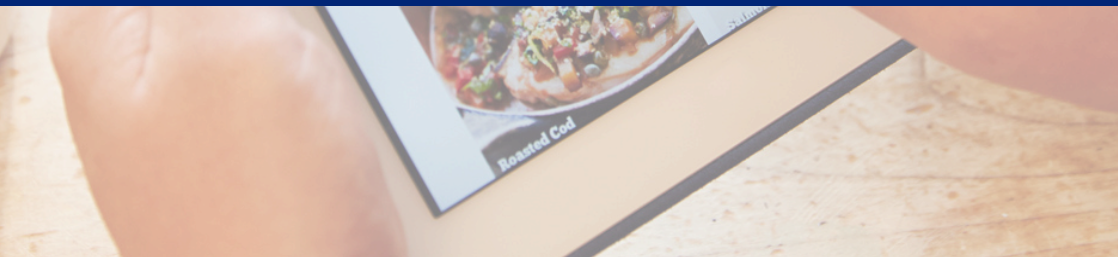


THE DIGITAL SKILLS OF EUROPEAN AGRI-FOOD ENTREPRENEURS

SURVEY REPORT

Digital Readiness for Agri-Food Entrepreneurship Training: Addressing the Digital
Competence of VET Educators (DigiFE)

Project number: 2021-2-2IE01-KA220-VET-000048843



SUMMARY

- This booklet outlines the findings of a survey investigating the current competencies and training needs of agri-food entrepreneurs in Ireland, Italy and Poland.
- The digital skills of these participants is above that of the previously-reported European average.
- Italy is the most confident in their digital skills. Comparably, Poland is the least confident.
- Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp are the most popular social media platforms to use.
- Participants are most confident in their social media use, and most interested in improving their data analysis skills.
- The majority (55.6%) of participants do not have a digital marketing strategy, do not monitor Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), do not have a business newsletter, and do not collect customer information.

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INTRODUCTION

This booklet has been developed as an output of the Erasmus+ funded *Digital Readiness for Agri-Food Entrepreneurship Training* (DigiFE) project. This project is led by the Atlantic Technological University Galway, Ireland. The project was developed in partnership with Confederazione Italiana Agricoltori Toscana (CIA Toscana), Italy, The Polish Farm Advisory and Training Centre, Poland and Macra na Feirme, Ireland.

The overarching aim of the DigiFE project is to review and adapt vocational education and training (VET) to respond to the digital needs of agri-food entrepreneurs in line with the digital competence framework.

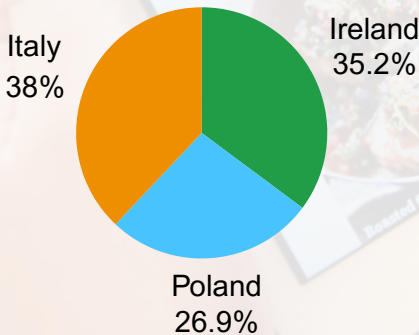
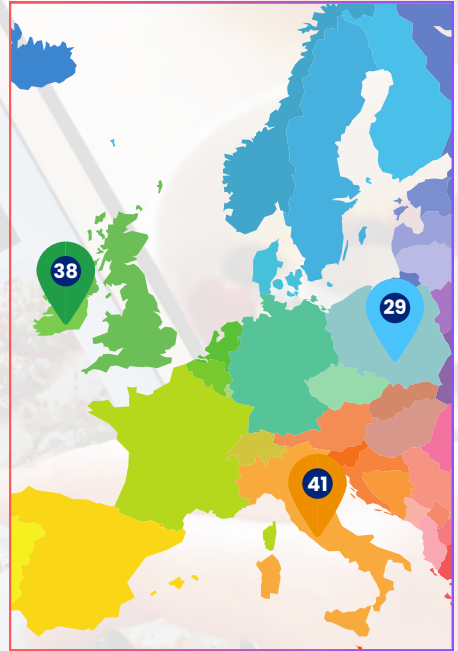
This booklet outlines the findings of a survey investigating the current competencies and training needs of agri-food entrepreneurs in Ireland, Italy and Poland. The aim of this booklet is to offer insights and highlight the key digital skills that VET educators should prioritise for their learners.



