



Creativity & Innovation Training in SME I-Create

Johann Laister

Multidisciplinary European Research Institute Graz (Austria)

johann.laister@merig.org

1. Introduction

Creativity and the management of innovation is considered as important indicator for development processes, balanced growth and strengthening of a company's profile. In most medium sized and larger enterprises the design and management of creative and innovative processes is an important issue. Very often in these organisations, external consultants guide and support processes leading to the formulation of a creativity and innovation strategy. In most small (< 50 employees) and specifically micro enterprises (< 10) there is a lack of strategic planning, creativity and innovation management. Even if a business plan has been developed for these enterprises, it is less likely to demonstrate evidence of creativity and innovation management when compared to larger businesses and there is a lack in the participation of one-person and micro-enterprises in the further VET process in creativity and entrepreneurship education in general. [1] The reasons for this are manifold including heavy involvement of decision-makers in the day-to-day business, less resources and lack of awareness in relation to the benefits of training, specifically in managerial topics, etc.

The basis of the project I-Create is a repository and learning programme on creativity and innovation developed for research institutions. This approach shall be adapted and targeted to decision-makers in small and specifically micro enterprises. The starting point for the programme is a creativity audit tool. The fully documented training material in creativity and innovation management on the one hand reflects obstacles of small enterprises in terms of creativity and innovation. On the other hand it reflects the specific needs of small enterprises concerning training organisation.

2. Barriers to training for small and micro enterprises

Small enterprises participate less in the formal training and education process, and it is also a policy objective to provide an appropriate education and training service for SME. An OECD study [2] outlines the challenge connected to education and training in small enterprises: Although SMEs constitute the mass of businesses, they make relatively few demands on formal education and training. Learning from experience is preferred. In most developed economies, special incentives are offered to encourage SME involvement in education and training. The key factors in design of successful programmes are an emphasis on action learning; 'know how', rather than 'know what'; networking and relationship management ('know who'); a problem and opportunity focus; the careful linking of knowledge to the development processes of the business; encouragement of peer exchange; organisation of knowledge in the right 'language' and at the right level; and timing and support for follow up implementation of learning. The absence of these prerequisites often leads SMEs to ignore the training offered. Focussing only on small and micro enterprises, these findings are supported by analyses made during the project I-Create, a report on the training situation in small companies [3] and general publication on barriers towards participation in education and training [4] outlining reasons for the low level of training being undertaken:

- Lack of understanding amongst owner/managers of their own deficiencies or lack of knowledge, the consequences and how this can be addressed.
- Time – The many demands on the owner managers of these businesses leaves little time for attending training courses. Absence from the business for prolonged periods is perceived as being impossible and even outside "office hours" it is difficult for owner/managers to commit to regular attendance at such programmes. Also, when key people are away from the company there are few people available or indeed able to deputise for them. Small business owners tend to react to situations rather than plan for them.
- Cost – Existing programmes are seen as being too expensive and participation fees are more affordable and justifiable for larger firms.
- Relevance – In many cases, existing programmes are not seen as being relevant to the needs of small businesses, again appearing more appropriate for larger companies and too often based in theory to be of practical use to micro enterprise. It is difficult to source/organise suitable training options.
- Local unavailability of key topics and insufficient course information or insufficient information on practical creativity and innovation tools. The supply side has been largely unresponsive to the demands of the types of development training demanded by small business managers.

3. Factors supporting training in small and micro enterprises

Whereas supply is concentrated on the provision of generic courses, often of long duration, delivered in a classroom setting, the demand among small enterprises is for short practical business specific and individualised interventions, delivered where possible at the place of business. Micro enterprise needs to become more familiar with concepts of creativity and innovation and the customisation of courses for micro enterprise needs to support this.



3.1 Methods designed to help overcome barriers

SMEs and their needs need to be very carefully considered to be involved in the design of programmes to ensure that they meet the needs of micro enterprise and managers need to be convinced of the “profitability” of participating in management development courses. In some countries the mindset of managers must be addressed.

An entrepreneurial culture needs to be fostered as well as helping owner/managers recognize the need for and the usefulness of know how in creativity techniques and innovation management.

