SYNCLUSIVE

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# Living Lab Report

## Sofia, Bulgaria

**Appendix 1 to D2.1 Realist Evaluation**



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# Authors

| Organisation | Author |
|---|---|
| ARC Fund | Slavyanka Ivanova, Georgi Dobrev, Myrto Ispyridou |
| SDA | Sevdalina Voynova, Snezhina Gabova, Stela Nedyalkova |

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# 1. Living Lab: Bulgaria

## 1.1 Building a Coalition (-> who is in it and what is their role?)

The Bulgarian Living Lab in Sofia (SofiaLab), implemented by the Sofia Development Association (SDA), has demonstrated a strong capacity to adapt the SYNCLUSIVE approach to the Bulgarian labour-market context. The Living Lab was designed around an active community coalition, bringing together public authorities, employers, civil-society organisations, social partners and other stakeholders. This collaborative model is central to the SYNCLUSIVE concept and is intended to create the conditions for sustainable labour-market inclusion beyond the individual interventions themselves.

Building a functioning coalition in a complex policy and employment environment required targeted outreach, persistence and flexible partnership-building. Bulgaria already has established public programmes supporting upskilling, reskilling and employment, including programmes offering certification and employer incentives. Rather than duplicating these mechanisms, SofiaLab positioned SYNCLUSIVE as a complementary, locally embedded approach, with particular added value in connecting stakeholders, strengthening employability, supporting mobility and testing an integrated package of interventions for people over 50.

SDA used several complementary entry points, drawing on existing relationships with public and private enterprises and engaging representatives of social partners and other intermediaries. From an early stage, SDA also included a licensed HR and training company to strengthen the pathway between skills development, employment and labour-market mobility. This flexible approach enabled the Living Lab to combine SDA's convening role with specialised expertise and employer networks.

SDA secured the participation of prominent businesses and continued to engage additional companies, including municipal enterprises, during implementation. The experience of coalition (re)building confirmed the value of sustained relationship development and of creating multiple entry points for employers and other stakeholders to contribute. It also enabled SofiaLab to progressively broaden the coalition and strengthen local ownership of the Living Lab.

At the time of the first activation event, the regional coalition consisted of the following organisations (ordered as they signed the Coalition Agreement):

- SDA
- Young Talents 50+
- ARC Fund
- Capital Municipal Agency for Privatisation
- Two NGOs dealing with social inclusion of vulnerable groups
- One business network
- Four private employers from the agrifood, automotive, building and IT sectors
- Two online media

Subsequently, the coalition was further strengthened by:

- The Employment Agency
- Sofia Urban Mobility Centre
- Confederation of Independent Trade Unions in Bulgaria

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- One private employer from the fast-moving consumer goods sector

The coalition operates through an open and collaborative management model, allowing each organisation to contribute according to its priorities, expertise and capacity. Its two-tier structure combines a core implementation group with a wider stakeholder community. The core coalition - SDA, Young Talents 50+ and ARC Fund - supports day-to-day planning, organisation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, while the broader coalition contributes through targeted activities such as career forums, training and engagement with representatives of the target group. This structure has enabled SofiaLab to combine continuity and operational capacity with broad stakeholder participation.

## 1.2 The target group

The Sofia Living Lab translated the overall SYNCLUSIVE objectives into a locally relevant and inclusive target-group approach. The initial focus was on women aged 55+, reflecting the evidence that women in this age group face particular barriers to labour-market participation, including gaps in digital skills and low participation in lifelong learning. Following dialogue with companies and public bodies, SDA broadened the operational target group to include both women and men over 50 who were looking for employment or considering upward or sideward mobility.

This adjustment reflected the Bulgarian regulatory and labour-market context and enabled SofiaLab to reach a larger pool of potential participants while maintaining a strong focus on the barriers experienced by women over 50. The broader approach also supported a more inclusive learning environment and allowed the Living Lab to address labour-market mobility as a shared challenge.

Precautions were taken throughout the interventions and coalition work to address potential discrimination based on gender. Both jobseekers and employees seeking upward or sideward mobility through upskilling were invited to participate. SDA managed an open recruitment process, with outreach continuing throughout implementation and gaining additional momentum following the first public activation event on 25 October 2024.

People who registered but did not participate in the SYNCLUSIVE interventions were also invited to contribute to monitoring and evaluation as a control group. This approach strengthened the evidence base of the Living Lab while maintaining a broad connection with the potential participant community.

## 1.3 From drivers & barriers to solutions

SofiaLab translated the identified labour-market barriers into a coordinated package of practical interventions designed to strengthen both employability and labour-market mobility. The 17-member coalition contributed to the implementation of interventions through skills development, career meetings and forums, psychological and career support, employer engagement, promotion of inclusive employment practices, and campaigns addressing age discrimination and stereotypes.

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The approach reflects the core SYNCLUSIVE principle that labour-market inclusion is strengthened when support for jobseekers is combined with opportunities for current employees to develop and progress. In Sofia, this was translated into an integrated offer connecting training, confidence-building, career support, employer engagement and awareness raising. The Living Lab therefore provided not only individual support, but also a platform for strengthening the local ecosystem around inclusive employment.

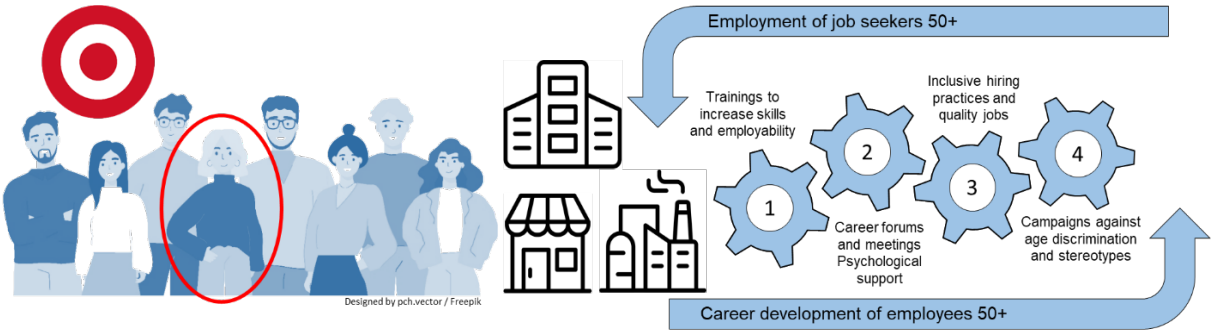


**Figure 1:** Implementation of ENGINE in SofiaLab

At the heart of the SofiaLab implementation was a free, needs-oriented training programme designed to strengthen the employability, confidence and adaptability of people over 50. The programme was informed by an assessment of the digital and green skills increasingly required by the labour market and was delivered through an online learning platform combined with in-person learning.

In line with the SYNCLUSIVE design, an online learning platform was developed, tested and put into practical use. The resulting hybrid format made participation more accessible and flexible: 30 hours of learning were distributed across three consecutive weeks, with participants able to switch between online and in-person participation for individual sessions.

The courses addressed three complementary areas: digital skills, including digital security, content creation, social media for business communication, the use of AI for work and digital public services; green skills, including the basics of circular economy principles and workplace materials; and personal and soft skills, competencies and motivation, including self-assessment, adaptability and financial literacy.

Qualified trainers delivered the programme, while participants could also access individual and group consultations with a psychologist or career counsellor and practical job-search assistance, including CV and interview preparation and advice on starting a business. This combination of technical, personal and career-oriented support during a month-long training and post-training period gave the intervention a particularly strong practical orientation. An overview of the training courses and other services provided is presented in Table 1.

The integrated offer allowed participants to select the combination of support most relevant to their needs and aspirations. Depending on their circumstances and the implementation phase in which they joined, jobseekers and employees could participate in one, two or all three training areas. This flexibility was a key strength of the Living Lab approach, allowing the intervention package to accommodate different starting points, career goals and learning needs.

The group-based training model deliberately brought together jobseekers and employees seeking sideward or upward mobility. Although participants entered with different levels of experience and skills, the course components were adapted to accommodate this diversity.

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The SofiaLab interventions were implemented from November 2024 to April 2026, providing a sustained period for testing, learning and refinement.

The experience also produced concrete examples of individual transformation. Two participants moved from job seeking into new roles—as a social worker and a project coordinator—after completing the programme. They reported that the training helped them build confidence, communicate their strengths more effectively, and approach job interviews with greater self-assurance. Their experiences illustrate how an integrated Living Lab intervention can translate skills development and community support into renewed professional opportunities.

Overall, SofiaLab has provided a strong real-life testing environment for the ENGINE approach in Bulgaria. Its combination of coalition-building, flexible participation, hybrid learning, personalised support, employer engagement and awareness raising has created a practical foundation for more inclusive labour-market pathways for people over 50. The experience is also valuable as a basis for learning, further adaptation and wider uptake of approaches that can support lifelong learning, career mobility and age-inclusive employment.

**Table 1:** Calendar of main intervention activities in SofiaLab

| | Nov 24 | Jan 25 | Mar 25 | Apr 25 | Nov 25 | Apr 26 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Soft skills 1st edition** | ■ | | | | | |
| **Digital skills 1st edition** | | ■ | | | | |
| **Soft skills 2nd edition** | | | ■ | | | |
| **Green skills** | | | ■ | | | |
| **First Career Forum** | | | | ■ | | |
| **Digital skills 2nd edition** | | | | | ■ | |
| **Second Career Forum** | | | | | | ■ |

## 1.4 Methods

### 1.4.1 Recruitment of participants

The intervention participants, both jobseekers and employees, have been recruited primarily through training advertisements, distributed through social networks and coalition member organisations' own networks. The advertisements contained registration links hosted in SDA's website where the candidates were asked to fill in a short registration form with their contact details and employment status. The day prior to the start of the training SDA shared with ARC Fund the list of registered jobseekers and employees. In the same afternoon, ARC Fund sent personal email invitations for survey participation to all persons in the list, with links to the respective online questionnaire, according to the employment status they have declared.

The distribution of survey links was planned in three measurement points for each training course: T0 – before the start of the course; T1 – immediately after the end of the course (three weeks after the start); and T2 – at least four months after the end of the course.

However, some of the training participants registered directly in the paper attendance lists distributed in the beginning of the first training sessions. These lists did not contain information

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about the employment status and for those who registered directly at place and did not answer at least one survey wave, this circumstance created hardship in defining which group they belong to. In addition, many of them did not have the chance to answer T0 really before any training activities had taken place.

SDA dedicated ten minutes prior to the start of the first session and 10 minutes after the last session of each training for ARC Fund to explain their role as research partner in the SYNCLUSIVE initiative, the research activities envisaged, data protection and confidentiality measures, as well as the importance of the reiterative survey methodology for the overall assessment of initiative's effect and for potential future improvements. In these time slots, ARC Fund also informed participants about the option to fill in a paper questionnaire instead of the online link, with enough paper questionnaires available at the training premises. Due to precautious considerations to not repel people from training participation, the researchers have not been allowed to be present during the training, nor to talk to people personally at place to invite them for in-depth conversation.

After the end of the last session, researchers were able to photocopy the attendance lists. Participants who attended at least two of the three training sessions were considered as completed the training and belonging to the Treatment group. Those; those who attended one session were considered as dropped; and with no one session attended, they were considered as not started. Both dropped and not started formed the Control group. For collection of T1 data, personal email invitations were sent, with different text according to the completion status. All of those who registered, regardless if through the form at the SDA website or at place, received two survey links: with the questionnaire for jobseekers and the questionnaire for employees. Hereby, those who changed their employment status, as well as those whose status was unknown, were able to answer the questionnaire relevant for their actual status. People who dropped out or did not start the training received the same questionnaires, but in separate control group links. Along with survey links, both Treatment and Control groups were invited to attend a group discussion or an individual interview, online or at ARC Fund premises, upon their convenience. The same procedures repeated at least four months after the last session of each training, for collection of T2 data.

As rather few representatives answered of those who dropped or did not start for each training course, and the Control group was expected to be very small in numbers, ARC Fund put additional efforts to recruit respondents for the control group. Two invitations to the general population aged 50+ were circulated through the organisation's Facebook and LinkedIn accounts. Again, only few persons responded. To address this gap, ARC Fund assigned a research agency to recruit and administer self-completed paper questionnaires with jobseekers and employees aged 50+ in Sofia. The data collection was implemented to coincide with the T2 phase of the last training and within the frame of a national representative survey, that guaranteed random sampling of households.

Additionally, one month after T2 collection for the last training, ARC Fund distributed a short questionnaire to the Treatment group (all who completed the training with the exception of two persons who requested discontinuance of further communication), collecting information on the influence of interventions of their further career and training development. The training participants were asked the following questions (Table 2):

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**Table 2:** Short questionnaire for the Treatment group – jobseekers and employees

| 1. Did you have a job before the training? | 2. Which of the following best describes your current situation? | 3. Did the training help you in one or more of the following ways? |
|---|---|---|
| a) Yes<br>b) No | a) I moved to a better position in the same job<br>b) I got new tasks, a new role or greater responsibilities in the same job<br>c) I found a better job than the one I had before the training<br>d) I started my own business or self-employed work<br>e) I found a permanent job after the training<br>f) I found a temporary job after the training<br>g) I work part-time or occasionally<br>h) I started a job training or a trial job<br>i) I completed another training with a diploma or certificate<br>j) I am still looking for a job<br>k) Other, namely: | a) Helped me find a job<br>b) Helped me get new tasks, a new role or greater responsibilities<br>c) Helped me get a better position in the same job<br>d) Improved my work skills<br>e) Increased my confidence in doing the work expected of me<br>f) Helped me in other ways, namely:<br>g) Did not help me |

For the Realist Evaluation on coalition level, trainers were invited for in-depth interviews at the beginning and at the end of the training sessions they delivered; while the coalition members received email invitations at each phase of coalition development (formation, sustainability and institutionalisation).

### 1.4.2 Attendance and participation

An overview of the participation of jobseekers and employees in the training courses is presented in Table 3. The total number of unique individuals who started participating in the training courses was 36 for the jobseekers and 58 for the employees. Out of these, 33 jobseekers and 48 employees completed the training courses they started (92% and 83% completion rates, respectively). As some of the jobseekers and employees registered, completed and subsequently answered the questionnaires for more than one training course (e.g. on soft skills and on digital skills), the cumulative numbers of registrations/completions/research participations are higher than the numbers of persons registered/completed/participated in research. Out of 101 training completions, 40 were of people with initial status of jobseekers, and 61 of people with initial status of employees. This data means that 21% of the jobseeker participants and 27% of employee participants (or a quarter of all) have completed both soft skills and digital skills training, e.g. the core intervention activities.

Regarding participation in research, 27 of the jobseekers and 36 of the employees who completed training courses (Treatment group) responded at least once to the quantitative questionnaires, with 82% and 75% participation rates for jobseekers and employees respectively (Table 3). However, only 17 jobseekers (52%) and 14 employees (29%) responded at least at two measurement points, while 5 jobseekers (15%) and 6 employees (13%) responded in all three survey waves (T0, T1 and T2). Subsequently, 9 jobseekers and 16 employees responded to the short questionnaire; and some information about 4 jobseekers and 9 employees was indirectly gathered through comparison of their answers to the main questionnaires across different training courses and survey waves.

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Of those who registered for a training but dropped or did not start (Control group), only 6 jobseekers and 20 employees responded (Table 3), but no one responded at more than one measurement point. In addition, one jobseeker and two employees for the Control group have been recruited through social network advertisement; and 35 jobseekers and 15 employees have been recruited within the frame of a national representative survey. Hereby, the total numbers of the Control group amounted to 42 for the jobseekers and 37 for the employees.

**Table 3:** Intervention participants

| | **Number of recruitments / people recruited for a training** | **Number of starts/ people who started a training** | **Number of drop-outs/ people who dropped out of a training** | **Number of completions / people who completed a training** | **Number of participants/ people participated in research (Treatment group)** | **Number of participants/ people participated in research (Control group)** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Jobseekers | **71/60** | **43/36** | **3/3** | **40/33** | **33/27** | **6** |
| Employees | **122/105** | **71/58** | **10/10** | **61/48** | **44/36** | **20** |

*The employment status is assigned according to the registration data provided by the participants, or if missing, according to the first survey phase they answered. As some people registered for or underwent only one, and others – two interventions (e.g. one soft-skill and one digital-skill training), the **black** figures represent total number of registrations/ starts/ drop-outs/ completions, and the **blue** figures represent the unique persons that registered/ started/ dropped/ completed, etc. The last column represents only those who registered for a training but dropped-out or did not start.

### 1.4.3 Methods of analysis

The survey data collected during the intervention was used to conduct the quantitative analysis using a combination of empirical methods, which were determined by the data structure and availability. The outcomes were first analysed on within-group level, only for the Treatment group (TG) across the T0, T1 and T2 measurement points. This approach was chosen due to the lack of a comparable Control group (CG) data collected in time periods, that directly correspond to the time periods in the TG. This is a central limitation to conducting a Treatment-Control group impact evaluation, using all the available time intervals. The CG which is currently presented in the tables below, was mainly collected during the final stages of the intervention period and to some extend overlaps with T2 of the TG. This has motivated our decision to conduct a Treatment-Control comparison only at T2.

For each of the groups of jobseekers and employees, we have analysed the within-group dynamics across the available periods, **while the measures were calculated only if a minimum sample size rule of n > 10 was satisfied**. For the jobseekers, we have compared the baseline T0 with T1 only, since T2 did not satisfy the sample size rule, which is needed to ensure a minimal statistical validity. We used a **paired-samples t-test on the mean difference** to compare the two time points, while also calculating the Cohen's D for the size of the effect. For the employees, we have used the same empirical strategy for comparing T0 and T1 as well as T0 and T2, since for this group the final period T2 has a sufficient sample size. For our analysis, we would have ideally used a repeated measures ANOVA. However, this method would have required each respondent to have answered at every time point, which is rarely the case in our data set. Therefore, a repeated-measures ANOVA substantially reduces the sample size, which undermines the validity of the test.

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Apart from the within-group analysis, we have also conducted a Treatment - Control comparison at T2 across the outcomes of interest. In this scenario, we have used a Welch t-test on the mean difference between the TG and CG, since those are independent samples. This analysis was conducted only for the employees, since the TG at T2 for the jobseekers had only 9 observations and did not satisfy the minimum sample size rule.

## 1.5 Quantitative results in SofiaLab

### 1.5.1 Characteristics of study participants

The baseline characteristics (at T0) of the TG and CG of jobseekers and employees are presented in Table 4. The average age of the TG of jobseekers and TG of employees was 58 and 59 years respectively, while the most of the participants were women (by 89%). Two of three TG jobseekers (67.9%) and four of five TG employees (84.6%) had at least tertiary education. In the CG of jobseekers prevail people with intermediate levels of education (52.5%). The educational levels of the CG of employees is approximately the same of the TG; however, it is a bit younger (with average age of 54) and the predominance of women is less significant (76%).

**Table 4:** Baseline socio-demographic characteristics for jobseekers and employees

| | **Jobseekers (N=28) at T0** | **Jobseekers – control group – T0+T1+T2 (N=42)** | **Employees (N=38) at T0** | **Employees – control group – T0+T1+T2 (N=37)** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Population characteristics | Means (SD) / Percentage (N) | Means (SD) / Percentage (N) | Means (SD) / Percentage (N) | Means (SD) / Percentage (N) |
| Age | 58 (6.4) | 58 (4.8) | 59 (6.7599) | 54 (5.6) |
| Gender (% women) | 89% women | 83% women | 89% women | 76% women |
| Level of education | | | | |
| Basic education (secondary or lower) | 0% | 2.5% | 0% | 0% |
| Intermediate education (upper secondary education, post-secondary non-tertiary education) | 32.1% | 52.5% | 15.4% | 16.2% |
| Higher education (short cycle, tertiary or higher) | 67.9% | 45.0% | 84.6% | 83.8% |

The employees showed a 10+ years of engagement with their last employer on average, with about 3 years longer period for the TG (nearly 14 years, compared to 11 years for the CG). Among the jobseekers, the average period of unemployment for the TG lasted about half year longer than for CG (2.286 compared to 1.714, respectively).

