

# PRO-STRATEGY GUIDE

## Innovative learning model

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## 1. Background

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PRO-STRATEGY GUIDE is a transfer of Innovation Leonardo Da Vinci (LDV) project based on the Strategy Train project results and products.

The project is build around the idea that clear strategic planning is the most important indicator for innovation and development processes, for a balanced growth and strengthening the company profile.

Planning strategically provides a competitive advantage to enterprises and allows not only reacting to market fluctuations but to analysing and developing medium and longer term concepts for entering new markets and developing new business models. It is also a requirement for being innovative enterprise and to safeguard jobs.

While in big enterprises setting up and implementing strategic development processes is very well handled as it is considered as an important area, it is not always the case in SMEs. Although it is true that they do have business plans, there is less evidence of strategic thinking in comparison to larger businesses. This observation is also supported by studies about training needs in SMEs.

Hence, the goal of PRO-STRATEGY project is to develop innovative learning models including innovative learning environments and learning contents in order to address the specific needs of the target group (e.g. time and place flexibility), is adoptable and modular (e.g. different backgrounds, sectors) and reflects the practical needs of the end users.

The learning models and contents will consider strengths of on-site and e-learning (blended learning) and will include facilities for transnational virtual collaboration (virtual learning groups, study cycles and coaching as a tool for teachers and trainers).

Main assumptions of PRO-STRATEGY Guide project stressed that this product should be prepared taking into account SMEs' specificities and made available for both self-learning and blended learning. In order to recognize SMEs' expectations, concerns, experiences and opinions regarding strategic management learning, the Consortium conducted a cross-cultural analysis. Results have indicated different issues which needs to be taken into account during the process of constructing the final product and model of learning on which the final product will be based.

Creating the innovative learning model is indispensable in terms of preparing a theoretical concept by gathering all the information related to factors that are meaningful for the learning process.

## 2. Objective of the innovative learning model

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- a) To indicate factors meaningful for learning process from the perspective of adults' learning models and PRO-STRATEGY Guide assumptions
- b) To derive practical implications for learning process from existing adults' learning models and conducted cross-cultural analysis
- c) To create a theoretical concept of connecting SMEs requirements with learning environment (Moodle platform) and strategic management problems
- d) To create a theoretical concept that enables using PRO-SRATEGY Guide products as self-learning method and in blended learning processes
- e) To include practical implications derived from chosen adults' learning models

## 3. Adults' learning models - short overview

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As target groups in PRO-STRATEGY Guide project is composed from SMEs' representatives and trainers working with SMEs, the innovative learning model must be created bearing in mind the way adults learn most efficiently.

Undoubtedly there are many different models of adult learning that enable a better understanding of the ways in which adult learners assimilate knowledge and develop skills. Nevertheless, we have chosen only those which seem to be most practical and applicable to SMEs' needs.

It is important to be aware of what 'learning' means. 'Learning' is an integrated process consisting of two interacting elements:

- interaction processes taking place between the learner and his environment (interactions may be direct or indirect such as reading a book or listening to cassette)
- internal, mental processes of assimilation and processing of knowledge that leads to the result of learning.

Understanding 'learning' in this way, implies two first factors that should be taken into account while designing effective learning process: First, it is important to choose the most appropriate learning environment and adjust it to learners competences and needs. This is a real challenge especially when we plan to conduct learning process in virtual environment. It is possible that in such situation, the first step will be to persuade learners that this environment does not bring threats to them. Learners should feel comfortable with the learning environment, so they can focus on gaining knowledge and skills. The second factor is the person - the learner. Effective learning process must be enriched in activities that could induce or reinforce the internal motivation for learning as motivation is indispensable to achieve the expected results. It should also contain means that facilitate the process of knowledge assimilation (eg. possibility to make self-assessment, sharing experience with other learners, possibility to clarify doubts etc).

