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DIGITRANS - Digital Transformation In The Danube Region

Validated regional DIGITRANS incubation space

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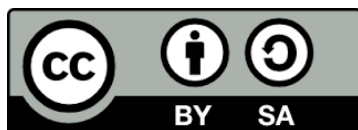
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1. Introduction

The power of incubation spaces lies in the collaboration of heterogenous groups of people from diverse sectors with different levels of expertise and experience – all working towards achieving some kind of goal. By taking them out of their everyday working contexts and forcing participants to take different perspectives when tackling a challenge, their minds are opened and creativity and enthusiasm are fostered. This is the value that the project consortium is attempting to create with the idea of DIGITRANS incubation spaces in the Danube area. It is meant to help SMEs gaining a better understanding how to transform into the digital age, but it is also supposed to offer an open environment that is available to anyone that is looking for a better comprehension regarding the digital transformation as a whole, the use of innovation methods or that is simply looking for a place to collaborate with others following trial and error approaches without the fear of failure.

In the context of DIGITRANS, the aim of the incubation spaces is to a) provide space for workshops and 1-on-1 sessions; b) provide space for interactive and creative working; c) demonstrate to SMEs how creative spaces can be designed; and d) to present the advantages of such innovation incubators to relevant stakeholders like politicians.

This document gives an overview on the DIGITRANS incubation space that has been refined and validated in several iterations with all project partners involved. It outlines the final incubation space concept including possible deviations derived from the regional implementations by the project partners in the Danube region. Additional, a catalogue of lessons learned derived from participants' feedback is provided for future installations of the DIGITRANS incubation space.

2. Implementation Guideline for the DIGITRANS Incubation Space

This implementation guideline is based on the validated regional incubation spaces that have been implemented in all partner regions. Throughout the implementation phase, each partner conducted workshops to further refine the incubation space by incorporating participants' feedback. Also included in this implementation guideline are recommendations for stakeholder selection, space adjustments as well as lessons learned.

Stakeholders for cooperation

When setting up an incubation space following the DIGITRANS concept, one should consider the establishment of close cooperation with political stakeholders and partners like district administrations, regional business development agencies or chambers of commerce as well as research institutions. The project partners report about strong networks and ecosystem with bilateral exchange of knowledge and experience. Incubation spaces set up do not only provide great benefit to local SMEs but do also profit from cooperation with relevant stakeholders from the economic as well as political environment raising their level of sustainability.

The project output is supposed to foster sustainable innovations in the regions and should therefore be considered a real asset for the public. Collaboration with relevant stakeholders enhances the visibility of the incubator as a place to promote innovation and new product development. This emphasises the importance of it towards companies as well as political stakeholders.