Private training consultants and mentors (with suitable qualifications and practical experience) are seen as the best currently available instruments for delivering management training to SMEs. [3] They can “translate” the theoretical language of many materials offered on innovation and creativity and make it practical for use by micro enterprise as well as identifying the specific requirements of the individual organisations.

The demand among small enterprises is for short practical business specific and individualised interventions, delivered where possible at the place of business. Owner-managers like personal and informal learning such as observation, mentoring and life experiences and make limited use of formal management programmes.

The establishment of “blended learning” solutions and practical tools involving a mixture of web-based and personal forms of learning can also address these demands. However, e-learning courses alone are unlikely to be suitable for most SME owner managers’ needs.

Also, “free” courses mean that participants often feel less committed to the learning process and as such a charge needs to be considered.

3.2 Preferred format of training

The I-Create survey amongst trainers and managers [5] underlines that the provision of management training programmes must meet the needs and learning styles of owner/managers and usually combines several formats. Generally, there is a clear preference amongst owner/managers for:

- Peer group management development activities involving periodic structured practical learning sessions (workshops). These should be supplemented by case studies from related enterprise sectors and mentoring.
- Short, practical, basic compact courses in specific applied management skills, such as creativity and innovation management, based on cases from real business context, preferably based on company’s own situation (at or near place of work) and which encourages self-learning.
- Informal peer group management activities, networking and benchmarking.
- Occasionally using on-line material and on-line communication platforms.
- One-to-one mentoring.
- Continuous integrated company interventions by training consultants over longer periods.

I-Create programme development and delivery should attempt to address these preferences. The first two imply that delivery through networks of small business would be particularly useful. Some owner/managers prefer printed material that provides a short, simple introduction related to practical situations and references to further help, additional subject matter, contacts for further support, etc. Thereafter, individual consultancy and support/mentoring is useful. Printing material is still relatively popular because it is well structured and one can find content easily, make notes and use it whenever it is needed.

The establishment of “blended learning” solutions involving a mixture of web-based and personal forms of learning can also support to address these demands. These could be based on reuse of online innovation and creativity learning materials in use in other countries.

4. Creativity and innovation training

Creativity is a transversal and cross-curricular skill which is seen as a very important and promising topic especially in terms of quality expectations but at the same time many teachers and education experts interviewed for a JRC-IPTS study [6], feel that the curricula in their countries do not, as yet, sufficiently encourage creativity and innovation, mainly because they are not clear how creativity should be defined and how it should be treated in learning and assessment.

Companies present significant levels of awareness with the term creativity and innovation management or at least they have used it in some degree in their working experience. Nevertheless training in that field is used rather seldom and on a per country basis a study [7] shows that in Lithuania and also Bulgaria (both countries participating in the I-Create project) there is need to expand awareness on creativity issues, proposing workshops or specific training programmes on creativity and innovation management for enhancing and promoting the idea of creativity in the working environment.

5. Conclusions

Following some possible conclusions for the adoption of the I-Create training programme in creativity and innovation management, which includes an audit tool, handbook and training materials.

1. The handbook and learning content developed should consider the following features:



- The audit tool should help managers / owners to identify deficiencies in terms of creativity and innovation. It should provide users with a guide tailored to subjects of most interest and benefit to their needs outlining which materials are relevant to them.
 - Training materials and subjects to be structured in a short, concise, modular format (possibly task specific) suitable for owner / managers of small businesses. This makes content flexible to use and accessible in terms of time and location.
 - Well structured general overview and introductory information on creativity and innovation management and its importance in a concise format supported by case studies and best practice examples which are taken from small and micro businesses.
 - Self-study materials should be practical, relevant and understandable for SMEs including case studies, quizzes, checklists, etc. The online version of self-study materials should be supported by a flexible, blended learning approach.
 - Online forums or similar approach like social media could be provided with networking and shared learning opportunities. This could also be used to provide small businesses with access to mentor support.
2. Material should be developed which is easily transferable between online and paper based (hard copy) formats. As a result material can be used during informal workshops (or occasional lecture-type settings) and networking sessions with peers with the support of tutors or moderators as favoured by respondents in different surveys.
3. Based on feedback from survey respondents relating to preferred learning providers the I-Create outputs should be promoted widely to private trainers and training companies, mentors and business consultants, professional institutions who may use them in their work with small business.

References

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