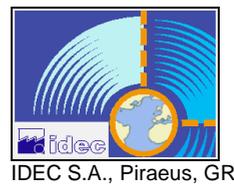




## ICONET

# Transfer Strategy SME



# Transfer Guide for SMEs

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## 1 Informal learning and SMEs

### 1.1 Introduction

Informal learning is semi-structured and occurs in a variety of places, such as learning at home, work, and through daily interactions and shared relationships among members of society. For many learners this includes language acquisition, cultural norms and manners. Informal learning for young people is an ongoing process that also occurs in a variety of places, such as out of school time, as well as in youth programs and at community centers.

In the context of corporate training and education, the term Informal Learning is widely used to describe the many forms of learning that takes place independently from instructor-led programs: books, self-study programs, performance support materials and systems, coaching, communities of practice, and expert directories.

Informal learning can be characterized as follows:

- It often takes place outside educational establishments standing out from normal life and professional practice;
- It does not necessarily follow a specified curriculum and is not often professionally organized but rather originates accidentally, sporadically, in association with certain occasions, from changing practical requirements;
- It is not necessarily planned pedagogically conscious, systematically according to subjects, test and qualification-oriented, but rather unconsciously incidental, holistically problem-related, and related to situation management and fitness for life;
- It is experienced directly in its "natural" function of everyday life.

Informal learning is largely invisible, because much of it is either taken for granted or not recognized as learning; thus, people lack awareness of their own learning. The resultant knowledge is either tacit or regarded as part of a person's general capability, rather than something that has been learned.

### 1.2 Learning at SMEs

Small and medium-sized enterprises are socially and economically important, since they represent 99% of all enterprises in the EU, provide around 65 million jobs and contribute to entrepreneurship and innovation. SMEs face a number of obstacles regarding their sustainability and development due to changing social economic conditions and increased competitiveness.

One of the main obstacles for SMEs is training of their personnel, in order to keep up with business and technological changes. SMEs managers are reluctant to dedicate time to formal training activities, due to limited resources. For an SME to manage and sustain business whilst engaging in training can be very difficult. Most SMEs do not have a formal learning culture, their priority is survival, leading to just-in-time activities, the benefits of training to the business have to be very clear and measurable

On the other hand informal learning is a prominent way of learning at the workplace in general and particular in SMEs. Typical activities in SMEs that engage learning are: visits and participation in exhibitions and fairs, working by experienced colleagues, job-rotating, meetings, travels and many others.

The ENSR study (European Commission, 2003) show that small enterprises have a big preference for informal training practices. Such practices are particularly important when a company trains new employees and in aiding the frequent changes in organisation common in SMEs. Their most common learning strategies are “learning by doing” and “just-in-time!” quick informal methods aimed to solve daily work tasks and closely oriented to their business. One negative aspect is that informal learning is often not acknowledged as learning within organisations. It is regarded as a part of the job or a method to do the daily tasks properly.

## 2. The ICONET Transfer Guide

### 2.1 The ICONET validation tool

The ICONET project builds on and transfers the results and outcomes of the earlier ICOVET project.

The ICONET project examined strategies to make informally or non-formally gained competences visible in order to enable disadvantaged young people to better understand their own competences and to learn how to use them in engaging with the formal world of vocational education and training, give teachers in schools of general education a better understanding of pupils` competences acquired outside schools and enable teachers to systematically use these competences in preparing for VET. It further aimed to give disadvantaged young people better access to training and employment in companies and likewise enable companies or training institutions to systematically use these competences in VET.

The project developed a validation tool, primarily comprised of an interview template and guide to help teachers, trainers and youth workers work together with young people to explore how their activities and experiences relate to competencies or abilities.

The guideline for interviews related to seven areas of potential informal learning:

- leisure time
- family
- school/training
- voluntary involvement
- jobs
- health
- special life situations

The assumption was that young people acquire abilities in at least one of these areas and that they will want to talk about it, if provided sufficient support.

Activities and competencies were recorded in a document owned by the young person.

The project also examined how these competencies could be translated into the terminology of the EuroPASS. Europass is a common European CV, approved by the European Parliament, documenting competences gained through both formal and informal learning.

## 2.2 New settings and new target groups

The ICONET project aimed to transfer the ICONET approach to new fields of application, settings, and target groups. This involved the further development of the ICONET tools and their adaptation for use with new groups and in new contexts.

The project also aimed to embed the key results and experiences from the ICONET project in each of the partner countries' system of career support programmes for disadvantaged people. The so doing, the aim was to open up new avenues for institutions and organizations working in the field of vocational support for disadvantaged target groups.

## 3. Transfer of ICONET to SMEs

SMEs employees form a totally distinct target group from young disadvantaged people. SMEs employees belong in very different age, educational and social groups. Besides this, the difference in the size and sector of companies can have a great effect on the employees and on the settings of informal learning. Therefore, in this document, we will present a transfer methodology, that can be used in specific size, sector and location SME setting, in order to better suit its particular needs.

