



*SMEs – Raising Awareness and Learning on Digital data,
data analysis and artificial intelligence*

Network Management Framework

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**SMART
REVOLUTION**



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SMERALD Network Management Framework

A Practical Guide to Building and Sustaining a European SME & VET Community in the Digital Era

A Strategic Blueprint for Building and Sustaining a Transnational SME & VET Community

Developed under the SMERALD Project (Erasmus+ 2023–2025)

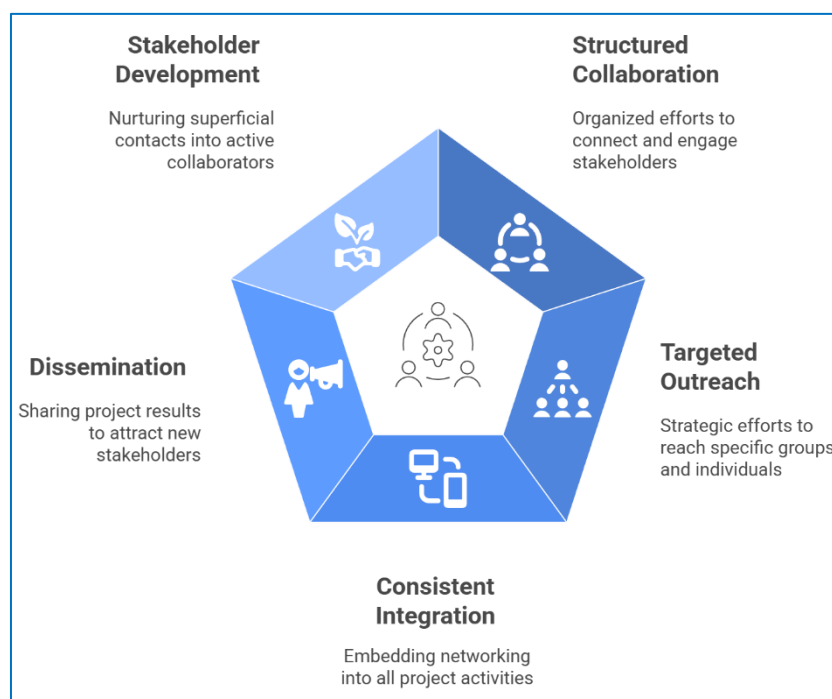
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Introduction

Networking has been a central pillar of the SMERALD project from the beginning. The application set a target of reaching 100–150 stakeholders, but the partnership significantly exceeded this number. This was achieved through structured collaboration, targeted outreach and consistent integration of networking across all project activities. From the outset, networking was closely interlinked with dissemination and stakeholder development: every communication activity, training event and piloting phase served to share results and expand and deepen the network. Dissemination created visibility, attracting new stakeholders. Networking enabled meaningful contact, strengthening engagement.

Stakeholder development ensured that these contacts did not remain superficial, but evolved into active collaborators who contributed to testing, validating and spreading SMERALD outcomes. This interconnected approach made outreach a dynamic cycle where communication, participation and relationship-building reinforced each other.



The purpose of networking in SMERALD is clear: to reach people and to create meaningful connections between SMEs, VET professionals, trainers, data specialists and innovative actors who share a growing interest in AI, Digital Data and Data Analysis.

This internal document is not just a outward-facing tool; it is a strategic tool that will strengthen the partnership's own engagement. It will encourage partners to continuously expand their networks, explore new thematic areas and cultivate stronger relationships with emerging stakeholders.