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**Table 5:** Baseline employment-related characteristics for jobseekers and employees

| | **Jobseekers (N=28) at T0** | **Jobseekers – control group – T0+T1+T2 (N=42)** | **Employees (N=38) at T0** | **Employees – control group – T0+T1+T2 (N=37)** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Population characteristics | Means (SD) | Means (SD) | Means (SD) | Means (SD) |
| **Obstacles jobseekers:** | | | Not applicable | Not applicable |
| Lack of job opportunities | 3.792 (1.215) | 3.132 (1.455) | | |
| Commuting difficulties, e.g. difficult transport connections, long distances | 3.37 (1.471) | 2.857 (1.523) | | |
| Lack of training and skills, e.g. language skills, lack of or outdated professional qualifications | 3.778 (1.528) | 2.951 (1.612) | | |
| Diminished work motivation or desire to work | 4.481 (0.849) | 2.659 (1.543) | | |
| Problems connected to health or functional capacity | 3.741 (1.678) | 2.537 (1.502) | | |
| Personal life situation, e.g. family, relatives, friends (caregiving, childcare) | 4.037 (1.16) | 2.525 (1.664) | | |
| **Obstacles employees:** | Not applicable | Not applicable | | |
| Lack of training and skills, e.g. language skills, lack of professional qualifications or outdated qualifications | | | 2.421(1.368) | 2.27 (1.484) |
| Little motivation to work on my career | | | 1.806 (1.142) | 1.784 (1.205) |
| Problems connected to health | | | 1.676 (1.036) | 1.649 (1.086) |
| Personal life situation, e.g. family, relatives, friends (caregiving, childcare) | | | 1.868 (1.07) | 1.622 (0.982) |
| Lack of a good network of people who can help me with my career | | | 2.444 (1.34) | 2.081 (1.382) |
| Lack of financial resources | | | 2.297 (1.151) | 2.543 (1.502) |
| Barriers in my organisation or company | | | 2.457 (1.146) | 1.882 (1.225) |
| **Years of employment with the current employer** | Not applicable | Not applicable | 13.964 (11.445) | 10.767 (9.676) |
| **Years of unemployment** | 2.286 (1.997) | 1.714 (1.013) | Not applicable | Not applicable |
| **Mental Health** | 0.215 (0.165) | 0.348 (0.242) | 0.227 (0.214) | 0.214 (0.177) |
| **Work Ability** | 7.926 (1.615) | 7.45 (2.062) | 7.703 (1.664) | 8.5 (1.404) |

In terms of the obstacles facing TG of jobseekers at baseline (Table 5), respondents indicated that on average, they are most affected by a diminished desire to work, followed by issues related to their personal life. Overall, TG of jobseekers were more likely to indicate being affected by certain obstacles, compared both to TG of employees and CG of jobseekers. For example, on a 1-5 scale, where 1 indicates “not difficult at all” and 5 indicates “extremely difficult,” the TG of jobseekers reported mean responses ranging from 3.37 to 4.481 across the different categories of obstacles (compared to a mean range of 2.525 to 3.132 for the CG of jobseekers and 1.676 to 2.457 for the TG of employees). In other words, the TG of jobseekers generally perceive career-related obstacles as ranging from “somewhat difficult” to “extremely difficult,” whereas the CG of jobseekers perceive them as “slightly difficult” to “somewhat difficult,” and the TG of employees tend to perceive them as “not difficult” or only “slightly difficult.” Simultaneously, among the employees, the perceptions of career obstacles do not differ substantially between the TG and the CG, with the exception of barriers in

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respondents' organisations. While CG felt these barriers "not difficult" to "slightly difficult", TG tended to estimate them as "slightly difficult" to "somewhat difficult".

In contradiction to their perceived diminished desire to work, the TG of jobseekers reported at least as better work ability as the TG of employees and the CG of jobseekers – 7.93 in a scale from 0 to 10, compared to 7.70 for the TG of employees and 7.45 for the CG of jobseekers. On the contrary, the work ability reported by the CG of employees is higher (8.5) than those of the TG of employees, which might be related to the fact that the CG is about 5 years younger than the TG.

The same trends can be observed regarding the mental health issues reported by the respondents. In a 0-1 scale where the lower values show less frequent and the higher values show more frequent mental health issues, the mean value representing the frequency of mental health issues experiences by the TG of jobseekers (0.215) is slightly lower than those for the TG of employees (0.227) and significantly lower than those for the CG of jobseekers (0.348).

### 1.5.2 Results for jobseekers

The share of jobseekers that completed the training courses and found employment after the intervention was at least 24%, while at least 12% entered a training or received some form of a professional certificate (Table 6). However, this data cannot be treated as fully reliable, as less than 40% of the jobseekers who have completed a training in SofiaLab responded to the short questionnaire or to enough measurement points, in order to trace the changes in their career lives.

**Table 6:** Results for jobseekers: number of jobseekers who found employment after the interventions (N=13) at T2 or later

| Employment status | N in follow-up | Percentage - follow-up | Percentage of all who completed |
|---|---|---|---|
| Not employed | 5 | 38% | 15% |
| Found employment | 8 | 62% | 24% |
| Permanent contract | 1 | 8% | 3% |
| Fixed-term contract | 2 | 15% | 6% |
| Other | 3 | 23% | 9% |
| No contract | 2 | 15% | 6% |
| Entered training or work trial | 2 | 15% | 6% |
| Received certificate/diploma/sub-diploma | 2 | 15% | 6% |

Furthermore, there is no proof that all cases of job finding can be associated with the interventions. Out of 5 jobseekers who answered the short questionnaire and reported to have found a job after T2, only two declared that it was due to the interventions they underwent (Table 7). Four of those five persons found temporary, part-time or freelance jobs, that might appear unstable over time. According to the opinion of the jobseekers – respondents of the short questionnaire, the intervention effects mostly led to improved skills and self-confidence.

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**Table 7:** Results for jobseekers: self-reported intervention effect (N=9) after T2

| Employment status | N in follow-up | Percentage - follow-up | Percentage of all who completed |
|---|---|---|---|
| Helped me find a job | 2 | 22% | 6% |
| Improved my work skills | 5 | 56% | 15% |
| Increased my confidence in doing the work expected of me | 3 | 33% | 9% |
| Did not help me | 2 | 22% | 6% |

In terms of the primary outcomes, **there are no significant changes in the self-assessment of skills, self-efficacy and job search self-efficacy of the jobseekers** who participated in a training and assessed their skills at T1 (Table 8). The size of the effect is the largest for the job search self-efficacy (Cohen's D = 0.48), which is also the only case in the outcomes for jobseekers, where the statistical significance is at the 10% confidence level. This shows some indication that the intervention had a positive effect on the participant's skills in job searching. Furthermore, the time lapse between T0 and T1 in SofiaLab was about three weeks – a period that was probably insufficient to accumulate evidence for improved knowledge and skills.

**Table 8:** Primary outcomes for jobseekers: results on skills and self-efficacy

| Outcome | T0 N, Mean (SD) | T1 N, Mean (SD) | T2 N, Mean (SD) | N of complete pairs, mean difference T1-T0 (only for complete pairs) | Effect Size (Cohen's D / $N^2$) | *P-value* (paired sample t-test between T1 and T0) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Skills (0-1 scale) | 27, 0.573 (0.143) | 21, 0.643 (0.176) | 9, 0.571 (0.091) | 15, 0.044 | 0.274 | 0.307 |
| Self-efficacy (0-1 scale) | 28, 0.768 (0.133) | 21, 0.772 (0.153) | 9, 0.743 (0.128) | 16, 0.016 | 0.178 | 0.488 |
| Job search self-efficacy (0-1 scale) | 27, 0.583 (0.22) | 21, 0.645 (0.195) | 9, 0.711 (0.15) | 15, 0.057 | 0.481 | 0.084† |

†The result is statistically significant at the 10% confidence level ($p<0.10$)

**The secondary outcomes** for jobseekers (motivation career identity, job seeking activity, job search attitude and mental health) do not show any significant results as well (Table 9). **Therefore, we cannot confirm that the effect of the intervention on both the primary and secondary outcomes is different from zero**. Again, the above considerations regarding scarcity of data and proximity of measurement points are valid.

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**Table 9:** Secondary outcomes for jobseekers

| Outcome | T0 N, Mean (SD) | T1 N, Mean (SD) | T2 N, Mean (SD) | N of complete pairs, mean difference T1-T0 (only for complete pairs) | Effect Size (Cohen's D / $N^2$) | *P-value* (paired sample t-test between T1 and T0) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Motivation/ career identity | 27,0.81 (0.142) | 21, 0.848 (0.123) | 9, 0.778 (0.19) | 15, -0.004 | -0.027 | 0.919 |
| Job seeking activity | 26, 1.5 (1.296) | 21, 2.143 (1.957) | 7, 1.143 (1.864) | 16, 0.344 | 0.177 | 0.489 |
| Job search attitude | 27, 0.535 (0.121) | 21, 0.515 (0.137) | 9, 0.5 (0.136) | 16, -0.059 | -0.404 | 0.127 |
| Mental health | 27, 0.215 (0.165) | 21, 0.302 (0.206) | 9, 0.231 (0.167) | 16, 0.055 | 0.297 | 0.254 |

### 1.5.3 Results for employees

The shares of employees who took on new roles and tasks and of those who participated in some form of career development activities after the end of the intervention, was at least by 13% of all who completed the training courses (Table 10). A larger share of at least 21% moved either upward or sideward to another career function. In the half of the cases, they moved to a new company or organisation. Although data is available for greater share of training graduates than in the case of jobseekers (52% compared to 39%), information is missing for almost half of the TG.

Similarly to the jobseekers, only four of ten employees who answered the short questionnaire and reported upward or sideward mobility, associated it with the intervention (Table 11). Again, improved skills and self-confidence are seen as the more prominent benefits of the intervention.

**Table 10:** Results for employees: number of employees that took on new tasks, roles, responsibilities or moved to another function (N=25) at T2 or later

| Career development | N in follow-up | Percentage – follow-up | Percentage of all who completed |
|---|---|---|---|
| Took on new tasks, roles, responsibilities | 6 | 24% | 13% |
| Moved to another function (upward/sideward) | 10 | 40% | 21% |
| Participated in development activities last 6 months | 6 | 24% | 13% |

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**Table 11:** Results for employees: self-reported intervention effect (N=16) after T2

| Employment status | N in follow-up | Percentage - follow-up | Percentage of all who completed |
|---|---|---|---|
| Helped me find a new job | 2 | 13% | 4% |
| Helped me get new tasks, a new role or greater responsibilities | 2 | 13% | 4% |
| Helped me get a better position in the same job | 0 | 0% | 0% |
| Improved my work skills | 10 | 63% | 21% |
| Increased my confidence in doing the work expected of me | 4 | 25% | 8% |
| Helped me in other ways, namely: I do my job more effectively | 2 | 13% | 4% |
| Did not help me | 1 | 6% | 2% |

In terms of the primary outcomes, there are no significant changes in the self-efficacy and job progression self-efficacy of the employees who participated in the training courses (Table 12). The effects are not significant for the paired-samples t-test both for T0-T1 and T0-T2 time periods.

**Table 12:** Primary outcomes for employees: results on self-efficacy

| Outcome | T0 N, Mean (SD) | T1 N, Mean (SD) | T2 N, Mean (SD) | N of complete pairs, mean difference T1-T0 (only for complete pairs) | N of complete pairs, mean difference T2-T0 (only for complete pairs) | Effect Size (Cohen's D / $N^2$) for T1 – T0. | Effect Size (Cohen's D / $N^2$) for T2 – T0 | *P-value* (paired sample t-test between T1 and T0) | *P-value* (paired sample t-test between T2 and T0) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Self-efficacy (0-1 scale) | 37, 0.788 (0.148) | 24, 0.79 (0.106) | 15, 0.804 (0.132) | 16, 0.019 | 11, 0.048 | 0.194 | 0.403 | 0.449 | 0.211 |
| Job progression self-efficacy (0-1 scale) | 37, 0.687 (0.159) | 24, 0.625 (0.182) | 15, 0.725 (0.186) | 16, -0.039 | 11, 0.057 | -0.202 | 0.386 | 0.432 | 0.229 |

For the secondary outcomes, there are positive results in the career planning and the work ability of the employees (in the T0-T2 comparison), which are significant at the 10% confidence level (Table 13). Once again, this shows some preliminary evidence about, which outcomes the intervention might have positive effect on. It is important to note that the significance at the 10% confidence level drops in the T0-T1 comparison for the same variables. This can be partially attributed to the larger samples size of the T0-T1 pair. In summary, we cannot confirm

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that the effect of the intervention on both the primary and secondary outcomes is different from zero.

**Table 13:** Secondary outcomes for employees

| **Outcome** | **T0 N, Mean (SD)** | **T1 N, Mean (SD)** | **T2 N, Mean (SD)** | **N of complete pairs, mean difference T1-T0 (only for complete pairs)** | **N of complete pairs, mean difference T2-T0 (only for complete pairs)** | **Effect Size (Cohen's D / $N^2$) for T1 – T0.** | **Effect Size (Cohen's D / $N^2$) for T2 – T0** | ***P-value*** **(paired sample t-test between T1 and T0)** | ***P-value*** **(paired sample t-test between T2 and T0)** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Organizational mobility | 36, 0.595 (0.286) | 23, 0.537 (0.203) | 15, 0.563 (0.271) | 14, 0.083 | 11, -0.029 | 0.349 | -0.139 | 0.214 | 0.654 |
| Career-planning | 38, 0.702 (0.196) | 24, 0.663 (0.197) | 15, 0.767 (0.219) | 16, 0.042 | 11, 0.121 | 0.192 | 0.59 | 0.455 | 0.079† |
| Job satisfaction | 38, 0.632 (0.293) | 24, 0.615 (0.244) | 15, 0.65 (0.305) | 16, 0.036 | 11, 0.053 | 0.141 | 0.16 | 0.582 | 0.608 |
| Work ability | 37, 7.703 (1.664) | 23, 7.913 (1.59) | 15, 9 (0.845) | 16, 0.188 | 11, 0.818 | 0.179 | 0.556 | 0.485 | 0.095† |
| Mental health | 37, 0.227 (0.214) | 22, 0.176 (0.161) | 15, 0.206 (0.124) | 16, -0.039 | 11, 0.818 | -0.399 | 0.089 | 0.132 | 0.775 |

### 1.5.4 Measuring the effect using the control groups

For this analysis we have used a Welch t-test on the mean difference between the TG and CG only at T2 and only for the employees, due to the scarcity of data for jobseekers. Based on the p-values presented in Table 14, **there are no significant differences between the TG and CG** in terms of the key outcomes of interest for the employees. Therefore, we **do not find statistical evidence that employees who participated in the training courses are more likely to** have positive outcomes across the used metrics. In four of the variables, we see that the average performance of the TG is lower than the control. The self-efficacy variable, has particularly large negative effect size with a Cohen's D = -0.599. In this case, as the results for the TG of employees did not worsen between T0 and T2, the negative values suggest higher vulnerability of employees attracted to (experienced need of) the training. This vulnerability might be connected with their lower work ability, older age (Table 5) or/and other factors. Further empirical investigation with a larger data set should explore the validity of this result.

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Overall, the absence of S-S results indicates that the current programme effects are not statistically different from zero.

**Table 14:** Comparison between treatment and control groups in T2

| Outcome | Treatment group (T2) N, Mean (SD) | Control group (T2) N, Mean (SD) | Treatment - Control-group mean difference (for T2) | Effect Size (Cohen's D / $N^2$) | P-value (Welch t-test between T2-Treatment and T2-Control) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Jobseekers:** | | | | | |
| Self-efficacy (0-1 scale) | 9, 0.743 (0.128) | 37, 0.766 (0.217) | *Not enough data (N<10) in T2 Treatment to compute the t-test* | | |
| Job search self-efficacy (0-1 scale) | 9, 0.711 (0.15) | 37, 0.57 (0.265) | | | |
| Motivation/ career identity | 9, 0.778 (0.19) | 37, 0.657 (0.234) | | | |
| Job seeking activity | 7, 1.143 (1.864) | 36, 2.528 (2.145) | | | |
| Job search attitude | 9, 0.5 (0.136) | 36, 0.512 (0.111) | | | |
| Mental health | 9, 0.231 (0.167) | 36, 0.336 (0.244) | | | |
| **Employees:** | | | | | |
| Self-efficacy (0-1 scale) | 15, 0.804 (0.132) | 18, 0.887 (0.11) | -0.083 | -0.599 | 0.104 |
| Job progression self-efficacy (0-1 scale) | 15, 0.725 (0.186) | 18, 0.766 (0.189) | -0.041 | -0.220 | 0.534 |
| Organizational mobility | 15, 0.563 (0.271) | 18, 0.631 (0.287) | -0.068 | -0.245 | 0.487 |
| Career-planning | 15, 0.767 (0.219) | 18, 0.713 (0.251) | 0.054 | 0.227 | 0.516 |
| Job satisfaction | 15, 0.65 (0.305) | 18, 0.752 (0.205) | -0.102 | -0.401 | 0.280 |
| Work ability | 15, 9 (0.845) | 18, 8.778 (1.166) | 0.222 | 0.215 | 0.531 |
| Mental health | 15, 0.206 (0.124) | 18, 0.162 (0.131) | 0.044 | 0.340 | 0.336 |

### 1.5.5 Specific outcomes for SofiaLab

In addition to the indicators comparable to the other living labs, participants in the SofiaLab interventions were asked to rate their skills on the key topics included in the training courses they registered for, as a supplement to the main quantitative questionnaire. The control group questionnaire included topics for both main types of training (Table 15). In order to make the results comparable with the main indicators, the 5-point scale was recalculated to a scale from 0 to 1. The groups of jobseekers and employee participants were combined into one group, since they underwent the same training courses in mixed groups, and to overcome the issue of insufficient data in the T2 phase.

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**Table 15:** SofiaLab training topics

| Scale | Personal/soft skills | Digital skills |
|---|---|---|
| 1. None<br>2. Average<br>3. Good<br>4. Very good<br>5. Excellent<br><br>↓<br><br>0 (None) – 1 (Excellent) | a) Analysis of your strengths and weaknesses, development of a personal portfolio and presentation at a job interview<br>b) Time management and balance between personal and professional life<br>c) Change management<br>d) Entrepreneurship skills<br>e) Motivation, leadership skills and teamwork<br>f) Financial literacy and management of personal finances<br>g) Asserting personal rights at work | a) Creating digital content and using social media for business communication<br>b) Using artificial intelligence at work<br>c) Cybersecurity (protection of personal data, protection of digital devices, use of basic digital public services, etc.) |

With this approach, comparison between T2 and T0 phase is possible only for participants in digital skills training, and comparison between T1 and T0 is possible for both types of training. The statistical analysis provides statistically significant results ($p < 0.05$) showing the interventions increased participants' confidence in their personal and digital skills. Based on the Cohen's D coefficients, the magnitude of the positive effect is larger for the digital skills. (Table 16).

**Table 16:** Specific outcomes for the Treatment group

| **Outcome** | **T0 N, Mean (SD)** | **T1 N, Mean (SD)** | **T2 N, Mean (SD)** | **N of complete pairs, mean difference T1-T0 (only for complete pairs)** | **N of complete pairs, mean difference T2-T0 (only for complete pairs)** | **Effect Size (Cohen' s D / $N^2$) for T1 – T0.** | **Effect Size (Cohen's D / $N^2$) for T0 – T2.** | ***P-value* (paired sample t-test between T1 and T0)** | ***P-value* (paired sample t-test between T2 and T0)** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Personal skills (0-1 scale) | 30, 0.577 (0.188) | 23, 0.582 (0.19) | 13, 0.581 (0.15) | 17, 0.08 | 9, 0.46 | 0.613 | NA | 0.023* | NA |
| Digital skills (0-1 scale) | 36, 0.225 (0.202) | 23, 0.409 (0.196) | 11, 0.576 (0.206) | 15, 0.17 | 11, 0.23 | 1.239 | 1.015 | 0.000*** | 0.007** |

*The result is statistically significant at the 5% confidence level ($p<0.05$)
**The result is statistically significant at the 1% confidence level ($p<0.01$)
***The result is statistically significant at the 0.1% confidence level ($p<0.001$)

Self-assessment values for intervention-related skills have been as well compared between TG and CG at T2 (Table 17). Again, the data provides solid base to state significant results in favour of TG, with significantly more prominent advantage regarding digital skills.

**Table 17:** Specific outcomes: comparison between Treatment and Control group in T2

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| Outcome | Treatment group (T2) N, Mean (SD) | Control group (T2) N, Mean (SD) | Treatment - Control group mean difference (for T2) | Effect Size (Cohen's D / $N^2$) | P-value (Welch t-test between T2-Treatment and T2-Control) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Personal skills (0-1 scale) | 13, 0.581 (0.15) | 55, 0.506 (0.24) | 0.075 | 0.330 | 0.189 |
| Digital skills (0-1 scale) | 11, 0.576 (0.206) | 55, 0.218 (0.267) | 0.358 | 1.383 | 0.000*** |

***The result is statistically significant at the 0.1% confidence level (p<0.001)

### 1.5.6 Answering the research questions using quantitative analyses

1. **Jobseekers:** To what extent do jobseekers experience changes in self-efficacy, skills, and other IMBP-related constructs, as well as living lab-specific outcomes, as a result of the intervention or intervention package?

The findings provide no statistically significant evidence that the intervention improved jobseekers' self-assessed skills, self-efficacy, job search self-efficacy, or other IMBP-related outcomes. Although job search self-efficacy showed the largest effect size (Cohen's D = 0.48) and reached significance at the 10% confidence level, the result is based on a very small sample and should be interpreted cautiously. Similarly, no statistically significant changes were observed in secondary outcomes, including motivation, career identity, job-seeking activity, job-search attitude, and mental health. Therefore, the study cannot confirm that the intervention had a measurable effect on either primary or secondary outcomes for jobseekers.

It should be emphasized that in 2025, Bulgaria was preparing for the adoption of euro. Along with political opposition in the country that was additionally aggravated over this process, the anticipated economic insecurity was disproportionally felt by vulnerable groups, including by the target group of SofiaLab. The resulting increased anxiety levels might have neutralised the potential positive intervention effects on participants' mental health.

Regarding living lab-specific outcomes, the scarcity of data in T2, amplified by the additional division of participants in soft-skills and digital-skills trainees, does not allow separate conclusions for jobseekers and employees. However, the analysis for the target group as a whole, proofs tangible intervention effect on LL-specific skills, and particularly digital competences.

2. **Employees:** To what extent do employees experience changes in self-efficacy, skills, and other IMBP-related constructs, as well as living lab-specific outcomes, following participation in the intervention or intervention package?