In general, while creating a new learning process based on any model, it is important to remember that:

- learning should be understood broadly - it includes psychological development, socialization and the acquisition of knowledge (that is why during the learning process activities, focus should not be only to one dimension)
- learning is a holistic process, comprising two sub-processes: direct and indirect interactions and the internal, mental process of acquiring knowledge;
- learning involves three parallel and interrelated dimensions: cognitive dimension, emotional dimension (psychodynamic), which includes issues such as motivation and attitude, and a social dimension

Theoretical models that could be especially useful for creating the PRO-STRATEGY Guide innovative learning model and give very clear directions on how to effectively prepare the learning process are:

1. Andragogy Knowles
2. self-steering learning / self-education (self-directed learning) (Tough, Hiemstra, Candy)
3. Learning the techniques of learning 'Learning how to learn' (Smith)
4. Reflective learning through experience (Kolb)

It is worth giving a short overview of implications for a learning process, derived from the above mentioned models:

**For the andragogy theory, formulated by Knowles, the principles that should be understood as pillars of learning process are:**

- necessity to explain to adults the reasons for which a particular material is taught
- supporting adults in their ability for independent learning (self-learning)
- using adults' life experiences in educational situations when it is possible
- being consciousness in what activities and social roles engaged by adults outside the learning environment and establish links with some elements of the learning process
- being aware of and respect the different motivation of adult learners

**For the self-steering learning theory formulated by Tough, Hiemstra and Candy, the principles that should be understood as pillars of learning process are:**

- being aware that adult learners have concrete reasons for engaging in an education process (in other words, they have needs to be met)
- awareness that adults are able to engage in autonomous, self-steering learning and most of them have had such an experience
- necessity to respect the autonomy and self-steering in adult education
- awareness of the limitations of self-steering learning in some situations including specific content

For the 'Learning how to learn' theory formulated by Smith, the principles that should be understood as pillars of learning process are:

- The learning environment should be organized not only by focusing on learning specific content or skills, but also on creating a space for discussion and sharing experiences

For the 'Reflective learning through experience' theory propagated i.a by Kolb, Tennant, Pogson, Jarvis, the principles that should be understood as pillars of learning process are:

- being aware that adult learning is always associated with a specific, concrete context and learners tend to use their experience to solve learning problems
- adult learning should encompass activities based on real situations and related to real experiences
- being aware that the experience can be both a help and a hindrance in learning
- results of a reflection process will differ among learners due to the unique and complex nature of biography and the human experience

By analysing the above mentioned models, we could summarise the most important principles as following:

- a) when dealing with an adult learning process, it is indispensable to implement elements based on their experience (life or professional) in order to reinforce the process of reflective thinking
- b) learning materials, activities and other elements used in adult learning process should reflect the reality of learners - it is necessary to get to know the day-to-day tasks and activities, undertaken by learners in order to generate contents to be implemented in real situations
- c) creating activities by encouraging adult learners to participate in knowledge acquisition processes and reinforce the motivation for self-steering learning
- d) preparing contents in such a way that allows multiplying the methods of its usage - as part of adult learns might not be accustomed to self-learning(?), it is valuable to create material available to use both as self-learning content and part of blended-learning process
- e) in their process of learning, adults need not only the methods of transferring the knowledge, but also interaction with other learners - it is crucial to implement elements enabling participants to share opinions, experience, clarify doubts etc.

## 4. Practical implications from cross cultural analysis

The objective of the cross - cultural analysis conducted in Workpackage 2 was to examine needs of SMEs in each one of the partner countries (except Austria -MERIG-) in terms of their current situation, expectations for future, finance possibilities, human capital development, differences of needs and possibilities between small and medium enterprises, within the context of strategic management training.

There were 102 respondents from SMEs sector and 49 trainers who participated in the research and filled the designed survey.

**As a result of this survey, we have obtained some interesting conclusions atht will be vey useful for our process of building innovative learning model. They are as following:**

- a) trainers and consultant working with SMEs point that there is a need to raise awareness on the meaning of strategic management in SMEs (Lack of this awareness is considered as a barrier for strategic management in SMEs sector)
- b) in general, strategic management training is mainly oriented to Top managers and middle managers
- c) cost of training, time and program suitability are mentioned as significant barriers to strategic management training in SMEs
- d) Consultants/mentors, private trainers/Training companies and universities/business Schools are mentioned as preferred learning providers
- e) Onsite/at work place, networking events and one to one discussions are preferred learning environment
- f) In terms of learning tool most preferred are combination of different tool, practical tool and individual coaching and mentoring
- g) In terms of learning structure task specific short term training and online short modular self study have strong preference among SMEs

There is also some very interesting conclusions regarding respondents' perception of what the advantages and disadvantages of on-line training are. This is of a especial importanceto PRO-STRATEGY Guide, as a Moodle based platform will be implemented as a main learning environment and training material will be available on-line.

