



*SMEs – Raising Awareness and Learning on Digital data,  
data analysis and artificial intelligence*

## ***Award Report***

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**SMART  
REVOLUTION**



**euroTRAINING**



**CATRO**



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## The SMERALD Award

### *A report on the Smerald Award*

## Table of Contents

1.	Introduction.....	3
2.	Purpose of the Award .....	3
3.	Sources of Candidate Projects .....	4
3.1	Business Case Inventory (WP2) .....	4
3.2	CPD Course Outputs (WP3).....	4
3.3	Datathon Use Cases (WP3 and WP5).....	4
3.4	Additional Relevant Projects.....	4
3.5	Shortlisting Process .....	5
4.	Evaluation Committee.....	5
5.	Award Decision .....	5
5.1	Project Overview .....	5
5.2	Motivation for the Award .....	6
6.	Significance for the SMERALD Project.....	6
7.	Conclusions .....	7

## 1. Introduction

As part of its overarching mission to strengthen the capacity of European SMEs in leveraging digital data, Data Analysis, and Artificial Intelligence, the SMERALD project implemented a wide range of activities aimed at fostering competence development, innovation, and applied learning. Among these initiatives, the SMERALD Best Practice Award served as an important milestone to recognise and celebrate outstanding contributions in the field of data-driven innovation for SMEs.

The award ceremony took place during the project's Final Conference and Multiplier Event, held on 21 October 2025. This event gathered SME representatives, VET providers, educators, researchers, and stakeholders from across Europe, providing a platform to present project outcomes, share experiences from pilots, and highlight exemplary practices emerging from SMERALD's activities. One of the key moments of the day was the announcement of the winner of the SMERALD Best Practice Award: Nikola Luburić, for his project Training Program Authoring Copilot.

This report describes the aims of the award, the selection process, the sources of candidate projects, the composition of the evaluation committee, and the rationale behind the final decision.

## 2. Purpose of the Award

The SMERALD Best Practice Award was created to:

- Recognise innovative use cases of Digital Data, Data Analysis, and Artificial Intelligence within the context of SMEs.
- Highlight exemplary projects that contribute to competence-based learning, data-driven decision making, and applied AI for workforce development.
- Promote replicable, sustainable solutions developed during or in connection with SMERALD's activities.
- Showcase successful applications that could enrich the SMERALD learning ecosystem, including its blended learning offer, competence framework, and Business Case Inventory.

The award aligns with SMERALD's broader objectives of strengthening SMEs' digital capacity, fostering competence-oriented learning approaches, and supporting the adoption of AI-enabled tools for innovation and professional development.

### 3. Sources of Candidate Projects

In line with the rich variety of project activities carried out during SMERALD's lifecycle, the award committee drew upon multiple sources to identify a diverse and representative pool of candidate projects.

#### 3.1 Business Case Inventory (WP2)

The Business Case Inventory compiled in Work Package 2 constituted one major source. This inventory includes 53 good practices and case studies documenting concrete applications of Data Analysis and Artificial Intelligence in SMEs across Europe. These examples capture real business needs, innovative approaches, and emerging trends in data-driven work practices. Several cases from this repository were considered for the award shortlist.

#### 3.2 CPD Course Outputs (WP3)

The SMERALD CPD course for SME managers, employees, and VET educators introduced a competence-based approach grounded in real-life business contexts. During the training activities, participants worked on designing, refining, and testing learning modules and use cases related to digital data competences. These outputs, created by mixed groups of professionals during the CPD, served as another rich source of candidate projects.

#### 3.3 Datathon Use Cases (WP3 and WP5)

The Datathon, organised in blended mode (in presence in Palermo and online) under the coordination of CNR, involved approximately 35 participants including SMEs, non-profit actors, and civil society organisations. Participants collaboratively analysed existing SMERALD use cases, explored educational content, and generated new data-driven ideas, identifying innovative applications of AI and data analysis relevant to their work environments. Selected Datathon use cases were also taken into account into the SMERALD educational offering and were also reviewed by the award committee.

