

TRAILS

Enabling Data Analytics for Actions
Tackling Skills Shortages & Mismatch



Policy brief #3: ENTERPRISE TRAINING INEQUALITY: THE SME GAP

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WHY IT MATTERS

Enterprises shape Europe's skills landscape. As technological change, the green transition, and demographic shifts redefine work, **continuing vocational training (CVT)** is crucial for **innovation, employability, and competitiveness**. Yet access to training is uneven: **large firms and knowledge-intensive sectors dominate**, while **SMEs—employing nearly two-thirds of Europe's workforce—offer fewer opportunities**, risking a two-speed skills economy.

WHAT DATA SHOWS

TRAILS harmonised **CVTS data (2010–2020)** to examine training across **firm size, sector, and country**. The analysis reveals persistent disparities in **who receives enterprise training**, how it is delivered, and the institutional factors that shape learning ecosystems.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Firm size matters:** In 2020, nearly 90% of large enterprises offered CVT, versus only ~50% of SMEs.
- **Sectoral differences:** Knowledge-intensive sectors lead in training provision; labour-intensive sectors like construction, hospitality, and retail lag behind.
- **Institutional context:** Countries with coordinated CVT systems (Denmark, Germany, Netherlands) have narrower SME gaps. Southern and Eastern European countries show wider divides.
- **Training formats are diversifying:** Large firms increasingly use on-the-job and self-directed learning, while SMEs rely on informal, ad hoc methods, widening skill gaps.
- **Structural imbalance:** Without targeted support, millions of workers risk being excluded from lifelong learning opportunities.

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POLICY IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Strengthen shared training infrastructures:** Sectoral and regional training funds help SMEs pool resources, access providers, and reduce inequalities. EU programmes (ESF+, RRF, Erasmus+) can support these efforts.
- **Simplify access and coordination:** Skills hubs, digital advisory platforms, and chambers of commerce can help SMEs navigate training opportunities efficiently.
- **Public-private partnerships:** Sectoral alliances (e.g., Pact for Skills) can create targeted learning pathways for underserved industries.
- **Cross-firm cooperation:** Large firms can share courses, mentoring, or facilities with SME suppliers, enhancing skills diffusion and inclusive supply chains.
- **Institutional commitment:** Combining collective funding, simplified access, and cooperation ensures lifelong learning becomes a standard business practice, not a privilege of scale.

LOOKING AHEAD

Bridging the SME training gap is **both a fairness and a strategic issue**. Targeted structural measures and collaborative approaches can make lifelong learning **accessible to all workers**, strengthening Europe's adaptability, productivity, and social cohesion.

RESOURCES AND LINKS

- Full deliverables: D6.3 and TRAILS reports
- For more information, please visit the TRAILS website(<https://www.trails-project.eu/>) and social media channels.