ADVANTAGES	CONSTRAINTS
<b>Opinions given by respondents from SMEs</b>	
- Training can be adjusted to the availability of people and their schedules.	- Implemented formats are not "friendly" and easy to use.
- A good tool to transmitting information and/or knowledge.	- When it comes to changing habits, ways of thinking or developing skills, reading a text and performing exercises is not enough. Nor when you need to create links between

	people.
- Flexibility (anytime, anywhere) and adaptability	- In general “face to face training is more effective.”
- Immediate and continuous access to training	- Sometimes contents are "poor". The trainer does not communicate enough with participants.
- Easy to access and easy self-assessments	- Requires personalized mentoring
- Studying at different times and using the environment that the user prefers	- Lack of interaction with colleagues; impersonal
- Statistical monitoring of the training	- Contents and support are not always of good quality
- Reducing costs	- No need for studying in training centres, Business schools and University campuses
	- Expensive and difficult access for SMEs
	- "Cultural resistance" coming from some decision makers in many SMEs.
	- Lower impact than “face to face” training
	- Distraction from office duties. Delays.
	- Lower motivation than “face to face” training
<b>Opinions given by trainers</b>	
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Although there are many threats indicated by respondents, there is a strong belief that on-line training using the proper methods and designed taking into account SMEs specificity (both organization and learning requirements specificities) can constitute a solution to reinforcing the learning opportunities for SMEs (on-line training minimize e.g. costs and is adaptable in terms of time).

**Analysing the main conclusions, we could derive some principles for learning model:**

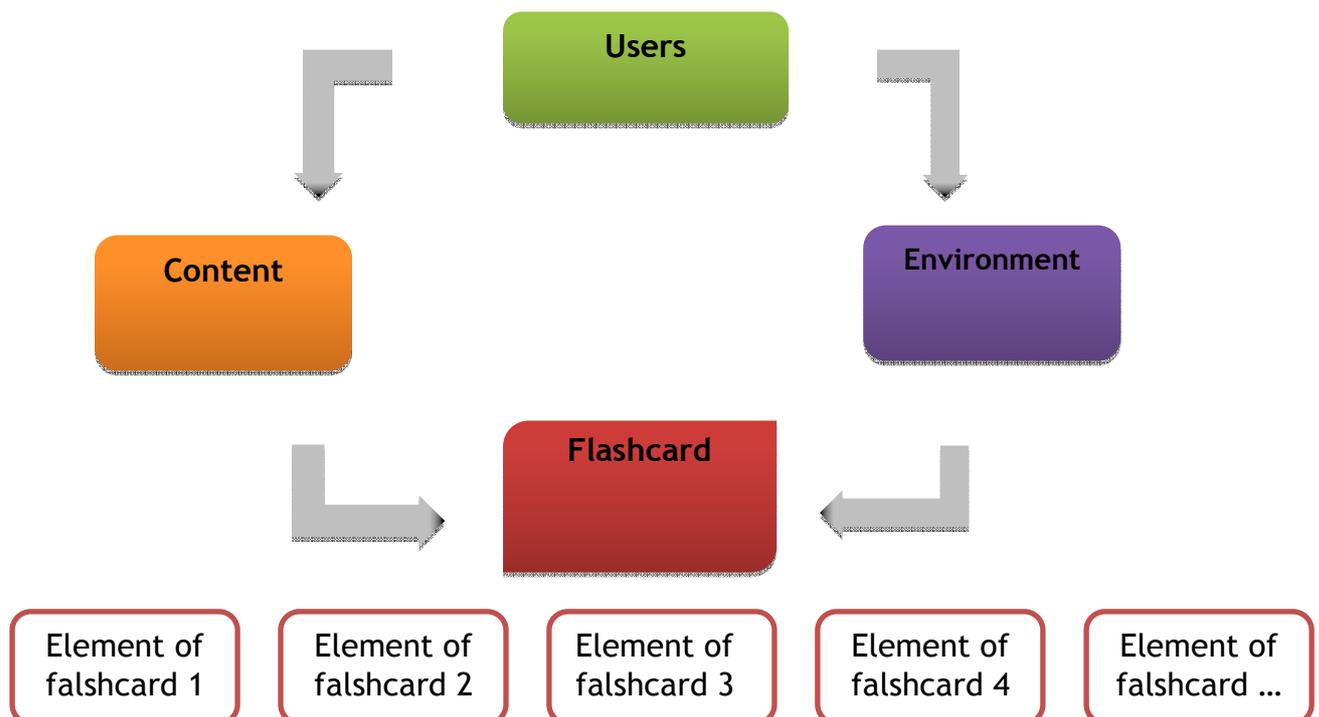
- a) There is a strong demand on practical and short contents, combining several environments and presenting strategic management tools and methods in "friendly" environments and using an accessible language - training should be prepared under the formula "just in time", 'just enough'
- b) Training material must be adjusted to SMEs specificity - this requires verifying it in terms of level of language and content difficulty, used terminology, suitability of case studies, usefulness of exercises that should be 'close type' with pre-defined feedback in order to give users clear information and hints for future)
- c) Differences shown in terms of preferred learning tool, learning environment and learning providers indicate that PRO-STRATEGY Guide product has to be flexible enough to be used in different training situation (as self-learning and as a element of blended - learning)
- d) *There is a necessity to provide practical training to SMEs - training material should present tools that could be implemented in SMEs in easy and quick way (with regards to language and suitability for specificity of SMEs) and reinforce the practical dimension by case studies adjusted to SMEs*
- e) On-line training must be designed with regards to mentioned anxieties and to learning preference such as interactivity (being able to discuss issues, to have the impression that there is a mentor leading through the course etc.), time effectiveness and flexibility (short modular training material)

