

IT Training Course for Small & Medium Business - Short Review of Leonardo da Vinci Programme SAMBITE Project

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INTRODUCTION

Small and medium-sized business is the best-developed and widely spread form of business in Europe. Such enterprises are the most active in adopting innovations, they easily and effectively react to market changes, are open to information and qualification improvements. Development of such enterprises encourages regional development as well. It is obvious that mutual benefit for business and governmental managerial structures is linked to mutual efforts. SMEs need support both from the State's institutions and business self-governmental organizations as well as from scientific and educational institutions. Coordination of business, science and the State's economic policy would encourage better conditions for origination of common welfare.

A close cooperation between education (Department of Applied Informatics at Vytautas Magnus University (LT), School of Computing Science at Middlesex University (UK), Centre for Continuing Education at Kielce university of Technology (PL)) and business organizations (Kaunas Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Crafts (LT)) allows to develop and successfully implement a joint project "Small and Medium Business Information Technology Education - SAMBITE" within the frames of Leonardo da Vinci programme.

THE MAIN AIM OF THE PROJECT

The main aim of the project has been to develop and test distance education materials on the organisation and implementation of Business Information Technology that is relevant to the needs of: SME's managers and employees, professional adults requiring intensive retraining, new graduates of non-computing disciplines, employees of government and local authorities, students of various specialities to match their skills and knowledge for using IT.

TARGET GROUPS

Evaluation of the researches and questionnaires served as the strong basis for a successful implementation of the "SAMBITE" project. A special questionnaire was prepared for the potential participants in the qualification improvement courses. 270 questionnaires were disseminated. With the help of the qualification tests, 200 representatives from 116 companies and organizations were chosen for the participation in the training courses. The three target groups were selected according to their occupation (Fig. 1):

- **SMEs- members of the Kaunas Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Crafts and SMEs;**
- **The employees of the vocational training institutions were the most interested in the qualification improvement in the field of IT;**
- **Non-governmental organizations and other associations.**

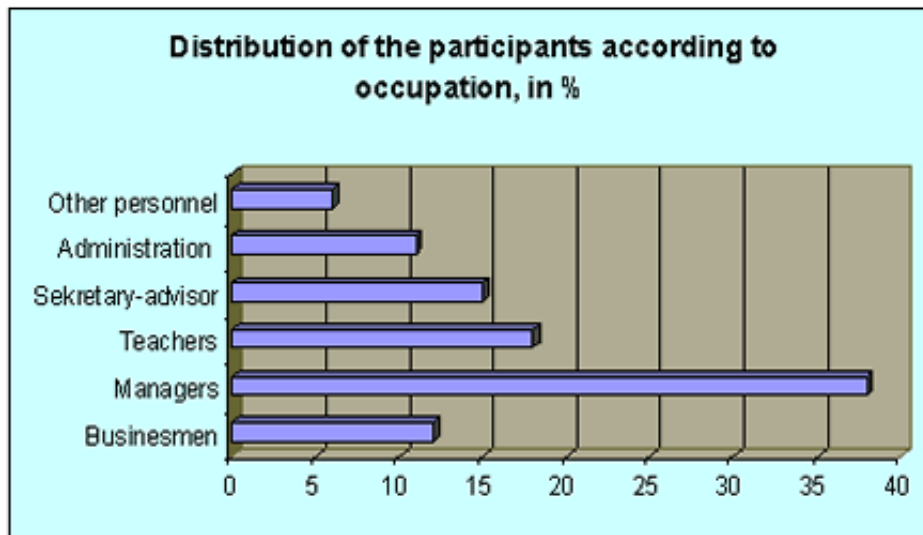


Fig.1. Statistical data on occupational distribution of the participants in the courses. The greatest part of them (77 %) were women who wanted to improve their knowledge in the IT field.

REASONS FOR IMPROVEMENT OF THE SKILLS

Representatives from the companies and organizations chosen to the training courses gave different reasons for their wish to attend the courses. The main, most commonly mentioned, reasons are indicated in the Fig. 2.

