National Piloting Experience Report

« Germany »

Authoring partner: blinc eG

www.smeraldproject.eu

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Introduction

- **Background:** *A brief summary of the context for your pilots (in relation to Digital Data and Artificial Intelligence competences in the context of SMEs/VET providers in your country)*

The pilot training at blinc eG emerged from a recognised need to explore the practical application of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in a real business context. Although AI is widely discussed across industries, its concrete use in daily operations—especially within small organisations—is still limited. This was evident within the internal structure of blinc itself, where only 3 out of 16 colleagues had any hands-on experience with AI tools prior to the training.

This lack of engagement was not due to a lack of interest, but rather a combination of time constraints and the absence of clear, easy-to-implement strategies for integrating AI into routine workflows. The pilot responded to this gap by providing a structured, low-barrier introduction to relevant tools, with a clear focus on enhancing efficiency, communication, and dissemination activities.

- **The Purpose and Objectives of the Pilots:** *why you did it – the reasons for piloting and what you set out to test*

This internal pilot program was designed as a starting point for integrating artificial intelligence (AI) into blinc's workflows and project processes. The goal was not only to raise awareness but also to equip staff with practical, directly applicable skills related to AI tools. The session was intentionally framed as the beginning of a broader digital transformation strategy within the organization.

The pilot introduced a structured learning journey that gradually guided participants through three core AI application areas: language models (LLMs), image generation, and video tools. Each section included a short presentation, a tool overview, and a hands-on activity. The competence-oriented approach, aligned with the LEVEL5 framework, served as the invisible structure guiding the learning experience.

Practically speaking, participants first explored AI tools individually, then collaborated to co-design a structured, AI-supported documentation workflow using ChatGPT. The goal of this prototype was to improve the quality, consistency, and efficiency of documentation processes, and it could serve as a model for future work.

The main objectives of the pilot included:

- introducing a structured approach to using AI tools (language models, image generators, and video tools) in the company's operational routines;

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- Demonstrating how AI can support internal documentation, communication, and dissemination activities.
- Enabling participants to critically reflect on the usefulness of different AI tools in their roles and daily tasks.
- Developing a functional workflow prototype that integrates ChatGPT as an intelligent assistant for documentation and project-based knowledge management.
- Initiating a broader, company-wide reflection on digital innovation and AI integration supported by the SMERALD framework.

- **The Target Groups: Pilot Participants and Beneficiaries**: *who was involved in the piloting - information about them: how many, their occupation, gender, age range, SMEs managers/employees or VET professionals etc)*

The pilot targeted blinc's internal staff (16 team members), including:

- Project coordinators
- Learning designers
- Communication and content creators
- Administrative and support staff
- Financial Administration

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Section 1: Methodology of the pilot(s)

Describe how the piloting was carried out, what the format was and what activities it involved. How many pilots did you organise and why did you do it this way?

1.1 Pilot 1: blinc's workflow update

- *Description of the pilot ie.* ***why****,* ***where, when*** *(the timeline),* ***by whom*** *(the facilitator/s)****, to whom*** *(the beneficiaries) and numbers involved*
- *Process/ methods used ie* ***how*** *it was conducted and* ***what*** *did you do? (eg learning projects (no.), face-to-face sessions, cascading the learning through the full blended learning course etc?)*

This pilot project was initiated to investigate the effective introduction and application of AI tools in small businesses. The training program was meticulously structured to ensure a blend of remote and in-person learning. Part of the training was conducted in-person at blinc's offices in Göttingen in January 2025, with other colleagues participating remotely via online platforms. The training was led by two colleagues and me. All three had participated in the SMERALD training in Palermo in December 2024 and were representatives of the SMERALD project. All 16 team members from blinc were invited; 9 colleagues attended the entire session, while others continued their training using materials and internal discussions.

The participants had a wide range of professional backgrounds, including project coordination, content development, IT, and visual communication. Despite varying levels of prior knowledge, none of them had previously used AI tools regularly in their workflows—with the exception of a few small AI experiments, such as image creation and text generation. For the majority of the team, this session marked their inaugural formal introduction to AI—and its associated depths and possibilities. While most were acquainted with prompting, and some had even used it superficially, they lacked a structured framework for discussing how to effectively work with LLMs.