## 5. The PRO-STRATEGY GUIDE Innovative learning model

Cross-cultural analysis and theoretical background have provided very important information that must be taken into account in building the innovative learning model.

Theoretical models present the idea on how to teach adults effectively (they give general basis), while respondents who participated in the PRO-STRATEGY survey shared with their opinions the specific area of interest for adult learning - SMEs business field. These conclusions enable us to create an innovative (from SMEs point of view) learning model articulated around the concept of Flashcard, which will be the main element of this model. Users (respondents) expressed their expectations in terms of content and environment which will be taken into consideration when designing and developing the Flashcards for adult learning.

The following chart and explanations will present in a schematic way the project's innovative learning model, as it will be developed by the project team:



Users - who they are?

- SMEs managers and owners (mostly Top managers and middle managers)
- trainers and consultants working with SMEs
- people without experience with online trainings
- people who expressed the need of developing their knowledge in the field of strategic management

#### **Content (units developed by the “Strategy Train” project) - how it will be presented?**

- Divided into small portions
- Includes practical information adjusted to SMEs specificity
- Written in a language that meets SMEs level of knowledge, related to strategic management
- Encompassing the scope of knowledge enabling participants to implement strategic management in their organisations
- Includes a glossary of the key words for each flashcard, in order to allow understanding the main concepts of strategic management

#### **Environment (Moodle platform) - how it will be designed?**

- Designed in user-friendly way, which means i.a. intuitive navigation, easy login in procedure
- Implements different learning methods (videotutorial, pdf documents, quizzes, questionnaires, forum, links etc.)
- Includes elements of interaction, enabling learners to share opinions and experiences
- Implements self-steering learning, which means that learners will decide what content they prefer to start with
- Includes self-assessment activities enabling participants to check their level of knowledge and receive feedback with suggestion for deciding the starting point of their learning process

#### **Flashcard**

The Flashcard concept has been selected as the innovative method for transferring the knowledge taking into account not only SMEs representatives' requirements in terms of content and learning environment, but also adult's learning principles.

It is designed to enable participants to learn in most effective way and trainers to use it in their training or consulting processes, as a supportive method. All Flashcards have the same structure and their content is encompassed from a particular chapter of a unit. The table below describes the different elements of the Flashcards.

