



STEAM BO.SS

boosting soft skills

Companies Needs

European Report | Abril 2024



Sapere utile



UNIMORE
UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI
MODENA E REGGIO EMILIA



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Table of contents

INTRODUCTION	3
COMPANIES PROFILE	5
DIMENSION/SIZE	5
ORGANISATIONAL CONFIGURATION	7
SELECTION AND RECRUITMENT PROCESS.....	10
IMPORTANCE OF SOFT SKILLS	11
POSSIBLE COLLABORATION.....	14
CONCLUSION	15
APPENDIX.....	17
APPENDIX I - SURVEY	18
APPENDIX II - COMPANY	22
APPENDIX III – SOFT SKILLS	24
APPENDIX IV – COLLABORATION.....	26

Introduction

In a constantly evolving labour market, soft skills have become crucial to professional success. Over the last 25 years, there has been growing recognition of the importance of soft skills, confirming their fundamental role in adapting to technological changes and work processes. Soft skills refer to interpersonal and intrapersonal attributes that go beyond technical knowledge, encompassing abilities such as effective communication, teamwork, problem-solving, creativity and adaptability.

The STEAM Boosting Soft Skills project adopts the STEAM approach, an educational methodology that integrates Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Maths, to promote interdisciplinary learning, problem-solving, creativity and critical thinking, collaborating with local companies to achieve three main objectives:

- Improve the transversal competences of Vocational Education and Training (VET) students.
- Create STEAM pilot projects in line with labour market needs.
- Levelling the skills of VET trainers with European standards and guidelines.

In line with the objectives of the 2030 Agenda, this initiative seeks to strengthen the relationship between companies and the VET system. By promoting dialogue and collaboration, the aim is to address the digital transformation and adapt the VET system to meet the demands of the labour market. This questionnaire served as a basis for understanding companies' needs, paving the way for sustainable partnerships and specific training for future generations.

Data was collected, aggregated and analysed on:

- **Company profile:** sector, size, company structure.
- **Search and selection process:** stages involved, importance of previous experience and transversal competences in personnel selection.

- **Soft skills:** assessment of their importance and priority.
- **Potential collaborations:** willingness to collaborate in subsequent phases of the project.

At the end of the document, we enclose the questionnaire administered to companies.

Companies Profile

Dimension/size

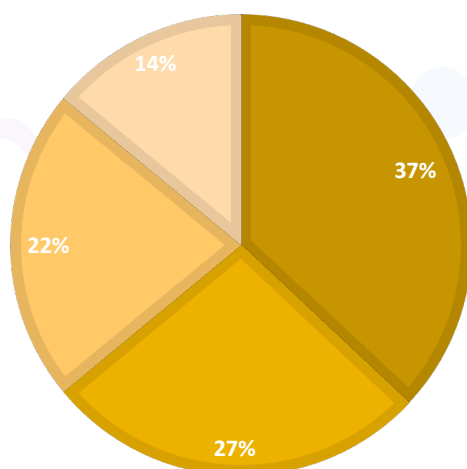
This survey covers companies in Portugal, Spain, Italy and Estonia, representing a sample of business diversity in the European Union. In total, 88 companies were surveyed: 27 in Portugal, 20 in Spain, 21 in Italy and 20 in Estonia.

The comparative analysis between the countries revealed that the percentage of micro-enterprises surveyed was similar (between 35% and 40%). However, there were differences in the number of large companies that took part in the project. In Italy and Estonia, only 5% of the companies surveyed are large, while in Spain and Portugal the percentage is 20%. Regarding medium-sized companies, Italy had 38% of participants and Estonia 25%, while Portugal had 15 % and Spain 10%.

Thus, analysing Graph 1, we can see that the differences between the **countries** reflect the specific business reality of each one, although in general the data is comparable in the European context.

COMPANIES DIMENSION

■ 1 - 10 ■ 11 - 50 ■ 51 - 250 ■ >250



Graphic 1 Companies dimensiona (global)

Most of the companies surveyed are micro-enterprises (37%) and small businesses (27%), totalling 64% of the sample. This diversity is illustrated in Graph 1, which shows the distribution of companies by number of employees. The participation of companies of different sizes, from micro-enterprises to large organisations (14% of the total), adds value to the

survey by providing a comprehensive view of the different perspectives and needs in relation to employees' transversal skills.

It can therefore be inferred that business diversity in Europe contributes to a broader understanding of transversal competences and their applications in the continent's diverse professional contexts.

The distribution of companies surveyed covers a variety of sectors, including Information and Communication Technology, Hospitality, Health and Hospitality Services, Retail, Accounting, Manufacturing, Logistics, Engineering, Accommodation, Education, Social Services, Real Estate, Industry, Commerce, and others.

The diversity of participating companies and the sectors they represent highlight the importance of this survey in understanding transversal competences in different European contexts, providing valuable insights for the development of strategies that meet the diverse business needs of the European Union.