The pilot was structured as a one-day blended training session, combining face-to-face elements for local participants with remote access for others via video conferencing tools. The session was designed around a modular concept that allowed colleagues to engage hands-on with AI tools, reflect on their potential, and test their application directly in relation to daily business tasks.

The training program was structured into three parts, each focusing on a specific area of AI implementation in SMEs.

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1. AI as LLM: Large Language Models (e.g., ChatGPT)

- Input: A short introduction explained what LLMs are and how they work, including prompting logic, context awareness, and data limitations.
- Tool overview: ChatGPT and Gemini were presented with examples tailored to SME tasks like drafting emails, summarising documents, or developing workshop outlines.
- Activity: Each participant received a task relevant to their field (e.g., creating a prompt for summarising a partner meeting or drafting text for a flyer).
- Discussion: Participants shared examples and reflected on how the tool's output met or didn't meet their expectations

2. The use of artificial intelligence to create images

- Input: A brief visual presentation showcased how AI tools can support visual communication—especially useful in project dissemination.
- Tool overview: Tools like Recraft.ai, Leonardo.ai, and Canva AI were introduced.
- Activity: Participants were asked to recreate a visual for an ongoing project, such as banners or website headers, using AI-generated designs.
- Result: Several image assets were directly integrated into the company's current project material.

3. AI for Video Creation

- Input: This segment illustrated how AI could support the creation of short explainer videos, presentations, or dissemination outputs.
- Tool overview: A walk-through of RunwayML, Genmo, Kapwing, and Kling.ai was provided.
- Activity: Teams collaboratively created a short 30–45 second explainer video using AI-generated script and visuals.

Each module follows a repetitive method cycle to support intuitive learning:

- Presentation of Tool(s) – brief overview and examples
- Guided Demo – showing live usage and functionality
- Individual or Team Task – 30–60 minutes of hands-on experience
- Feedback Round – group discussion to evaluate usability and potential

The final collaborative task.

The training program concluded with a collaborative initiative: the development of a prototype workflow for integrating artificial intelligence into the company's

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documentation processes. Participants explored the potential of tools like ChatGPT to facilitate the organization of raw data into structured summaries and the creation of content for project reports and online platforms.

The prototype integrated a logic-based prompt system and a reusable and adaptable workflow template for various documentation and dissemination contexts across the company.

Pedagogical Framing

Although the training did not include an explicit pedagogical framing, it was designed around the SMERALD competence development model, with:

- Competence development is structured across three areas: knowledge, skills, and attitudes.
- Activities that reflect the LEVEL5 dimensions of cognition, action, and emotion.
- Reflection is incorporated into task design and discussions.

This approach enabled participants to develop confidence, explore freely, and establish practical routines without the pressure of formal assessment.

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Micro-Credentials in the Pilot

How were participants evaluated and guided through Micro-Credentials? Explain how learners were evaluated with technologies such as Competence Spider and LEVEL5. What strategies were implemented to monitor progress and validate competencies? How does tailoring the learning experience and dividing the course into micro-modules affect learners' progress and engagement?

How did breaking down the entire course into micro-modules and tailoring teaching to individual requirements affect the overall learning experience?

The piloting of micro-credentials was integrated into the training process in a light and accessible way, with a strong emphasis on self-reflection and voluntary engagement. Rather than enforcing a formalised assessment structure, the objective was to familiarise participants with the SMERALD validation tools and allow them to experience competence-based recognition in a meaningful, low-barrier format.

Use of the SPIDER Questionnaire

During the initial session, all participants were invited to complete the SPIDER self-assessment questionnaire, developed as part of the SMERALD Competence Framework. The tool was introduced as a reflective entry point to help learners better understand their current position in relation to AI, Data Analysis, and Digital Data competencies.

- It enabled participants to self-evaluate their competence levels along the three dimensions: knowledge, skills, and attitudes.
- The results were used to spark internal reflection and group discussion, particularly around how individuals perceive their digital readiness.
- It also served to make competence development more tangible—especially for those unfamiliar with structured learning models.

