

DIGI GEN

Professional career guidance for women in management positions in the field of digital competence

RECOMMENDATIONS

*Outlook on the future of the
DIGIGEN up-skilling programme*



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1 INTRODUCTION

The number of working women in European countries has been increasing for a long time, so in 2024, their share is roughly comparable to the share of working men. However, the proportion of women and men working in managerial positions is not comparable. Women are underrepresented in managerial positions in both the public and private sectors. This gender inequality has led the European Commission to place the promotion of women's employment at the centre of European policy. The Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 states: "The Commission will ensure that Member States [...] implement this directive to enable men and women to equally thrive both personally and professionally". More specifically, "Companies, communities and countries should be led by both women and men, in all their diversity. Whether you are a woman or a man should not influence the career you pursue."

Digitalisation is often cited as a key factor in achieving greater gender parity in leadership positions. The digital transformation connects the world of work and places new challenges in the everyday tasks of managers. For example, having to lead in a virtual space and with digital working tools. In light of these developments, there is a growing recognition of the importance of interpersonal and communication skills. Skills that are frequently ascribed to women.

Furthermore, digital leadership is often linked to more flexibility, such as working from home, which can enhance work-life balance. Some authors view the convergence of these factors as a potential avenue for a feminisation of leadership. The Erasmus+ project DIGIGEN (a combination of DIGitalisation and GENder) addresses these issues from an advisory perspective.



2 PROJECT SUMMARY

The overarching aim of DIGIGEN is to create an up-skilling programme that enables guidance professionals to design their counselling approach for women in digital leadership positions (in line with their counselling background), taking into account current scientific findings.

The overarching target group is organisations in the *(further) education sector* that establish the DIGIGEN up-skilling programme as a training course offer. They are the addressees of the developed concept and indirectly benefit from the content. A direct target group that benefits from the up-skilling programme are *guidance professionals* (e.g., in Human Resource Management (HRM), career and coaching services, public employment services, and further education institutions). The counselling support for (future) female managers makes *women* an indirect target group.

Within the project, a competence profile was elaborated to clarify the needs of counsellors and female managers as well as the general status quo. This competence profile was composed of (1) a literature review, (2) semi-structured interviews with counsellors and (3) semi-structured questionnaires for female leaders. The interviews and questionnaires involved 51 guidance professionals and 104 female leaders.

The results provided good insight into the needs of guidance professionals on the one hand and (future) female leaders on the other. The insights then were the basis for designing the DIGIGEN up-skilling programme with a curriculum, a didactical framework, and ready-to-use training materials. These were tested by means of an expert review and three national piloting events.



In the last step, all project results were taught exploratively in face-to-face courses and uploaded to the DIGIGEN website. The website provides self-directed learning opportunities and support for teachers and trainers of educational organisations (see <https://digi-gen.eu>).

Overall, the following products and outcomes were created:

Competence profile – literature review and needs analysis¹

- 3 x Literature Report; *one each for Germany, the Netherlands, and Hungary*
 - 1 x Transnational Literature Synthesis; *integrating the three Literature Reports*
 - 4 x Literature Summary; *short version in each national language*
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- 1 x Research Report; *summary and synthesis of the interviews and questionnaires*
 - 4 x Research Summary; *short version in each national language*

Up-skilling programme – concept, curriculum, and resource package²

- 1 x Didactical Framework; *explaining the didactics of the programme (concept)*
 - 1 x Structural Handbook; *providing an overview of the modules (curriculum)*
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- 1 x Step-by-Step Instructions; *detailed instructions on the training material (trainer guide)*
 - 7 x Presentation; *presentations on introduction + 5 topics + final reflection (resources)*
 - 8 x Reader; *complementing background information for all content (participants material)*
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- 2 x Problem-Based Learning Libraries with 17 x Readers and 4 x Case Studies
 - 1 x Self-Evaluation Form for Guidance Professionals

¹ All documents are in English; unless indicated otherwise.