According to the [European Commission](#), *"small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) play a crucial role in the EU economy. They represent 99% of all enterprises in the EU and have been responsible for the creation of around 85% of new jobs in the last five years. Together with start-ups, they are driving the transformation of the private sector thanks to their strong innovation potential"*¹

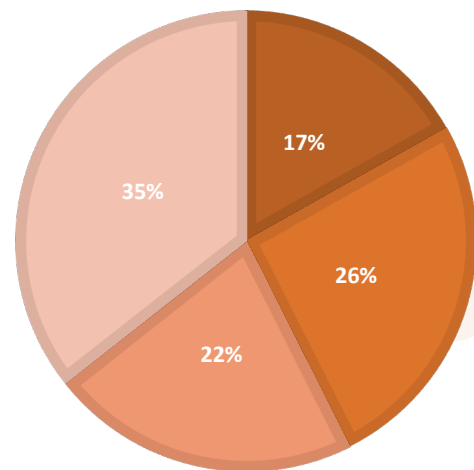
¹ <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/activities/support-businesses>

Organisational configuration

The organisational configuration of the surveyed companies vary according to regional trends and preferences. The most widely adopted model, accounting for 36 % of responses, is the team-based model (Graph 2). This model is predominant in Portugal, Estonia, and Spain, but in Italy it accounts for only 14 % of responses. In this format, different teams are responsible for specialised tasks and have the authority to make decisions in line with the company's overall objectives.

COMPANIES STRUCTURE

■ Hierarchy ■ Functional ■ Horizontal or Flat ■ Team Based

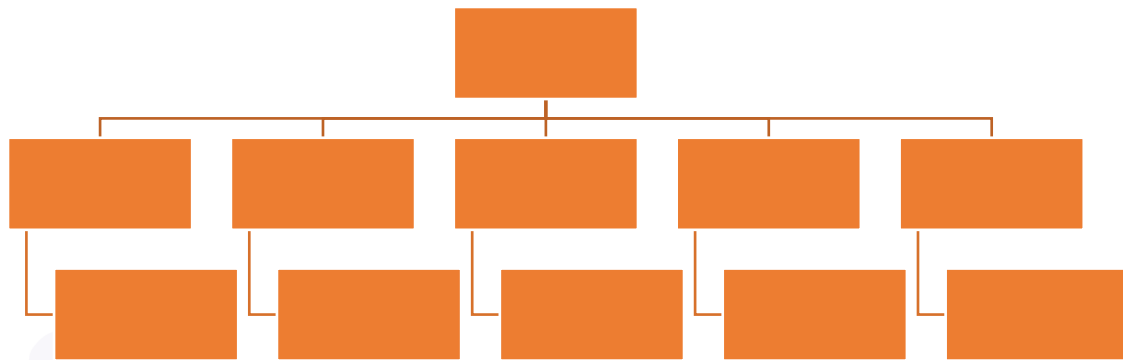


Graphic 2 – Companies structure



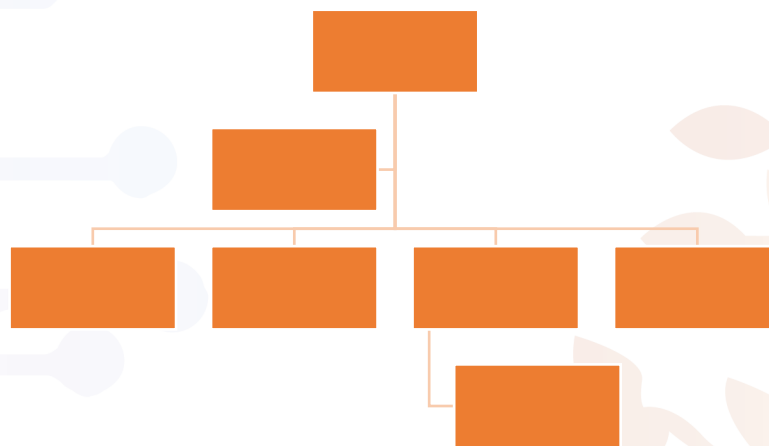
Graphic 3 – Team based organizational structure

Next, with 25 % of responses, we find the "functional" model. This is structured based on specific competences and functions, with the positions of greatest responsibility at the top and each department operating autonomously. This type of organisation allows for specialisation by area but can result in greater compartmentalisation between teams.



Graphic 4 – Functional organizational structure

The "hierarchical" model is the least common, accounting for only 17 % of responses at European level. In Estonia, this model is not used, and in Spain it represents only 5% of companies. In general, this type of organisation is considered less effective in terms of communication, as decisions are made centrally, and information can get lost in the different hierarchical layers.



Graphic 5 – Hierarchical organizational structure

The predominance of the team-based model among the surveyed companies reflects a trend towards decentralising authority and promoting greater autonomy for employees. Functional and hierarchical models, on the other hand, although less common, still represent important forms of organisation. A comparative analysis of the different countries and their organisational preferences allows us to understand how the diversity of models meets the different strategic objectives of companies (*Appendix II - Company*).