RESPONDENTS

The survey captured the perspectives of EU Agri-Food entrepreneurs, featuring respondents from Ireland, Italy, and Poland.

The survey had a similar number of respondents from each country. The results represent a broader European-wide scenario rather than being specific to any single country.



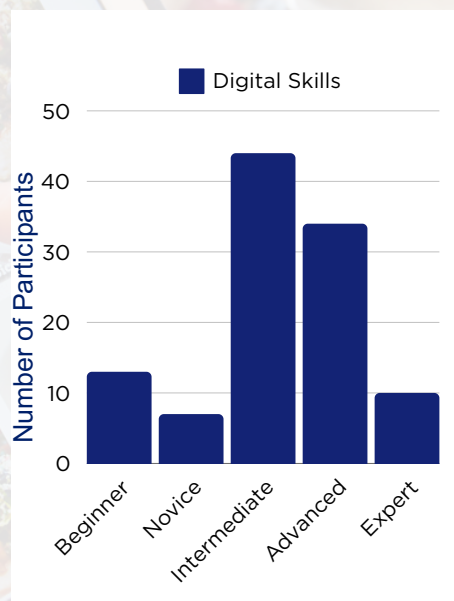
DIGITAL SKILLS

Digital skills encompass a variety of abilities related to using digital devices, communication applications, and networks to access and manage information.^{1,2}

Digital competence is recognised as the confident, critical, and responsible use of and engagement with digital technologies for learning, work, and participation in society.^{1,2}

Participants of this survey were asked to rate their own self-perceived level of digital skills, recognised as their ability to find, evaluate, share, and create content using digital devices (either smartphones or computers).

The majority of participants consider their digital skills 'intermediate' or 'advanced', suggesting that in general they are confident in their ability using technology and developing content.

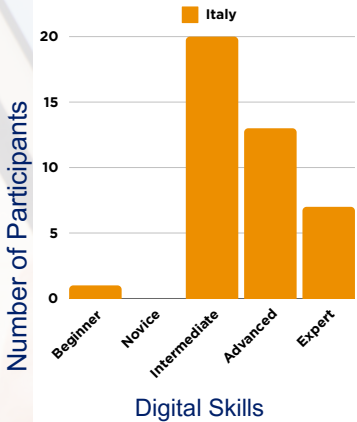
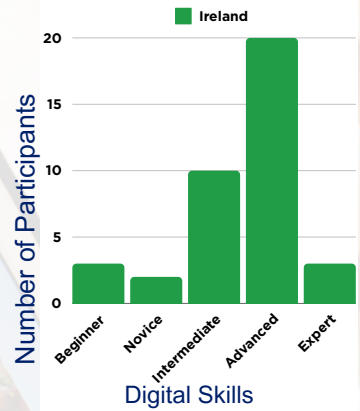


Though 'No digital skills' was an optional answer, there was no reporting of this by participants. These results exceed the European average level of such skills, with 42% of the European population reporting that they lack basic digital skills.³

(¹ UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2009; ² European Commission, 2019; ³ European Commission, 2023)

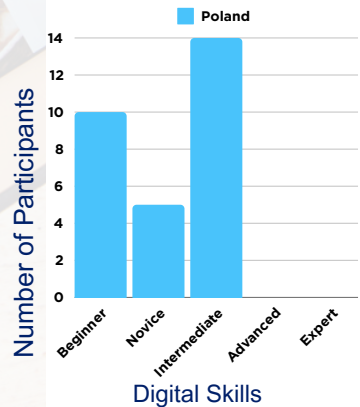
SKILLS BY COUNTRY

The Irish respondents consider their digital skills 'advanced' for the most part, followed by 'intermediate'. Ireland has the highest number of participants considering their skills 'advanced', substantially above the European average.



