



Managing Diversity in SMEs in Practice

AUŠRINĖ ŠILENSKYTĖ (ED.)



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Editor Aušrinė Šilenskytė  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6828-026X>

Authors Aušrinė Šilenskytė  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6828-026X>

Tiphaine Delecour  <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-6392-6964>

Anna-Carina Mohrholz

Kimmo Kallioniemi

Foreword Adam Smale  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2051-9849>

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Foreword

In a period marked by rapid technological change, demographic shifts, workforce transformation, and heightened societal expectations, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have become key considerations for organisations of all shapes and sizes - not just the large and more mature ones. Yet, while large corporations often dominate discussions and scholarly work on DEI, the experiences of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) remain comparatively underexplored. This volume of research-informed, short cases addresses that gap by presenting a rich collection of real-world cases from smaller technology, digital, and service firms that have engaged with DEI not simply as a symbolic exercise, but as an integral part of their strategic, operational and talent management. Through the different voices of managers, entrepreneurs, and employees, the cases present insightful accounts that, whilst never straightforward, meaningful engagement with DEI can strengthen innovation, resilience, internationalisation, talent attraction, and long-term competitiveness, while simultaneously contributing to broader societal well-being.

The strength of this case collection lies in its practical orientation and nuanced perspective, integrating different organisational settings and forms of diversity that do not usually receive much attention. The cases presented here neither portray DEI as a simple solution nor reduce it to a set of compliance activities. Instead, they reveal the complexity, challenges, and opportunities involved in creating workplaces, products, and services that recognise human diversity in its many forms. From managing multicultural teams and supporting neurodiversity to addressing customer discrimination, inclusive leadership, and accessible digital design, the featured companies illustrate how DEI can generate value for both business and society. The teaching notes are a great additional resource that provide simple yet powerful ways for teachers to include the case in their curriculum and get their students to think critically and holistically. I believe, and I hope, that these cases can inspire managers, educators, students, and policymakers to critically reflect on their own assumptions and practices, and to recognise that effective DEI management is ultimately about unlocking human potential, enabling organisational success, and building more sustainable and inclusive communities.

Adam Smale

Professor, International Human Resource Management
Dean, School of Management, University of Vaasa, Finland

Abstract

Diversity is no longer a peripheral issue for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). It shapes their resilience and innovation capabilities, influences talent management and customer relationships.

This book brings together authentic cases from technology and service businesses, inviting readers to grapple with managerial situations that involve diversity management in the context of SME business development, including product and service development, strategy implementation, project management, team management, and other related areas.

Combining practical relevance with evidence-based perspectives, this edited volume presents a rich collection of cases that equip current and future managers, as well as learners, with the knowledge, skills, and strategic capabilities required to build and grow inclusive organisations.

The book is accompanied by detailed teaching notes (available online in open-access format) that demonstrate how each case can be used in higher and vocational education to model managerial actions and decision-making in inclusive organisations.

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The editor and case authors would like to extend our sincere gratitude to the companies from Finland and Germany that collaborated closely with us in the development of the cases presented in this book. We are especially grateful to the entrepreneurs, managers, and employees whose reflections helped capture the realities of managing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in smaller firms.

I am deeply grateful to all chapter authors for their commitment and collaboration. Their ability to translate practical insights into compelling cases and essays has created valuable learning opportunities that inspire reflection and critical thinking and support the development of present and future business leaders.

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Aušrinė

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Abbreviations

DEI	Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
SME	Small and Medium Enterprise
CEO	Chief Executive Officer

1 INTRODUCTION AND AN OVERVIEW OF THE EDITED VOLUME

Aušrinė Šilenskytė, University of Vaasa, Finland

1.1 Diversity, equity, and inclusion in smaller technology and service firms

Recent surveys show that small and medium enterprises (SMEs) have a limited understanding of what diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)¹ concepts mean in practice, which often leads to unrealised potential of DEI or engaging with DEI only in performative actions (Šilenskytė & Kiverä, 2026). Narayan (2026) explains this problem particularly well and details why SMEs may reject current DEI thinking. She argues that rejection of DEI can lead them to miss an important opportunity to build resilience, innovation, and competitiveness in today's complex and rapidly changing business environment (Narayan, 2026).

To avoid such lost opportunities and encourage SMEs to engage with DEI, this volume features real stories of real companies and managers who have experienced that engagement with DEI can be fascinating and beneficial for business and society even if it is sometimes challenging. This edited volume presents company cases where managers realised that DEI is an integral part of SMEs' lives and strategic management (as explained by Šilenskytė et al. (2026)) and now are working to address DEI in practice.

The choice to focus on technology/digital and service industries was natural – these are two growing economic sectors that are important both today and for the future. “Digital technologies are transforming economies, creating jobs, and improving lives. They have dramatically changed communications, business, health, education, finance and more” (World Bank, 2023). Advanced technological solutions are penetrating every sphere of life and business (McKinsey & Company, 2025), while “the services sector today generates more jobs (50 per cent share of employment worldwide) and output (67 per cent share of global GDP) than agriculture and industry combined – and is increasingly doing so in economies at earlier stages of development” (WTO, 2023, p. 13). Therefore, having an

¹ “*Diversity* is the representational variety of people, processes, and thinking within an organisation. [...]. *Inclusion* is the felt experience of people within an organisation (Shore et al., 2018). Inclusion is achieved when ‘people of all identities and many styles can be fully themselves while also contributing to the larger collective, as valued and full members’ (Ferdman, 2017, p. 235). *Equity* refers to the active process of identifying and dismantling unfair structural and institutional barriers that limit specific groups of people and creating conditions that enable those groups to achieve fair outcomes (Everett and Hill, 2025).” (Šilenskytė et al., 2026, p. 2)

understanding of how DEI can further support strategic business development and management of companies in these sectors is highly important.

Extending the work and case collection published by Šilenskytė et al. (2026), this collection focused on showcasing how smaller companies strategize with and for DEI, as well as how they create structures and work designs that unleash DEI's potential. This collection represents multiple themes that fall under the mentioned topics when allocated under the framework for managing DEI in SMEs presented by Šilenskytė et al. (2026) (cf. Figure 1.1 below).

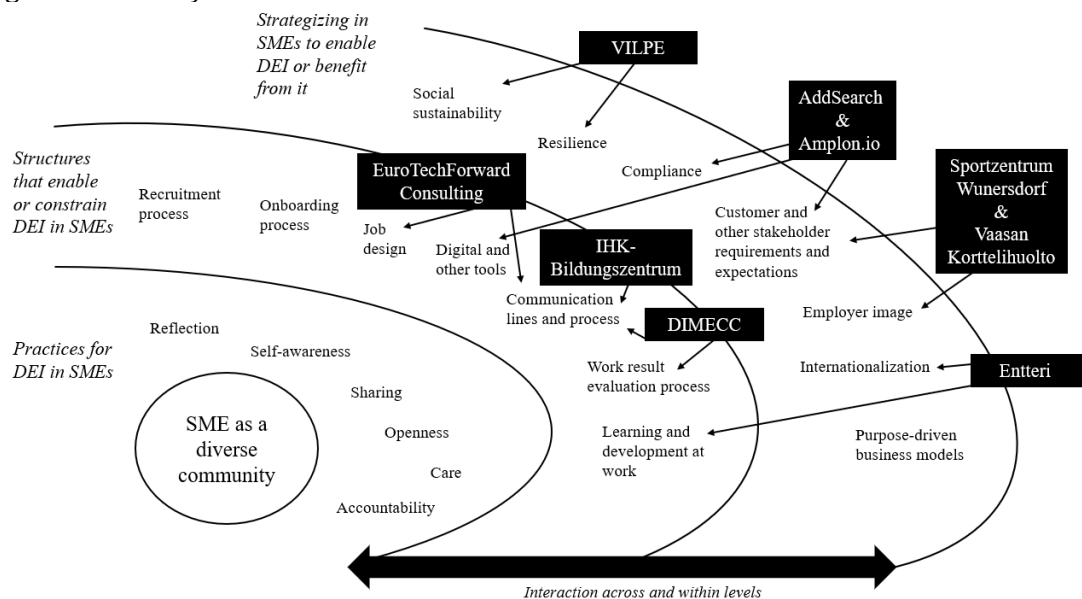


Figure 1.1. Themes represented in the cases of this collection (company cases classified applying the framework developed by Šilenskytė et al. (2026, p. 12)).

Each case is briefly presented further in the following section.

1.2 Company cases in this collection

This collection features nine cases primarily designed for the learning and reflections of current and future business managers. However, these cases will bring insightful reflections to professionals in various associations and unions, policymakers, and sustainability enthusiasts. Each case is accompanied by online teaching notes that educators can use to facilitate their teaching in the classroom.

In the first part of the book, readers will find five cases from Finland from digital and technology-driven firms: DIMECC, VILPE, Entteri, AddSearch and Amplon.io. These are real companies, each standing out in their industry and area of operations despite being

of smaller size. The executive stories covered in these cases talk about building innovation, resilience, international growth, and successful products when considering potential, opportunities, and challenges brought by diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).

The first case is about the DIMECC, a company that coordinates a Finnish innovation ecosystem to drive innovation and technological development, and follows Harri Kulmala, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of DIMECC. The case invites reflections on managing strategic growth and technological innovations through diversity and inclusion, raises awareness about societal discourse influence on managerial decision-making, and allows critical reflection on positive and negative effects of diversity in smaller firms.

The case about VILPE, an award-winning enterprise that specialises in ventilation and roofing solutions, presents how resilience and growth can be created through social sustainability², especially DEI embedded in the firm's culture, management principles, and community work. The case features Tuomas Saikkonen (CEO), Harri Heiskanen (the Head of Production at VILPE) and Katarina Hellén (the Head of Research at VILPE), who, as a management team, successfully navigated multiple crises and now are planning socially sustainable further adoption of robotics in manufacturing.

The case about Entteri, a Finnish SME in the dental software industry, tells the story of building internationalisation competencies and establishing a presence in foreign markets through DEI. In addition, by following the steps and considering the insights of Topi Koskinen, a thoughtful business director at Entteri, the case illustrates the mindset and actions of a successful SME manager who understands how to utilise DEI for the firm's strategic management. Professionals seeking to build successful careers will also learn from Shruti Dharwadkar, Entteri's first international employee, whose profile and thoughtful actions allowed for tapping into DEI benefits and supported significant organisational transformation.

The case about AddSearch, one more award-winning enterprise that designs business-to-business advanced content and product search solutions, showcases the interconnections between workforce composition and a firm's ability to design successful digital products. It also reveals the importance of understanding both technological and social factors, highlighting that digital product development should move beyond pure technical compliance. Inspirational story of Helena Rebane, CEO of AddSearch, and her quest for

² "Social sustainability in business refers to the integration of practices that promote human well-being, fairness, and societal development across organizational operations. Rather than limiting sustainability to environmental and economic factors, businesses must address core social issues that influence both internal functioning and wider societal outcomes. Social sustainability has three interconnected dimensions: (1) Safety and security (i.e., fair labor practices, health and safety at work); (2) Learning and growth (i.e., education and training, job security, employment); and (3) Community development (i.e., diversity, equity, and inclusion, social involvement, human rights, consumer and product responsibility)" (Ajmal et. al, 2018; Šilenskytė et al., 2024, p. 2).

further championing DEI in a firm that is already doing outstanding work in this area as well as in business performance.

The Amplon.io case, co-authored with the company's CEO Kimmo Kallioniemi, who is also a main protagonist in the case, invites us to rethink the digital visuals we use for strategic management in smaller and larger firms. The case brings many unexpected perspectives, including the highlight that men (not women) are disproportionately affected by colour-blindness and, therefore, are usually disadvantaged in utilising the visual signals on which most digital platforms for strategic and operational management and reporting rely. Thus, readers with this case will engage in rethinking both strategic management and various DEI aspects in the context of business management and digital product development.