The results indicate no statistically significant changes in employees' self-efficacy or job progression self-efficacy following participation in the intervention. Some positive results were observed for secondary outcomes, specifically career planning and work ability, in the longer-term comparison (T0-T2), where changes were significant at the 10% confidence level. However, these effects were not consistently significant across measurement periods.

Comparison between the Treatment group and the Control group also revealed no statistically significant differences in key outcomes. As a result, the study cannot conclude that the

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intervention produced measurable improvements in employees' primary or secondary outcomes.

For living lab-specific outcomes, as well as for the mental health results, the above considerations regarding jobseekers are valid for the employees as well.

3. **Mobility effects:** To what extent does the intervention package lead to changes in jobseekers' employment status and in employee mobility within organisations, such as increased employment transitions or shifts in tasks and responsibilities?

Some positive outcomes are suggested by the facts that at least 24% of the participating jobseekers found employment after the intervention, and at least 12% entered additional training or obtained a professional certificate. Among employees, 13% assumed new roles or responsibilities, and 21% experienced upward or lateral career moves, either within their organization or through transitions to another employer. However, due to substantial missing data and low response rates, particularly among jobseekers, the reliability of these estimates is limited. Mobility data is available for less than 40% of jobseeker and about a half of employee training participants. Consequently, while the descriptive results suggest potential positive employment and career mobility effects, the study does not provide robust statistical evidence that the intervention package caused these changes. In less than half of the reported mobility cases, the participants associated them with the intervention. Skills and self-confidence improvements are pointed instead as self-reported intervention results.

## 1.6 Realist Evaluation results – coalition level

The Realist Evaluation analysis of SofiaLab is based on qualitative data collected through 34 in-depth interviews and one online focus group discussion conducted between July 2024 and March 2026. This period can be conditionally divided in two phases: a theory developing phase, which lasted approximately until March 2025, and theory refinement and testing phase, which spanned the period between April 2025 and March 2026.

Coalition-level information feeding Realist Evaluation analysis was obtained from one group discussion, six interviews with coalition members and two interviews with trainers, that is, professionals who delivered the training courses. The conducted interviews with trainers were totally six. They provided rich and valuable information at the individual level and were therefore considered in this part of the analysis. The individual level analysis additionally includes information from in-depth interviews with jobseekers and employees who completed the training courses (Treatment group), as well as jobseekers and employees who registered for the courses but did not start or complete them (Control group). The precise number of Realist Evaluation data sources disaggregated by type of respondent, theory development and level of analysis is presented in Table 18.

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**Table 18:** Overview of qualitative data collected in SofiaLab

| | Phase 1: theory developing | Phase 2: theory refinement / testing |
|---|---|---|
| **Individual level** | | |
| Interviews with jobseekers | 0 Treatment group; 0 Control group | 7 Treatment group; 2 Control group |
| Interviews with employees | 0 Treatment group; 0 Control group | 10 Treatment group; 3 Control group |
| Interviews with trainers | 5 | 1 |
| **Coalition level** | | |
| Interviews with coalition members | 3 | 3 |
| Interviews with trainers* | 2 | 0 |
| Focus group (number of participants) | 0 | 1 (8) |

* The total number of interviews with trainers is 6. Two of the interviews are used both at individual and coalition level.

### 1.6.1 Coalition-level general and context information

The identified factors enabling and hindering the activity of the local coalition in SofiaLab can be summarized in seven major groups.

***Governance structure***

High governance *centralisation* was identified as a defining structural constraint for the Bulgarian Living Lab. Bulgaria operates a nationally governed employment system, and local offices are limited to the territorial delivery of centrally designed programmes. This significantly restricts what a city-level coalition can realistically achieve in terms of influencing employment policy. According to the coalition leader, the only meaningful pathway to policy influence would require alignment between local and national governing parties, which was not the case when the SYNCLUSIVE interventions were designed and implemented. Furthermore, from the beginning of 2017 to the middle of 2026, Bulgaria went through five early parliamentary elections and had eight caretaker national governments. The *political instability and polarisation* in the country made the majority of stakeholders unwilling to participate in initiatives involving political figures, such as the city mayor. In response, the coalition focused its efforts on more locally achievable outcomes, such as awareness-raising, visibility events, success stories, and networking, rather than pursuing structural policy change.

***Social policies***

The existing national employment programmes in Bulgaria offer state-recognised certifications for participants completing training activities organised through the Employment Office and provide comparatively attractive incentives for employers through subsidised employment schemes targeting different categories of unemployed individuals. While these instruments strengthen employability and facilitate labour market entry by combining skills development with financial support for employers, from the perspective of NGO-driven small-scale initiative like Synclusive, they appeared rather as a hindering factor for creation and establishment of a strong local coalition, as they leave little room to demonstrate and prove an added value:

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"But then again, I mean, what exactly do you offer to the process, because in the meantime, you have to compete with the instruments that are offered by the state, the difference being that the state is offering much longer time that they offer, they work with companies or they provide certification, and so on." *(interview with coalition members, formation phase)*

On the contrary, gaps in labour policy were seen as opportunities for the coalition in SofiaLab to test ways of addressing them.

The first labour policy gap identified as an opportunity was the *greater focus on younger rather than older unemployed people*. In addition, existing national policies targeting women aged 50+ were perceived as being more oriented towards providing early retirement options than supporting their continued participation in and adaptation to the labour market (*interview with coalition members, formation phase*). The selection of people aged 50+, with a particular focus on women as a target group opened a niche for the SYNCLUSIVE coalition, where the need for knowledge and promising practices is clearly recognised.

Subsequent gap-opportunity ambivalence was found in the *underutilisation* of the target group's skills. Many jobseekers aged 50+ already possess solid qualifications (e.g., in economics or law), yet low self-confidence, rather than lack of skills, remains a major barrier to finding suitable employment. Older workers are often concentrated in low-skilled jobs despite having higher education and substantial expertise, leading to underutilised skills and further erosion of self-confidence *(interview with trainer, sustainability phase)*.

As another gap, it was further noted that people 50+ in Bulgaria have a great need to increase and update their digital skills *(interview with trainer, sustainability phase)*. The national employment agency offers free training programmes for unemployed persons across a range of occupational profiles and age groups. However, according to coalition members, these programmes are *narrowly focused on skills development* and *disconnected from community-building and personal development support.* What was identified as missing from the existing policy offer was a space for personal skills development, psychological support, and informal contact with employers free from the pressure of formal interviews *(interview with trainer, sustainability phase)*. These findings directly informed the intervention design, in which digital skills and soft skills training courses, along with meetings with employers, became core components.

While some opportunities are provided through the Employment Agency, they were considered insufficient to cover the entire target group *(group discussion with coalition members, institutionalisation phase)*. As a general observation, it was noted that policies for people aged 50+ require stronger design, implementation, and more consistent commitment from responsible institutions. *(interview with trainer, sustainability phase).* Two promising EU-level training-related policies were identified: Individual Training Accounts (still in the process of being introduced in Bulgaria), which enable people to accumulate funds and time for lifelong training from their first job; and Micro-credentials, which offer short, flexible skill development to address labour market insecurity and demotivation linked to uncertain income prospects. However, as limited policy awareness has been identified as a long-standing shortcoming of policy implementation in Bulgaria, Micro-credentials were immediately incorporated into the soft-skill training programme, and trainees were encouraged and supported to make use of them *(interview with trainer, sustainability phase)*.

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***Institutional quality***

The context factors related to institutional quality were mainly described as hindering the work of the coalition. Nevertheless, some enabling elements can also be identified. According to the observations of an employer representative, the SYNCLUSIVE coalition operated in a context where *no harmful policies* directly obstructed its activities, making the key issue not regulatory barriers but *the extent to which public institutions are willing and able to facilitate connections* between employers and job- and mobility-seekers *(interview with coalition member, sustainability phase)*. On the enabling side, institutions appeared to remain formally open to engagement and do not openly rejected participation in coalition activities. This *formal openness* provided the coalition with access to relevant stakeholders and opportunities to build working relationships. Institutional support was also reflected in symbolic forms of participation, such as the Employment Agency's endorsement of the initiative through signing the coalition agreement and displaying information about the initiative *(interview with coalition member, institutionalisation phase)*. The existence of senior institutional contacts who acted as coalition access points *(interview with coalition members, institutionalisation phase)* further demonstrated that channels for cooperation could be established within public bodies.

At the same time, several factors limited the depth and effectiveness of this engagement. Public institutions were *constrained by political and budgetary conditions* that reduced their capacity to contribute beyond their existing mandates and programmes. Rather than explicitly declining involvement, institutional actors often signalled disengagement by referring to activities they were already implementing, indicating a limited willingness or ability to take on additional responsibilities. *Political instability* was a particularly significant constraint, as frequent early elections created uncertainty and discouraged officials from making commitments that extended beyond short-term political horizons. This instability also affected the continuity of institutional relationships, as illustrated by the sudden removal of a senior coalition contact from their position for reasons beyond the coalition's control. *Budget delays* further reinforced these constraints *(interview with coalition members, institutionalisation phase)*. As a result, formal participation often prevailed over substantive contribution, raising concerns about the strength of collaboration and commitment within the coalition. This pattern was particularly visible in the Employment Agency's involvement, which remained largely symbolic rather than operational, with limited active support for referring unemployed individuals to training opportunities, presumably due to the absence of contractual obligations and restricted staff capacity *(interview with coalition member, institutionalisation phase)*.

***Labour market structure***

The labour market and institutional environment created both opportunities and significant constraints for stakeholder engagement. An important enabling factor was the coalition's adoption of a cross-cutting target group approach focused on women and people aged 50+, which allowed engagement with a broad range of employers while avoiding exclusive relationships with individual companies. As a public interest organisation, the coalition leader must avoid arrangements that could be perceived as favouring a single employer or contravening state aid rules, making this broad-based strategy an important mechanism for maintaining legitimacy and employer outreach. Participation was also more readily achievable among large companies, which have stronger incentives to engage due to workforce turnover challenges and external pressures related to ESG reporting. The ENGINE model was therefore considered more viable in relation to large employers *(interview with coalition members, institutionalisation phase)*.

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At the same time, several factors hindered coalition expansion and sustained stakeholder involvement. Public organisations such as municipal companies, cultural institutions and schools operate under more extensive regulatory requirements than private employers, which might constrain their flexibility to participate in coalition activities. The coalition model also required long-term commitment and significant time investment - conditions that could discourage stakeholder engagement, especially in respect of SMEs. The business case for participation was also uneven across company size. While large employers could absorb the costs of workforce development activities, SMEs often lacked sufficient personnel and organisational capacity to justify investment in upskilling and mobility-oriented initiatives. For smaller firms, the effort required to train employees and subsequently fill resulting vacancies was considered disproportionate to the potential benefits. Competition between companies presented an additional obstacle, as the participation of one employer from a particular sector might deter others from joining due to concerns about revealing internal challenges, such as labour shortages, to competitors *(interview with coalition members, institutionalisation phase)*.

More broadly, the heterogeneous nature of the Sofia labour market created a structural challenge for coalition building: large and international companies generally possess the resources to address workforce issues independently and therefore have limited need for coalition support, whereas smaller companies that might benefit most from participation frequently lack the capacity to engage. This tension limited the coalition's ability to simultaneously attract stakeholders with both the need and the capability to participate actively:

"Those who have capacity don't have the need of us, and those who have the need of us don't have capacity to participate". *(interview with coalition member, institutionalisation phase)*

***Economic situation***

The labour market in Sofia is characterised by both significant workforce shortages and changing employer recruitment strategies, creating a mixed environment for engagement.

On the enabling side, Bulgaria faces substantial labour shortages, with large numbers of unfilled positions and declining labour market participation *(interview with coalition members, institutionalisation phase)*. In Sofia, the demand for workers exceeds the number of available jobseekers, particularly in occupations requiring specific technical qualifications such as electricians, welders, locksmiths, and installers *(interview with coalition member, sustainability phase)*. At the same time, demographic and labour market developments create potential opportunities for the coalition's inclusion agenda. People aged 50+ are increasingly active and willing to remain in employment, partly due to low pension levels, while a reversal in migration trends has led to more Bulgarians returning to the country, including students *(interview with trainer, sustainability phase)*. These conditions align with the coalition's focus on labour market inclusion and workforce development.

However, several labour market dynamics reduced employers' incentives to engage with the coalition. Although personnel shortages are significant, employers have increasingly addressed them by recruiting groups of workers from third countries such as India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Kazakhstan through specialised agencies. These workers are perceived as less costly and more easily replaceable, making this strategy more attractive than investing in the recruitment and integration of vulnerable domestic groups. Consequently, many employers saw limited value in engaging with the SYNCLUSIVE's offer *(interview with coalition members, institutionalisation phase)*.

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At the same time, broader economic developments have reduced labour demand in some sectors, with job vacancies declining, some businesses closing, especially outside Sofia, and employers increasingly relying on automation and organisational adaptation rather than new recruitment. *(interview with coalition member, sustainability phase).* These trends are accompanied by longer-term structural challenges, including low wages, difficulties in the transition from education to quality employment, uncertainty regarding qualification needs, and changing worker preferences towards more flexible forms of work *(interview with trainer, sustainability phase)*. Together, these factors limited the immediate demand for coalition-supported interventions despite the persistence of labour shortages and inclusion challenges.

***Education and training system***

According to the opinions of coalition members, the Bulgarian education and training system created both structural challenges and several opportunities that supported the coalition's work.

One enabling factor was the strong demand for workers with secondary technical qualifications, created by the disappearance of many former secondary technical schools. This skills shortage increases the value of collaboration with educational and training centres and creates a clear need for responsive training initiatives. Another important enabling factor was the presence of people aged 50+ who possess technical qualifications and substantial professional experience. Beyond serving as employees, they can act as mentors for younger workers, while some individuals with highly specialised expertise have the potential to become trainers themselves *(interview with coalition member, sustainability phase)*. The coalition's focus on digital, personal, and soft skills was also perceived as a major strength, as these areas are insufficiently addressed by existing state-supported or employer-provided training and are particularly relevant for older workers and women seeking labour market re-entry or career mobility *(interview with trainer, sustainability phase)*.

At the same time, several factors hindered the coalition's work. Bulgaria's limited participation in lifelong learning, combined with employers' short-term workforce planning, makes it difficult to address long-term skills needs through traditional education pathways. Although the country has a large network of vocational education and training centres, their high degree of specialisation has reduced flexibility and mobility between qualifications. Additional barriers arise from the fragmentation of the training system. National employment agency programmes remain narrowly focused on occupation-specific skills, while links between different types and levels of training are weak *(interview with trainer, sustainability phase)*.

A mismatch between the coalition's intervention focus and employer demand has also been identified. While training in digital and personal skills was viewed positively, employers emphasised shortages in technical occupations and suggested a stronger need for vocational qualifications:

"The training courses you do are great, because they will need digital skills, for sure, communication skills for sure. But there comes a point when, if you redirect this to be more technical, then the focus becomes different and you become one of the few who will offer it, anyway. Right now, if you open training catalogues, just in Sofia, of companies that offer it, you will see that the training courses are more or less the same and they are tied to the basic things that people need to know, which I say again, they are necessary and important, but if we want it to have a deeper meaning and focus on a problem that is currently in Bulgaria, they

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need to be more specifically targeted. On what the larger companies really need." *(interview with coalition member, sustainability phase)*

Furthermore, certificates issued by NGOs do not have the same recognition as those provided by state-certified training organisations, particularly for public-sector employers *(interview with coalition members, formation phase)*. The coalition also faced challenges in scaling its activities due to the disconnect between employer-led and NGO-led training. The ongoing digitalisation created additional pressure for continuous adaptation of both the training system and the coalition's activities *(interview with coalition members, institutionalisation phase)*. This limited the value and reach of coalition-supported training and suggested a need for partnerships with certified providers or for obtaining certification directly *(interview with coalition member, institutionalisation phase)*.

***Cultural attitudes toward target groups***

The work of the local coalition was shaped by a combination of enabling and constraining factors related to the situation of people aged 50+, employer attitudes, and broader social dynamics.

Many people over 45 are pointed as not accustomed to taking responsibility for their own professional development in terms of planning, decision-making, and financing training activities *(interview with trainer, sustainability phase)*. In addition, while older workers are recognised of possessing considerable experience, loyalty and other assets, they are often perceived as lacking digital skills and being less adaptable to changing labour market requirements *(interview with coalition member, formation phase)*. These characteristics were identified as potential barriers to participation in training and employment initiatives.

Simultaneously, the same target group provided important opportunities for the coalition. People aged 50+ are increasingly valued by some employers for their maturity, loyalty, responsibility, knowledge, and professional experience. Although age discrimination remains widespread, with many employers reluctant to recruit workers over 50 and some recruitment processes reportedly filtering out candidates above 45 through AI algorithms *(interview with coalition members, formation phase)*, there are signs of changing attitudes. Some employers actively seek older workers, while managers who themselves belong to the 50+ age group may be particularly supportive of this workforce *(interview with coalition member, sustainability phase)*. Thus, age could function simultaneously as a source of exclusion and as an asset that strengthened the coalition's mission.

The coalition's strategic focus on people aged 50+ was another enabling factor. This group is broadly relatable and less politically contentious, making it easier to build support among stakeholders. However, the coalition also faced internal tensions regarding its objectives and methods. Differences existed between more worker-centred approaches, which prioritised individuals' capacities and aspirations, and business-centred approaches, which emphasised responding to employer demand. These debates reflected wider societal questions about balancing business continuity with social inclusion, particularly in contexts where employers increasingly recruit third-country workers while vulnerable local groups remain excluded *(interview with coalition members, institutionalisation phase)*.

Finally, broader cultural and relational factors affected the coalition's ability to build partnerships and expand its activities. A tendency towards individualism and distrust of unfamiliar organisations means that people are more likely to engage with actors they already

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know and trust. This created challenges for coalition-building and stakeholder engagement, especially among employers *(interview with coalition member, institutionalisation phase)*. Companies operating in the same sector might be unwilling to participate alongside competitors *(interview with coalition members, formation phase)*, and trust in the coalition itself appeared to require long-term relationship-building that extends beyond a single project cycle *(interview with coalition member, sustainability phase)*. As a result, developing sustained credibility and trusted networks was both a prerequisite for and a challenge to the coalition's long-term effectiveness.

### 1.6.2 Coalition-level mechanisms

#### 1.6.2.1 Coalition formation

The coalition formation phase in SofiaLab can be broadly described as spanning the period from the start of the SYNCLUSIVE project to the launch of the first intervention, with coalition-building activities being most intensive between mid-2023 and the end of 2024.

***Member participation & diversity***

At the formation phase, member participation was the primary challenge to the local coalition in Sofia. The lead organisation struggled to define a clear value proposition and entry point into a highly regulated labour market. While the partners knew how to use recruitment channels and tested a wide range of approaches, including job platforms, municipal employers, labour unions, chambers of commerce, professional associations, organisations working with specific target groups, individual companies, and unemployed people, these efforts were largely unsuccessful because stakeholders required specific information about the expected parameters and benefits, job opportunities, training outcomes, or certifications that the project could not clearly offer. The coalition also found it difficult to position itself among established labour-market actors with clearly defined roles and services. Public employment schemes often offer longer-term support, funding, recognised qualifications, and established procedures. This led to delayed recruitment and implementation, as significant effort was spent defining the offer rather than delivering activities, and to low engagement, especially from employers. Since recruitment depended heavily on a few committed partners, there were difficulties in scaling the coalition. Coalition partners themselves had to spend substantial effort defining their role and differentiating the project from existing labour-market actors.

To overcome these challenges, the partners gradually built a core coalition involving an HR company, the Employment Agency, and several employers, to improve access to the target group. These actors provided legitimacy, access to participants, and existing recruitment channels. Collaboration with public authorities and employment services increased credibility and reach. Subsequently, the small/core/nuclear coalition implemented ENGINE, while the larger was learning from the experience of the smaller circle and was trying to use it to translate this experience into some policies or measures or scaling up. A core main media partner and other media were also identified as needed partners to be attracted.

***Collaboration & commitment***

At the outset of the coalition, the core partners were trying to develop a complementary recruitment and service-delivery structure in which each partner has a distinct role. The Employment Agency was expected to contribute by increasing access to potential candidates from the target group and by connecting the coalition with relevant state-supported programmes, which might strengthen outreach and legitimacy. Since the role of the

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Employment Agency was seen as primarily supportive and intermediary, the effectiveness of recruitment was largely depending on the capacity and performance of the HR agency, which was expected to take the lead in identifying, attracting and matching unemployed individuals with employment opportunities. At the same time, the lead partner played a strategic coordination role by designing the intervention offer, providing expertise and facilitating agreements on responsibilities within the coalition, in order to ensure coherence and alignment among partners. These arrangements were crucial for more effective recruitment processes, clearer division of tasks and stronger support for beneficiaries, ultimately improving employment outcomes for the target group. However, from the very beginning, some partners felt connected rather to the mission than to the coalition:

"We don't have specific role in this project, just a joint press-conference to bring the public attention to the labour situation of people 50+, and using your premises for a joint training of people in this age. We see you as a key partner in our broader activity in this field." *(interview with coalition member, formation phase)*

***Communication & knowledge sharing***

The collaborative development of training interventions by the lead organisation, employers and the HR agency demonstrated a strong process of knowledge sharing, where partners exchanged insights on labour market needs, recruitment challenges, and the skills required by both jobseekers and employers. This shared knowledge was likely to result in more relevant and responsive training programmes, better employment outcomes for participants, and a stronger supply of qualified candidates for employers. Stakeholders benefited from access to each other's expertise, enabling more informed decision-making and a better understanding of emerging needs and opportunities. An important enabling factor was the long-standing cooperation among the organisations, which had built trust, regular communication channels, and confidence in the quality of information exchanged.

