

NEWS Project
Erasmus+ KA210-VET | Small-scale Partnership in VET

Organisational Skills & AI Readiness Survey

Analysis Report

Survey period: September 2025 – June 2026
Respondents: 113 organisations (Ireland, Germany, Latvia, Spain)
Activity: Identifying CPD Requirements of Member Organisations (Activity 2)
Lead organisation: European Business Excellence Network e.V. (EuroBEN)
Purpose: Evidence base for Activity 4 — Derive CPD Policies for SMEs

Executive Summary

This report presents the analysis of 113 survey responses collected as part of the NEWS (Network for European Workforce Skills) project, an Erasmus+ KA210-VET small-scale partnership. The survey was designed to identify the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) requirements of member organisations of the participating NGOs across four European regions: Ireland, Germany, Latvia, and Spain.

The survey exceeded its target of 100 respondents and captures a broad cross-section of predominantly micro and small enterprises (82% with fewer than 50 employees) across 15+ sectors. The findings reveal a workforce landscape in transition, driven by rapid AI integration and digitalisation, where skills demand is outpacing training supply — particularly within SMEs constrained by limited funding and internal capacity.

Headline statistics

113 Total survey responses collected	74% Confident or very confident about skills readiness by 2026	86% Currently using AI tools in some capacity	59% Cite limited funding as the primary barrier to upskilling
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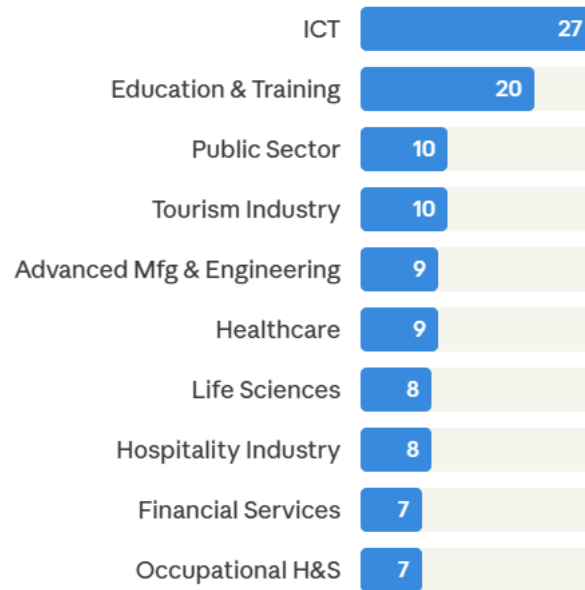
Section 1: Respondent Profile

1.1 Sector Distribution

Respondents represent a broad spectrum of sectors, with ICT (24%) and Education & Training (18%) comprising the largest groups. This reflects the composition of the NEWS partner networks, which are particularly active in technology and vocational training sectors.

Sector	Responses (n)
ICT	27
Education & Training	20
Public Sector	10
Tourism Industry	10
Advanced Manufacturing & Engineering	9
Healthcare	9
Life Sciences	8
Hospitality Industry	8
Financial Services	7
Occupational Health & Safety	7
Green Economy	6
Fire Safety	6
Facilities Management	4
Business Consulting	2
Other (Cultural, Social, Logistics)	3

Primary sector

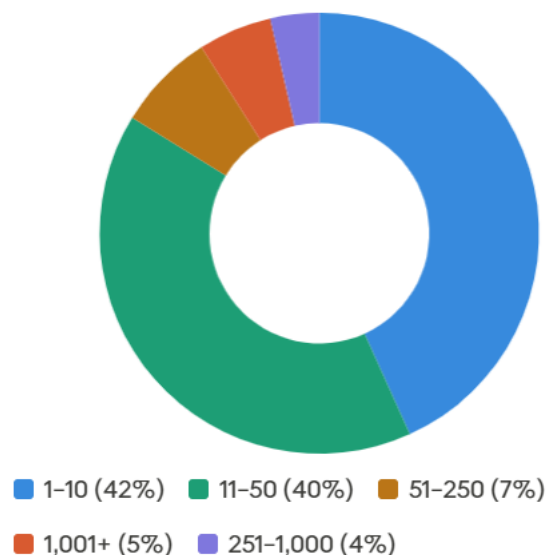


1.2 Organisation Size

The sample is heavily skewed toward micro and small organisations, consistent with the SME focus of the NEWS project. Organisations with fewer than 50 employees account for 82% of respondents, confirming the target group profile.

