



EmpowerHer

DIGITAL TOOLS FOR BUSINESS SUSTAINABILITY



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PROBLEM

The rapidly changing digital landscape presents a significant challenge for women entrepreneurs, who often face gaps in critical skills needed to boost their businesses and remain competitive.

SOLUTION

A comprehensive online training and mentoring programme to power women-owned businesses with digital tools.

Levelling up women's digital business skills

EmpowerHer supports women entrepreneurs to navigate the realms of digital innovation and green business practices. By championing e-commerce adoption and encouraging the seamless integration of cutting-edge digital tools, this initiative empowers women-led businesses to grow sustainably and efficiently in a fast-evolving marketplace.

The EmpowerHer project, part of the Transform Together Fund, offers a blend of training and mentoring designed to uplift women entrepreneurs. By combining structured learning modules with one-on-one guidance, the

programme offers the women a unique opportunity to gain critical knowledge while receiving personalised real-time support to apply what they learned to their companies.

The training programme seamlessly integrates digital skills into every aspect of entrepreneurship, emphasising the importance of strategy and adaptability over specific tools. Participants learned to view digital tools as enablers—accessible and practical solutions whose true value is unlocked when used to design, analyse and continuously improve operational strategy.

Overview



|| ASSOCIAZIONE MICROLAB, ITALY

Each module is designed to be both interactive and insightful, comprising 14 engaging lessons spanning 18 hours in total. Live trainings are conducted via Zoom, ensuring accessibility and real-time collaboration between participants. Participants also gain access to The Academy (MicroLab's e-learning hub), which hosts videos, lesson materials and additional reading materials. To keep the learning dynamic, end-of-module assessments are required to unlock subsequent modules, allowing MicroLab to accurately track participants' progress.

Over the course of eight months, participants receive tailored guidance, focusing on pivotal aspects such as crafting solid business plans, setting achievable goals, refining marketing strategies, innovating product development, mastering financial planning, and building sustainable growth models. Mentoring sessions (one hour twice monthly) offer a choice of virtual or in-person meetings, ensuring flexibility and convenience for busy women business owners.

To foster collaboration and spark meaningful conversations, participants attend networking events held every three months. These gatherings are designed to ignite inspiration, cultivate partnerships, and open doors to new opportunities for their businesses.

MODULE	TOPICS	TOOLS
Entrepreneurship and digital	Project management, Business Model Canvas to plan and structure business ideas	Trello, Asana, Miro
Online marketing and selling	Software for target analysis and CRM for managing the digital sales funnel	Google Analytics, Meta Insights, Salesforce, Zoho
Improving communication	Email marketing, online advertising tools for communication campaigns	Mailchimp, Google Ads, Meta Ads, Instagram, LinkedIn, TikTok, ChatGPT, Canva
Business management and cash flow	CRM for managing customer relations, accounting software to monitor cash flow	Salesforce, Zoho, Cash Flow
Access to credit	Crowdfunding platforms, funding management, CRM for strategic business relationship management	HubSpot, Zoho, Bigin, Brevo, Agile CRM, Bitrix24
Sustainable growth	Measuring sustainable impact to assess corporate sustainability	Digital checklist for assessing environmental and social sustainability

Building the modules

The EmpowerHER training curriculum was carefully built over three months. Local mentors and training experts volunteered their time to co-create the curriculum alongside MicroLab's team of mentors. Key design decisions were:

- Conducting a needs assessment among 70 women, with 43 responses affirming high demand for digital and sustainability skills and shaping the focus of content
- Restructuring the original 7 modules into 6 to embed digital tools and concepts throughout the entire programme rather than presenting them in all in one module
- Engaging MicroLab mentors early on to brainstorm content and establish a tool for skill self-assessment.

Recruiting participants

To galvanize interest, MicroLab launched an open call for women entrepreneurs to showcase their innovative business ideas. The initiative was prominently featured on the MicroLab website and amplified across Meta, Instagram, LinkedIn, and TikTok using engaging posts and a promotional video.

MicroLab also hosted an Instagram Live session, where the program's details were unveiled in an interactive format. Targeted advertising campaigns on Meta and Instagram ensured the call to action reached a wide audience.