***Trust & stakeholder relationships***

The coalition's experience suggested that trust and stakeholder relationships could support future collaboration, as positive past cooperation increased partners' willingness to engage in new joint initiatives and strengthened confidence in working together. For stakeholders, this could lead to greater continuity of partnerships, improved coordination, and more effective sharing of resources and expertise. However, the potential impact of the SYNCLUSIVE offer appeared constrained by its limited clarity and competitiveness, particularly because the interventions could not guarantee jobs or provide widely recognised certifications, which may have reduced its attractiveness to both employers and jobseekers. An additional hindering factor was that employers were generally unaccustomed and hence, distrustful to working with NGOs to address workforce needs and tended to rely on established recruitment channels, potentially limiting their engagement with the coalition.

#### 1.6.2.2 Coalition sustainability

For the local coalition in Sofia, the sustainability phase covered the period during which the coalition's core intervention: the delivery of free training courses to the target group, was implemented. This phase extended from November 2024 to November 2025.

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***Governance & leadership***

Coalition members repeatedly emphasized that the coalition is intentionally informal, flexible, and based on voluntary collaboration. Leadership was exercised through coordination by Sofia Lab and SDA, who convened partners, organized events, and steered the training interventions, but without rigid governance procedures. This informality was portrayed as an advantage: it allowed quick adaptation of training content, responsive engagement with employers, and personalised support for participants. Contextual factors—such as Bulgaria's centralized employment governance and institutional norms that favour formal state programs—made this flexible, bottom-up leadership style even more important, because it enabled the coalition to act where formal institutions were slow or poorly aligned with the needs of people 50+. Coalition members implicitly suggested that the coalition's effectiveness stemmed from this balance: enough structure to coordinate activities and maintain continuity, but enough flexibility to adjust interventions, integrate employer feedback, and respond to the lived realities of older jobseekers. This adaptive leadership approach was described as essential for designing relevant training courses, implementing them efficiently, and sustaining engagement across diverse actors *(group discussion of coalition members, sustainability phase)*.

A coalition member described the leadership approach as characterised by openness, purpose-driven decision-making, and focused on long-term value rather than immediate results. For stakeholders, this type of governance and leadership was likely to have fostered trust, commitment, and continued engagement by emphasising shared goals and intrinsic motivation. A potential barrier was the expectation of slow and less visible short-term results, which could have challenged the sustained motivation of some participants while an important enabling factor was the perceived authenticity and openness of the leadership:

"I like the leadership because it is open and is motivated by the sense and no other motives. You just should not expect fast results and should not do the things because of the results. Do it because of the sense and the results will come." *(interview with coalition member, sustainability phase)*

***Member participation & diversity***

The coalition members described the coalition as an informal network of organisations, including NGOs, employers, recruitment companies, municipal bodies, national institutions, and training providers. Their participation varied according to organisational role and the stage of the intervention: employers were most actively involved in adapting training activities and meeting directly with trainees, NGOs and training providers led implementation, while municipal and national institutions contributed mainly through activation events and strategic coordination, although the Employment Agency was expected to contribute additional support through access to labour market measures and financial incentives for employers hiring participants from the target group. Coalition members noted that the involvement of public institutions increased the visibility of the project and created opportunities for future policy influence. They also indicated that contextual factors, such as the limited HR capacity of SMEs, employers' low awareness of state support programmes, and the project's funding arrangements, influenced both the level and consistency of participation. Coalition members further suggested that stronger involvement from employers and small businesses would have improved the alignment between training provision and labour market needs, while the diversity of members enhanced the quality and sustainability of the interventions through the

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complementary contributions of employers, NGOs, and public institutions *(group discussion of coalition members, sustainability phase)*.

***Collaboration & commitment***

The coalition members described collaboration and commitment among partners as strong and largely driven by a shared recognition of the need to support people aged 50+ facing age discrimination, digital skills gaps, and other labour market barriers. They portrayed the coalition as a "coalition of the willing," in which engagement depended on motivation, sector-specific needs, and existing relationships rather than formal commitments. Coalition members also indicated that contextual factors such as limited employer awareness, SMEs' restricted HR capacity, and the centralised structure of employment policy had reduced the level of engagement of some employers. Despite these constraints, they considered the strong commitment of core partners, including NGOs, trainers, municipal authorities, and several employers, to have contributed to more effective intervention design and implementation by ensuring that training reflected labour market needs, providing comprehensive support to beneficiaries, and creating a more sustainable and responsive model than formal institutions alone could have achieved. They further highlighted that the coalition's informal and flexible style of collaboration had enabled partners to adapt quickly to emerging needs and maintain their engagement throughout the intervention period *(group discussion of coalition members, sustainability phase)*.

***Communication & knowledge sharing***

Communication and knowledge sharing served as an important mechanism for coordinating activities, exchanging experiences, and adapting interventions to participants' needs. Information was shared through meetings, forums, consultations, and joint events, enabling coalition members, employers, trainers, and institutional actors to exchange feedback and lessons learned. This continuous interaction supported the adjustment of training content, alignment with labour market needs, and the integration of practical and psychological support, thereby enhancing the relevance and sustainability of project activities.

The mechanism also contributed to stakeholder engagement. Respondents suggested that more frequent updates, consultations, and opportunities for employers to observe training activities could further strengthen stakeholders' sense of ownership and belonging to the project. In particular, greater involvement of employers was expected to increase their awareness of the project's benefits and encourage stronger commitment and participation. More regular communication with all coalition members was similarly viewed as a way to foster a sense of being active contributors to, rather than external observers of, project development.

"I mainly followed what you were doing on LinkedIn, how far the people you were developing had gotten, and so on. But if you want this to improve and the partners to feel like a whole, there need to be more frequent meetings to discuss what has happened, what happens next, what the feedback is, and so on. I think that would be the key. Even if they are online, they don't have to be live. They can be online for a 20-minute briefing, just to discuss some things, and then employers will probably be more open, and all partners, not just employers, all partners, because they will be together, and an open table always gives everyone the opportunity to share their opinion." *(interview with coalition member, sustainability phase)*

Communication and knowledge sharing further revealed the need for greater methodological alignment across partner countries. As partners worked with different target groups and

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contexts, respondents stressed the importance of common and measurable indicators, including quantitative targets, to assess progress and compare outcomes. The delayed or missed communication of such shared evaluation frameworks limited the coalition members' ability to track achievements consistently and generate comparable evidence of success.

Several environmental factors acted as enablers of this mechanism, including shared professional backgrounds, previous experience in European projects, and a common professional language among partners. These factors facilitated trust and effective knowledge exchange. At the same time, differences in national contexts, target groups, institutional settings, and organisational capacities created barriers to communication and outcome comparison. Without clear communication processes and shared evaluation standards, these external factors could hinder collective learning and the assessment of project impact.

***Trust & stakeholder relationships***

Trust and stakeholder relationships emerged as an important mechanism supporting collaboration within the coalition and engagement with external stakeholders. The coalition's informal and voluntary structure further facilitated relationship building by encouraging dialogue, feedback, and flexible responses to emerging needs.

Trust strengthened coordination among NGOs, trainers, municipal bodies, and some employers, contributing to more responsive implementation, collaborative problem solving, and greater sustainability of project activities. It also supported the coalition's role as a bridge between employers and older jobseekers or employees seeking career mobility. However, coalition members noted that establishing this intermediary role and gaining employers' trust required considerable time, while the project's limited duration constrained the depth of relationship building. As a result, continued initiatives beyond the project were viewed as necessary to achieve broader and more lasting effects. Stronger trust and stakeholder relationships had the potential to increase employers' willingness to engage in project activities and support age-inclusive employment practices, while improving opportunities and support for older workers. For coalition partners, trust could enhance commitment, collaboration, and the sustainability of outcomes.

Coalition members described trust as having been built through long-standing cooperation, previous European projects, shared goals, and open communication. At the same time, external barriers were identified. Coalition members highlighted the lack of widely recognised examples, common approaches, or leadership across countries, which limited opportunities to demonstrate proven practices and encourage employer participation. Differences in incentives between public and private organisations, employers' limited awareness of relevant public programmes, and the restricted HR capacity of many SMEs also reduced opportunities to build trust and strengthen stakeholder engagement.

#### 1.6.2.3 Coalition institutionalization

In SofiaLab, the beginning of the coalition's institutionalisation phase could be considered to have coincided with the completion of the training programme at the end of 2025. At that time, the coalition started to reflect on the lessons learned; on the assets of SYNCLUSIVE and how to promote their societal uptake, including as internal working practices of coalition members; and on the unresolved challenges and possible strategies to address them in similar future initiatives.

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***Governance & leadership***

Governance and leadership served as a key mechanism for coordinating the coalition and maintaining stakeholder engagement. The lead organisation acted as the central driver, bringing partners together, managing relationships, balancing diverse expectations, and creating roles for coalition members. This leadership supported cooperation and continuity, although it required significant effort that the leader of the coalition assessed as not been formally included in the project design. The coalition became more formalised through a non-binding declaration signed several months after its establishment. This was seen positively, as helped provide structure and visibility while preserving flexibility; but coalition members noted a continuing tension between informal collaboration and formal governance *(interview with coalition members, institutionalisation phase)*.

The mechanism contributed to stakeholder coordination, engagement, and collective action; however, its effectiveness was limited by the lack of clearly documented roles and responsibilities. The goodwill-based coalition agreement did not establish formal obligations, reducing accountability and clarity. Coalition members therefore suggested that future initiatives should specify partner commitments more explicitly. While the voluntary nature of participation facilitated collaboration, it also acted as an external barrier to stronger governance structures and long-term sustainability *(interview with coalition member, institutionalisation phase)*.

***Member participation & diversity***

Member participation and diversity functioned as an important mechanism shaping both coalition formation and implementation. The coalition was intentionally broad, bringing together ministries, research institutes, municipal bodies, businesses, HR organisations, and NGOs. This diversity facilitated coalition formation because different actors recognised potential benefits from participation and contributed complementary perspectives, expertise, and resources. This mechanism had the potential to increase the reach, legitimacy, and relevance of project activities by involving a broad range of stakeholders, while also creating opportunities for resource sharing and collaboration. However, coalition members noted that diversity also created management challenges, as organisations differed in their agendas, levels of commitment, and organisational cultures. Differences in institutional priorities, organisational capacities, and motivation acted as barriers, making sustained participation more difficult and placing additional demands on coalition coordination and relationship management. A distinction emerged between organisations for which labour market inclusion was a core mission and those for which it was a more peripheral concern. The former tended to remain consistently engaged, while the latter required more intensive relationship building and coordination to sustain their participation *(interview with coalition members, institutionalisation phase)*.

Coalition members also distinguished between a core coalition and a wider coalition. The core coalition worked closely throughout the project, building on relationships that had existed before SYNCLUSIVE. In contrast, participation in the wider coalition was more episodic, with members contributing to specific activities such as job fairs, information dissemination, training observation, or communication events. As a result, only a limited number of organisations could be considered continuously and substantively engaged *(interview with coalition member, institutionalisation phase)*.

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***Collaboration & commitment***

Collaboration and commitment functioned as an important mechanism for translating coalition membership into collective action. Commitment was most evident in the implementation of intervention activities, with stakeholders contributing to lectures, mock interviews, curriculum development, and employment opportunities, whereas sustained strategic engagement proved more difficult to maintain. To support ongoing collaboration, the lead organisation relied on personal networks, informal coordination, and opportunities for stakeholder visibility. This mechanism facilitated the mobilisation of diverse expertise, resources, and opportunities, generating benefits for both employers and participants. However, its effectiveness was constrained by several external factors, including the internal governance procedures of large companies, the existence of alternative programmes within public institutions, and the absence of formal incentives for broader coalition members without contractual obligations. These factors contributed to uneven levels of commitment across stakeholder groups and increased the coordination burden placed on coalition leadership.

***Communication & knowledge sharing***

Coalition members saw the shared success stories of intervention participants as the strongest motivator for coalition members, far more effective than statistics, because they showed tangible impact and reinforced shared ownership of results. They felt the Realist Evaluation cycle was too slow to sustain momentum, as findings arrived after the coalition had already moved on.

Transnational learning was limited, relying only on written briefs rather than direct peer exchange, which the respondent viewed as insufficiently engaging for coalition members. The project's *transnational design* was found as *limiting meaningful cross-national learning,* because exchange occurred only through written briefs rather than direct inter-coalition contact, which would have been more motivating. Such direct interaction could have enabled richer discussion of shared challenges like third-country labour recruitment, demographic change, and retirement-age reforms. The project's research design (particularly the *Realist Evaluation timeline*) was flagged as a structural disconnect: by the time evaluation findings were available, the coalition momentum had already moved on *(interview with coalition member, institutionalisation phase)*.

***Trust & stakeholder relationships***

Trust functioned as a central mechanism in the formation and operation of the coalition. The coalition was initially established largely through pre-existing interpersonal and organisational trust in the lead organisation, with many stakeholders agreeing to participate despite having limited knowledge of the other partners. In the Bulgarian context, coalition-building relied predominantly on informal trust-based relationships rather than formal institutional arrangements, requiring continuous relational work and personal engagement from the lead organisation to sustain participation. This mechanism generated several outcomes: it facilitated stakeholder recruitment and coalition stability, strengthened collaboration, and created valuable networking opportunities through access to partners' contacts, expertise, and institutional networks, which became a benefit in its own right beyond the project's formal objectives.

The effectiveness of the trust mechanism was shaped by several contextual factors, including a strong cultural preference among employers for working with familiar and trusted actors, the

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dependence on prior relationships within the labour market, ambiguity regarding partner roles, and the limited duration of a single project. Stakeholders recognised that sustained trust, particularly among employers, would require longer-term collaboration extending beyond the lifespan of one project.

***Other mechanisms***

*Visibility and media exposure* functioned as a mechanism that supported stakeholder retention by providing public recognition and opportunities to demonstrate social responsibility. This generated reputational benefits for participating organisations and helped maintain engagement among less active partners. Its effectiveness was likely influenced by the value stakeholders placed on public image and the availability of opportunities for external visibility, although its influence may have diminished over time without tangible results.

*The novelty of the coalition's approach* facilitated initial stakeholder engagement by stimulating interest in a new form of cross-sector collaboration. This contributed to stakeholder mobilisation and willingness to participate in coalition activities. The mechanism was likely strengthened in contexts where existing labour market approaches were perceived as insufficient

*Training quality* operated as a mechanism that reinforced participant engagement through positive learning experiences. High-quality delivery increased confidence in the programme and motivated participants to enrol in subsequent training activities. This resulted in stronger participant retention and enhanced perceptions of coalition credibility. Its effectiveness was influenced by the relevance of the training content, the competence of trainers, and the extent to which training responded to participants' needs.

### 1.6.3 Summarizing findings along Coalition-level CMOs

#### 1.6.3.1. Inflow of vulnerable jobseekers

Coalition members generally viewed the inflow of jobseekers as problematic. Initially, the targeted focus on the group was perceived as a potentially effective mechanism, enabling coordinated efforts to engage a large number of employers and convince them that some or all of their vacancies were suitable for people aged 50+. This approach was expected to help shift employers' mindsets and contribute to overcoming age-related stereotypes.

At the outset of the interventions, even the registration of jobseekers for training courses was at risk. Employer-driven recruitment proved ineffective, while the wider coalition, including the employment agency, did not actively refer participants despite the agency's formal involvement. The core coalition compensated by mobilising its own networks and free channels, such as a job-search platform. Subsequently, the quality of the training experience encouraged some participants to enrol voluntarily in further courses.

However, the matching efforts encountered significant barriers. While the employers engaged in the SYNCLUSIVE initiative at SofiaLab appreciated efforts to improve participants' general competences, including digital, green, and soft skills, they primarily sought candidates with specific professional, mainly technical, qualifications. In addition, many vacancies involved working conditions that members of the target group were often unable or unwilling to accommodate, such as outdoor work or jobs located outside the city.

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The coalition members' views allow formulation of the following Content-Mechanism-Output (CMO) statements:

***1) Labour market integration initiatives focused on specific target group can change employers' mindset***

**Mechanism:** An initiative focused only on the specific target group (people 50+) can meet with a great number of employers to discuss their job positions one by one and convince them that at least part of them is suitable for target group representatives.

**Outcomes:** The way of thinking of employers can be changed and many positions for the target group open.

**Context facilitators:** Some employers themselves are aged 50+ and sympathise with their generation. Many have already experienced the weaknesses of working collectives, compound of young people only, and/or praise some qualities of older workers as loyalty, maturity and professional experience.

**Hindering factors:** People 50 + in Bulgaria are victims of widespread stereotypes and discrimination among the employers and younger generations as a whole. Many employers perceive them as less effective at work and unable to adapt to changing environment.

**Overarching CMO: If** people 50+ in Bulgaria are largely rejected by employers due to stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes, **then** a focused initiative concentrated on this target group only would be able to meet with a large number of employers and discuss with them the feasibility of employing person aged 50+ at every job opening they have. **Because** specific and practical examples of where people 50+ can be employed convince employers of their employability, this **may lead to** change of employers' mindset and opening of many positions for representatives of the target group.

***2) Coalition networks enable participant recruitment despite limited employer and Employment Agency engagement***

**Mechanism:** The partners from the core coalition used their own networks and free channels, as Facebook and job advertisement websites, to promote the training courses among the target group and to secure inflow of both older jobseekers and employees to the intervention activities. Subsequently, the quality of training courses triggered the complementary mechanism of "word of mouth".

**Outcomes:** Participants for the training courses have been successfully recruited, and more than 100 training completions were achieved.

**Context facilitators:** The core coalition partners have a long-standing experience in working with diverse vulnerable groups that provided options for reach-out. The right choice of Facebook and the most popular job-search website as channels that are widely used by older people contributed to the overall success.

**Hindering factors:** The engagement of the Employment Agency with referral of jobseekers to the training courses was not as extensive as expected. Furthermore, practically no employers enrolled their employees aged 50+ in the first training. As a result, the successful start of the interventions was put at risk. In addition, in Sofia, as a capital city, there are numerous training courses advertised, including on topics chosen for the interventions in SofiaLab (e.g. digital, green and soft skills courses).

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**Overarching CMO: If** employers were unwilling to engage with the coalition, and some wider coalition members did not actively refer participants, **then** the core coalition used its own networks and free channels to advertise the training courses. **Because** target group representatives have been informed through popular channels and attracted by the free access and actual topics of the training courses; and subsequently, because the first participants have been satisfied with the training quality, **as a result,** inflow was achieved through individually-driven channels rather than employer or wider-coalition pipelines, and some participants were retained for a follow-up training.

***3) Combining general skills with job-specific qualifications strengthens the inflow of vulnerable jobseekers into employment***

**Mechanism:** Interventions providing digital, green and soft skills can equip people 50+ with broadly sought knowledge and skills and boost their self-confidence. When these general skills are complemented by updated qualifications or requalification corresponding to specific high-demand job positions, participants can also meet the qualification requirements of employers engaged in SYNCLUSIVE.

**Outcomes:** Increased motivation, self-confidence and preparedness for job interviews, combined with relevant job-specific qualifications, can increase participants' chances of qualifying for interviews and accessing available job opportunities, thereby strengthening the inflow of vulnerable jobseekers into employment.

**Context facilitators:** General skills, such as digital, green and soft skills, are useful and expected almost universally. Strong market demand for specific professions can provide employment opportunities when jobseekers possess the corresponding qualifications and professional profiles.

**Hindering factors:** The company profiles may differ substantially from the backgrounds of the target group, while jobseekers' professional profiles are very diverse. Some employers' activities also take place in different settlements. Differences in required qualifications, professional profiles, jobseekers' interests and working conditions can therefore make matching jobseekers with available opportunities more difficult.

**Overarching CMO: If** digital, green and soft skills are universally applicable and useful for people 50+ in their job-seeking and career development, while specific professions are broadly demanded in the country and by the engaged employers, and intervention participants have diverse professional backgrounds, **then** an intervention design combining general skills with specific professional qualifications and closer matching between jobseekers' and employers' profiles can better connect labour supply and demand, **because** jobseekers can gain both broadly applicable skills and the specific qualifications required for job openings that correspond to their interests and working conditions. **As a result,** the intervention can strengthen the inflow of vulnerable jobseekers into employment.

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### 1.6.3.2. Upward / Sideward mobility of employees

Coalition members expressed more pessimistic views regarding employee mobility than regarding the inflow of jobseekers. Employed training participants were ultimately recruited individually from diverse backgrounds rather than through employer pipelines, and the number of employed participants achieved generally did not depend on the wider coalition.

Furthermore, the coalition did not succeed in linking training participation to promotion pathways. While preparing newcomers can bring benefits through their fresh perspectives, employers more often preferred to develop existing staff, as this was perceived as a faster and easier process. At the same time, employers described internal promotion as challenging because finding a replacement can take a year or more, making them reluctant to promote employees solely for the purpose of individual development. In many companies, the structure of the job positions does not allow internal mobility or at least requires serious process of requalification. An additional barrier identified was that members of the target group - people aged 50+, were perceived as more hesitant about career changes and in need of more time to accept them compared with younger employees.

