NextGen
OPPORTUNITY

GUIDELINES

FOR YOUTH EMPLOYMENT AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

2026

Research findings, practical guidance and country-specific resources

Co-funded by
the European Union

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.



Co-funded by
the European Union

TABLE OF CONTENTS

0. About the guidelines
  0.1 About the NextGen Opportunity project
  0.2 Purpose of the guidelines
  0.3 Who are these guidelines for?
  0.4 How to use this publication

Part I – Understanding youth employment and entrepreneurship in Europe

1. Comparative analysis of youth employment, self-employment and support needs
   1. Executive summary
   2. Research methodology
   3. Comparative contextual analysis
   4. Comparative survey findings
   5. Comparative qualitative findings from focus groups and youth recommendations
   6. Main gaps and implications for the NextGen Entrepreneurship and Employment Clinic
   7. Comparative recommendations
   8. Conclusion
   9. Appendices and sources

2. Employment and self-employment support – Country-specific resources. About the guidelines
    - Czech Republic
    - Denmark
    - Ireland
    - Italy
    - Romania
    - Serbia

Part II – Preparing for employment

3. How to apply and prepare for a job
    1. Start with direction, not applications
    2. Build a skills and evidence map
    3. Find reliable job opportunities
    4. Read the job ad like a checklist, not a wish list
    5. Research the employer before you apply
    6. Match your evidence to the vacancy
    7. Think in examples, not buzzwords
    8. Your application package: more than a CV
    9. Write a short application message that sounds like a person
    10. Use AI as an assistant, not as your identity
    11. Prepare for the interview before you know the questions
    12. During the interview: slow down and answer the question
    13. If you have little or no formal work experience
    14. After the interview: follow up without chasing
    15. Before accepting an offer, check the actual conditions

16. Protect yourself from fake job offers and unsafe recruitment
17. If you are looking for work in another country
18. Adapt the strategy to your situation
19. Practical templates and checklists
20. Useful European tools and sources

4. Working rights and responsibilities – Country-specific resources
    - Czech Republic
    - Denmark
    - Ireland
    - Italy
    - Romania
    - Serbia

Part III – Exploring entrepreneurship

5. How to develop a business plan
    1. What a business plan is and why it matters
    2. Choose the right planning format
    3. Core elements of a business plan
    4. Adapt the plan to the type of business
    5. Practical models and calculations
    6. Using AI tools responsibly
    7. Useful European resources and free planning tools
    8. Quick quality check before submission
    9. Appendix A – Simple business plan template
    10. Appendix B – Short glossary

6. How to register a business – Country-specific resources
    - Czech Republic
    - Denmark
    - Ireland
    - Italy
    - Romania
    - Serbia

ABOUT THE GUIDELINES

ABOUT THE NEXTGEN OPPORTUNITY PROJECT

NextGen Opportunity: Bridging the Gap for European Youth is a European project co-funded by the European Union, implemented from 1 November 2025 to 31 October 2027 in six countries: Czech Republic, Denmark, Ireland, Italy, Romania and Serbia.

The project is coordinated by Club for Youth Empowerment 018 (KOM 018), Serbia, in partnership with Regional Development Agency South (RDAS), Serbia; Beyond Borders, Italy; Blackwater Training, Ireland; Nordic Crew, Denmark; Youth Progress, Czech Republic; and ATDD, Romania.

NextGen Opportunity addresses the challenges young people face when entering the labour market, finding stable employment or exploring self-employment. Particular attention is given to young people with fewer opportunities and those facing social, economic or geographical barriers.

Through research, practical training, mentoring, stakeholder engagement and advocacy, the project aims to improve young people's employability and entrepreneurial skills, strengthen access to available support measures and contribute to more inclusive youth employment systems.

A central part of the project is the development of **NextGen Entrepreneurship and Employment Clinics**, designed to provide young people with practical guidance, skills development, mentoring and connections to relevant employment and entrepreneurship opportunities.

PURPOSE OF THE GUIDELINES

These guidelines have been developed within the NextGen Opportunity project as a practical resource for young people exploring employment and self-employment opportunities across Europe.

The publication brings together research findings, practical advice and country-specific information in one accessible resource. It is based on research conducted in the six partner countries, including national analyses, surveys involving 1,291 young people, and qualitative findings from focus groups.

The guidelines cover three main areas: understanding youth employment challenges and available support systems, preparing for employment, and exploring entrepreneurship.
In addition to general European-level information, the publication provides links to country-specific resources covering employment and self-employment support, working rights and responsibilities, and business registration procedures.

By combining research with practical information, the guidelines aim to help young people better understand their options, navigate existing support systems and make informed decisions about their professional future.

WHO ARE THESE GUIDELINES FOR?

The guidelines are primarily intended for young people who are looking for their first job, preparing to enter the labour market, seeking new employment opportunities or considering starting their own business.

Particular attention is given to young people with fewer opportunities, including those who are unemployed, not in education or training (NEET), or face additional barriers to accessing employment and entrepreneurship opportunities.

The publication is also intended for youth workers, educators, career counsellors, mentors, employment support organisations and other professionals working with young people.
It can be used as supporting material for individual guidance, workshops, training activities, mentoring programmes and the NextGen Entrepreneurship and Employment Clinics.



HOW TO USE THIS PUBLICATION

The publication is organised into three main parts, which can be read independently depending on the reader's interests and needs.

Part I – Understanding youth employment and entrepreneurship in Europe

Presents the findings of comparative research conducted in the six partner countries. It highlights common challenges, gaps in existing support systems and recommendations for improving youth employment and entrepreneurship opportunities. This part also provides access to national information on employment and self-employment support programmes and services.

Part II – Preparing for employment

Offers practical guidance on searching for job opportunities, identifying and presenting skills, preparing applications, attending interviews and evaluating job offers. It is complemented by country-specific resources on working rights and responsibilities.

Part III – Exploring entrepreneurship

Supports young people interested in self-employment or starting a business. It explains the main steps in developing a business plan, including market research, financial planning and risk assessment, and provides links to national business registration guidelines.

Each country-specific section contains direct links to resources developed for the six participating countries. Readers can select their country to access more detailed information on relevant procedures, rights, programmes and available services.

The publication can be used from beginning to end or as a reference when specific information is needed. Its practical sections contain examples, tools, templates and checklists that readers can adapt to their own circumstances.

As national legislation, administrative procedures and support programmes may change, readers should verify current requirements and opportunities through the relevant official sources.

KOM 18 RRA JUG Beyond Borders ATDD YOUTH PROGRESS Blackwater Training & Consulting THE NORDIC CREW Co-funded by the European Union

PART I

UNDERSTANDING YOUTH EMPLOYMENT AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN EUROPE

1. Executive summary

The NextGen Opportunity project addresses youth unemployment, self-employment and transition-to-work challenges in six participating countries: Czech Republic, Denmark, Ireland, Italy, Romania and Serbia. The comparative analysis confirms that youth unemployment cannot be treated only as a numerical labour market problem. Across the consortium, young people describe a more complex reality: delayed entry into employment, lack of practical experience, weak links between education and work, limited awareness of support programmes, fragile access to career guidance, and uncertainty around self-employment.