Organisation size	Responses	% of total
1–10 employees	48	42%
11–50 employees	45	40%
51–250 employees	8	7%
251–1,000 employees	4	4%
1,001+ employees	6	5%

Organisation size

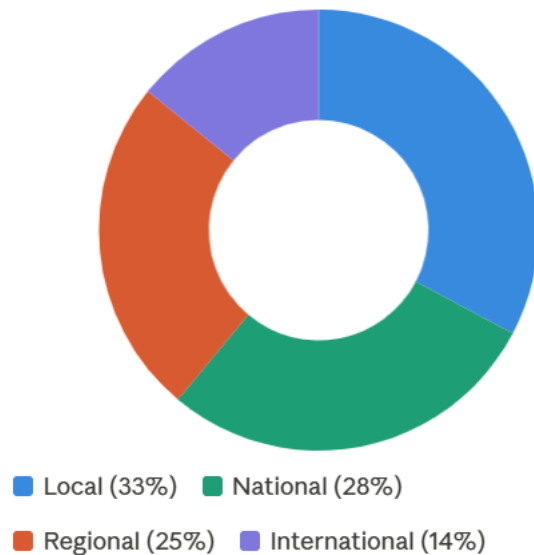


1.3 Geographic Reach

Most organisations operate locally (33%) or nationally (28%), indicating that the survey captures the grassroots SME level targeted by the project. A significant minority (14%) operate internationally, reflecting the pan-European ambitions of several partner networks.

Geographic reach	Responses	% of total
Local	37	33%
National	32	28%
Regional	28	25%
International	16	14%

Geographic reach

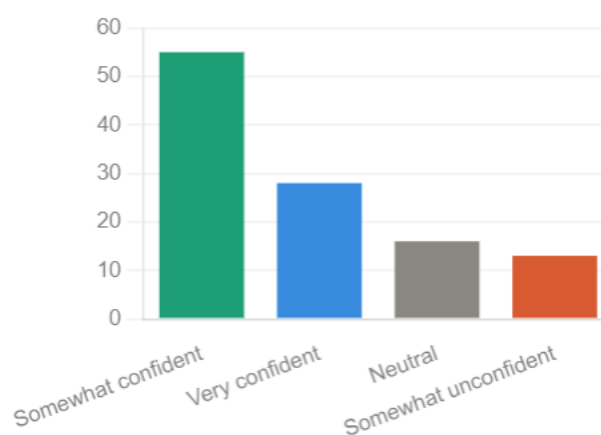


1.4 Confidence in Meeting Skills Needs by 2026

A clear majority (74%) express at least some confidence in their organisation's ability to meet its skills needs by 2026. However, 11.5% are somewhat unconfident, and a further 14% remain neutral — together representing a substantial share of organisations that may struggle without targeted CPD support.

Confidence level	Responses	% of total
Very confident	28	25%
Somewhat confident	55	49%
Neutral	16	14%
Somewhat unconfident	13	12%

Confidence in meeting skills needs by 2026



Profile summary: Respondents skew heavily toward micro and small organisations — 82% have fewer than 50 employees, consistent with the SME focus of the NEWS project. The ICT sector leads (24%), followed by Education & Training (18%) and Public Sector/Tourism (9% each). Most organisations operate at local or national level (61%), with 14% reaching international markets. A large majority (74%) are at least somewhat confident about meeting their skills needs by 2026, but 11.5% remain unconfident — a cohort requiring targeted CPD support.

Key insight: The 26% of organisations that are neutral or unconfident about their readiness represent a priority cohort for CPD policy intervention. These are most likely to be micro-enterprises and organisations in sectors with fast-changing skills requirements such as ICT, Healthcare, and Manufacturing.