In the second part of the book, the focus is on service-oriented smaller businesses and the manifestation of DEI-related issues in their context. Four companies, Vaasan Korttelihuolto (Finland), Sportzentrum Wunersdorf (Germany, firm's name anonymised), EuroTechForward Consulting (Finland, firm's name anonymised), and IHK-Bildungszentrum Frankfurt (Oder) (Germany), form an insightful collection. These cases invite reflections on how smaller firms may utilise DEI to build their competitive advantages, support societal sustainability and inclusion goals, and occasionally face value-based collisions with their customers; or manage visible and invisible diversity in the industry that requires continuous contact with the firm's customers, striving to ensure the highest rates of customer satisfaction.

The Vaasan Korttelihuolto offers a fascinating story of a family business and its leader, Benjamin Slotte, who has created a highly inclusive work environment in the firm and now celebrates numerous benefits that support business success: access to a committed workforce, lower turnover and sick leave rates, increasing service quality, and the ability to serve a diverse customer base, among others. Yet, some of his hard-working employees, people of colour, occasionally face racist behaviour from some customers. The case invites reflection on racism and discrimination in addition to showcasing multiple best practices on how to utilise DEI to strengthen smaller firms' competitiveness.

The Sportzentrum Wunersdorf case and the story of Martin Ramer, the CEO who hires the first migrant employee in the gym, Muhammad (all names are changed to protect confidentiality), bring us to a small firm that simultaneously faces opportunities and challenges when promoting social inclusion at work and in society. This honest story aims to relate to every manager in the service industry who envisions DEI benefits but also needs to address several issues during its implementation while facing customer expectations. Since Martin found the way forward and Muhammad keeps successfully working in the gym, we featured this story anonymously, providing the possibility to reflect on how goal setting and mutual small steps by employer and employee can lead to significant DEI benefits for business and society.

The other anonymised case – EuroTechForward Consulting – represents several stories and real events that happened in a work setting inviting us to understand colleagues, partners, and service providers who have ADHD, i.e., Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. The case encourages learners to examine how ADHD-related characteristics may influence workplace behaviour, particularly when the condition is undisclosed or undiagnosed. However, simultaneously, the case draws attention to the fact that with small actions in job design that employers can take and in job crafting that employees can take, the power of creativity of the individuals with ADHD can be released, thus developing excellent services and solutions for business and society.

Last, but surely not least, is the case of vocational training provider IHK-Bildungszentrum Frankfurt (Oder) and its managing director, Sandy Morgan, who needs to manage invisible diversity in a hybrid work setting to ensure team's engagement, high service quality, and capability to deliver trainings that adhere to industry standards. This case challenges our assumptions in how we understand the concept of diversity. The case shows how essential it is to reflect on and engage with DEI, even in smaller firms that seem to be not so diverse when considering visible diversity dimensions such as gender, race, age, or ethnicity. There are many invisible diversity elements (e.g., religion, lifestyles, neurodiversity, etc.) that create multiple needs of employees and various effects at work. Many of these cases show that engaging with DEI in practice is not about DEI programmes that focus on a narrow set of actions or a pre-defined set of diversity dimensions. Instead, meaningful engagement of DEI in SMEs is about recognising intersectionality, i.e., “how different aspects of a person's identity—such as gender, race, age, or class—interact with each other and with the surrounding context to shape their experiences.” (Kiverä, Šilenskytė, Delecour, 2026, p. 53).

In other words, managing DEI in SMEs in practice is about challenging the assumptions that only certain specific minority or under-represented groups need to be supported at work. Instead, it is about a holistic understanding that everyone in certain contexts or circumstances may need adjustments or accommodations in product design, work arrangements, or result evaluation to achieve business and community success. Moreover, managing DEI in SMEs is fundamentally a matter of effective strategic and operational management that generates both business and societal value (Šilenskytė et al., 2026), rather than an exercise in charity, political messaging, or advocacy.

1.3 Looking forward: Next steps towards social sustainability in SMEs

Students, managers, working professionals, and everyone who is excited about DEI and a wider concept of social sustainability after reading the inspirational stories featured in this book can further learn about this topic, assess their firms' or individual capabilities, and plan further or report past actions by using the open access digital tool for social sustainability management in SMEs <https://tool.dei4sme.eu/en/> that was developed by the University of Vaasa within the DEI4SME (EU-funded) project and tested by all DEI4SME project partners, students, and SMEs in Austria, Finland, Germany, and Lithuania, who shared excellent feedback and inputs for improvements.

The digital tool offers many functionalities. For learning about how DEI can be incorporated in SME daily work, human resource management, compliance, and strategic management efforts, please visit the section '*Learn & Plan*' as indicated in figure 1.2 below.

Then, more cases, managerial stories, and academic insights on DEI in SMEs can also be found in an edited volume by Šilenskytė, Fletcher, Butkevičienė, and Jayton (2026) book "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Small and Medium Enterprises: Concepts, Cases, and Managerial Perspectives", recently published by Edward Elgar Publishing.

The hope is that these resources will inspire engagement with DEI and social sustainability, creating context-sensitive and new ways to unleash their potential in SMEs. While one SME is considered to be a minor economic unit, when taken together, SMEs form the foundation of European and many other economies worldwide and therefore can lead the change towards socially sustainable business and society (Šilenskytė et al., 2026). By using these digital resources and edited volumes, students, managers, entrepreneurs, policymakers, and all enthusiasts can start working towards this change.

[Home](#)
[Learn & Plan](#)
[Report](#)
[Inclusion Competencies](#)
[For Educators](#)
[Glossary](#)
[FAQ](#)

EN

Social sustainability in daily work and routines

WHAT THIS MEANS

Make inclusion a normal part of daily work — how you listen, meet, give feedback, and collaborate. Small, regular habits beat big one-off projects.

HOW TO ENGAGE

- Check your engagement level in daily inclusion practices
- See examples of integrating social sustainability in daily work
- Plan my actions to develop inclusive daily work

WHY IT PAYS

Inclusive micro-practices increase employee voice, creativity and problem-solving, especially valuable for small teams that need everyone's ideas.

Managing people in a socially sustainable way

WHAT THIS MEANS

Apply fairness and inclusion to all people-management activities: how you write job ads, shortlist, interview, promote, pay and terminate.

HOW TO ENGAGE

- Check your engagement level in socially sustainable people management
- See examples of managing people in a socially sustainable way
- Plan my actions to strengthen social sustainability in people management

WHY IT PAYS

Fair, visible processes help you attract and keep scarce talent and avoid disputes—key for European SMEs competing with larger employers and serving diverse markets.

Compliance and governance of social sustainability

WHAT THIS MEANS

Understand the EU context (e.g. CSRD/ESRS) and local laws on equality, anti-discrimination and work environment. Even if you are not directly in scope, larger customers will ask SMEs in their supply chains to demonstrate progress.

HOW TO ENGAGE

- Check your engagement level and choose a development path
- See examples of compliance and governance of social sustainability
- Plan my actions to strengthen compliance and governance of social sustainability

WHY IT PAYS

Make social sustainability part of the business model—how you design services, enter markets, and define success. European evidence links inclusive practices to innovation and resilience; diverse boards and inclusive leadership support long-term performance.

Social sustainability in strategic management

WHAT THIS MEANS

Make social sustainability part of the business model — how you design services, enter markets and define success.

HOW TO ENGAGE

- Check your engagement level with social sustainability in strategic management
- See examples of social sustainability in strategic management
- Plan my actions to strengthen strategic management with social sustainability

WHY IT PAYS

Connecting social goals to your core offer strengthens brand, customer trust and innovation, and improves access to EU buyers and finance that increasingly prioritise social performance.

Figure 1.2. Digital learning resources to further deepen knowledge and skills in social sustainability at <https://tool.dei4sme.eu/en/learn-and-plan/>

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Part I: Managing Diversity in Digital and Technology-Driven SMEs

2 DIMECC: LOOKING BEYOND THE FIRST EXPLANATION

Tiphaine Delecour, University of Vaasa, Finland

Abstract

Harri Kulmala, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of DIMECC, a Finnish innovation ecosystem's orchestrator that facilitated collaboration between stakeholders to drive innovation and technological development, faced an unexpected managerial challenge in 2024. As the organisation expanded and diversified, productivity appeared to decline despite continued business success and annual growth. Meetings became more frequent and longer, discussions happened more often, tasks took longer to complete, and decision-making slowed. Harri began to question whether DIMECC's growth and efforts to embrace diversity had compromised organisational efficiency and productivity. Harri needed to evaluate the organisational transformation that DIMECC underwent in the past decade as it evolved from a micro-enterprise to a small enterprise by intentionally building a more diverse workforce to support innovation. The case invites reflection on the confusion about the effects of diversity on organisations and encourages learning to investigate the causes of organisational challenges when going beyond the first potential explanation, which is often shaped by misconceptions or social discourse. This case challenges learners to critically evaluate the relationship between workforce diversity, organisational growth, and productivity.

Keywords

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI); organisational growth; strategic change; small and medium-sized enterprise (SME); productivity; innovation.

Teaching notes

Teaching notes can be accessed online by educators using this web link:

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2.1 The case study

2.1.1 Troubling patterns of challenged workflows

DIMECC operated at the centre of Finland's innovation scene. Unlike traditional organisations, it functioned as a co-creation ecosystem's coordinator, connecting over 2,000 research, development and innovation professionals across 400+ organisations (DIMECC, n.d.). By facilitating collaboration between companies, universities, and research organisations through collaborative projects and innovation ecosystems, DIMECC accelerated the joint development of new technologies, business opportunities, and market-ready solutions. DIMECC achieved all of these with a relatively small team of employees and a strong ability to innovate, learn, and improve.

Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Harri Kulmala was not afraid to admit when something was no longer working. Today was one of those days. As he reviewed DIMECC's workflow maps, bottlenecks appeared at nearly every handover between the team. The productivity reports confirmed the troubling patterns from the last couple of years: internal tasks were taking longer to complete, internal meetings had nearly tripled, and decision-making has slowed across teams. Harri wondered, *"Have I made a mistake when seeking growth and innovation by embracing diversity? Had such DIMECC's growth come at the expense of productivity?"*.

2.1.2 Diversity that led a strategic shift to foster growth and innovations

Over the years, Harri worked hard to create a work environment in DIMECC where employees would feel welcome, be proud of their individualities, and could utilise unique strengths. Harri understood that diversity had a positive link to decision-making, performance quality and creativity in the organisation (Milliken & Martins, 1996) and therefore sought to grow the team through meaningful and job-focused diversification of employees to support innovations:

"Heterogeneous teams lead to improved and increased understanding and acceptance of opposite-thinking behaviour. This transformation we led was amazing, intended and strategic" – Harri Kulmala, CEO of DIMECC.

In 2014, DIMECC employed 10 employees of one, Finnish, nationality; only 25% were women. Professionals in the firm spoke six languages and had two types of degrees and backgrounds, namely engineering and business administration. In 2025, the picture was very different and much more diverse. DIMECC employed 30 employees, of whom 53% were women. Professionals in the firm represented five nationalities, spoke 12 languages,

and had backgrounds in engineering, social sciences, data sciences, business administration, economics, linguistics, and media. The staff recruited over 10 years brought a unique skillset useful to develop DIMECC's operations and offerings that expanded significantly.

Over the past decade, DIMECC experienced remarkable growth. In 2016, the organisation launched its ecosystem strategy, a strategic shift that later proved highly attractive to companies seeking collaborative innovation. What began with a single ecosystem expanded into seven major industrial ecosystems in collaboration with key actors in Finland (DIMECC, 2024). By the early 2020s, ecosystem activities had become DIMECC's core operations.

"This ecosystem activity already accounted for two-thirds of DIMECC's activities last year, and as a result, we reach a much larger number of our clients' personnel compared to the pre-2016 years." – Harri Kulmala, CEO of DIMECC (DIMECC, 2024)

Alongside this transformation, DIMECC strengthened its roles in driving digital transitions, facilitating research, development and innovation (RDI) projects, and connecting organisations to develop new technologies and business opportunities (DIMECC, 2024). The organisation's ambition to position Finland as a global leader in innovation was increasingly reflected in its operational and financial performance. For Harri, DIMECC's growth was evident not only through its expanding ecosystems but also in its workforce and annual revenue.

