AI4VET4AI

AI-powered next generation of VET

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D3.1: Handbook: How to engage different AI-related stakeholders in VET ecosystems

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Executive Summary

The **AI4VET4AI project** addresses a critical challenge facing Europe's workforce: the urgent need to develop AI-related skills and expertise within vocational education and training (VET) ecosystems. By uniting educational institutions, industry players, and government bodies, the project leverages **the Triple Helix Model** to foster an environment where innovation, knowledge exchange, and collaboration thrive. This approach ensures that graduates, employees, and decision-makers are better prepared to engage with AI responsibly and effectively.

As part of its efforts, the project undertook **a comprehensive awareness-raising campaign** (Work Package 3), including events and outreach activities tailored to various stakeholders. Within this framework, the "Blueprint for Engaging AI-related Stakeholders in VET Ecosystems" was developed, providing a strategic roadmap for community-building, stakeholder segmentation, and inclusive dialogue. Online platforms—ranging from social media channels to specialized forums—were combined with offline gatherings like meetups and conferences to reach educators, students, researchers, policy advocates, industry professionals, and entrepreneurs.

These activities revealed several key insights. First, well-prepared, context-specific content—supported by expert speakers, interactive formats, and storytelling—proved essential in building trust, dispelling misconceptions about AI, and inspiring participants to explore practical applications. Second, the quality of engagement depended on strategic outreach: combining broad public announcements with targeted invitations, tapping into professional and youth-oriented social networks, and aligning subject matter with local interests. Third, the formation of Memorandums of Understanding and similar agreements underscored the importance of long-term partnerships and structured cooperation. Such instruments serve as catalysts for sustained collaboration, ensuring that knowledge transfer, curriculum development, and skill-building initiatives remain ongoing rather than episodic.

Crucially, the project identified challenges as well. Attracting and retaining participants, balancing technical depth with accessibility, and engaging harder-to-reach groups like policymakers or non-tech professionals required adaptability and refinement of approaches. Lessons learned—such as offering preparatory materials before events, segmenting audiences into smaller discussion groups, and adopting "roadshow" formats for regional outreach—can guide future initiatives.

Overall, **the achievements of the AI4VET4AI project's awareness-raising campaign demonstrate that a carefully structured, community-centric approach can enhance trust in AI, spotlight its relevance to diverse sectors, and strengthen VET ecosystems**. By building relationships that extend beyond single events, embracing interactive and inclusive methods, and cultivating strategic alliances through formal agreements**, the project offers a scalable model for others seeking to prepare Europe's workforce for an AI-driven future**.

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1. Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is not just a technological advancement; it is a transformative force shaping the future of work, education, and society. As AI increasingly becomes a part of our daily lives—whether through healthcare innovations, sustainable energy solutions, or streamlined industrial processes—**it is clear that the ability to harness its potential is no longer optional but essential**.

Despite its immense promise, Europe faces significant challenges in adopting AI at the pace of global competitors. A lack of widespread AI expertise and skilled professionals has created a bottleneck, limiting the region's ability to fully capitalize on this technology's potential. Vocational education and training (VET) systems, as critical drivers of workforce development, have a pivotal role to play in bridging this gap.

The AI4VET4AI project is a bold step toward addressing these challenges. By equipping educators, students, and businesses with the tools and knowledge to leverage AI, the project aims to empower regions across Europe to lead in ethical, innovative, and sustainable AI applications. Through strategic partnerships, cutting-edge training programs, and the establishment of dedicated AI innovation hubs, we are building the foundation for a skilled workforce ready to shape the AI-powered future of Europe.

The project aims to raise awareness of AI's transformative potential and build a strong community around its adoption in vocational education. By identifying high-potential sectors for AI application across 17 regions, it collaborates with businesses and organizations to develop 14 free online courses (MOOCs) and teaching materials. These resources, combined with the establishment of 11 AI-focused VET campuses and 7 innovation incubators, foster collaboration, creativity, and entrepreneurial skills, driving the digital transformation of the workforce.

The project fosters strong partnerships among stakeholders to raise awareness of AI potential among public and private sector representatives and civil society within the regions involved.

The project consortium is composed of **26 partners coming from 11 different countries** (Croatia, Slovenia, Serbia, Austria, Germany, Greece, Italy, Spain, Netherlands, Turkey and Ireland) **across 17 European NUTS2 regions, divided into 3 categories: VET providers, Enterprise, industry or sector representative organisation and Research institute**. VET providers that are part of the consortium are Algebra College University (AUC), Technical School Cakovec (TSC), Faculty for information studies Novo mesto (FIS), School Center Celje (SCC), Belgrade Metropolitan University (BMU), Management Center Innsbruck International Hochschule GmbH (MCI), Technische Informationsbibliothek (TIB), AKMI S.A (AKMI), Uni Naples (UNINA), Inercia Digital (INDI), University of Amsterdam (UvA), S.K.T.A.I.H.L (SKTAIHL) and Griffith College (GC). Enterprise, industry or sector representative organisations are Croatian Artificial Intelligence Association (CROAI), Poslovna inteligencija d.o.o. (PI), Arctur (ARC), Association for Women's Potential Affirmation and Networking (AFA), Network Development Hub GmbH (NDH), Strategische Partnerschaft Sensorik e.V. (SEN), Rezos Brands (REBR), Kelyon (KEY), Camera Commercio Italiana per la Spagna (CCIS), AlterContacts (ALCO), Southeast Anatolian Exporters' Association (GAIB) and Anser (ANS). The research institute that is part of the project is Rudolftovo (RUD).

Each partner brings a clear added value to the consortium and all partners are aware of the institutional benefits that participation in this project will bring to their organisations. VET providers will have the opportunity to innovate the pedagogical approach of the courses, focusing, on the one hand, on teaching innovation and intrapreneurial mindset and on the other contributing to applied research for the development of local communities and regions. The labour market actors, with their expertise, will have the opportunity to contribute to spread AI know-how on the project's results all around Europe; will aid SMEs in improving their AI skills and knowledge, also supporting the

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development on new VET training programs; will add value with their high-level experience on AI and its use to foster new business, their know-how on methodologies and digital tools for AI and related products/services.