² All documents are in English, German, Dutch, and Hungarian.

Testing – piloting events and expert review

- 3 x Piloting Event; *one each in Germany, Hungary and the Netherlands*
 - 1 x Expert Review; *conducted in the Netherlands with training experts*
-
- 1 x Testing Report; *summarising all improvements made along the development process*

Implementing – face-to-face training and online platform

- 6 x Training Cours; *two each in Germany, Hungary and the Netherlands (face-to-face)*
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- 1 x Webpage; *featuring all products and the up-skilling programme (including self-learning)*
-
- 4 x Multiplier Event; *national dissemination of the up-skilling programme and project*
 - 5 x Flyer and Poster; *national dissemination of the up-skilling programme and project*

Reflecting – evaluation and recommendation

- 1 x Webpage Evaluation Report; *summarising feedback on the website; English*
- 1 x Recommendation Report; *critical reflection and further usage of the results; English*

3 RECOMMENDATIONS

The testing phase was pivotal in refining the DIGIGEN up-skilling programme, ensuring it aligns with the needs and aspirations of trainers/teachers, learners, and female leaders. Feedback from these sessions highlights a strong consensus on the programme's relevance, particularly praising its comprehensive approach to digital leadership and its nuanced understanding of gender dynamics in leadership. The programme's structure, design, and the seamless integration of its modules are consistently recognised as strengths, showcasing a well-crafted curriculum that supports learner success. (see [Testing Report](#) for more information)

Based on the feedback, recommendations on how to use the up-skilling programme were created. Recommendations 1 to 3 address all target groups of the up-skilling programme (trainer, guidance professional, female leader, interested person). Recommendations 4 to 6 are relevant for educational organisations only.

RECOMMENDATION 1: TAKE WHAT YOU NEED!

The up-skilling programme is a framework of 5 Topics. These Topics build on each other but are at the same time self-contained. Consequently, not every Topic (and its sub-content) might have the same relevance for every user. During the testing, it became known that HR experts are most interested in information about digital leadership and the organisational context. Then again, career counsellors and coaches are most interested in empowering women and knowing about profound counselling theory.

It is expressly desired that *trainers* choose and select topics that are relevant to their students. The Topics and their content can be supplemented, shortened, or removed in total. As an *individual learner* on the DIGIGEN website, choose what interests you most and get acquainted with the information presented.

RECOMMENDATION 2: ADAPT IT TO YOUR CONTEXT!

All the information given in the up-skilling programme delivers rather theoretical and abstract input. This abstract level of information was deliberately chosen to make it as easy as possible to transfer the content to different counselling contexts. For example, no current numbers on female representation at the management level are given in the material. This prevents the documents from becoming outdated after just a few years and makes them more adaptable to contexts (e.g., country). Also, strategies to



empower women (Topic 3) are shown on a meta-level rather than concrete instructions. This is to initiate critical thinking and avoid a generalisation of women.

As a *trainer*, use examples to make the programme fit your setting and include context-specific information in your training. As an *individual learner* on the DIGIGEN website, critically reflect and transfer what you have learned to your context of expertise.

RECOMMENDATION 3: ,FEMALE 'IS BUT ONE DIVERSITY DIMENSION!

Although the up-skilling programme is designed around the topic of supporting women in becoming or being a leader, it does not wish to discriminate against any other dimensions of diversity. In contrast, most of the stereotyping aspects mentioned within the up-skilling programme are not exclusive to women but apply to many diverse people (e.g., nationality, age, etc.). The up-skilling programme does not want to penalise someone but to address unknown aspects of counselling to improve the experience of a particular group of counselees. It just happens that this particular group is women.

RECOMMENDATION 4: ADJUST THE TEACHING TO YOUR AUDIENCE!