Graphic 6 – Horizontal or Flat organizational structure

Selection and Recruitment Process

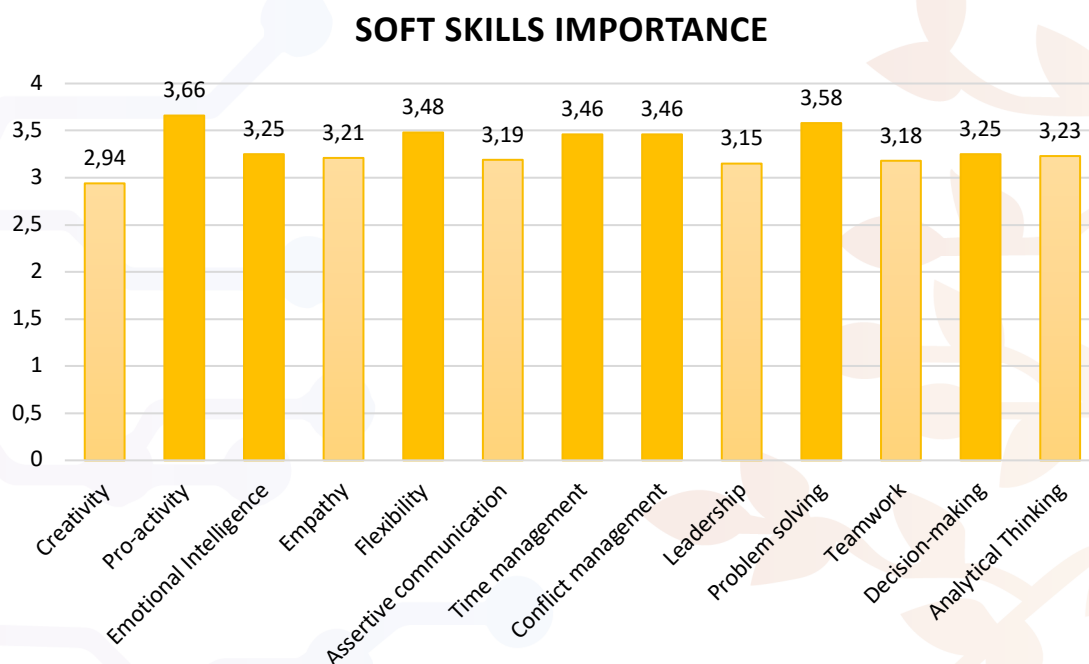
In the survey, companies were asked about the stages involved in the selection and recruitment processes. In general, most companies carry out only two main selection phases: CV analysis and personal interviews. This trend is predominant among the companies analysed, with an almost unanimous preference for traditional recruitment methods. CV analysis and personal interviews are common practices, indicating their prevalence in many organisations in Europe. In addition, medium-sized and large companies often employ other techniques, such as specific tests, as part of the selection and recruitment process.

Specific questions about this process were included in the survey to understand which methods are used in Europe and how recruits' abilities are assessed. By identifying common practices and exploring how candidates' abilities are assessed, the questionnaire aimed to capture a clear picture of the assessment criteria and tools employed.

Not only was this focus on the selection process essential to understand which techniques are most used, but also to recognise how they align with the current needs and expectations of the labour market of these four European countries. The results show no significant differences between the countries involved in the study, reinforcing the uniformity of recruitment practices across borders.

Importance of Soft Skills

In today's dynamic business environment, soft skills, also called interpersonal or behavioural skills, are fundamental to the success of companies. As the European Commission emphasises: *"Transversal skills like critical thinking, teamwork, and learning skills are essential for work, education and daily life. Developing and recognising these skills play an important role in promoting sustainable economic growth, social inclusion, and competitiveness. The EU supports employers, workers and training institutions in advancing these skills".²*



Graphic 7 – Classification of soft skills importance

In an increasingly connected and team-based work environment, soft skills play an essential role in effective communication and productive collaboration between team

² https://year-of-skills.europa.eu/document/download/92562485-9deb-43a8-ac5f-826ff8bdb32a_en?filename=Transversal_skills_factsheet_3.pdf&prefLang=es

members. According to the companies surveyed by the partners, the most valued soft skills are:

- o Proactivity
- o Problem-solving
- o Flexibility
- o Time management
- o Conflict management
- o Decision-making
- o Emotional intelligence

In Spain, problem-solving (3.85) and teamwork (3.80) top the rankings, demonstrating that Spanish employers value collaboration and the ability to overcome challenges. Leadership (3.70) is also highly rated, indicating a significant emphasis on the ability to lead teams. However, creativity (3.10) and empathy (2.85) were rated as less important, suggesting that employers perhaps value skills directly linked to productivity and organisation more than creative expression or interpersonal understanding (*Appendix III - Soft skills*).

In Italy, teamwork (3.80) was the most valued skill, indicating a focus on collaboration. Leadership (3.67) and assertive communication (3.65) also received high scores, reflecting the need for skills that facilitate clear and effective communication. Creativity (2.57) and decision-making (2.81) scored low, indicating that Italian employers may prefer more stable organisational structures, with less emphasis on quick decision-making and originality (*Appendix III - Soft skills*).