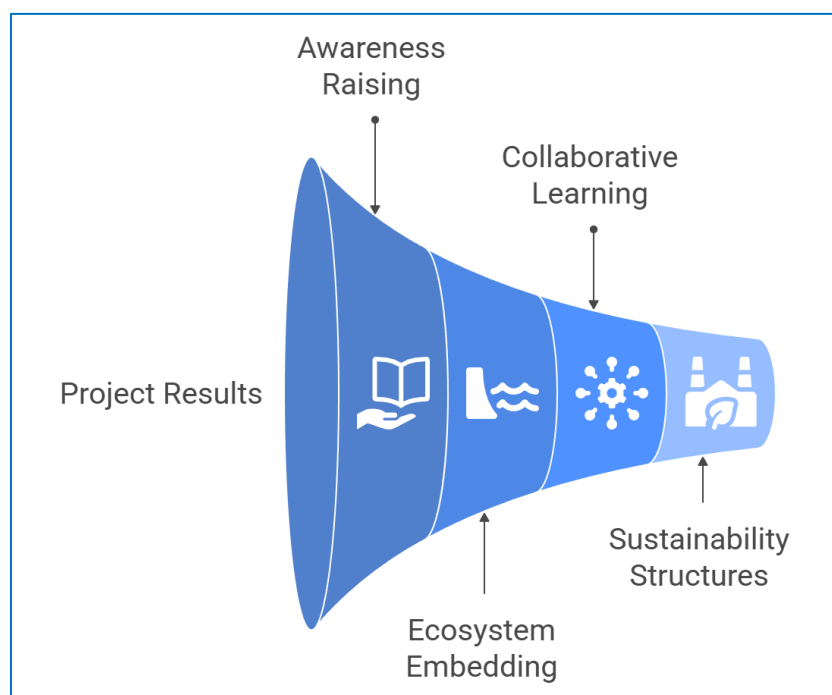
Networking in SMERALD is both outward- and inward-oriented: it supports the project's overarching goal of strengthening SME digital capacity through competence-oriented learning while simultaneously promoting an "open for new contacts" mindset among partners. This ensures that the consortium remains dynamic, interconnected and ready to engage with new opportunities in the evolving digital landscape.

The Logic of Networking in SMERALD

The networking strategy in SMERALD is based on the idea that the development of competence in SMEs depends on community rather than isolated activities. This concept is rooted in a key finding from the project's initial research stages: digital transformation in SMEs is seldom realised through individual learning events, but rather through shared experiences, collaborative problem-solving, and continuous knowledge exchange. SMEs learn best when they can observe how others approach similar challenges, compare real-life examples and access supportive peer groups that encourage experimentation.

Networking therefore creates the social infrastructure that enables competence development. It ensures that information flows, that trainers stay connected to real needs and that organisations are supported when navigating rapidly evolving technologies.

Most SMEs have limited time and staff capacity, and limited access to specialised knowledge. To address these issues, SMERALD created opportunities for stakeholders to learn together, exchange real experiences, and develop a shared language around digital transformation.



Networking therefore:

- supports awareness-raising in fields where competence levels vary significantly;
- It strengthens the uptake of project results by embedding them in local ecosystems.
- ensures that learning becomes collaborative rather than individual;
- It creates long-term structures for sustainability and continued competence development.

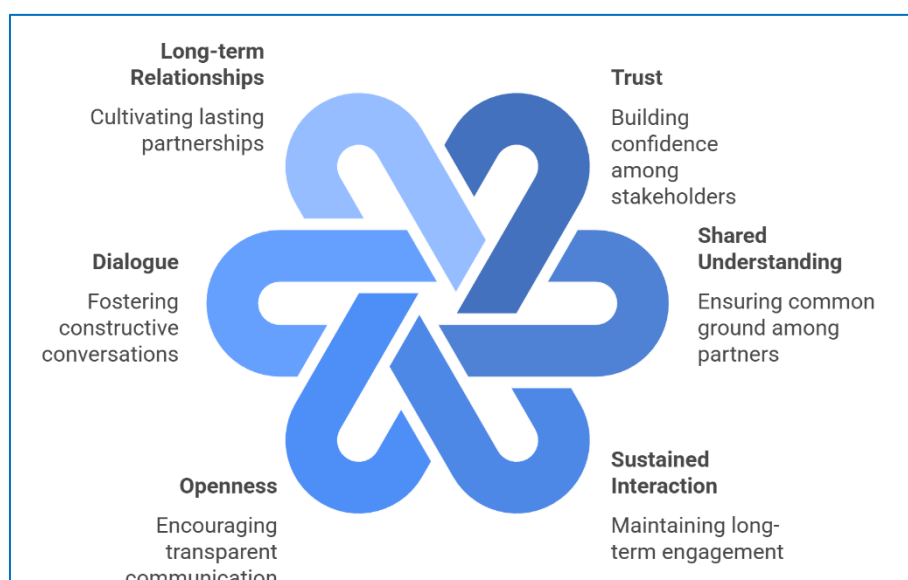
In a rapidly evolving technological environment where AI and data-related tools are changing almost daily, transnational exchange is essential. SMERALD's network provides a platform for SMEs and VET stakeholders to explore emerging trends, compare contexts, and share solutions.