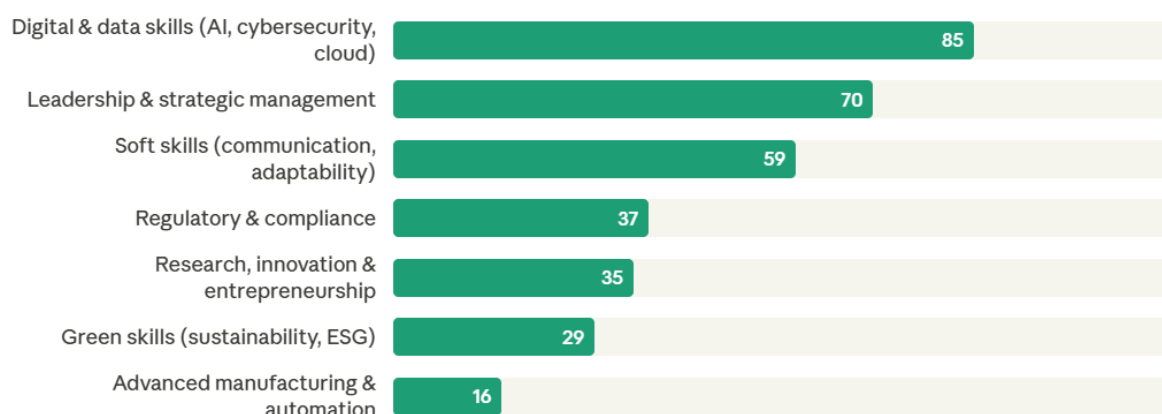
Section 2: Critical Skills Priorities and AI Integration

2.1 Critical Skill Categories (Q5)

Respondents were asked to select up to three skill categories most critical to their organisation's future success. Digital and data skills dominate overwhelmingly, cited by 75% of all organisations — nearly double the frequency of the second-ranked category. This finding is consistent across all sectors surveyed.

Skill category	Mentions	% of orgs
Digital & data skills (AI, cybersecurity, cloud, data analysis)	85	75%
Leadership & strategic management	70	62%
Soft skills (communication, adaptability, collaboration)	59	52%
Regulatory & compliance (financial, environmental, risk)	37	33%
Research, innovation & entrepreneurship	35	31%
Green skills (sustainability, ESG reporting)	29	26%
Advanced manufacturing & automation	16	14%

Most critical skill categories (Q5 — select up to 3, n=113)



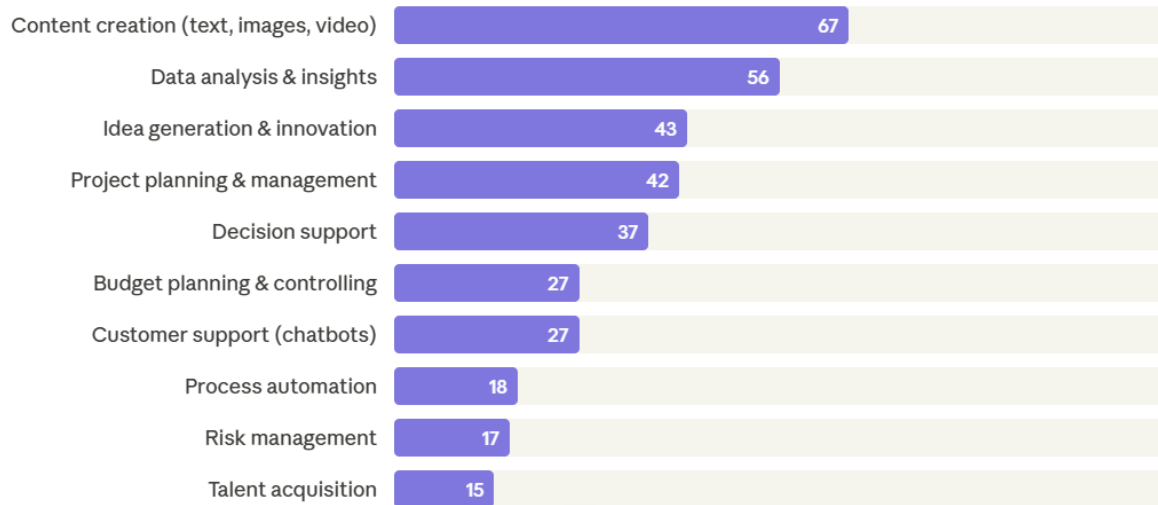
Key insight: The top three priorities — digital & data skills, leadership, and soft skills — suggest that CPD programmes must be holistic. Technical AI literacy cannot be delivered in isolation; it must be paired with management development and interpersonal skills to drive genuine organisational transformation.