The ICONET methodology is based on a structured interview on a basis of a set of guidelines that aims to identify key competences acquired through family and leisure time, formal training, work experience, voluntary activities and other life situations. Adaptation of the ICONET methodology is being done at multiple levels. First the instruments itself needs to be adapted, in order to reflect particular conditions of the SMEs. The process needs also adaptation as well as the actors and the expected results. The involvement of the end-users is expected to be more active, as we are no longer talking about young people, but adults with substantial work experience.

### 3.1 Adaptation of instruments

The instruments of the ICONET methodology consist of:

#### *Making visible young people's competencies: a validation tool*

This is the main tool for the identification of competencies acquired in non formal and informal settings. The tool is an interview grid and consists of seven areas of potential informal learning that are:

- leisure time
- family
- school/training
- voluntary involvement
- jobs
- health
- special life situations

In each area, there is an example and then a grid to fill with activities, competences and correspondence with Europass skills and abilities.

Adaptation of the validation tool mainly refers to the introductory questions in each area and in the used example. For example in the first area leisure time, the used example refers to a young person exercising break dance. When referring to adults it is more likely that they go to other dance classes or doing other hobbies rather than bread dance. The same applies through all areas in the validation tool. The questions and examples currently used are highly targeted to young people in transition from school to adult life. These have to be adapted to reflect adult people with different life experiences, obligations and currently working.

It is under consideration, whereas the area 3: School/training is of interested in SMEs. This depends strongly on the age of the specific end users. If they are young adults, then it may be still relevant. However, speaking of people above their 30s, activities done in the school years are not relevant. This can be omitted or can be altered to Education/training and refer in a wider sense to upper school education i.e. college or university years.

Moreover the area 5: Working experience can be very important for informal learning. Common tasks at work outside the formal work description require a great set of skills and competences that are usually ignored and neglected. For example an office secretary can practice in her job accounting, taking with customers and suppliers, dealing with public relationships tasks that are often given to workers following their particular skills and wants but are not necessarily part of the work position.

In addition area 4: Voluntary involvement can reveal a great deal of social, organisational and artistic skills.

#### *Manual for using the interview guidelines*

The manual is targeted mainly to the interviewer, in order to prepare for the interviews and adapt the interview grid according the specific interviewee. The manual has two parts the first is guidelines for the interviewer and the second is an overview of the validation tool with specific examples. The guidelines need to be adapted accordingly. For the second part, it will follow the changes already done in the validation tool.

#### *Best practice guide*

The best practice guide describes the prerequisites and the required context for the use of the validation tool. It describes the necessary skills that the interviewer should possess and some other considerations like ethical, confidentiality, ownership and other.

#### *Train the trainer curriculum*

In ICONET trainers can be teachers, counsellors, advisors, group facilitators that work with the young people. As the validation tool is not self-explanatory there is a need to train these people to use the validation tool and plan the interviews with the young persons.

The curriculum need adaptation as the actors, the interview process and the validation tool change to suit the particular needs of SMEs.

### 3.2 Adaptation of process

The ICONET methodology has a number of requirements for the use of the validation tool with young disadvantaged people.

- The interview takes place on a one-to-one setting
- The young person must feel comfortable
- Ideally, the young person has a trusting relationship with the interviewer

- The young person is involved in the process on a voluntary basis

When referring to SMEs employees, interviews can be one-to-one or in a focus group session, when each interviewee can fill in his/her own tool, or there is a person dedicated to take notes.

The facilitator should present the seven areas to the people, ask them the relevant questions and guide them with the relevant examples. The interviewees can have more active participation than young people. For example, they can make by their own the correspondence of acquired skills and competences with skills and abilities in Europass form, or they can fill in the Europass CV as a result of the interview.

Focus groups can be organised at the company level, at department level or in a group of employees from different companies, for example at a regional, local or sectorial level, organised by chambers, associations or trade unions.

### 3.3 Actors involved

The guide is designed for all those working with learners, in formal and informal settings. This could include teachers and trainers, youth and social workers, careers guidance workers and those working with socially disadvantaged groups.

It may also be of interest to researchers working in this field and to curriculum developers, policy makers, planners and managers interested in the recognition of informal learning.

In SMEs context, the actors involved are: managers and human resources managers of SMEs, supervisors, trainers, external consultants. In particular cases it can also be a trained employee. Focus groups can also be organised in collaboration with chambers of commerce and industry, business associations, sectorial, regional or local organisations and trade unions.

