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TALENT. TECH. TRUST.

Welcome to the latest edition of the 28DIGITAL newsletter!

As the year comes to a close, this edition of the 28DIGITAL newsletter offers a brief reflection on a period of strong progress and meaningful collaboration. It has been an exceptional year, and we would like to sincerely thank our partners, institutions, innovators, and ecosystem stakeholders for their continued trust and engagement.

This issue highlights several milestones that underscore our shared momentum.

28DIGITAL has been recognised as a **Startup Ecosystem Star 2025**, with awards spanning startup programmes, talent and research, and innovation policy — a recognition that reflects the collective efforts of the wider ecosystem.

We also feature new strategic partnerships that strengthen Europe's innovation capacity and global reach. A **collaboration** with **San Marino Innovation and GEA** supports the development of an agile innovation environment closely connected to Europe's leading hubs, while **our work** with the **United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO)** advances long-term, innovation-driven development in emerging and developing markets.

The edition concludes with upcoming opportunities across education, scale-up support, social innovation, and digital health — reinforcing our focus on turning innovation into sustainable impact.

Thank you for contributing to a year of concrete results and shared ambition!

As we step into the year ahead, one thing is certain: innovation moves faster when we build it together.

28DIGITAL Takes Home 3 SES Awards

Big win alert: 28DIGITAL **has been named** a **Startup Ecosystem Star 2025** by the ICC and Mind the Bridge — earning recognition in **three categories**: *Best-in-class Startup Programs*, *Top Talent & Research*, and *Pioneering Innovation Policy*. The awards **were presented** at ICC HQ in Paris alongside the OECD and European Commission, coinciding with Mind the Bridge's new report, *"The Calm Before the AI Storm."* The global snapshot shows a $4.2T startup economy, nearly 98,000 scaleups, and a clear trend: AI is about to reshape innovation faster than any previous wave.

Why it matters:
The SES Awards spotlight the organisations shaping the next era of startup ecosystems — those investing in talent, collaboration, capital, and innovation-driven policy. Accepting the award, CEO Federico Menna put it simply:
"This recognition validates our direction and the dedication of the entire 28DIGITAL ecosystem."

Bottom line:
In a world preparing for the AI storm, 28DIGITAL is already building what comes next.

Joining Forces to Power San Marino's Innovation Future

Big move: A new strategic MoU unites **San Marino Innovation**, **GEA**, and 28DIGITAL to accelerate the Republic's evolution into a dynamic innovation hub. **The agreement**, signed by leaders from all three organisations, marks a major step for one of the world's smallest states aiming for outsized impact.

Why it matters:
San Marino is emerging as a fertile ground for experimentation, startup growth, and digital transformation. Through this partnership, it gains access to proven innovation methodologies, global networks, and closer ties to Europe's leading tech ecosystems.

What's in the deal:

- Joint programmes connecting San Marino with top innovation hubs in Europe and the U.S.
- Co-designed initiatives to discover, validate, and scale new tech solutions.
- Challenge-driven calls engaging startups, corporates, universities, and research centres.
- Exploration of funding opportunities, including a potential San Marino–based deep-tech fund.
- Visibility and branding efforts to position San Marino as a credible innovation sandbox.

Bottom line:

A small nation and key innovation players are joining forces — and opening a new chapter in Europe's technological landscape.

28DIGITAL & UNIDO: A Collaboration to Build Innovation Systems That Endure

The collaboration between 28DIGITAL and the **United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO)** is entering a new, **more ambitious phase** aimed at strengthening innovation-driven development across emerging and developing markets. While our Dubai partnership accelerates venture growth, this work focuses on shaping the foundations of national innovation systems.

At the core:

The global expansion of **UNIDO's ScaleX programme**. By supporting its rollout, we're helping create a framework for mission-driven innovation, open collaboration, and technologies that deliver real impact within local communities.

What's taking shape:

We're co-creating **Ecosystem as a Service**, a programme rooted in our ecosystem methodology. Its goal: help countries build resilient, interconnected innovation environments aligned with local priorities and anchored in strong governmental engagement.