The validated incubation space

The DIGITRANS incubation space, as depicted in Fig. 1, is divided into four subspaces with specific purposes and equipment: The workshop subspace, the office and research subspace, the focus subspace and the gallery subspace. These subspaces do not have to be separated by walls or furniture and the size of each subspace should ideally be variable (marked by red arrows) depending on the workshops' needs like number of participants, accessibility and kinds of prototypes.
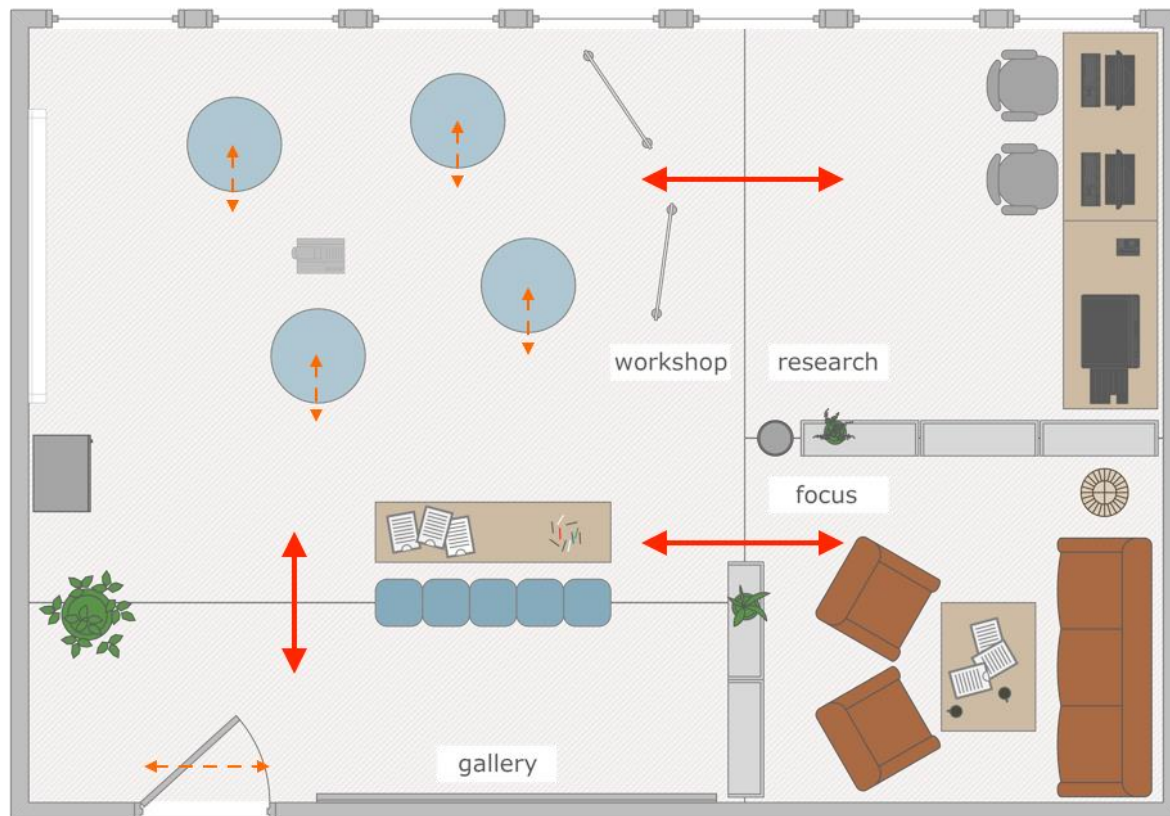

Fig. 1: Room diagram for the DIGITRANS incubation space

It is recommended to select the furniture and equipment as flexible as possible – for each of the four subspaces (e.g. light tables and chairs or furniture on wheels) with accessibility features kept in mind (marked by orange dotted arrows). This way an adaptation to the participants' needs can be reached – for example height-adjustable tables for people in wheelchairs.

In the workshop subspace, high tables, movable white- or pinboards as well as a furniture representing self-service counters for tools like pens, sticky notes and papers. A projector and a screen can be considered depending on whether it shall be used in the conducted DIGITRANS workshops. Low furniture, like seats or shelf, can be used to mark the transition to the gallery and research subspaces. The research subspace features workstations with computers and peripherals or – in case participants work on their own computers – just tables and chairs. Separated by higher furniture like bookshelves

or even solid walls, the focus subspace contains a couch table and comfortable seating options like sofas or armchairs. The focus subspace is the only area that should be separated as it marks a place of retreat for focussed working in smaller groups.

When planning furniture, it is necessary to keep in mind the specific regulation and rules of the property owner where the incubation space is installed. Paying attention e.g. to fire protection or other safety rules as well as accessibility is mandatory. Only certificated furniture is allowed in those cases.

The furniture itself is not the most important thing for the participants as they focus mainly on the workshop itself but at the same time with the incubation space it should be assured that the workshop can be held flawlessly. However, furniture that is different from the participants' usual working environments is considered welcome. Also adjustable high tables are regarded as an excellent alternation for the body in the working process, because most of the time people sit at a regular desk. Some physical movement in between facilitates the brain, to open up for new ideas, connections and the finding of good solutions.

Impressions

The following pictures shall give an orientation on how the different spaces can look like in reality and how they are used in real workshop settings.

Fig. 2: Example of Workshop Subspace (HSRT)

Fig. 3: Example of Workshop Subspace (TICM)

Fig. 4: Example of Gallery Subspace (ITG)