The country contexts are different. Denmark and Czech Republic operate in generally stronger labour market environments, yet young people still face transition gaps, skills mismatch and unequal access for vulnerable groups. Ireland combines an overall strong labour market with specific barriers linked to rural areas, transport, migrant status and insecure entry-level jobs. Italy, Romania and Serbia show more structural challenges, including higher youth unemployment or NEET risks, regional disparities, low awareness of public measures and a stronger need for practical transition support. These differences matter because the NextGen Clinic should not be implemented as a generic information service. It should function as a practical bridge between young people, employers, public programmes and local support systems.

The comparative survey included 1,291 valid responses from the six countries. The survey shows several strong cross-country patterns. Lack of experience, low salaries, lack of job offers and geographic location are among the most important employment barriers. In several countries, many respondents are either not employed, employed only occasionally or active mainly through education and training rather than stable work. Career guidance is insufficient: in all countries, a majority of respondents had not received career or employment support in the previous two years. Awareness of public employment and entrepreneurship programmes is also weak, especially in Serbia, Romania, Ireland and Czech Republic.

Self-employment is viewed with interest, but not with confidence. In most countries, many young people had considered self-employment, yet the likelihood of starting a business in the next two years remains lower than the level of interest. The most consistent barriers are lack of start-up capital, fear of financial risk, lack of business knowledge and lack of mentoring. The most requested forms of support are start-up grants or micro-loans, business training, mentoring and legal or administrative guidance.

Another important finding is that young people connect employability with mental well-being, stress management, confidence and emotional balance. Between 71.9% and 90.7% of respondents, depending on the country, consider mental well-being and stress management important or very important for staying employed and performing well at work. This supports the inclusion of non-clinical well-being, communication and resilience elements within the future Clinic methodology.

The main conclusion is that the future NextGen Entrepreneurship and Employment Clinic should be modular, practical and locally adaptable. It should combine job-readiness support, access to work experience, entrepreneurship training, mentoring, labour-rights information, mental well-being elements, outreach to vulnerable groups and simplified guidance on public programmes. The Clinic should be designed as a youth-friendly support mechanism that translates complex systems into understandable steps and connects young people with real opportunities.

2. Research methodology

This comparative analysis is based on the research process carried out within WP2.2 of the NextGen Opportunity project. The research was designed to provide a clear, evidence-based overview of youth employment, self-employment, entrepreneurship pathways and available support measures in each partner country. The final purpose of this comparative document is not only to summarise national findings, but also to identify shared needs, country-specific gaps and practical implications for the design of the NextGen Entrepreneurship and Employment Clinic and the future Guidelines.

The methodology combined three complementary sources of evidence. First, each partner prepared a national report based on desk research. These reports reviewed youth unemployment, self-employment, NEET statistics, legal and institutional frameworks, labour market demands, existing public programmes and support measures. Second, partners implemented a common survey among young people, using the same questionnaire structure adapted into national languages. Third, partners included focus group findings and youth-driven recommendations, where available, to add qualitative depth to the quantitative findings.

The national reports followed a common structure: overview of the youth employment and self-employment situation; legal framework and social rights; labour market demands and opportunities; national programmes and support measures; analysis of survey findings; and youth-driven recommendations. This common structure made it possible to compare both quantitative indicators and qualitative observations across countries. The national reports also provided references to official sources such as national statistical offices, ministries, Eurostat, OECD, EURES, labour offices and other relevant institutions.

The survey questionnaire was organised into six thematic sections. Section A collected the respondent profile, including age, gender, place of living, education, current status and belonging to specific vulnerable groups. Section B examined employment situation, recent work experience, contract type, stability and relation between work and formal education. Section C explored barriers to employment, discrimination, interest in self-employment, reasons for considering entrepreneurship and barriers to starting a business. Section D focused on public support systems, career guidance, mental well-being and stress management. Section E examined skills and labour market needs. Section F collected youth recommendations and willingness to participate in employment-related youth initiatives.

The comparative survey dataset included six national datasets. The valid sample used for this comparative analysis was: Czech Republic n=200, Denmark n=201, Ireland n=200, Italy n=263, Romania n=205 and Serbia n=222, for a total of 1,291 valid responses.

The qualitative analysis was based on the focus group findings and youth-driven recommendations included in the national reports. These findings were not treated as statistically representative, but as interpretive evidence showing how young people explain the barriers identified in the survey. The comparative qualitative synthesis focused on recurring themes: lack of practical experience, unclear transition from education to work, weak career guidance, limited awareness of public support, rural and geographic barriers, migrant and minority barriers, discrimination, financial risk in self-employment and the need for more youth-friendly support services.

The analysis also considered several methodological limitations. National survey samples were collected through project partner networks and should be understood as project research samples rather than nationally representative samples. Some samples over-represent specific target groups, such as rural youth, migrant youth, students or urban respondents, reflecting the project's outreach focus. In addition, national reports differed in the level of detail provided on focus groups and external sources. These limitations do not weaken the practical value of the findings, but they should be considered when using the document for wider policy claims. The strongest value of this analysis lies in identifying practical needs and designing a responsive support model for the NextGen Clinic.

Country	Valid survey sample	Main sample feature	Specific analytical note
Czech Republic	200	Strong representation of respondents aged 16-21 and young people still in education.	Percentages are based on valid answers for each question.
Denmark	201	High share of migrant or ethnic minority respondents, reflecting the project focus on migrant youth.	Percentages are based on valid answers for each question.
Ireland	200	Mixed sample including rural youth, migrant/minority respondents and young people in unstable employment.	Percentages are based on valid answers for each question.
Italy	263	Strong rural sample, with a high share of unemployed and NEET respondents.	Percentages are based on valid answers for each question.
Romania	205	Sample strongly represented by students and urban respondents, with gender imbalance towards female respondents.	Percentages are based on valid answers for each question.
Serbia	222	Predominantly urban/suburban sample, with strong representation of young people in education or training.	Percentages are based on valid answers for each question.

3. Comparative contextual analysis

The desk research in the six national reports shows that youth employment challenges appear in different forms depending on the national labour market. In some countries, the problem is not only the absence of jobs, but the difficulty of moving from education into relevant, stable and secure employment. In other countries, youth unemployment and NEET rates remain high enough to represent a structural social and economic risk. Across all countries, however, the same conclusion emerges: young people need support that is practical, accessible and connected to real labour market entry points.

The comparison also shows that self-employment should be treated carefully. It can offer autonomy, flexibility and income opportunities, but it can also shift risk onto young people if they do not have capital, business knowledge, legal guidance, mentoring and access to markets. For this reason, the future Clinic should not promote entrepreneurship as a simple solution to unemployment. It should help young people make informed decisions and test business ideas safely.