This Handbook is part of the AI4VET4AI project's deliverables completed within Work Package 3 (WP3), led by the Croatian Artificial Intelligence Association (CroAI), with a primary focus on raising awareness of AI skills and their role in creating job opportunities. To achieve this, WP3 included four interconnected tasks: Development of the plan for ecosystem building and awareness-raising activities (T3.1), Public outreach campaign for AI VET ecosystem build-up and awareness raising (T3.2), Talks with policymakers and public officials (T3.3) and Partnering with European AI brands (T3.4). T3.1 focused on creating a detailed plan to connect VET providers with labor market agents, research institutions, policymakers, and enterprises. Using co-creation methods, CroAI coordinated a public outreach campaign designed to respect regional and national specificities while promoting a unified European VET AI agenda. As a part of T3.2, local events, debates, meetups, and info days were organized to foster discussions on AI's role in sustainable development and career opportunities. These activities brought VET providers into closer collaboration with businesses and helped establish national and regional Centers of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs). The campaign also supported mapping AI-related skill gaps and regional use cases. Recognizing that engagement with policymakers requires distinct strategies, T3.3 focused on discussions about AI regulation and the alignment of national and EU skill systems. These talks also aimed to integrate the project into national Smart Specialization Strategies (S3), ensuring long-term sustainability. T3.4 sought to involve pan-European AI brands to enhance the project's visibility and sustainability. By aligning VET education with current trends and involving key industry leaders, this task aimed to make vocational training more attractive to young learners and foster deeper connections with the broader AI community.

WP3 also included three key deliverables, each contributing to the overarching goals of the project by addressing specific aspects of AI awareness, trustworthiness, and integration into VET ecosystems: handbook: How to engage different AI-related stakeholders in VET ecosystems (D3.1), Recommendations on trustworthy AI (D3.2) and Data-sets for VET teaching (D3.3). D3.1 is a comprehensive step-by-step guide designed to help VET providers and partners identify and engage key stakeholders within their regional ecosystems. Drawing on best practices developed throughout WP3, the handbook offers practical advice on launching effective public outreach campaigns and fostering collaboration. It concludes with guidelines for formalizing partnerships through Memorandums of Understanding and Cooperation with labour market actors, ensuring sustainable engagement. D3.2 provided actionable recommendations for regulating AI-powered solutions in both the public and private sectors. Based on insights gained from communication campaigns conducted across multiple regions, the recommendations focus on fostering trust in AI applications by aligning them with ethical standards and societal needs. This deliverable aims to support policymakers and organizations in adopting responsible AI practices. As a foundational resource for future project activities, D3.3 compiles data sets collected through outreach campaigns and interactions with regional, national, and European AI companies. These data sets will play a critical role in developing practical teaching materials and resources for use in subsequent work packages, ensuring that VET programs are equipped with relevant and up-to-date content for AI education.

Each deliverable strengthens the project's capacity to build awareness, foster trust, and integrate AI effectively into vocational education and training ecosystems.

This document is a part of D3.1. **The following chapters will provide a step-by-step guidebook, composed of best practices from WP3, on how to identify stakeholders in the regional VET ecosystem, engage them, launch public outreach campaigns, and conclude the process with a series of Memorandums of Understandings and Cooperation with different labour market actors**.

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2. Community building and AI-related stakeholders engagement in VET ecosystems

2.1 Identification of relevant stakeholders

At the beginning of our awareness-raising campaign, we recognized the importance of effectively engaging AI-related stakeholders in VET ecosystems. To ensure the successful execution of all the activities envisioned, we developed the **"Blueprint for Engaging AI-related Stakeholders in VET Ecosystems"**. This blueprint outlines strategies for fostering collaboration between academia, industry, and government, drawing on the **Triple Helix Model**. The Triple Helix Model of Innovation is a framework for understanding and analysing innovation processes in a knowledge-based society, which primarily focuses on the interaction between academia, industry, and government as key actors in the innovation process.

The Triple Helix Model introduces three main actors or helices that interact and influence each other in the innovation process:

- **University (Academia)**: This helix represents universities and research institutions. In this context, universities are not just sources of knowledge but also active participants in the innovation process. They contribute to innovation through research, education, and the development of human capital.
- **Industry**: This helix represents the business sector, including companies and corporations. Industry plays a crucial role in innovation by applying knowledge generated in universities to develop new products, services, and technologies. The industry also provides funding and partnerships for research projects.
- **Government**: This helix represents government agencies and policies that shape the innovation ecosystem. The government can influence innovation by funding research, creating favourable regulatory environments, and setting innovation-related policies. It often serves as a mediator and facilitator of interactions between academia and industry.

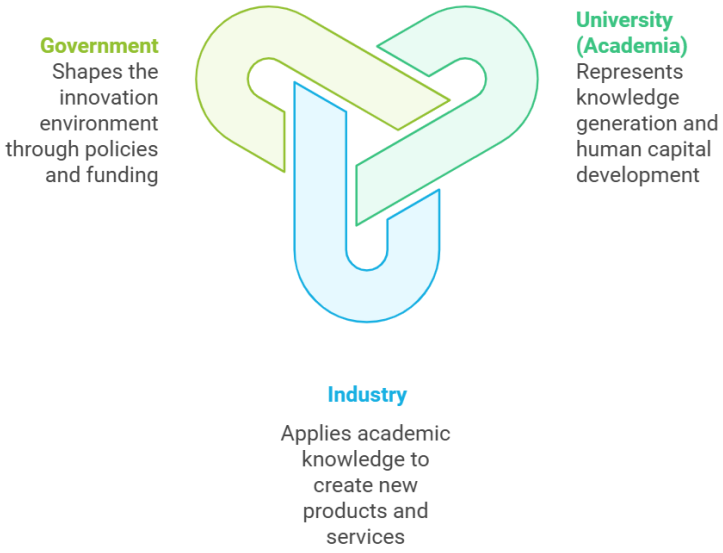

Figure 1 Triple Helix model

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In the Triple Helix Model, innovation is seen as the result of the dynamic interactions and collaborations among these three helices. It emphasizes **the importance of a knowledge-based society where the boundaries between academia, industry, and government are porous and where innovation is co-produced by all three actors working together**. This model highlights the need for effective networks, partnerships, and knowledge flows between these sectors to foster innovation and economic development.