As a more realistic alternative, two separate tracks were proposed: one focused on individual upskilling and the other on encouraging employers to hire from the target group, not necessarily within the same organisation or timeframe.

"You help both sides, but not obligatory within one and the same organisation simultaneously." *(interview with coalition member, institutionalisation phase)*

***1) Barriers to employers' engagement limit ENGINE and internal mobility.***

**Mechanism:** As a public interest organisation, the lead organisation couldn't partner exclusively with a single private employer, as this would risk violating de minimis state aid rules and appear as market interference. The cross-cutting target group focus (women, 50+) was adopted as a strategy to maintain a broad employer reach without favouring any single company.

**Outcomes:** Although some employers enrolled their employees in the training courses, the numbers of engaged employers and respectively, of their employees involved, was low; the ENGINE model failed to be fully implemented as there was no internal mobility outcome identified resulting from the interventions.

**Context facilitators:** Older employees feel the need and have strong desire to develop. Many like their organisations, are loyal to their employers, and would prefer internal career development instead of taking risk to move elsewhere.

**Hindering factors:** Large companies from one and the same sector refrained from participating in common initiatives as SYNCLUSIVE, as they were afraid that some sensitive information about their companies might be revealed to competitors. For SMEs, the effort and cost of training one person to move up and then backfilling their position was felt disproportionate for a small company.

**Overarching CMO: If** the ENGINE model – which assumes that upskilling existing employees creates vacancy chains for incoming jobseekers – requires large employers or non-competitive sectors to function, **then** the lead organisation as a public-interest organisation cannot partner exclusively with a single employer due to state aid considerations, and is not able to partner with SMEs that predominate the region's employer landscape, for whom the

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business case does not hold. **Because** coalition members may therefore not see upward or sideward mobility as a realistic or relevant goal within the current project design, **as a result**, there is no coalition-level outcome related to upward or sideward employee mobility.

***2) Decoupling upskilling from internal mobility enables parallel support for employees and employer***

**Mechanism:** The coalition provided upskilling opportunities to employees who came independently, without the participation of their employer in SYNCLUSIVE initiative. Simultaneously, support for employers to improve their inclusive practices regarding people 50+ continued as a separate track.

**Outcomes:** Employers were encouraged to consider development of older workers, without obligatory connecting training with internal mobility; and older employees were supported in their career development, not obligatory within the same companies.

**Context facilitators:** Many older employees in Bulgaria experience job dissatisfaction and/or insecurity that attracted them to participate in the interventions on their own accord.

**Hindering factors:** In many companies, the job positions differ significantly in terms of type of qualification and transitions within the company are hardly feasible. The training of the employees provided by the employer frequently is relevant for their current positions only. The majority of employers experience hardship to recruit candidates for the low-level, and not for medium- and high-level positions. Many companies are not interested in upskilling and reskilling of employees, but only in inflow of jobseekers.

**Overarching CMO: If** employers found internal promotion unfeasible or risky due to lengthy replacement processes, and both employees and employers experience challenges in the process of sideward or upward mobility within the same company, **then,** instead of linking training participation to internal mobility within the same organisation, the coalition separated support for the employees and support for the employers in different tracks. **Because** this approach did not require employers to take actions counteracting their business logic, while still supplied them with good practices; and gave opportunity to many employees to develop, regardless the practices of their employer, **as a result**, no upward or sideward mobility was an achieved outcome; but employers were more inclined to support older employees and older employees were better prepared for career changes.

#### 1.6.3.3. Higher competitiveness of the target group

The increased competitiveness of older workers was an anticipated outcome of interventions even in the formation phase when the interventions have been designed but not commenced. The design of the interventions itself, along with the free access and the socialising opportunities that the training with peers provides, was expected to make knowledge easy to adopt and to have motivational effect on the target group representatives.

In addition, the focus on the building of soft skills as one of the main pillars of the training programme was planned to fill the gap left by state-operated training programmes and to supply intervention participants with handy job-seeking and team-work abilities that would help them to improve their labour market positioning.

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***1) Easy-to-follow intervention design helps motivation and absorption of knowledge***

**Mechanism:** The mechanism is aimed to remove several substantial learning barriers for older people: 1) financial access, by providing free training and informing that free opportunities exist; 2) “ableist” barrier, by showing the example of peers who experience the same hinders and convincing older people that they can make progress too; 3) time barrier, by easy-to-follow design of the training, helping older people to achieve results with acceptable time resources.

**Outcomes:** People aged 50+ acquire new relevant knowledge that increases their competitiveness and stable job prospects.

**Context facilitators:** With raising retirement age and low pensions, raising cost of living and unstable political and economic situation in the country, older people need stable/additional income sources to cope. In addition, they have higher health needs, sometimes requiring substantial expenses.

**Hindering factors:** The qualification becomes outdated as people go older, especially in the fast-developing environment and with hampered access to support for upgrade or requalification. Older people often feel they lack skills and knowledge, but also lack information what exactly they need, how to achieve it and who can help, as well as resources and confidence to change their situation.

**Overarching CMO: If** people aged 50+ face increasing financial pressures due to rising retirement ages, low pensions, higher living and healthcare costs, while also experiencing outdated qualifications, limited access to requalification support, and low confidence in their ability to learn, **then** providing free, accessible, and age-sensitive training that highlights successful peer examples can reduce financial, informational, motivational, and time-related barriers to participation. **Because** these interventions increase awareness of learning opportunities, strengthen self-efficacy, and make skills acquisition more achievable within available resources, **as a result**, older workers acquire relevant new knowledge and skills, contributing to enhanced labour market competitiveness and more stable employment and income prospects.

***2) Soft skills training provides job-seeking and team-work abilities***

**Mechanism:** Focusing on soft skills training, built on many practical examples of job-seeking and working relation situations, as one of the main intervention pillars, allows the easy utilisation of this knowledge still in the process of training.

**Outcomes:** Older people are equipped with job-seeking and team-work skills that help them improve their career prospects both in situations of unemployment and employment.

**Context facilitators:** There is a great variety of training programmes on language, digital and specific professional skills offered by the Employment Agency, but a gap is identified regarding soft skills training programmes.

**Hindering factors:** As the very nature and importance of soft skills are largely unknown, people might not be easily attracted to enrol.

**Overarching CMO: If** numerous programmes address technical, language, and digital skills but relatively few focus on soft skills, **then** embedding practical, situation-based soft skills training into interventions can strengthen participants’ job-seeking and workplace interaction

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capabilities. **Because** the immediate application of learning through realistic examples helps participants recognise the relevance and value of soft skills despite limited prior awareness of their importance, **as a result**, older adults become better equipped to navigate job-search and workplace relationships, contributing to improved career prospects in both unemployment and employment contexts.

#### 1.6.3.4. Improved intervention co-design

The intervention achieved important advances in intervention design through a collaborative coalition approach, which combined research-based needs assessment with partners' practical expertise to develop a training programme tailored to people aged 50+ and their labour market challenges. The design process also generated broader insights into labour market inclusion and positioned the target group strategically within policy and employer discussions. However, implementation faced challenges related to sustaining partner engagement, requiring substantial unbudgeted coordination and relationship-building efforts, while differing views within the coalition regarding the appropriate thematic scope and ambition of training put in question the alignment with labour market needs. Furthermore, monitoring of design effectiveness relied largely on qualitative feedback and informal observations, limiting the availability of systematic evidence to support ongoing adaptation and learning.

***1) Trusted exchange of diverse expertise enabled responsive intervention co-design***

**Mechanism:** The diverse expertise of coalition partners enabled them to exchange experiences and knowledge, complementing empirical grounding with target-group-specific delivery experience and knowledge of general labour-market demand, particularly the demand for digital skills. Their previous collaboration facilitated discussions, and each partner trusted the information provided by the others.

**Outcomes:** The coalition developed a well-designed intervention that addressed the needs of the target group while also responding to general labour-market demand for digital skills.

**Context facilitators:** Many coalition members had collaborated on other initiatives and met on a regular basis. Their communication was smooth, and they trusted one another. Their diverse profiles contributed to a broad range of expertise, including analytical knowledge and practical experience working with various vulnerable groups.

**Hindering factors:** Not all partners were involved from the outset, and the level of engagement was uneven.

**Overarching CMO: If** coalition partners operated within a context of established relationships, regular communication, mutual trust, and complementary expertise, **then** the exchange of knowledge and experience across organisations enabled the co-design of an intervention that combined empirical evidence with practical insights into the needs of the target group and general labour-market demand, particularly for digital skills. **Because** partners trusted one another's contributions and were able to integrate diverse analytical and delivery perspectives despite uneven levels of engagement and the late involvement of some members, **as a result**, the coalition developed a well-designed intervention that was responsive to the needs and circumstances of the target group, while also addressing relevant labour-market skill demand.

***2) Relationship management sustained collaboration, but not consensus***

**Mechanism:** The lead organisation drew on each partner's specific expertise and invested substantial uncosted effort in relationship management to sustain contributions, as partners

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with a direct stake in the target group were intrinsically motivated, whereas others needed to be actively engaged and reminded of the mutual benefits of participation.

**Outcomes:** The intervention was co-designed with a broader range of components than a single organisation would likely have provided alone, albeit at the cost of additional coordination effort; however, disagreements regarding intervention design persisted.

**Context facilitators:** All partners were motivated by the potential success of the initiative and the mutual benefits that could result from it.

**Hindering factors:** Coalition partners varied considerably in the extent to which the target group aligned with their organisational mission. In addition, employers required job candidates with specific qualifications. monitoring of design effectiveness relied largely on qualitative feedback and informal observations, limiting the availability of systematic evidence to support ongoing adaptation and learning.

**Overarching CMO: If** coalition partners were motivated by the potential mutual benefits of the initiative but varied considerably in the extent to which their organisational missions and interests aligned with the target group's needs, and systematic evidence for adaptation was limited, **then** the lead organisation's active relationship management and mobilisation of partners' complementary expertise enabled their continued participation in the intervention. **Because** differing priorities and expectations, including employers' demand for specific qualifications, shaped partners' views on the intervention, **as a result**, despite ongoing collaboration, resulting in a more comprehensive co-designed intervention, disagreements regarding its design persisted with significant coordination costs and unresolved tensions.

#### 1.6.3.5. Strengthened intervention implementation and delivery

The intervention demonstrated notable achievements in implementation and delivery through a coalition-based approach that expanded access to participants, employers, and diverse expertise, thereby enhancing the reach and relevance of activities. However, implementation was challenged by varying levels of partner commitment, reflecting differences in the extent to which the target group aligned with individual organisational priorities. The experience highlighted the importance of clearly communicating overarching objectives and measurable targets across all coalition members to ensure coordinated action and effective progress tracking.

***1) Strategic targeting enabled broad support but did not ensure full ENGINE implementation***

**Mechanism:** The coalition selected older adults as a target group because they constituted a broadly recognisable population with limited political opposition. This focus resonated with a wide range of stakeholders and had the potential to attract diverse partners to the SYNCLUSIVE initiative, including policymakers, employers, and the general public.

**Outcomes**: Interest among the target group was high, and the intervention was implemented successfully. However, the ENGINE was not implemented in full scale.

**Context facilitators:** There was no significant political opposition to the labour market inclusion of older workers within the country.

**Hindering factors:** Variations in the level of engagement among partners, reflecting differences in organisational goals and cultures, hindered the full-scale implementation.

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**Overarching CMO: If** there was little political opposition to the labour market inclusion of older workers, but partner engagement varied due to differing organisational goals and cultures, **then** selecting older adults as a broadly recognisable and politically uncontroversial target group helped mobilise support from diverse stakeholders, including policymakers, employers, and the wider public. **Because** this focus resonated across stakeholder groups and fostered broad interest in the initiative, **as a result**, the intervention was implemented successfully and attracted strong participation from the target group; but lower engagement of some stakeholders prevented the full implementation of ENGINE.

***2) Time-consuming evaluation prevented adaptation***

**Mechanism:** The evaluation of intervention started and results came too late to serve as evidence base for adaptation.

**Outcomes**: The coalition lacked a timely mechanism for monitoring goal implementation.

**Context facilitators:** A common Realist Evaluation methodology was developed and refined that allows comparison of results across living labs.

**Hindering factors:** Without incentive mechanisms and financial resources envisaged for participation in research activities, a low number of intervention participants responded. The research methodology required four months between the second and the third measurement point. The project had not envisaged how and when intermediate evaluation results might be used to adapt interventions.

**Overarching CMO: If** the project's evaluation methodology required significant time and did not envisage incentive and intervention adaptation mechanisms, **then** evaluation findings were not available in time to inform implementation. **Because** delays in evaluation results limited evidence-informed adaptation of the intervention and may have reduced the motivation of some coalition members, **as a result**, delayed evaluation feedback limited timely monitoring and evidence-informed adaptation.

#### 1.6.3.6. Improved sustainability/scaling of interventions

The intervention contributed to sustainability by establishing the coalition as a trusted intermediary between employers and individuals seeking employment or career mobility. However, the project's limited duration constrained the development of employer trust, stakeholder recognition, and sustained participation, suggesting that continued implementation through follow-up project phases would be needed to achieve lasting impact. Greater use of social media and participant success stories was also identified as an opportunity to strengthen outreach, employer engagement, and target-group participation.

***1) Continued funding enables sustained activities, trust and participation***

**Mechanism:** Continued project funding, enabling further implementation phases, combined with the promotion of a growing number of success stories through social media, would provide opportunities to build trust among employers and other stakeholders whose engagement had previously been limited.

**Outcomes:** Larger numbers of employers and members of the target group would be attracted to the intervention, thereby maximising its impact on the local labour market.

**Context facilitators:** SYNCLUSIVE had already generated tangible benefits for employers, including greater awareness of the strengths of older workers and examples of inclusive

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workplace practices, as well as for older workers through improved competitiveness, self-confidence, and motivation.

**Hindering factors:** The project operated on a relatively small scale for a capital city, and its duration was too limited to allow the development of broad stakeholder trust.

**Overarching CMO: If** the initial benefits for employers and older workers had already been demonstrated, but the project remained too small in scale and too short in duration to establish broad stakeholder trust, **then** funding, enabling further implementation and combined with the promotion of an expanding pool of success stories via social media, could strengthen engagement among employers and other stakeholders. **Because** visible evidence of positive outcomes can enhance credibility, reinforce the value of inclusive employment practices, and build confidence in the intervention over time, **as a result**, greater numbers of employers and older workers could be attracted to participate, thereby maximising the intervention's impact on the local labour market.

The attribution of the above CMO configurations to coalition phases is presented in Figure 2. The coalition's development can be understood as a progression through formation, sustainability and institutionalisation, although some CMOs extended across these phases. During formation (CMOs 1, 6, 7, 8 and 10), strategic targeting, responsiveness to the target group's needs, complementary expertise and trusted relationships created the conditions for coalition building and co-design of the intervention. Sustainability during implementation (CMOs 2, 9 and 11) depended on the coalition's capacity to mobilise alternative operational resources and networks, actively maintain partner engagement, and generate timely learning for adaptation. Institutionalisation (CMOs 3, 4, 5 and 12) reflected lessons about how the approach could be better aligned with labour-market demand, pragmatically adapted where the full ENGINE model proved difficult to implement, and continued or scaled through further funding, trust building and demonstration of successful outcomes. CMO 10 bridged formation and sustainability, while CMO 11 connected sustainability with institutionalisation, illustrating that coalition development was iterative rather than strictly sequential.

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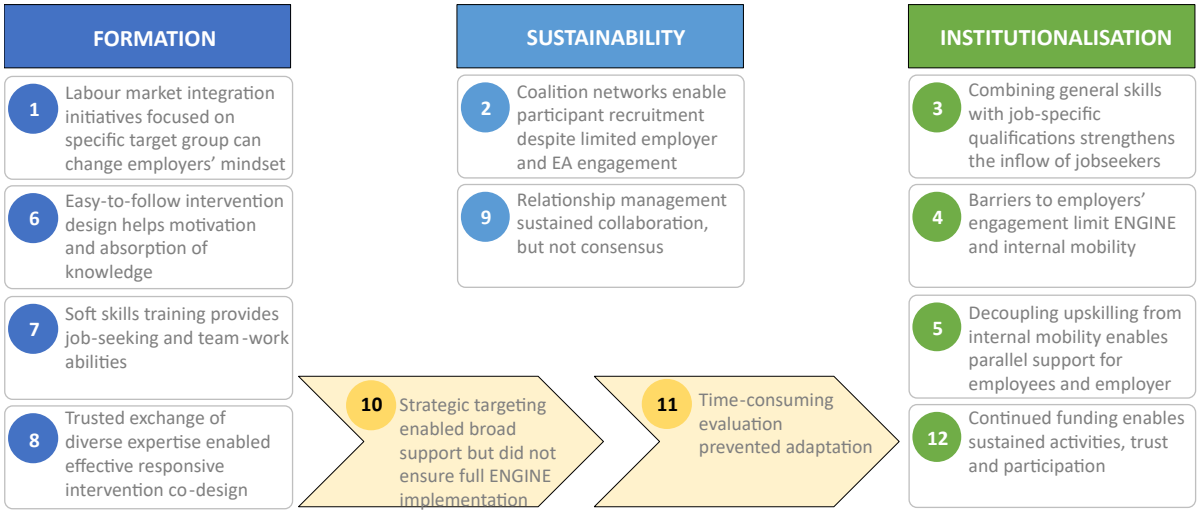


**Figure 2:** Mapping of coalition-level CMO configurations across the coalition phases

## 1.7 Realist Evaluation results – individual level

Individual-level Realist Evaluation analysis is based on 10 interviews with employees and 7 interviews with jobseekers from the treatment group; 2 interviews with jobseekers and 3 with employees from the control group; and 6 interviews with trainers (Table 18). The interviews with the target group representatives were conducted only in theory refinement phase (between December 2024 and March 2026), while the interviews with trainers were conducted between July 2024 and February 2026. The majority of the interviews were conducted online, and small part of the respondents chose to meet researchers at the research premises.

### 1.7.1 Individual-level general and context information

The analysis of individual-level information allowed to differentiate one type of context factors specific for the employees; two types of factors specific for the jobseekers; and eight types of factors common for the two target subgroups.

#### 1.7.1.1. Context factors relevant for employees

***Perceived job insecurity***

In fact, the majority of employees who were attracted to the training programmes and shared their experiences and insights during the in-depth interviews were motivated by perceived job insecurity. In a sense, many of them had already experienced the psychological effects of anticipated unemployment, including anxiety, fear of the future, disorientation regarding labour market demands and requirements, and a lack of confidence in their ability to find alternative employment. Our employed and self-employed interlocutors perceived their jobs and livelihoods as unstable due to a toxic workplace atmosphere, personnel cuts within their companies, declining workloads or client bases, and changes in ownership.

"That's the toxic environment. There they stifle you, there they tell you what you can and can't do and not to think for yourself, and so on…" *(employee, soft skills training)*

"But the work is decreasing more and more… due to the consolidation of the market in Bulgaria there is less and less work." *(employee, control group)*

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#### 1.7.1.2. Context factors relevant for jobseekers

***Prolonged job-seeking period***

Although long-term unemployment is conventionally defined as unemployment lasting more than 12 months, jobseekers in both the treatment and control groups who provided detailed information about their life circumstances tended to perceive their job-search periods as prolonged after only a few months. The weaker the feedback from potential employers and the more limited the available financial support, the more strongly they expressed a sense of prolonged job seeking. After several months, unemployed individuals had often exhausted their ideas about where and how to search for new employment. Repeatedly unsuccessful efforts led to a sense of failure and diminished self-confidence. In addition to the internalised need to acquire or improve qualifications, some unemployed participants were attracted to the training courses by the opportunity to learn about the experiences and job-search strategies of their peers.

"- What motivated you to participate in the course and what benefits did you hope to gain?

- Well, to refresh my memory on some things, to connect with other people, to communicate, to see what they are looking for… That was my main reason, and social contacts." *(jobseeker, soft skills training)*

***Lack of feedback by employers***

According to the jobseekers' accounts, the practice of not providing responses to applicants has become relatively common in recruitment processes in Bulgaria. Uncertainty regarding the status and outcome of job applications contributed to candidates' stress and left them unsure whether they met the job requirements, whether another applicant had been selected, whether the vacancy remained active, or even whether their application had reached the relevant decision-makers within the organisation. These uncertainties also created room for doubts about the possible influence of discriminatory practices or perceived deficiencies in the applicant's qualifications and experience. Moreover, the lack of feedback deprived jobseekers of an important opportunity for self-assessment and professional development.

