



Enhancing informal learning and learning culture





Preface

In March 2024, the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs, together with the Dutch Social and Economic Council, held the online meeting ‘Enhancing informal learning and learning culture’. During this meeting, we discussed learning culture, informal learning and the Dutch approach.

However, there is much more to say about this topic than we could fit into an hour and a half. That is why we have not only included the information discussed during the webinar in this magazine, but also outlined the broader context about learning culture and informal learning in the Netherlands. Here you will find inspiring examples, background information, references to research and more explanation about Dutch regulations.

If you have any questions after reading this, please feel free to [contact me](#).

I look forward to continuing our work on this topic in the coming years!

Kind regards,

Annemiek Wortman
Dutch Ministry of Social affairs and employment
National Skills Coordinator

Webinar recording

Did you miss the European Year of Skills webinar or would you like to watch it again?

[Click here to watch the Webinar Year of Skills: Enhancing Informal Learning and Learning Culture on YouTube.](#)

It explores lifelong and informal learning, featuring insights by Jacqueline Prins (Secretary-General of the Social-Economic Council) and Annemiek Wortman (National Skills Coordinator of the Netherlands). It also includes a presentation on the benefits of lifelong learning by Paulien Bongers (TNO), and theme sessions on policy instruments and self-directed learning. For questions on this topic, you can

contact Paulien Bongers at Paulien.Bongers@tno.nl or Linda Koopmans at Linda.Koopmans@tno.nl.

Know more

If you want to learn more about the learning culture and informal learning in the Netherlands, click [here](#) for the Monitor learning culture. The Monitor is initiated by The Social and Economic Council (SER) and the Netherlands Organization for Applied Scientific Research (TNO). It highlights trends and shifts in learning behaviors within the workforce and how these practices evolve over time.



Dutch policy lifelong learning

Rapid technological advancements and green and digital transitions are reshaping work and tasks. Workers with particular skills, especially those with technical expertise, are crucial for driving these transitions. And with the current tight labour market, many sectors struggle to find employees, which emphasizes the urgent need for continuous workforce development.

While the Netherlands performs well when it comes to formal learning, certain target groups and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which constitute 99% of the labour market, show only average participation in lifelong learning (LLL). Both employers and employees share the responsibility for training to remain flexible and innovative. The government's role is to facilitate and promote LLL and to foster a positive learning culture.

Stimulating a broad learning culture

The Netherlands has recently launched a campaign to stimulate a learning culture, which encourages people to learn and work on their skills throughout their careers. The Learning Culture Program focuses on stimulating learning and development in companies, with special attention to SMEs. The aim is to make SMEs more aware of the necessity and value of LLL and to provide instruments for making learning and development more self-evident in their organization. Stimulating informal learning is an important part of this.

People learn in many different ways and have different preferences in how they learn. Some people are less likely to engage in formal learning as they may have negative past experiences. Most of the time spent on learning and developing happens on and off work. According to Dutch research, up to 91% of learning occurs informally through new tasks, feedback from colleagues, or peer-to-peer coaching.

That is why informal learning is the way to go for SMEs as it can be easily incorporated into their daily routine.

Informal learning, non-formal learning and formal learning complement each other as well. Research shows that participation in one form of learning stimulates participation in another form.



Subsidy schemes: SLIM and The Expedition

SLIM

The SLIM (stimulating learning culture in SMEs) subsidy scheme allocates 48 million euro annually to support learning and development initiatives in SMEs. Since its inception in March 2020, over 5,000 grants have been awarded, benefiting individual SMEs, partnerships, and large companies from the agricultural, catering and recreation sector. In addition to the subsidy, the Dutch government offers a support program to ensure the successful implementation of projects by providing information, practical tools and by facilitating the exchange of knowledge between projects.

Evaluation of the SLIM scheme highlights its positive impact on LLL in participating companies, including clearer strategies, increased investment in learning and

development, better understanding of employee skills and aspirations, and enhanced competency levels among employees.

The Expedition Scheme

The Expedition Scheme is another part of the Learning Culture Program that focuses on knowledge sharing and development. It finances projects aimed at making scientific and practical knowledge on lifelong learning and sustainable employability more accessible. The initiative supports projects with publicly available outcomes, contributing to broader knowledge dissemination and future rounds of funding. Four projects have started since 2023 and will continue to be implemented throughout 2024 beyond. A new application period opened in May 2024.