"At the beginning of the 20s, DIMECC had fewer than 10 employees and an annual income less than 2 million euros per year. Having worked about half of the decade, we have 30 employees with annual revenue of about 4 million euros per year. Growth has been fast." – Harri Kulmala, CEO of DIMECC (DIMECC, 2024)

2.1.3 Internal organisational changes to embrace personnel diversification

With this growth in personnel numbers and internal changes in workforce composition, Harri started noticing emerging challenges in daily work:

"I thought, how can we maintain and improve productivity and efficiency in an environment in which everybody does not have the same cultural background knowledge, understanding, and working habits? We used a lot of time for processes, debates, discussions and instructions in 2024 that were not needed at all in 2014." – Harri Kulmala, CEO of DIMECC.

DIMECC's teams had grown into a heterogeneous group, and there was a need to support this diversification with internal processes. Throughout the years, Harri has implemented several organisational changes to tackle rising productivity challenges.

To help newcomers understand DIMECC's ways of working and bridge knowledge and work habit differences, Harri introduced a structured training and onboarding process. He developed a comprehensive code of conduct outlining workplace practices in Finland and at DIMECC, including a diversity-equity-inclusion (DEI) section promoting respect for individual differences. An employee handbook summarised key policies, such as remote work, salary agreements, or benefits available to all, while OpenAI licences were provided to encourage efficiency.

In daily work, DIMECC continued to rely on informal working methods that previously enabled quick decision-making and smooth communication. This meant that, typically, as it was in many micro or small firms, the reporting structure, responsibilities, coordination, and more of the work processes remained rather informal and organic.

2.1.4 Time to look beyond the easy answer to efficiency challenges

Harri reflected on the company's journey. Between 2014 and 2024, DIMECC experienced a fundamental shift, reshaping how the organisation operated. Growing small and medium enterprises (SMEs) were often faced with new complexities (Kindström et al., 2024), where organisational success required adaptations and rethinking workflows, practices, or structures to accompany expansion. DIMECC was no exception.

Harri worked on policies to address the growing number and diversity of employees, and his efforts should have succeeded. While all employees worked under similar guidelines and equal access to work tools, Harri and the team still faced efficiency challenges in DIMECC.

The first thought that came to Harri's mind was that diversity of employees brought these difficulties and slowed organisation. Harri's concerns were further strengthened by the ongoing debates on DEI and the political environment surrounding DEI programmes (Guillén, 2025), which were particularly rising in 2025. It would have been easy to go with the flow and cancel their DEI policy, focusing on the reasoning that diversity brought inefficiencies to the firm and would not support its further development. After all, this was what many firms did that year (for example, cf., Murray & Bohannon (2025), Kornick, (2025), Repko, (2025)).

Harri thought, *"If the workforce's diversity had truly been the source of concern and hindered DIMECC's performance, how had our organisation achieved so much over the same*

period?” Harri paused, looked at the workflow maps again, and wondered: “*Can there be another reason that leads to the loss of efficiency in DIMECC?*”.

2.2 Questions for reflection

1. In what ways has workforce diversity contributed positively to DIMECC’s innovation capabilities?
2. Why did an increase in diversity within the company appear to contribute to productivity challenges?
3. What concrete organisational practices has DIMECC implemented to improve efficiency without reducing inclusion or diversity?
4. What is the central problem DIMECC is facing, and how has it evolved over time? What could be the reasons, other than diversity and discourses around DEI present at that time, that led to inefficiencies in DIMECC?

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3 VILPE: PLANNING DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION WITH SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY IN MIND

Aušrinė Šilenskytė, University of Vaasa, Finland

Abstract

VILPE, an award-winning international medium-sized enterprise specialising in ventilation and roofing solutions, has achieved its success through technological excellence and a learning-based, inclusive organisational culture. The latter ensured that VILPE as a family business was successfully growing in local and global markets for the last 50 years, addressing extreme market turbulence, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the Ukraine-Russia war, and the economic crisis in Finland. To support its international strategy and the exports of smart building product solutions that were launched in Europe and recently entered the United States' market, further digital transformation and adoption of robotics in manufacturing were necessary. As Tuomas Saikkonen, chief executive officer of VILPE, and the management team planned these developments, they faced potential contradictions between business goals and their deep organisational commitment to social sustainability. The case invites learners to reflect on strategic management of the firm, realising how questions concerning social sustainability play a major role in international strategy and digital transformation.

Keywords

social sustainability; digital transformation; advanced technology; international strategy; diversity and inclusion; small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs); manufacturing

Teaching notes

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3.1 The case study

3.1.1 Taking over management of a successful family firm at the inception of global crisis

In 2020, Tuomas Saikkonen took over a successful family business from his father, Eero Saikkonen, VILPE's founder. While Tuomas was involved in VILPE's business and held several positions in the firm before the chief executive officer's (CEO) appointment, the start of his tenure as a CEO was challenging, to say the least. Several months after Tuomas became the CEO, the global Covid-19 pandemic hit. This pandemic, among other disruptions, severely altered global supply chain exchanges and component processes, leaving long-term effects on the market. On the one hand, the demand for VILPE's products boomed during Covid-19. On the other hand, there was a shortage of engines and other parts, and the price of raw material increased rapidly. Moreover, the constraints in transporting materials and parts resulted in unfulfilled demand and, therefore, lost sales. The pandemics brought uncertainty, different rules, remote work, quarantine, constant change of plans, and new ways to do sales. The emerging crisis was threatening to ruin everything that was created over the years.

Before the Covid-19 pandemic started, VILPE was a strong family-owned Finnish manufacturing firm. VILPE traced its origins back to 1974, when founder Eero Saikkonen developed an innovative fastening solution that addressed practical challenges in roofing construction. This invention led to the establishment of the firm, which, over time, expanded from a single-product focus into a broader range of roofing and ventilation solutions, launching in-house production in the 1980s and introducing the VILPE brand, which gradually became its central identity (SK Tuotteen tarina, 1975-2015).

For the last 30 years, VILPE was a profitable international business. Already in 2015, VILPE had a sales organisation divided into four regional teams: Finland; the Nordic countries and Western Europe; Eastern Europe; and Russia, together with other countries in the region, and was working on transforming its international operations by shifting from managing sales from Finland to a more established presence abroad (SK Tuotteen tarina, 1975-2015). In the 2020s, VILPE managed subsidiaries in Russia, Ukraine, Poland, Sweden, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and developed joint operations with Renson in Belgium (SK Tuotteen tarina, 1975-2015; VILPE, n.d.). VILPE exported in the wholesale market around the entire Europe and was proud of its highest standards, recognised by quality ISO9001 and environment ISO14001 certifications (VILPE, n.d.). VILPE employed 130 people and was a successful medium-sized business that on average generated 21.9 million euros in turnover annually (VILPE, n.d.). Eero was very proud of what he had created over years of hard work and proudly handed over successful operations to his son, who immediately faced the hit of a global crisis.

3.1.2 Building technological excellence internationally and resilience through social sustainability

This was not the first time VILPE faced a significant crisis. Due to the recession in Finland during the early 1990s, VILPE faced significant setbacks but managed to rebuild its operations by focusing on innovative ventilation solutions, international expansion, and adoption of a debt-free growth strategy. Continuous investment in product development, patented innovations, and brand development has positioned the company as a leading European provider of roofing ventilation solutions, known for its commitment to quality, sustainability, and customer-driven innovation (SK Tuotteen tarina, 1975-2015). The Covid-19 global crisis revealed one additional strength that VILPE has developed over the years: its organisational culture, based on learning and problem-solving, as well as the firm's commitment to social sustainability that proved to be an invaluable asset.

VILPE has been committed to various aspects of social sustainability, such as community, learning, safety, diversity and inclusion, and long-term vision, before regulations or customer demands for sustainability were relevant or popular. VILPE sought to challenge established ways of working and focused on new solutions to enable safe living in healthy buildings. VILPE's appreciation for people inside and outside the organisation and collaboration (SK Totten tarina, 1975-2015) was felt in business management, not just corporate communication.

VILPE has focused on recruiting the best employees without limiting the definition of 'the best'. For VILPE, employee attitude mattered more than individual characteristics, such as nationality, language, or personal background. At VILPE's factory, employees spoke 11 languages: Persian, Afghan, Hungarian, Russian, Estonian, Filipino, Thai, Bulgarian, Nepalese, Finnish, and Swedish. Some employees initially did not have a shared language and learned to communicate together in the process of work. The management commitment to foster diversity and inclusion was the key to this:

"Many companies find excuses not to hire diverse employees, especially if some have no shared language, citing safety concerns in the manufacturing area. We believe that if such diverse and security-concerned organisations as NATO can find ways to communicate among different team members, we can do it, too. And we succeeded," – Tuomas Saikkonen, VILPE's CEO.

To ensure that VILPE recruits and retains the best employees and remains open to what 'the best' means, VILPE has adopted specific human resource management practices. First, when recruiting for manufacturing-related tasks, VILPE's team interviewed a large majority of applicants, selecting interviewees primarily through their motivation and interest in the company and in learning at work. Additionally, the candidates would be openly shown the nature of work and factory environment before being asked to accept

the job offer. This fostered openness and trust from the start, a learning-focused culture, continuous improvement, and opportunities for everyone committed to learning and working in the firm.

As a result, VILPE's workforce was very diverse, not just linguistically but also in terms of age, gender, culture, and abilities. VILPE's management was skilled at realising how different diversity dimensions translate into specific value capture at work, even if these diversity features in the job market were seen as disadvantages.

"We focus on discipline, learning at work, and problem-solving, not on complaints. Thus, we encourage employees from diverse backgrounds to focus on discipline and solving issues that arise. Some employees are especially valuable in this process. For example, employees of higher age, those who have life experience and respect the rules, are an excellent lever for those young and energetic, who often see rules as flexible" – Harri Heiskanen, the Head of Production at VILPE.

This way of working and seeing diversity as a strategic asset was not natural for everyone; it required managerial competency development. Over the years, VILPE's top management worked with middle managers and team leaders to ensure that diversity and inclusion would be considered a possibility to grow, access better employees, challenge the assumptions, and improve creativity, moving business forward towards uncharted territories.

VILPE was also deeply involved in local community work, driven by memories of the past recession in the 90s and how economic difficulties forced many families to withdraw children from sports activities. Since that recovery, VILPE has viewed social responsibility as self-evident and has made giving back a core part of its values, donating 0.3 per cent of its annual turnover, over €55,000 per year, to charitable causes, with a strong focus on equality. Non-monetary contributions, such as employee volunteering, further complemented its main donations and sponsorships (VILPE, n.d.). Therefore, commitment to community was at the core of VILPE's and its employees' ethos.

In 2022, this was even recognised at the national level when VILPE won the National Enterprise Award in Finland, with the selection jury emphasising VILPE's exemplary investment in product development, the company's values, courage, and community work (VILPE, 2022).

3.1.3 Award-winning enterprise hit by another international crisis

Soon after receiving the National Enterprise Award and overcoming the Covid-19 crisis, VILPE's team was hoping for a more peaceful year. However, Russia's invasion into

Ukraine in 2022 impacted VILPE's first (Russia) and fourth (Ukraine) biggest markets, leading to the closure of the Russian subsidiary and the immediate loss of at least 25% of overall sales.

Moreover, the war drove the price of many materials up. For example, by April 2022, plastic prices were up by 95% compared to the pre-war price level. As if this would not have been enough, in 2022 started the deepest and longest-lasting housing and construction market downturn in Finnish history since the recession of the early '90s, with the new housing volume dropping approx. 75% from the peak. Tuomas had to develop a quick strategic shift to ensure the company's continued success.

The need to find new international markets that would compensate for lost sales was vital. Once again, VILPE challenged their team's assumptions and decided to enter the uncharted territory. Considering the global focus on digital transformation and the newly developed smart building product solutions *VILPE Sense* that resonated with these trends, VILPE started working on a new pivot in its internationalisation strategy.