2.2 AI Tool Integration (Q7)

Respondents were asked to identify areas where AI tools are currently being used in their organisations. The results reveal that AI adoption has moved well beyond experimentation: 86% of organisations report active use of AI in at least one area. Content creation, data analysis, and idea generation are the three leading applications.

AI use area	Mentions	% of orgs
Content creation (text, images, video)	67	59%
Data analysis & insights	56	50%
Idea generation & innovation management	43	38%
Project planning & management	42	37%
Decision support	37	33%
Budget planning & controlling	27	24%
Customer support (chatbots, automation)	27	24%
Process automation	18	16%
Risk management	17	15%
Talent acquisition & personnel management	15	13%
Predictive maintenance	9	8%
Supply chain optimisation	7	6%
Sales forecasting	6	5%

Areas where AI tools are currently being used (Q7 — select all that apply)



Key insight: The breadth of AI use cases — spanning creative, analytical, operational, and strategic functions — means that CPD guidelines cannot be limited to a single 'AI literacy' module. Organisations need role-specific, contextual training that maps AI tools to actual job functions and workflows.

Digital skills dominate: 75% of organisations rank digital and data skills (AI, cybersecurity, cloud, data analysis) among their top three critical needs — the single most cited category by a wide margin. Leadership & strategic management (62%) and soft skills (52%) complete the top three, suggesting that technical upskilling must be complemented by management and interpersonal development. AI tool adoption is already broad: content creation (59%), data analysis (50%), and idea generation (38%) are the leading use cases, indicating that most organisations have moved beyond experimentation into practical deployment.

Section 3: Addressing Skill Gaps and Training Preferences

3.1 Current Approaches to Skill Gaps

Internal training and upskilling programmes are the dominant strategy for addressing skill gaps, used by 72% of respondents. However, 14% report not currently addressing skill gaps at all — a significant vulnerability, particularly given the pace of change driven by AI and digitalisation.

Approach	Mentions	% of orgs
Internal training & upskilling programmes	81	72%
Partnering with external training providers / HEIs	39	35%
Use of apprenticeships & traineeships	36	32%
Hiring new talent with required skills	33	29%
Not currently addressing skill gaps	16	14%

How organisations address skill gaps

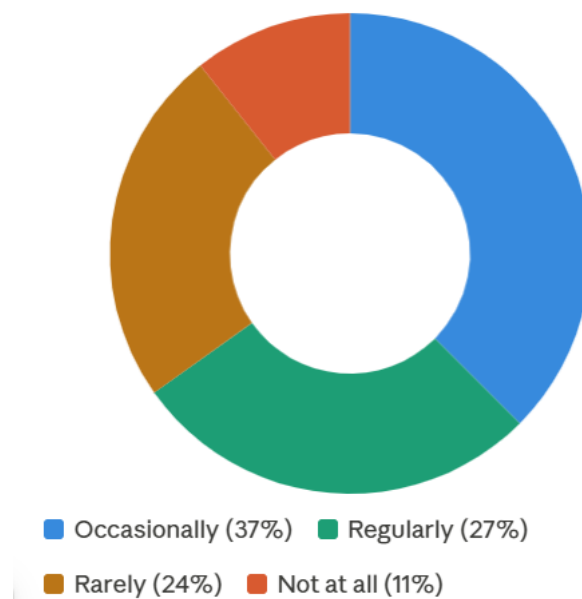


3.2 Collaboration with Education and Training Institutions

Despite the central role of education-industry collaboration in addressing structural skills gaps, the depth of engagement is relatively shallow. Only 27% of organisations engage regularly through co-designed curricula or joint programmes. The largest group (37%) engages only occasionally, suggesting largely transactional rather than strategic relationships.