CompetentNL: a common skills language for the Netherlands

Skills as the foundation for career choice and development

The Dutch labour market increasingly demands the development of new or additional skills. Skills encompass all personal and professional abilities, competencies, and knowledge components that an individual currently possesses or can develop in the future. Focusing on skills and targeted training makes finding a suitable place in the job market and lifelong development easier. A common skills language is needed because it creates a unified framework for identifying and articulating skills.

A common skills language:

- Helps employers to find the right professionals and to create a job vacancy, profile, or training program.
- Provides the workforce and job seekers with insights into what they already know and are able to do.
- Offers the educational field a foundation for tailored and effective training programs and courses.
- Provides intermediaries to connect supply and demand more efficiently.



What is CompetentNL?

CompetentNL will be a publicly accessible national standard, or “skills language,” designed to describe skills

for all stakeholders in the job market and education sector. It comprehensively details skills and links them to occupations and vocational qualifications. As the demand for certain skills changes, new occupations emerge, and others disappear. Continuously updated with new information, CompetentNL will eventually incorporate skills from various education sectors. This evolving standard will serve as a foundational tool for career choices and development opportunities based on skills.

How does CompetentNL work?

CompetentNL will encompass all possible skills, occupations, and vocational qualifications in the Netherlands. CompetentNL is supported by hybrid AI: a combination of the expertise of labour market professionals, the vocational education qualification structure, and artificial intelligence (AI).

This ‘hybrid AI’ establishes connections between all skills and the labour market and educational field in the Netherlands. New skills and synonyms, along with descriptions of skills and their context, are presented to experts for assessment before being added. This ensures that: CompetentNL remains up-to-date and that it will be made accessible for use in skills applications through an API (Application Programming Interface) and Linked Open Data. An API is a modern standard for programs to communicate with each other. How CompetentNL will ultimately be utilised is at the discretion of the users of the CompetentNL data.

What makes CompetentNL special?

CompetentNL:

- Is an accurate and comprehensive description of Dutch occupations and vocational training at the skills level.
- Forms the basis for a labour market focused on skills and lifelong learning.
- Serves as the national standard for exchanging complete and accurate information about skills between the labour market and the (vocational) educational field.
- Is a learning system that stays up-to-date and adapts to changes in the labour market and education programs.
- Can be directly applied in other systems without significant modifications through an API and Linked Open Data.
- Connects the Netherlands with the labour markets of Europe and worldwide.

For more information, visit:

[Flyer CompetentNL \(in English\)](#) | [Publicatie](#) | [CompetentNL](#)

Effective lifelong development in the green industry

How do we ensure that companies and organisations in the green domain, and especially its employees, continue to learn and develop? How can keep up with opportunities and innovations both within and outside their industry? And most importantly, how do they lead the way?

Globally, we face major challenges. Examples include:

- Greening our economy and society
- Sustainable housing construction
- Production of sufficient, safe and healthy food

- Reduction of CO₂ emission
- Climate adaptation
- Conservation of nature and biodiversity and a healthy
- Safe living environment for people and animals.

The green domain plays an important role addressing these issues. To continue making a difference, the green industry in the Netherlands (and worldwide) should develop itself even further.



But what do these employees want themselves? How do they view their work? What are their motivations and needs when it comes to learning and development? Wouldn't it be nice if there were more insights into what really suits different types of people working in this sector?

From research to personas

To address these questions, Sparkey, known for its Workprofiler model, conducted quantitative research on this topic. Based on the survey data on 2,300 workers, 650 of whom work in the green industry, Imagro translated the data into 'personas' or employee profiles. These were tested in interviews with various employers in the green domain.


From 'goal-oriented approacher' to 'down-to-earth doer'

Although everyone is different, we found four different recognisable green employee profiles, each appealing to a different learning format and training offer: the green personas. For example, the mindful explorer likes to learn within their own team, while the focused doer prefers to take a course outside of the workspace. Then there is the down-to-earth doer, who is happy to be done with school. Each persona raises interesting questions like – how can you engage this type of employee?

Groenpact detailed suggested approaches for each profile

GREEN PERSONAS

Employee profiles to encourage learning and development




DOWN-TO-EARTH DOER

Employees who are not directly motivated to learn and develop, but have a more wait-and-see attitude.