LEVEL5 Validation and Certificates

For those colleagues who showed a deeper interest in documenting and formalising their learning outcomes, individual LEVEL5 competence validations were offered after the training.

- These participants used the SMERALD learning platform to revisit core content and map their learning achievements.
- Based on their self-assessments, reflection on specific learning outcomes, and application of AI tools in their roles, a LEVEL5 certificate was issued.

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- The LEVEL5 Cube was introduced as a tool for visualising their competence development, highlighting progress made during and after the training.

This flexible and optional approach to micro-credentials allowed for:

- A low-pressure entry into validation culture,
- The opportunity to recognise competence without creating barriers,
- Strengthened ownership over personal development pathways.

Impact of Micro-Module Structure

The modular nature of the SMERALD content played a supportive role in this process:

- It enabled participants to engage with specific learning units at their own pace, without feeling overwhelmed.
- It facilitated customisation of learning paths based on personal or job-specific relevance (e.g. some focused more on LLMs, others on image tools).
- This flexible setup boosted engagement and gave individuals the chance to see immediate value in what they were learning and validating.

Overall, the micro-credentials approach was positively received, particularly because it provided recognition without formal pressure, encouraged self-directed reflection, and reinforced the value of competence-oriented validation in workplace learning.

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1.2 Pilot 2: KanalVier

- *Description of the pilot ie.* ***why****,* ***where, when*** *(the timeline),* ***by whom*** *(the facilitator/s****), to whom*** *(the beneficiaries) and numbers involved*
- *Process/ methods used ie* ***how*** *it was conducted and* ***what*** *did you do? (eg learning projects (no.), face-to-face sessions, cascading the learning through the full blended learning course etc?)*

As part of the SMERALD piloting phase, blinc initiated a second pilot with KanalVier, a creative multimedia company based in Göttingen (Germany) specialising in video production, animation, and visual storytelling. The objective was to explore the potential of integrating AI into client-facing processes and internal visual content development.

KanalVier was invited to join the SMERALD CPD training programme in Palermo in December 2024. Prior to the CPD event, blinc facilitated a half-day preparatory session with the KanalVier team, intended to raise awareness of AI opportunities and assess the potential for AI to support their existing workflows.

Participants:

- The pilot involved four team members from KanalVier with diverse roles, including film production, art direction, and 3D visualisation.
- All participants attended the full 4-day CPD course.
- The blinc team facilitated both the preparatory workshop and the post-training follow-up.

Process / Methods Used

The pilot unfolded across several key phases:

1. Pre-Training Introduction (Half-Day Onboarding Workshop)

- Aimed to raise curiosity and test initial AI applications in the company context.
- Covered LLMs and AI-driven visual tools relevant for media production.
- Discussions focused on identifying areas where AI could streamline workflows, particularly in early-stage client interaction and concept visualisation.

2. CPD Training in Palermo (4 Days)

- The KanalVier team participated in the full SMERALD CPD programme.

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- During the training, they developed a prototype concept: an AI-powered assistant to support client briefings and early-stage visualisation, enabling more rapid and tailored responses to client expectations.
- They presented a simplified version of their prototype at the end of the training week, including mock-up outputs and a conceptual workflow using ChatGPT and visual AI tools (e.g., for draft storyboards or script suggestions).

3. Post-Training Follow-up (2 Remote Sessions)

These sessions were conducted in January and February 2025 and focused on:

- Refining the prototype based on internal testing and team feedback.
- Exploring integration options into their existing project pipeline.
- Discussing legal and data protection challenges, especially concerning the use of AI-generated client data and cloud-based tools.

Micro-Credentials in the Pilot

As part of the SMERALD piloting activities, the KanalVier team engaged with competence validation through the use of the SPIDER self-assessment questionnaire, aligned with the LEVEL5 approach.

SPIDER Questionnaire – Competence Self-Reflection

- The initial SPIDER reflection was completed prior to the team's participation in the SMERALD CPD training. This helped capture their starting point in terms of competences related to AI, digital data, and data analysis.
- A second round of reflection took place during one of the follow-up sessions held in Göttingen, allowing participants to assess their individual progression and reflect on the integration of AI tools in their daily work context.
- This process helped identify shifts in awareness, motivation, and confidence—particularly in applying AI to support client interaction and visual ideation workflows.