Shortlisting applications

The selection process was designed to be thorough, ensuring that participants would fully commit to the programme and maximise the benefits of this interactive process. This multi-stage approach included:

- **Letter of introduction:** Applicants were invited to craft a guided letter detailing their motivation, describing their work/life balance and training needs, as well as outlining their business aspirations. This offered a chance to showcase their enthusiasm and alignment with the project's goals and demonstrate that they had the flexibility needed to fully participate in project activities.
- **Interactive webinar:** Those whose letters demonstrated eligibility were given the opportunity to shine in an online meeting. This engaging session allowed them to present their ideas, connect with organisers, and demonstrate their readiness for the next stage of the journey.

Development

Training

Fortnightly trainings were conducted via Zoom (with a break in August) at 6:00 pm for up to 1.5 hours. These trainings were delivered by six mentors, with 30–35 participants joining each session, and recordings available on the Academy platform for those who could not attend live.

Mentoring

From the outset, participants were paired with one of a team of 32 mentors who offered tailored guidance and advice to help sharpen the women's entrepreneurial skills, tackle obstacles, and lay the groundwork for long-term business success. Following each training module, participants benefited from 1–2 hours of focused mentoring within a fortnight, ensuring they could seamlessly apply the lessons learned to their respective businesses.

Networking

MicroLab organised two in-person networking sessions to reinforce meaningful connections among participants. One mentor was also tasked with fostering a sense of community amongst participants. They created a dedicated WhatsApp group to share links, ideas and useful resources. By the end of the programme, participants asked to keep the group active to continue supporting each other, exchanging information, advice and opportunities—and even start new collaborative ventures.

Implementation



What happened?

The project was initially designed for 40 participants (including 20 aspiring entrepreneurs). Out of 98 initial applications, 47 were ultimately invited to participate in the project: 38 Italians, 2 EU citizens and 7 non-EU nationalities, with ages ranging from 21 to 65. The increase in the number of participants was to prevent potential dropouts from jeopardising implementation (and indeed, 5 participants withdrew during the process).

Rejected applicants were referred to alternative business development paths within MicroLab (e.g. funding for vocational training for foreign nationals) or elsewhere (e.g. start-up funding via ImpactHub, internships for women with no experience in their chosen field, or informational events and webinars to help women better define their direction and goals).

Following each module, participants were tested on their mastery of the material. These results were compared against an initial self-assessment questionnaire (which acted as a baseline). Impressively, the participants showcased an average skill boost of 2.03 on a scale of 1 to 5, with those possessing higher education levels demonstrating even stronger gains. Among the group of aspiring entrepreneurs, the transformation was particularly striking, as they achieved an average improvement of 2.13 points across all 6 modules.

Among the 24 aspiring female entrepreneurs who completed the project, 2 launched a new business by the end of the project. The others made significant progress in defining their business model, assessing economic sustainability and planning their activities, and anticipate formally launching their businesses in short order.

Successes



What did clients think?

Participants enjoyed how the programme's WhatsApp group emerged as a lively hub of interaction and camaraderie, with members eagerly sharing opportunities, exchanging ideas, and supporting one another throughout the program. Participants found it so useful they asked to continue the group even after the project came to an end.

For participants from migrant backgrounds, the opportunity to meet with local entrepreneurs of all kinds, not just migrants, was appreciated — underscoring the importance of a focus on migrant integration in all projects, no matter the topic.

The mentoring initiative proved to be a cornerstone of the project's success, due in part to the mentors dedicating time to regular team sessions to discuss strategy and challenges. The mentors plan to replicate the approach in future, demonstrating the value of combining digital training and personalised mentoring. The work done on evaluation and qualitative analysis (journals, tests, etc.) will also serve as a methodological foundation for future projects.

What worked?

Setting the bar at the right level: The programme identified promising candidates using two main criteria: commitment coupled with the viability of business idea. It did not, however, require participants to have an existing enterprise. In fact, it was an explicit goal of the project to test whether the EmpowerHer model was effective for both groups. The result was positive: post-training assessments reveals that both types of participants benefited from the programme compared to their baseline. While it's true that existing entrepreneurs generally started with slightly more advanced skills, but the most significant differences in pre- and post-training scores were linked to educational background, rather than entrepreneurial status.