IMPORTANT:

- ▶ Security
- ▶ Freedom
- ▶ Collegiality
- ▶ Appreciation
- ▶ Guidance
- ▶ Clarity



IMPORTANT:

- ▶ Challenges
- ▶ Reward
- ▶ Result
- ▶ Advancement
- ▶ Clarity
- ▶ Speed

APPROPRIATE FORMS OF LEARNING

Microlearning short and quick. From colleagues on the shop floor. Short course.

WATCH AND LEARN

Let them learn by watching and doing (practical) rather than reading and doing assignments (theoretical).

STAGEWIS

Do not ask for too much at once, even if it is mandatory. Give the employee confidence that he/she can do it by providing positive (small) learning experiences (step by step).

SFEER

Don't make it all too heavy, bring it with humour and provide connectivity. Rather an energising performer than a serious specialist.

APPROPRIATE FORMS OF LEARNING

Traditional (longer) training or coaching programmes. Day training with certificate. External company visits (peek into other teachers).

CONCRETE OFFER

A clear, substantive and concrete offer. Preferably directly applicable and linked to certificates.

REWARD

Offer a reward (bonus, salary increase, promotion, extra responsibilities, etc.) to win? Then come the goal-oriented tackler faster in action.

CLEAR AGREEMENTS


Make clear agreements. These employees are generally operationally minded and like speed. Let them know they actually have to do something to earn etc.

GOAL-ORIENTED TACKLER

Employees who learn and develop out of self-interest and when circumstances clearly demand it.

IMPORTANT:

- ▶ Security
- ▶ Freedom
- ▶ Collegiality
- ▶ Appreciation
- ▶ Guidance
- ▶ Clarity



IMPORTANT:

- ▶ Challenges
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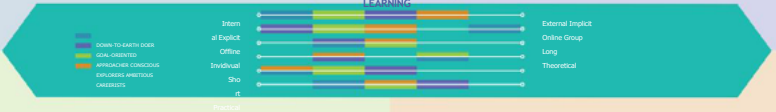
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PREFERENCES FOR LEARNING




Legend: Blue = Down-to-earth doer, Green = Mindful explorer, Orange = Ambitious careerist, Red = Focused doer. Y-axis: Stream of English, Office, Individual, Shop, it. X-axis: External Impact, Online Group, Long, Theoretical.

CONSCIOUS EXPLORERS

Eager-to-learn employees who consciously engage in (personal) development and tools are provided.

IMPORTANT:

- ▶ Personal development
- ▶ Income security
- ▶ Inspiring leader
- ▶ Collegiality
- ▶ Work-life balance



IMPORTANT:

- ▶ Freedom
- ▶ Variety
- ▶ Content development
- ▶ Autonomy
- ▶ Status
- ▶ Flexibility
- ▶ Creativity

APPROPRIATE FORMS OF LEARNING

Internal think tanks and master classes. Online training courses/courses. Short-term training and courses (professional and personal development).

INSPIRATIONAL VISION

Involve this employee in the visioning of the organisation and the plan to flesh it out.

BOXES

In development discussions (tool assessment), provide clear frameworks with sufficient freedom of movement / room for autonomous action.

NOTES


Encourage internal transfer of knowledge during internal training or inspiration sessions by and for these employees.

AMBITIOUS CAREERISTS

Self-reliant employees who are strongly intrinsically motivated to develop and set clear goals in the organisation.

IMPORTANT:

- ▶ Personal development
- ▶ Income security
- ▶ Inspiring leader
- ▶ Collegiality
- ▶ Work-life balance



IMPORTANT:

- ▶ Freedom
- ▶ Variety
- ▶ Content development
- ▶ Autonomy
- ▶ Status
- ▶ Flexibility
- ▶ Creativity

APPROPRIATE FORMS OF LEARNING

(Online) training courses/courses, including self-study. Intervention groups and learning networks. Webinars and seminars.

RELATED

Let him/her join internal think tanks with other motivated colleagues, by future plans and strategy of the company.

OBJECTIVES

Let the employee link his/her own objectives to the company goals and vision.

FACILITE

Facilitate that the employee interacts sufficiently with like-minded people and ambitious colleagues. Both internally, but also outside the organisation.

