WP T2.4.3
Report on Vertical Plus and Soledis Joint Work on Technical Work, Operations, Cultural Exchange and Innovation

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1. Introduction

This report synthesises, and reflects on, the collaborative work undertaken by project partners Vertical Plus and Soledis, with a narrative on 4 key areas of exchange:

- Technical Exchange

- Operational Exchange

- Cultural Exchange

- Innovation

As this is an end-of-project report, it aims to draw on content that has been covered in other reports, to draw out key aspects of meta-level learning. This report draws together the headlines, lists the salient reports and documents and where to find them. It draws conclusions from the interplay between the four identified areas of exchange, based on what the project partners judge to be the most significant meta-level learning linked to these four areas.

The project partners always believed that E-Channel was an innovative project with an ambitious, long term goal of establishing business relationships, technological innovation and integration by creating a sustainable and durable SME focussed model, with dedicated Launchpads which could be replicated in the France Channel England (FCE) area and beyond.

The original bid (p4) states:

> E-Channel unlocks new markets for SMEs on both sides of the Channel; Part of the innovation of the Launchpad model is that it overcomes cultural and linguistic barriers and reduces duplication e.g., on research and development. Creating compatibility and diffusion of FR and UK technologies makes it easier for SMEs to sell their products.

> Through an exciting and rigorous knowledge and cultural exchange, Vertical Plus and Soledis will learn from each other, bring new products and ideas to the export market, increase the commercialisation of research, develop and roll out an innovative business model to support SMEs.

Table 1 maps the four areas of exchange with examples of collaboration, and the key documentation which supports them.

Area of exchange	Examples of collaboration and exchange	E-Channel documentation and reports[1]
Technical Exchange	- The design and creation of the DMCP[2] - The vision of DMCP operations and the 4 tools - Responding to SME feedback about the DMCP	- Briefing document outlining E-Channel technological model for participants - Report that summarises the work to create the Data Management Control Platform

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[1] All these documents are available at https://www.e-channel.org/resources/
[2] Data Management Control Platform

	• Adapting the DMCP to mitigate Covid-19 via remote access
	
	• Moodle[3] and Nodal Start[4]
	
	• Prestashop[5]
		• A guide for Launchpad Account Managers and SMEs in using the E-Channel Data Management Control Platform tools:
		   1. Business Growth tool
		
		• A guide for Launchpad Account Managers and SMEs in using the E-Channel Data Management Control Platform tools:
		   2. Inventory Management tool
		
		• A guide for Launchpad Account Managers and SMEs in using the E-Channel Data Management Control Platform tools:
		   3. Business Planning tool
		
		• A guide for Launchpad Account Managers and SMEs in using the E-Channel Data Management Control Platform tools:
		   4. Market Assessment tool
		
		• Report on the operation and performance of the E-Channel DMCP with the participant SMEs

Launchpad Operations	• The two Launchpads - vision and setup • Launchpad daily operations • Launchpads as training hubs for the 24 SMEs • Delivery of the consultancy services for the 24 SMEs • How the Launchpads worked with BSOs[6] and Non-BSOs[7]	• Set of criteria to ensure that participant SMEs have potential and capability • Company Specific Criteria Checklist • Gatekeeper Briefing Pack • SME Briefing Pack • [Report on key findings and lessons learnt by the Launchpads for SME preparation and audit](#) • Report on the impact of the project for Vertical Plus and Soledis during the project and future opportunities

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[3] Moodle, an online distance learning platform, was proposed by E-Channel as a learning resource so the SMEs could access their toolset, data, and materials in an exciting, active way through a badge or award system. Moodle was an innovative response to support participant SMEs and mitigate against Covid-19.

[4] NODAL START is an innovation by Soledis based on the E-Channel e-commerce consultancy model with a 6-day audit, followed by 6 months of support.

[5] Prestashop is a 'freemium', open source e-commerce platform. More information is available at https://www.prestashop.com/

[6] A BSO is a Business Support Organisation: An organisation whose role is to support other businesses. For example a chamber of commerce or a government agency

[7] A Non-BSO is a non-business support organisation. That is to say, a business which does not support other businesses but is a business in its own right. For example a haulage company or an advertising agency.