Matching the product with the new market required further development that the firm in crisis could not fully achieve by itself. Katarina Hellén, the Head of Research at VILPE, worked on enhancing VILPE's expertise through the institutional support available for companies from the European Union (EU) (European Union, n.d.). This led to the development of an EU co-funded project directed at ensuring that VILPE's smart building product solutions suit export markets (VILPE, 2024).

"For the first time in our 50-year history, we have unique smart technology that enables us to grow globally. VILPE Sense has already been launched in Europe, and now it's time for the next step," - Tuomas Saikkonen, VILPE CEO (VILPE, 2025).

In the beginning of 2026, VILPE opened a new market, the United States of America (USA), and their newly established subsidiary there (VILPE, 2025).

3.1.4 Preparing for a wide adoption of robotics in business when considering fears of employees

The market developments required further developments inside the firm. The next step was to widely utilise robotics in manufacturing, further boosting productivity and operational effectiveness, which was necessary to effectively serve new and existing markets. VILPE has adopted several robotics solutions for the parts of their production lines where tasks were highly repetitive, and recruiting for these roles was challenging. This approach effectively combined two goals: it ensured that employee and business perspectives were combined.

However, further steps in adopting robotics on the factory floor were not so straightforward and might have been perceived by employees as a threat to their position. As Tuomas, together with his team Harri and Katarina, was planning the wider digitalisation in manufacturing, they also started asking questions, such as: *How to adopt advanced technologies in a socially sustainable way without employees being threatened by this change? How to ensure that employee upskilling is successful, since advanced technologies may require more complex skills and not everyone speaks fluent local languages? Can we still ensure safety and security in the factory with diverse employees even after installing a wide range of robotics solutions?*

3.2 Questions for reflection

1. What were the key sources of VILPE's competitive advantage, and how did they enable the company to sustain long-term success?
2. How have VILPE's social sustainability practices contributed to its strategic business development locally and globally in both stable and turbulent periods?
3. Which socially sustainable recruitment and management practices enabled VILPE's international expansion and digitalisation?
4. How can VILPE leverage new technologies (i.e., robotics), its organisational setting, and external environment to align business and social sustainability goals during its latest stage of digital transformation focused on widely adopting robotics in manufacturing?

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The case is also based on the two-hour interview conducted with Harri Heiskanen and Katarina Hellén on 10 April, 2026, and several presentations delivered by the VILPE' CEO Tuomas Saikkonen during the events such as The EnergyWeek 2026, the Local Business Heroes event at the Vaasa Startup Factory, and others.

4 ENTTERI: DIVERSIFYING WORKFORCE FOR ENABLING FIRM'S INTERNATIONAL GROWTH

Tiphaine Delecour, University of Vaasa, Finland

Abstract

This teaching case examines how Entteri, a Finnish small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) operating in the dental software industry, explored workforce diversification as a strategy for internationalisation and growth after reaching market saturation in Finland. The case follows business director Topi Koskinen, who believed international recruitment could strengthen the company's capabilities and support expansion beyond domestic markets. To address gaps in marketing and international competencies, Entteri recruited Shruti, its first international employee ever. Her arrival initiated significant organisational change, including the transition from a Finnish-speaking to a dual-language work environment. While some employees welcomed the shift, others expressed concerns about language, uncertainty, and organisational identity. The case highlights the opportunities and challenges that SMEs face when pursuing internationalisation through diversity. It encourages discussion about the experiences SMEs are likely to encounter when they choose to implement an internationalisation strategy supported by employee diversity. This case relates to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth).

Keywords

diversity; internationalisation; small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs); strategy; organisational change.

Teaching notes

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4.1 The case study

4.1.1 Launching an internationalisation strategy started with a question

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs),³ due to their size and other constraints, often operated locally rather than internationally (European Commission, 2007). Entteri, founded in Finland in 1994, was no exception. The Finnish-speaking SME became a leader in the dental industry with its dental patient information system, widely used across Finland (Entteri, n.d). Topi Koskinen, Business Director, led since 2023 key strategic growth initiatives in this firm.

In 2023, the company management reviewed opportunities and decided to focus on finding international markets. The domestic market penetration was approaching its ceiling, so international growth appeared a natural option. With this objective at hand, Topi initiated the evaluation of Entteri's capabilities to identify gaps needed to operate internationally.

4.1.2 Can employee diversity enable internationalisation and drive growth?

Given foreseeable local market share saturation and the need to grow, it was the right moment for Entteri to transition and become international:

"If the organisation is planning to grow and reach the phase where they want to be international, my recommendation is to just start now." – Topi Koskinen, Business Director at Entteri.

Drawing on his consulting experience in a large firm, where hiring was routine, Topi identified links between international hires and company growth. However, he recognised that SMEs recruited less frequently and more cautiously. Although workforce diversity could support growth, SMEs faced challenges for expansion as foreign markets brought unfamiliarity and required more resources to learn and operate; meanwhile, limited resources (budget, time, people) and their small size provided constraints (Breuillot et al., 2024; European Commission, 2007).

Regardless, Topi believed workforce diversification could provide Entteri with urgently needed growth opportunities.

³ An SME is a firm that employs up to 250 people and have up to 50 million euros turnover or up to 43 million euros balance sheet totals (European Commission, 2026).

“As managers and influencers in the company, we should give a little push towards the angle of: “Be brave, hire the foreigner” because it serves the company to have more international capabilities” – Topi Koskinen, Business Director at Entteri.

Topi knew that to enable internationalisation, diversity needed to be leveraged as an organisational resource (Breuillot et al., 2024). And, for Topi, this meant that he needed to meet at least three points. First, the recruitment had to address strategic needs and a gap in the firm’s capabilities. Second, commitment from managers across the firm was essential to gain support for the change and acceptance of the first international teammate. Third, Topi emphasised the importance of understanding the process and challenges involved.

4.1.3 Addressing challenge n°1: Defining a job and finding a suitable employee

Topi identified the need for Entteri to strengthen its international marketing capabilities. With the gap recognised, he built a job profile that was supposed to guide the recruitment. Additionally, Topi realised that this was the first international hire in the firm, and emphasis on the company’s internationalisation needs alone would have been insufficient. Thus, he thought about what individual competencies and social profiles would further support organisational change. When the competency map for the position was ready, Topi remembered serving as a mentor for an international student, Shruti, who fitted the profile needed.

Originally from India, Shruti spoke English and had moved to Finland in 2021. She had 9 years of work experience, including being the founder of her company in India, and freelancing for a Finnish start-up. She had also lived in Italy prior to Finland; she was outgoing, sociable, and comfortable initiating conversations.

4.1.4 Addressing challenges n°2 and 3: Managing internal challenges

Shruti joined in June 2024. That summer the company shifted from Finnish-speaking to a dual-language organisation. While some employees welcomed the necessary change in the software industry increasingly shaped by English, others raised concerns.

“Some employees mentioned the global world and the spread of English in the industry. Others had personal worries and hesitation of speaking English. A few had political stances against an international employee, as many Finns are unemployed. They also questioned the need to change 60 people’s working language for one” – Topi Koskinen, Business Director at Entteri.

Topi expected these reactions and viewed them as part of the process. He responded through open communication and practical support. Staff were surveyed about their concerns and encouraged to use local language in informal settings. The company offered Finnish and English language courses to support the transition, and Shruti's willingness to learn Finnish was strongly emphasised as she initiated daily practices for language transition:

"I had this idea to learn together; I placed a whiteboard near my desk and whoever wanted to teach me new Finnish words could come write on it and talk to me. It went from useful to hilarious words. It helped to learn and connect with colleagues and discuss in both English and Finnish" – Shruti Dharwadkar, Entteri's first international employee.

Shruti's social skills played a key role in easing tensions. As Topi expected, she led the change, initiated social activities, presented her background as an advantage, and expressed interest in learning Finnish language and culture from colleagues. Her profile was invaluable in supporting the transition and shaped how Topi and other managers in the firm viewed future international recruitments.

4.1.5 The internationalisation strategy is not one-size-fits-all

After hiring and integrating the first international employee so successfully, Topi was now onto solving another dilemma: *How can the international growth of Entteri be supported further? Is one foreign employee enough to upskill and develop the needed internationalisation and language competencies?*

Initiating an internationalisation strategy was not new for Topi. From his previous experience in the consulting business, he learned that every international hire facilitates international expansion, but he knew that Entteri was the other type of business. For Entteri, where business relied on technical expertise in addition to knowledge work, a scaling strategy of hiring more international staff was not necessarily as suitable as in a consulting business or at least required adaptation. Topi reflected, *'What are the next most meaningful steps in developing Entteri's internal capabilities to support the successful internationalisation of the firm?'*

4.2 Questions for reflection

1. How did Topi's experience in the consulting industry help him realise emerging business opportunities and implement them successfully?
2. What was Topi's reasoning for hiring a new international recruit in Entteri for the first time in 30 years?
3. Why was Topi convinced that changing the working language of 60 people for 1 was worth it?
4. Evaluate how Topi successfully implemented the internationalisation strategy identified for Entteri: how did the human resources development, communication, managerial actions, and organisational change contribute to the success of starting internationalisation?
5. The case ends with a new dilemma: *how can the international growth of Entteri be supported further?* Take the role of the business director of Entteri and think about how to develop and plan the next steps of the internationalisation strategy, carefully analysing what it could require.

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The case is also based on several interviews conducted with Topi Koskinen, Business Director at Entteri, and Shruti Dharwadkar, Entteri's first international employee.

5 ADDSEARCH: ACCESSIBILITY AND INCLUSION BEYOND TECHNICAL COMPLIANCE

Tiphaine Delecour, University of Vaasa, Finland

Abstract

Helena Rebane, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of AddSearch, was reviewing feedback from the testing of their search solution developed for her newly acquired customer, a telecommunication company selling mobile subscriptions in Finland. Although the developed technology functioned correctly and complied with recognised accessibility standards, one tester, 60-year-old Joseph, struggled to retrieve the information he needed. Determined to understand and tackle the source of the problem, Helena investigates the implementation process, the accessibility and inclusion requirements that guided the development and internal testing process, and the circumstances around Joseph's frustrating experience. This case offers insights into the interconnectedness of technological and social factors, highlighting the importance for digital product developers to move beyond pure technical compliance and reflect on the end-users' real understanding formed by aspects of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Keywords

accessibility; small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs); Socio-Technical System; search solution; digital products; implementation; Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI).

Teaching notes

Teaching notes can be accessed online by educators using this web link:

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22255495>

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Helena Rebane, the CEO of AddSearch, and other professionals in AddSearch for their excellent and extensive collaboration in developing this case.

5.1 The case study

5.1.1 The call that changed the meaning of “accessibility” and “inclusion”

In an increasingly digitalised world, a company’s success often depended on one simple ability: helping customers find the information they needed, when they needed it. Helena Rebane, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of AddSearch, strived exactly for that. AddSearch, a Finnish business-to-business small software company specialised in advanced content and product search solutions, worked with 1,800 global business customers, helping them improve their users’ digital experiences (AddSearch, n.d.). Under Helena’s professional leadership, the firm built a reputation for creating technological products that were both innovative, accessible, and inclusive.

Despite AddSearch’s strong reputation for inclusion, one feedback conversation prompted Helena to reconsider what accessibility and inclusion meant in practice. Their newest customer, a telecommunication company selling mobile subscriptions in Finland, tested the search solution that AddSearch developed for them and raised a problem. Their information technology (IT) manager explained:

“Joesph, one of our older testers, struggled to find information he needed. According to him, the search returned results, but too many and disorganised. As a result, his experience suffered.” – Johan Karri⁴, the telecommunication company’s IT manager, who contracted AddSearch to build a search solution within their website.