However, effective networking and stakeholder engagement require substantial effort, continuous coordination and a significant investment of time. Building trust, strengthening relationships, and transforming initial contacts into long-term, active partnerships is a gradual process whose impact may only be fully realised months or even years after the first interaction. Adopting this long-term perspective is crucial for viewing networking as a sustained strategic activity rather than a short-term project output.

Core principles guiding the SMERALD network

Before defining these principles, it is important to understand the background that shaped the SMERALD approach to networking. From the outset of the project, the partners recognised that digital transformation in SMEs requires more than just training activities; it also depends on trust, a shared understanding, and sustained interaction between a variety of stakeholders.

The consortium was therefore committed to developing a network culture that promoted openness, dialogue, and the development of long-term relationships. Against this backdrop, the SMERALD partners followed a set of guiding principles to ensure meaningful, inclusive networking aligned with the project's competence-based learning philosophy.



1. Relevance and practical usability

Stakeholders were engaged based on their direct connection to SME training, digital upskilling, or data-driven work processes. The network grew around real needs rather than theoretical interests, ensuring that each contact added practical value to the consortium. This relevance-driven approach enabled the partnership to prioritise individuals who were actively driving or supporting digital transformation within their organisations. It also meant that outreach efforts had to be intentional and relationship-oriented, involving identifying the

right stakeholders, creating meaningful entry points for dialogue and nurturing contacts over time.

In practice, this required partners to look beyond their existing circles, identify new stakeholders in emerging AI and data ecosystems, and continuously evaluate which of these stakeholders could benefit from, and contribute to, the SMERALD approach. By grounding the network in authentic needs, the partnership fostered engagement that was both credible and sustainable.

2. Low-threshold access and inclusivity

Events and activities were designed to welcome SMEs with a wide range of digital readiness levels. Participation required no prior experience with AI or data analysis, so even those at the beginning of their digital transformation journey felt confident joining. This low-threshold approach acknowledged that many SMEs lack the time, resources, or prior exposure to emerging technologies, and that true engagement can only develop when entry barriers are intentionally removed.

By creating an environment where curiosity was valued over expertise, partners enabled stakeholders to participate without fear of judgement, gradually building trust and openness. This inclusivity ensured that learning opportunities were accessible to all, from organisations that were already digitally mature to those that were taking their very first steps towards AI and data-driven work practices.

3. Collaboration and co-creation

Networking opportunities, such as the CPD, the datathon and the final conference, were designed to encourage shared problem-solving, teamwork and hands-on exploration. These activities were designed to create environments in which participants could engage with one another as equals, exchange perspectives across disciplines and sectors, and co-create solutions to real challenges faced by SMEs.

Rather than merely presenting information, partners facilitated collaborative learning spaces where experimentation was encouraged, and stakeholders could test approaches, receive feedback, and refine their ideas iteratively. This collaborative ethos strengthened relationships within the network, nurtured a sense of community ownership, and ensured that networking produced meaningful outcomes rather than just superficial connections.

4. Competence Orientation

The SMERALD Competence Framework provided a shared language for understanding digital transformation. By focusing on practical competencies rather than technical jargon, it aligned stakeholders and enabled actors with very different levels of digital maturity to communicate effectively and meaningfully.