		● Report summarising work undertaken with Participant SMEs ● Report on the operation and performance of the E-Channel Launchpads with SMEs ● Report on key findings and lessons learnt from trends for participant SMEs ● Report on key lessons from e-commerce supported new market entry with participant SMEs: Project Team experience
Cultural Exchange	● Staff collaboration: cultural and technical staff exchange ● B2B[8] and B2C[9] collaboration ● The impact of Covid-19 on cultural exchange ● The impact of Brexit on cultural exchange ● Cultural Exchange between the participant SMEs and the BSOs ● Cultural Exchange between the French and UK participant SMEs	● Report on potential contribution of other EU projects to E-Channel ● Report on actual contribution of other EU projects to E-Channel
Innovation	● The project partners are 2 SMEs ● E-Channel Consultancy model for SME e-commerce new market entry (pre-Covid-19) ● Collaboration on finding innovative ways of keeping the project going in the face of the pandemic ● Innovation for SMEs to operate in partnership with their Launchpads and establish new business practices	● Report on E-Channel Coaching and Partnership Model ● Report on key lessons learnt in establishing E-Channel Consultancy Services ● Report on Vertical Plus and Soledis Joint Work on Technical, Operations, Cultural Exchange and Innovation

Table 1: The four areas of exchange with examples of collaboration, and the key documentation which supports them

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[8] Business-to-business (B2B) is a transaction or business conducted between one business and another, such as a wholesaler and retailer.

[9] Business-to-consumer (B2C) refers to the process of a company selling products and services directly to the consumer.

As illustrated in Diagram 1, Innovation is at the heart of the E-Channel project. While technical exchange, operational exchange and cultural exchange are linked to each other in different ways, they are all linked to the innovative processes, services and systems designed by the E-Channel Project. While reflecting on the work of the project and the work of the partners, this was our first piece of meta-level learning.
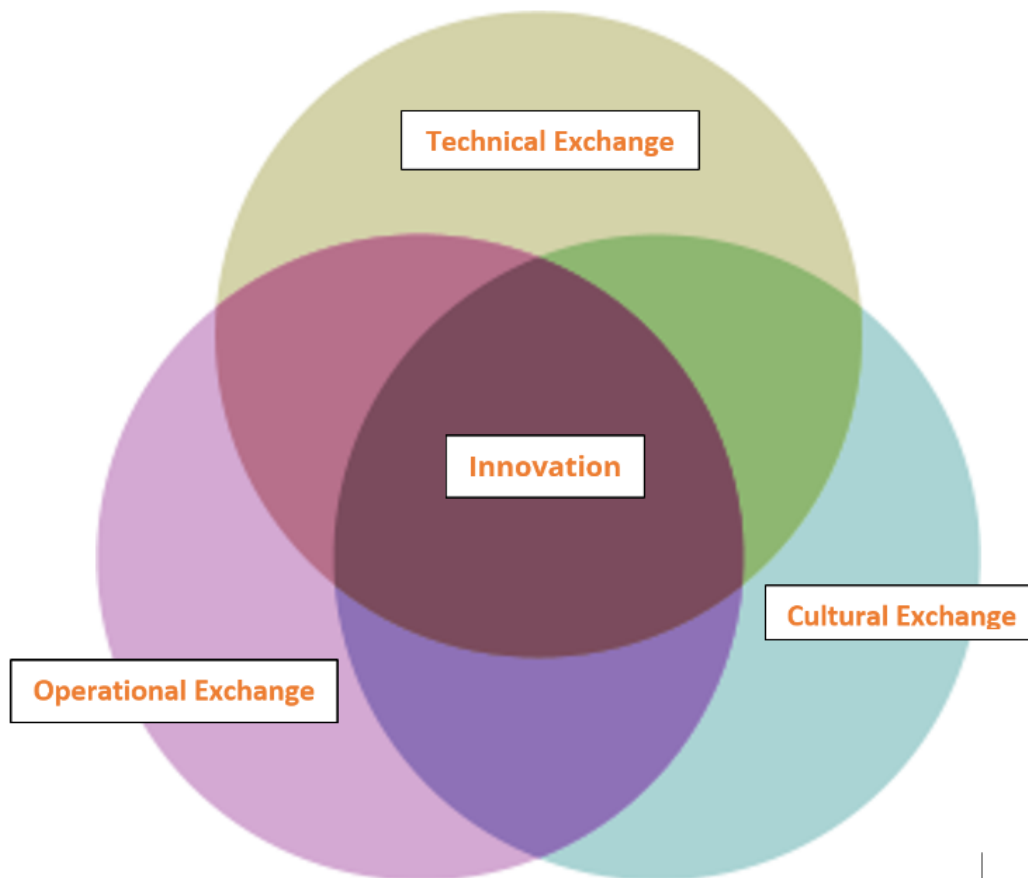