5.1.2 Understanding digital products beyond the technology

Helena knew the importance of meeting accessibility standards, and AddSearch’s digital products always considered accessibility guidelines. The internationally recognised Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) created by the World Wide Web Consortium pushed for an accessible digital world (Gudhka, 2024). The Web Accessibility Directive (WAD) and the European Accessibility Act (EAA) mandated compliance in the European Union (EU) further to avoid excluding part of the population (European Commission, 2026a; 2026b). There were four key principles of accessibility (POUR) that AddSearch strived to address: 1) *Perceivability*: users should be able to access information through different senses; 2) *Operability*: users should be able to navigate and use controls; 3) *Understandability*: users’ information and functionality should be clear and predictable; 4) *Robustness*: content should be compatible with diverse users and assistive technologies (Directives (EU) 2019/882, 2019). The EU WAD required also an accessibility statement,

⁴ The names of the customer and the tester are anonymized, and some conversations are altered for securing confidentiality and enhancing learning process.

a feedback mechanism for users to report problems and request information, and regular monitoring (Directive (EU) 2016/2106, 2016).

Moreover, for Helena, the final product of AddSearch was never just the information retrieval software. It was a foundation for the user's web browsing experience. AddSearch team understood that every implementation was different, as clients utilised different web structures, tools, designs, and organised content differently. Developers designed algorithms and interfaces around clients' needs, but once the search tool was implemented on their customers' websites, the real discovery of end customers' needs began. It was impossible to anticipate every aspect even with conversations between AddSearch and their customers. Every implementation raised challenges, as end customers, for whose browsing experience the search solution was being developed, were as unique as the businesses who contracted AddSearch.

Different devices, languages, browsing habits, and needs meant that inclusion and accessibility depended not only on the technology or global standards but also on how the end user, AddSearch customer's customer, interacted with it. These factors interacted directly with the technology and ultimately shaped how the user experienced AddSearch products.

5.1.3 Challenging assumptions after the software failed a user

After testing a product developed for the new client, an issue was raised. But not from a system crash, a broken code, or a failed accessibility audit. On the screen, Helena saw that the comprehensive search software had worked exactly as intended by her team and complied with WCAG technical accessibility standards.

"Can you tell me more about this tester's profile?" – Helena Rebane, CEO of AddSearch.

"Joseph is 60 years old. He is not new to computers and can navigate web content easily. He attempted to retrieve invoicing information from his computer. Joseph said that the experience was confusing, the website presented too many options simultaneously, and he could not find the information." – Johan Karri, IT manager, customer of AddSearch.

"And did the search engine work and return results as you expected?" – Helena.

"Yes, Joseph wrote a prompt in the search bar, and results appeared. But, according to him, too many. He activated Reader Mode to get a simpler text-based page, utilized Screen Reader too but it read content unclearly. He also tried to adjust text size, but it was still too confusing for him." – Johan.

Helena knew the technology, technically, functioned correctly. Her team of seventeen people working across Europe, Africa, Asia and Australia tested the software and ensured the product maintained both quality and accessibility standards. Yet, Joseph struggled with the results the search software provided.

5.1.4 The importance of internal diversity for developing digital products

Helena understood the consequences such experiences brought. Internally, the situation raised difficult questions.

“We tested everything, reviewed the requirements: keyboard navigation, screen-reader compatibility, text-scaling features, contrast settings, and content clarity. Everything appeared to meet the standards. Our team encountered no issues.” Helena Rebane, CEO of AddSearch.

As Helena reflected on the results, a detail stood out: AddSearch’s average employee age was 35, while Joseph was 60. Although the team had thoroughly tested the technology technically and from the perspective of users of their age, they lacked first-hand experience of the needs and challenges faced by older users. The issue was not a lack of technical expertise but a social profile gap between those designing and those using the solution.

While Helena knew that the AddSearch product was never just about the technology and that their success depended on the interaction between people, technologies, and their environments rather than isolated components (Abbas & Micheal, 2026), she discovered a new aspect in this interaction to consider. The tool satisfied accessibility standards and was inclusive for some users but was still difficult to use under certain circumstances. The challenge was not whether the technology worked as intended or whether accessibility was considered, but how accessibility and inclusion were considered by the technology developers and how much internal diversity the team had to represent a diverse customer base.

5.1.5 Strategizing for inclusive and accessible digital experiences

For Helena, the feedback became more than an accessibility and inclusion issue; it became a learning opportunity. She reflected on the 2024 “International Employer of the Year” award in the small- and medium-sized enterprises category that AddSearch received. The company demonstrated its commitment to diversity and inclusion by employing people from 17 countries, but Joseph’s experience presented new opportunities.

Helena began to consider: *How could diversity be further developed in AddSearch to have a better representation of a diverse customer base? How could the company's workforce play a greater role in shaping the products and services offered? How could AddSearch translate its internal diversity into better digital experiences for all?*

5.2 Questions for reflection

1. What is accessibility, and how is it relevant in digital products? What guides accessibility integration in digital products? What is the relationship between accessibility and inclusion in the context of digital products? Please refer to this case but also personal research when answering the question.
2. The case suggests that Joseph's experience resulted from interconnected elements. Which interconnected factors contributed to outcomes of using AddSearch's digital product, and how did they influence one another?
3. Could AddSearch have identified and tackled the problems encountered by Joseph before releasing the technology for testing?
4. What actions taken by AddSearch demonstrate their ongoing care to meet customers' accessibility and inclusion needs? What actions should AddSearch take further to ensure that they can serve their customers even better, considering their diversity?

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The case is also based on interviews and company presentations by Helena Rebane, CEO of AddSearch, at the DEI4SME Hackathon I (Finland & Online).

6 AMPLON: WHEN STRATEGIC PERFORMANCE TURNS INVISIBLE

Aušrinė Šilenskytė, University of Vaasa, Finland

Kimmo Kallioniemi, Amplon.io

Abstract

Kimmo Kallioniemi founded Amplon.io after years of working in senior leadership positions in multinational corporations to solve a challenge that managers repeatedly encounter: how to follow strategy execution in real time and align strategy implementation across organisational units, management levels, and national borders. During the first year of his start-up, Kimmo successfully onboarded several customers and was confident that Amplon.io provided an intuitive and effective solution to the identified problem. But his assumptions got challenged when a highly skilled chief executive officer (CEO) of one of his largest customers struggled to complete basic onboarding tasks and interpret the platform's strategic performance dashboards. As Kimmo investigated the problem, he discovered that every twelve men (8%) are colour-blind and therefore unable to distinguish many of the visual signals on which most strategic and operational management digital platforms, including Amplon's reporting system, rely. Kimmo needs to set a plan for improving the digital tool so that strategic decisions and actions become visible for everyone. This case helps learners explore the implications of accessibility for digital product design, evaluate the risks of relying on colour-coded information, and assess how inclusive design can improve both user experience and strategy execution.

Keywords

strategy implementation, digital transformation, digital accessibility, colour blindness, colour vision deficiency, user experience, dashboards, strategic management, inclusive design, software development

Teaching notes

Teaching notes can be accessed online by educators using this web link:

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22256250>

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6.1 The case study

6.1.1 A digital tool for transforming strategy implementation across borders

After years of working as a vice president in several large multinational corporations, Kimmo Kallioniemi became increasingly frustrated by persistent management challenges, such as ensuring that data on strategy execution was accurate and available in real time across all divisions of the firm, as well as ensuring that the strategy was understood and implemented consistently across countries, business units, and organisational levels. While spreadsheets and digital presentations were visual and useful (Azad & Zablith, 2021), having them constantly updated and aligned across divisions, languages, and timeframes was time-consuming and distracting to strategic foresight.

To address this problem, he founded Amplon.io, a software company dedicated to helping organisations align strategy formulation, execution, and monitoring (Šilenskytė, Carneiro, Kohtamäki, 2025). By early 2020, Amplon.io was a small company and had a functioning digital platform. Kimmo, now the company's chief executive officer (CEO), was onboarding his first corporate customers. Amplon.io was designed to be intuitive and simple to use. Early customers praised its simple interface (see Figure 6.1. below) and smooth onboarding process, giving Kimmo confidence that the platform was ready for broader adoption.

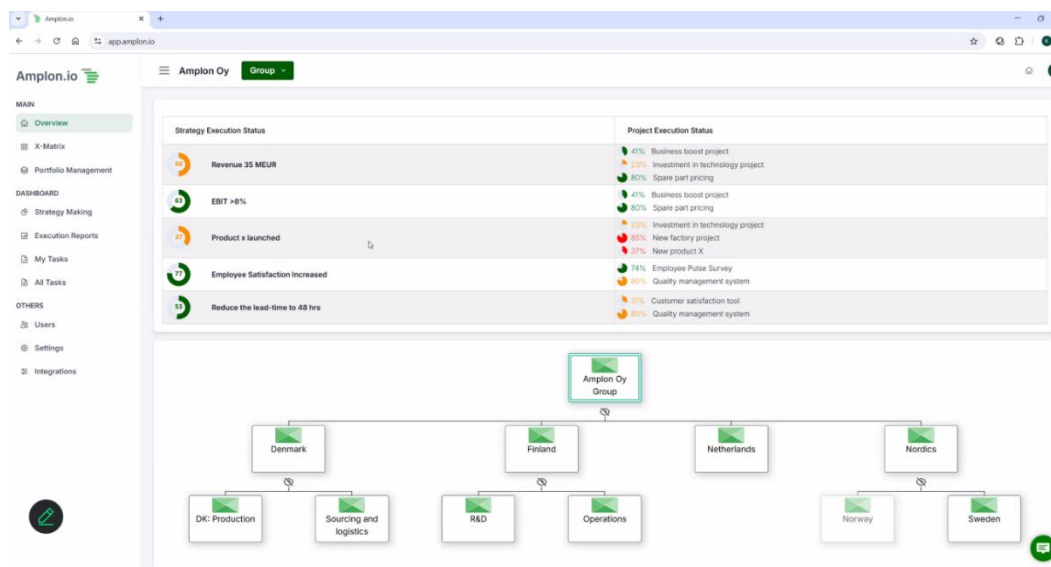


Figure 6.1. Digital view of the starting page with the strategic organisation in Amplon.io.

On December 4, 2020, Kimmo was onboarding his largest customer to date. During the session, he met with the company's CEO, Tommi Manninen⁵, who was eager to start using the platform.

As Tommi logged in, Kimmo guided him through the main features.

"Once you have finalised the strategy matrix and added the strategic objectives, you can save it by pressing the green button." – Kimmo, CEO of Amplon.io.

To facilitate the user experience, Kimmo had designed the page so that only one green button existed on the X-Matrix⁶ where strategic goals were being edited. It was clearly visible to Kimmo, yet Tommi appeared confused and did not proceed. Kimmo repeated the instructions several times and explained the process in different ways, but nothing seemed to help. Finally, somewhat uncomfortably, Tommi interrupted:

"Kimmo, I can't see the green button you're referring to."

6.1.2 Navigating a dashboard where traffic lights drive strategy execution

The onboarding difficulties continued, and Kimmo soon realised that the green button was only a small part of a much larger issue. Like many strategic management systems, Amplon.io has used a traffic-light logic inspired by Hoshin Kanri⁷ and other renowned performance-management practices. Strategic objectives were displayed using colour-coded indicators: **Green** indicated objectives progressing as planned; **Yellow** signalled areas requiring attention; and **Red** highlighted critical issues or underperforming initiatives.

The platform's dashboards allowed managers to trace objectives across departments and organisational levels, providing a real-time view of the strategy execution in their firm.

⁵ The name has been changed and some facts about the customer and this situation have been slightly altered to protect confidentiality, but the essence of this real situation with the anonymized customer remains the same.

⁶ The X-Matrix is a core Hoshin Kanri tool that visually links long-term strategic objectives, annual goals, improvement initiatives, performance measures, and responsible managers on a single page to ensure alignment between strategy and execution throughout the organization (Amplon.io, 2024). Amplon.io was designed to provide a digital interactive version of this matrix which allows making strategy, aligning actions and following them real time from anywhere in the world as the changes were made (Šilenskytė et al., 2025).