While testing the up-skilling programme, it became clear that different groups of students have different learning habits. In the Netherlands, interactive learning was favoured over frontal teaching. In Germany and Hungary, students valued the profound theoretical input. However, due to the small number of participants in the testing, it is not yet possible to draw any general conclusions from this observation. Overall, it should be noted that learning styles differ between institutions and students, which should be considered when teaching.



In DIGIGEN practice, this could look like starting with the case studies (from Topic 5) and having the students work through these alongside the theoretical input. With experienced guidance professionals, discussion tasks could be more at the centre of the up-skilling programme so participants can profit from their professional expertise and exchange. With newcomers in the field of guidance, theoretical aspects of counselling could be focused, and role play could be conducted using the four case studies (from Topic 5).

RECOMMENDATION 5: PREPARE YOURSELF!

Teaching the up-skilling programme does not require any specific qualification for the trainer. However, having some experience teaching/training a group of adults (in other contexts) is recommended. Furthermore, the trainer does not necessarily need to be an expert in counselling female leaders but needs to be acquainted with the content s*he teaches. Therefore, if the content is unknown to a trainer, the Readers on each Topic provide a first glance at the required background knowledge and additional recommendations for further reading.

RECOMMENDATION 6: MAKE IT OFFICIAL!

While the up-skilling programme is not certified through the project, it is designed to be easily certified by any organisation that wishes to use its materials. This flexibility allows the programme to seamlessly integrate into existing educational frameworks, enhancing its potential for widespread adoption. The programme's scope is about 5 to 15 ETCS credits on the European Credit Transfer System, depending on the extensivity of the discussions and case studies. Therefore, it can easily be implemented as a course within a study programme or as a stand-alone qualification. Information on possible certification/accreditation is provided in the Structural Handbook.



4 NATIONAL IMPACT

In **Germany**, there has been considerable interest in the up-skilling programme among the Federal Employment Agency and adult education centres ('Volkshochschulen'). The Federal Employment Agency is considering integrating the up-skilling programme's content into the qualification of prospective and experienced career counsellors on a permanent basis. One potential avenue for this is through the project partner, the University of Applied Labour Studies (HdBA), as part of the university's teaching and certificate programmes. Alternatively, training could be provided by the training centres ('Bildungs- und Tagungsstätten') of the Federal Employment Agency, where counsellors receive training all over Germany. The adult education centres ('Volkshochschulen') were primarily interested in the content for female managers during the pilot phase. They would utilise the programme's modular structure (building blocks) to design their own concept directly aimed at women in management positions. This last-mentioned group of female leaders also showed considerable interest, with young women particularly keen to explore the topic in the context of their own careers. This overall interest in the up-skilling programme is encouraging, but it remains to be seen how it will develop.

In **Hungary**, HR counsellors, career counsellors, project leaders, and female entrepreneurs affiliated with the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Csongrád-Csanád (CSKIK) got acquainted with the upskilling programme and responded positively to its structure and content.

With its aims and outputs, the project was presented to female entrepreneurs, i.e., the members of the Female Leaders' Club of CSKIK, who reacted encouragingly to the topics covered in the training material. Female leaders want to learn about new



trends and tools in digitalisation and need concrete strategies and exercises to upgrade their digital skills. We encourage female leaders to use the practical aspects of the upskilling programme and advise them to study the parts which explore digital leadership and digital management tools (Topics 1 & 2).

The upskilling programme might be included in the training programme of Hungarian higher education institutions offering training programmes or further training possibilities on human resource counselling, guidance counselling and teacher training. Respective parts of the material can be covered in courses where entrepreneurial skills are taught or developed.

Experienced HR and guidance counsellors already working at companies, in the public employment sector, job centres, recruitment agencies, and career support offices can use the training materials to upgrade their knowledge individually.

With the help of the [EPALE platform](#), the adult training community in Hungary also got acquainted with the upskilling programme. Using the material, trainers of adult learners can expand their trainers' portfolio, including the DIGIGEN concept. Individual adult learners, entrepreneurs, startupper, and female entrepreneurs with leadership aspirations can individually select the relevant topics of their own interest.