Use and Benefits of the SPIDER Tool

The tool provided a low-threshold, intuitive entry point into the concept of competence-oriented learning and validation.

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It enabled participants to articulate personal learning goals and track development in areas such as:

- Openness to AI tools for communication and ideation.
- Application of AI to support their production pipeline.
- Ethical and practical considerations, such as data protection in client-facing tools.

While the LEVEL5 certification process was not formally applied in this pilot, the SPIDER tool played a key role in facilitating structured reflection and aligning the learning experience with the SMERALD competence framework.

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Section 2: Results of the pilot(s)

Describe the outcomes/results achieved (quantitative and qualitative)

2.1 Pilot 1 – blinc's workflow update

Achievements and successes

- The training successfully demonstrated the practical application of AI for project-related workflows to a team with limited prior experience.
- Ten colleagues participated fully in the in-person training, engaging with new tools such as ChatGPT, image generators and video creators.
- The structured training format, which included hands-on exploration and reflection, helped to demystify AI and reduce any initial hesitation or resistance.
- During the session, a prototype for a structured, AI-supported documentation workflow was developed and is currently being refined and tested internally.
- Participants reported increased confidence in their ability to use AI tools, and several are now using them for smaller internal tasks such as outlining, idea generation and creating content drafts.

Challenges

- Participants progressed at different speeds due to varying levels of digital literacy and prior exposure to AI, requiring flexible facilitation and tool adaptation.
- Several technical challenges emerged during the session, including login issues, limited hardware capacity and the need for stable internet connections in order to test web-based tools.
- Integrating AI into real workflows did not happen immediately; it required follow-up after the training and continued mentoring.

Identification of any refinements/improvements needed in the SMERALD methodology

- Although the competence-oriented approach was effective, participants would have benefited from a clearer explanation of the concept of competence development.
- Providing pre-training materials (e.g. short tool overviews or example use cases) could help participants prepare more effectively and save time during the live session.

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- The SPIDER self-assessment and LEVEL5 validation were useful for those who were interested, but guided reflection templates could help to integrate them into the learning process.
- Future pilots should include clearer, role-specific examples for different departments (e.g. administration versus communication) to demonstrate direct relevance more clearly.

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2.2 Pilot 2 – KanalVier

Achievements and successes

- KanalVier, a creative media SME, embarked on a bespoke CPD training programme, beginning with the Palermo training event in December 2024.
- Building on this momentum, the team participated in two follow-up sessions in January and February 2025, which focused on integrating AI tools into their internal workflows.
- As part of the training, KanalVier developed a prototype AI assistant designed to facilitate smoother and more responsive client interactions. This tool is designed to help visualise concepts more quickly and clearly depending on the needs and understanding levels of clients.
- The company presented an initial, simplified version of the prototype at the end of the training week and continued to refine the solution during the follow-up sessions.
- This process has successfully raised awareness, built foundational AI competencies and initiated a change process within the team.

Challenges

- Although enthusiasm was high, the technical implementation of the prototype was subject to practical limitations, particularly with regard to data privacy and external client testing.
- As a small creative enterprise, the team had limited time, which made it difficult to pursue deeper technical development.
- Using AI in a human-centred, creative context necessitated the constant adaptation and reconsideration of tools.

Refinements needed

- The modular approach of the SMERALD CPD was highly suitable for creative SMEs such as KanalVier, as it enabled flexible integration into real-world business challenges.
- The use of real prototypes for learning activities should be promoted further as a key pedagogical element — it enables learners to progress from exploration to implementation.
- In future CPDs, optional tracks or toolboxes tailored to creative industries could increase relevance and uptake.

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Section 3: Conclusions

What key findings/conclusions can you draw from the the piloting process? Please identify the highlights with regard to the SMERALD approach.