Country	Main youth employment context	Specific groups or disparities	Implication for the Clinic
Czech Republic	Low general unemployment coexists with delayed labour market entry, weak student-work integration and transition challenges.	Young women in NEET status, rural youth and young people without practical experience require specific attention.	The Clinic should focus on transition support, practical experience, accessible programme information and employer links.
Denmark	Strong labour market institutions and high youth employment are accompanied by low youth self-employment and barriers for migrant youth.	Migrant and foreign-born youth face language barriers, recognition issues and weaker networks.	The Clinic should provide multilingual guidance, labour market navigation, internships and integration support.
Ireland	Overall labour market performance is strong, but young people face insecure work, rural transport barriers, migrant/refugee issues and limited local opportunities.	Rural youth, asylum seekers, migrants and young people without networks face additional obstacles.	The Clinic should combine employment guidance, rural access solutions, rights information and tailored support for migrants.
Italy	Youth unemployment and NEET levels remain structurally high, with strong regional and rural disparities and frequent precarious employment.	Rural youth, young women, vulnerable groups and young people in Southern or isolated areas are particularly affected.	The Clinic should focus on local access, wage/job-quality issues, career guidance, entrepreneurship support and anti-discrimination.
Romania	Youth unemployment, NEET risk and rural-urban disparities are significant, with a weak transition from education to work.	Rural youth, young women with low education, Roma youth and young people outside formal support systems face serious barriers.	The Clinic should provide practical transition pathways, career guidance, internships, mentoring and simplified access to programmes.
Serbia	Young people face long school-to-work transitions, high youth unemployment compared to adults, weak awareness of programmes and urban-rural/regional gaps.	Young people from rural areas, Roma youth, persons with disabilities and those outside institutions are at higher risk of exclusion.	The Clinic should provide job-readiness, legal/labour rights guidance, public programme navigation and one-to-one support.

3.1 Shared contextual patterns

Several cross-country patterns appear across the national reports. The first is the transition gap between education and employment. Young people often complete education without practical experience, work habits, employer contacts or knowledge of how recruitment works. This gap appears even in countries with stronger labour markets, because the issue is not only job availability but also the ability to access relevant and stable jobs.

The second pattern is the visibility gap of support systems. Public programmes, employment services, entrepreneurship grants and career counselling exist in all countries, but they are often not visible, not understandable or not perceived as accessible by young people. This is especially important for young people with fewer opportunities, who may have less trust in institutions or less access to informal networks.

The third pattern is the quality-of-work gap. Many young people are not only concerned about finding any job, but about finding work that is fairly paid, legally protected, stable and connected to their skills. Low wages, unpaid or insecure work, temporary contracts, informal work and lack of protection appear repeatedly across survey and focus group findings.

The fourth pattern is the self-employment risk gap. Young people are interested in entrepreneurship, especially because of independence, flexibility and income potential, but they clearly identify financial risk, lack of capital, lack of business knowledge and lack of mentoring as major barriers. This means that entrepreneurship support must be structured, step-by-step and realistic.

4. Comparative survey findings

This section presents the main comparative findings from the six survey datasets. The tables use harmonised categories across different national-language questionnaires. Results should be interpreted as project survey findings, not as nationally representative statistics.

4.1 Respondent profile

Country	n	Female	Urban/suburban	Rural	Vulnerable groups
Czech Republic	200	50.00%	71.50%	28.50%	32.00%
Denmark	201	47.30%	83.60%	16.40%	58.70%
Ireland	200	50.00%	62.50%	37.50%	56.00%
Italy	263	52.50%	32.00%	68.10%	45.60%
Romania	205	66.30%	74.60%	25.40%	15.60%
Serbia	222	58.60%	97.70%	2.30%	5.40%

The survey samples reflect the different outreach strategies and local target groups of the project. Italy has a strongly rural sample, while Serbia is predominantly urban/suburban because only complete demographic responses were included and the valid dataset is concentrated in urban areas. Denmark and Ireland show high shares of respondents belonging to vulnerable groups, mainly due to the inclusion of migrant, minority or rural respondents. Romania has a high share of students and female respondents. These differences are important because they shape the interpretation of barriers and priorities in each country.

4.2 Employment situation and transition to work

Country	Not employed in last 12 months	Occasional work in last 12 months	Unemployed/NEET status	In education/ training	Work not related to education
Czech Republic	22.20%	42.30%	28.00%	47.50%	32.00%
Denmark	19.40%	51.70%	20.80%	25.90%	35.30%
Ireland	30.50%	26.50%	26.00%	26.00%	26.50%
Italy	41.80%	43.00%	51.00%	37.60%	21.30%
Romania	42.40%	28.80%	6.80%	52.20%	15.60%
Serbia	41.90%	32.90%	17.10%	52.30%	35.10%

The employment findings show that the transition from education to stable work is uneven across the six countries. In Italy, 51.0% of respondents were classified in the survey as unemployed or NEET, which confirms the seriousness of the Italian youth labour market challenge within this project sample. In Czech Republic, Ireland, Denmark and Serbia, the unemployment/NEET shares are lower than Italy but still significant in relation to the purpose of the project. Romania appears to have a lower unemployed/NEET share in the survey sample because the sample is strongly represented by students and young people in education.

Occasional work is a major pattern in several countries. Denmark, Italy, Czech Republic and Serbia show high shares of respondents who had worked occasionally in the previous 12 months. This suggests that young people are often active, but not necessarily in stable or secure employment. The qualitative findings confirm that occasional work can be useful for income, but it does not always lead to career development, recognised experience or stable transition.

The relation between employment and formal education is also weak. Work not related to education is particularly visible in Denmark, Serbia and Czech Republic, and it also appears in Ireland and Italy. This does not mean that young people are unwilling to work, but that they often enter jobs that do not use their qualifications, especially when they lack experience, networks or local opportunities.

4.3 Main employment barriers

Country	Top employment barriers selected by respondents
Czech Republic	Low salaries (48.2%); Lack of experience (44.0%); Lack of job offers (34.0%)
Denmark	Lack of job offers (56.7%); Lack of experience (49.8%); Lack of relevant skills (41.8%)
Ireland	Lack of experience (34.0%); Geographic location (27.0%); Lack of job offers (26.0%)
Italy	Low salaries (76.0%); Lack of job offers (52.9%); Geographic location (50.6%)
Romania	Low salaries (55.6%); Lack of experience (51.7%); Lack of job offers (42.9%)
Serbia	Lack of experience (44.1%); Low salaries (38.3%); Lack of job offers (27.5%)

The most frequent employment barriers are lack of experience, low salaries, lack of job offers and geographic location. These are not isolated problems. Lack of experience prevents entry into better jobs; low salaries reduce motivation and make youth work economically insecure; lack of job offers and geographic barriers limit young people's choices, especially in rural and remote areas. The Italian sample clearly emphasises low salaries, lack of job offers and geographic location, while Romania and Serbia strongly emphasise low salaries and lack of experience. Denmark highlights lack of job offers, lack of experience and lack of relevant skills, while Ireland gives stronger weight to geographic location and local access.