Another key element of the blueprint is **community building**. Community-building strategy spans online and offline methods, recognizing the importance of both digital and physical spaces. Online platforms like WhatsApp and Zoom facilitate accessible knowledge sharing and networking, while offline events like meetups, conferences, and parties bring diverse groups together. This structure enables the community to engage regularly and maintain a supportive network.

The blueprint emphasises community-based education to demystify AI and address ethical concerns. It suggests organizing educational events to connect students with AI experts and industry leaders, fostering practical skills and entrepreneurial spirit.

Social media and newsletters play a significant role in expanding outreach. Using diverse platforms (e.g., LinkedIn for professional networking, TikTok for younger audiences) allows engaging a broad demographic, enhancing accessibility and encouraging inclusive AI discussions.

To further enhance the engagement of AI-related stakeholders, the blueprint emphasizes several additional initiatives and strategies. A key aspect is the segmentation of online communities into niche groups, such as Machine Learning Engineers, Product Managers, and Infrastructure Engineers, to facilitate focused and tailored interactions. Unique formats like the "Fight Club," where participants debate AI topics from opposing viewpoints, foster critical thinking and dynamic discussions. Offline events are meticulously planned to address diverse needs—meetups in smaller cities cover general AI topics to welcome broader audiences, while those in larger cities explore niche subjects for more specialized discussions. These events are held in relaxed, informal venues, encouraging open dialogue and inclusivity. Parties, biannual networking events, attract a diverse mix of professionals from different industries, providing unique opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration. Additionally, the blueprint highlights mentorship programs, where experienced professionals contribute to the community by sharing their knowledge, thus creating a "full circle" of learning and growth. Leveraging diverse social media platforms, from TikTok for younger audiences to LinkedIn for professionals, ensures broad accessibility and engagement, complemented by newsletters that provide storytelling and updates. This comprehensive approach strengthens the inclusivity and accessibility of the community, fostering meaningful connections and driving AI innovation.

Once these community-building efforts and outreach activities were underway**, it became clear that people from all corners of the ecosystem were eager to join the conversation**. Their interest offered us a chance to see exactly how various stakeholders—whether educators, students, industry leaders, or policymakers—were engaging with the ideas at hand.

Educators and training institutions, **including professors and VET teachers**, demonstrated strong enthusiasm, particularly regarding AI's potential in curricula and the digital future of education. These stakeholders actively participated in discussions on integrating AI into teaching, eager to learn about its applications.

Students and researchers also showed high levels of engagement. Students, driven by curiosity about AI technologies, participated enthusiastically, while researchers focused on the latest AI advancements relevant to both academic and practical applications.

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Industry representatives and company professionals, particularly from sectors like design, textiles, and IT, expressed significant interest. These stakeholders, especially those in tech and media production, were keen to explore how AI could transform their industries.

Government representatives and policy advocates were drawn to the ethical, regulatory, and societal implications of AI. They were also interested in forming collaborative partnerships with academic institutions and industry professionals to address these considerations.

Lastly, **entrepreneurs and AI professionals** brought a practical perspective. Entrepreneurs were focused on AI's applications for business growth, while AI specialists engaged in discussions on skill development and technological advancements in the field.

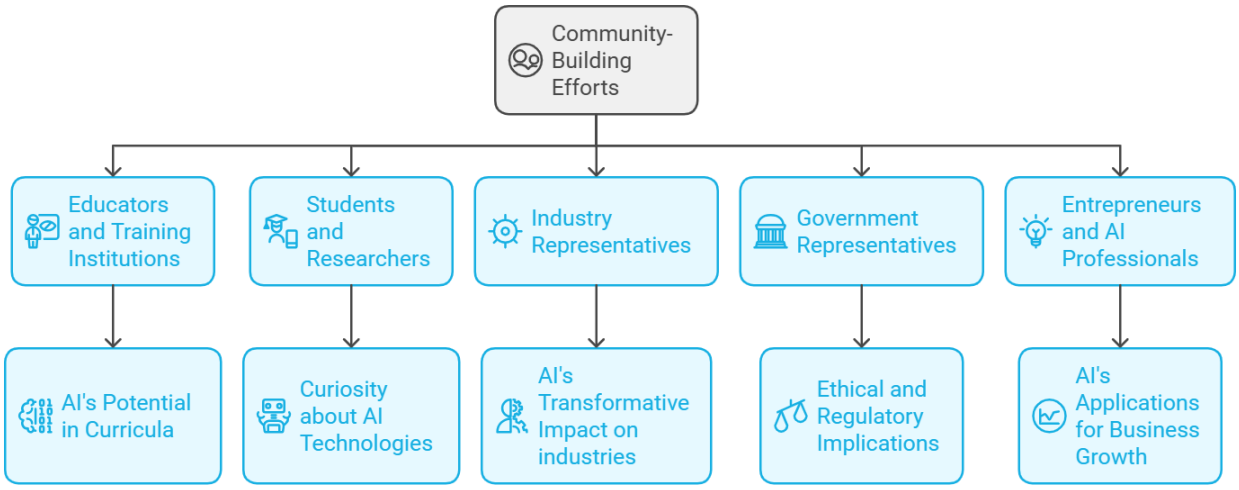

Figure 2 Different stakeholder groups and their interests in AI

These groups contributed **to rich, multi-perspective discussions, enhancing the depth and engagement of the WP3 events**.

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2.2 Our insights: Best practices and Challenges

In collaboration with our **26 partners, we successfully organized 80 events across 11 countries**, engaging diverse AI-related stakeholders in VET ecosystems. These events served as a foundation for gathering insights and experiences, which are presented in this handbook. The following sections will delve into **the best practices, lessons learned, and recommendations derived from these activities**, providing actionable strategies for fostering collaboration, innovation, and inclusivity within VET ecosystems.

2.2.1 Best practices

The organisation of the awareness-raising events was notably successful, with partner organisations highlighting several key factors that contributed to this outcome.

One of the central elements was **strong collaboration and thorough preparation**. Effective coordination was established among various stakeholders, including representatives from government, academia, and industry. This reflects the successful application of the Triple Helix framework, which emphasises collaboration across these three spheres. Additionally, the teams overseeing the event ensured that both logistics and content were meticulously managed, leveraging digital tools to streamline planning processes.