Fig. 5: Example of Focus Subspace (MAG)
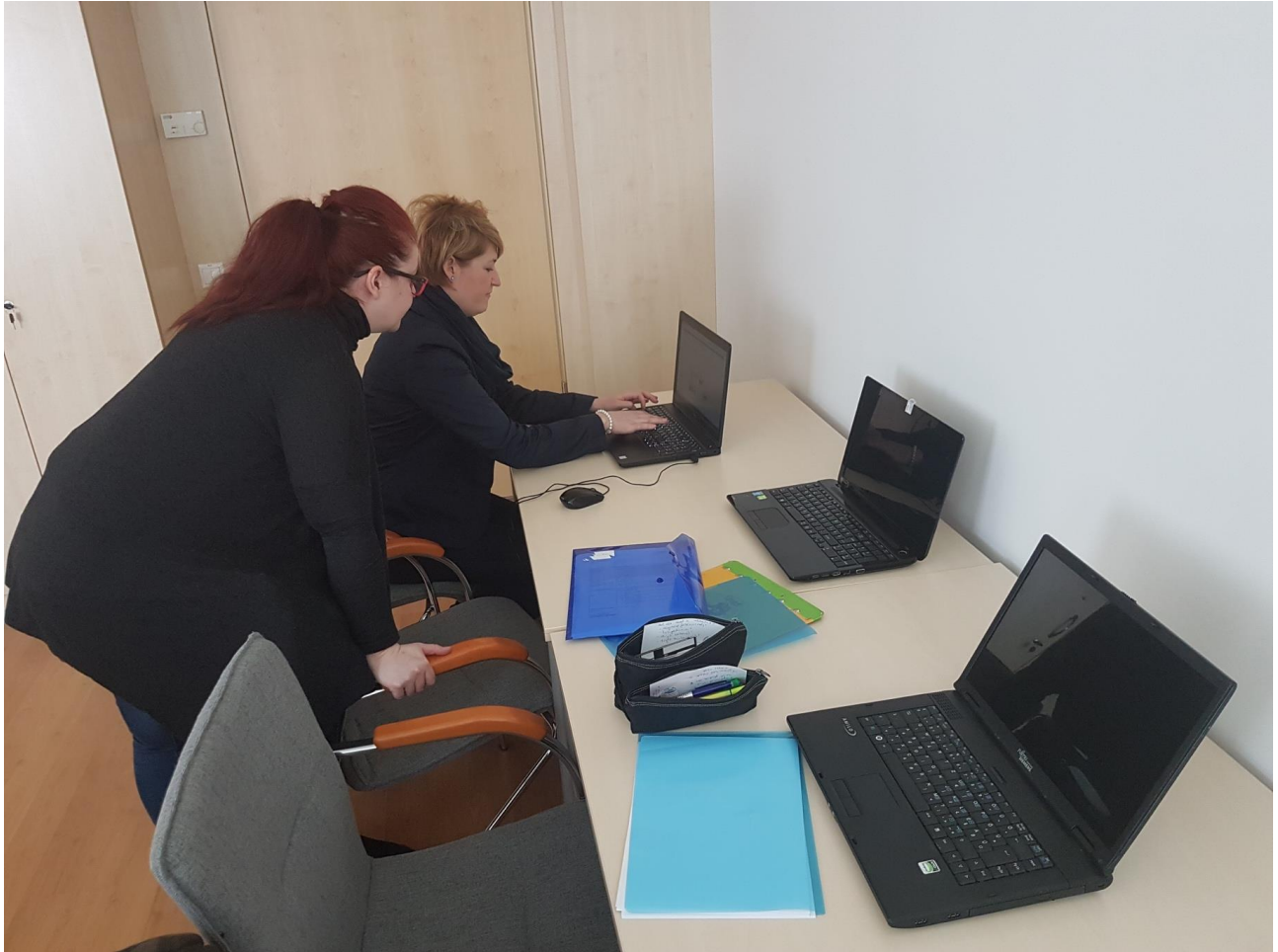
Fig. 6: Example of Focus Subspace (AUPM)

Fig. 7: Example of Research Subspace (MAG)

3. Lessons Learned

For the validation of the regional incubation spaces, workshops with SME participants as well as internal workshops with project partners have been conducted and lessons learned regarding the incubation space were documented. This catalogue of lessons learned based on the observations of the project partners as well as the participants' feedback is meant to help with future installations of incubation spaces following the DIGITRANS method.

General

The incubation space allows the participants to step out of their everyday work surrounding and to develop new ideas without being interrupted by phone, other requests or colleagues. To support this aspect, the selected furniture and equipment should differ from regular office ones with respect to form, style and colour. Access to daylight through windows helps to foster creativity better compared to artificial light sources. The space should also be well-ventilated and provide a calm environment with at least distraction as possible.

One of the most important aspects of the incubation space is the literal room for ideas – in written form. The DIGITRANS incubation space provides writing surfaces in various forms like whiteboards, pinboards, flipcharts or special wall paint with minimal limitation of mobility. Ideally, each workshop group should be able to rely on at least one whiteboard.