"I'm sending my resume constantly – maybe 100 applications per week. The problem is, I don't know if HR reads those resumes, if they look at them... They don't call me back for any serious positions, because I don't know what they're looking for or what their criteria are, or why they advertise these positions on websites at all." *(jobseeker, soft skills training)*

#### 1.7.1.3. Context factors relevant for employees and jobseekers

***Age-based discrimination/ stereotypes***

Both jobseekers and employees described experiencing pervasive age-based discrimination throughout their job-search and employment trajectories, particularly after the age of 40 and even more markedly after the age of 50. Many reported that while they initially received neutral consideration during the application process, recruiters' attitudes appeared to change once their age became apparent through personal information, educational history, or face-to-face interactions. Respondents perceived a strong employer preference for younger candidates, often attributing limited interview invitations and high rates of application rejection to age rather than qualifications or experience. Several participants noted that awareness of the extent of age discrimination emerged through interactions with peers in employment training programmes, where similar experiences of exclusion were widely shared. Older employees

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also reported beliefs that employers were reluctant to invest in their training and development due to assumptions about proximity to retirement, adaptability, or capacity for innovation, despite possessing substantial professional expertise and digital competencies. These experiences contributed to feelings of labour-market marginalisation, uncertainty about career mobility, and reduced confidence in securing suitable employment. In response, some participants adjusted their expectations, sought opportunities to demonstrate continued professional development, or pursued self-employment as an alternative to repeated rejection. Overall, their accounts suggested that age functioned as a significant barrier to labour-market participation, limiting access to employment opportunities and undermining the perceived value of accumulated skills, qualifications, and experience.

"- Well, look, when you get older, things change...
- Do they ask you how old you are?
- Yes, they definitely ask. And if you state your age, that's it." *(employee, digital skills training)*

"I was worried about putting my age in because that immediately gives you less of a chance… The moment when I gave up on realizing myself on the market, but rather to do something of my own, was the moment you go to such a younger team; and at a certain point our society itself is much more discriminatory, not even the employer itself, to look at the slightly more mature person with the idea that they are less capable." *(employee, control group)*

"First of all, I think that in our country there was a long-standing neglect of people who are close to retirement and at retirement age." *(trainer, soft skills)*

***Skills felt outdated or insufficient***

Older workers frequently perceived their skills and knowledge as partially outdated or insufficiently aligned with contemporary labour-market demands, particularly in relation to rapidly evolving digital technologies. Many described uncertainties regarding the relevance and adequacy of their existing competencies, noting that the absence of constructive feedback from employers made it difficult to identify which skills remained valuable and which required further development. Respondents emphasized a strong need for continuous learning, retraining, and skills upgrading in order to keep pace with technological change, digitalization, and emerging workplace expectations. While they possessed extensive professional experience and accumulated occupational knowledge, many felt that this experience alone was no longer sufficient in a labour market increasingly shaped by digital tools, artificial intelligence, cloud technologies, and new forms of communication. Several participants expressed concerns about declining proficiency in previously acquired skills, such as foreign languages, due to lack of use, while others identified gaps in areas such as digital marketing, presentation software, and advanced computer applications. They often viewed participation in training programmes as an opportunity to remain current, enhance employability, and demonstrate adaptability to employers. At the same time, respondents acknowledged that prolonged engagement in routine work could contribute to skill obsolescence, reinforcing the perception of falling behind technological and professional developments. Overall, their accounts reflected a strong commitment to lifelong learning, combined with concerns that their skills required continuous renewal to remain relevant in a rapidly changing employment environment.

"I have accumulated routine and knowledge, but we live in a dynamic environment, where there is artificial intelligence, the need for ecological thinking and continuous digitalization. We need to develop. When you go to a meeting in a company, given that I am 50+, they need to feel that I am not stuck in one place, but can move forward." *(employee, digital skills training)*

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***Lacking resources for upskilling***

The target group representatives reported facing multiple resource-related barriers that constrained their ability to engage in upskilling and professional development. A key challenge involved limited orientation regarding emerging labour-market demands, as many expressed uncertainties about which competencies were required, which training opportunities would be most beneficial, and how to identify relevant courses. This uncertainty was reinforced by difficulties understanding new occupational categories and rapidly changing job requirements, particularly in digitally oriented sectors. Financial constraints also emerged as a significant obstacle, especially among unemployed individuals or those working in low-paid positions, who reported prioritising basic economic security over investment in training. In addition, lack of time was consistently identified as one of the most substantial barriers to learning. Participants who were employed often struggled to combine training with full-time work commitments and reported exhaustion from prolonged hours spent at computers or in demanding jobs. Others highlighted that caring responsibilities, including the provision of support to older parents or dependent family members, further reduced the time and flexibility available for participation in educational activities. Some respondents also noted practical barriers to accessing training, including limited opportunities to attend courses, even in online formats. Overall, the accounts suggested that older adults' engagement in upskilling was shaped not only by motivation and willingness to learn, but also by structural constraints related to information, financial resources, time availability, and caregiving obligations, which collectively limited their capacity to pursue continuous professional development.

***Social isolation, loneliness***

Some of our interlocuters described experiences of social isolation and loneliness as significant challenges associated with later life and labour-market disengagement. They reported that their social networks had gradually diminished due to a range of life-course transitions, including separation from partners, children becoming independent, relocation, unemployment, and the loss of friends and acquaintances. For unemployed individuals in particular, the weakening of professional ties often resulted in reduced contact with former colleagues and a growing sense of social exclusion. Some training participants noted that prolonged periods of working from home or spending extensive time on computers had further limited opportunities for social interaction, contributing to difficulties in adapting to workplace environments and rebuilding professional relationships. Feelings of loneliness were linked to the absence of meaningful social support and a lack of regular communication with others, which affected both emotional well-being and confidence in seeking employment. Some participants perceived training programmes not only as opportunities for skill development but also as important spaces for social connection, mutual encouragement, and moral support. Engagement in such activities was viewed as a mean of improving sociability, restoring a sense of belonging, and reconnecting with broader social communities. Overall, participants' accounts suggested that shrinking social networks and reduced social participation negatively affected their social orientation, self-confidence, and mental well-being, while simultaneously creating additional barriers to labour-market reintegration.

"Yes, the bad thing is that my contacts are small and I simply have no one to talk to... So, I hope that this course will be just as good and that I will also receive, if nothing else, at least moral support for looking for a job. I would like to be among people somehow, not to be that and, and from being among people, there would be some benefit for you and me." *(jobseeker, digital skills training)*

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### *Impaired health*

Part of the respondents described impaired health as a significant factor shaping their employment opportunities, work capacity, and engagement in professional development during later life. Many reported experiencing a range of physical and health-related limitations, including reduced mobility, chronic illnesses, disabilities, weakened physical endurance, and the long-term consequences of serious medical conditions. These health challenges often restricted their ability to perform physically demanding jobs, maintain standard working hours, or continue practising their previous occupations under customary working conditions. Several participants explained that health-related needs required workplace accommodations that their occupations cannot accommodate, resulting in job loss, prolonged periods of inactivity, or withdrawal from employment. Ongoing medical treatment, regular examinations, and rehabilitation requirements further constrained their availability for work and job searching. Some respondents also noted that periods of ill health had interrupted their careers for several years, necessitating efforts to acquire new skills or redirect their professional activities. Individuals with officially recognised disabilities reported experiencing additional barriers in recruitment processes, perceiving that employers viewed health conditions and disability status negatively despite their continued ability to work. Overall, participants' accounts suggested that deteriorating health and disability not only reduced functional work capacity but also interacted with labour-market discrimination and insufficient workplace accommodations, thereby increasing the risk of exclusion from employment and limiting opportunities for continued labour-market participation.

"The point is that I personally suffered some health problems, and from there things changed. I had actually left on a rather long sick leave; I really had things that I had to do with regard to my health. But there was no way we could continue, to provide me with the necessary conditions according to me, specifically. There is a dynamic in our profession, and unfortunately no one can fight it or avoid it." *(jobseeker, digital skills training)*

I have [a document] from the territorial expert medical commission. I got [a disability] due to stress, because I was overloaded. I've been rejected by employers due to my medical records. This is discrimination. I'm capable of working. But some employers are put off if you have a disability; they refuse to hire you. *(jobseeker, soft skills training)*

### *Specific abilities to learn*

Trainers' accounts suggested that learning capacities were shaped by age-related and general cognitive and psychological characteristics that influenced attention, information processing, and knowledge acquisition. They described a preference for structured and systematic learning approaches, emphasizing the importance of clearly defined tasks, objectives, and learning sequences in supporting engagement and comprehension. Respondents also demonstrated awareness of the need for timely application of newly acquired knowledge, perceiving that intentions not translated into action quickly were likely to lose priority and be forgotten. In addition, they emphasized limitations in the capacity to simultaneously engage with multiple unfamiliar topics, highlighting the importance of focused learning and gradual progression. Overall, their experiences indicated that effective learning in older age was facilitated by structure, repetition, practical application, and manageable cognitive demands.

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***Diverse individual needs***

Trainers' and some participants' evidences also highlighted the diversity and complexity of individual training needs among older adults, reflecting differences in educational background, motivation, life experiences, personal circumstances, and learning orientation. While many needs related directly to employability and skills development, participants also referred to broader factors such as self-confidence, attitudes toward lifelong learning, personal values, social experiences, and psychological well-being. Motivation emerged as a particularly important determinant of successful learning, with respondents distinguishing between individuals who engaged in training out of genuine interest and those who participated primarily due to external pressures. Prior educational attainment and established learning habits were perceived as facilitating continued engagement with training, whereas long periods without formal learning could reduce confidence in one's ability to study effectively. Participants also emphasized the importance of opportunities for communication, exchange of experiences, and mutual learning, valuing training as a space for reflection and social interaction as well as knowledge acquisition. In some cases, previously unrecognized needs emerged during training, including the need for support in coping with experiences of verbal or online violence. Overall, the findings suggested that older adults constituted a highly heterogeneous group whose training needs extended beyond skill acquisition and were shaped by a complex interplay of personal, social, educational, and emotional factors.

### 1.7.2 Individual-level mechanisms

In SofiaLab, the mechanisms in which the interventions realised their impacts in individual level, could be summarised in six main categories. Each category consists of several to dozen specific mechanisms, the great majority of which were applied to both subgroups (jobseekers and employees) and in the two main interventions (soft skills and digital skills training courses) alike.

#### 1.7.2.1. Targeting specific group and precise identification of needs

When specific group is targeted, its needs can be better identified and addressed. As individual perception, when an initiative is especially dedicated to their group, people feel their problems and needs recognized, and themselves valuable for the society. Not only one or another, but a **combination** of crucial obstacles to the labour market inclusion of older jobseekers were identified and addressed, in order to provide solid support. The responses of the interviewed jobseekers and employees suggested that the effectiveness of targeting older jobseekers stemmed from the specific social and labour-market challenges they faced, including age discrimination, rapidly changing skill requirements, limited resources for upskilling, social isolation, health constraints, and reduced confidence in their employability. These interconnected barriers created needs that were often overlooked in generic employment and training programmes. In this context, initiatives specifically designed for people aged 50 and over enabled a more accurate identification of shared needs and challenges, while also providing participants with a sense of recognition and social value. By addressing the combination of structural, social, and psychological obstacles affecting this group, such interventions contributed to improved skills, enhanced self-confidence, stronger peer support networks, better preparedness for job-search processes, and greater motivation to pursue employment or self-employment opportunities.

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"I was looking for this type of courses, some activities, even for my free time - workshops, various creative things, and oh my, this one with SofiaLab popped up and intrigued me a lot. To be honest, the title that is for people 50+. I personally believe that people with experience, but who are already moving into another age group, are overlooked in Bulgaria… and when I saw the ad, I immediately thought of it. Okay. Here's some innovation, something atypical. Basically, let them look for the old dogs." *(interview with jobseeker, soft skills training)*

#### 1.7.2.2. Experienced trainers

The individual-level data evidenced that experienced trainers played a critical role in facilitating learning and engagement among older adults by combining subject expertise with strong pedagogical, interpersonal, and supportive capacities. This mechanism acted in a context where participants possessed highly diverse educational backgrounds, varying levels of digital literacy, and often low confidence resulting from labour-market exclusion or other personal challenges. The trainers, who communicated in accessible language, adapted explanations to different knowledge levels, provided individual support, and drew on experiences similar to those of the trainees were able to establish trust and relevance. Their ability to create a respectful, non-judgmental, and well-organised learning environment encouraged active participation, personal sharing, and peer exchange, while ensuring that participants felt valued and their needs were recognised. Experienced trainers were also able to flexibly adapt training content to emerging needs, integrate real-life examples, and balance emotional support with skills development. As a result, participants reported greater confidence, stronger engagement with learning, improved acquisition and retention of knowledge, enhanced satisfaction with the training process, and increased readiness to apply new skills in their job-search and professional development activities.

"First of all, I would put, of course, the teacher. Because with all courses, it's a bit like school, if the teacher is not worth it, nothing happens. As the teacher is, so are the students. Your teachers are, good for you, 10 out of 10. You know how to select them, you clearly work well with them, they feel good in this type of course and maybe that's of great importance for them to do well." *(interview with jobseeker, soft skills and digital skills training courses)*

#### 1.7.2.3. Specific training features

A range of training design features enhanced learning outcomes among older adults by aligning educational delivery with their cognitive characteristics, prior learning experiences, and practical needs. This type of mechanisms took place in the context of participants' diverse knowledge levels, mentioned above, limited familiarity with new technologies for the majority of them, and a preference for structured and purposeful learning, that the trainers found as specific characteristic of mature learners. The training programmes were described by the trainees as effective because of their **manageable duration**, the **limited number of new topics**, and the content presented through a **systematic progression** that helped participants maintain concentration and engagement. **Practical exercises, real-life examples**, and opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge to employment-related situations (soft skills training courses) increased the perceived relevance and usability of learning, thereby strengthening knowledge retention and confidence. **Beginning from basic concepts** (digital skills training courses) helped establish a common foundation among participants with different levels of prior knowledge, reducing barriers to participation and enabling informed decisions about further learning needs. In addition, the **provision of learning materials for**

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**independent use** after training encouraged continued self-directed development beyond the formal course. Collectively, these training features facilitated the acquisition of practical and applicable skills, improved self-confidence, stimulated further learning, and enhanced participants' capacity to conduct more effective job searches and navigate labour-market challenges.

#### 1.7.2.4. Group environment

The group environment appeared as both learning and social tool.

As a learning tool, it: (i) provided opportunity to exchange knowledge and questions within the group; (ii) made visible for the trainees their actual level in the respective field, as they were able to compare with peers; (iii) for the same reason, it allowed identification of own strengths and weaknesses and planning one's further development.

As a social tool, the group environment: (i) provided opportunity for instant exchange of information and experiences about the labour market and connected topics; (ii) created a friendly/safe space for sharing; (iii) acted as a support network both ad hoc (during the course) and beyond (after its end).

The group training environment functioned as an important mechanism for enhancing learning, motivation, and psychosocial well-being among older jobseekers. The context factors associated with this mechanism were participants' frequent experiences of labour-market exclusion, low self-confidence, limited knowledge of changing employment requirements, and social isolation. Through interaction with peers facing similar challenges, trainees shared experiences, exchanged information, and collectively made sense of their employment difficulties, which helped them recognise that unsuccessful job-search outcomes were often rooted in structural barriers rather than individual shortcomings. This process reduced feelings of guilt and self-blame, strengthened self-esteem, and fostered a sense of community and belonging. Group discussions, peer learning, collaborative activities, and opportunities to compare experiences enabled participants to acquire new knowledge, identify areas for further development, and learn about labour-market trends from one another. The mutual encouragement and support provided within the group increased motivation to participate, complete training activities, and persist in job-search efforts. In some cases, the relationships established during training developed into longer-term support networks that continued to facilitate personal and professional development. However, the effectiveness of this mechanism depended on active and constructive participation; when engagement was limited, opportunities for peer learning and mutual support were reduced. Overall, the group training environment contributed to improved confidence, enhanced learning outcomes, reduced social isolation, and greater readiness for labour-market participation.

"It is useful because everyone shares their experience of how they looked for a job, what they were told or what they were not told at all. We shared our experiences there, such as what we encountered during interviews and so on. It is very useful to hear first-hand what others have encountered, so you know you are not alone and that everyone faces the same challenges." *(interview with jobseeker, soft skills training)*

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### 1.7.2.5. Additional support

**Complementary activities**

The individual-level analysis found that additional support mechanisms enhanced the effectiveness of training by addressing practical, informational, and social barriers that could otherwise limit participation and learning. Older adults often required more time to process new information, faced technical difficulties in online learning environments, and benefited from connections between training and employment opportunities. Complementary activities, including individual consultations, meetings with employers, job fairs, and networking events, extended learning beyond formal training sessions and provided opportunities for clarification, guidance, and direct labour-market engagement. These forms of support enabled participants to reflect on acquired knowledge, resolve emerging questions, and gain confidence in applying new skills. At the same time, logistical support, such as the provision of digital equipment, stable connectivity, training materials, and prompt technical assistance, reduced participation barriers and ensured uninterrupted engagement with the learning process. A welcoming and well-organised learning environment further promoted comfort, motivation, and active involvement. Together, these forms of additional support strengthened participants' sense of being valued and assisted, facilitated successful course completion, improved learning outcomes, and increased readiness to pursue employment and further professional development.

"The technology is up to par, with these large monitors, wherever you sit, whatever you do, you can see everything, you can hear it, the team is wonderful. It ensures, they immediately react in case of technical problems. The fact that you always took care of a light snack upon arrival, coffee and hot tea, a light lunch, is simply an incredible bonus for all of us and an extremely pleasant surprise. I was surprised during the first course, the first lesson. To be honest, sometimes at these types of events, the organizers seem to skip this part, and it's important. Hungry, nervous people who have some physical, material need, are not in the mood to learn and listen to what is being said to them." *(interview with jobseeker, soft skills and digital skills training courses)*

### 1.7.2.6. Initial personal motivation

The individual motivation functioned as a key enabling mechanism influencing engagement with training and subsequent development. The participants either recognised a personal need for change, skill development, or re-employment, or possessed pre-existing interests and goal-oriented attitudes that encouraged learning. Motivated individuals actively participated in training, asked questions, completed assignments, and sought opportunities to extend their knowledge beyond the formal curriculum. Such engagement fostered stronger skill acquisition, greater confidence in their ability to influence their employment prospects, and increased commitment to continued learning and job-search activities. Conversely, lower levels of motivation, often associated with personal circumstances or adverse experiences, limited active participation and reduced the potential benefits of training.

"I have participated in many training courses, so from my previous work experience, I know that desire is required. When a person has desire, things can be achieved." *(interview with jobseeker, soft skills training)*

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"Besides two or three people who were really interested in the subject matter that was being taught, there were people who... they didn't know what they were there for." *(interview with employee, digital skills training)*

### 1.7.3 Summarizing findings along Individual-level CMOs

As a result of the Realist Evaluation work at the individual level, more than 500 CMOs were initially distilled from the available data. At the second stage, CMOs that were semantically different but followed similar logical sequences were aggregated, while those describing causal chains that did not include elements of the interventions were excluded, reducing the total number to approximately 180. At the third stage, the CMOs were classified into groups according to the category of the leading mechanism. At the fourth stage, CMOs containing the same mechanisms were further aggregated and reconstructed to contain only one mechanism, regardless of the type and number of contextual factors and outcomes associated with it. For each category of mechanisms, only those CMOs were selected that were repeatedly identified in respondents' evidence, contained the most prominent outcomes, and demonstrated the strongest logical construction. Additionally, priority was given to CMOs describing common elements of the interventions, while topic- and training-specific CMOs were excluded.

#### 1.7.3.1. Targeting specific group and precise identification of needs

***1) Age-specific focus strengthened mental well-being and engagement***

**Mechanism:** Initiatives specifically targeting people aged 50+ signalled an understanding of their particular challenges, skills gaps, starting points, and competitive disadvantages, making them more easily trusted and attractive to potential participants. Age-targeted training and social activities also fostered a sense of recognition and value, addressed participants' psychological needs, and encouraged them to engage with new information and opportunities relevant to their age group.

**Outcomes:** Participants experienced improved mental health, psychological well-being, and self-esteem through feeling recognised, valued, and socially included. They also gained new information and ideas about relevant training and qualification opportunities.

**Context facilitators:** The increasing labour market activity of people aged 50+ had become more widely recognised by employers and society, while older adults themselves were motivated to remain active, keep up with labour market developments, and compare their skills and opportunities with those of their peers.

**Hindering factors:** People aged 50+ seeking new employment often felt that their age group was overlooked by society and encountered perceived employer reluctance to recruit older workers, which contributed to feelings of rejection, isolation, and discouragement.

**Overarching CMO: If** people aged 50+ experienced age-related disadvantage, employer reluctance, social isolation, or discouragement, while remaining motivated to stay active and competitive, **then** initiatives explicitly designed for their age group could foster trust, recognition, and engagement by addressing their specific social, psychological, and skills-related needs. **Because** such targeted provision made participants feel understood, valued, and socially included while responding to their specific circumstances, **as a result**, their mental

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health, psychological well-being, and self-esteem improved, alongside increased engagement with relevant training and qualification opportunities.

***2) Relevant knowledge restored self-confidence and job-seeking motivation***

**Mechanism:** Training in contemporary, labour-market-relevant skills helped participants overcome insecurity by updating their knowledge and exposing them to current trends and perspectives. Tangible evidence of newly acquired competencies strengthened their confidence in their abilities and labour-market suitability, while reducing psychological barriers to learning and restoring curiosity and motivation.

**Outcomes:** Participants updated their knowledge and regained confidence in their value to the labour market, providing initial impetus to seek employment or pursue better job opportunities.

**Context facilitators:** Labour-market demand for contemporary skills created opportunities for individuals who updated their knowledge and competencies.

**Hindering factors:** Both employed and unemployed older people experienced insecurity arising from skills gaps or lack of employment. In a rapidly changing environment, their previous experience was not always perceived as relevant, which could generate fears about their ability to acquire new skills; ingrained habits and attitudes could further contribute to diminished confidence and motivation to develop themselves.