A focus on **personalised and relevant content** also played a significant role. The organisers dedicated time to crafting high-quality presentations tailored to specific target groups, which significantly boosted participant interest. Contributions from experts in the AI and VET sectors enriched discussions, while interactive formats, such as panels and Q&A sessions, encouraged active engagement. This approach aligns with the blueprint's emphasis on building trust, fostering experience-sharing, and enabling participants to form meaningful connections.

The blueprint also advocated for **a diverse audience**, and this goal was successfully achieved. Suggestion to organise panels with a moderator and four panellists from distinctly different backgrounds, including policymakers, physicians, lawyers, engineers, entrepreneurs, artists, and professors, proved beneficial. This approach allowed organisations to gather insights on how individuals from various fields perceive and adapt to changes brought by AI, along with the personal and professional impacts they experience. The events indeed attracted a wide-ranging audience from different sectors, resulting in dynamic discussions and a multiplicity of perspectives on AI applications.

Finally, **accessible locations and ample networking opportunities** further contributed to the events' success. Held at venues like universities and networking spaces, these events were easy to attend and provided valuable chances for networking.

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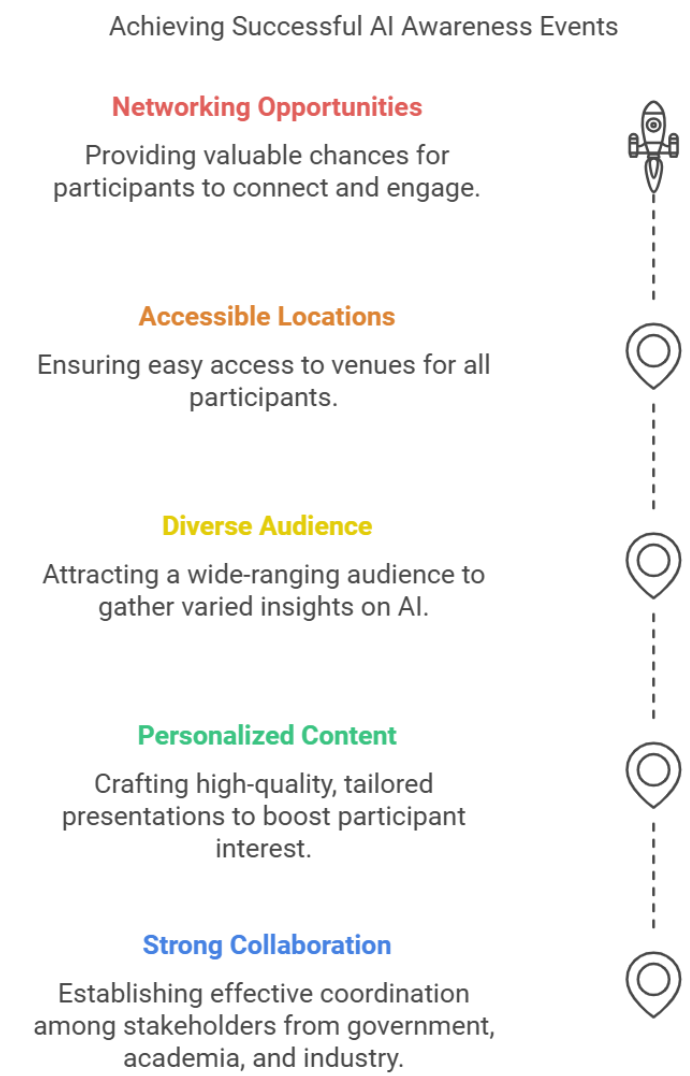

Figure 3 Steps in organization of successful awareness-raising events

Together, these factors fostered a vibrant environment for dialogue and learning about AI applications, significantly contributing to the overall success of the awareness-raising events.

2.2.2 The challenging aspects of organising awareness-raising events

Organising the awareness-raising events presented several challenges, as reported by partner organisations. These challenges included balancing content, coordinating diverse stakeholders, engaging participants, and overcoming logistical obstacles.

One of the primary challenges was **achieving the right content balance**. According to our experience, the panel topics should be adapted based on the location. For events in larger cities, organisers are encouraged to cover more niche aspects of AI to fill a gap in the metropolitan AI scene. Conversely, in smaller regions, panels should address broader topics to encourage inclusive discussions. However, maintaining a balance between technical AI topics and accessible content that would resonate with both experts and the general public proved challenging. Careful planning

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was needed to engage all participants and facilitate meaningful discussions that were neither too technical nor overly simplistic.

Coordination and alignment among stakeholders were also complex. When the aim was to focus on general topics that would appeal to a broad audience, bringing together educators, policymakers, and business leaders with diverse interests proved demanding. Creating a unified agenda that addressed all viewpoints while keeping discussions engaging was no small feat. A takeaway here would be to give greater consideration to selecting topics that are well-suited to an audience with varied backgrounds, ensuring that everyone's perspective is incorporated.

Participant engagement and attendance also posed significant challenges. We recommended a multifaceted promotion strategy to attract participants and build an online community. Various digital platforms, such as WhatsApp groups, segmented by audience interests, were promoted via social media, email, and the website. Additionally, subscription options for newsletters were made available on the website and shared at events. Channels on platforms like Salesforce, Slack, and Discord were intended to facilitate deeper discussions around specific AI topics, strengthening community connections. Core social networks, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and LinkedIn, were also utilised, each targeting different age groups and professional interests. TikTok attracted younger audiences with creative content, while LinkedIn served as a hub for professional collaboration and information exchange. Actively promoting the WhatsApp community and newsletter subscriptions across these platforms aimed to broaden outreach and boost engagement. Despite these efforts, partner organisations reported difficulties in attracting and retaining participants, particularly for standalone events. Successfully conveying AI's relevance and developing effective outreach strategies required significant effort and fine-tuning.

Lastly, **logistical challenges proved demanding**. Scheduling, selecting appropriate venues, and ensuring consistency throughout the year were complicated by the evolving audience and the unique demands of each event. Balancing these logistical needs with the goal of hosting impactful and engaging events required careful attention to detail and adaptability.