The broader agenda:

- Long-term institutional capacity building
- Talent and skills development
- Governance model improvements
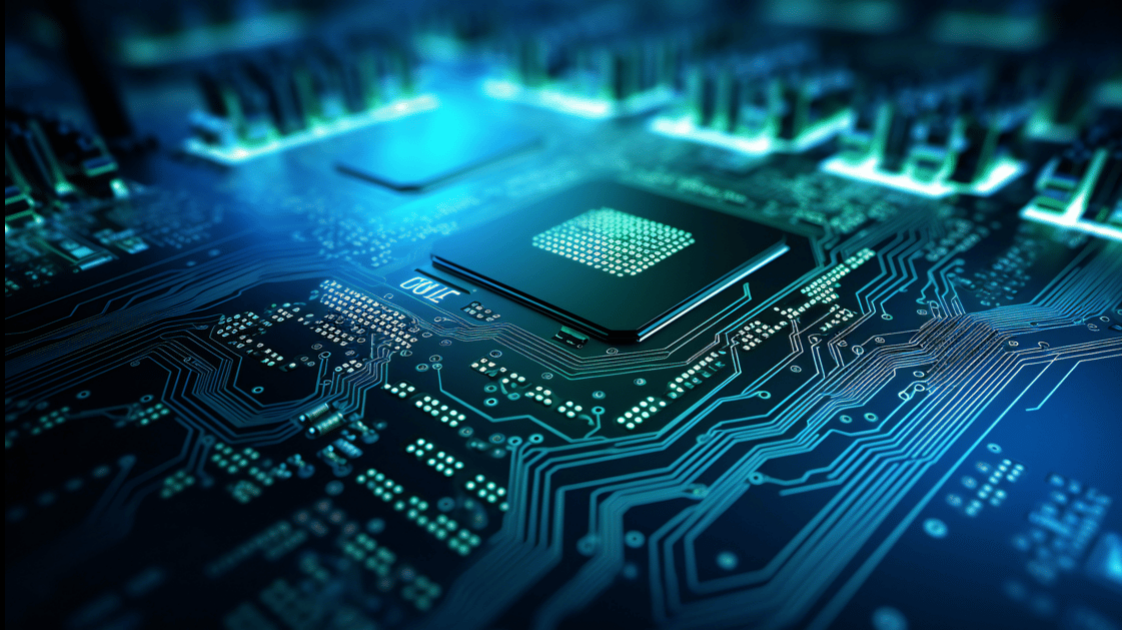- Stronger public–private partnerships

Why it matters:

This collaboration is about more than ecosystem growth — it's about **designing innovation pathways that are inclusive, sustainable, and built to last**.

Bottom line:

When **collaboration meets commitment**, countries gain the tools to shape their own innovation futures.

In Other News: Summer Schools, Smart Cities, Social Innovation & Digital Health

Summer School Programmes 2026 — Applications Open

28DIGITAL is expanding its Summer School offerings and is looking for universities and training providers to design new two-week programmes in emerging tech. The call is open to organisations across EU Member States and Horizon Europe–associated countries, with submissions due **19 January at 17:00 CET**. All details and requirements are available **on the open call homepage**, and proposals must be submitted via the 28DIGITAL intranet.

Women in Digital Index Launched

The **WIDCON (Connecting Women in Digital)** project has released the **2025 Women in Digital Index**, a new data-driven benchmark tracking women's participation across Europe's digital pipeline — from STEM education to leadership. Launched in Brussels, the Index highlights persistent gaps in digital jobs and senior roles despite strong educational participation, and provides an evidence base to support more effective gender-equality policies across Europe.

▢ ACCEND Scale-Up Accelerator — Deadline Extended

Smart city startups and SMEs now have until **23 December 2025** to join the ACCEND Scale-Up Accelerator, which offers tailored support, cross-border investor access, and a guided path to scale. The latest info day recording is available online, and **the application form** is live. Eligible companies must be headquartered in the EU or a Horizon Europe–associated country.

DiGi-SEII — Scaling Digital Capacity for Social Enterprises

The DiGi-SEII programme has extended its deadline to **9 January 2026**, supporting social enterprises and their support organisations with online learning, mentoring, matchmaking, and in-person exchanges. Participants can also receive up to **€2,000** for travel to programme events. Separate application forms remain available **for Social Enterprises** and **SESOs**, with eligibility spanning Belgium, France, Greece, Sweden, Ukraine (for SEs) and the full EU/OCTs (for SESOs).

UNITE Open Call — €4M for the Future of Digital Health

UNITE is inviting innovators to submit solutions that advance remote care and health data interoperability, with up to **€1M** available per selected project. **The deadline is 15 January 2026**, and applications must be submitted through the UNITE Cloud platform. Eligible applicants come from seven participating regions, including Zealand, Northern Netherlands, Central Macedonia, Lombardy, Extremadura, Scotland, and Romania. The UNITE project has also launched a **Call for External Experts** to evaluate the submitted proposals.