In Estonia, leadership (3.70), problem-solving (3.58) and conflict management (3.55) were the highest rated competences, showing a clear focus on managing people and solving challenges. However, creativity (2.90) and empathy (2.85) were the least valued, suggesting that the Estonian market prioritises practical skills, such as leadership and

problem-solving, rather than more intangible skills, such as creativity (*Appendix III - Soft skills*).

In Portugal, proactivity (3.93) tops the rankings, closely followed by problem-solving (3.78) and leadership (3.78). This suggests that Portuguese employers value individuals who anticipate challenges and act promptly. Interestingly, time management (2.52) and empathy (2.71) received relatively low scores, perhaps suggesting that although companies value efficiency, they are more concerned with practical action than detailed organisation (*Appendix III - Soft skills*).

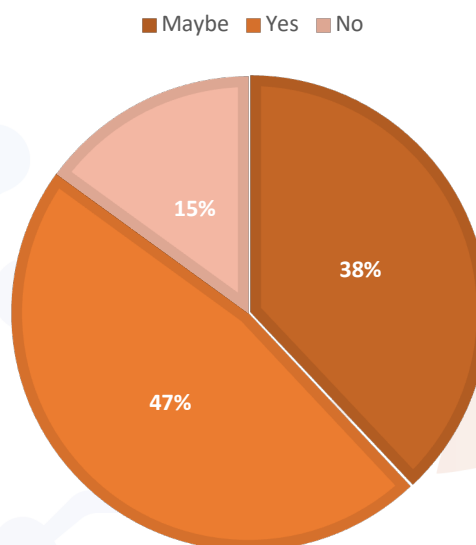
In general, there is consistency in valuing problem-solving, leadership and teamwork skills, highlighting the importance of these abilities in European business dynamics. However, the variation in the classification of other skills, such as proactivity and creativity, reveals cultural and market differences.

It is important to note that some competences, such as creativity and leadership, received lower ratings in relation to relevance. This indicates that, despite being recognised as important, these skills are not a priority for companies when compared to other competences. This result could have significant implications for recruitment and talent development strategies, highlighting the need to balance the focus on different soft skills according to the specific needs of each company and the labour market in general.

Possible Collaboration

Considering that one of the main objectives of the "STEAM Boosting Soft Skills" project is to strengthen connections between companies and the vocational education system, with the aim of reducing the gap between the skills acquired by students after training and the skills required by the labour market, companies were asked about their willingness to collaborate with the Consortium in the next phases of the project. Of the 88 companies surveyed across Europe, 41 (47%) expressed a willingness to collaborate in the next phases of the project, 33 (38%) indicated that they might be able to collaborate, and 13 (15%) did not intend to contribute any further.

POSSIBLE COLLABORATION



Graphic 8 – Possible collaboration in future steps of the project

Conclusion

The survey carried out as part of the "STEAM Boosting Soft Skills" project offers an in-depth look at business dynamics and the soft skills considered fundamental in the four countries surveyed: Portugal, Spain, Italy, and Estonia. With the participation of 88 companies representing a sample of European business reality, valuable patterns were identified that inform current labour market needs and how companies organise themselves to meet these demands.

Analysis of the profile of the companies surveyed shows clear differences between countries in the distribution by size and sector, as well as in organisational preferences. Despite these variations, the prevalence of the team model and the high participation of micro and small companies reflect the European reality, where decentralisation and autonomy in operations play a significant role.

Regarding the importance of soft skills, there are consistent trends. Problem-solving, leadership and teamwork were widely valued in all countries, standing out as essential for effective business operations. However, other competences, such as creativity and empathy, received lower ratings, highlighting cultural and market differences. These variations reveal that companies' priorities reflect the specific needs of each country and sector, guiding recruitment, and talent development strategies.

The openness to collaboration expressed by 85% of the companies surveyed, either directly or potentially, highlights the importance and relevance of the "STEAM Boosting Soft Skills" project in strengthening connections between companies and educational institutions. Such collaboration will make it possible to adjust curricula to the demands of the labour market, reducing the gap between the skills acquired during training and the needs of companies.

In conclusion, this survey provides valuable insights into how European companies view transversal skills and their importance for organisational success. At the same time, it reinforces the need for an integrated approach between the business and education sectors to ensure that the next generation of professionals is equipped with the skills needed to thrive in the dynamic and ever-evolving European labour market.

We realise that the number of responses does not represent a significant sample of the entire universe of companies in Europe. Given this limitation and our commitment to aligning the project's strategies and results with the real needs of the labour market, the questionnaire remains open and is available at https://bit.ly/survey_STEAMboss and on the project's official website <https://steamboss.eu>. This allows for continued and wider participation, enabling more companies to freely share their insights.

Appendix

Appendix I - Survey

STEAM Bo.SS - Soft Skills Survey

In the ever-changing landscape of the job market, continuously shaken by shifts, soft skills have become crucial for professional success. Over the past 25 years, there has been a growing recognition of the significance of these transversal skills, acknowledging their pivotal role in adapting to technological changes and work processes. Soft skills refer to interpersonal and intrapersonal attributes that go beyond technical knowledge, encompassing abilities such as effective communication, teamwork, problem-solving, creativity, and adaptability.