Diagram 1: A representation of how Innovation is at the core of the E-Channel Project

2. Methodology

As much of this ground has been documented in previous reports, the purpose of this report is to provide the headlines, an overview and a clear narrative on how the four areas; technical exchange, operational exchange, cultural exchange and innovation, intersect with a narrative on lessons learnt at a meta-level.

Information for this report was gathered during the final project claim period, from February to July 2021, from a variety of sources including formal Project Management Meetings (PMM), technical meetings, meetings between Launchpad staff, discussions from micro-meetings and informal catch-up meetings, informal conversations and comments, and email communications from different stakeholders at various points during this time.

The impact of Covid-19 on the project has been discussed in other reports and is referenced where there has been a direct impact on the four areas discussed in this report.

3. Meta-Level Learning: 12 Key Lessons

A set of 12 key lessons learnt by the project partners at a meta-level from this project have been captured below. These lessons are not in any specific order.

3.1 An innovative partnership and an innovative project
It was not common for the lead partner or a partner in an Interreg project to be an SME, so the pairing of these two organisations was innovative. The two project partners combined their technical experience and expertise to offer a 'one-stop' technical and operational solution to the 24 participant SMEs by combining the technical support with operational support, coupled with the benefit of a robust cultural exchange in an integrated package, with each strand informing the others. This innovative package led to a robust model which the project partners feel can be duplicated in the future.
Key lesson 1
It is possible for two SMEs, working in different countries and with a different market focus, to provide joined-up, cross-cultural e-commerce support to different types of SMEs, even when faced with Brexit and a pandemic.

3.2 The importance of Vertical Plus and Soledis Cultural Exchange
The cultural exchange between Vertical Plus and Soledis began in February 2018, when both companies first met to discuss the possibility of a technical and operational collaboration. The E-Channel Project started later than anticipated, in September 2019. In retrospect, the timing was crucial because Vertical Plus and Soledis had already had a series of face-to-face meetings, had established a good working relationship and had a clear understanding of the fine detail of their collaboration in the E-Channel project before the impact of the pandemic in March 2020.

As they started the process of cultural exchange before any technical or operational exchange took place, and almost two years before the pandemic, they had a greater knowledge and understanding of each other as well as the project.

Had they not been able to build this personal relationship first based on their cultural exchange, the likelihood is that the collaboration between Vertical Plus and Soledis would not have been as successful. It would have been possible, but far more difficult, to engage in cultural exchange remotely and it might not have been at such a deep level. As it was, the relationship was strong enough to weather the pandemic and for Vertical Plus and Soledis to consider future collaboration.

Key lesson 2

While so much can be achieved with technology, including in the face of transnational and global challenges, effective and sustainable cultural exchange needs really solid personal relationships of trust to be established, with in-person meetings as a key factor.

3.3 The technology supports the operation

From the beginning, the project partners ensured that their technical teams interacted with Launchpad teams to discuss and share the technology to be used with the SMEs. The technical meetings focussed on function, performance and operation. Although there was a feedback loop, the technology had to support the operation, not vice versa. This is a really important point as, from the start, the technical teams and Launchpad operations teams worked closely together, not separately and so understood how their two areas overlapped to support the aims of the project. As this principle was embedded in the project, when the pandemic hit, the technical and operational teams already had this shared understanding, they were therefore greater disposed to make the changes to greater remote access.