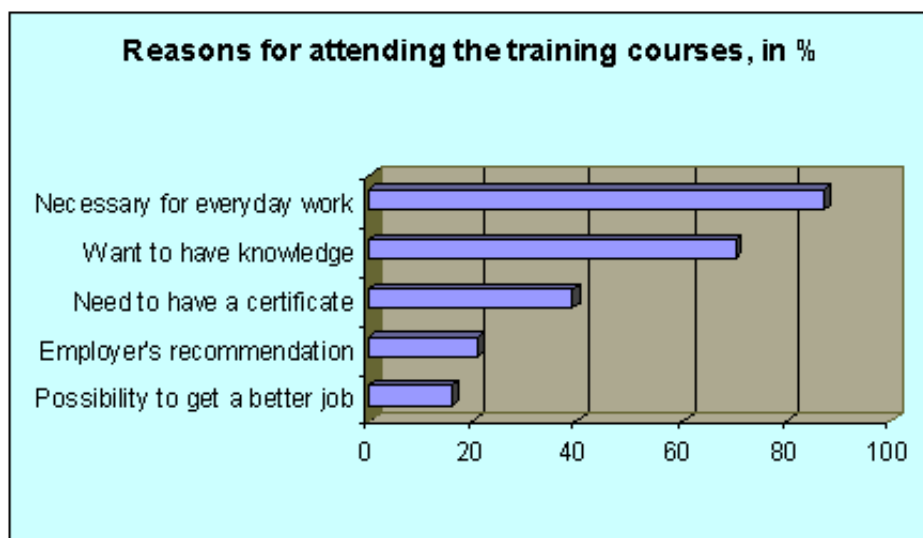


Fig. 2. The main reasons for attending the training courses.

EXPERIENCE IN WORKING WITH COMPUTER

The aim of the project is to improve IT development and work with the computer in the SMEs, therefore the selected participants already had certain experience in working with the computers. 89% of the participants of the qualification courses have indicated that they use computers in their everyday work. As tests have showed, the personnel of the SMEs knows texts processing the best (77 %), then Internet (71 %) and e-mail (57 %) using. Data on Internet usage presented by the Chamber significantly exceed the statistical average of the country (correspondingly, 71 % and 41,8 %) due to the fact, that the majority of the participants of the training courses came from the centers of the counties,

e.i. cities of Kaunas and Marijampole, or from the areas close to these cities. Distribution of the main experiences is shown in the Fig. 3.

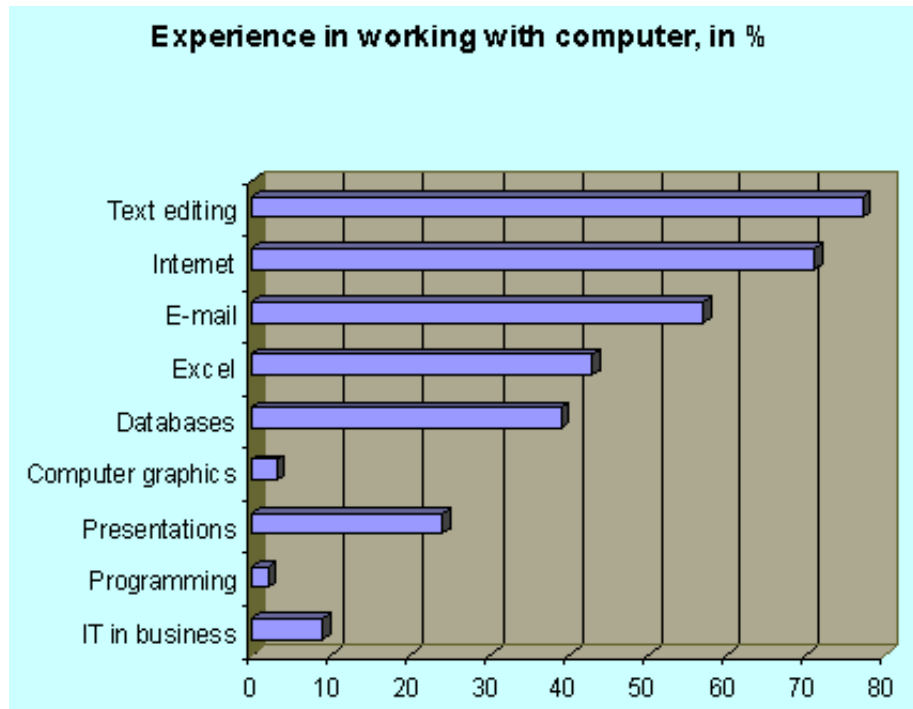


Fig. 3. The experiences of target learners.