4.4 Discrimination and vulnerable groups

Country	Discrimination often/sometimes	Share of respondents from vulnerable groups	Main interpretation
Czech Republic	17.80%	32.00%	Discrimination is less frequently reported than in Italy or Denmark, but rural and vulnerable groups still require targeted support.
Denmark	40.80%	58.70%	High discrimination reporting should be read together with the strong migrant/minority representation in the sample.
Ireland	28.50%	56.00%	Discrimination is linked to migrant/minority status, legal status, rural access and limited networks.
Italy	54.00%	45.60%	The highest discrimination reporting among the six survey samples, especially relevant for vulnerable respondents.
Romania	19.00%	15.60%	Lower reported discrimination than Italy or Denmark, but structural rural and education barriers remain significant.
Serbia	16.70%	5.40%	Reported discrimination is lower, but the vulnerable subsample is very small and many vulnerable youth may be outside the survey reach.

The survey confirms that discrimination and vulnerability cannot be measured only through one question. In Denmark, Ireland and Italy, discrimination is more visible in the survey because the samples include young people with migrant, rural or other vulnerable backgrounds. In Serbia, the reported share of vulnerable respondents is small, which means that the low level of reported discrimination should not be interpreted as an absence of discrimination in the wider youth population. For the Clinic, the practical conclusion is that all country models should include safe referral pathways, clear labour-rights information and additional outreach to youth who are less likely to appear in standard online surveys.

4.5 Self-employment and entrepreneurship

Country	Considered self-employment or already self-employed	Likely/very likely to start a business in next 2 years	Top reason	Top barrier	Top requested support
Czech Republic	70.50%	19.90%	Desire for independence (57.5%)	Fear of financial risk (69.4%)	Start-up grants/micro-loans (49.5%)
Denmark	45.30%	22.90%	Desire for independence (63.2%)	Fear of financial risk (65.7%)	Business training (64.7%)
Ireland	15.00%	32.00%	Flexibility (31.0%)	Fear of financial risk (35.0%)	Start-up grants/micro-loans (40.5%)
Italy	40.70%	39.50%	Desire for independence (71.6%)	Lack of start-up capital (71.4%)	Legal/administrative support (52.1%)
Romania	73.60%	28.80%	Desire for independence (59.0%)	Lack of start-up capital (65.9%)	Start-up grants/micro-loans (63.4%)
Serbia	67.50%	29.30%	Better income potential (64.0%)	Lack of start-up capital (64.4%)	Start-up grants/micro-loans (69.4%)

The survey shows a clear difference between interest in self-employment and readiness to start a business. In Czech Republic, Romania and Serbia, a high share of respondents had considered self-employment or were already self-employed, but the share that is likely or very likely to start a business in the next two years is much lower. This gap is also visible in Denmark and Italy. Ireland is a specific case in which fewer respondents had considered self-employment, but a higher share expressed likelihood of starting a business, suggesting a smaller but more motivated potential entrepreneurship group.

The reasons for considering self-employment are mostly positive: independence, flexibility, personal interest and better income potential. However, the barriers are substantial. Lack of start-up capital, fear of financial risk, lack of business knowledge and lack of mentoring are the most consistent obstacles. The requested support forms are therefore very practical: grants or micro-loans, business training, mentoring, legal and administrative support, networking and spaces where business ideas can be tested safely.

The future Clinic should treat entrepreneurship as one pathway, not as a universal solution. The self-employment module should start with business idea testing and risk assessment before moving to registration, finance, business planning or grants. It should also include mentoring from active entrepreneurs and simple explanations of legal and tax obligations.

4.6 Public support systems, programme awareness and career guidance

Country	Not aware of public	Hard/not sure access	No career support in last 2
Czech Republic	73.10%	74.90%	89.10%
Denmark	63.20%	71.20%	82.10%
Ireland	77.00%	71.50%	70.00%
Italy	56.70%	20.20%	65.40%
Romania	78.50%	51.20%	86.80%
Serbia	93.20%	74.80%	60.80%

This is one of the strongest comparative findings. In every country, a high share of young people had not received career guidance or employment support in the previous two years. The highest shares are recorded in Czech Republic, Romania and Denmark, followed by Ireland, Italy and Serbia. This finding directly supports the establishment of the NextGen Clinic as a practical, youth-friendly guidance mechanism.

Awareness of public programmes is also weak. Serbia has the highest share of respondents who are not aware of any public programmes supporting youth employment or self-employment. Romania, Ireland and Czech Republic also show very low awareness, while Denmark and Italy show somewhat better but still insufficient visibility. Even when young people know that programmes exist, many perceive access as unclear, hard or uncertain.

The Clinic should therefore include a regularly updated country-specific map of public support measures, eligibility criteria, application steps, deadlines, required documents and contact points. This information should not be presented only as a list. It should be converted into simple pathways: What can a young person do this week? What documents are needed? Who can help? What is realistic for someone without experience, capital or institutional contacts?

4.7 Skills, education and mental well-being

Country	Top skill selected	Top improvement requested	Mental well-being important/very important	Education poorly/not prepared
Czech Republic	Communication (78.3%)	More internships/ traineeships (55.4%)	88.00%	33.70%
Denmark	Digital skills (64.2%)	More internships/ traineeships (52.7%)	78.60%	38.30%
Ireland	Communication (43.0%)	More internships/ traineeships (44.8%)	73.00%	38.50%
Italy	Digital skills (62.0%)	Higher salaries (86.3%)	71.90%	64.30%
Romania	Communication (64.9%)	Better education quality (63.4%)	90.70%	62.40%
Serbia	Communication (68.5%)	Higher salaries (59.0%)	90.50%	35.10%

Communication appears as the most consistently important skill across the survey. It is the top skill in Czech Republic, Ireland, Romania and Serbia, and it is also highly ranked in Denmark and Italy. Digital skills are especially prominent in Denmark and Italy. Teamwork, problem-solving, foreign languages and entrepreneurial skills also appear strongly. The findings suggest that the future Clinic should not focus only on technical job application skills. It should include communication, confidence, problem-solving, teamwork and digital readiness.

Education is not rejected by respondents, but many do not feel fully prepared for the labour market. Italy and Romania show the highest shares of respondents who feel poorly or not at all prepared, while Denmark, Ireland, Serbia and Czech Republic also show substantial gaps. This reinforces the need for practical learning, employer contact, career counselling, internships and clearer links between formal education and real work.

Mental well-being and stress management are strongly connected to employability in the survey. In every country, a clear majority of respondents consider mental well-being important or very important for staying employed and performing well at work. A similarly strong majority agrees that practices supporting focus, emotional balance and stress management can improve young people's performance, motivation and decision-making at work. This provides a clear justification for integrating non-clinical mental well-being and stress management into Clinic sessions.