Key lesson 3

Effective technical innovation needs clear-use case scenario data for planning and post development real use feedback to ensure the solutions are both fit for purpose and users, as well as being technically possible and reliable.

3.4 Cultural differences impact on DMCP technical and operational work

With the benefit of their own cultural exchange, the project partners understood, from the very start of the project, that the content, view, and operation of the DMCP would differ depending on the SMEs location in France or the United Kingdom due to cultural and operational differences, as well as their B2C or B2B operational focus. These subtle differentiations were embedded by the technical teams at the start of their work and so were not added in later to a 'core system'.

Key lesson 4

It was important for the project partners that when the Launchpads or the SMEs accessed the DMCP, it should not feel weighted to being a model that was 'overly English' or 'overly French' and it should be flexible enough to handle B2B or B2C needs for the SME.

3.5 Cultural exchange and language accessibility
Part of the innovation of the Launchpad model is that it overcomes cultural and linguistic barriers. Vertical Plus, an English SME, was the lead partner and project partner, Soledis, was a French SME. All meetings between the project partners were held in English because the Soledis Managing Director and the Launchpad Account Managers all spoke fluent English. The Vertical Plus / E-Channel project coordinator spoke French and translated all the documents; agendas, minutes, actions, reports etc so that all E-Channel documents are in both French and English. This bi-lingual element was innovative but also quite rare. The ability to have key documents in both languages was crucial because it made them accessible to all staff at both Vertical Plus and Soledis and went some way to make up for the joint technical and operational meetings having to be held in English. To assume that 'English is the language of business' is not only passé and outdated, but could even prevent UK SMEs from accessing new international e-commerce markets. The ability to converse in the language of the project partner and the participant SME is a lesson taken on board by Vertical Plus, as they reflect on rolling out this model in the future.
Key lesson 5
Working with and in another language, as part of doing business, is also a key way to understand the business culture in different markets.

3.6 Innovation driven technical and operational exchange
The events of 2020, specifically the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic from March 2020, as well as the uncertainty of post-Brexit trading conditions, added additional layers of uncertainty to the general 'rough and tumble' of running a small or medium size business. In response, not only did Vertical Plus and Soledis have to come up with innovative technical and operational responses and solutions even before the planned and agreed project processes had had time to become embedded, but they had to do this work in a very short time. The physical nature of the Launchpads was replaced by remote working and video conferencing tools, including the initial SME sign-up and induction, utilising the project's distance learning platform. This was a true test of the resilience, flexibility and determination of both project partners that they were able to collaborate (remotely) and that solutions were found and implemented in the time frame.
Key lesson 6
Vertical Plus and Soledis, as SMEs themselves, as well as having the technical and operational knowledge to support the SME project participants, were able to draw from their own experience of handling the same challenges of Brexit and Covid-19.

3.7 Technical and operational support for the SMEs from a Launchpad perspective

Supporting participant SMEs to become data driven e-commerce practitioners, accessing, understanding and interrogating their own data, with E-Channel Consultancy Model support was innovative.

It was based on a technical and an operational exchange as the two Launchpads used the (Covid-19 adjusted remote access) DMCP to support the SMEs.

The impact of Covid-19 was felt differently by the UK and French Launchpads and so impacted their operation and performance differently. For example, there were times when different lockdown rules applied in the UK and France.

The model was ultimately successful but working with SMEs remotely was more difficult for the Launchpads for the following reasons:

- Many of the participant SMEs lacked I.T. skills and e-commerce experience and skills set;

- Many of the participant SMEs needed more I.T. support to undertake e-commerce than had been anticipated;

- Additional collaborative work was required to connect the DMCP to the SMEs' data as the Launchpads did not fully take into account all the different platforms the participant SMEs were using.

This took up far more time than had been anticipated, especially as the selection and induction stages started in early 2020, and coincided with the first wave of the pandemic hitting Europe.

In retrospect, the project partners feel that under normal circumstances, more time could have been given during the selection and induction stages to assess the SMEs I.T. capability and capacity and this would be a lesson learnt for the future.