Restriction-free accessibility

Following a strict inclusion policy, it has to be assured that the incubation space setup is fully accessible regarding doors, tables, equipment and restrooms. Disabled people have to be able to attend workshops and use the incubation space without any restrictions. For that purpose, adjustable furniture is to be considered and available rooms have to be examined before installation.

Materials

Analogous to the writing surfaces, the writing utensils like pens and paper are crucial for innovation method and the lack of it can be considered a creativity blocker. It should be ensured that ordinary markers are separated from erasable board markers and are also distinguishable or else white boards might be rendered useless.

Sticky notes are a great tool for noting ideas and should be provided in various sizes and colours so that an additional dimension for differentiation is provided.

The DIGITRANS method provides various canvases and templates, like Osterwalder's Business Model Canvas or Value Proposition Canvas, that should be printed in DIN A1 or even A0. Providing printed canvases to the workshop participants is a real timesaver eliminating unnecessary transcriptions and the teams can also take the completed canvases with them to further work on it in their companies.

It should be made sure that each group of workshop participants has quick access to a workshop toolbox containing equipment like pens, markers and sticky notes, glue and tape, scissors and ribbons for network visualisations. The content of these toolboxes will accompany the participants throughout the whole workshop.

In the prototyping phase it is recommended to provide underlays for handcrafted work. Not only is it easier to transport and present the prototypes but it also protects the tables from accidental damage.

For the whole workshop, a timer to manage the time slots better, WIFI for the participants to do desk research as well as special equipment to support digital transformation like a 3D printer can be added.

Basic equipment costs

The following cost statement is derived from the adapted version of the DIGITRANS incubation space reference model at Reutlingen University. Obviously, the equipment costs vary in each country and therefore they only present an estimate on equipment costs for the setup of a regional incubation space.

Tab. 1: Cost statement for the equipment of an incubation space

Description	Unit Nr	Unit Rate	Budget
metaplan boards	3	300.00 €	900.00 €
high tables	4	150.00 €	600.00 €
1 adjustable counter	1	400.00 €	400.00 €
stools	5	100.00 €	500.00 €
projection screen	1	250.00 €	250.00 €
room dividers	2	350.00 €	700.00 €
armchairs	2	300.00 €	600.00 €
couch	1	173.08 €	173.08 €
table	1	200.00 €	200.00 €

Cooperation with relevant stakeholders

To set up a sustainable and attractive incubation space it is recommended to establish also close relationships with relevant stakeholders from the political and business environment. On the one hand, they can support the incubation space in becoming more known in the region and on the other hand they can also support in offering additional services or specific technical equipment.

For example, at Reutlingen University the team realised to establish close relationship with a retailer company which has now equipped one separate room with smart home devices. This allows workshop participants to also get a better understanding on what functionalities these new digital technologies are offering and how they are working. Participants can integrate these experiences in their own digital business model development process.

In addition, establishing close contacts with policy stakeholders by e.g. informing them regularly on the incubator's achievements or inviting them to workshops so that they themselves can experience what it means in working in such an innovative environment also contributes to a better understanding on the policy side on how companies can be supported in developing new digital business models. This can thus also result in new policy initiatives to further support the digital transformation process in one region.

4. Conclusion

SMEs do not start their innovations on a green field but have to cope with change management and the actual transformation of existing business models; and unlike large companies SMEs are often lacking dedicated human and monetary resources for trial and error approaches. For most of the SMEs that are not in the position of bringing new know-how into the company by hiring digital experts or integrating startups into their structures, the DIGITRANS consortium wanted to find a way on making the drivers of digital transformation and processes of innovation more comprehensive. The focus was set on helping them to discover innovations for their businesses by raising their awareness for easy-to-use creative methods for business development and hereby allaying their fears of becoming the "digital prey" in the game of digitalization. The incubation space provides the ideal breeding ground for the required creativity and innovation and by installing incubation spaces throughout the Danube region, interested parties from all areas and sectors gain access to this environment. Providing the implementation guideline to the public is the project consortium's attempt to raise awareness and sustainability by enabling interested parties to setup their own local incubation spaces. These incubation spaces do not only provide room for workshops or interactive and creative working in general, they also demonstrate how creative spaces can be designed and they present the advantages of such innovation incubators to relevant stakeholders like politicians.