**Overarching CMO: If** older employed or unemployed people experienced insecurity, declining self-confidence, and psychological barriers arising from outdated skills and a dynamic labour market, **then** training in contemporary, labour-market-relevant skills could provide tangible evidence of their capabilities and restore their confidence and motivation to learn. **Because** acquiring relevant knowledge and recognising their renewed competence could reduce psychological barriers and strengthen their perceived labour-market value, **as a result**, participants updated their knowledge, regained curiosity and self-belief, and gained the impetus to seek employment or better job opportunities.

#### 1.7.3.2. Experienced trainers

***1) Adaptive trainer expertise supported learning success***

**Mechanism:** The trainer's extensive experience and expertise supported the development and delivery of a well-designed training programme. Experience with diverse audiences enabled the trainer to tailor course content, materials, explanations, and pacing to the specific needs and interests of the group, while attentiveness and an inclusive attitude ensured that individual difficulties and questions were addressed equally. This adaptive and supportive approach fostered trust, engagement, and motivation throughout the learning process.

**Outcomes:** The training addressed both programme objectives and participants' learning needs, supported successful course completion, and promoted motivation to learn. Participants acquired more consistent and comprehensive knowledge, with fewer unclear or missed topics.

**Context facilitators:** The trainer had extensive teaching experience in universities and schools and substantial experience working with diverse audiences. The trainee group consisted of older people with varying levels of skills and knowledge, making adaptive teaching particularly relevant.

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**Hindering factors:** Not identified.

**Overarching CMO: If** older people with diverse skill levels participated in training delivered by an experienced trainer accustomed to working with diverse audiences, **then** the trainer's expertise, attentiveness, and adaptive teaching practices enabled the content, pace, and explanations to be tailored to individual and group needs. **Because** this responsiveness fostered trust, sustained engagement, and ensured that learning difficulties were addressed, **as a result**, participants were motivated to learn, acquired more consistent and comprehensive knowledge, and successfully completed the course.

***2) Inclusive participation restored self-confidence and motivation***

**Mechanism:** The trainers created an inclusive environment that encouraged trainees to express themselves, answer questions, and share their experiences, thereby reducing fears of testing and exposure. By emphasising what participants already knew rather than what they lacked, the trainer provided a secure foundation for further learning and enabled trainees to perceive themselves as active participants in the learning process, strengthening their self-confidence.

**Outcomes:** Trainees overcame their initial lack of confidence, developed greater self-confidence, and demonstrated increased engagement and motivation in the learning process.

**Context facilitators:** Trainees had many questions extending beyond the initially announced topics, creating opportunities for active participation and sharing of experiences.

**Hindering factors:** Many people aged 50+ had not participated in training for a long time and associated training with traditional school-based classroom experiences. They also lacked confidence in their ability to cope with unfamiliar fields requiring a broad range of skills.

**Overarching CMO: If** people aged 50+ lacked confidence in their ability to learn in unfamiliar fields and associated training with previous classroom experiences, **then** providing an inclusive environment in which everyone could express themselves, answer questions, and share their experiences helped them recognise their existing knowledge and become active participants in the learning process. **Because** this approach shifted attention from knowledge deficits to existing strengths and provided a secure foundation for further learning, **as a result**, trainees regained self-confidence and demonstrated greater engagement and motivation.

***3) Trusted professional guidance enhanced learning and labour-market confidence***

**Mechanism:** Direct contact with experienced trainers enabled participants to receive precise, context-specific answers to their questions rather than having to search and filter generic, potentially unsuitable or inaccurate online information. Trainers' professional expertise and, where relevant, first-hand involvement in labour policy provided authoritative and trustworthy information, creating confidence in the knowledge acquired. This guided exposure reduced the effort required to navigate unfamiliar options and provided a credible foundation for further learning.

**Outcomes:** The learning process became easier and more effective, and participants gained a clearer understanding of how they could benefit from the knowledge acquired. This knowledge provided a foundation for further personal and professional development and strengthened participants' confidence in their ability to meet employers' expectations.

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**Context facilitators:** Participants were willing to develop their knowledge in the respective field, while substantial information and learning resources were available online. Trainers' first-hand involvement in the development of relevant labour policies further strengthened their professional expertise.

**Hindering factors:** Participants were increasingly distrustful and selective regarding potentially false or unreliable online information. Some had previously held high-level digital qualifications but lacked sufficient time to explore new options and applications thoroughly, while others had already spent considerable time trying to identify appropriate ways of working with specific applications.

**Overarching CMO: If** trainees sought to develop their skills in a context of abundant but potentially unreliable online information, while lacking the time or confidence to identify appropriate solutions, **then** direct guidance from experienced professionals providing authoritative, context-specific information offered a trusted basis for learning. **Because** trainers' professional expertise enabled them to filter information, address individual questions, and provide precise and credible guidance, **as a result**, learning became easier and more effective, trainees gained a secure foundation for further development, and strengthened their confidence in meeting employers' expectations.

**CMO specific for digital skills training**

***1) Accessible explanations fostered confident and independent digital skills use***

**Mechanism:** The trainer communicated calmly, patiently, and respectfully, providing detailed explanations in accessible language and allowing sufficient time for participants to understand and practise each step. They repeated, rephrased, and adjusted the pace and depth of instruction to different skill levels, thereby reducing pressure, confusion, and fear of judgement. Accessible explanations helped bridge the gap between participants' familiarity with digital tools in everyday life and their less familiar professional applications, enabling trainees to internalise new knowledge rather than simply reproduce demonstrated tasks.

**Outcomes:** Trainees expanded their knowledge and use of digital applications, became less anxious about working with digital tools, and developed greater self-confidence and motivation. They filled basic skills gaps, progressed towards a more consistent level of competence, completed the training more easily, and became better able to perform similar tasks independently without additional support.

**Context facilitators:** Not identified

**Hindering factors:** Trainees often had only every-day, rather than professional, experience with digital tools and entered the training with basic, obsolete, or widely varying levels of knowledge and skills. Some participants had limited access to peer support because they attended online, while others experienced psychological vulnerability, including reduced confidence and motivation following sudden job loss.

**Overarching CMO: If** trainees entered training with basic, obsolete, or highly diverse levels of digital skills, limited professional experience with digital tools, and, in some cases, reduced confidence or access to peer support, **then** calm, patient, and detailed explanations in accessible language, combined with sufficient time and responsive pacing, enabled them to understand and internalise unfamiliar concepts. **Because** this approach reduced anxiety, confusion, and fear of falling behind while bridging the gap between every-day and

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professional use of digital tools, **as a result**, trainees strengthened their self-confidence, developed more consistent digital skills, completed the training more easily, and became more capable of performing similar tasks independently.

#### 1.7.3.3. Specific training features

***1) Hybrid training enhanced participation and completion***

**Mechanism:** Hybrid training provided greater flexibility by combining time-saving participation options with opportunities for face-to-face interaction and peer contact. By accommodating different schedules, responsibilities, and practical constraints, the hybrid format reduced the risk of excluding potential trainees and enabled individuals who could benefit from the training to participate through alternative attendance options.

**Outcomes:** Participants were more likely to attend and successfully complete the training, while the flexible format enabled the intervention to reach and benefit a broader range of people.

**Context facilitators:** Not identified.

**Hindering factors:** Potential trainees faced inconvenient training locations, physical disabilities, competing responsibilities, and limited free time, particularly when they were employed.

**Overarching CMO: If** potential trainees faced limited free time, work responsibilities, or inconvenient training locations, **then** hybrid training provided flexible participation options while preserving opportunities for face-to-face interaction and peer contact. **Because** this flexibility reduced practical barriers and allowed participants to choose formats compatible with their individual circumstances, **as a result**, training was more likely to be successfully attended and completed and could benefit a broader range of participants.

***2) Small-group work strengthened skills development***

**Mechanism:** Dividing trainees into small groups according to their skill level helped them relax, engage with the learning process, and assess their motivation to continue. Opportunities to speak and collaborate in small groups or pairs within a familiar environment reduced stress, while practical joint tasks, such as developing business plans, further strengthened motivation and encouraged participants to pursue their ideas.

**Outcomes:** Participants gained more equitable opportunities to develop their skills, identify ways of overcoming barriers, and strengthen their capacity to put their ideas and plans into practice.

**Context facilitators:** The presence of trainees with similar interests created favourable conditions for small-group collaboration and mutual engagement.

**Hindering factors:** Training groups included participants with diverse attitudes and entry levels of knowledge, while stressful settings and difficulties speaking before an audience constrained active participation.

**Overarching CMO: If** trainees entered training with diverse levels of knowledge and confidence and experienced stress when speaking before larger groups, **then** working in small

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groups or pairs, particularly with peers of similar skill levels or interests, created a safer environment for participation and practical collaboration. **Because** this setting reduced anxiety and encouraged trainees to express themselves, practise skills, and develop ideas together, **as a result**, participants gained greater opportunities for skills development and increased motivation and capacity to translate their ideas and working plans into practice.

***3) Foundational training enabled independent skills development***

**Mechanism:** The training introduced participants to the existence and functions of unfamiliar tools and concepts. By starting from the most elementary level and progressing step by step through increasingly advanced content, it provided participants with a basic foundation of knowledge and skills on which they could build further.

**Outcomes:** Participants became able to use their newly acquired knowledge with greater ease and benefit from its practical application. The foundational knowledge also empowered them to seek further information and develop independently, while providing a basis that could be more easily upgraded through subsequent employer-provided training.

**Context facilitators:** Not identified.

**Hindering factors:** Some trainees had no prior awareness of the existence or functions of relevant tools and concepts and entered the training as complete beginners, while age-related learning difficulties could slow their progress. In addition, advanced skills were highly sector-specific, limiting the extent to which they could be addressed through general training.

**Overarching CMO: If** trainees had very limited prior knowledge on the training topics and faced difficulties learning unfamiliar concepts, **then** training that started from the most elementary level and progressed step by step enabled them to build a solid foundation of knowledge and skills. **Because** this gradual approach made unfamiliar concepts accessible and provided a basis for further development, **as a result**, trainees used their newly acquired knowledge with greater ease, independently sought further information, and developed skills that could subsequently be upgraded by employers.

#### 1.7.3.4. Group environment

***1) Peer experience exchange reduced self-blame and restored self-confidence***

**Mechanism:** Group training enabled participants to exchange experiences and perspectives with peers, learn from different responses to similar challenges, and provide mutual social and emotional support. This exchange encouraged participants to reflect on their own circumstances, communicate more openly, and recognise alternative ways of addressing their difficulties.

**Outcomes:** Participants gained courage, improved their social orientation and skills, and experienced better psychological well-being and self-confidence. They gradually became more comfortable expressing themselves and their aspirations and regained motivation to learn, seek employment, and present themselves more confidently.

**Context facilitators:** The training group included peers who faced similar labour market challenges, experiences of isolation, and barriers to employment, while also bringing diverse experiences, perspectives, and coping strategies. This combination of shared circumstances and diverse responses created favourable conditions for identification, mutual understanding, and meaningful experience exchange.

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**Hindering factors:** Some older people had lost social contacts and experienced isolation, depression, or discouragement. Others had repeatedly attempted to improve their situation without success, contributing to self-blame, worry, diminished confidence and motivation, and, in some cases, difficulty articulating their goals and aspirations.

**Overarching CMO: If** older people experienced isolation, discouragement, and loss of confidence after unsuccessful attempts to improve their situation, **then** exchanging experiences with peers facing similar challenges enabled mutual identification and learning from different responses to shared difficulties. **Because** recognising similar experiences in others normalised participants' circumstances and reduced self-blame by demonstrating that their difficulties reflected broader barriers rather than personal failure, **as a result**, participants regained self-confidence and motivation, improved their psychological well-being and social orientation, and became better able to articulate and pursue their learning and employment goals.

***2) Peer information exchange and connections built partnerships, networks, and job prospects***

**Mechanism:** Group training enabled participants to exchange ideas, information, and experiences, provide positive feedback, and offer mutual psychological and practical support. This interaction fostered a sense of community and trust, encouraged participants to explore potential professional partnerships, and facilitated the development of longer-term connections through which information and opportunities could continue to be exchanged.

**Outcomes:** Peer exchange enhanced participants' training experience and motivation for further development. The relationships established during training provided opportunities for continued mutual support, professional collaboration, and access to information about new employment opportunities, thereby increasing participants' prospects of finding work.

**Context facilitators:** Participants faced similar labour market challenges, while shared professional backgrounds or interests facilitated meaningful exchange and potential collaboration. The dynamic labour market, characterised by continuously emerging actors and opportunities, increased the potential value of new professional connections and information exchange.

**Hindering factors:** Some participants pursuing business or self-employment opportunities lacked support from their families. Previous experience of teamwork also varied, potentially influencing participants' readiness to recognise and engage with the benefits of peer collaboration.

**Overarching CMO: If** people facing similar labour market challenges participated together in training, particularly where shared professional interests facilitated connection, **then** exchanging ideas, information, and experiences with peers fostered mutual support, trust, and lasting professional relationships. **Because** these exchanges provided new perspectives, strengthened motivation, and created networks through which opportunities and resources could continue to circulate, **as a result**, participants were encouraged to pursue further development, support one another beyond the training, and increase their opportunities for employment or professional collaboration.

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***3) Peer learning strengthened knowledge and self-confidence***

**Mechanism:** Peer learning enabled participants to learn through one another's questions, experiences, viewpoints, and feedback. Mutual support reduced fears of asking elementary questions, while comparison with peers' knowledge levels reinforced learning and motivation.

**Outcomes:** Participants filled knowledge gaps, strengthened their self-confidence, and progressed more effectively towards the training goals, gaining knowledge and skills applicable to their future development.

**Context facilitators:** Participants shared a common need for employment and willingness to learn. Familiar people and settings further supported comfortable peer interaction.

**Hindering factors:** Unfamiliar people and settings could initially inhibit participation, while differences in knowledge levels could make less-skilled participants reluctant to ask questions.

**Overarching CMO: If** participants with shared employment needs entered training with different knowledge levels and some hesitated to ask questions, **then** peer learning through shared questions, experiences, and mutual support helped them clarify uncertainties and learn from one another. **Because** observing peers normalised knowledge gaps and reduced fear of appearing uninformed, **as a result**, participants strengthened their knowledge and self-confidence and progressed more effectively towards the training goals.

**1.7.3.5. Additional support**

***1) Additional information enabled independent development***

**Mechanism:** Providing trainees with additional information, links to relevant online training, and information about free courses enabled them to build on their existing knowledge and become more confident in finding further information and support independently.

**Outcomes:** Participants became more motivated to seek information independently, more confident in their work or job search, and better able to decide whether and how to continue their development. Access to further learning opportunities also supported their qualification and labour-market competitiveness.

**Context facilitators:** Participants were interested in additional types of training beyond the topics already covered.

**Hindering factors:** No individual or training programme could cover all relevant knowledge and topics. Limited or absent income further restricted access to paid qualification courses.

**Overarching CMO: If** trainees were interested in further learning but faced knowledge gaps and financial barriers to additional training, **then** providing information, links, and access to relevant free learning resources enabled them to build on their existing knowledge. **Because** knowing where and how to access further support increased their confidence and capacity to continue learning independently, **as a result**, participants became more motivated to seek information, make informed development choices, and improve their qualifications and labour-market competitiveness.

***2) Comprehensive practical support enabled effective learning***

**Mechanism:** Comprehensive practical support addressed different barriers to participation: refreshments helped satisfy basic needs and reduce tension, well-prepared organisers

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provided timely solutions, and technical assistance prevented trainees from missing training content.

**Outcomes:** Trainees were better able to concentrate, follow the course fully, and engage more effectively in the learning process.

**Context facilitators:** Not identified.

**Hindering factors:** Many older participants had limited technical and digital skills, while some experienced psychological pressure or unmet basic needs that could hinder their concentration and participation.

**Overarching CMO: If** older trainees experienced psychological pressure, unmet basic needs, or limited technical and digital skills, **then** comprehensive practical support, including refreshments, responsive organisation, and technical assistance, reduced distractions and prevented participants from missing training content. **Because** these forms of support reduced tension and practical barriers to participation, **as a result**, trainees were better able to concentrate, follow the course fully, and learn more effectively.

#### 1.7.3.6. Initial personal motivation

***1) Health conditions constrained job search and required requalification***

**Mechanism:** Serious health conditions that were incompatible with the requirements of participants' previous jobs shifted their priorities towards medical examinations and treatment. At the same time, health-related work limitations required them to consider requalification and assess job vacancies more carefully to identify suitable employment.

**Outcomes:** Participants were compelled to consider requalification towards occupations compatible with their health conditions. Their job-search activity slowed substantially or temporarily ceased, and they applied for fewer positions.

**Context facilitators:** Not identified.

**Hindering factors:** Participants had worked in high-demand and stressful occupations involving physical requirements, while serious or recurring health conditions reduced their capacity to continue in these roles and created a need for requalification.

**Overarching CMO: If** individuals developed serious health conditions that were incompatible with the physical or psychological demands of their previous occupation, **then** they prioritised medical examinations and treatment while needing to consider requalification and more carefully assess suitable job opportunities. **Because** their health restricted the range of appropriate jobs and diverted time and resources from job search towards treatment and requalification, **as a result**, job-search activity slowed substantially or temporarily ceased, with fewer applications submitted and a need to transition towards more health-compatible occupations.

***2) Internal motivation sustained learning and development***

**Mechanism:** Internal motivation and persistence encouraged older jobseekers not to give up when facing barriers but to invest their time in reading, learning, and developing their knowledge. A strong willingness to learn and work hard helped them preserve their self-confidence and continue seeking ways to move forward.

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**Outcomes:** Participants expanded their knowledge and demonstrated their competence to others. Their continued engagement in learning helped them cope with difficulties, avoid discouragement and loss of motivation, and increased their likelihood of participating in planned interventions and pursuing further development.

**Context facilitators:** A strong desire for personal and professional development supported internal motivation. Higher levels of education and qualification, together with an established disposition towards learning, further facilitated continued learning and development.

**Hindering factors:** Unemployment, difficulties in finding work, and repeated job-search failures created substantial psychological pressure for older people. In addition, not everyone had a strong learning orientation, and some people aged 50+ had not actively exercised their learning skills for many years.

**Overarching CMO: If** older jobseekers experienced unemployment, repeated setbacks, and psychological strain but retained a strong desire to develop, **then** internal motivation and persistence encouraged them to continue learning, maintain self-confidence, and actively seek ways forward. **Because** sustained learning and persistence helped them cope with difficulties and resist discouragement, **as a result**, they expanded their knowledge, maintained motivation, and were more likely to engage in interventions and pursue further development.

### 1.7.4. Overarching CMO at individual-level

***Responsive and supportive training transforms perceived vulnerability into perceived capability***

**Mechanism:** When training was responsive, supportive, and socially inclusive, through age-relevant content, experienced and adaptive trainers, accessible delivery, peer interaction, and practical support, participants experienced greater psychological safety, social connection, and normalisation. They came to perceive themselves as valuable and capable again and the training goals as feasible.

**Outcomes:** Participants regained self-confidence, motivation, and self-efficacy; successfully participated in and completed training; acquired and independently applied relevant knowledge and skills; improved their mental wellbeing and social connectedness; and increased their employment prospects and capacity for career development, continued employment, or self-employment.

**Context facilitators:** Willingness to learn, shared challenges and interests, and prior experience provided resources upon which training courses could build. Demand for new skills and financial needs served as additional incentives.

**Hindering factors:** Older people experienced discrimination, isolation, and discouragement; labour-market pressures and changing or unclear demands; skills gaps and outdated knowledge; low self-confidence and motivation; constraints related to time, location, disability, and finances; and limited access to support.

**Overarching CMO: If** people aged 50+ face discriminatory attitudes, changing labour-market demands, skills gaps, low self-confidence and motivation, isolation or discouragement, limited access to support, and psychosocial and practical barriers to learning and labour-market participation, but have a need or willingness to learn and develop, **then** age- and needs-relevant, accessible training is provided, incorporating tailored content, adaptive and trusted guidance, supportive peer interaction, and appropriate practical support. **Because** these

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resources enable participants to perceive learning as relevant, achievable, trustworthy, inclusive, and worthwhile, and to perceive themselves as valuable and capable, **as a result**, they regain confidence and motivation, acquire and independently apply new knowledge and skills, strengthen their psychological wellbeing and social capabilities, and improve their labour-market prospects and opportunities for further development.

The summary of the most important facilitating and hindering context factors, intervention mechanisms and perceived outcomes is illustrated by Figure 3 below.