Level of collaboration	Responses	% of total
Regularly (co-designing curricula, joint programmes)	31	27%
Occasionally (guest lectures, placements)	42	37%
Rarely	27	24%
Not at all	12	11%

Collaboration with education/training institutions



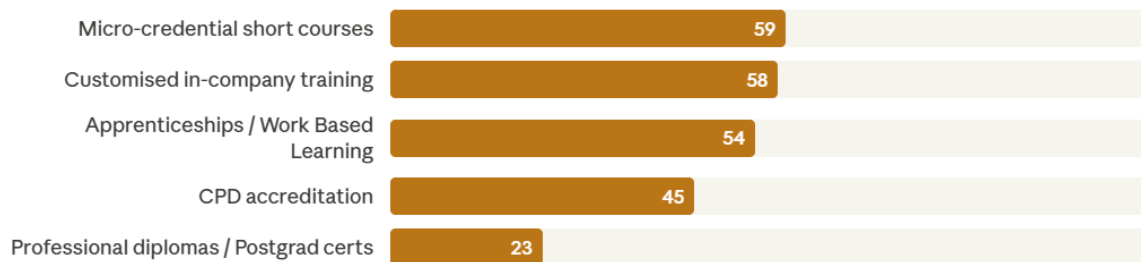
Key insight: The gap between ideal and actual collaboration is striking — 35% of organisations want to partner with training providers, yet only 27% do so regularly. CPD policies should create structured incentives and frameworks for deeper employer-provider co-design, particularly for customised in-company training.

3.3 Preferred Training Programme Types

Respondents were asked to indicate which types of education or training programmes they are most interested in accessing or developing. Three formats are closely clustered at the top, all reflecting a preference for practical, flexible, employer-embedded learning:

Training programme type	Mentions	% of orgs
Micro-credential short courses	59	52%
Customised in-company training	58	51%
Apprenticeships / Work Based Learning	54	48%
CPD accreditation	45	40%
Professional diplomas / Postgraduate certificates	23	20%

Preferred training programme types



Key insight: The near-equal preference for micro-credentials, customised training, and apprenticeships reflects a common underlying need: learning that is short, practical, employer-relevant, and does not require extended time away from work. CPD guidelines for SMEs should prioritise these formats over traditional longer-duration programmes.

Internal training is dominant but insufficient: 72% rely on internal training and upskilling, yet 14% are not currently addressing skill gaps at all — a significant concern for workforce readiness. Collaboration with education institutions is predominantly occasional (37%) rather than deep, with only 27% engaging regularly through co-designed curricula or joint programmes. Among training formats, micro-credentials (52%), customised in-company training (51%), and apprenticeships/work-based learning (48%) are equally attractive, signalling demand for flexible, practical, employer-led learning solutions that fit SME constraints.

Section 4: Barriers and Support Needs

4.1 Main Barriers to Addressing Future Skills Needs

Limited funding and resources emerge as the dominant structural barrier, cited by nearly six in ten organisations (59%). Regulatory and bureaucratic challenges and difficulty attracting talent are jointly ranked second, each cited by 37% of respondents.

Barrier	Mentions	% of orgs
Limited funding / resources	67	59%
Regulatory or bureaucratic challenges	42	37%
Difficulty attracting talent	42	37%
Lack of internal training infrastructure	35	31%
Inadequate supply of skilled graduates	34	30%
Low staff engagement in learning	26	23%

Main barriers to addressing future skills needs



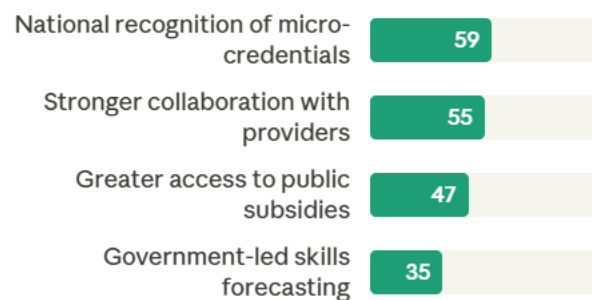
Key insight: The combination of funding scarcity (59%) and lack of internal training infrastructure (31%) paints a picture of SMEs that want to invest in their workforce but face structural constraints beyond their control. This reinforces the case for public subsidy mechanisms, shared training resources, and consortium-based CPD models.

4.2 Most Valuable Workforce Preparation Supports

When asked what supports would be most valuable in preparing their workforce, respondents prioritised system-level changes over direct training provision. National recognition of micro-credentials and stronger education-industry collaboration are the top two asks — both directly addressing the structural gaps identified above.