NEEDS OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES

The analysis of the results from the answers to the questionnaire allowed to indicate the priority needs of the SMEs for IT. In the meantime, the greatest need is to use Internet (70 %), e-mail (68 %), data bases (62 %), text processing (59 %), and spreadsheets (43 %). One has expected the greater need for making company presentations or solving multimedia tasks. The priorities of the company needs are given in the Fig. 4.

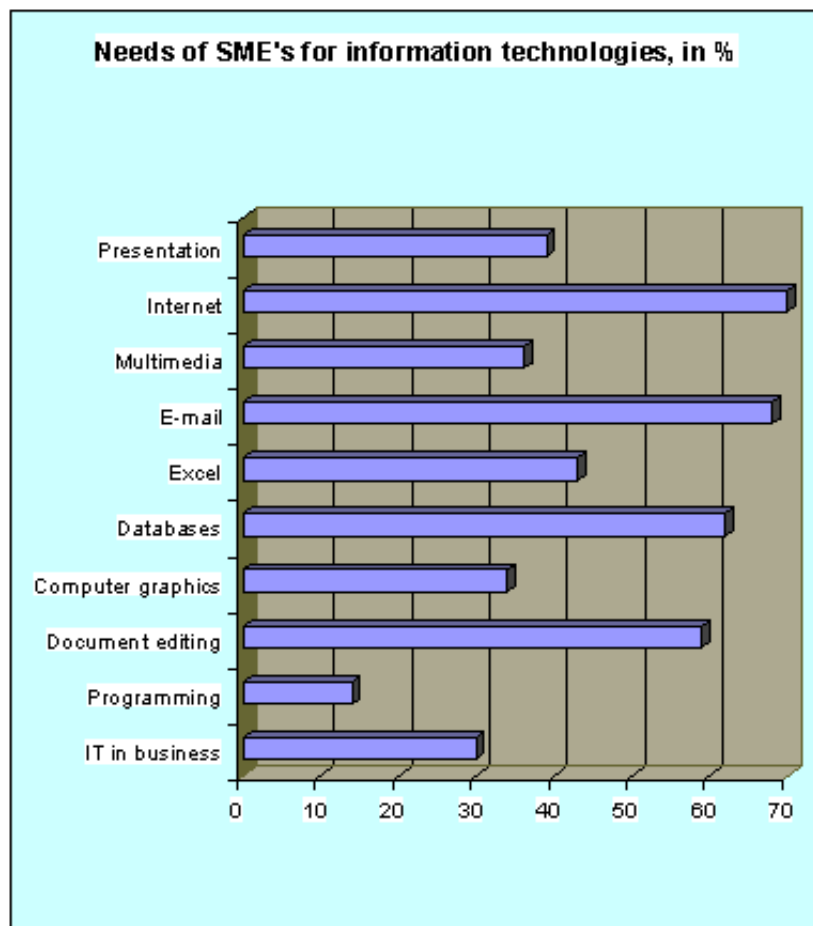


Fig. 4. The priorities of the company needs.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

According to investigated needs, SAMBITE consortium developed distance education program in business information technology for SME's and similar organizations. Here has been developed a series of distance education modules in a variety of media [written, electronic, CD ROM,] of basic, cohesive, high quality, flexible distance education learning materials (study materials, scenarios of practical tasks, learners guide, teachers guide) in business information technology.

Basic distance education module consists from 15 chapters, which include the main modern software packages. In each module there is table of contents. The first lesson is always the Introduction, the last - the Summary. Introduction includes clearly stated objectives. The objectives are broken down into the theoretical knowledge and practical skills learners should have gained after successful learning of the presented material in the module. Each topic is described with definitions, worked examples, references to case studies and so on. Nearly 5-8 worked exercises and review materials in the form of a multiple choice test, which can be checked by the student and then corrected.