Key lesson 7

Because of the restrictions of remote working, the project focussed on what it could do remotely to support the participant SMEs. Although it was not designed to be a data-driven project, this element lent itself best to the circumstances.

By supporting the SMEs with their understanding and use of their data, Vertical Plus and Soledis realised that this was a significant SME shortfall, and so the consultancy realignment and focus on data actually resulted in a considerable benefit to the SMEs.

3.8 SMEs and technology deficit - layers of IT

The majority of the participant SMES lacked significant experience with e-commerce. Undertaking e-commerce was already a stretch for some of the participant SMEs. While the project partners were able to adapt the E-Channel technology and operations relatively quickly to adjust to remote working, many of the participant SMEs found this to be a layer of technology which took them outside their comfort zone.

The pandemic added an additional layer of stress as the participant SMEs realised that e-commerce could be paramount to their business but they did not have the skills or the capacity to invest in learning. This pushed a lot of SMEs further out of their comfort zone. The need to work remotely to access this e-commerce solution added another layer of I.T. skills that many of the SMEs didn't have.

For many valid reasons, the participant SMEs did not invest the time to upskill themselves, even with the support offered by E-Channel through the Moodle initiative. Discussions about remote, interactive systems, including Moodle, provided an informative technical exchange between the French and UK Launchpads.

The project partners feel that although ultimately, this cohort of 24 SMEs did not engage with Moodle, most likely due to the unprecedented circumstances, Moodle is still a good model which would address SME support and training, in a post-Covid-19 era, and they would therefore consider it as a future step.

Key lesson 8

While this cohort of 24 SMEs did not engage with Moodle with enthusiasm, as it required more time spent learning rather than tackling the immediate challenges of Brexit and Covid-19. However, the project partners now feel that such an online learning support tool does have a place in supporting SMEs (in less stressful times) on their e-commerce new market entry journey, and would therefore consider it as a future development.

3.9 SME attitude to opportunity and risk

The participant SMEs realised the benefits of engaging with e-commerce to enter new markets as a way to mitigate against Covid-19 and protect their business. Many of the participant SMEs said this was a huge factor in their decision to join the E-Channel project. However, it also became clear that while they were open to any opportunities presented by the project, the business climate in 2020 meant that they were also relatively more operationally risk averse. Under these circumstances, it was not always easy to read their motivation or judge their capacity for change or growth as the SMEs were understandably cautious. As SMEs themselves, the project partners empathised with the participant SMEs and understood their sense of vulnerability.

Key lesson 9

The project partners feel that although these were exceptional times, more consideration could be given during the selection and onboarding stage, to how the potential participant SMEs feel about risk as well as opportunities so that these areas could be further tuned to meet the concerns as well as the aspirations of the SMEs.

3.10 UK and French collaboration in the face of Brexit

The impact of prolonged pre and immediate post Brexit uncertainty Brexit and related post-Brexit trading conditions was felt by the project partners at a business and project operational level.

- It delayed their access to BSOs.

- It impacted on the UK SMEs' appetite for entering new domestic e-commerce markets rather than the wider European markets and beyond.

● Likewise, it dampened the French SMEs desire to enter the UK e-commerce market.

Key lesson 10
Despite the uncertainty of post-Brexit trading conditions, (even in July 2021 as this report was being written), the project partners believe that having two launchpads, one in each country, was a robust model, which could be replicated with the right project partners. This is supported by their cultural exchange and the pragmatic belief that once the 'dust settles', the UK and French markets will 'still be there' as future e-commerce new market opportunities.