The framework's structure helped participants to understand how competencies develop over time, what digital transformation requires in real work situations and why certain behaviours and mindsets are as important as technical knowledge.

By basing networking activities on this shared framework, partners encouraged a deeper level of engagement, enabling stakeholders to contextualise their experiences, compare challenges across different contexts, and collectively explore ways to enhance their digital preparedness. This competence orientation gave the network conceptual coherence, ensuring that discussions remained relevant, actionable, and accessible to all community members.

5. Transparency & Trust

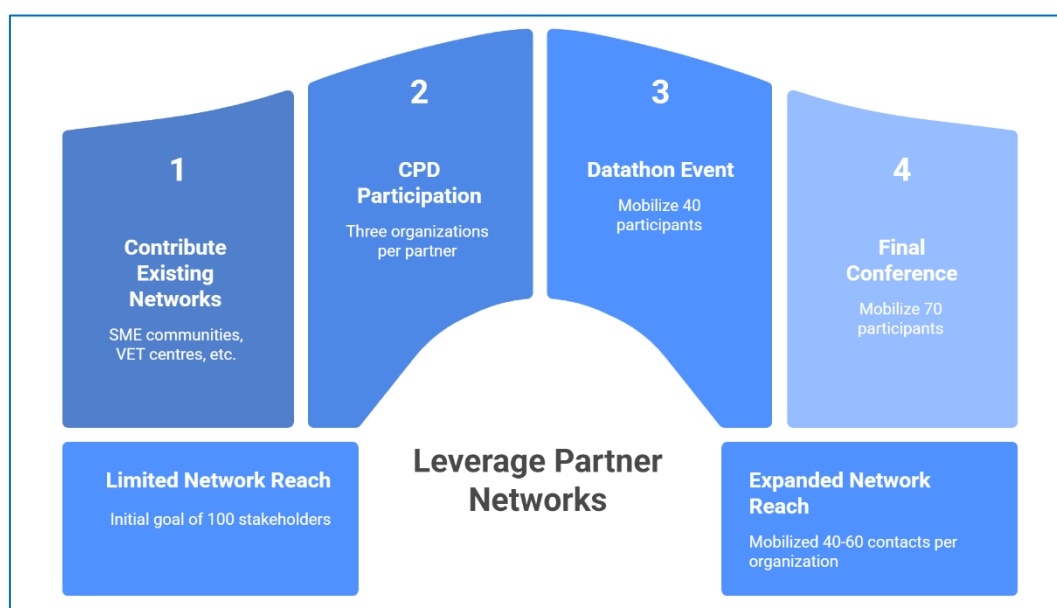
All training materials, tools and resources were openly accessible through the SMERALD Learning Suite. This openness was a strategic commitment to building transparency and trust across the entire network, as well as a practical decision. By ensuring stakeholders had unrestricted access to presentations, frameworks, assessment tools and examples, the partnership demonstrated its commitment to sharing knowledge freely and supporting learners beyond individual events.

This transparent approach reduced uncertainty for SMEs who were new to AI and data-related topics, created a sense of safety for experimentation, and enabled participants to revisit materials at their own pace. Over time, this openness fostered trust in both the project outputs and the partnership itself, laying the foundation for long-term engagement and deeper collaboration. Transparency thus became a core part of SMERALD's networking culture, strengthening credibility and the relationships on which the network depends.

Network structure in SMERALD

SMERALD's network is built directly upon the existing structures, ecosystems and professional circles of each partner. Rather than being a simple mailing list, it is a multi-layered constellation of local, regional and transnational contacts which the partners actively nurtured and expanded throughout the project. Each organisation contributed the networks they brought into SMERALD, ranging from SME communities and VET centres to innovation hubs, universities, technical actors and regional multipliers. This created a combined outreach that far exceeded the initial goal of 100–150 stakeholders.

Through partner networks alone, the project mobilised 40–60 contacts per organisation on average, which were further extended through continuing professional development (CPD) participation (three organisations per partner), the Datathon (ca. 40 participants) and the final conference (70 participants). This layered structure ensured that networking was grounded in real professional relationships, growing organically through each activity and reflecting the diverse strengths and ecosystems of the SMERALD partnership.



