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Report on the impact of
the E-Channel Project for
Vertical Plus and Soledis
during the project and
future opportunities



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1. Rationale

As part of the E-Channel end-of-project learning, project partners Vertical Plus and Soledis collaborated to create an end of project report, analysing where they were at the end of the journey undertaken together as project partners, with a focus on:

- a) An analysis of the impact of the project for Vertical Plus and Soledis;
- b) Future plans and opportunities for Vertical Plus and Soledis.

The end-of-project learning process has allowed Vertical Plus and Soledis to step back and reflect on their accomplishments as the E-Channel project draws to its end. Time for reflection is paramount for all learning organisations but this is particularly pertinent after the turmoil and challenges faced by project partners Vertical Plus and Soledis in 2020-2021. This included Brexit¹ uncertainty followed by a lack of clarity around post-Brexit trading conditions and the impact of Covid-19. As well as supporting the project participant SMEs, it should be remembered that both project partners are themselves SMEs, trying to run their own businesses. This has been an opportunity to reflect on what was accomplished in the face of so much upheaval and uncertainty. At a time when Vertical Plus and Soledis were having to react and respond to the unprecedented, changing circumstances around them, it has been useful to capture the impact on both partners, as well as considering ways forward.

This is the final report in the series of E-Channel reports, all of which are available at <https://www.e-channel.org/resources/>.

2. Methodology

Throughout the E-Channel project, data for all the reports was collected from a variety of sources including:

- Formal Project Management Meetings;
- Meetings between French and UK Launchpad staff,
- Feedback from Launchpad Account Managers about SME New Market Evaluation Plans;
- Discussions from Launchpad micro-meetings and informal catch-up meetings,
- SME feedback from their regular cycle of reviews;
- Briefings at monthly project management meetings;
- Reviews with the Joint Secretariat;
- Data Management Control Platform² (DMCP) data.

¹ A report on Brexit impact is available at <https://www.e-channel.org/resources/>.

² More information about the Data Management Control Platform (DMCP) is available at <https://www.e-channel.org/resources/>.

Data collection and assimilation by Vertical Plus and Soledis, was ongoing throughout the project, during the timetabled, formal meetings and regular discussions and this process helped to inform the project.

The methodology for this report is slightly different to the other reports in the series. The main findings for this report have been captured and grouped as broad themes, to create an overview of the impact of the project for Vertical Plus and Soledis as well as their future plans and opportunities, so as to identify key points. This period of meta-reflection by Vertical Plus and Soledis pulls together some deeper project learning for the project partners in a summative report.

3. Impact of the E-Channel Project for project partners Vertical Plus and Soledis

1. Vertical Plus and Soledis were both interested in working internationally with SMEs, and in international markets, prior to starting the E-Channel project. The project affirmed that working collaboratively gave each project partner the opportunity to do this.
2. E-Channel has given both project partners, themselves two SMEs, a greater understanding of the international e-commerce market and the practices within them, including the different operational and cultural concerns and priorities in different countries. The E-Channel project has made both project partners more internationally focused and even more nuanced in their understanding of different e-commerce and related business pressures, including how SMEs in different localities perceive different opportunities. Vertical Plus and Soledis are now more aware of the factors that play out for different types of SMEs and the different factors which influence SME behaviour in different countries.
3. Undertaking the E-Channel project helped both Vertical Plus and Soledis to a deeper understanding of the role and function of different types of BSOs, how they have to operate as entities in their own right and the opportunities they bring to SMEs and e-commerce support companies. Planned for engagement with BSOs was very clearly tied into the E-Channel original project plan but, due to Brexit and then the impact of Covid-19, the project partners had to keep adapting the approach taken to BSO engagement and to some extent, it was necessary to wait until the time was right for the BSOs to engage with both E-Channel rather than potential participant SMEs rather than the other way round.
4. Working collaboratively, and remotely, Vertical Plus and Soledis undertook additional technical work on the DMCP and supported the SMEs with this work. This was a challenging but ultimately rewarding process as the two project partners have now designed a functional DMCP which can be used remotely.
5. Vertical Plus and Soledis were always a good match as project partners because of their complimentary skills. Vertical Plus is more B2C focussed and Soledis is more B2B focussed. Both project partners were disappointed that Covid-19 and Brexit impacted the participant SMEs in their decisions not to strongly enter into these different new market areas. However, against the backdrop of the pandemic and Brexit, the participant

SMEs were initially more confident about developing their e-commerce new market strategies by building on what they were already doing and did not feel they could stretch to becoming more multifaceted businesses. By the end of the project, the project partners started seeing some growing interest in developing new B2B or B2C components of their business from the participant SMEs.

