timeline. In order to give employers adequate time to plan the exchanges there would be benefit from having an effective implementation period of more than one year.
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Partners in the MobiliseSME Project Consortium

The project consortium, led by European Entrepreneurs CEA-PME, was responsible for the management, implementation and delivery of MobiliseSME.

ADEGI (Spain) - Asociacion De Empresarios De Gipuzkoa – the Business Association of Gipuzkoa, a private organisation, has more than 35 years history in the promotion of business activity in this province of north-eastern Spain.

AFDEE (France) - Association Française des Dirigeants d'Entreprise en Europe – the French Association of Company Managers in Europe brings together interested entrepreneurs in a dynamic European network, associated with CEA-PME (below).

BDG /SBA (Belgium) - Belgisch-Deutsche Gesellschaft/Société Belgo-Allemande – the Belgian-German Society has been serving the shared cultural, social and business interests of the two countries for over 50 years.

BVMW (Germany) - Bundesverband Mittelständische Wirtschaft, Unternehmerverband Deutschlands E.V – the German Federal Association of SMEs speaks for more than 530,000 companies (including member associations) covering some ten million employees.

European Entrepreneurs CEA-PME (Belgium) (Lead Partner) – European Entrepreneurs CEA-PME is a Brussels-based business federation which currently counts 14 European associations of SMEs among its members, with some 600,000 associated businesses employing more than 14.5 million people.

CONFAPI (Italy) - Confederazione Italiana Della Piccola E Media Industria – the Italian Confederation of SMEs, established in 1947 to represent the needs and interests of Italian SMEs, now represents some 154,000 companies with 1.9 million employees.

EVEA (Estonia) - Eesti Väike- ja Keskmiste Ettevõtjate Assotsiatsioon – the Association of Estonian SMEs, is Estonia's only independent representative organisation for SMEs, aiming since 1988 to represent and protect the interests of the sector and to strengthen the competitiveness of its members.

MÜSIAD (Turkey) - Müstakil Sanayici ve İşadamları Derneği – the Independent Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association, is an NGO founded in 1990 by a group of Turkish businessmen. Membership of the association now exceeds 2,000.

PÁTOSZ (Hungary) - PályázatiRók és Tanácsadók Országos Szövetsége – the National Association of Grant Project Managers and Consultants, was established in 2004. In 2015 it began to build up a new network of associate partners, aiming to incorporate 300 SMEs in addition to its existing membership.

PTIR (Romania) - Asociația Patronatul Tinerilor Întreprinzători din România – the Association of Young Entrepreneurs in Romania, is a national NGO operating at European level, with a national membership of 2,500 SMEs covering over 100,000 employees.

Associate Partners **EFIP** - the European Forum of Independent Professionals – is a European not-for-profit collaboration of national associations which represents over 10 million independent professionals at EU level through targeted research, advocacy and campaigning.

ESBA - the European Small Business Alliance – is a Brussels-based advocate for European SMEs and self-employed. Through its direct membership, associate membership and cooperation agreements, the Alliance now represents almost one million small businesses and covers 35 European countries.

FES - Friedrich Ebert Stiftung – the Friedrich Ebert Foundation is the oldest political foundation in Germany. As a non-profit institution, it operates independently to promote a pluralistic society approach to current policy challenges.

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