In the **Netherlands**, digital transformation plays a crucial role in shaping modern society. However, women still need to be represented in the technical and digital sectors, which limits their participation in this transformation.

Although positive steps have been taken, such as initiatives to encourage more girls to pursue STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) and ICT (Information and Communication Technology), the gap between men and women remains significant. Career opportunities for women are hindered, but diversity and innovation in the digital sector are also limited. Even more worrying, it leaves the



industry without diverse perspectives to be able to create services and products that fit all of society.

Training and education are essential to bridging this gender gap. Through targeted training, women can develop the digital skills crucial in an increasingly automated and technology-driven world. This up-skilling programme aims to enhance leadership qualities and entrepreneurial skills in the digital space. Furthermore, it also contributes to a more inclusive work environment where women have equal opportunities to grow and make an impact. In a world where digital transformation plays a central role in almost all industries, it is crucial that women are fully included.

The DIGIGEN up-skilling programme contributes to this development. The programme is modular in structure and designed in such a way that the facilitator can choose how to use the content. This programme allows the facilitator to tailor it to reflect the client's vision and thus offer tailor-made training.



5 CRITICAL REFLECTION

The up-skilling programme could be considered generic. As already mentioned, this is by no means an omission on the part of the project team but rather intentional. In the project's first phase, with its literature review and needs analysis, it quickly became clear that the influence of stereotypes concerning gender and digitalisation is largely unknown. It also became clear that the challenges faced by women in leadership positions could not be more heterogeneous. Right after that first phase, it became therefore clear that the up-skilling programme could not present a universal solution. Instead, it must raise awareness of the situation and create a scientifically sound basis for exchanging experiences among guidance professionals. Therefore, the up-skilling programme is not generic but creates a foundation with a broad range of ideas and topics for one's counselling approach. One consequence of the broad range of topics is the online self-evaluation form for guidance professionals. The form supports the guidance professionals in identifying their already existing competencies and reflecting on their areas of improvement. Based on the results, the self-directed learning or teaching strategy can be adapted.

While creating the online platform, it became clear that the programme thrives on the theoretical input and the discussions that build on it. Thereby, the theoretical input creates awareness of the situation, while the discussions allow participants to reflect on their counselling. The theoretical input is easily transferable to the online context, while the discussions are based on face-to-face interventions. For this reason, the online course focuses on self-directed, flexible, and efficient knowledge acquisition, presenting all information in the most accessible way possible while deliberately avoiding elements such as quizzes and the like.



6 FUTURE TRENDS

There is currently a high awareness of gender roles and stereotypes in society. Eventually, this will lead to a change in people's gender-specific perceptions. This, in turn, will impact women who are and will be in leadership positions. Women may be more likely to aspire to leadership roles or move more strongly into stereotypical male professions. The DIGIGEN up-skilling programme could be a small piece of the puzzle to drive this change. At the same time, the up-skilling programme's relevance and necessity will change with this societal transformation. Those impacts can not yet be foreseen.

In addition to the change in social role perceptions, digitalisation is constantly progressing. As a result, the digital competencies and software skills mentioned in the up-skilling programme can quickly become outdated. With this in mind, DIGIGEN's documents must continually be reviewed and adapted to ensure that they are up to date.

Ultimately, it is important to recognise that there is no single solution that will address the underrepresentation of women in management positions. On the one hand, women must decide for themselves whether they wish to pursue management positions. On the other hand, it is important to recognise that women are not a homogeneous group. The up-skilling programme is, therefore, reluctant to make a concrete proposal for a solution and instead calls for an interactive exchange between the experienced participants. However, there may be instances where such concrete strategies or proposals can be applied uniformly to a group of women. Identifying these instances is a task for the future.



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