The Italian respondents consider their digital skills 'intermediate' for the most part, followed by 'advanced'. Italy has the highest level of participants considering their skills 'expert'.

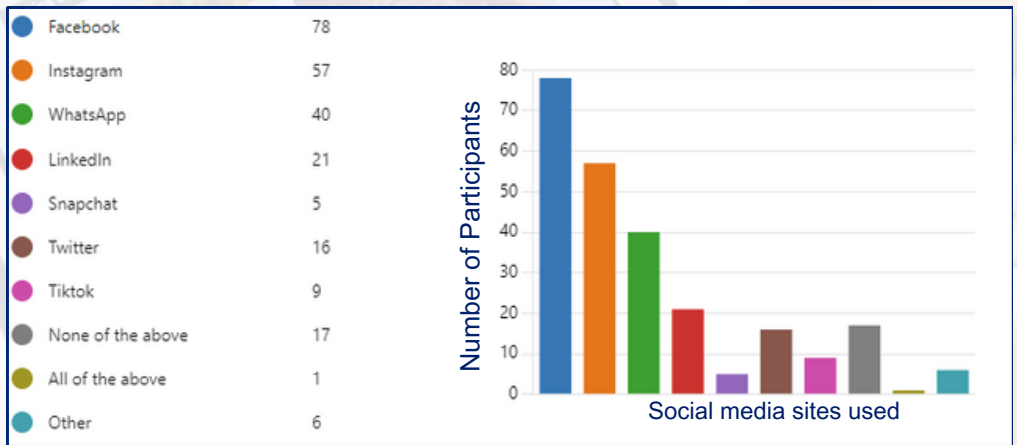
The Polish respondents consider their digital skills 'intermediate' for the most part, followed by 'beginner'. Poland has the lowest level digital skills with no reports of 'advanced' or 'expert' digital skills.



(³European Commission, 2023)

SOCIAL MEDIA USE

The rise of social media in recent decades has changed how people engage and communicate with one-another on a global scale. Using social media platforms can significantly influence the performance of a business and it's relationship with existing and potential customers.⁴



Participants were asked what social media platforms they use specifically for their business. Facebook is the most popular social media platform, followed by Instagram and WhatsApp.

17 participants reported using no social media platforms for their business. Of these participants, 8 consider their digital skills as 'beginner', 7 as 'intermediate', and 2 as 'advanced'. Given the significance of a business having a digital presence, these participants could greatly benefit from considering developing such a presence for their business.

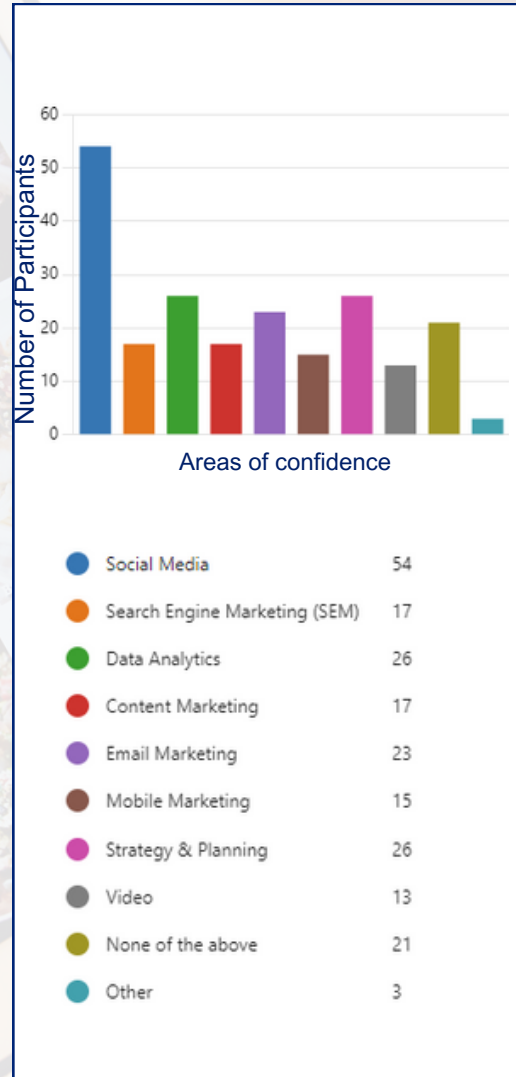
⁴(Krishnamurthy et al. 2023)

