Bridging the digital gender divide starts with SME4DD

An increasingly digital Europe means an increasing need for people skilled in information and communication technologies (ICT). To meet this demand, Europe will need to ensure that everyone has a chance to contribute to the digital transformation.

Unfortunately, this currently isn't the case.

According to the European Commission, even though women make up 51% of the EU population, only one in three STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) graduates and 1 in 5 ICT specialists are female. What's even more worrying is the fact that these figures have not changed much over the past decade. As a case in point, only 12% of the AI workforce is female.

This is problematic not only because everyone should have an equal opportunity to thrive in the digital decade, but because diversity is key to Europe's competitiveness. For example, Europe needs more people in ICT jobs to overcome the strategic shortage of workers with advanced digital skills. If we fill at least 45% of these jobs with women by 2027, Europe will see a significant boost to its GDP, with estimates ranging from EUR 260 to 600 billion.

Clearly, Europe needs to do more to increase the number women working in tech, and that starts with increasing the number of girls and women studying ICT and gaining digital skills, whether at school, at university, or through such upskilling and reskilling initiatives as SME4DD.

An EU-funded project under the Digital Europe Programme, SME4DD is designed to provide SME professionals – including women – with the essential skills and knowledge they need to navigate and leverage the digital innovations that are defining our future.

But SME4DD doesn't just talk the gender diversity talk, it walks the walk too. In fact, several of our courses are facilitated by leading females in the fields of Artificial Intelligence, Blockchain and Cybersecurity.

One of those females is Laure Bourgois, PhD.

With a doctorate in Artificial Intelligence, Dr Bourgois is an Associate Professor of AI at the University of Versailles, an AI expert at France's National Cybersecurity Coordination Centre, and the author of dozens of scientific publications and popular articles on AI. She also serves as an engineer at SME4DD project partner Inria, where she leads our Machine Learning: Tech Bricks for SMEs and Scikit-learn, the Machine Learning Toolbox for SMEs courses.

How does the SME4DD project help answer this need?

The project is an excellent opportunity for everyone who wants to gain the digital skills needed to careers futureproof. The short-term structure of our courses means one can participate in the training while holding a full-time job.

The project sets an ambitious goal of bringing 30% of women into training courses. While this target is more achievable in entry-level programs, it proves to be more challenging in advanced-level courses where the presence of women remains very low. This is particularly evident in specialized fields such as blockchain, cybersecurity, or machine learning, where female participation is still significantly underrepresented.

To increase our chances to attract women, we have opened several free courses, in particularity in blockchain. Inria Academy delivers a course on machine learning for executives for free and the women participation is more near to 30%. These programs are designed to provide participants with

practical skills they can apply immediately, while also building a strong foundation for acquiring more advanced competencies in the future.

Last but not least, because our courses are designed based on the needs of SMEs, they will increase the number of women able to design, develop and deploy digital solutions in the economy and across sectors.

Our goal is not only to improve access but also to ensure that women are better equipped to keep pace with rapid technological change. For example, in light of recent developments at Accenture—where thousands of employees will let go after being outpaced by AI our training offers a proactive way to avoid such scenarios by providing women with a solid foundation from which to build towards new skills and jobs of tomorrow.