#### 3.4 Additional Relevant Projects

In addition to the official SMERALD outputs, the committee also considered externally developed but highly relevant AI-driven solutions, provided they aligned with the thematic focus of the project and demonstrated potential interest for SMEs or VET ecosystems.

### 3.5 Shortlisting Process

Based on these sources, the committee compiled an initial pool of candidates and subsequently selected a shortlist of ten projects that best reflected the values, aims, and innovation potential of the SMERALD initiative.

## 4. Evaluation Committee

The evaluation of the shortlisted projects was conducted by an internal SMERALD committee, composed of representatives from three partner institutions:

- CNR–Institute for Educational Technology (ITD) – project coordinator
- blinc eG (Germany) – expert group in competency-based learning and validation
- Smart Revolution (Italy) – specialist in training, learning methodologies, and SME innovation

This diverse composition ensured a balanced assessment combining pedagogical, methodological, and business-oriented perspectives. The committee reviewed each shortlisted project considering the following criteria:

- Relevance for SMEs
- Use of Digital Data, Data Analysis, or Artificial Intelligence
- Added value for competence development and VET ecosystems
- Innovative potential and transferability
- Coherence with SMERALD's methodological framework

## 5. Award Decision

After careful analysis, the committee unanimously decided to assign the **SMERALD Best Practice Award** to **Nikola Luburić** for his project "**Training Program Authoring Copilot**".

### 5.1 Project Overview

*Training Program Authoring Copilot* is an AI-driven system designed to assist educators, trainers, and organisations in designing competence-oriented training programmes. By integrating advanced language models with structured competence frameworks, the tool

helps produce learning pathways, identify transversal competences, and tailor educational content to learners' needs.

This application stands out for its potential to bridge technological innovation with meaningful educational design, supporting both SMEs and VET professionals in the creation of high-quality, personalised learning experiences.

## 5.2 Motivation for the Award

The official motivation provided by the internal SMERALD committee is as follows:

*"After having carefully analysed various use cases, the internal SMERALD committee would like to assign the award to Nikola Luburić for his project Training Program Authoring Copilot for its outstanding use of Artificial Intelligence in the domain of competence-based learning.*

*The application contributes to bridging the gap between technological innovation and educational value to enhance the personalization of learning pathways and provide meaningful insights into learners' progress and the development of transversal and professional competences. It proves how AI can act as an enabler of competence-based learning ecosystems, rather than as a mere automation tool, thus empowering educators, supporting learners, and fostering a culture of data-informed educational practice."*

## 6. Significance for the SMERALD Project

The award-winning project exemplifies the SMERALD vision: leveraging Digital Data and AI not merely as technological add-ons, but as strategic components of competence development within SMEs. Its alignment with SMERALD's framework is evident in several dimensions:

- **Competence-oriented learning:** The project operationalises the competence-based approach central to SMERALD, fostering personalised, modular, and evidence-based training solutions.
- **AI as an enabler:** It showcases how AI can support, not replace, educational and organisational decision-making.
- **Transferability:** The tool can be easily adapted to different business contexts, making it valuable for SMEs with diverse needs.

By awarding this project, the consortium highlights the potential of AI-powered tools to enhance both the design and delivery of professional development within SME contexts.

## 7. Conclusions

The SMERALD Best Practice Award represents a significant initiative within the project's broader strategy to promote digital transformation in SMEs through competence-oriented learning approaches. The process successfully brought together a variety of outputs from the Business Case Inventory, CPD course, Datathon, and other relevant initiatives, ultimately recognising an exemplary and forward-looking AI-based solution.

Nikola Luburić's project, *Training Program Authoring Copilot*, stands as a powerful example of how AI can drive innovation in learning design, empower SMEs and VET professionals, and foster sustainable digital competence development.

The award ceremony at the final conference not only marked the culmination of SMERALD's activities but also reinforced the central role of innovative, data-informed practices in shaping the future of SME training and skills development in Europe.