5. Comparative qualitative findings from focus groups and youth recommendations

The focus group findings and youth-driven recommendations add important depth to the survey results. They show how young people explain the barriers behind the numbers. Across countries, young people describe employment support systems as fragmented, career guidance as late or too general, internships as often unpaid or inaccessible, public programmes as hard to understand, and entrepreneurship as attractive but risky. The focus groups also confirm that young people are not asking only for motivation. They are asking for concrete pathways, practical experience, fair conditions and real access to information.

The qualitative material differed in scope across national reports, but the recurring messages are consistent enough to inform the Clinic methodology. The following synthesis is based on the focus group findings, open survey recommendations and national report conclusions.

Practical experience and first-job access

Young people repeatedly emphasise the contradiction of being asked for experience while not being offered realistic opportunities to gain it. This appears in Czech Republic, Denmark, Ireland, Romania, Serbia and Italy. Paid internships, traineeships, job-shadowing and work-based learning should therefore be central to the future Clinic.

Career guidance and information access

Young people want guidance that is practical, early and understandable. They ask for clear information on jobs, internships, public programmes, entrepreneurship grants, legal requirements and next steps after education. This is especially important for newcomers, migrants, rural youth and those outside institutional networks.

Education-labour market mismatch

Young people often feel that education does not prepare them sufficiently for work. The issue is not only content, but the lack of practical tasks, employer contact, interviews, CV preparation, business knowledge, financial literacy and labour-rights education.

Financial barriers and job quality

Low salaries, unpaid internships, cost of transport, cost of training and fear of financial risk are repeated concerns. Youth employment support cannot focus only on employability skills; it also needs to address fair pay, contracts, rights, social protection and access to resources.

Inclusion of vulnerable groups

Focus group findings highlight that vulnerable young people face layered barriers: language, legal status, rural location, disability, minority background, lack of networks, lack of transport, discrimination or low trust in institutions. Support must be flexible, individualised and locally accessible.

Entrepreneurship support

Young people request grants, micro-loans, mentoring, legal and administrative assistance, practical business training and opportunities to test ideas before taking financial risks. Entrepreneurship support should therefore be gradual and risk-aware.

Mental well-being and confidence

Young people link stress, uncertainty and low confidence with employability. The Clinic should include non-clinical support for stress management, communication, motivation, workplace pressure and decision-making.

5.1 Country-specific qualitative messages

Country	Key qualitative message from national findings	Practical implication
Czech Republic	Young people need stronger links between education and practical experience, improved visibility of support programmes, lower administrative barriers and mental well-being support.	Develop internships, employer cooperation, programme navigation and simple entrepreneurship/legal guidance.
Denmark	Young migrants and students need guidance on the Danish labour market, CPR-related steps, language, internships and English-friendly opportunities.	Offer multilingual guidance, integration-oriented job navigation and paid work experience pathways.
Ireland	Young people face unstable work, limited local opportunities, transport barriers and strong reliance on personal connections; migrants and asylum seekers face legal and qualification barriers.	Create accessible career pathways, rural/local support, transparent job-search tools and migrant-sensitive guidance.
Italy	Rural and vulnerable youth need better career guidance, local opportunities, inclusive public programmes, wage/contractual equity and entrepreneurship finance/mentoring.	Build local guidance points, anti-discrimination awareness, microfinance links and community employment networks.
Romania	Focus groups describe a systemic transition failure between education and work, including the experience paradox, weak career counselling and fragmented information.	Introduce structured internships, early career counselling, mentorship and centralised information tools.
Serbia	Survey implications point to the need for job-readiness, public programme navigation, mentoring, labour-rights information, vulnerable-youth outreach and mental well-being elements.	Develop modular employment and entrepreneurship support with one-to-one guidance and simple tools.

6. Main gaps and implications for the NextGen Entrepreneurship and Employment Clinic

The comparative analysis indicates that the NextGen Clinic should be built as a practical support mechanism, not as a one-time training activity. It should help young people understand where they are, what they need, what options exist and what steps they can realistically take. It should also help partners cooperate with employers, public institutions, employment services, schools, youth organisations and local stakeholders.

The Clinic model should be modular because young people do not have the same needs. Some need a first-job pathway, some need career orientation, some need help to understand contracts and rights, some need entrepreneurship guidance, while vulnerable youth may need individual support and referral to specialised services. The same framework can be used in all countries, but the emphasis should differ according to national context.

6.1 Proposed Clinic modules

Module	Purpose	Core content
1. Entry assessment and individual pathway	To identify each participant's status, needs, barriers and preferred pathway.	Short needs assessment; employment/self-employment pathway choice; individual action plan; referral needs.
2. Job-readiness and first employment	To prepare young people for realistic entry into the labour market.	CV and motivation letter; interview practice; presenting limited experience; job search strategies; employer expectations.
3. Work experience pathway	To reduce the experience barrier and connect young people with real work settings.	Internships, traineeships, job-shadowing, volunteering, short work-based learning, employer visits and local opportunity mapping.
4. Labour rights and job quality	To help young people recognise fair and legal work conditions.	Contracts; working hours; unpaid work; informal work; discrimination; probation; social contributions; where to seek help.
5. Entrepreneurship and self-employment	To support informed and risk-aware business development.	Idea testing; business model; basic financial planning; pricing; market validation; legal registration; tax obligations; grant/micro-loan preparation.
6. Public programme navigation	To make existing support measures understandable and accessible.	Country-specific programme database; eligibility; deadlines; documents; application steps; one-to-one guidance.
7. Mentoring and networking	To provide social capital, professional feedback and confidence.	Mentor matching; entrepreneur/employer talks; peer groups; networking with local businesses and institutions.
8. Mental well-being and confidence	To strengthen employability through non-clinical support for stress and motivation.	Stress management; communication; emotional balance; coping with rejection; decision-making; workplace pressure.
9. Inclusion and outreach	To reach young people who are less likely to access formal support.	Flexible formats; local outreach; multilingual support where needed; rural access; accessible materials; referral cooperation.

6.2 Country-specific emphasis for implementation

Country	Recommended emphasis
Czech Republic	Transition from education to work, career guidance, paid experience, visibility of support programmes and simplified business administration.
Denmark	Migrant/international youth guidance, language and integration support, internship access, recognition of qualifications and public service navigation.
Ireland	Rural access, transport-sensitive support, migrant/asylum seeker guidance, entry-level pathways, fair contracts and local opportunity mapping.
Italy	Rural and isolated-area guidance, job quality and wages, NEET outreach, discrimination prevention, local employment networks and entrepreneurship finance.
Romania	Structured transition from education to work, mandatory or recognised internships, early career counselling, mentorship and centralised programme information.
Serbia	Practical job-readiness, higher visibility of public measures, mentoring, labour rights, business plan support, vulnerable-youth outreach and stress management.