Support needed	Mentions	% of orgs
National recognition of micro-credentials	59	52%
Stronger collaboration with education/training providers	55	49%
Greater access to public training subsidies	47	42%
Government-led skills forecasting & guidance	35	31%

Most valuable workforce preparation supports



Funding and talent are the twin constraints: Limited funding (59%) is overwhelmingly the leading barrier, followed by regulatory/bureaucratic challenges and difficulty attracting talent (both 37%). Lack of internal training infrastructure (31%) and inadequate graduate supply (30%) compound the problem, painting a picture of SMEs caught between resource scarcity and a supply-side skills shortage. In response, organisations most value national recognition of micro-credentials (52%) and stronger collaboration with education/training providers (49%), both of which directly address their structural constraints. Government subsidies (42%) and skills forecasting (31%) round out the support agenda.

Section 5: Key Findings for CPD Policy Development

The following six findings summarise the principal evidence base drawn from this survey. They are presented in order of policy significance and should directly inform the CPD guidelines to be developed in Activity 4 of the NEWS project.

Finding 1: AI literacy is the universal upskilling priority

75% of organisations rank digital and data skills — including AI, cybersecurity, cloud, and data analysis — as among their top three critical needs. This is consistent across all sectors, organisation sizes, and geographies surveyed. CPD guidelines must treat AI literacy as a foundational requirement, not an elective, and must be designed to reach the full spectrum of SME employees — not just technical staff.

Finding 2: Micro-credentials are the preferred delivery format for SMEs

52% of organisations express preference for micro-credential short courses, and national recognition of micro-credentials is the single most requested policy support (also 52%). CPD guidelines should strongly favour short, stackable, formally accredited modules that can be completed without extended time away from work. The European Qualifications Framework and existing Erasmus+ quality standards provide a ready foundation for cross-national recognition.

Finding 3: Limited funding is the defining structural barrier

59% cite limited funding and resources as the primary barrier — a figure that likely understates the true constraint among the smallest organisations. CPD policy guidelines for SMEs must include a dedicated section mapping available public subsidies, national training funds (such as Ireland's Skillnet, Germany's Qualifizierungschancengesetz, Latvia's ESF programmes, and Spain's FUNDAE), and Erasmus+ mobility and project funding routes. Low-bureaucracy access pathways are essential.

Finding 4: Industry-education collaboration is shallow and must be deepened

Only 27% of organisations co-design curricula with education providers, despite 35% wanting to partner with them. CPD policy should create structured frameworks and incentives for deeper employer-provider collaboration, including co-designed customised training, industry advisory boards for VET programmes, and work-based learning arrangements. The NEWS consortium itself is a model for this kind of cross-sector partnership.

Finding 5: Leadership and soft skills are underserved relative to their importance

62% rank leadership and strategic management as a critical priority, and 52% rank soft skills — yet these needs are less well served by the training formats preferred by SMEs. CPD guidelines should explicitly integrate management capacity development and interpersonal skills into technical AI and digital training pathways, rather than treating them as separate streams.

Finding 6: 14% of SMEs are not addressing skill gaps at all — and need outreach-first strategies

One in seven organisations is currently doing nothing to address skill gaps. This cohort — disproportionately micro-enterprises and organisations without internal training infrastructure — is the most at-risk group. CPD guidelines should include specific outreach-first strategies for this segment: simple entry points, peer learning and consortium models, light-touch needs diagnostic tools, and awareness of subsidies. Waiting for these organisations to self-refer to training providers will not work.

Section 6: Recommendations for CPD Policy Guidelines

Based on the survey findings above, the following recommendations are proposed as the framework for the CPD policy and guidelines document to be produced in Activity 4 of the NEWS project.

6.1 Framework principles

- CPD programmes for SMEs should be flexible, modular, and employer-embedded — not reliant on extended full-time study.
- AI and digital literacy should be integrated as a cross-cutting competency within all CPD pathways, not siloed as a standalone technical module.
- All CPD pathways should include formal accreditation aligned to the European Qualifications Framework to ensure cross-national recognition and career portability.
- Policy should address both supply-side (training programme availability) and demand-side (subsidy access, engagement incentives) barriers simultaneously.