⁷ Hoshin Kanri is a strategic management system that aligns long-term objectives, annual goals, projects, and performance measures across all organizational levels through the X-Matrix and a structured Plan-Do-Check-Act review process, ensuring that strategy is continuously executed, monitored, and adapted (Amplon.io, 2025; Jackson, 2006)

Kimmo considered these real-time functioning dashboards (see Figures 6.2 and 6.3 below) one of Amplon's strongest features.

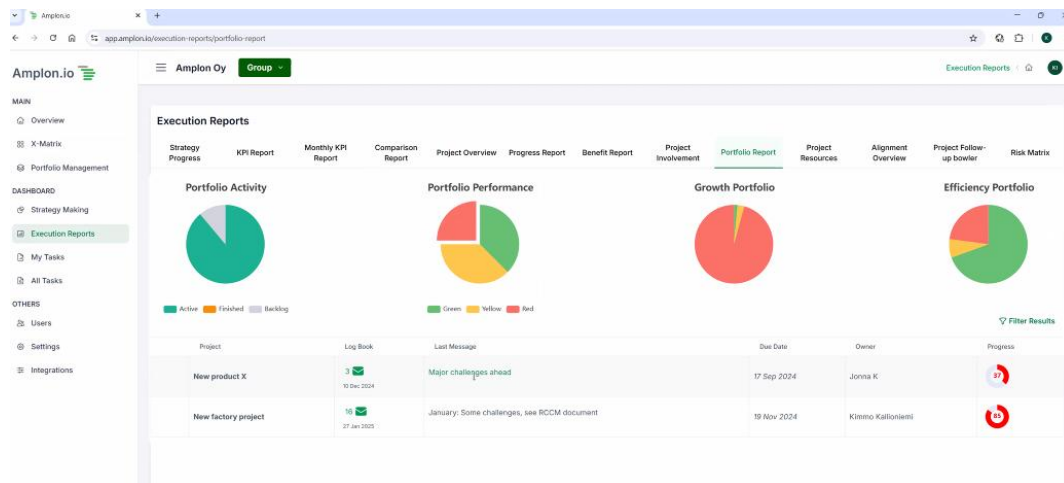


Figure 6.2. Reports and data analytics on strategic project portfolio produced by Amplon.io in real time.

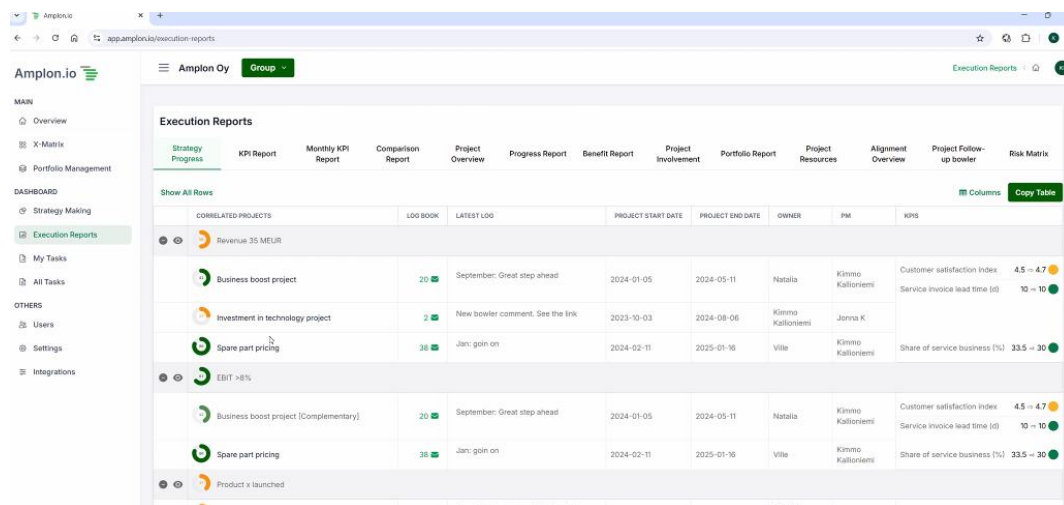


Figure 6.3. Reports and data analytics on strategy progress produced by Amplon.io in real time.

As Kimmo demonstrated the reporting functions, he invited Tommi to enter progress on strategic projects as well as key performance indicators and review the automatically generated status reports. Almost immediately after entering data, Tommi became disoriented, and multiple explanations were not helping. He struggled to distinguish between statuses and appeared uncertain about how to interpret the dashboard.

Kimmo knew that this could not be explained by a lack of managerial competence. Tommi was a highly respected executive who had successfully led his organisation for years using traditional strategy tools such as spreadsheets and presentations. In Tommi's case, Amplon.io was intended to enhance managerial effectiveness, not compensate for missing skills. Trying to understand the issue, Kimmo asked:

"Which part of the dashboard is causing difficulties?"

Tommi replied:

"Is there a way to change the colours or use a different type of visual coding?"

At that moment, Amplon.io offered no such option.

Tommi suggested postponing the onboarding process for a few days while he would reflect on whether to proceed further with Amplon.io adoption in his organisation.

6.1.3 Lost in colours: Rethinking strategy visibility in digital dashboards

After the meeting, Kimmo was puzzled. Every previous customer, even those less skilled than Tommi, had completed onboarding smoothly, yet one of his most important and skilled customers had been unable to use core functions of the system. Kimmo was concerned about the possibility to lose this customer. The experience challenged his assumption that Amplon.io was intuitive for everyone. Reflecting on the conversation, he recalled two key observations: Tommi could not identify the green 'save' button, and he had asked for alternative colour coding in the dashboards.

Kimmo began researching the issue. To his surprise, he discovered that colour vision deficiency, commonly known as 'colour blindness', affected approximately one in twelve, i.e., 8 per cent, of men. The most common form of colour blindness made distinguishing between red and green particularly difficult (General Services Administration, 2026).

As he continued reading, Kimmo realised that many digital products faced similar challenges. Dashboards, performance indicators, reporting systems, project-management tools, and analytics platforms often relied heavily on colour to communicate meaning. But, in such a case, for users with colour vision deficiencies, important information became difficult or impossible to interpret (General Services Administration, 2026; w3.org, 2025). He also discovered that inclusive digital product design that addressed vision deficiencies was not only an act of goodwill but also a highly regulated area guided by multiple legal acts in Europe, the USA, and other countries, typically mandatory for all business-to-customer digital solutions (Chugaievska, 2025).

The realisation was unsettling for an early entrepreneur in a digital business. Amplon.io was designed to make strategy visible throughout the organisation. Yet for many users, critical parts of that strategy were effectively invisible. Kimmo sat back and considered the implications:

"If managers cannot clearly see the signals that guide strategy execution, can they truly manage performance effectively? And how should Amplon.io be redesigned so that strategy becomes visible to everyone?"

The question marked the beginning of Amplon's journey toward designing a more accessible and inclusive strategy management platform while simultaneously strengthening its competitive advantage.

6.2 Questions for reflection

1. What accessibility challenges are illustrated in the case? Using the case materials and additional sources, explain the concepts of accessibility and colour blindness, and discuss their implications for the inclusive design of digital products.
2. Drawing on the case and your own examples, how might colour blindness influence managerial decision-making, performance monitoring, and strategy execution in both small and large organisations?
3. Review the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), the European Accessibility Act (EAA), and Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act accessibility requirements in the United States. What obligations, recommendations, and best practices do these frameworks establish for digital product developers, and which are most relevant to a small and growing international software company such as Amplon.io?
4. If you were Kimmo, what changes would you prioritise in Amplon's interface, dashboards, and reporting features to ensure that strategic information remains accessible and actionable for all users, including those with colour vision deficiencies? How would these developments affect Amplon's social sustainability engagement and competitive advantage?

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Part II: Managing Diversity in Service-Oriented SMEs

7 VAASAN KORTTELIHUOLTO: WHEN QUALITY OF WORK, AND NOT THE COLOUR, MATTERS

Aušrinė Šilenskytė, University of Vaasa, Finland

Abstract

Benjamin Slotte was leading a successful family business, Vaasan Korttelihuolto, that offered services in property maintenance and cleaning. In addition to business success, Vaasan Korttelihuolto was championing their inclusive company culture that united committed employees of diverse races, cultures, linguistic backgrounds, ages, gender identifications, and nationalities. Benjamin was reviewing his company's performance and recognised a worrying trend: with the arrival of diverse employees, turnover rates and sick leaves have reduced, and overall customer satisfaction has improved, but complaints from some specific customers about the firm's service quality have increased. After careful personal investigation, Benjamin found that some customers complained about the service provided by people of colour who worked in the firm, even if their work met or exceeded the standards. Benjamin faced the challenge of how to address expressions of racism coming from some of the company's customers. The case presents a managerial dilemma that involves conflicts of value, stakeholder legitimacy, and organisational justice. It also raises awareness of the high levels of discrimination that people of colour still face in Europe and other continents.

Keywords

company culture; customer satisfaction; diversity; inclusion; racism; value conflict; discrimination; organisational justice; family business; stakeholder legitimacy.

Teaching notes

Teaching notes can be accessed online by educators using this web link:

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22259953>

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Benjamin Slotte, the CEO of Vaasan Korttelihuolto, for an excellent and extensive collaboration in developing this case and Tiphaine Delecour for a friendly review of this case.

7.1 The case study

7.1.1 When a firm's hard-working team met racism in society

Vaasan Korttelihuolto Oy was a Vaasa-based property maintenance company that provided caretaking, cleaning, outdoor maintenance, and emergency services for residential and commercial properties. As a locally owned firm, it served over 100 properties in the Vaasa region.

Benjamin Slotte, a chief executive officer (CEO) and co-owner of the firm, was reading through the latest customer satisfaction survey, enjoying the feedback received:

"In my opinion, you do your work well and on time. Timely repair and refurbishment are the most important things." (Translated from Finnish; Vaasan Korttelihuolto (n.d.))

"The best property maintenance we've had in the building since I moved here about 35 years ago. Keep up the good work. A big plus for being bilingual, too. THANK YOU!" (Translated from Swedish⁸; Vaasan Korttelihuolto (n.d.))

He was very proud that their hard work was paying off. The company received the highest overall customer satisfaction ratings, measuring their work results as well as service-mindedness and communication (Vaasan Korttelihuolto, n.d.).

As he moved through the report, he spotted several complaints, too:

"The worker did not complete the work in my yard as I expected. He was lazy and took so long to do the work."

"The worker you sent does not realise Finnish standards! Next time, please send someone who can do the work as per the standard of this country⁹."

Benjamin paused. He personally trained and revised the skills of all employees in the firm and was aware of their capabilities to complete the work. He also regularly reviewed how many tasks each employee completed per day and estimated what time was needed to complete the assignments. He was sure that his team was efficient, hard-working, and knew the standards they had to meet. Thus, Benjamin did not immediately respond to these concerns. Instead, he decided to pay even closer attention to how his team worked.

⁸ Finland had two national languages: Finnish (the language of majority) and Swedish (the language of minority) (Info Finland, 2025).

⁹ Comments that represent several customer feedback entries received in local languages

Several weeks later, they got an email from a customer with very similar concerns as Benjamin spotted in the customer satisfaction survey. Since the customer's complaint was not anonymous and the task being questioned just completed, Benjamin jumped in the car and visited the location to validate or contest the feedback. When Benjamin arrived, he thoroughly checked everything and concluded that the employee, whose work was questioned, completed the task as expected and with the utmost care. Benjamin himself would have delivered the same results. Benjamin asked the customer what specifically was wrong. The answer was unpleasant:

"Please do not send these black guys to work in my yard; they don't know how to do the job!"¹⁰

Benjamin thanked the customer for the feedback and went back to the office feeling both uncomfortable and concerned about the situation. He thought, *"How should I respond to a customer who so disrespectfully referred to my skilled and hard-working employee? Should I respond to this customer's demand and assign a differently looking employee, even if I know that the work of all my employees, regardless of their colour, is done well? If I send a person of colour again, will I lose this customer? What should I do when every customer is so important for our small business?"*

7.1.2 Vaasan Korttelihuolto: A business where diverse employees find a family

Vaasan Korttelihuolto was a family-owned company that emphasised customer service, rapid response, and year-round property upkeep through a workforce of approximately 21-30 employees. In 2026, the firm employed people who originated from Finland, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Latvia, Italy, Bangladesh, the United Kingdom, Russia, Pakistan, and Iraq and who were of diverse ages, gender identifications, and linguistic backgrounds (Slotte, 2026).