7. Comparative recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the combined desk research, survey findings, focus group findings and youth-driven recommendations. They are written as practical directions for the future Clinic and for wider youth employment policy dialogue.

1. Strengthen practical links between education and the labour market

Education providers, employers and youth organisations should create regular opportunities for practical learning, job-shadowing, employer visits, simulations, internships and real work tasks. The survey shows that lack of experience and weak labour-market preparation are among the most consistent barriers across countries. The Clinic should therefore help young people translate education into employability and should cooperate with schools, universities and employers.

2. Expand paid and accessible internships, traineeships and entry-level opportunities

Young people need real experience, but unpaid opportunities are inaccessible for many. Paid internships and traineeships should be promoted, especially for young people without family financial support, rural youth, migrants and vulnerable groups. The Clinic should map local opportunities and advocate with employers for fair and structured entry-level positions.

3. Make public support programmes visible and understandable

A high share of respondents are not aware of public youth employment or self-employment programmes. Existing measures should be explained in simple language and gathered in country-specific guidance tools. The Clinic should provide step-by-step assistance with eligibility, documents, deadlines and applications.

4. Provide earlier, more practical and more individualised career guidance

Most respondents had not received career guidance or employment support in the last two years. Career guidance should start earlier, be more practical and include job search, employer expectations, labour rights, entrepreneurship options and local opportunities. The Clinic should combine group workshops with one-to-one consultations.

5. Support self-employment through finance, business knowledge and mentoring

Interest in self-employment is high in several countries, but financial risk and lack of capital reduce readiness to start a business. Young entrepreneurs need grants, micro-loans, financial literacy, business planning, mentoring and legal-administrative guidance. The Clinic should offer a safe pre-start phase where young people can test ideas before formal registration.

6. Address job quality, low wages and insecure work

Youth employment support should not focus only on getting any job. Young people repeatedly raise low salaries, temporary contracts, informal work, unpaid internships and weak protection. The Clinic should include labour-rights education and should support young people in recognising fair and legal working conditions.

7. Develop targeted outreach for vulnerable and less visible youth

Rural youth, migrants, ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities, young parents, Roma youth, asylum seekers and young people outside education or employment systems face additional barriers. Support should be flexible, accessible and proactive. The Clinic should cooperate with local organisations, schools, employment services and community actors to reach those who are not reached by standard calls.

8. Recognise skills gained through non-formal learning and community engagement

Many young people gain communication, teamwork, problem-solving and leadership skills through volunteering, youth work, sports, cultural activities or informal work. These skills should be recognised and translated into employability language. The Clinic should include tools for skills mapping and portfolio development.

9. Integrate mental well-being, confidence and stress management into employability support

Survey findings strongly show that young people connect mental well-being with their capacity to stay employed and perform well. The Clinic should include non-clinical activities on confidence, stress management, communication, motivation, coping with rejection and workplace pressure.

10. Involve young people in the design and evaluation of employment measures

Young people should not be treated only as beneficiaries. They should be involved in designing Clinic activities, reviewing materials, testing tools and providing feedback to decision-makers. This will make the support more relevant and will strengthen youth participation in policy dialogue.

8. Conclusion

The comparative analysis confirms that the NextGen Opportunity project is addressing a real and shared need across six countries. The specific labour market contexts differ, but the core problem is similar: too many young people move from education to work without practical experience, clear guidance, stable opportunities, sufficient knowledge of support systems or confidence to navigate employment and self-employment pathways.

The most important value of the future NextGen Entrepreneurship and Employment Clinic will be its ability to translate complex systems into practical steps. Young people do not need only general information. They need guidance that is understandable, personal and connected to real opportunities. They need to know how to prepare for a job, how to approach employers, how to understand their rights, how to access programmes, how to test a business idea and how to manage stress and uncertainty during the transition process.

The analysis also shows that the Clinic should be adaptable. In Denmark, the focus should be stronger on migrant and international youth integration. In Ireland, rural access and migrant/legal-status barriers should receive particular attention. In Italy, rural isolation, low wages, precarious work and NEET outreach are central. In Romania, the key issue is the transition failure between education and work. In Serbia, the most urgent needs are programme visibility, practical job-readiness, mentoring and labour-rights guidance. In Czech Republic, the Clinic should strengthen links between education and work, practical experience, public programme visibility and simplified entrepreneurship support.

The final recommendation is that the future Guidelines should present the Clinic not as a single curriculum, but as a modular support model. Each partner should be able to combine common core elements with country-specific priorities. This will allow the project to remain comparable at European level while still responding to the concrete realities of young people in each country.

APPENDIX 1. SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE STRUCTURE

The common survey questionnaire used in the project included the following thematic sections and question areas.

Section	Content
A. Profile of the respondent	Age group, gender, place of living, highest education completed, current status and belonging to vulnerable groups.
B. Employment situation	Employment in the last 12 months, contract type, stability of employment and relation between job and formal education/training.
C. Barriers and challenges	Main difficulties in job search, discrimination, reasons for discrimination, consideration of self-employment, likelihood of starting a business, reasons for self-employment, barriers and support needs.
D. Support systems and policies	Awareness and use of public programmes, usefulness and accessibility of programmes, career guidance, mental well-being and stress management.
E. Skills and labour market needs	Most important skills for labour market success and assessment of whether education prepared respondents for the job market.
F. Youth recommendations	Priorities for improving youth employment, willingness to participate in youth initiatives and one open recommendation to decision-makers.

APPENDIX 2. DETAILED COMPARATIVE SURVEY TABLES

A2.1 Current status distribution

Country	Employed full/part-time	Without contract/self-employed/ internship	Unemployed	NEET	In education/ training
Czech Republic	45.00%	12.50%	25.50%	2.50%	47.50%
Denmark	51.20%	5.00%	10.40%	10.40%	25.90%
Ireland	38.00%	4.50%	22.00%	4.00%	26.00%
Italy	20.20%	12.50%	29.70%	21.30%	37.60%
Romania	28.30%	10.70%	6.80%	-	52.20%
Serbia	20.30%	10.90%	16.20%	0.90%	52.30%

A2.2 Top employment barriers

Country	Top 5 employment barriers
Czech Republic	Low salaries (48.2%); Lack of experience (44.0%); Lack of job offers (34.0%); No difficulties (18.8%); Geographic location (16.2%)
Denmark	Lack of job offers (56.7%); Lack of experience (49.8%); Lack of relevant skills (41.8%); Low salaries (31.3%); Poor access to information (31.3%)
Ireland	Lack of experience (34.0%); Geographic location (27.0%); Lack of job offers (26.0%); Lack of relevant skills (22.5%); Low salaries (22.0%)
Italy	Low salaries (76.0%); Lack of job offers (52.9%); Geographic location (50.6%); Lack of experience (25.5%); Poor access to information
Romania	Low salaries (55.6%); Lack of experience (51.7%); Lack of job offers (42.9%); No difficulties (19.5%); Lack of relevant skills (18.5%)
Serbia	Lack of experience (44.1%); Low salaries (38.3%); Lack of job offers (27.5%); Poor access to information (10.8%); Geographic location