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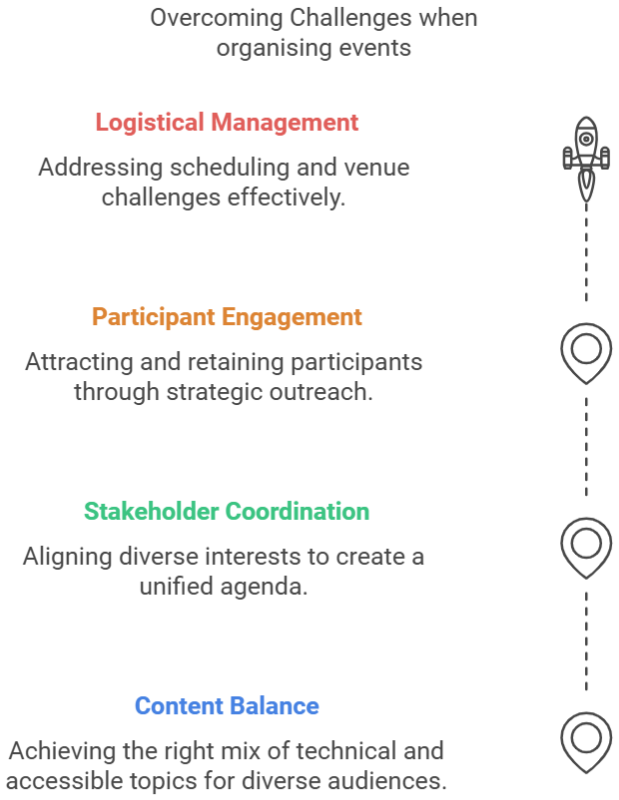

Figure 4 Steps in overcoming challenges when organizing awareness-raising events

Addressing these challenges required thoughtful planning, adaptability, and collaboration among all stakeholders to create impactful and engaging events. By refining content balance, fostering stakeholder alignment, and enhancing promotion strategies, future awareness-raising initiatives can better connect with diverse audiences and sustain their engagement.

2.2.3 Lessons learned while organizing awareness-raising events

To further enhance the awareness-raising events, partner organisations have proposed several improvements focusing on interactivity, outreach, clarity, flexibility, and content adaptation.

While participants appreciated the quality of materials provided, **adding interactive components could deepen engagement and knowledge retention**. Suggested additions include pre-event resources, such as preparatory materials and webinars, as well as post-event follow-ups to reinforce learning. Breakout groups were also recommended to allow participants to focus on specific areas of interest, enabling a more tailored and in-depth discussion.

To reach a broader and more diverse audience, especially underrepresented groups, partner organisations advised a **more targeted outreach strategy**. This could involve promoting events on multiple social media platforms, establishing partnerships, and sending targeted invitations. Paid social media promotions were specifically recommended to enhance visibility and attract participants from varied backgrounds.

While the events drew a diverse group of stakeholders, some attendees felt that **a clearer event purpose** aligned with their specific interests would make the sessions more relevant, particularly for those not directly involved with

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AI. By defining the event objectives in a way that addresses the needs of different audiences, organisers could increase appeal and engagement.

To boost regional interest and engagement, some organisations suggested **a "roadshow" format or a blended approach**, focusing on a series of events within a set timeframe. This format could help build momentum, attract a variety of participants, and sustain interest across different regions.

To make presentations more relevant, dynamic, and engaging, organisations proposed **dividing participants into smaller groups or offering tailored sessions** based on their background and expertise. This approach would allow stakeholders to delve deeper into topics most pertinent to their roles, ensuring that content remains accessible and impactful. Overall, most participants expressed satisfaction with the organisation and effectiveness of the WP3 events, with some even noting that no significant changes were necessary.

Most participants were generally satisfied with the organisation and effectiveness of the events, with several expressing that no changes were needed.

2.2.4 Engaging Different Stakeholder Groups

According to feedback from partner organisations, several stakeholder groups proved challenging to engage in the awareness-raising events.

Policymakers and public officials, for instance, had limited availability due to demanding schedules and bureaucratic processes, which made securing consistent involvement difficult.

Similarly, **business leaders**, particularly from SMEs, often prioritized other commitments and required more concrete, industry-specific examples of AI's benefits to motivate their participation. Many company owners also had limited familiarity with AI, which further complicated engagement efforts.

While some **students** showed curiosity and actively participated, others—particularly in early events—were more hesitant to join discussions and group activities, requiring additional efforts to foster engagement.

Healthcare and other non-technical professionals, such as those in traditional HR roles, found AI's relevance to their work less clear and were occasionally sceptical about its value.

Lastly, **local and national institutions**, along with certain education authorities, were sometimes less active participants, possibly due to a limited understanding of AI's significance for their sectors.

These groups often needed additional outreach efforts and tailored messaging to address their specific needs and priorities. Those are the stakeholders that special attention should be paid to when organising future events with the goal of engaging different AI-related stakeholders in VET ecosystems.

In the awareness-raising events, the ease of approaching and engaging stakeholders varied significantly, with certain groups being more receptive than others.

Among the easiest to approach were **educators and academic institutions**, including VET teachers and university professionals. Their existing interest in AI and familiarity with educational events made them highly receptive and eager participants.

Students and young adults, although sometimes challenging to engage fully in discussions, were also mentioned as easy to approach. Their enthusiasm for learning about new technologies, especially when events fit into their schedules, contributed to their openness.

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Entrepreneurs and AI professionals were also relatively easy to engage, particularly those from tech sectors or with an interest in AI trends and applications. These individuals were keen to participate, especially when the discussions focused on practical applications of AI that could benefit their work.

In contrast, **policymakers and government bodies** were the most difficult to approach. Their demanding schedules and the complexity of bureaucratic processes required extensive outreach efforts, making consistent engagement challenging.

The corporate audience, especially leaders from traditional or non-tech SMEs, also required tailored outreach. They often needed clear, industry-specific examples of AI's benefits before committing to participation.

Additionally, **local education authorities and representatives from creative industries**, such as writing, were less responsive. AI's relevance to their fields was not always immediately clear, which sometimes limited their interest.