AREAS OF CONFIDENCE

Participants were asked to identify the digital skills they consider themselves to be confident in from a given list. There was no limit on the amount of skills participants could select.

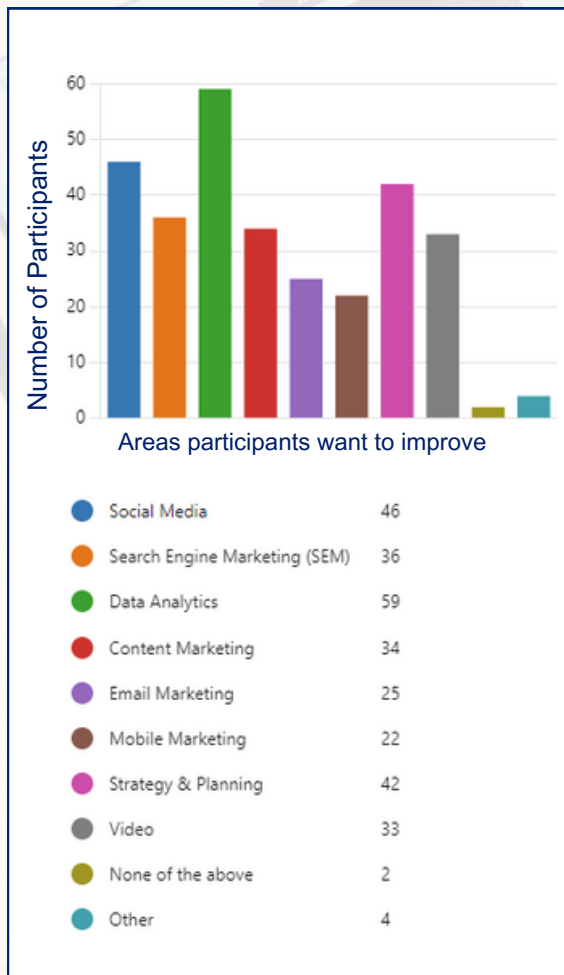
Social media was the most reported area of confidence followed by strategy & planning, and data analysis.

21 participants reported no confidence in the list of digital skills. Of the 21 participants, 11 were from Poland. This further emphasises the perceived lack of digital skills among participants in Poland, who, in an earlier question, reported the highest levels of 'beginner' and 'novice' digital proficiency.



SKILLS TO IMPROVE

Participants were asked to identify the digital skills they most wanted to improve, with no restriction on the number of skills they could choose.



The most commonly reported areas that participants want to improve is data analytics, followed by social media and strategy & planning

Data analytics is the science of fusing data from various sources to identify relationships and causalities, which help in the development of business predictions and support decision-making.

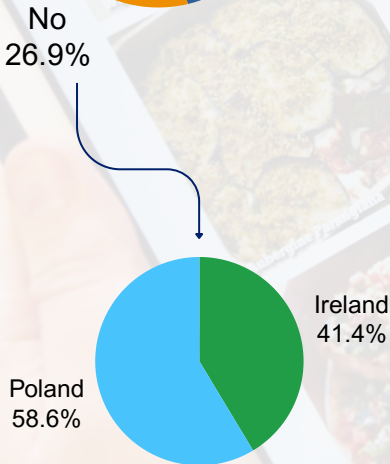
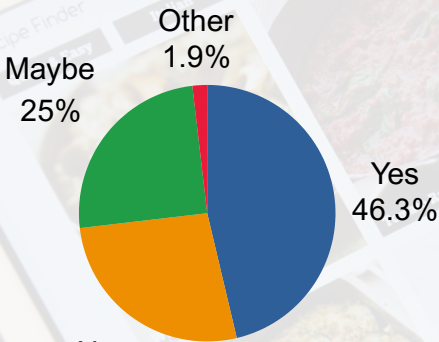
⁵

Having an understanding of how the company is performing and the ability to predict potential upcoming issues can help entrepreneurs in ensuring counteractive strategies and plans exist.