Tapping into expertise: A collaborative effort to shape the training curriculum between mentors and beneficiaries from other MicroLab initiatives ensured the program resonated with the unique needs of its participants. This process involved two brainstorming sessions and a follow-up event where mentors shared firsthand experiences of supporting mentees.



Additionally, over 70 women entrepreneurs and aspiring entrepreneurs from Microlab's network provided feedback that not only enriched the curriculum but helped refine the schedule and organisation of the sessions.

Last-minute fine-tuning: To ensure the curriculum effectively addressed participants' knowledge and skills gaps (and to provide an evaluation baseline), a pre-training questionnaire was distributed to all participants. This survey revealed a strong proficiency in areas such as content creation, enterprise fundamentals, advertising campaigns, sales funnel strategies, customer journeys, e-commerce and the Business Model Canvas. However, it highlighted a lack of confidence in business strategies—an area that received the lowest scores.

Armed with these insights, Microlab made significant adjustments to the draft curriculum to better serve the participants' needs. The content of the seventh module, on digital tools, was integrated across each of the first six modules on business management, sales, communication, finance so that participants were learning concepts and the tools to implement those concepts side by side.

Adapting in real-time: Microlab's ability to pivot and tailor the training curriculum during the sessions was driven by participant feedback, ensuring the content stayed fresh and directly aligned with their evolving needs. This approach turned each session into an interactive experience, where personalised insights and practical applications empowered participants and kept their enthusiasm high.

Smart mentor–mentee matching: The application process provided useful insights into each participants' personality and business profile which were used to pair mentees with the right mentor. However, this approach proved too labour-intensive to replicate in Microlab's routine operations due to the lack of advanced tools to swiftly process the vast data generated by the application.

Although the project didn't experience any major failures per se, a few challenges emerged that added complexity to its implementation:

DATA OVERLOAD

While detailed insights from participants were invaluable for tailoring the curriculum, manually processing such extensive data proved cumbersome and stretched staff resources to their limits. Without advanced IT tools, this task became far more laborious than anticipated.

MONITORING

The learning platform did not allow to effectively track learners' progress with customised reports. As a result, Microlab staff members had to invest a significant amount of time to collect the necessary information.

MANAGING TRADE-OFFS

While the educational content was finely tailored to meet the needs of project participants, this level of specificity inadvertently reduced its broader applicability. For the platform to serve future groups of entrepreneurs effectively, additional content will need to be developed to ensure its relevance to a wider audience and maintain its long-term utility.

Challenges



Insights for tomorrow, and beyond

The core lesson emerging is that the transformative power of capacity-building programs such as these is amplified by pairing it with access to financial services, either in the form of loans or grants.

For other organisations aspiring to provide integrated training and mentoring programmes, MicroLab has the following recommendations:

- **Blend digital with human interaction:** Online tools works best when paired with personal connections that provide tailored feedback and active listening by experts
- **Prioritise understanding and clarity:** Listening to needs and clearly explaining the programme boosted participants' motivation and engagement

- **Provide consistent support:** Visible guidance from staff and mentors reduced dropouts and built trust
- **Structure fosters confidence:** A clear schedule and organised materials added reliability to the learning journey
- **Balance quality with flexibility:** Professional standards combined with adaptability ensured relevance and responsiveness
- **Boost self-awareness:** Pre-training self-assessments helped participants recognise their potential.
- **Encourage holistic growth:** Beyond skills, the programme nurtured confidence and independence.
- **Plan for data needs:** Effective monitoring and evaluation require dedicated tools and resources from the start.

SINCE 2003, MicroLab Association has promoted social inclusion by supporting self-entrepreneurship, career guidance and financial education through mentoring and training.

MicroLab is a volunteer-based association of 55 volunteers and 5 staff throughout Italy. MicroLab has trained over 8,000 people and provided career guidance to over 1,000 students. It has been trained on ecological transition, digitalisation, and support for MSME digitalisation.

MicroLab supports unserved people who want to find economic independence by launching a business or finding a decent job. MicroLab supports the financial and employment inclusion of migrants and refugees, and entrepreneurship initiatives for women survivors of domestic violence. Additionally, it supports financial education within schools.

Recommendations



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