The firm approached workforce diversity through a principle of value-based realism, recognising that the company used Finnish values as foundational but built an international team with the required deliberate organisational adaptation rather than expecting integration to occur naturally. Benjamin emphasised that the organisational culture must actively support and embrace employees from diverse backgrounds. While acknowledging that not every initiative would work perfectly, the company adopted a continuous improvement mindset, striving to learn from challenges and progressively create a more inclusive and effective work environment. The goal was not immediate perfection but a sustained commitment to developing practices that enable all employees to succeed (Slotte, 2026).

¹⁰ Comment that represents several customer feedback entries received in local languages

To translate these principles into practice, the company invested in infrastructure designed to facilitate the recruitment, integration, and day-to-day work of international employees. For example, Vaasan Korttelihuolto issued work ads with slogans in multiple languages and implemented a work management system available in Finnish, Swedish, and English. In addition, all staff letters, work instructions, organisational documents, and company-wide communications were systematically provided in all three languages. These practices reduced language barriers, increased access to information, and ensured that international employees could participate fully in organisational processes, thereby reinforcing the company's commitment to inclusion and equal treatment (Slotte, 2026).

To manage multilingualism and the costs involved, Benjamin utilised artificial intelligence tools that allowed for fast, low-cost translations. Benjamin asked employees and learned about various cultural holidays, such as Ramadan, to understand how holidays and workload planning were to be adjusted. He was open to considering physical office developments, such as installing bidet showers, seemingly small but in practice a vital detail for employees to feel comfortable at work (Slotte, 2026).

Benjamin took the initiative to organise many social events where his team could meet informally, interact, and better understand each other. He built these events around the work done, celebrating the hard work of the staff. As a result, in Vaasan Korttelihuolto, employees had the “End of the Winter” party, where they acknowledged all the hard work completed during the fierce Finnish winter and enjoyed the moment when snow-cleaning work was over. The summer harvest was celebrated in autumn’s “Burger Fest” and alike (Slotte, 2026):

“Social events connect people. In them, you can observe wonderful developments of interconnectedness; for instance, you may find Joakim from Finland talking with Tho about Vietnamese rap. And magic happens. This is why we are now working to rearrange our garage (office) to the venue where social interactions could naturally happen daily. For example, we are building longer tables instead of building higher walls.” (Slotte, 2026).

As a result of their inclusive culture, where diverse employees felt at home, Vaasan Korttelihuolto never faced the shortage of skilled employees. Moreover, Benjamin started to realise many other benefits that he had not initially envisioned:

“Balancing workload and holiday time became easier. Now we can make holiday plans based on different cultural holidays; we do not have a situation where all employees want to go on holidays in July, as it is common in Finland. We also noticed the reduction in sick leave days, especially the “Friday sicknesses”, when employees would take Fridays off pretending to be sick. Many foreigners or people of colour are very

committed workers because they appreciate the opportunity to work or want to break stereotypes, so they often work harder than the average employee.” (Slotte, 2026).

7.1.3 Meeting customer demands without compromising human dignity and company values

Back in the office, Benjamin continued reflecting on the customer’s complaint and the next steps. He could not understand how, in the happiest country in the world for many consecutive years, racism like this could continue to exist (Moore, 2021). Browsing online, he realised that this problem was not unique to Finland. Many Nordic countries reported very high rates of racism, too (Kataja, 2020). Sadly, similar trends were visible year after year and penetrated across all of Europe. Benjamin found that in the EU, “56% of people who identified as part of a minority group based on their ethnicity or skin colour, disability status, religion, sexual orientation or gender identity stated that they had experienced discrimination in the preceding year – up from 46% in 2019.” (OECD, 2024, p. 10 & p. 4). While no patterns of discrimination were directed at the same group of people across all of the work domains (Kiverä, Šilenskytė, Delecour, 2026), the trends concerning ethnic- or skin colour-based discrimination often persisted across countries (OECD, 2024).

Benjamin asked himself, *“Can I address this problem without breaking our company’s values for inclusion or the dignity of my valued employee? Is this problem wider than we, as a small business, can address?”*

7.2 Questions for reflection

1. How did Vaasan Korttelihuolto, as a small business, work to ensure an inclusive work environment for diverse employees?
2. What expected and unexpected benefits from their work on diversity, equity, and inclusion did the company observe? What were the challenges that the company faced due to their inclusive approach to hiring diverse people?
3. How should Benjamin address the emerging problem with this and other similar customers? Can this problem be addressed by a manager of a small business? When answering this question, please consider the societal environment, features of small businesses, perspectives of various stakeholders, and the issues concerning justice, among others.

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8 SPORTZENTRUM WUNERSDORF: BUILDING INCLUSIVITY AND SERVICE EXCELLENCE

Anna-Carina Mohrholz, IHK-Projektgesellschaft mbH, Germany

Abstract

Sportzentrum Wunersdorf, a small fitness company in Brandenburg, Germany, took a brave step and hired its first migrant employee, aiming to fight discrimination, promote social inclusion, and contribute to labour-market integration. As a micro-SME with a customer-centred service model, it quickly became clear that the employee's limited skills in the German language affected daily communication with colleagues and customers. This created tensions around service quality, customer confidence, and team coordination. The case shows how language barriers, intercultural cooperation, and the absence of diversity management structures and practices may challenge small businesses' operations and how to plan actions related to diversity and inclusion to avoid such drawbacks.

Keywords

migrant integration; diversity and inclusion; language barriers; customer service; workplace integration; social inclusion

Teaching notes

Teaching notes can be accessed online by educators using this web link:

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22259854>

8.1 The case study

8.1.1 When work for inclusion met customer and coworker pushback

The EU's anti-racism and migration policies stressed equal opportunities, non-discrimination, and labour-market integration (EU Commission, 2025). Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) were central in putting these goals into practice because they constituted the largest employer group across Europe (European Commission's Annual Report on European SMEs 2025/2026), thereby offering jobs, skills development, and local services to a diverse population. As mandated by EU policies, Sportzentrum Wunersdorf (further Sportzentrum), a small fitness company in Brandenburg, Germany, was also working towards diversity and inclusion but faced a challenge.

Sportzentrum was a family-orientated gym offering fitness courses, equipment training, wellness activities, and a sauna. It employed fewer than ten staff members and served a regional customer base. Owner Martin Ramer and his business partner hired the gym's first migrant employee, Muhammad¹¹. Muhammad was a motivated and skilled fitness coach, but he had limited German language skills.

Martin, while appreciating Muhammad's professionalism, soon noticed that some customers became uncertain about the gym's service, and coworkers started to raise concerns about the fluency of collaboration at work. Martin thought: *How can I create an inclusive work environment without compromising the team spirit, image, and quality of service at the gym?*

8.1.2 Sportzentrum: A gym with a personal touch to the customer service

Sportzentrum positioned itself as a local provider of fitness, nutrition, and wellness services. Its offerings included group classes, individual training, and leisure activities. Digital and hybrid formats, personalised training, wearable technology, and a growing demand for community-based services increasingly shaped the fitness sector and the operations of Sportzentrum.

Thus, the gym relied heavily on direct contact with customers on-site or online and on interaction-based service quality. With no international operations, the gym focused entirely on the local market. Nevertheless, over the past months, Sportzentrum expanded

¹¹ The name of the firm and all people mentioned in the case are fictional to retain confidentiality, but the situation presented in this case is real and based on the actual facts gathered from the firm during the DEI4SME Hackathon II (Lithuania & Online) and subsequent conversations.

its services and attracted a more diverse customer base. Management strengthened the front desk and service team. The logical progression appeared to be a greater diversification of the gym's staff.

8.1.3 Challenging path towards diversity and inclusion in a small, local firm

Muhammad, as the first migrant employee who joined the gym's team, was motivated and capable, but his limited German skills soon after the start began creating communication challenges with the gym's team and with customers.

In Sportzentrum, as a micro-SME, each employee had multiple responsibilities, and integration difficulties had immediate practical effects. Inside the gym's team, the lack of formal diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) structures became visible. Employees raised questions about language support, intercultural cooperation, and available resources. The integration process also affected employee satisfaction and retention. Staff remained committed to excellent service, but informal translation tasks, extra coordination, and customer complaints increased pressure in the daily work of coworkers who were fluent in German.

Customer reactions were mixed. Some gym members welcomed the more international atmosphere, while others felt unsure when communication was slow or unclear, especially in relation to contracts, membership changes, or safety information. Sensing emerging concerns, Martin started to monitor customer feedback more closely and set a medium-term goal of increasing customer satisfaction by 15–20%.

While Mohammad's arrival caused extra challenges, Martin remained thoughtful and appreciated both risks and opportunities that employment of a migrant brought to the firm. With this act, as a micro-SME, Sportzentrum contributed to local employment and service provision, and, in particular, the gym had the potential to reach more diverse customer groups. However, this potential remained limited as long as language barriers and service concerns dominated internal discussions.

8.1.4 The decision point

After several months of efforts, Sportzentrum stood at a clear decision point. Martin had gathered initial information on language barriers, customer reactions, and internal inclusion practices and had defined targets for language improvement, customer satisfaction, retention, and training. Recognising small businesses' vulnerability to staff turnover, Sportzentrum identified a need to reduce turnover by 10–15% over the coming year through better inclusivity, clearer support roles, and professional development

opportunities. Moreover, Sportzentrum set a target to improve Mohammad's language proficiency by 20–30% within six months through structured training. Management also considered introducing regular diversity and cultural sensitivity training for all staff. Although the path ahead was clear, all the necessary actions required time and other investments.

Improvements could not be achieved in one day; however, feedback from customers and employees showed both the potential of inclusive hiring and the risks linked to communication, service quality, and day-to-day stability.

Martin and his business partner now had to decide how far Sportzentrum should invest in language training; DEI measures; and customer communication. The key questions were which path to choose, how closely a micro-SME should align with emerging inclusion practices, and what balance between short-term costs and long-term impact seemed acceptable.

8.2 Questions for reflection

1. Which DEI issues were Martin Ramer and his business partner facing after employing a migrant employee?
2. What kind of training does the migrant employee need to succeed at work described in the case? What kind of training does the rest of the staff need to feel comfortable during the ongoing changes at work?
3. Which path should the management choose to foster DEI in their micro-SME? What are the first steps and in long-term goals? Consider the best practices provided on this website <https://tool.dei4sme.eu/en/learn-and-plan/> and do your own research when answering this question.
4. How closely should a micro-SME engage with emerging inclusion practices, and what balance between short-term costs and long-term impact seems acceptable?

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9 EUROTECHFORWARD CONSULTING: MANAGING UNUSUAL CREATIVITY, ENTHUSIASM, AND INITIATIVE AT WORK

Aušrinė Šilenskytė, University of Vaasa, Finland

Abstract

This teaching case explores the challenges of managing work design, team coordination, and project outcomes when an employee exhibits characteristics associated with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in a knowledge-intensive consulting environment. Set in a small consulting firm, the case follows three consultants working on an important AI adoption project for a key client. Justin is highly creative, technologically advanced, and a critical source of expertise, but repeatedly misses internal deadlines and struggles to follow agreed-upon processes. As project pressure increases, he takes an impulsive action intended to help the team: he submits an unfinished report directly to the client without authorisation. The decision threatens client relationships, team trust, and organisational reputation. The case encourages learners to examine how ADHD-related characteristics may influence workplace behaviour, particularly when the condition is undisclosed or undiagnosed. It also highlights the role of job design, coordination mechanisms, and job crafting in reducing risks while enabling employees to contribute their unique strengths.