THIS PRODUCT WAS INITIATED BY THE GREEN FACT ACCELERATION PROGRAMME LABOUR MARKET AND CIVIL GREEN

Make learning work for you: Learning ambassadors

Education and development are important to gain and maintain a strong position in the labour market. However, not everyone takes advantage of the training opportunities offered within companies.

Research shows that practically skilled employees often do not engage in career advancement. Learning ambassadors specifically encourage and inspire those who could use some support in this area. Thanks to the subsidy from the Expedition Scheme of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, the Dutch trade union CNV can train and support a large group of learning ambassadors for free in the coming years.

The power of a learning ambassador

A learning ambassador is a colleague who supports others in the field of education and development and actively makes this topic discussable in the workplace. Colleagues can turn to the learning ambassador with questions such as: How am I doing in the labour market? What can I do within my work? And how do I get there?



The power of a learning ambassador lies in their ability to support colleagues in education and development, drawing from their own experience. As direct colleagues, they know exactly what's going on within their team, helping to remove barriers for confidential conversations about career progression. They act as a link between employees and the HR department without taking on managerial responsibilities.

Free training and support by CNV

The aspiring learning ambassadors are trained by CNV in a two-day training session on how to help colleagues with questions about education and development. After the training, they can immediately start working as an ambassador within their own organization.

A communication toolbox and a contact person in the organization assists them in this process. Additionally, CNV organizes peer coaching sessions where learning ambassadors can discuss their experiences. This ongoing support ensures that learning ambassadors remain effective in their roles and can continuously improve their skills.

The HAN University of Applied Sciences monitors the participating companies and learning ambassadors to find out how they can most effectively be utilized. The effectiveness of this method has already been proven in previous research.



More information can be found here: [Leerambassadeurs: maak werk van leren binnen jouw organisatie! - Campagnes | CNV](#) (in Dutch) or you can send a mail to leerambassadeurs@cnv.nl

Is your organization future proof? SLIM supports lifelong learning within SMEs

In the whirlwind of today's changing world with the rapid advancements in technology and digitalisation, our daily lives are constantly shaped by transitions. Amidst these shifts, it's easy to overlook how these changes profoundly impact our work routine and environment. As society hurdles forward at rocket speed, one thing becomes abundantly clear: the need for new knowledge has never been more pressing. This demand for continuous learning poses a significant challenge for both individuals and organizations, urging us to adapt and evolve to stay relevant.

A healthy learning culture within organizations is essential in tackling this challenge head-on. By encouraging employees and colleagues to engage in continuous learning, businesses not only stay relevant, but also become more attractive as an employer.

How do you create a healthy learning environment where learning and development are the norm? That's where the SLIM subsidy comes in!



About the subsidy

The SLIM subsidy is offered by the Dutch ministry of social affairs and employment. The goal is to inspire, encourage and facilitate SME's to sustainably grow the learning environment in their organization.

Companies are then asked to make a plan for their organization and execute this within 12 to 24 months, depending on the type of collaboration. The subsidy operates on a co-financing model, providing an initial advance to initiate the project. Companies have the option to apply either individually or in collaboration, with a minimum requirement of two SMEs.

The plans may include actions categorized into four groups, referred to as 'activities,' offering organizations the flexibility to select a single category or blend them as needed.

- Examination of the company: a diagnosis of the required knowledge and skills in the company leading to a concrete training plan.
- Career advice for workers in a SME.
- Support in the implementation of a learning and development method.
- Offering practical training places to participants for vocational training.

Is the subsidy effective?

The sustained interest in the subsidy is evident from the consistently high number of applications that surpass the annual budget. A recent survey revealed encouraging statistics:

- Managers have gained better insight into employee competencies (73%) and aspirations (79%).
- Improvement in the overall learning culture within companies (75%).
- More employee participation in training and development, even without subsidies (70%).