Our project adopts the STEAM approach, an educational methodology that integrates Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics to promote interdisciplinary learning, problem-solving, creativity, and critical thinking skills, collaborating with local companies to achieve three key objectives: enhancing the soft skills of Vocational Education and Training (VET) students, creating STEAM pilot projects aligned with the needs of the job market, and aligning the competencies of VET trainers with European standards.

Aligned with the goals of the 2030 Agenda, this initiative seeks to strengthen the relationship between companies and the VET system. By fostering dialogue and collaboration, our aim is to address digital transformation and tailor the VET system to meet the demands of the job market.

This questionnaire serves as a foundation to understand the needs of companies, paving the way for sustainable partnerships and specific training for the generations to come. We kindly ask you to answer these questions honestly and sincerely appreciate your participation.

Thank you.

Section 1

STEAM Bo.SS – Company

1. Company Name*
2. Industry*
3. E-mail
4. How many employees does the company currently have? *
 - a. Micro company (1-10)
 - b. Small company (11-50)
 - c. Medium-sized company (51-250)
 - d. Big company (>250)
5. What is the predominant organizational structure in your company? *
 - a. Hierarchical - Organizational structure with a clear chain of command from top management to lower-level employees, each having a supervisor.
 - b. Hierarchical - Organizational structure with a clear chain of command from top management to lower-level employees, each having a supervisor.
 - c. Horizontal or flat - Organizational arrangement with minimized management levels, promoting a more decentralized structure and quicker decision-making.
 - d. Horizontal or flat - Organizational arrangement with minimized management levels, promoting a more decentralized structure and quicker decision-making.

Section 2

STEAM Bo.SS - Selection and Recruitment Process

6. What steps are involved in the selection process in your organization? *
 - a. CV analysis

- b. Interview
- c. Psychotechnical tests
- d. Personality tests
- e. Specific tests (physical/skill, artistic, knowledge, etc)
- f. Other:

7. Rate the following statements according to their level of importance, from 1 (not important) to 4 (very important).

- a. Previous professional experience is the most important factor in the hiring process.
- b. Professional experience in the field that candidates are applying for is a determining factor.
- c. Soft skills are important when selecting candidates in the hiring process.
- d. Developing soft skills is essential for the success of teams and for *increasing efficiency*.

Section 3

STEAM Bo.SS – Soft Skills

8. Rate the following soft skills according to their importance from 1 (not very relevant) to 4 (very relevant): *

- a. Creativity
- b. Pro-activity
- c. Emotional Intelligence
- d. Empathy
- e. Flexibility
- f. Assertive communication
- g. Time management
- h. Conflict management
- i. Problem solving
- j. Teamwork

- k. Leadership
- l. Decision making
- m. Analytical thinking

9. If you value another soft skill that is not listed above, please tell us which one.

Section 4

STEAM Bo.SS - Next Steps

10. Since this project aims to strengthen the relationship between the needs of companies and the VET system, your collaboration will be essential. In this sense, we will need your input in the next phases (interviews, co-design of pilot programs, training events, surveys). Can we count on your company's involvement?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Maybe

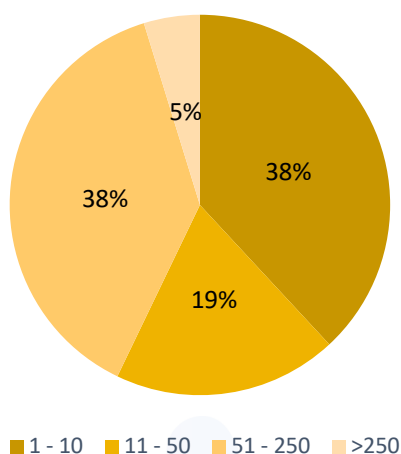
Section 5

Thank you for your collaboration.

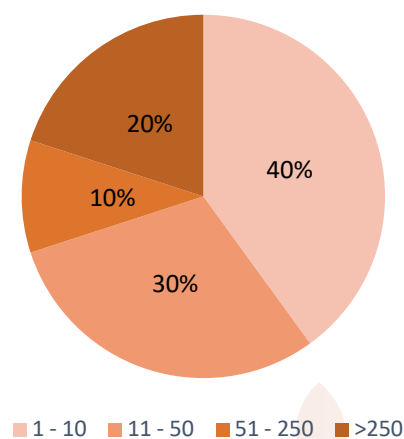
Appendix II - Company

How many employees does the company currently have?