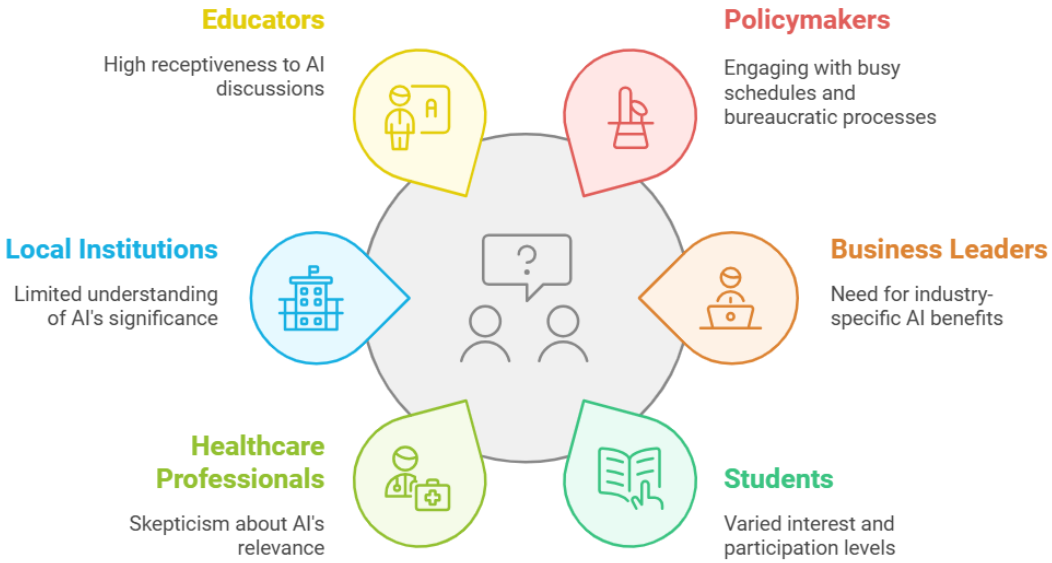

Figure 5 Engagement of different stakeholder groups

Overall, engagement success varied widely among stakeholder types, with the most success observed among educators and tech-oriented participants, while policy makers and non-tech industry professionals were more challenging to approach and engage.

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3. Memorandums of Understanding and Cooperation with Labour Market Actors

Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) represent critical strategic instruments for bridging the gap between Vocational Education and Training (VET) providers and labour market actors in the rapidly evolving landscape of Artificial Intelligence. These documents are more than formal agreements; they are commitments to collaborative growth, knowledge exchange, and mutual advancement.

In the context of AI integration, MoUs play a pivotal role in aligning educational curricula with industry needs, facilitating knowledge transfer, and creating pathways for practical learning. The most effective partnerships involve a diverse range of stakeholders, including tech companies, research institutions, government agencies, and professional associations.

A comprehensive MoU should address several key components: **shared objectives that align with AI skill development strategies, clear collaboration mechanisms, and robust resource-sharing frameworks**. This might include joint research initiatives, internship programs, curriculum development, and knowledge exchange platforms. Critically, these agreements must incorporate performance metrics that allow for ongoing evaluation and adaptation.

The negotiation process requires a nuanced approach. Organizations must conduct thorough stakeholder analyses, understanding each party's unique strengths and motivations. The focus should be on creating long-term strategic partnerships that offer mutual benefits, with an emphasis on flexibility and innovation.

Challenges are inevitable in such collaborations. Differences in organizational cultures, rapidly changing technologies, and resource constraints can complicate partnerships. Successful MoUs mitigate these risks through **transparent communication, adaptable structures, and a commitment to continuous learning**.

The AI4VET4AI project has demonstrated the potential of such collaborations through successful partnerships. **Examples include VET providers developing AI-focused internship programs with tech companies, research institutions creating tailored skill development modules, and government agencies aligning AI education with national digital transformation strategies.**

Ultimately, Memorandums of Understanding are not static documents but **living frameworks for collaboration**. In the dynamic world of AI, these partnerships must remain nimble, forward-looking, and deeply committed to bridging the gap between educational potential and industry requirements. The most successful MoUs will be those that view collaboration as **an ongoing dialogue, constantly evolving to meet the challenges of an AI-driven future**.

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4. Strategy and Framework for Establishing National AI CoVEs

Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) are the cornerstone of high-quality vocational education in Europe, designed to bridge education with industry needs and catalyse regional development. They go beyond traditional education by forming dynamic skills ecosystems that integrate VET providers, companies, industry associations, and local communities. AI-focused CoVEs, in particular, play a crucial role in preparing Europe's workforce for an AI-driven economy, ensuring the skills and competencies developed align with the rapid technological changes of the 21st century

4.1 Skills ecosystems as the foundation of CoVEs

The concept of **skills ecosystems** underpins the success of CoVEs. These ecosystems represent **a network of interconnected stakeholders, including VET providers, local industries, policymakers, and community organisations, working collaboratively to create a responsive and sustainable training environment**. AI-focused CoVEs must anchor themselves within these ecosystems, leveraging industry input to design programs that meet both current and future demands.

For AI, skills ecosystems should focus on cultivating both technical expertise and applied knowledge. This includes integrating AI technologies such as machine learning, data analytics, and robotics into curricula while ensuring learners develop problem-solving and collaboration skills. By fostering close ties with companies, CoVEs can ensure that their programmes remain agile, adapting to innovations and the evolving needs of the labour market. Moreover, by aligning with regional economic priorities, such as smart specialisation strategies, CoVEs can amplify their impact on local development and innovation.

4.2 Building sustainable partnerships with companies

Strong and enduring partnerships with companies are central to the mission of CoVEs. Unlike traditional academic models that often function independently of industry, CoVEs thrive on active collaboration. Companies, particularly SMEs, bring invaluable perspectives by identifying skill gaps, providing real-world challenges for learners, and offering work-based learning opportunities such as internships and apprenticeships.

For AI-focused CoVEs, these partnerships should extend into applied research collaborations where businesses and learners co-create solutions to industry-specific challenges. For example, an AI CoVE could work with a manufacturing firm to develop predictive maintenance algorithms or collaborate with a healthcare provider to design patient data analysis tools. These partnerships should be formalised through agreements, such as Memorandums of Understanding, which clearly define shared goals, roles, and responsibilities. Companies can also serve as ambassadors for the CoVE, advocating for its programmes within their industries and communities. By doing so, they not only ensure a steady flow of skilled talent into their organisations but also contribute to the broader economic development of their regions.