The SMERALD pilot process provided valuable insights into how AI and digital competence frameworks can be introduced and embedded in different SMEs and creative business environments. The following key conclusions can be drawn from the internal blinc pilot project and the external KanalVier pilot project:

The introduction of AI depends on the work context and digital readiness:

- The integration of AI into everyday business was strongly influenced by the roles of the participants and their existing familiarity with digital tools. For some, especially those already involved in digital content creation or project management, the introduction of AI was intuitive and quickly led to practical applications. For others, especially those with lower digital literacy, the process was more difficult and required additional time and support to recognise the value and opportunities of AI.

Awareness raising and creating opportunities are crucial first steps:

- In both pilot projects, the biggest initial hurdle was raising awareness and overcoming scepticism or uncertainty about AI. Structured, easily accessible introductions – supported by practical exercises – proved essential in demystifying AI and moving participants from passive curiosity to active experimentation.

Time investment brings diverse opportunities:

- While the learning curve for AI tools can be time-consuming, the pilot projects have shown that investing in structured training opens up a wide range of opportunities – from improving documentation processes to fostering creative ideas and communicating with customers. The hands-on, modular approach enabled participants to see immediate, job-relevant benefits.

Digital divide within teams:

- The pilot projects revealed a clear divide: some team members welcomed digital tools as a means of increasing efficiency and creativity, while others viewed technology as a necessary but somewhat opaque means of achieving work goals. This underscores the need for tailored training and ongoing support to ensure an inclusive digital transformation.

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Industry-specific readiness influences learning outcomes:

- The KanalVier team, which was already heavily involved in technology-enabled creative work, quickly adapted to AI tools and developed ambitious prototypes. The biggest challenge was not technical competence, but integrating new AI-supported ideas into established business processes and ensuring compliance with data protection regulations. In contrast, the blinc team was more concerned with building basic skills and confidence.

Highlights of the SMERALD approach

Competence-oriented, modular learning:

- The SMERALD approach, which is based on competence development (knowledge, skills, attitudes) and supported by the LEVEL5 framework, provided a flexible structure that could accommodate different learning speeds and interests. The modular structure allowed participants to focus on the AI applications most relevant to their tasks, promoting engagement and ownership of the learning process.

Reflection tools promoted self-awareness:

- The use of SPIDER self-assessment and optional LEVEL5 validation encouraged reflection on digital readiness and competence development. These tools lowered the threshold for formal validation and made progress tangible, especially for those with less experience with structured learning models.

Prototyping and practical application:

- Both pilot projects emphasised the value of rapid implementation from theory to practice. The development of real-world prototypes (e.g. an AI-supported documentation workflow at blinc, a customer assistant at KanalVier) helped participants recognise the immediate relevance of AI and provided concrete models for future integration.

Relaxed, inclusive validation:

- By offering the option to choose and control micro-certificates and validation themselves, the SMERALD approach respected individual learning preferences and reduced anxiety about assessment. This fostered a positive learning culture and encouraged experimentation.

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Overall conclusion

The SMERALD pilot projects confirmed that effective AI integration in SMEs and the creative industries depends on awareness raising, context-sensitive training and opportunities for practical experimentation.

The SMERALD approach, with its competence-based, modular and reflective design, proved adaptable to different organisational cultures and maturity levels and supported both basic learning and advanced prototyping. The process also showed that there is a continuing need for tailored support, clear communication of benefits and attention to the human side of digital transformation.

Section 4: Recommendations

Taking into account your conclusions, what needs to be done to improve/adapt the SMERALD methodology and approach.

Improvement and adaptation of the SMERALD methodology

Based on the findings and conclusions from both pilot projects, the following recommendations aim to improve the SMERALD methodology while maintaining its flexibility, inclusiveness and strong anchoring in competence-based learning. These are not radical changes, but practical refinements to make the approach even more user-friendly and attractive for different SME contexts.

1. Improve preparation and onboarding

- **Pre-training materials:** Some elements of the course and the resulting piloting could be provided through introductory materials with application examples to facilitate access and understanding of some tools.
- **Clarify the competence-oriented model:** Although the competence-oriented learning module already existed on the platform, the content is very theoretical. A better connection could be established by incorporating current examples from the piloting. This could certainly also lead to simplifications in the context of validation and reflection exercises.