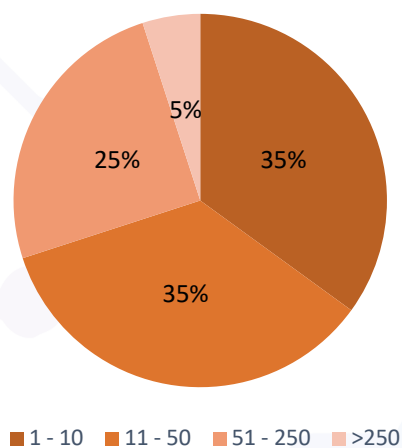
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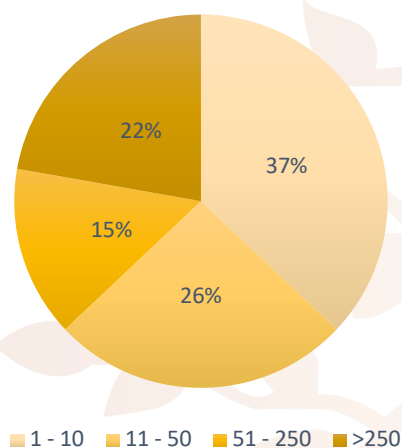
SPAIN



ESTONIA



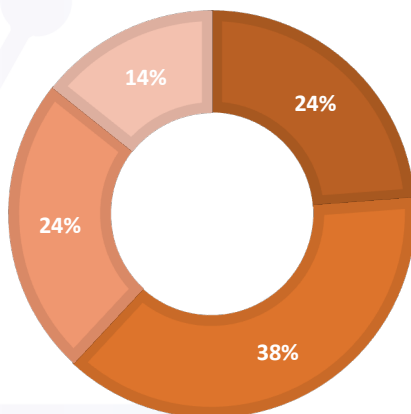
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What is the predominant organizational structure in your company?

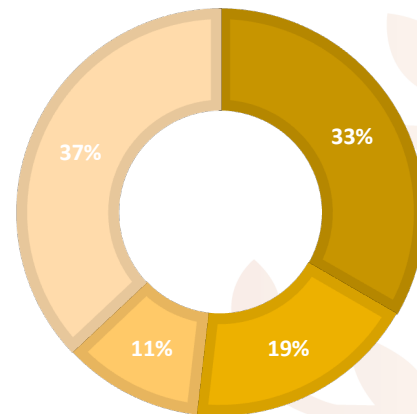
ITALY

■ Hierarchical ■ Functional ■ Horizontal or Flat ■ Team Based



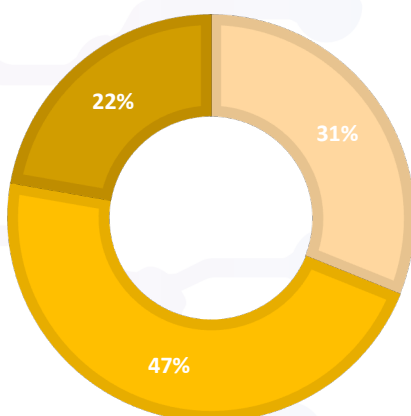
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■ Hierarchical ■ Functional ■ Horizontal or Flat ■ Team Based



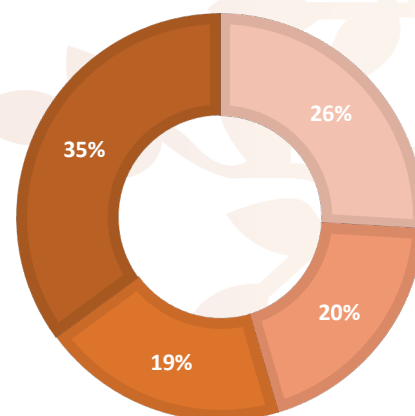
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■ Functional ■ Horizontal or Flat ■ Team Based