A2.3 Top barriers to self-employment

Country	Top 5 barriers to self-employment
Czech Republic	Fear of financial risk (69.4%); Lack of start-up capital (61.8%); Complex legal procedures (30.1%); Lack of mentoring/support (15.1%)
Denmark	Fear of financial risk (65.7%); Lack of business knowledge (51.2%); Lack of start-up capital (48.3%); Complex legal procedures (40.3%); Lack of mentoring/support (27.9%)
Ireland	Fear of financial risk (35.0%); Unstable market conditions (30.0%); Lack of business knowledge (29.0%); Lack of mentoring/support (23.0%); Complex legal procedures (22.5%)
Italy	Lack of start-up capital (71.4%); Fear of financial risk (68.8%); Lack of mentoring/support (37.7%); Lack of business knowledge (34.4%); Complex legal procedures (32.5%)
Romania	Lack of start-up capital (65.9%); Lack of business knowledge (51.2%); Fear of financial risk (48.8%); Unstable market conditions (28.8%); Lack of mentoring/support (25.9%)
Serbia	Lack of start-up capital (64.4%); Fear of financial risk (50.0%); Lack of business knowledge (45.5%); Unstable market conditions (40.5%); Lack of mentoring/support (26.1%)

A2.4 Top requested support for self-employment

Country	Top 5 requested forms of support
Czech Republic	Start-up grants/micro-loans (49.5%); Legal/administrative support (47.3%); Mentorship/coaching (28.0%)
Denmark	Business training (64.7%); Legal/administrative support (60.2%); Mentorship/coaching (60.2%); Start-up grants/micro-loans (52.2%); Networking opportunities (19.9%)
Ireland	Start-up grants/micro-loans (40.5%); Business training (40.0%); Legal/administrative support (30.5%); Mentorship/coaching (30.5%); Networking opportunities (27.5%)
Italy	Legal/administrative support (52.1%); Mentorship/coaching (49.8%); Business training (40.7%); Coworking spaces (28.1%); Networking
Romania	Start-up grants/micro-loans (63.4%); Mentorship/coaching (45.4%); Networking opportunities (27.8%); Coworking spaces (14.6%)
Serbia	Start-up grants/micro-loans (69.4%); Mentorship/coaching (53.6%); Business training (42.8%); Networking opportunities (39.2%)

A2.5 Top skills and requested improvements

Country	Top skills	Top improvements requested
Czech Republic	Communication (78.3%); Problem solving (55.4%); Foreign languages (38.9%); Critical thinking (34.9%); Digital skills (28.0%)	More internships/traineeships (55.4%); More career guidance (24.6%); Support for vulnerable groups (8.6%)
Denmark	Digital skills (64.2%); Communication (62.7%); Teamwork (42.8%); Problem solving (42.3%); Foreign languages (39.8%)	More internships/traineeships (52.7%); Better education quality (49.3%); Higher salaries (42.3%); More career guidance (42.3%); Stronger employment protection (41.3%)
Ireland	Communication (43.0%); Teamwork (37.5%); Digital skills (35.5%); Critical thinking (28.5%); Technical skills (27.5%)	More internships/traineeships (44.8%); Support for vulnerable groups (33.9%); More career guidance (31.8%); More remote job opportunities (28.1%); More local job opportunities (28.1%)
Italy	Digital skills (62.0%); Communication (54.4%); Foreign languages (44.9%); Problem solving (38.0%); Technical skills (37.6%)	Higher salaries (86.3%); More local job opportunities (40.7%); Support for vulnerable groups (38.4%); Better education quality (38.4%); More internships/traineeships (21.7%)
Romania	Communication (64.9%); Foreign languages (46.8%); Teamwork (42.9%); Critical thinking (42.0%); Digital skills (40.5%)	Better education quality (63.4%); Higher salaries (54.6%); More career guidance (32.2%); More remote job opportunities (26.8%); Stronger employment protection (21.0%)
Serbia	Communication (68.5%); Entrepreneurial skills (43.2%); Problem solving (42.8%); Technical skills (41.0%); Digital skills (37.8%)	Higher salaries (59.0%); More internships/traineeships (54.1%); More career guidance (41.4%); Better education quality (34.2%); More remote job opportunities (34.2%)

A2.6 Key comparative indicators

Country	Not aware of programmes	No career support	Mental well-being important	Agree stress/ focus practices help	Poorly/not prepared by education	Willing to join initiatives (yes/maybe)
Czech Republic	73.10%	89.10%	88.00%	85.80%	33.70%	35.40%
Denmark	63.20%	82.10%	78.60%	83.10%	38.30%	93.50%
Ireland	77.00%	70.00%	73.00%	80.50%	38.50%	80.70%
Italy	56.70%	65.40%	71.90%	74.90%	64.30%	70.30%
Romania	78.50%	86.80%	90.70%	78.50%	62.40%	83.90%
Serbia	93.20%	60.80%	90.50%	84.20%	35.10%	65.70%

SOURCES CONSULTED:

Main external source categories referenced through national reports:

Eurostat data on youth unemployment, NEET rates, labour market participation and employment indicators.

National statistical offices and labour force surveys: Czech Statistical Office, Statistics Denmark, Central Statistics Office Ireland, ISTAT, National Institute of Statistics Romania, Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia.

National ministries, labour offices and employment services referenced in the national reports, including ministries responsible for labour, employment, social protection, education and youth employment measures.

OECD sources on youth employment, inclusive entrepreneurship, labour market transitions and country-specific youth employment challenges.

European Commission, EURES and related European sources on labour market information, education and training, youth employment and support measures.

World Bank, ILO and Global Entrepreneurship Monitor sources referenced in national reports for wider labour market, skills and entrepreneurship analysis.

National programme sources referenced in the reports, including Youth Guarantee-related measures, entrepreneurship/start-up support schemes, active labour market measures and national or regional youth employment initiatives.

EMPLOYMENT AND SELF-EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT – COUNTRY-SPECIFIC RESOURCES

Employment and self-employment support systems differ across European countries. Public employment services, training programmes, financial incentives, entrepreneurship schemes and mentoring opportunities may be available, but eligibility criteria and application procedures depend on national regulations and programmes.

The following country-specific resources provide information on available support measures and relevant institutions in each participating country.

Explore the resources for your country:

- **SERBIA**
- **CZECH REPUBLIC**
- **DENMARK**
- **IRELAND**
- **ITALY**
- **ROMANIA**

PART II

PREPARING FOR EMPLOYMENT

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

A job search is a project. The goal is not to send the largest possible number of applications. The goal is to understand what you are looking for, find real opportunities, show evidence that you can contribute, prepare well, and make informed choices. For a first job, this may mean learning how to describe experience that did not come from paid employment. For someone changing field or country, it may mean translating existing experience into a new context.