The SAMBITE modules are designed to be more or less self contained. If the student need some feedback or advice, he (or she) can contact to personal tutor via e-mail. Besides students are supported by regular seminars.

Scenarios of practical works are developed for two different level learners:

Beginners

Hardware and software (2 hours), OS Windows (6 hours), Text processing WordPad, MS Word (6 hours), Spreadsheets MS Excel (4 hours), Presentations MS Power Point (4 hours), Internet (8 hours) - in total 30 hours;

Intermediate Learners

Text processing MS Word (10 hours), Spreadsheets MS Excel (14 hours), Internet (6 hours).

Distance learning methodology has been chosen and developed for part time working students, who have free time to access during evenings, weekends, holidays. The course designed for the personal computers which are the standard hardware of SME. The learning environment is based on Web technology. Before the start of study, students are given teaching materials pack including:

- a. Course material textbook;
- b. Students guide;
- c. CD-ROM (if necessary);

The participants, who have graduated from the courses, have received certificates. They had to answer also several questions concerning the practical benefit from the courses, applicability of theoretical and practical material for practical usage in the SMEs. The opinions of the participants are shown in the Fig. 5.

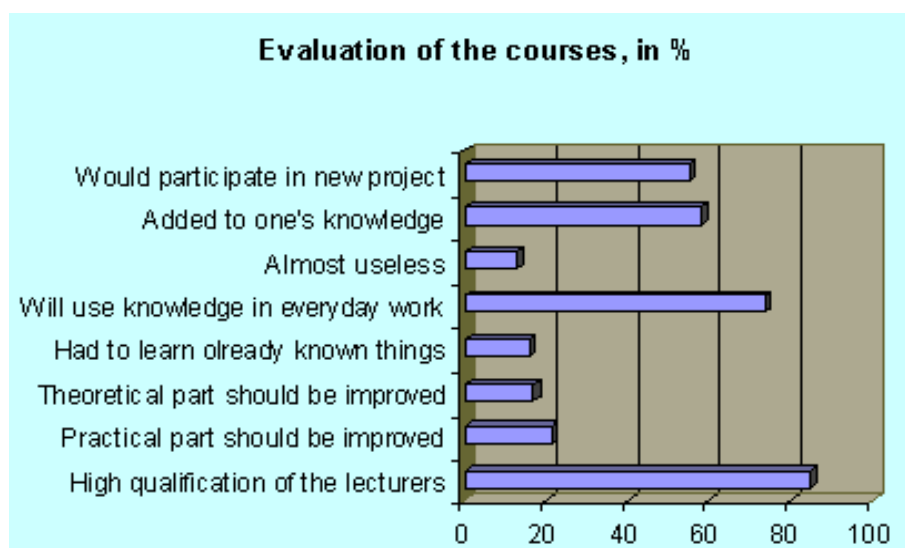


Fig. 5. Evaluation of the courses.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The planning, coordination and implementation of the project fully complied with the project tasks and led to a successful implementation of these tasks. A basic methodic experience in organizing the training courses was received, which proved the expediency of the methods chosen.

During the experimental courses some additional needs and requirements for informational technologies of the SMEs representatives became clear. After evaluating these needs and requirements, the training modules were corrected and learning material was improved by deeper analyzing information technologies as well as widening and objectifying application possibilities.

Top managers of the SMEs understand the importance of relationship between business and learning and value the benefit received from the EU project for the formation of small and medium-sized business and its environment in Lithuania.

The observations, proposals, wishes and evaluations from the project participants will allow the organizations, which implement the projects, to better coordinate the needs of the SMEs with the tasks of the future-to-be projects.

The most important think is that the improved materials of the training modules will be used for the training of small and medium-sized businessmen by the "SAMBITE" project partners in Poland and the Great Britain.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research described in this paper was done under financial support of European Commission, Directorate - General XXII - Education, Training and Youth, Leonardo da Vinci programme.

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