SPAIN

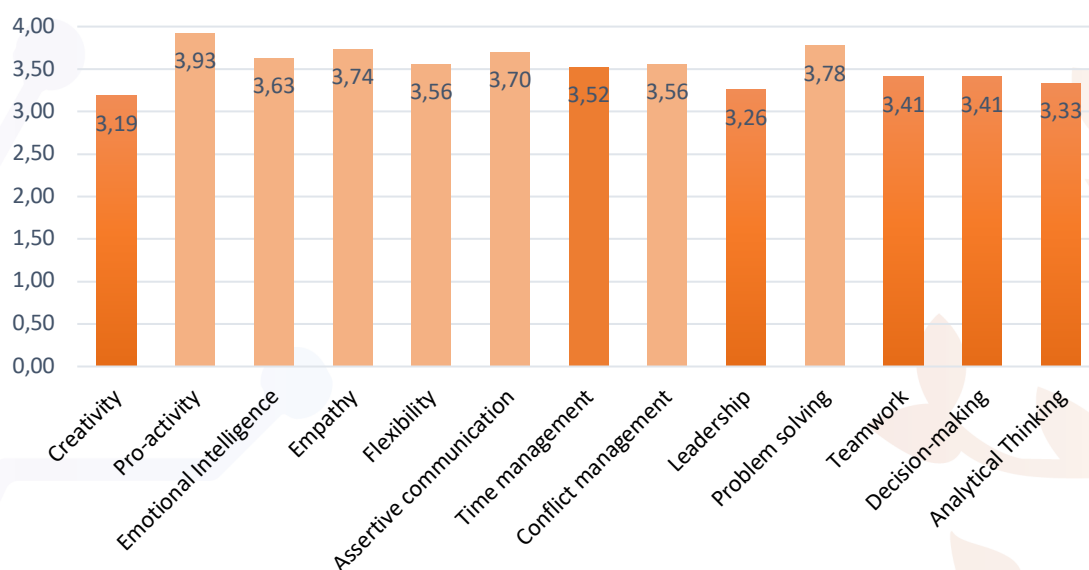
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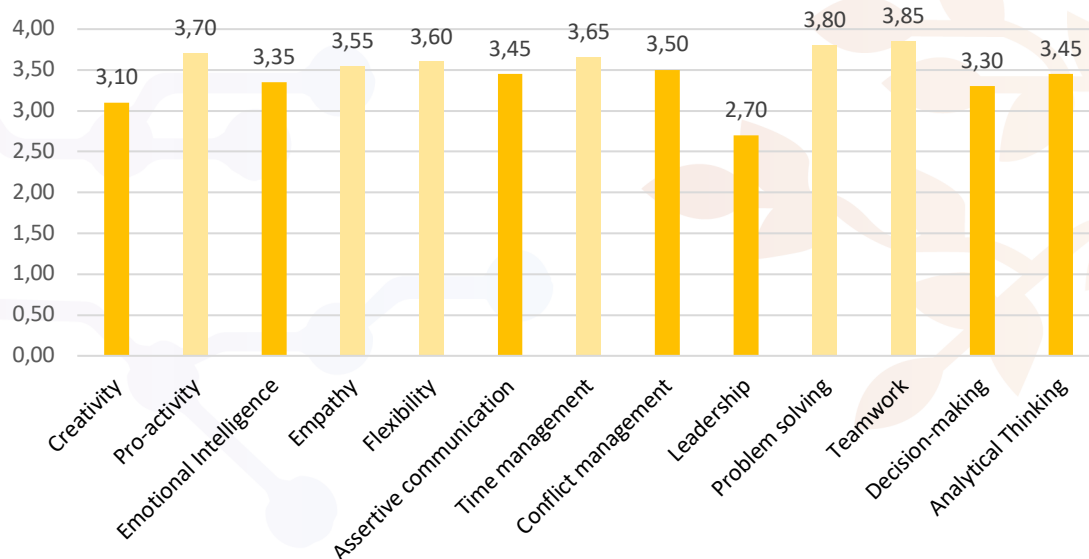
Appendix III – Soft Skills

Rate the following soft skills according to their importance from 1 (not very relevant) to 4 (very relevant):