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4.3 Integrated activities for comprehensive development

AI-focused CoVEs should deliver **a wide range of integrated activities to maximise their impact on learners, businesses, and regional development**. These activities go beyond conventional training, offering holistic solutions that address the educational, economic, and social dimensions of vocational excellence. The following activities form the core of a successful AI-focused CoVE:

1. Skills development through work-based learning

Work-based learning (WBL) is the cornerstone of vocational excellence, providing learners with direct exposure to the challenges and requirements of the workplace. In the context of AI-focused CoVEs, WBL must integrate **cutting-edge tools and methodologies, enabling learners to gain hands-on experience with AI technologies**. This includes: developing and deploying machine learning models on real datasets provided by industry partners, training on operational AI systems, such as predictive analytics in manufacturing or chatbot development in customer service, participating in live AI projects within companies, allowing learners to see the practical implications of their skills. By embedding learners in real-world environments, CoVEs not only ensure skill acquisition but also foster professional readiness. WBL also benefits to companies, which can evaluate potential employees and integrate fresh perspectives into their operations.

2. Industry-driven innovation projects

Innovation projects serve as a bridge between vocational training and applied research. CoVEs, in collaboration with companies, can design projects that address specific industry challenges, fostering an environment of creativity and problem-solving. These projects may involve: developing AI solutions tailored to local economic needs, such as optimisation algorithms for logistics or computer vision applications for quality control in manufacturing, creating prototypes or proof-of-concept solutions that businesses can test and refine for commercialisation, facilitating interdisciplinary projects where learners work alongside professionals from different sectors, blending AI expertise with domain-specific knowledge. These projects not only enhance learner competencies but also position CoVEs as hubs of innovation that drive regional economic growth and competitiveness.

3. Entrepreneurial support

Fostering entrepreneurship is a critical function of CoVEs, particularly in the AI domain, where **innovation often leads to the creation of new businesses.** CoVEs could establish dedicated incubators and accelerators to support learners and startups in developing AI-driven products and services. Key initiatives include: offering mentorship programmes where industry leaders and successful entrepreneurs guide learners through the process of ideation, business modelling, and market entry, providing access to funding opportunities, such as grants or venture capital, to help startups scale their operations, creating hackathons and innovation challenges to stimulate creative thinking and rapid prototyping among learners. In addition to entrepreneurship, CoVEs should support intrapreneurship: encouraging learners to innovate within existing companies. By equipping learners with the skills to lead change from within, CoVEs contribute to the transformation and modernisation of established industries.

4. Lifelong learning programmes

AI is a rapidly evolving field, and staying competitive requires continuous skill development. CoVEs should prioritise **lifelong learning by offering flexible upskilling and reskilling programs tailored to various learner profiles**. These programmes may include: short-term courses and certifications in emerging AI technologies, such as natural language processing, deep learning, or AI ethics, custom training modules designed for specific industry sectors, such as AI applications in agriculture, healthcare, or financial services, online and hybrid learning models to accommodate

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the needs of working professionals, with asynchronous content delivery and virtual labs for hands-on practice. Lifelong learning programmes ensure that both current workers and job seekers can adapt to changing industry requirements, enhancing workforce resilience and mobility.

5. Community engagement

CoVEs must be inclusive, providing access to AI education and training for **diverse demographic groups, including those traditionally underrepresented in the tech sector**. Community engagement initiatives can take several forms: outreach programmes targeting women, minorities, and individuals from rural or economically disadvantaged areas, using scholarships or subsidised training to reduce barriers to participation, partnerships with local schools to introduce AI concepts to younger students, inspiring interest in STEM careers early on, collaboration with community organisations to host public seminars and workshops, demystifying AI and addressing societal concerns such as data privacy and algorithmic bias. By fostering inclusivity, CoVEs contribute to social cohesion and ensure that the benefits of AI education extend to all members of society.

4.4 Steps for establishing national AI CoVEs

The establishment of a national AI-focused CoVE requires a strategic, **multi-phased approach that carefully balances immediate priorities with long-term goals**. Each step in this process builds on the previous, ensuring that the CoVE becomes a sustainable and transformative hub for skills development, innovation, and economic growth.

1. Stakeholder mapping and engagement

The first step in creating a CoVE is **identifying and engaging key stakeholders who will form the foundation of the skills ecosystem**. These stakeholders include VET providers, industry partners, local and regional policymakers, and community organisations. Building a strong network requires targeted outreach and trust-building activities that highlight the mutual benefits of collaboration. For example, companies may gain access to a pipeline of skilled workers and opportunities for applied research, while VET providers benefit from aligning their curricula with industry demands. Policymakers and local authorities are also critical allies, as they can provide funding, policy support, and strategic alignment with broader regional development goals.

2. Defining shared vision and objectives

Once stakeholders are engaged, the next step is **to define a shared vision and objectives for the CoVE**. This vision must reflect both regional and national priorities, ensuring that the CoVE aligns with economic strategies such as smart specialisation initiatives or digital transformation agendas. Objectives should be clearly articulated and measurable, focusing on outcomes such as the number of learners trained, innovations developed, or businesses supported. This shared vision fosters a sense of collective purpose among stakeholders and sets the tone for all subsequent activities.

3. Designing integrated training programmes

Designing training programmes that integrate both **foundational and advanced AI skills is a critical aspect of establishing a CoVE**. These programmes must be informed by the needs of local industries, ensuring their relevance and applicability. For instance, in regions where agriculture plays a significant role, training programmes might focus on AI applications for precision farming, while in urban technology hubs, the focus could be on AI-driven automation or data analytics. Flexibility and modularity are essential in programme design, enabling learners to tailor their education to specific career goals or skill gaps.

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4. Developing innovation hubs

These hubs act **as collaborative spaces where learners, educators, and industry partners come together to solve real-world problems and develop new technologies**. In an AI-focused CoVE, innovation hubs serve as platforms for applied research, experimentation, and prototyping. Companies can bring their challenges to the hub, enabling learners to work on practical projects that have tangible outcomes. For example, learners might design predictive maintenance algorithms for local manufacturing firms or develop natural language processing tools for customer service applications. These hubs also foster interdisciplinary collaboration, encouraging participants from different sectors to exchange ideas and create novel solutions. By serving as a bridge between education and industry, innovation hubs position CoVEs as drivers of local economic development and technological advancement.