3.11 SMEs working in isolation
The project was designed so that the participant SMEs could support each other throughout the process of E-Channel induction and related e-commerce support. It was envisaged that the SMEs would be recruited and on-boarded in tranches of 8 so they would have their induction and initial e-commerce training together at the Launchpads. Before March 2020 and the impact of Covid-19, it was planned that all 24 SMEs would have opportunities for technical, operational and cultural exchange at the Launchpads. The role of the Launchpads would include the following: ● to be the public front-facing operation of E-Channel; ● to host shared events at both the French and the UK Launchpads; ● to host events to attract potential participant SMEs; ● to host trade events between SMEs, BSOs, and Non-BSOs; ● to host meetings between the participant SMEs; ● to signpost and facilitate maximum cultural exchange; ● to be used as on-site training venues for SME peer support and learning; ● to offer face-to-face support. Due to the lockdowns, the Launchpads could no longer function as physical offices or drop-in centres for participant SMEs or BSOs to visit. Instead, the Launchpads had to create new processes, beyond the original project plan. As a result, not only could these events not take place but each SME was forced to work remotely, in isolation, with no interaction with any of the other participant SMEs so they missed out on opportunities to network and to support each other. All collaborative work had to take place virtually.
Key lesson 11
Innovative technical solutions impacted on project operations in terms of the additional support and guidance needed by the SMEs, working individually rather than in the original model designed for them to work in cohorts. This remote strategy did not support deeper or longer-term cultural understanding or engagement as much as face-to-face working would have done. The SMEs would have possibly found the process less stressful, more beneficial and even faster if they had had access to peer support and peer learning and the services originally envisaged for the Launchpads. The project partners believe that, in the future, with the Launchpads functioning as hubs in the way they were intended, this model is robust and could be repeated, with additional on-line learning to support the process rather than replacing the face-to-face elements.

3.12 Prestashop, Moodle and Technical Exchange
The project partners learnt from each other. As the project draws to its end, they have discussed ongoing and future technical and operational collaboration. Vertical Plus is planning developments in areas such as B2B, the use of Prestashop, and opportunities to use Moodle or similar tools. Soledis is considering 'NODAL START,' an innovation based on the E-Channel e-commerce consultancy model with a 6-day audit, followed by 6 months of support.
Key lesson 12
As well as supporting the participant SMEs, the project partners, as learning organisations themselves, were open to learn from, as well as collaborate with each other. In this way, Vertical Plus and Soledis were able to empathise with the SMEs who were going through a similar process of innovation and business change.

4. Summary - Emergent Themes

Many of the technical, operational and cultural exchanges between the project partners were of a different type than had been envisaged. Innovative solutions for the project partners were put in place for the participant SMEs, some of which had to be re-visited and refined as the work to support the SMEs continued.

By having to interview, sign-up and induct the participant SMEs remotely rather than face-to-face, there were fewer opportunities to ask follow-up, probing questions in areas such as technical competence. E-Channel then had to address the following:

- Technological competence was an area where all the participant SMEs, on both sides of the Channel, were weaker than expected, and their ability to focus on this was hindered by Covid-19.

- Some of the SMEs over-estimated their e-commerce knowledge and related technical know-how.

- Some of the SMEs underestimated the impact that new market entry would need to have on their overall business operational practice.

A key lesson is that when attempting to help SMEs with e-commerce, it is easy to get drawn into requests for wider technical support, especially when the SMEs were highly stressed as unfortunately, the project recruitment and induction phase coincided with the full force of the first wave of the pandemic in Spring 2020. As a result, it was hard for the project partners not to offer additional support so as to keep the SMEs on track.

However, as a reflective exercise, as the project is drawing to a close, it can be seen that a full end-to-end consultancy model, with coaching and partnership with the SMEs, was delivered and that the recruited French and UK SMEs undertook their e-commerce journeys with E-Channel.

E-Channel was well received by the participant SMEs, BSOs, and non-BSOs. The participant SMEs found the data audit and support, paired with the collaborative e-commerce coaching model to be of benefit to them, even if they could not access all the DMCP features and avail themselves of all the training and networking opportunities offered by the Launchpads due to Covid-19.

The project partners feel that the E-Channel model is one that could be successfully replicated.

Perhaps, as a final piece of meta-learning and with the benefit of hindsight, the project partners did not fully appreciate, at the time, the added value from their own cultural exchange during the early stages of project planning, which preceded the pandemic and the need to mitigate against Covid-19. It was equally and as much due to the cultural exchange that had already taken place between the project partners that E-Channel prevailed.