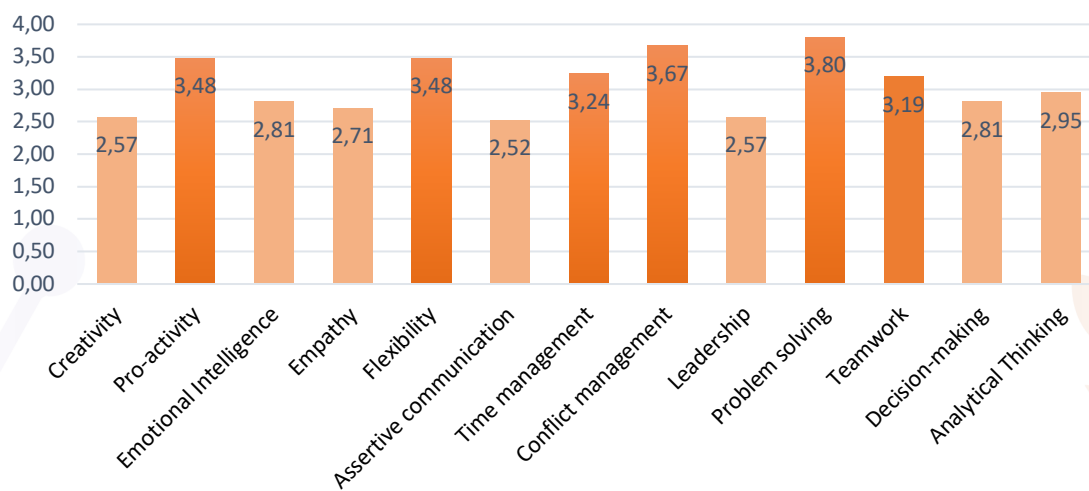
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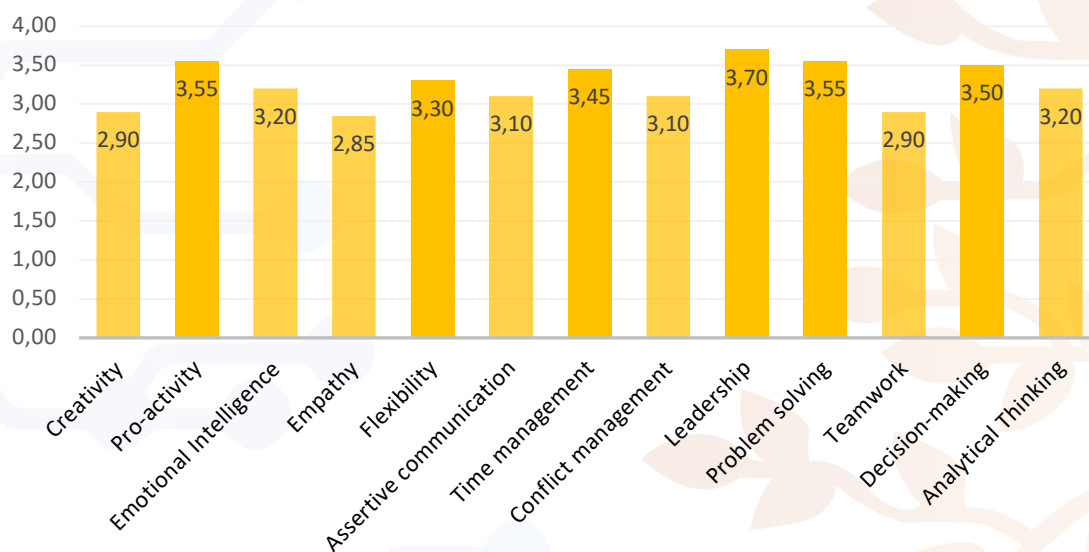
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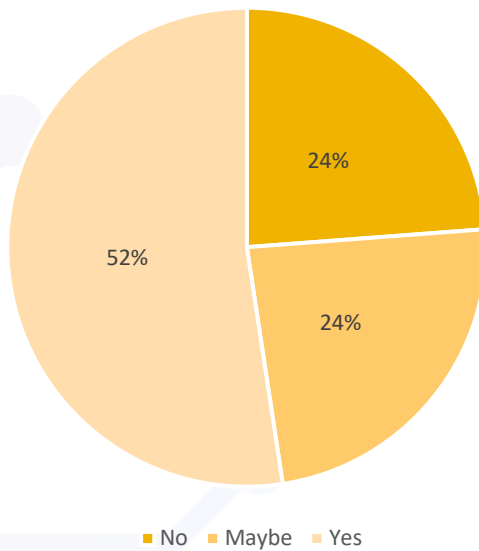
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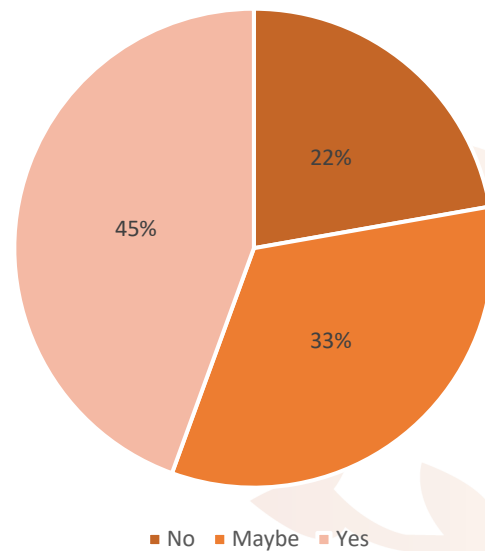
Appendix IV – Collaboration

Can we count on your company's involvement?

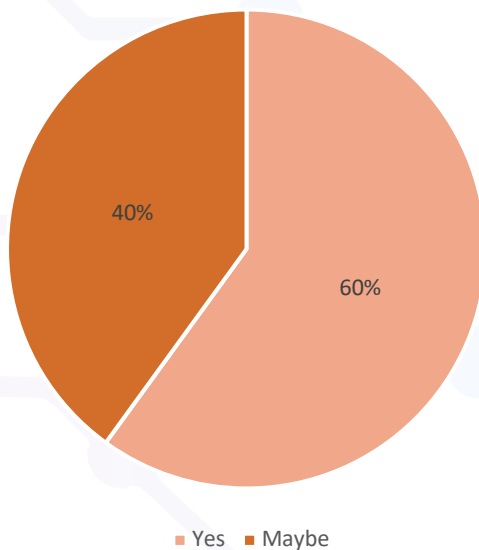
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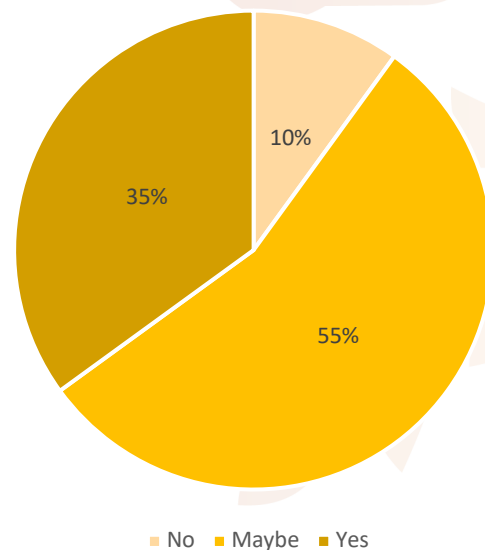
Portugal



ESTONIA



SPAIN





THE BOOST THAT MAKES THE DIFFERENCE



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