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Bringing Digital from the Periphery to the Core of the Small Firm: the Role of the DIGA Learning Programme

There is a keen interest amongst policy makers and educators to better understand how entrepreneurs engage with and use digital as a foundation on which to devise focussed optimal digital policy and relevant competency development interventions to equip small firms prosper in an ever intensifying digital marketplace.

This digitalised or increasingly ‘virtual’ marketplace is scaling with incredible speed, generating ‘real time’ or ‘around the clock’ trading, converging buyer with seller and producer, fast tracking product innovations necessitating small firms to be digitally agile and capable – posing challenges for many entrepreneurs. The nature of these challenges were highlighted in the results of a quantitative cross cultural survey comprising of 482 enterprise trainers and educators, learners and entrepreneurs in the UK, Ireland, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Norway and Spain. Digital challenges arose in relation to the language used to describe digital where respondents felt it was difficult to keep current with the ever-evolving technologies and the number of interchangeable expressions used to describe it. The findings show that the low level of integrated usage of digital by owner-managers was in the main related to insufficient knowledge and skills as to what digital entails and a lack of appreciation of the contribution that it can make to their business bottom line in the short term.

Essentially small firms are heterogeneous in nature and much of a firm’s digital adoption is dependent on the owner manager’s experience with digital, their competencies and perception and attitudes as to what constitutes digital beyond marketing and the type of ICT hardware infrastructure in place. The reality is that while many of today’s small firms are products of the technological era, it does not necessarily mean that they have fully knowledge about the vast potential of digital or how it can be deployed across the enterprise and contribute to bottom line and overall financial outputs.

It can be concluded from this study that digital is closer to the periphery than the heart of the enterprise primarily due to lack of digital and E-Skills competencies of the entrepreneur and their employees and an underestimation of the potential financial and non-financial benefits of digital beyond the marketing function.

Bringing Digital from the periphery to the core of the small firm – Digital Academy for Growth Programme

The Digital Innovations for Growth Academy Project¹ is an Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership from seven member states (UK, Ireland, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Norway and Spain) involved in the enhancement of digital competencies of entrepreneurs and owner-manager through the provision of appropriate small firm context digital training programmes. Informed by the results of the quantitative empirical study the DIGA Learning Programme (<http://digaproject.eu/learning-programme/>) was designed to support entrepreneurship trainers and educators (ETE) in the development of their digital competencies and skills to enable





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them to train, advise and mentor entrepreneurs to become more digitally-literate. The DIGA Learning Programme promotes an integrated perspective of the role and benefits of digital technologies as they apply to the specific characteristics of the start-up and established small enterprise. It incorporates five modules to develop the core digital competencies identified in policy and practice reports:

- 1. Enhancing Digital Awareness and Knowledge**
- 2. The role and use of Digital Technologies and their benefits to Business**
- 3. Making Digital Deliver for the start-up and small business**
- 4. Enabling and Supporting the Development of an Entrepreneurial Digital Strategy**
- 5. Designing Integrated (Digital Competence) Entrepreneur Support/Programmes**

During the development of the programme, a blended delivery approach was deployed encompassing knowledge sharing complemented by linked practice based experiential learning via online activities, supporting exercises, case studies and individual and team assignments. The learning environment was designed to encourage and enable peer and supported group learning in an informal interactive manner. This creation of a community of learners generated a network of professional contacts for ongoing collaboration between the participants. 93 enterprise trainers and educators working in 5 EU countries completed the 5-module DIGA Learning programme. The feedback from their DIGA Learning Programme experience is presented below.

How the DIGA Learning Programme builds enterprise wise digital competencies

The evaluation responses demonstrate that DIGA provided a very positive digital learning journey (professional and personal) for participants. This incorporated the provision of knowledge and best practices on EU and National digital policies; clarification of the concept of digital and what it means beyond marketing; an insight and evaluation of the range of digital tools available and their uses in an entrepreneurial context; guidelines and templates to develop an integrated digital strategy for a small firm and how to develop a digital strategy training programme for entrepreneurs.

Complementing the above knowledge acquisition were practical and applied experiences of using digital in an entrepreneurial context. The nature and type of digital learning acquired from participation in DIGA include the following:

- The participants now have a more embedded digital mind-set and positive disposition towards using digital in an integrated manner – understanding the ‘*what*’ and the ‘*how*’ of digital as it applies in an entrepreneurial context.
- There is a heightened awareness of and ability to extend digital beyond a marketing and promotions application to take account of its potential benefits across all business functions.
- An Increased level of confidence was reported in supporting entrepreneurs/small business owners to develop an entrepreneurial digital strategy.





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- More proactive engagement with and introducing digital to clients rather than waiting for clients to ask about it – making digital part of the business narratives and discussions/deliberations between ETE and their clients.
- Participants have developed skills and are able to use methods to monitor the return (financial and non-financial) and the benefits of digital tools.
- Central to embedding and nurturing digital competencies was the opportunity for participants to explore, test and practice digital via practical exercises, assessments, videos, team and individual assignments throughout the programme. The practical and action learning aspects of the programme directly engaged the learner in the practice of digital and it also afforded the ETE to gauge and monitor their digital learning (knowledge and skills) being acquired as they progressed the modules.

The comments obtained from participants highlighted the multiple positive aspects of the programme by incorporating both the theory and practice of digital in a relevant entrepreneurial context. The theoretical components of the modules provided knowledge and understanding of the broader topic of digital and demystified the jargon of digital and moreover provided participants with a more business wide comprehension as to what digital means for strategic business cross functional decisions. Participants also acknowledge and appreciate that digital technology is an evolving and ever advancing domain and thus digital learning is ongoing and through DIGA have developed a set of skills and resources continue and build on their digital learning.

Final Reflections

Integrating digital across functional domains can create additional value financially and non-financially for the small firm. An effective digital strategy calls for extensive cross-functional orchestration that requires the entrepreneur to be digitally capable, confident and have the mind-set to provide a focus and resources to a digital agenda. The DIGA programme has shown its ability to deliver measurable digital knowledge, skills and competencies - moving digital from the peripheral to a core business function – perceptual and operationally. Further it engages the entrepreneur with digital where the practical language of digital becomes a natural part of the business narrative for entrepreneurs.

To heighten the awareness of the need for digital skills, digital must be viewed as a critical business competency, and as with any competency it requires investment and ongoing learning and practice to ensure an integrated implementation of the ‘why’; ‘what’; ‘how’ and ‘when’ of digital. When digital knowledge and skills are in place then subsequent decisions by the entrepreneur on the most appropriate use of digital tools and the required digital infrastructure will be more focussed and relevant to the needs of the firm and its market requirements. It is contended that ICT is still a very silent tool in many small firms, but if made more vocal it can be an invaluable asset which underpins and enables the efficient execution of cross functional integration and converging the firm with its external stakeholder of customers, buyers and suppliers.





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Further information on the DIGA Project is available here: <http://digaproject.eu/>

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Note:

This paper is an intellectual output of the Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership Project Digital Innovations for Growth Academy (DIGA) [2014-1-UK01-KA202-001780]. It presents research and analysis to inform the development of the DIGA training programme to enhance the digital competencies of enterprise educators and trainers. Digital Innovations for Growth Academy operates as a Strategic Partnership from seven member states. The partners are from the social, private and public sectors. Through the testing and piloting of the programme materials the project will include 120 enterprise trainers and educators from five partner countries.

Disclaimer:

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