2. Adapt content and learning paths

- **Role-specific examples:** Integrate application examples from different SME roles (e.g. project management, communication, creative employees) to increase perceived relevance and promote practical application.

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3. Support reflection and validation

- **Structured reflection templates:** The SPIDER and LEVEL5 tools are a first approach to self-reflection. The addition of simple examples can also make them more accessible and meaningful for those who are not familiar with competence frameworks.

4. Focus on realistic prototyping

- **Prototyping as a core element:** The variant of the own prototype is an excellent introduction to developing individual added value and revealing potential. This process could be further enhanced to support the motivation of the participants even more. This is because they act as bridges between theory and application and promote confidence in the introduction of the tools.
- **Facilitate follow-up to the training:** To make the pilot even more sustainable, it would be a good idea to hold optional mentoring or feedback sessions to support continuous development and ensure that new tools are integrated smoothly into real workflows.

5. Remove organisational and technical barriers

- **Technical support for troubleshooting:** Platforms, tools or other forms of technical applications are usually accompanied by classic problems such as login issues or connection instability. It is only possible to test each scenario in advance to a limited extent, but the experience gained can be collected in the context as FAQs.
- **Promote internal acceptance:** Involve managers or team leaders in short introductory sessions to promote a common understanding and commitment to digital innovation.

6. Embed legal and ethical awareness

- **Data protection modules:** Although data protection is handled differently in European countries, there is a demand for it. KanalVier's experience has shown that this is a decisive factor for long-term acceptance.

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Section 5: Pilot snapshots

What is your biggest highlight from the piloting phase? It can be a good practice, interesting case study, positive success story or a touching quote/feedback you received from your learners. It can be in the form of a text or video or photo collage etc. Be creative, so we can use it for a post in the project social media.

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"When AI Met Coffee & Cameras – A SMERALD Tale"

Once upon a recent Tuesday, in a small but mighty office nestled between creativity and chaos (a.k.a. the headquarters of blinc), a group of humans made a collective decision: "Let's finally do something useful with all this talk about AI." Thus began the SMERALD pilot—an experiment that promised to bring digital data, competence frameworks, and a splash of artificial intelligence into the real world of SMEs.

The first group of brave participants were the blinc team themselves. Known for their love of post-its, flipcharts, and big ideas, they approached the training like a mystery box challenge. Out of 16 people, only 3 had ever dared to ask ChatGPT more than "What's the weather like in Rome?"

So we began. We introduced SPIDER questionnaires (no actual spiders involved—though some were still afraid). People mapped their competence levels, with faces somewhere between "A cloud is just something in the sky, it actually stores data? Good to know.'" and "Please don't make me install anything."

But something magical happened. Once the tools were demystified, the coffee was strong, and people realized they didn't need a PhD to explore AI, things got rolling. Presentations became prototypes. Notebooks turned into dashboards. And someone even trained an AI to write team newsletters (which, admittedly, were still funnier when written by hand).

Now enter KanalVier, our creative video crew from Göttingen. They joined the official CPD course in Palermo—partly for the sunshine, mostly for the innovation. As filmmakers, they weren't strangers to tech, but AI felt like a distant cousin: powerful, unpredictable, and often misunderstood.

Before flying to Palermo, they joined a short half-day workshop—just to "see if AI had anything to offer." By the end of that session, they were scribbling ideas for a client assistant prototype using generative tools to visualise scripts in real time.

Four days in Sicily later, they returned with sunburns, AI prototypes, and a suspiciously improved coffee standard. Back home, we met again—twice—to fine-

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tune their solution. The result: a working assistant that helps clients better imagine video outputs before filming even begins.

The only roadblock now? Data protection. The tool is ready to go, but until they can guarantee GDPR compliance, it's locked behind a curtain, like a stage set waiting for its premiere.

And so, in the grand finale of our pilot, we didn't just teach AI—we lived it. Some learned how to use it for research. Others for writing better emails. One person used AI to generate memes for the team Slack. All valid use cases, obviously.

The SMERALD pilots reminded us that you don't need to be a data scientist to get started with AI. You just need time, curiosity, and a bit of space to experiment.

And also—coffee. Always coffee.

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