4.1 Partner contributions

Each partner mobilised their own ecosystem of SMEs, VET organisations, trainers and local actors. Importantly, however, networking was never treated as a one-directional task. Instead, it functioned as a mutual opportunity: while partners expanded the SMERALD network, they simultaneously strengthened and diversified their own organisational networks, opened up new areas of work and accessed stakeholder groups that had previously been outside their usual remit. This made networking a strategic investment in each partner's future work as well as a contribution to the project, creating long-term value beyond SMERALD.

Across the consortium, partners activated the following structures:

- 5–10 stakeholders per partner from existing or newly explored networks, many of whom represented sectors or thematic areas with which the partners had not previously engaged.
- Three organisations per partner were involved in the CPD training, expanding regional visibility and strengthening relationships with SMEs seeking AI-related support.
- Ca. 40 participants took part in the Datathon (local and online), bringing in new contacts from the innovation, youth entrepreneurship, data analysis and ICT communities.
- 70 participants attended the final conference, combining stakeholders from previous activities with entirely new actors reached through partner channels.

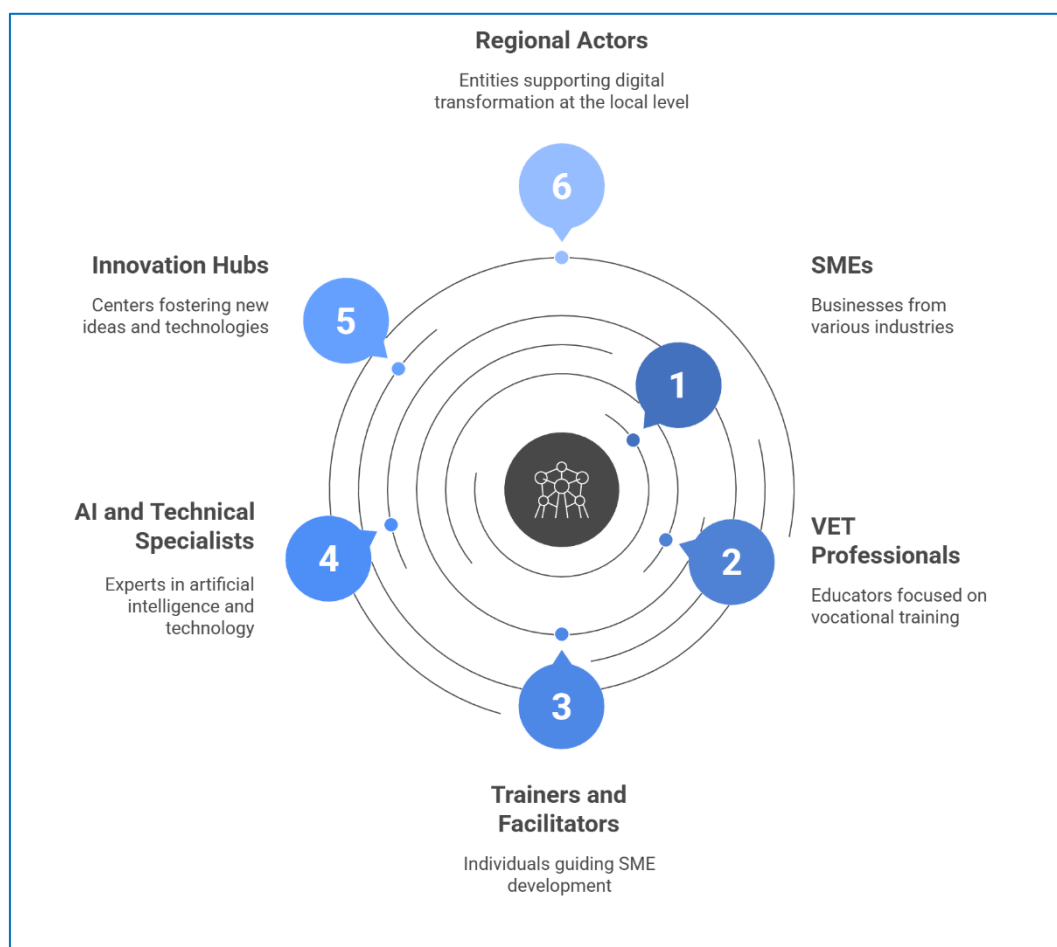
By viewing outreach as a collaborative and exploratory process, the partners contributed to building the SMERALD community and gained new contacts, thematic entry points and opportunities for future cooperation. Therefore, the resulting numbers are not just indicators of achievement; they reflect a successful, mutually beneficial networking strategy that deepened engagement both within and beyond the consortium.