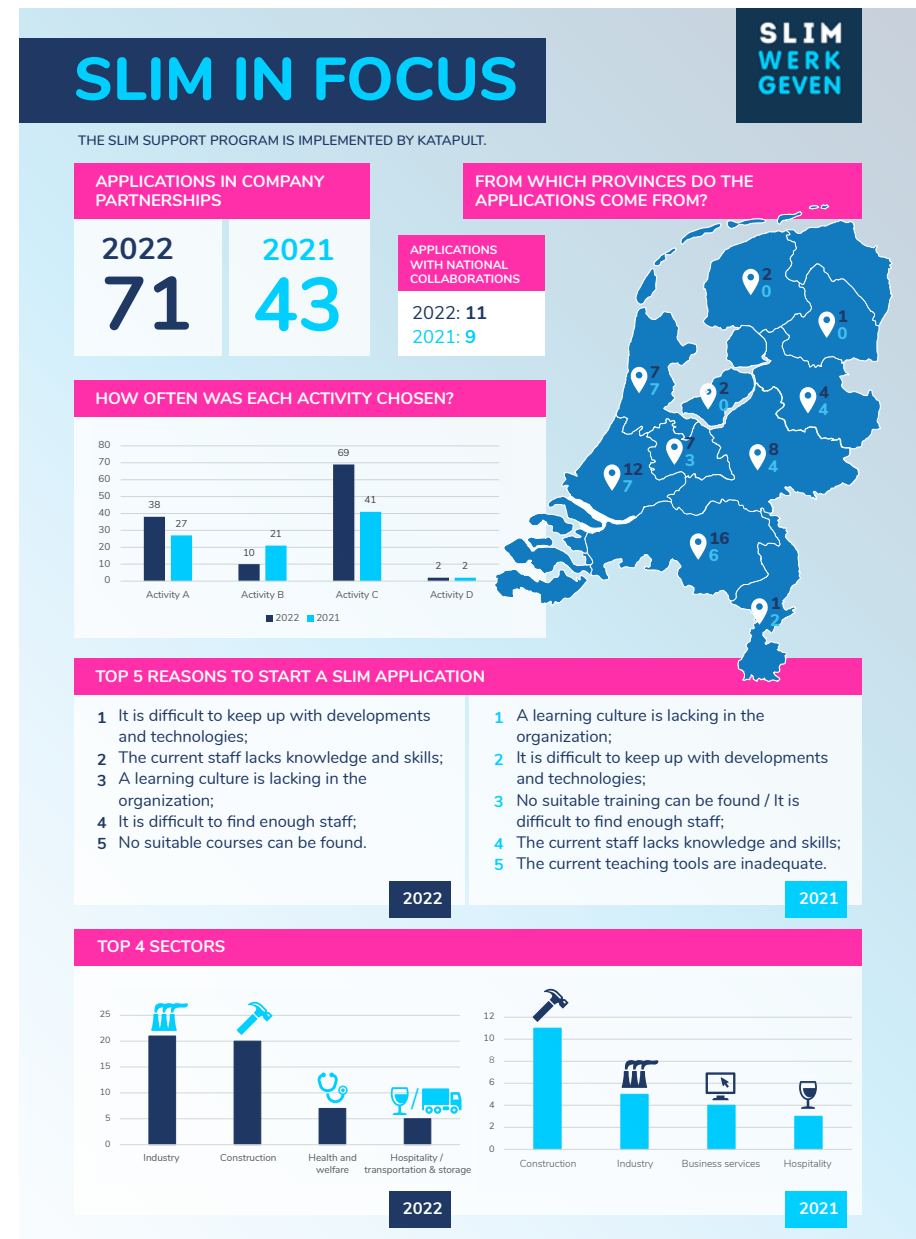
- Employees gain better organizational understanding, increased involvement, and motivation (63%).
- Greater self-management of career paths among employees (63%).

You can also read about the success story of [Rijnland Facility BV](#), detailing the start of their SLIM project and their experiences thus far. The interview and analysis were carried out for the knowledge and support program by the organization “Katapult”. Collaborating with the ministry, Katapult aids applicants by guiding and motivating them throughout their SLIM-application. Through a dedicated platform, applicants and other interested parties have access to various resources, events, and inspiration, including:

- Personalized guidance
- Peer-to-peer sessions
- Expert-led workshops
- Showcasing exemplary practices and summaries from other SLIM projects.
- General information on topics such as informal learning, feedback, trust and the “learner persona”.

For more information on the subsidy, visit the [government website](#) or the website of [the support program](#) (in Dutch) and [its organization](#) (in English).

Below you will find an analysis of applications within a company partnership for the years 2021 and 2022. It presents the ‘activities’ predominantly selected and explores the motivations behind the applications.