6.2 Programme design priorities

- Micro-credentials: Design a suite of short, stackable micro-credential modules covering AI literacy, data analysis, digital tools, and leadership fundamentals. Target 8–20 hour completion times.
- Customised in-company training: Develop a co-design framework enabling training providers to adapt modules to specific employer contexts, with sector-specific case studies and tools.
- Work-based learning: Expand apprenticeship and traineeship pathways into digital and AI-related occupations, with clear qualification outcomes recognised across partner regions.
- Peer learning networks: Establish cross-sector SME learning communities within each partner region, facilitated by the NGO partners, to reduce isolation and share best practice.

6.3 Systemic and policy actions

- Advocate for national recognition of micro-credentials across Ireland, Germany, Latvia, and Spain, building on EU Micro-credentials Framework recommendations.
- Map and publish accessible guides to public training subsidies in each partner region, updated annually.
- Develop a CPD needs diagnostic tool for SMEs — a brief, self-administered questionnaire that identifies skill gaps and maps them to available training resources.
- Establish formal employer advisory boards within each NGO partner to ensure ongoing alignment between training programme content and real market needs.
- Invest in outreach to the 14% of organisations not currently addressing skill gaps, using trusted intermediaries (chambers of commerce, sector associations, peer networks) rather than direct marketing.

Appendix: Survey Instrument Summary

The survey instrument comprised 11 core questions covering the following dimensions:

Question	Topic
Q1	Primary sector of operation
Q2	Organisation size (by headcount)
Q3	Geographic reach (local / regional / national / international)
Q4	Confidence in meeting skills needs by 2026
Q5	Most critical skill categories (select up to 3)
Q6	Emerging technologies planned for integration in 2026
Q7	Areas where AI tools are currently being used
Q8	How skill gaps are currently being addressed
Q9	Extent of collaboration with education/training institutions
Q10	Preferred types of training programmes
Q11	Main barriers to addressing future skills needs
Q12	Most valuable workforce preparation supports
Q13 (open)	Most undervalued or overlooked future skills
Q14 (open)	Additional resources needed from the national training system

All responses were anonymous. The survey was administered via Microsoft Forms and distributed by the four NEWS partner organisations to their respective member organisations. Data collection ran from September 2025 to June 2026, with the majority of responses (approximately 75%) collected between May and June 2026 during partner-facilitated workshops and events.

Summary of the analysis

Respondent profile

The sample is heavily composed of micro and small enterprises: 42% have 1–10 employees and 40% have 11–50, so 82% fall squarely within the SME category targeted by NEWS. The largest sectors are ICT (24%), Education & Training (18%), and Public Sector and Tourism (9% each). Most organisations operate locally (33%) or nationally (28%), with 14% reaching international markets.

Confidence and AI readiness

74% of respondents are at least "somewhat confident" about meeting their skills needs by 2026, but 11.5% express no confidence — a cohort that should be a priority for the CPD guidelines. AI tool integration is already widespread: only about 14% of respondents indicate no AI use. The most common applications are content creation (59%), data analysis (50%), and idea generation and project planning (around 37–38% each).

Critical skill priorities

Digital and data skills top the list by a wide margin (75% of all respondents include it in their top three), followed by leadership and strategic management (62%) and soft skills (52%). This tells a clear story: technical upskilling cannot be delivered in isolation — it must sit alongside management capacity building and interpersonal development.

Addressing skill gaps

Internal training is the dominant method (72%), but 14% are not currently addressing gaps at all. Collaboration with education institutions is mostly occasional (37%) and only 27% engage in deep co-design of curricula. This gap between need and structured provision is significant. In terms of preferred formats, micro-credentials, customised in-company training, and apprenticeships are all closely clustered near the top — organisations want flexible, practical, employer-embedded learning.

Barriers and requested supports

Limited funding (59%) is the defining structural constraint, ahead of regulatory challenges and difficulty attracting talent (both 37%). The top requested supports — national recognition of micro-credentials (52%) and stronger collaboration between education and industry (49%) — directly address these structural weaknesses and should anchor the CPD policy recommendations.

Implications for the next task (CPD policy and guidelines for SMEs)

The six key findings highlighted in the report — AI literacy as universal priority, preference for micro-credentials, funding scarcity, shallow industry-education collaboration, underserved leadership skills, and a cohort of disengaged SMEs — together form the evidence base for the CPD policy document. The guidelines should specifically address stackable short-course pathways, public subsidy mapping, deeper employer-provided co-design, and low-barrier entry points for the smallest organisations.