Keywords

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD); job crafting; job design; team coordination; project management; consulting; small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)

Teaching notes

Teaching notes can be accessed online by educators using this web link:

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9.1 The case study

9.1.1 Managing a demanding project with valuable experts

EuroTechForward Consulting¹² was a small management consulting firm with fewer than ten employees. Despite its size, the company had won an important engagement advising a manufacturing client on how artificial intelligence (AI) could be integrated into management and operational processes.

Angela, the project lead, was responsible for ensuring that the final report met the firm's quality standards. Riccardo was responsible for redesigning the client's business model around AI-enabled opportunities. Justin provided technical expertise on AI applications and emerging technologies.

Justin was widely recognised as one of the firm's brightest consultants.

"Nobody understands these AI tools better than Justin," Riccardo often said.

Angela agreed. Whenever clients asked difficult questions about AI models, automation, or emerging technologies, Justin typically had an answer. He was also known for proposing unconventional solutions that impressed clients.

Yet there was another side to his work. Internal deadlines were frequently missed. Colleagues often waited for his contributions while he became absorbed in exploring new AI applications, assisting colleagues on unrelated projects, or testing the latest technological developments.

"Did you get the AI adoption section finished?" Angela asked during a project meeting.

"It is almost ready," Justin replied. "I found a new model that could improve the recommendations. I just want to test it first. It can be a game changer."

Angela nodded, although she had heard similar responses before.

As the project progressed, delays began affecting the rest of the team. Riccardo could not finalise his business model recommendations because key assumptions depended on Justin's analyses on the technology. Angela increasingly spent her time revising schedules and adjusting plans. While Justin's expertise created value for the project, his work patterns were creating growing coordination problems for the team.

¹² The name of the firm and all characters in the case are changed and some facts are slightly altered to secure confidentiality, but the situation described largely represents real events.

The project was approaching its final week, and Angela was becoming frantic and stressed thinking of ways to ensure successful and timely project delivery.

9.1.2 Ah! I must put everything together now

One week before the client deadline, the three consultants met for lunch. The atmosphere was serious.

"We need a clear plan," Angela began. "The report is not yet complete, and we can't afford any surprises."

Justin listened attentively. Angela outlined the sequence:

"Justin, you finalise your sections tomorrow. Riccardo then integrates your findings and completes his recommendations. After that, I need two full days to review everything, ensure consistency, and prepare the final submission."

Riccardo nodded: *"That works for me."*

Justin agreed as well.

For the first time in weeks, Angela felt reassured. The team left lunch believing they reached an understanding on responsibilities and timing.

The next day, however, Justin immersed himself in several unrelated activities again. He assisted colleagues with other assignments, explored newly released AI tools, and continued to refine analyses beyond the agreed scope. Simultaneously, he became increasingly concerned and stressed about the approaching deadline.

Late at night, while reviewing files in the firm's document repository, Justin noticed an earlier version of Riccardo's section. An idea immediately occurred to him.

"Ah! I must put everything together now," Justin thought. "We might actually be ahead of schedule."

Caught by this excitement, Justin was working through the night. He merged his material with Riccardo's draft, used an AI agent to review and improve the report, and produced what he believed was a complete project deliverable.

His excitement could not be contained. While immersing himself in the project and the use of a newly developed AI agent to enhance the report, Justin completely forgot the conversation he had over lunch with his colleagues. Without consulting them, he

submitted the report directly to the client. Then, he went to sleep convinced he had helped the team.

9.1.3 The perfect storm: When good intentions go wrong

Angela opened her email the next morning and froze. The report had already been delivered. Initially, she assumed there had been some mistake but quickly noticed the sender: Justin.

As she read the report, her concerns deepened. Several sections contained factual inconsistencies. Important edits had not been incorporated. Most alarmingly, the report included an outdated version of Riccardo's recommendations. Angela immediately called an emergency meeting.

"What happened? Why did you submit the report last night, four days ahead of schedule?" she asked.

Justin appeared surprised by her reaction.

"I thought I was helping," he said. "We were running out of time. I used an AI agent to review everything and submitted it so you wouldn't have to manage all the final coordination. I know you are always busy with projects and other tasks."

"But we agreed on the process," Angela replied. "You submitted unfinished work to the client."

Riccardo added, *"That wasn't my final version."*

Justin looked confused: *"I genuinely thought this would save time and help us."*

The air was thick with growing tensions, despite Angela and Riccardo's silence. The client was one of the firm's most important accounts. This premature submission could damage the team's credibility, Angela's leadership position, Riccardo's professional image, and the reputation of the entire consultancy.

At the same time, Angela reflected on Justin's behaviour during the project. His actions appeared irresponsible, yet they were not malicious. The sections inserted in the report on technology were of high quality and offered unique ideas for the customer, even if they were poorly organised and too technical. Justin's section would have been acceptable after her rigorous editing. Justin had repeatedly demonstrated unusual creativity, enthusiasm, and initiative. However, he seemed unable to consistently follow agreed structures, prioritise tasks, or evaluate the consequences of impulsive decisions.

As Angela considered her next steps, several questions emerged: *Should the problem be treated as an individual performance issue, a team coordination failure, or a consequence of how work had been designed? How should she address the client situation and emerging tensions within their team? Is there a way to understand Justin's work patterns and manage them? And how could the firm maintain Justin's strengths while reducing the risks created by his disorganised and impulsive work patterns?*

9.2 Questions for reflection

1. Spend some time reading about Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) – what is it and what are its symptoms? How might ADHD characteristics have been related to Justin's behaviour throughout the project? Consider both the positive and negative manifestations.
2. To what extent did the design of the work contribute to the project's outcome? Analyse how task interdependence, autonomy, deadline structures, communication processes, and project governance may have amplified the risks associated with Justin's work style.
3. What forms of job crafting and work redesign could help Justin perform more effectively while preserving his strengths? Think of interventions at the individual, team, and organisational levels that could reduce coordination problems and improve project outcomes when working with colleagues who have diagnosed or undiagnosed forms of ADHD.

10 IHK-BILDUNGSZENTRUM FRANKFURT (ODER): ENHANCING TEAM COHESION AND COMMUNICATION IN FLEXIBLE WORK ENVIRONMENTS

Anna-Carina Mohrholz, IHK-Projektgesellschaft mbH, Germany

Abstract

IHK-Bildungszentrum Frankfurt (Oder) was a small vocational training provider that struggled to balance flexible work with strong team cohesion in the post-pandemic hybrid work environment. With fewer than 10 employees and around 300 annual seminars, it operated under competitive pressure to offer modular, digitally supported, and hybrid learning while fulfilling a public-service mandate. After COVID-19, increased remote and flexible work improved autonomy but led to weaker collaboration, reduced team spirit, and communication gaps, straining staff as they maintained a broad course portfolio. The managing director, Sandy Morgen, had to decide how to structure flexible work, communication routines, and collaboration tools so that they strengthened, rather than weakened, internal cohesion, productivity, and educational quality, despite limited data and differing views and needs within the team. The case invites reflection on the invisible dimensions of diversity and their effects on work in environments where visible diversity seems to not exist.

Keywords

remote work; team collaboration; flexibility; wellbeing; equitable work; invisible diversity

Teaching notes

Teaching notes can be accessed online by educators using this web link:

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22259734>

10.1 The case study

10.1.1 Changing work environment in a post-pandemic era

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, remote work had become more common, including in SMEs that previously worked mostly on site (Eurofound, 2024). Further education and training had also shifted toward blended and hybrid formats, with less purely in-person delivery. In the post-pandemic era, a “new normal” included hybrid arrangements and an emphasis on digital skills and lifelong learning (Marcus, 2022).

As a result of these work environment changes, in many firms as well as in the IHK-Bildungszentrum in Frankfurt (Oder), a small enterprise that provided trainings in one region of Germany, more colleagues worked from home or on flexible schedules. While this brought freedom, Sandy Morgen, the managing director, witnessed weaker collaboration and declining team spirit. This was starting to affect the quality of the firm’s services, and Sandy had to ensure high-quality education for the region. Thus, Sandy was thinking, *“How can I strengthen social connection and improve communication among co-workers with diverse needs and schedules?”*

10.1.2 IHK-Bildungszentrum Frankfurt (Oder): A small firm with wide regional impact

Established in 1991, the IHK-Bildungszentrum Frankfurt (Oder) operated within the German Chamber of Commerce (IHK) system as a leading provider of higher vocational training and regional continuing education. Despite having fewer than 10 employees, it delivered around 300 seminars and certificate courses across diverse industries, serving companies, professionals, and jobseekers in the Frankfurt (Oder) region and beyond.

Its business model combined a public-service mandate with market-orientated education, offering practical, workplace-related training and tailored in-company programmes aligned with regional labour-market needs. The organisation operated only in the domestic German market, without international expansion plans, but played a critical role in supporting professional development across Germany.

Major trends shaped the continuing-education industry: digitalisation, automation, and hybrid learning formats. Skills shortages, demographic change, and rising demand for resilience, digital competencies, and green skills were reshaping what providers must offer. The IHK-Bildungszentrum Frankfurt (Oder) that had to adhere to these trends competed with public institutions, private providers, online platforms, and corporate academies. It had to balance its public-service role with market pressures and adapt to regional economic needs. While the continuing-education market had become more

competitive, employers expected modular, digitally supported training, and learners wanted flexible, shorter, hybrid formats that required educational innovations and the integration of digital and hybrid formats while maintaining practical, high-quality training. Therefore, the IHK-Bildungszentrum Frankfurt (Oder) had faced growing internal and external pressure.

10.1.3 Balancing pressures, needs, and demands in a small team

Internally, the organisation's small size was both a strength and a constraint. It enabled close coordination, but the increase in remote work had led to weaker connection and cooperation among colleagues. Limited capacity to develop new formats, invest in digital infrastructure, and expand the portfolio placed strain on employees and affected well-being. Maintaining around 300 seminars and certificate courses required significant effort and efficiency. Sandy faced the challenge of maintaining the team's productivity while ensuring flexibility and its cohesion without overloading the small team.

The IHK-Bildungszentrum Frankfurt (Oder) had a small, highly committed team formed from, what seemed to be, relatively similar individuals. The professionals who worked in the firm included a majority of females from different age groups with varying beliefs in modern approaches versus traditional education systems. Thus, when moving to hybrid work, the expectation was that the team would remain cohesive and highly connected despite the change in the working mode. However, soon after shifting to hybrid collaboration, the IHK-Bildungszentrum Frankfurt (Oder) discovered a number of challenges and a need to create a work environment where flexibility did not undermine team cohesion or productivity.

10.1.4 Hybrid work environment as a double-edged sword

When the IHK-Bildungszentrum's team started working more flexibly in a hybrid format, communication gaps occurred and social connection reduced. With fewer than 10 employees managing hundreds of seminars annually, the organisation faced pressure from competition, changing learner expectations, and the shift toward hybrid and digital learning; therefore, communication and efficiency gaps were quickly spotted, making engagement and collaboration harder.

Staff, who seemed to be similar, had different perspectives; they started to schedule work around their individual needs, and regular ways of exchanging information and organising started to fail. The team needed better or different collaboration tools and stronger engagement strategies to sustain productivity without sacrificing flexibility.

Sandy Morgen faced a clear decision: *how to structure flexible work and team practices so they strengthened rather than weakened the organisation's ability to deliver high-quality education? How to improve communication, collaboration, and social bonding among employees, trainers, and management without much investment? How to understand what specific differences among the staff are causing this lack of cohesion in the team?*

10.2 Questions for reflection

1. Why could a hybrid work environment have caused worsening team cohesion and declining team spirit? How could the concepts of diversity and inclusion help explain this team dynamic in the firm?
2. How can Sandy Morgen structure flexible work and team practices so they strengthen rather than weaken the organisation's ability to deliver high-quality education? How to implement these changes in a resource-constrained smaller firm?
3. Which path should the management choose to ensure a long-time balance between flexibility and cohesion that incorporates the employees' wishes and needs?

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The case is also based on interviews and company presentations given at the DEI4SME Hackathon II (Lithuania & Online) as well as further discussions with the firm.