5. Establishing sustainable infrastructure

The development of **infrastructure to support the CoVE's activities** is essential. This includes creating physical spaces, such as AI labs and innovation hubs, equipped with state-of-the-art technologies that enable hands-on learning and collaborative projects. Digital infrastructure is equally important, particularly for AI-focused CoVEs, as it facilitates remote learning, virtual collaboration, and access to global resources. The infrastructure should be scalable to accommodate the evolving needs of learners and industry partners, ensuring the CoVE remains at the forefront of technological advancements.

6. Monitoring, evaluation and continuous improvement

Establishing a CoVE also requires a commitment to **monitoring, evaluation, and continuous improvement**. This involves setting up robust feedback mechanisms to assess the impact of training programmes, partnerships, and other activities. Regular evaluations, conducted in collaboration with stakeholders, provide valuable insights into what is working and what needs adjustment. For instance, feedback from industry partners may highlight emerging skill gaps, prompting the CoVE to update its curricula or training methods. Similarly, learner feedback can help identify barriers to participation or areas where additional support is needed.

Sustainability should be a core consideration throughout the establishment process. A CoVE cannot rely solely on public funding; it should develop a diversified funding model that includes partnerships with industry, revenue from training programmes, and potential grants for research and development initiatives. This ensures that the CoVE remains financially stable and operationally viable in the long term. Equally important is the need for the CoVE to adapt to changes in the economic and technological landscape, positioning itself as a dynamic and forward-thinking institution.

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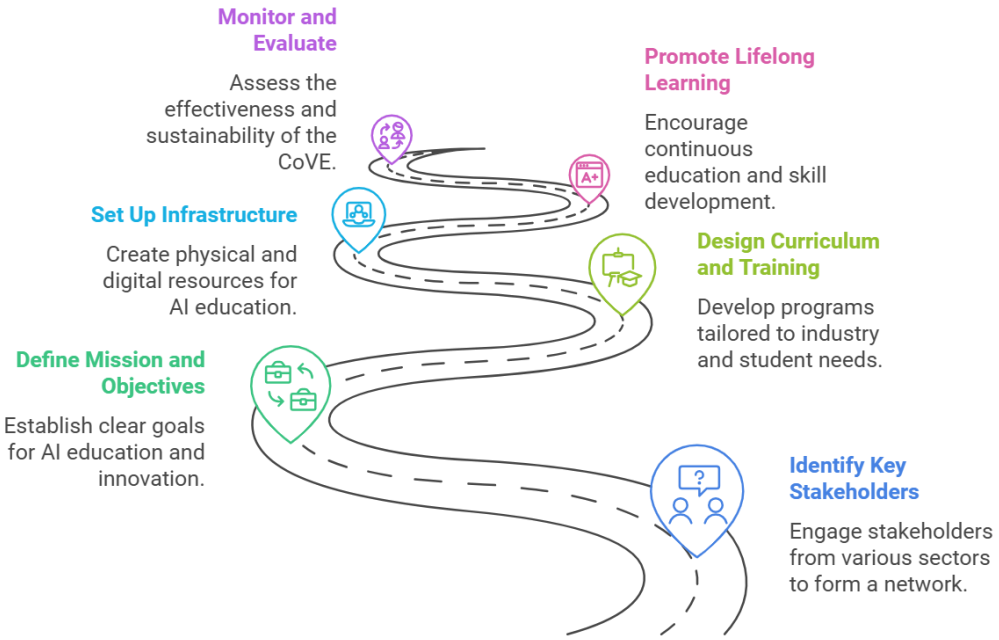

Figure 6 Steps for the establishment of a national CoVE

4.5 The broader role of CoVEs in society

AI-focused CoVEs have **a unique opportunity to act as catalysts for regional innovation and economic development**. By equipping learners with cutting-edge skills and fostering a culture of collaboration, CoVEs help create a resilient workforce capable of navigating and shaping the AI-driven future. Their role extends beyond education. AI-focused CoVEs support local businesses by driving innovation, contribute to social inclusion by offering accessible training opportunities, and enhance regional competitiveness by aligning their activities with economic priorities. As such, CoVEs are not only pillars of vocational excellence but also **key players in Europe's broader strategy for digital transformation and sustainable development**.

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5. Conclusion

The awareness-raising campaign conducted as part of our awareness-raising campaign not only succeeded in generating significant interest and engagement among a diverse range of AI-related stakeholders in VET ecosystems—it also **laid a strong foundation for sustainable, long-term partnerships**. By leveraging the Triple Helix Model, ensuring content relevance, and adopting flexible outreach methods, we created events that resonated with academia, industry, and government alike. The result was a dynamic and inclusive environment where participants felt encouraged to explore AI's potential, ask critical questions, and form meaningful connections.

One of the campaign's greatest achievements was demonstrating how community-building strategies—such as niche online groups, approachable offline meetups, and a blend of expert input and interactive activities—can demystify AI, making it accessible and appealing to stakeholders with varying levels of familiarity. Tailoring content to local contexts, addressing both technical and non-technical audiences, and employing storytelling through social media and newsletters proved instrumental in cultivating trust, reducing misconceptions, and showcasing AI's tangible benefits.

To those planning similar initiatives, **we recommend prioritizing authenticity and adaptability**. Clearly articulate the purpose of each event, offer interactive formats to strengthen engagement, and continually refine promotional tactics based on stakeholder feedback. Make use of diverse communication channels: professional networks for experts, dynamic platforms for younger audiences, and sector-specific forums for niche discussions. Consider long-term strategies like establishing recurring events, mentorship programs, and regular follow-ups to maintain momentum and deepen relationships.

Formalizing these relationships through Memorandums of Understanding or structured partnerships sets the stage for sustained impact. By continuing to exchange knowledge, co-create content, and align objectives, stakeholders can collectively shape the skills and competencies needed for the AI-driven future. The lessons learned here serve as a model for future projects, demonstrating how dedicated outreach, inclusive engagement, and a commitment to long-term cooperation can **strengthen vocational education and training ecosystems across Europe**.

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