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CONTENT CREATION

Participants were asked to report whether they feel confident in their content creation ability.

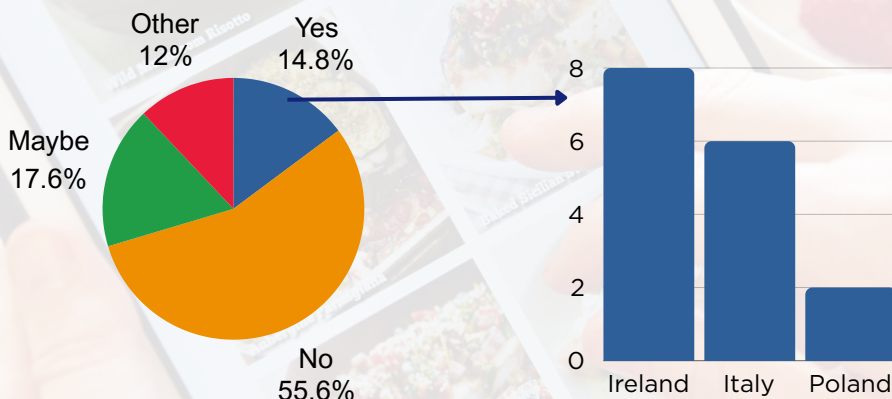


Nealy half of the respondents to this survey reported being confident in their content creation skills. However, social media was reported as the area which respondents were most confident, but also where they would most like to improve their skills. This suggests that though they are confident in developing content, it is the sharing of this content and communicating with their target audience that they find challenging.

Of those who reported no confidence in their content creation skills, the majority were from Poland and the remainder were from Ireland. Italian participants did not report having 'no confidence' in their digital content creation skills.

DIGITAL MARKETING STRATEGY

Digital Marketing is the process of advertising a company's products or services by using digital technologies. This can include developing advertising displays, promoting the product or service on the internet, and advertising through other digital mediums such as google. Integrating such advertising into a business model can support its growth and help it to reach new customers.⁷

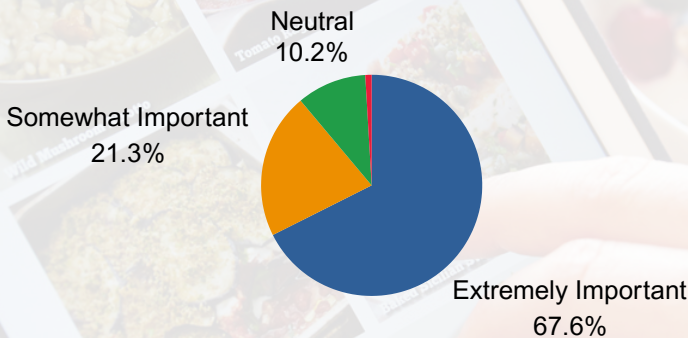


When asked whether they have a digital marketing strategy within their business, over half of respondents reported that they do not.

Of those who reported that they do have a digital marketing strategy within their business, only 2 were from Poland. Comparably, Ireland had 8 respondents who reported a digital marketing strategy and Italy had 6. These findings further suggest that entrepreneurs in Ireland have the highest degree of digital skills and confidence while those in Poland have the lowest.