Case study: From window cleaner to specialist

The work in the cleaning industry is becoming increasingly more attractive due to the rise of many new innovations. However, a lot of people still see working as a cleaner more as a temporary job than a permanent career choice. That's why **Rijnland Facility** and **ZaakSchoon**, along with partners from **Kansacademie**, created an approach to find and retain the right employees in the tight labor market. The secret to this approach lies in personal development paths based on the match between personal ambitions and business strategy. **Laura van Leeuwen** (Rijnland Facility), **Joyce Jacobs** (Ont-moeter), and **Mick Slaap** (Kansacademie) explain how it works.



First off, what is 'Kansacademie'? ('Opportunity academy')

Mick: "A consortium of parties collaborating with public and private companies to organize sustainable labour integration through comprehensive and measurable cooperation. In this project, it is done in collaboration with a cleaning and glass cleaning company (Rijnland Facility), a supplier of sustainable cleaning products (ZaakSchoon), coaching and integration partners (Ont-moeter, Refugee Aid, the municipality of Zoeterwoude), subsidy & compliance advisors (RT-M project financing), and specialists in talent analysis (Jobpersonality)."

Why did you apply for a SLIM project?

Mick: "Innovation in the cleaning and sanitation industry hinges on people's development. Without people, a cleaning company is nothing; I believe 80% of your costs and knowledge reside in the people. So, they need to innovate along with us, meaning they need to continue learning."

What special approach have you developed?

Mick: "A new way to match people with a company. We first assess your talents and ambitions, then see which company aligns with them in terms of strategy and core values. Then, we outline a career path for you within that company. All partners involved use a collaboration platform we developed, which included objective recruitment, matching technology, and a talent test. The results form an objective basis for a sustainable employment contract."

What is the most innovative aspect of your approach?

Mick: "That we focus on the employment perspective and on long-term career paths. This helps to retain existing employees as well as to attract new ones. Because when you tell someone: "come here for a career, you can start as a cleaner or window cleaner but that you can eventually become a sustainable maintenance specialist, data analyst, or process facilitator,". That's a whole

different perspective than saying, “we need window cleaners, and we want to keep you in that position as long as possible.”

Joyce: “There’s much more engagement among people in this industry than people tend to assume.”

So, they don’t just see cleaning as a way to earn some money?

Joyce: “Exactly. I’ve encountered highly engaged people at Rijnland Facility who have a lot of passion for the company. People who get excited about the idea that they could do more at the company than they currently do. We map out that ambition and then say: we’re going to help you get there in five years.”

Mick: “We offer all the courses and training needed for that with the Rijnland GreenBiz Academy – a learning environment within the framework of the aforementioned [Green Deal](#). These can be courses related to personal development, such as a Dutch language course or a cycling course for newcomers. But there are also many courses and training sessions closely related to the company’s processes. For example, we share videos about sustainable cleaning techniques that we produce ourselves, with the help of product and service suppliers.”

If you want to encourage a learning culture, the question is always: how do you get the rest of the company on board? How is that at Rijnland Facility?

Laura: “That’s not a problem at all. Our team leaders are used to training their people. Regardless of where someone comes from or how much knowledge they have when they start, everyone always undergoes refresher training at the company. So, that focus on learning and development is ingrained in our team leaders.”

Are you already seeing effects?

Laura: “Definitely. All our employees are now taking courses and obtaining certificates. It makes them think about next steps: I have a certificate now, so I can move from being a cleaner to a project manager. So, that development perspective really has a positive influence on their motivation to stay.”



How can you ensure the new approach is sustained?

Joyce: “By, among other things, scheduling regular work meetings where employees feel that they are seen and heard. If there’s a hiccup in development somewhere, it’s noted and addressed. At Rijnland and ZaakSchoon, the sense of togetherness is very strong. That makes it easy to be open and honest. But the culture in small and medium-sized enterprises revolves around: ‘keeping going, going, going. By sitting down together once in a while, employees realize I’m seen, I’m heard, I’m valued.”

What are important things to consider when embarking on a project like this?

Mick: “It helps to create a SMART methodology that you can evaluate and adjust setting a goal for a certain number of employees, new products or new customers through sustainability. Then it becomes measurable so that it comes to life. The link with your operation is vital for the success of a project like this.”

For more information on this initiative, go to:

<https://kansacademie.org/partner/rijnland-facility-bv> (In Dutch).

Colophon

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