4.2 Stakeholder Profiles

Before outlining the types of stakeholders involved, it is important to recognise that the SMERALD network did not emerge by chance. It developed through the combined strengths, existing relationships and long-standing professional ecosystems of all project partners. Each organisation entered the project with its own national, regional and thematic networks —

some deeply rooted in SME training and others connected to VET systems, innovation communities or sector-specific expertise. By bringing these diverse ecosystems together, SMERALD created a rich, multi-layered stakeholder community that reflects the real landscape of digital transformation across Europe.

The SMERALD network includes:



- SMEs from diverse sectors;
- VET professionals and adult educators;
- trainers and facilitators working with SMEs;
- AI and technical specialists;
- innovation hubs and digitalisation centres;
- Regional actors supporting digital transformation.

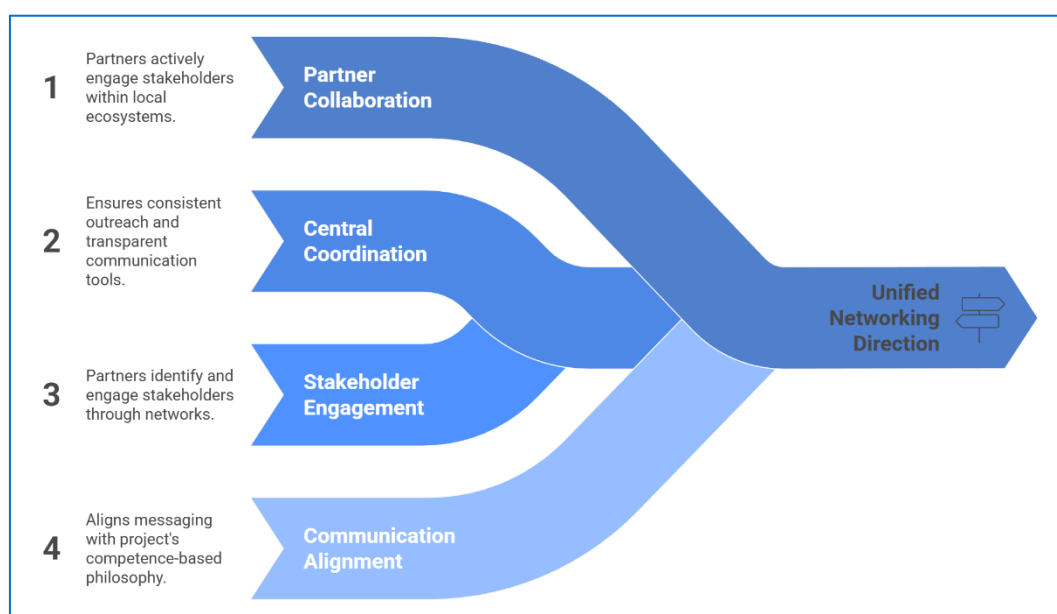
This stakeholder constellation not only reflects the needs of the project, but also the unique strengths and established networks of each partner. Each organisation entered the project with its own local and national ecosystem, ranging from long-standing SME collaborations and sector-specific training communities to university networks, innovation clusters, and European-level alliances built up over years of project experience. These existing structures provided the partnership with a solid foundation, enabling partners to engage with familiar contacts and stakeholders swiftly and effectively.