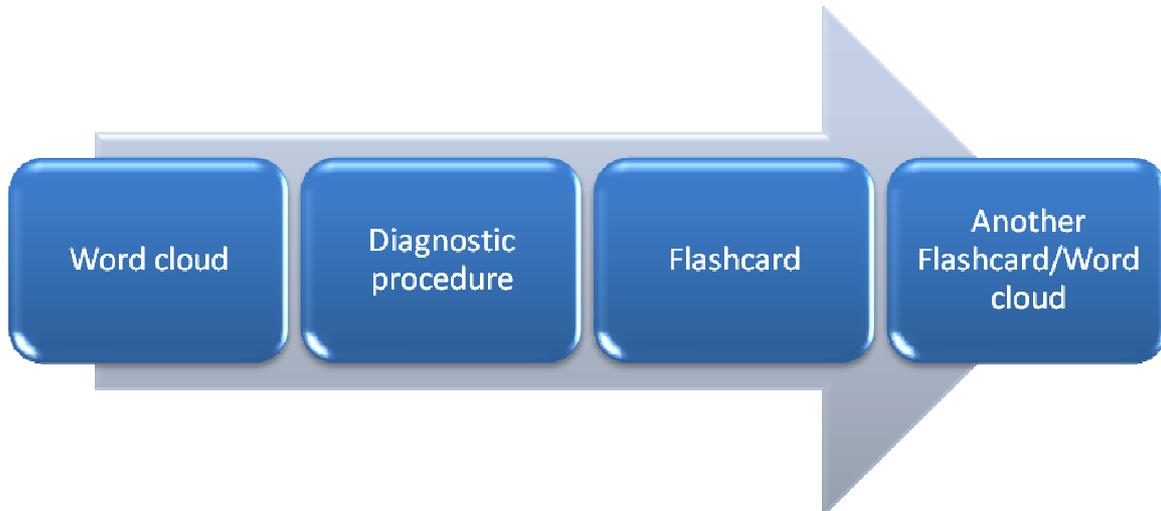
Element of Flashcard	Short description	Its meaning in the learning process
Introduction	Includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• learning objectives</li> <li>• estimated time of learning</li> <li>• indicating level of management for which particular content is suitable</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• informing learners about learning goals</li> <li>• informing about estimated learning time - they are able to plan the learning process</li> <li>• informing about possible usefulness by indicating the level of management</li> </ul>
Videotutorial	Includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• presentation prepared in PPT</li> <li>• video with lecturer explaining the content and accompanying participant</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• presenting small portion of knowledge in language adjusted to SMEs</li> <li>• including the lecturer contributes to interactivity</li> </ul>
Activity for user	May take form of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• analyzing article</li> <li>• webquest (seeking particular information in Internet)</li> <li>• questionnaire with feedback</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• engaging</li> <li>• encouraging to reflective thinking and using experience</li> <li>• different type of activity</li> </ul>
Tool description	Includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• description of standardized procedure which could help to derive interesting conclusions about organisation's condition</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• presenting useful and practical procedure that could be implemented in learners' organisation</li> </ul>
Good practice catalogue	Includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• descriptions of case studies suitable for SMEs and reflecting their reality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• presenting case studies adjusted to SMEs specificity (they are not detached from their reality)</li> <li>• examples of case studies adjusted to SMEs may be helpful with finding solving</li> </ul>

Forum		<p>problems in participants' organisations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• providing reference for learners' organizations</li> </ul>
	<p>Includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• space for creating and commenting posts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• providing an opportunity to indirect interaction by sharing ideas, opinions and experience</li> <li>• providing a place for building on-line peer-to-peer society</li> </ul>
	<p>Includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• most important information from Flashcard</li> <li>• suggestion concerning the next step</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• stressing the most important information</li> <li>• indicating the next Flashcard to read or way to go back to 'word cloud'</li> </ul>
Bibliography	<p>Includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• list of books concerning the strategic management</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• providing sources for completing the acquisition of knowledge</li> </ul>

In order to provide flexibility and to adjust the whole process of knowledge acquisition to individual needs, this needs to start with 'word cloud' which consists of questions related to particular issues connected with strategic management.

'Word cloud' allows choosing the items of interest to each participant in instead of imposing a pre-defined order. After selecting the topic from 'word cloud' the participant is directed to a diagnosis procedure based on 'closed type' questions with pre-defined feedback suggesting the Flashcard to read. After receiving the feedback, the participant will be able to decide whether he/she wants to 'read' the suggested Flashcard and answer another question from 'word cloud'.

After completing the Flashcard, the participant receives information concerning other available Flashcard related to a different topic. He/she can then decide to continue or go back to 'word cloud'. A visualization of this process is shown below:



## 6. Sample of flashcard

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Will be incorporated after translating final version of Flashcards.

## 7. Summary

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The Key features of the innovative learning model that contribute to make it useful for SMEs' managers and owners and for trainers are:

- a) the model is based on a compilation of two perspectives: theoretical models and research conducted among potential final users -PRO-STRATEGY Guide innovative learning model- takes into account the main conclusions and therefore is comprehensive
- b) the training materials are developed on the basis of the innovative learning model, can be used as self-learning materials or as elements of blended-learning process - Flashcards are flexible enough to meet the expectations of users preferring one of these two methods
- c) Flashcards are accessible for mobile trainings -
- d) Flashcard are designed in such a way that they reinforce the motivation of users by providing different kind of learning methods, opportunities of interaction and occasion to make a self-assessment in friendly and safe environment