



WP1 - S3 Innovation Hub Network in Blue Economy sectors and seajobs

A1.4. Activation of an Innovation Hub Network

D.1.4.1 SMEs Matching Study



Summary

1. Introduction	3
2. Needs Analysis of SMEs in the Adriatic Blue Economy	3
2.1. Key Challenges Facing SMEs.....	3
2.2. Sector Specific Needs.	4
3. Cross- Border Service Offerings for SMEs.	5
3.1. Digitalization & Smart Technologies	5
3.2 Sustainability & Circular Economy Support	5
3.3 SME Innovation & R&D Support.....	5
3.4 Business & Market Development Support.....	5
3.5 Cross-Border Matchmaking for Sea Jobs.....	6
4. Strategic Implementation & Expected Outcomes	6
4.1. Implementation Plan.....	6
4.2 Expected Outcomes.....	6
5. Conclusion: Preparing for the Cross-Border Strategy	7



1. Introduction

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) operating in the Blue Economy across the Adriatic region face both significant opportunities and structural challenges. The **BLUESLINKS project** has identified a pressing need for innovation, sustainability, and enhanced collaboration among SMEs in maritime sectors such as **fisheries, aquaculture, nautical services, marine biotechnology, and coastal tourism**. The creation of a **cross-border cluster** between Italy and Croatia aims to bridge these gaps by providing SMEs with **innovative services, digital transformation tools, and structured matchmaking mechanisms for skills and labor force alignment**.

This study provides an in-depth analysis of SME needs and highlights the role of the cross-border strategy, focusing on:

- Digitalization and sustainable business practices.
- Access to funding and innovation support.
- Matchmaking between SMEs and the labor market.
- The role of regional clusters in fostering competitiveness and collaboration.

This document serves as a preliminary analysis to the Cross-Border Strategy (D.1.4.2), laying the foundation for its implementation.

2. Needs Analysis of SMEs in the Adriatic Blue Economy

2.1. Key Challenges Facing SMEs

A comprehensive survey among 89 stakeholders in Italy and Croatia reveals that the key challenges for SMEs include:

1. **Lack of qualified workforce** – 66.7% of SMEs struggle to find skilled labor, particularly in **fishing, aquaculture, and emerging blue biotechnology fields**.



Italy – Croatia

BLUESLINKS

2. **Low adoption of smart specialization strategies (S3/S4)** – 71.4% of SMEs are unaware of regional Smart Specialization Strategies, limiting their ability to access innovation funding and policy incentives.
3. **Slow digital transformation** – Only 20% of SMEs have adopted **advanced digital tools**, while 86.7% express a need for training in **Industry 4.0 and digital solutions**.
4. **Environmental sustainability pressures** – Over 60% of SMEs report difficulties in adopting **circular economy practices**, complying with new regulations, and addressing climate change impacts.
5. **Fragmented market access** – SMEs struggle to expand into international markets due to **weak cross- border networks and insufficient financial support**.

2.2. Sector Specific Needs.

Blue Economy Sector	Key Needs identified	Strategic Support Required
Fisheries & Aquaculture	Skilled workforce, sustainable practices, branding	Training programs, market access support
Coastal & Maritime Tourism	Smart tourism models, climate adaptation strategies	Digitalization, innovation in service models
Nautical Services	Skilled labor, digital transformation, infrastructure	Industry 4.0 tools, workforce training
Blue Biotechnology	R&D investment, specialized workforce	Cross-border R&D hubs, access to financing
Marine Renewable Energy	Regulatory alignment, funding opportunities	Policy support, investment matchmaking

SMEs in **traditional sectors** (fishing, tourism) require **business model diversification**, while those **in emerging sectors** (biotechnology, marine energy) need **innovation-driven policies and funding**.



3. Cross- Border Service Offerings for SMEs.

The **BLUESLINKS consortium** will establish a **structured network of cross-border service centers**, offering tailored support based on SME needs. The **Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)** underlines the **strategic commitment** to enhancing SME competitiveness through these services.

3.1. Digitalization & Smart Technologies

- **Workshops and webinars on AI, IoT, and big data** applications in the Blue Economy.
- **One-on-one digital consulting** for SMEs lacking expertise in adopting smart technologies.
- **Access to an online resource hub** featuring best practices in digital transformation.

3.2 Sustainability & Circular Economy Support

- Training in **eco-friendly production, sustainable fishing, and aquaculture practices**.
- Tools for conducting **Environmental Impact Assessments** to comply with EU regulations.
- Support in adopting **circular economy models** and energy-efficient processes

3.3 SME Innovation & R&D Support

- **Innovation hubs** connecting SMEs with research institutions for R&D collaboration.
- Assistance in **accessing EU grants and funding mechanisms** for sustainable growth.
- Pilot projects to **test new business models** in a cross-border environment.

3.4 Business & Market Development Support

- **Mentorship programs** pairing SMEs with industry leaders.
- **Training in digital marketing, regulatory compliance, and business diversification**.



Italy – Croatia



- **Market validation services** helping SMEs test their products/services before scaling.

3.5 Cross-Border Matchmaking for Sea Jobs

- **Job fairs and recruitment days** for connecting SMEs with skilled professionals.
- **Apprenticeship and internship programs** to address skills shortages in the maritime sector.
- **Skill certification programs** to enhance workforce readiness for Blue Economy jobs.

Each service center will **specialize in different areas**, ensuring an **efficient allocation of expertise** across Italy and Croatia.

4. Strategic Implementation & Expected Outcomes

4.1. Implementation Plan

Phase	Key Activities	Starting Month
Phase 1 – Awareness Outreach	Develop promotional materials, launch online resource hub, host initial workshops	May 2025
Phase 2 – Training Engagement	Conduct in-depth training, mentorship, and networking events.	September 2025
Phase 3 – Evaluation Sustainability	Monitor SME progress, refine services, and secure long-term funding.	April 2026

4.2 Expected Outcomes

- **Increased SME adoption of digital and sustainable practices.**



Italy – Croatia

BLUESLINKS

- **Stronger cross-border collaboration** between SMEs, research institutions, and policymakers.
- **Improved access to financing and innovation support mechanisms.**
- **A fully developed Adriatic Blue Economy cluster** fostering business creation and investment.
- **A structured system for matching SMEs with skilled professionals**, addressing critical labor shortages.

5. Conclusion: Preparing for the Cross-Border Strategy

The **SMEs Matching Study** underscores the urgent need for **structured, cross-border cooperation** to address digital, environmental, and workforce challenges in the Adriatic Blue Economy. The proposed **network of cross-border service centers** will provide **strategic support**, ensuring that SMEs can navigate innovation and sustainability transitions while gaining **access to new markets and skilled talent**.

This document serves as a **foundation for the Cross-Border Strategy (D.1.4.2)** and will guide its implementation by aligning SME needs with targeted solutions.

For SMEs, policymakers, and stakeholders engaged in the Adriatic Blue Economy, the next step is to formalize collaboration mechanisms, secure financial resources, and implement structured service offerings for **long-term economic resilience and competitiveness**.