WEBSITE IMPORTANCE

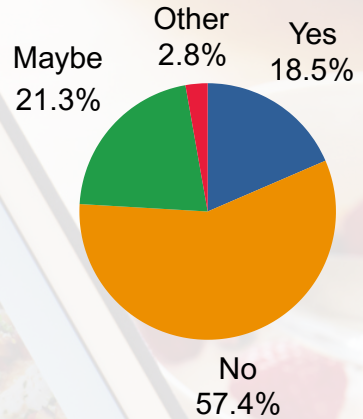
A key element to having an online presence is having a website. A good website that is easy to navigate enables existing and new customers to explore a brand, learn about its products/services, contact the company with queries or feedback, and can be set up to allow product/service purchasing. ⁸



Though survey respondents acknowledge the importance of having a website for a business and consider having one 'extremely important', previous answers suggest that many entrepreneurs do not have a website for their business. Less than 1% of participants consider a website of little to no importance for a business.

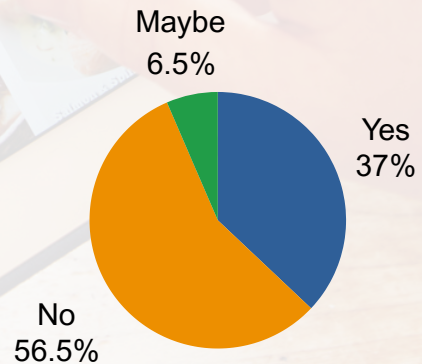
KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) are a quantifiable way to measure the performance of a business over time. Knowing this information can support entrepreneurs in predicting future situations and making informed decisions to avoid negative impacts on their business. However, most participants reported not using KPI's in their business, suggesting maybe they do not realise the value in KPI monitoring or are not confident in their abilities to use KPI information.⁹



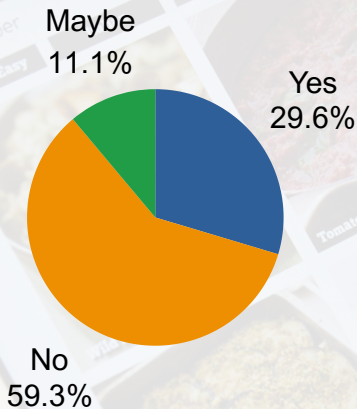
NEWSLETTER

A newsletter is a written or digital publication by a business that tells readers about news, events and other information related to the business and its recent activities. This can entertain and inform readers and turn potential customers into buyers. Similar to KPI and website use, most participants responded 'no' when asked whether they incorporate newsletter-like marketing into their business.¹⁰



⁹Hennigan and Main, 2024;¹⁰Shopify, 2022)

COLLECTING CUSTOMER DATA



Collecting feedback on customers' experiences, wants, needs, likes and dislikes can help entrepreneurs to develop and refine their business, its products or services.¹¹ However, less than a third of participants reported gathering information from their customers.

Those who reported gathering customer data were asked what type of data they gather. The most common answer was customer email addresses.



¹¹(Shah and Rai, 2022)

CONCLUSION

The digital skills of agri-food entrepreneurs varies across Europe, with the majority of participants in this investigation considering their digital skills as 'intermediate'. Social media use is common among this cohort, with Facebook reportedly the most used, followed by Instagram and WhatsApp. Participants are most confident in, but also most interested in improving their social media, search engine marketing, and data analysis skills. Less common among participants is the use of a specific digital marketing strategy or key performance indicators, the collection of customer data and the circulation of newsletters about their business.

These areas should be the focal points considered in the development of new and existing curricula for VET educators in Agri-Food entrepreneurship. As the level of digital skills vary across Europe, incorporating optional modules into curricula may support entrepreneurs coming from a range of backgrounds with varying skill levels to focus solely on specific areas. Such curricula should focus on responding to the wants of agri-food entrepreneurs, such as improving their skills relating to social media, search engine marketing, and data analytics. It should also inform them of the benefits of and give them the skills to become competent in areas they have not pursued in the past (collecting customer data, using key performance indicators, using a digital marketing strategy, and circulating newsletters to customers).



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