6. The E-Channel project has made both Vertical Plus and Soledis think more deeply about how they support and communicate with their clients. Remote working, virtual meetings and the SME's attitudes to risk as well as opportunities have been part of the steep learning curve.
7. The ongoing project reporting, followed by the end of project learning reports have allowed Vertical Plus and Soledis to reflect more than they might otherwise have done on the rough and tumble of business and to capture, through reporting, their own learning and technological development.

4. Future Opportunities

Despite the challenges faced by project partners Vertical Plus and Soledis in 2020-2021, this has not broken the relationship between them; indeed, it was strengthened in the face of adversity. Going forward, both Vertical Plus and Soledis see the potential to continue to learn from each other's approaches to e-commerce and from their different client bases.

1. Due to Covid-19, travel restrictions and remote working, the expected crossover of SMEs so that both project partners would work with them, did not happen. However, this process was set up and was ready to go and both project partners believe that this model has validity in the future.
2. Vertical Plus and Soledis are excited at the prospect of working internationally with SMEs. The project has affirmed that e-commerce new markets are an opportunity to be further explored.
3. The project has shown that e-commerce is of major importance for SMEs who are looking to enter new markets and is an opportunity to be further explored. Vertical Plus and Soledis see potential for continuing this work and exchanging practice as they do so.
4. An avenue for further consideration is to more commonly utilise the E-Channel Consultancy Model and provide more technological support for SMEs looking to enter e-commerce new markets; websites, data tracking etc
5. As both project partners successfully collaborated on technical developments for the project, Vertical Plus and Soledis will continue to use each other as a touch stone and point of advice when considering new technical developments, to check in and benchmark new ideas and practices.
6. Vertical Plus and Soledis both see opportunities for adapting the DMCP approach further and to work with SMEs on understanding their data, inventory, profit and costs, sales and ways forward to enter new markets.
7. The project partners look forward to opportunities for more B2B and B2C collaboration. Vertical Plus aims to learn more about B2B and deploy this to more UK SMEs. Soledis will

work with Vertical Plus on strategies for B2C which will make both companies more rounded in what they can offer in the marketplace, and potentially more robust in diversification of their own e-commerce approaches.

8. Vertical Plus and Soledis both see opportunities for working with BSOs in the future to support SMEs with e-commerce new markets.
9. Vertical Plus is now on a journey to potentially using Prestashop³, as used by Soledis for most of its UK clients going forward, and Soledis is supporting this. Soledis is a Platinum PrestaShop agent.
10. Soledis is considering the Vertical Plus Return On Investment (ROI) Model, which incorporates pricing, billing and market positioning. This is based on a collaborative, shared growth model with the SME clients and means that both company and client are highly motivated to work together to boost sales.
11. Vertical Plus and Soledis have ended the project still feeling like professional colleagues with deeper respect and understanding of each other's expertise and, where partnerships and, where future collaborations are possible, will certainly seek to go for these opportunities. Two sets of business brains being applied to a problem will be an advantage.

5. Summary

Vertical Plus and Soledis are both in a stronger position to realise their ambitions of supporting SMEs with e-commerce new market entry, and have supported all 24 participant SMEs on their e-commerce journey.

E-Channel has been a success, not only due to the collaboration between Vertical Plus and Soledis but also because of the hard work and commitment by the 24 SMEs, the assistance of Business Support Organisations such as the Franco-British Chamber of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) and Bretagne Commerce International, and of course, the Joint Secretariat, which made itself available to E-Channel at the time of greatest uncertainty. Vertical Plus and Soledis would specifically like to thank Amandine Bisaro.

The E-Channel project is grateful to all its stakeholders for their support during the unprecedented times of 2020, and throughout the project.

³ PrestaShop is an open source, modular and customisable e-commerce solution.