At the same time, SMERALD opened up opportunities for partners to expand beyond their traditional circles. Some strengthened regional engagement with new SMEs, while others accessed European platforms, AI-oriented communities or VET networks that had previously been out of their reach. This dual dynamic of building on established strengths while exploring new areas significantly broadened the project's outreach and ensured a highly diverse stakeholder mix.

The combination of partner-specific ecosystems and newly developed contacts ensures rich exchange and cross-sectoral learning, creating a network that continues to grow beyond the project's formal timeline.

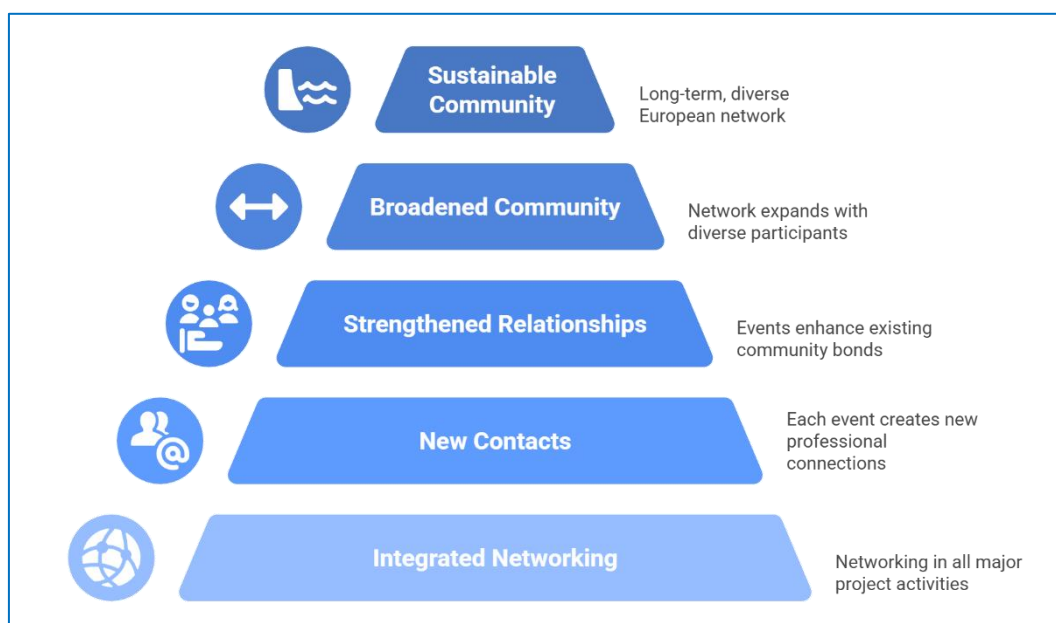
Management approach

Effective coordination of networking efforts in SMERALD relied on a coherent management strategy that aligned the diverse strengths of all partners and ensured a unified direction. Rather than treating networking as an isolated work package, the consortium integrated it into all activities, including training, piloting, dissemination, events and ongoing communication. Each partner played an active role in identifying, approaching and engaging with stakeholders within their local ecosystems. They did this by drawing on their existing professional networks and expanding them through the new opportunities opened up by the project. At the same time, central coordination ensured consistent outreach approaches, aligned messaging with the project's competence-based philosophy, and transparent sharing of communication tools across the consortium.



This collaborative structure functioned as an iterative cycle in which partners regularly exchanged updates, shared new contacts, discussed opportunities and reflected on emerging needs. This ongoing communication created a dynamic flow of information that allowed the network to grow organically while staying closely connected to the project's goals. Messaging across countries remained coherent, emphasising SMERALD's core values: accessibility of AI and data skills for SMEs; practical, competence-oriented learning; and the open, free availability of the Learning Suite. Documentation processes ensured that stakeholder contacts, event participants and engagement activities were systematically recorded, thereby supporting quality assurance and long-term sustainability.