### 3.4 Expected results

The main result of the ICONET methodology is the completed individual Europass CV. Europass CV is one of the Europass instruments, the one most widely used in Member States. Europass CV is completed by the person him/herself and reflects in a structured form his/her education, work experience, skills and competences. Europass CV is not validated by a competent body, it is just a CV, but in a structured format, so as to include skills and competencies acquired through informal and non-formal settings.

Other intangible results of the use of ICONET tool are:

- The awareness of people of skills and competences that they possess and the new possibilities that are open to them in terms of career. This is beneficial to both employers and employees, when they can mutual agree and plan a career development plan, further training or alter tasks and job assignments,
- The motivation of the participants to further explore and develop skills and competences as well as to look for ways to certify and validate skills and competences through informal and non-formal learning. This strongly depends on the country of origin and the level of recognition (or not) of informal and non formal learning other factors such as sector of the company and particular occupation.

## 4. Further considerations

This section is intended to provide a short guide or checklist for those interested in developing the ideas in this transfer guide forward and possibly implementing their own project or initiative for the recognition of informal learning.

### *Requirements and needs analysis*

The ICONET project suggests that requirements or needs analysis is critical to any successful transfer of approaches to the recognition of informal learning. Who are the people with which the methods and tools are to be used? What is their background and previous experiences? Will they feel comfortable with such an approach? What have they got to gain from exploring their previous learning and how can they effectively use the outcome of the process?

The experience of the ICONET project suggests that directly involving the end users in the design of the project can help in ensuring it matches their needs.

### *Existent systems and structures*

Any innovative approach to teaching and learning has to consider existing structures for education and training. What are existing policies at national, regional or local levels? Are there existing programmes or projects to which you can connect? In which structures can instruments and methods for the recognition of informal learning be embedded?

### *Networks*

Are there existing networks which are interested in the recognition of informal learning? These might be at institutional or subject area or focusing on education and training for particular socially disadvantaged groups. How can contacts be developed with such networks?

### *Partnerships*

You may be in a position where you can implement projects or initiatives for the recognition of informal learning yourself. But often you will need to develop partnerships with associations or other organisations in order to do this. Who are the partners who can best help in this? What is their interest in the recognition of informal learning and how might it help in their work? What is the best way to approach these organisations?

### *Accreditation and recognition*

How can informal competencies be recognized or accredited? How can these competencies be located in the European or the respective National Qualifications Frameworks? Is there any connection to the work of accreditation institutions?

### *Support from managers and staff*

Another finding from the ICONET project was that the support of managers and staff in organisations and institutions responsible for education and training is critical to the introduction of new tools and methods. Not only do they need to know about such initiatives but the need to understand why they are being asked to undertake this work. This is particularly important as such initiatives will often have implications in terms of resources. How can this be achieved?

### *Training of trainers*

The training of trainers is another crucial factor in successfully implementing projects for the recognition of informal learning. There are different ways in which this can be done –

through workshops, seminars, meetings, one to one sessions or through the use of Information and Communication technologies.

Teachers and trainers need not only to understand the tools and methods, but the pedagogic approaches to recognising informal learning and how such recognition will play a role in the future learning or career progression of learners.

### *Curriculum*

Most of the ICONET projects have involved integrating the recognition of informal learning into existing courses or curriculum. This involves a two fold approach to adaptation – what needs to be changed in the ICONET tools and methods to integrate within the existing curriculum and how does the existing curriculum need to be changed to accommodate such tools and processes? Who is responsible for curriculum development and who has authority to agree such changes? How much time will the ICONET approach take and how is it to be timetabled?

### *Pedagogy and Support for learners*

Most, if not all, learners will need support in recognising skills and competences gained from informal learning. How is this support to be organised? What teaching and learning methods are best suited to the needs of the learners? How can we make learning attractive and motivate participants? Who will support the learners and what form will the support take. This could include group and peer group learning or one-to-one sessions with teachers or counsellors? At what point does support stop? How can we ensure that learners are able to use the results of taking part in the process?

### *Using technology*

The ICONET project found the use of Information and Communication Technologies can be an effective tool to support the identification of skills and competences gained from informal learning, to motivate participants and to make learning attractive. The project also found that there is a wide range of free open source and social software that can be used effectively for this purpose and in the process of use develops new skills and competences.

Of course the use of technologies provides issues. What programmes should you use? Do the teachers and trainers have sufficient competence to use such technologies? Do you have access to computers and internet connectivity? Are there issues regarding internet safety?

### *Continuing support*

If you are interested in further developing and transferring the ICONET methods and tools for the recognition of skills and abilities gained from informal learning, there are a number of possible ways in which the project partners can support you.

The first port of call is the project's main website at [www.iconet-eu.net](http://www.iconet-eu.net) This website contains case studies and reports from each of the pilot implementations together with examples of good practice. As well as accessing reports and documents, the site contains multi media including photos, audio and video.

The site is multi lingual including material in English, German, Romanian, French, Portuguese and Greek