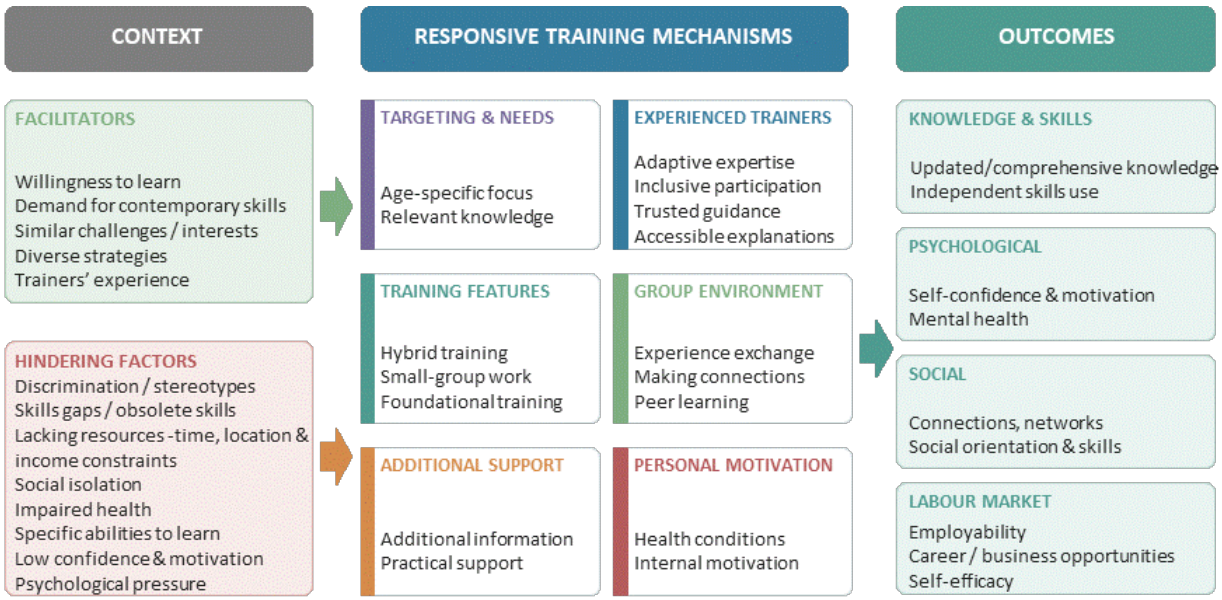


**Figure 3:** Context factors, mechanisms and outcomes in SofiaLab

## 1.8 Overarching findings quantitative and qualitative analyses

### 1.8.1. Reflecting on the quantitative and qualitative results

The qualitative data gathered through the Realist Evaluation at the individual level **confirmed** some of the conclusions derived from the quantitative data. For instance, during the in-depth interviews, our interlocutors identified the new knowledge they had acquired as one of the major benefits of the intervention they had undergone. At the same time, the quantitative analysis demonstrated statistically significant differences in living-lab-specific skills both between the pre- and post-training measurements for the treatment group and between the treatment and control groups four months after the training. Respondents to the short questionnaire, including both jobseekers and employees, also placed considerable emphasis on skills acquisition as a specific benefit of the intervention.

However, the majority of the findings from the Realist Evaluation at the individual level **contradicted** the conclusions derived from the quantitative analysis. Moreover, the quantitative data from the main surveys differed from those obtained through the short-questionnaire survey. The main survey data did not demonstrate changes in participants' motivation and self-efficacy, whereas respondents to the short questionnaire highlighted improved self-confidence as the second most important benefit of the intervention, and evidence from the in-depth interviews pointed to increased motivation and self-confidence as

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the most prominent and frequently reported outcomes. According to the quantitative findings, participants' mental health did not change significantly between the measurement points; however, a large proportion of the free-form conversations included reports of various mental health benefits.

The research observations and overall analysis suggested three possible types of explanation for these divergent results, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive:

**Realist Evaluation interviews attracted the most satisfied and enthusiastic participants.** As a general rule, voluntary and non-incentivised participation in research activities, particularly qualitative research, tends to attract the most active individuals. In the context of beneficiary feedback, it is usually the most satisfied and/or the most dissatisfied individuals who respond. In the case of the interventions conducted in SofiaLab, despite some recommendations provided by the trainees who agreed to participate in in-depth interviews, their overall feedback was highly positive. This circumstance provides grounds for the hypothesis that the identified contradictions between the outcomes of the quantitative and qualitative components of the survey may be attributable to differences in the levels of intervention effects, and consequently in satisfaction levels, among the participants covered by the two methodologies. The relatively small numbers of employees and jobseekers who participated in at least two measurement points may also have prevented the quantitative analysis from demonstrating the results that emerged from the Realist Evaluation.

**Some broader socio-economic factors are more powerful than the intervention effects.** As discussed in the analysis of the quantitative results, the anticipated economic challenges associated with the adoption of the euro may have had a negative impact on the mental health of vulnerable groups, potentially nullifying the effects of the intervention. Similarly, the strength of perceived age-based discrimination and expectations of a worsening economic situation may have been considerably more powerful than participants' sense of increased personal capacities and, consequently, may have resulted in negative assessments of self-efficacy.

**The comparative quantitative methodology does not encompass the potential effects of living-lab-specific intervention activities.** The only statistically significant results from the quantitative survey concerned improved self-assessments of knowledge in topics covered by the training activities, which may lead to the conclusion that the most important intervention results are those specific to the living lab. This provides grounds for stating that the Realist Evaluation data **complemented** the quantitative data. The most prominent example is the reported effect of the interventions on older workers' social skills, labour-market orientation, and broader social orientation, as well as on the development of supportive social networks that may improve their prospects for personal development, employment, and self-employment in the long term.

As the two target subgroups underwent equal interventions, the answers of the research questions cannot be fully separated for the employees and jobseekers, moreover that many of the employees felt their jobs insecure and experienced similar psychological effects as the jobseekers. Still, some of the intervention effects are more relevant to one of the subgroups.

For vulnerable employees, the main mechanisms were **perceived relevance, renewed sense of self-efficacy, trusted guidance and accessible learning**. Updating labour-market-relevant skills provided evidence that older employees could continue to learn and adapt, strengthening confidence in their professional value. Adaptive trainers, inclusive participation, peer learning and step-by-step instruction made learning more achievable, while hybrid

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provision reduced barriers related to work, time, location or disability. These mechanisms were facilitated by participants' motivation to learn, supportive learning environments and labour-market demand for the skills acquired. They were constrained by age discrimination, outdated skills, low confidence, health limitations, and practical or financial barriers. Outcomes included greater confidence and motivation, updated skills, successful training completion and increased capacity for independent development. Together, these strengthened participants' **continued employability and potential for career development or better employment**, although direct upward mobility was not clearly demonstrated.

For vulnerable jobseekers, the interventions additionally functioned as a process of **psychological and labour-market reactivation**. Successful learning restored self-confidence and perceived employability, while interaction with peers facing similar difficulties reduced isolation and self-blame. Peer relationships also created supportive networks through which information, employment opportunities and possibilities for collaboration could emerge. Trusted trainers helped participants navigate complex information and identify relevant learning and development opportunities. These mechanisms were facilitated by participants' willingness to learn and work, the relevance of training to employment opportunities, and access to supportive trainers, peers and further learning. They were constrained by repeated job-search failures, discrimination, financial difficulties, outdated skills, low confidence and health problems. Outcomes included renewed job-search motivation, improved skills and self-confidence, stronger networks and greater capacity to pursue **employment, requalification or self-employment**.

Across employees and jobseekers, training worked most effectively when it addressed **skills gaps together with the psychological, social and practical consequences of labour-market vulnerability**. Age- and needs-relevant training, experienced and adaptive trainers, accessible teaching, peer interaction, flexible delivery and practical support created trust, recognition and psychological safety. These conditions reduced anxiety and self-doubt and strengthened participants' confidence, motivation, self-efficacy and willingness to continue learning. Where older employees and jobseekers had experienced disadvantage, declining confidence, skills gaps or isolation but retained a willingness to develop, responsive and supportive training made learning feel **relevant, achievable and worthwhile**. This enabled participants to perceive themselves as capable of learning and adapting, acquire and independently apply new skills, and engage more confidently with labour-market opportunities. Subsequently, their capacity for **continued employment, career development, labour-market (re)entry and self-employment increased**. However, the translation of these capacities into actual employment or upward mobility remained dependent on wider circumstances, including broader economic situation, available jobs, labour-market demand employer behaviour, and personal health.

### 1.8.2. Impact of the coalition on individual-level initiatives

The coalition influenced individual-level outcomes primarily **indirectly, by shaping the accessibility, relevance and quality of the interventions through which self-efficacy and skilled behaviour developed**. Its most important contribution was the co-design of an age-sensitive intervention that combined research-based knowledge with partners' practical experience of vulnerable groups. Mutual trust and complementary expertise supported the development of training that responded to barriers experienced by people aged 50+, including outdated skills, low confidence, limited knowledge of development opportunities, financial constraints and apprehension about learning. Free access, accessible training design,

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practical examples and peer-based learning subsequently reduced barriers to participation and helped participants perceive learning as achievable.

At the individual level, these coalition-enabled intervention characteristics activated **self-efficacy as a central mechanism connecting participation with behavioural change**. Participants' exposure to relevant training, achievable learning tasks and examples of peers facing comparable difficulties provided evidence that they remained capable of learning and adapting. This was particularly important where older workers had previously perceived their knowledge as outdated or had experienced declining confidence following unemployment or labour-market difficulties. The intervention consequently supported changes from uncertainty about one's abilities towards greater confidence, motivation and willingness to continue learning. The quality of the training appeared to reinforce this process, as satisfied participants voluntarily enrolled in subsequent courses and word-of-mouth became an additional recruitment mechanism. Thus, self-efficacy was reflected behaviourally in **continued engagement in learning and greater readiness for further development**.

The coalition also contributed to changes in **skilled behaviour** by prioritising digital, green and particularly soft skills. Practical, situation-based soft-skills training allowed participants to apply learning to job-search and workplace situations, strengthening their capacity to manage interviews, professional relationships and teamwork. General skills training therefore increased participants' knowledge and confidence and better prepared both employees and jobseekers for labour-market interactions. The coalition's intervention design supported a progression from **accessible learning, through improved skills and strengthened self-efficacy, towards more confident application of skills and continued learning behaviour**.

However, the evidence also demonstrated an important boundary to this individual-level pathway. Improvements in self-efficacy and general skilled behaviour did **not necessarily translate into employment or upward mobility**. Employers frequently required specific professional, particularly technical, qualifications that were not provided by the intervention. Differences between participants' professional backgrounds, available vacancies and acceptable working conditions further weakened the match between improved individual capabilities and employment opportunities. Thus, participants could become more confident, motivated and skilled while remaining unable to meet the formal requirements of available vacancies. The findings therefore distinguished between **enhanced individual capability and realised labour-market mobility**.

This distinction was particularly evident for employees. The coalition did not establish a direct connection between training participation and internal promotion, and no identifiable upward or sideward mobility resulted from the intervention. Employers faced organisational and economic barriers to internal mobility, including difficulties replacing promoted workers, limited internal career structures and the costs of requalification. The coalition consequently separated employee development from employer engagement. This adaptation enabled older employees who participated independently to strengthen their capabilities without making their development conditional upon their employers' willingness or capacity to promote them. Although this approach did not generate internal mobility, it **preserved the individual-level pathway towards greater career readiness**, while employer-focused activities separately encouraged more inclusive attitudes towards older workers.

The coalition's impact was also constrained by its uneven capacity to mobilise the wider institutional environment. When employers and the employment agency did not generate the

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anticipated participant inflow, the core coalition successfully used its own networks, social media and job-search channels. This secured participation and enabled individuals to benefit from the interventions, but it also meant that participation was predominantly **individually driven rather than embedded in employer or institutional pathways**. Similarly, the coalition's targeted engagement had potential to challenge employers' stereotypes about workers aged 50+, but the limited scale and duration of the initiative restricted the extent to which such changes could create opportunities corresponding to participants' enhanced capabilities.

Overall, the coalition appeared to have exerted its strongest influence at the **intervention-to-individual interface**, rather than directly producing employment transitions or career mobility. Coalition-based co-design and implementation created accessible, relevant and supportive learning opportunities that reduced barriers, generated sense of capacity and strengthened participants' self-efficacy. Increased self-efficacy, in turn, supported motivation, continued learning and more confident application of newly acquired digital, soft and other general skills. The emerging causal pathway could therefore be summarised in Figure 4:

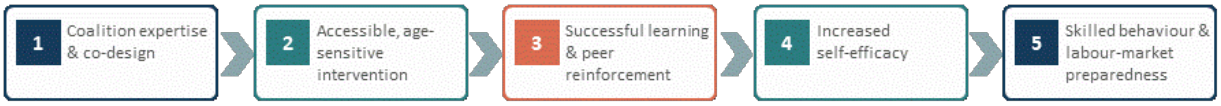


**Figure 4:** Pathway from coalition to individual level

However, the final transition from **improved capability to realised mobility** depended on factors largely outside the individual training intervention, particularly occupational qualifications, vacancy characteristics, employers' recruitment and promotion practices, and the fit between labour supply and demand. The coalition therefore appeared more successful in **strengthening the agency, self-efficacy and skilled behaviour of people aged 50+ than in converting these individual changes into immediate employment or mobility outcomes**. This suggested that future coalition-based approaches would need to connect effective individual-level capability development more closely with professional requalification and concrete employer demand if improvements in self-efficacy and skilled behaviour were to result consistently in labour-market inflow or upward mobility.

### 1.8.3. The ENGINE approach

#### Coalition building

Coalition building was **implemented, but only partially achieved in the form envisaged by ENGINE**. A cross-sector coalition was established, involving NGOs, employers, HR organisations, training providers, municipal actors, and national institutions. In practice, however, implementation relied primarily on a **small core coalition**, while the wider membership participated more selectively. Trust-based relationships, pre-existing cooperation, flexible leadership, and a shared commitment to improving employment opportunities for people aged 50+ enabled the formation and functioning of this core group. By contrast, **broad and sustained stakeholder participation was not fully achieved**. Public institutions often provided legitimacy and symbolic support rather than operational involvement, while employer participation remained scarce. The coalition also lacked clearly defined and binding responsibilities, which reduced accountability and made continued participation dependent on voluntary commitment and the coordinating efforts of the lead organisation. Most importantly, the ENGINE ambition to use the coalition as a vehicle for

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**structural or policy-level change was not realised**. Bulgaria's highly centralised employment governance left limited scope for city-level policy influence, while prolonged political instability further reduced institutional willingness to make longer-term commitments. Consequently, ENGINE was implemented in SofiaLab primarily as a **flexible local network for intervention delivery, knowledge exchange, awareness raising, and relationship building**, rather than as an institutionalised coalition capable of influencing employment policy. The experience therefore suggested that ENGINE's coalition-building component was feasible at the local operational level, but its broader institutionalisation required longer-term relationship building, clearer partner responsibilities, stronger employer incentives, and more sustained involvement of national-level policy actors. For developing **self-efficacy and mobility**, the most important characteristic of the ENGINE coalition appeared to have been its capacity to connect vulnerable participants with employers, trainers, HR professionals and other supportive actors, thereby expanding networks, confidence and awareness of employment opportunities. However, the Bulgarian context showed that a broad multi-stakeholder coalition was **not in itself sufficient**: trust-based relationships and active involvement of a small core of partners mattered more than formal or symbolic membership, particularly in a centralised and institutionally unstable environment.

### Multi-level intervention package

The multi-level intervention package was **implemented most strongly at the individual level, partially at the organisational level, and hardly at the institutional or policy level**. At the individual level, ENGINE provided digital and soft-skills training, personal development support, employability activities, and contact with employers. The ENGINE emphasis on combining **skills development, personal support and direct interaction with employers** appeared particularly important for strengthening self-efficacy, as participants required not only updated competencies but also greater confidence in recognising, presenting and applying their existing experience to new employment opportunities. At the same time, increased mobility depended on the context: without corresponding employer demand, recognised qualifications and opportunities for occupational mobility, improvements at the individual level could not automatically translate into employment or career transitions. At the organisational level, employers contributed to training, mock interviews, meetings with participants, curriculum discussions, and employment-related activities. However, **more substantial changes in employer practices were not systematically achieved**. Employer demand frequently concerned technical and vocational qualifications rather than the transferable skills primarily offered through ENGINE, while NGO-issued training certificates lacked the recognition of state-certified qualifications. Some employers also had limited incentives to invest in older domestic workers when alternative recruitment channels, including third-country recruitment, were available. The **institutional and policy level of the package remained least developed**. Although public institutions participated in the coalition and the intervention increased visibility of the challenges faced by people aged 50+, this did not translate into significant changes in employment programmes or policies. Centralised governance, political instability, institutional capacity constraints, and the existence of established state programmes restricted the space for such change. Thus, ENGINE operated in SofiaLab predominantly as an **individual-plus-organisational intervention**, while the intended connection between individual empowerment, organisational change, and systemic policy transformation remained incomplete.

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### Co-design and co-implementation

Co-design and co-implementation were **implemented as adaptive practices, but participation in these processes was uneven**. The intervention was not delivered as a completely fixed package. The participants enrolled in different intervention elements upon their current needs and availability. Training content and activities were progressively adapted through exchanges among the lead organisation, trainers, employers, HR actors, and other coalition members. Employer feedback informed discussions about labour-market needs, while trainers and implementation partners adapted activities to participants' needs, including digital skills, communication, personal development, and contact with employers. The coalition's informal governance structure supported this flexibility and enabled relatively rapid adjustments during implementation. Co-implementation was also visible in partners' practical contributions to training sessions, mock interviews, employer meetings, recruitment contacts, events, and dissemination. The **adaptive and participatory character of ENGINE** was important for self-efficacy and mobility because it allowed interventions to respond to the actual barriers experienced by people aged 50+ and to incorporate employer perspectives on changing labour-market requirements. However, the Sofia experience suggested that extensive co-design by all coalition members was less important than **continuous feedback from those directly involved**, since diverse stakeholder capacities, limited employer engagement and rapidly changing labour-market conditions made focused and iterative adaptation more feasible than comprehensive shared decision-making. **Full and continuous co-ownership across the coalition was not achieved**. Co-design remained concentrated among the core partners, while members of the wider coalition often participated only in specific activities or followed implementation from a distance. Communication with the entire coalition was not sufficiently frequent to maintain a strong sense of shared ownership, and evaluation feedback was considered too slow to inform implementation in real time. Moreover, transnational learning remained limited, reducing opportunities to adapt ENGINE through direct exchange between Living Labs. The experience of SofiaLab therefore indicated that co-design and co-implementation had functioned effectively as **pragmatic mechanisms for adapting intervention delivery** but had not developed into comprehensive shared decision-making across all stakeholders. More regular feedback loops, systematic employer and beneficiary involvement, clearer opportunities for partner contribution, and faster transfer of evaluation findings would have been required to implement this dimension of ENGINE more fully.

### 1.8.4. Maintenance and sustainability of the coalition

The sustainability of the coalition depended less on maintaining the project in its original form and more on whether **relationships, knowledge, practices, and mechanisms developed through the collaboration could continue beyond formal project implementation**. The coalition had established a foundation for such continuity through previous collaboration, regular communication, mutual trust, and complementary expertise. These relationships facilitated knowledge exchange and enabled partners to combine research evidence with practical experience of vulnerable groups. Consequently, an important sustainable outcome was the accumulated **shared knowledge and experience of designing age-sensitive labour-market interventions**, which could inform partners' subsequent activities independently of the continuation of the formal coalition.

At the same time, the findings indicated that coalition maintenance would have required continued investment in **relationship management and coordination**. Partner engagement

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had remained uneven because the target group and intervention objectives aligned differently with individual organisations' missions and interests. The lead organisation had invested substantial, partly unbudgeted effort in maintaining participation and demonstrating the mutual benefits of collaboration. Although this had enabled a broader intervention than a single organisation could probably have delivered, it had not eliminated disagreements concerning intervention design or generated equal ownership among coalition members. The sustainability of the coalition as an active structure had therefore remained vulnerable to the withdrawal of dedicated coordination resources after project completion.

The intervention had nevertheless initiated processes that had potential to persist beyond the project's formal duration. First, the coalition had strengthened **awareness of the labour-market potential and development needs of people aged 50+** among participating organisations and employers. The targeted approach had provided concrete opportunities to question stereotypes concerning older workers and had exposed employers to inclusive employment practices. Even where immediate recruitment or internal mobility had not occurred, these experiences had created a basis upon which more inclusive employer attitudes and practices could subsequently develop.

Second, the coalition had strengthened **individual learning and development processes** that were not inherently dependent on continued project support. Free, accessible and age-sensitive training had increased participants' knowledge, self-confidence and motivation, while information about further learning opportunities had encouraged continued skills development. Participants' voluntary enrolment in subsequent training suggested that successful intervention experiences had generated continued learning behaviour. Peer relationships and informal word-of-mouth had additionally provided mechanisms through which information, confidence in the intervention, and opportunities for participation could continue to circulate.

However, sustainability had been constrained by the limited duration and scale of the initiative. The project had not operated long enough to establish broad employer trust or fully institutionalise pathways connecting training with recruitment and internal mobility. Furthermore, delayed evaluation results had restricted evidence-informed adaptation during implementation, reducing opportunities to identify and consolidate the most effective approaches before project completion. The absence of strong employer and Employment Agency pipelines also meant that participant recruitment had remained dependent largely on the core coalition's networks and individual initiative rather than becoming embedded within existing institutional systems.

Overall, the evidence suggested that the **most sustainable legacy lay in the capacities and processes generated by the coalition rather than in the maintenance of the coalition as an unchanged organisational structure**. These included trusted inter-organisational relationships, accumulated expertise in age-sensitive intervention design, greater awareness of older workers' capabilities, accessible training practices, enhanced individual self-efficacy and continued learning behaviour, and informal networks for outreach and information exchange. Longer-term sustainability, however, would have required continued coordination, stronger institutional and employer ownership, more systematic evidence for adaptation, and integration of these practices into organisations' routine activities. Continued dissemination of successful participant and employer experiences could also have supported this process by reinforcing credibility and gradually expanding trust and participation beyond the original project.

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