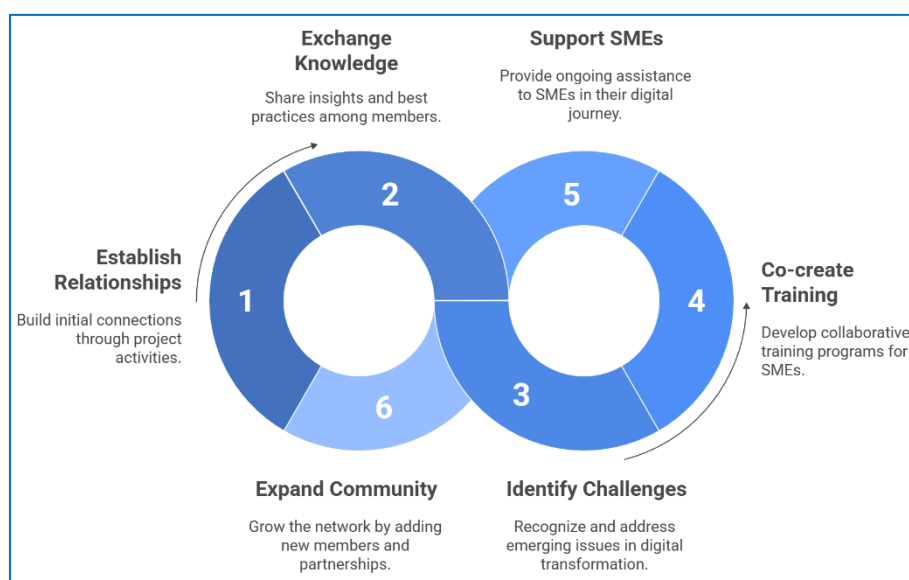
By integrating networking into every major project activity — from the CPD to the piloting sessions, the datathon and the final conference — the partnership ensured that the network continuously expanded and deepened. Each event created new contacts, strengthened relationships, and broadened the community. Through this integrated, participatory management approach, networking became an integral part of SMERALD's identity, supporting the creation of a far-reaching, diverse, and sustainable European community centred on digital transformation in SMEs.



Sustainability of the network

Networking in SMERALD does not end with the project; it evolves into a long-term, collaborative ecosystem that continues to grow and adapt, connecting actors across Europe. As digital transformation in SMEs is an ongoing process rather than a one-time intervention, the relationships established through SMERALD are designed to last beyond the project cycle.

The partnership views the network as an expanding community of practice, rather than a closed group, that continues to exchange knowledge, identify new challenges, co-create training offers and support SMEs as technologies and needs evolve. This means that the structures built during the project form the foundation for future cooperation, new partnerships and continuous capacity building, extending well beyond its formal duration.



The partners have committed to:

- keeping the SMERALD Learning Suite active as a shared training hub;
- integrating SMERALD tools into ongoing training offers and new Erasmus+ proposals;
- maintaining relationships with SMEs from CPD, piloting and conferences;
- further developing the SMERALD Competence Framework in new contexts;
- expanding the network through linked initiatives such as ARIES, IDEAL and B4C.

The result is a sustainable, transnational community with a long-term interest in supporting the digital transformation of SMEs.

Conclusion

The SMERALD network is more than a project result—it is a living community built on shared needs, trust and practical relevance. By linking SMEs, VET professionals and technology-oriented stakeholders across Europe, SMERALD created a foundation for continued collaboration in AI and digital data competences.

At the same time, this document should be understood primarily as a supportive tool rather than a formal guideline:

it offers structure, inspiration and shared language, but it does not prescribe fixed procedures. Partners are encouraged to adapt, reinterpret and expand its ideas according to their own regional contexts, organisational priorities and evolving stakeholder needs.

In this way, the framework remains flexible, open and responsive—mirroring the dynamic nature of the network itself.

Through a clear logic, coherent principles and strategic management, the project exceeded its networking goals and established structures that will continue to benefit partners and stakeholders long after the project ends.

This Networking Management Guideline summarises the approach that made this possible and offers a model for future projects aiming to build practical, inclusive and sustainable communities around digital transformation.