The guide follows the normal order of a job search

Direction → opportunity → application → interview → offer.

It deliberately keeps CV advice short. A CV is only one part of the process, and a good-looking document cannot compensate for a poorly chosen vacancy, a generic application or weak preparation.

Part	What it helps you do
1–3	Decide what you are looking for and find reliable opportunities.
4–7	Understand a vacancy and build an application around evidence, not buzzwords.
8–10	Use CVs, short application messages, portfolios and AI tools effectively.
11–13	Prepare for interviews and questions without memorising scripts.
14–16	Check offers, basic rights, cross-border issues and possible scams.
17–18	Adapt the approach to different situations and keep a simple job-search system.
19	Use ready-to-copy practical templates and checklists.

1. Start with direction, not applications

Before opening job boards, decide what you are actually searching for. “Any job” sounds flexible, but it makes it harder to recognize good opportunities and to explain your motivation. You do not need a perfect five-year plan. You only need enough direction for the next step.

Write down three short lists:

- **Must have:** conditions that are genuinely necessary, such as location, legal work status, minimum income, working hours, accessibility, transport or language.
- **Would like:** things that matter but are negotiable, such as remote work, a particular sector, training opportunities or schedule.
- **Not for me:** conditions you already know would make the job unsuitable or unsafe.

Then describe the type of work, not only the job title. For example, “I want work where I organise people and information, solve practical problems and communicate with clients” is more useful than “I want an office job”. The same skills can appear under very different job titles.

Useful tool: Explore occupations and the skills linked to them in ESCO

2. Build a skills and evidence map

Employers usually look for evidence that a person can do the work. Evidence can come from paid jobs, but also from volunteering, school projects, internships, caring responsibilities, family businesses, community activities, sport, creative work, personal projects, short courses or freelance tasks.

Do not start with adjectives such as “hard-working”, “creative” or “good communicator”. Start with something you actually did. Then identify the skill behind it.

What happened	What you did	What this shows
A student event had 120 participants.	Coordinated registrations, timetable and communication with speakers.	Organisation, communication, time management.
A local sports club needed more young participants.	Prepared social media content and contacted schools.	Outreach, content creation, initiative.
A family shop was busy during weekends.	Helped customers, handled stock and solved routine problems.	Customer service, reliability, practical problem-solving.
No formal work experience yet.	Completed a group project with a deadline and divided tasks.	Teamwork, planning, responsibility.

A useful test is: could you give a real example if the interviewer asked “When did you do that?” If the answer is no, the skill probably needs clearer evidence.

Useful tool: Use ESCO to search for occupations and related skills

3. Find reliable job opportunities

Use several channels. Different sectors recruit in different ways, and many opportunities never appear on the same platform. A practical search can combine public employment services, EURES, company websites, sector-specific job boards, professional networks, youth organizations, career centers, local employers and direct contact.

- Create job alerts instead of repeating the same search every day.
- Use more than one job title. Search by skills, tasks and sector as well as by title.
- Check the employer's own website when you find a vacancy on another platform.
- Keep a simple list of applications so you know what you sent, when, and to whom.
- Do not assume that every vacancy visible on social media is genuine. Verify the company and source before sending sensitive information.

EU job search: EURES services for jobseekers
Practical advice: EURES hints and tips for jobseekers

4. Read the job ad like a checklist, not a wish list

Many young people reject themselves before the employer does. Job advertisements often mix essential requirements with preferred experience and an ideal profile. Separate them.

Look for	**Questions to ask yourself**
Core tasks	What would I actually do each week? Which tasks have I done before in another context?
Essential requirements	Is this legally or practically necessary: licence, qualification, language, work permit, shift availability?
Preferred requirements	Could I learn this quickly? Is it described as “preferred”, “advantage”, “plus” or “desirable”?
Skills	What evidence do I have for two or three skills that matter most?
Conditions	Location, hours, contract type, salary if stated, travel, remote/hybrid arrangements, start date.
Application instructions	Deadline, documents, file format, language, reference number, application portal or email.

If you meet the core requirements but not every preferred item, applying can still make sense. However, do not ignore genuine legal requirements, professional licenses or language requirements that are necessary for safe or lawful work.

5. Research the employer before you apply

A job application is stronger when you understand what the organization actually does. Research also protects you from wasting time or responding to a fraudulent offer.

- Check the official website, current activities, products or services and the location of the organization.
- Look at the vacancy on the employer's own careers page if one exists.
- Check whether the recruiter's email domain matches the organization.
- Read recent public information about the organization, but do not rely only on promotional content.
- If the employer is unfamiliar, search the relevant national business register or another official source where possible.
- Prepare one sentence explaining why this particular role or organization makes sense for you.

You do not need to "fall in love with the company". The purpose of research is to understand the role well enough to make a good application and to decide whether the opportunity is credible and suitable.

6. Match your evidence to the vacancy

A strong application does not repeat everything you have ever done. It selects the experience that answers the employer's main question: why could this person do this job?

Choose three to five requirements from the vacancy and connect each one to evidence. If the ad says "work with customers", "organize schedules" and "use spreadsheets", your application should contain real examples of customer contact, organization and spreadsheet use rather than a generic list of personality traits.

Vacancy asks for	**Your evidence**	**Where to show it**
Customer communication	Answered enquiries and supported participants during events.	CV bullet + interview example
Organisation	Managed registrations and timetable for a two-day activity.	CV bullet
Excel / spreadsheets	Tracked attendance and basic costs in Excel or Google Sheets.	Skills section + interview
Teamwork	Worked in a five-person project team with divided responsibilities.	Interview example

Use the employer's language when it is accurate. If the vacancy says "inventory", and you previously "kept track of stock", you can use the word inventory. Do not copy terms you do not understand and do not claim skills you cannot demonstrate.

7. Think in examples, not buzzwords

Short examples are more convincing than labels. “Good communication skills” is difficult to evaluate. “Explained registration steps to new participants and answered questions during a public event” gives the employer something concrete.

For important examples, use a simple four-part structure:

1. Context – what was happening?
2. Task – what needed to be done?
3. Action – what did you personally do?
4. Result – what changed, improved, was completed or learned?

This is similar to the STAR method often used in interviews. The result does not need to be dramatic. Finishing on time, reducing mistakes, helping a customer, solving a conflict or learning a new tool can all be valid results.

8. Your application package: more than a CV

Depending on the vacancy, the employer may ask for a CV, short application form, cover letter, portfolio, certificates, references, work samples or links. Send what is requested. Extra documents do not automatically make an application stronger.

A CV should make relevant evidence easy to find.

Keep the CV simple, readable and tailored. There is no single mandatory European CV format for every employer. Europass is a free and widely recognised option, especially when applying across Europe, but many employers also accept other clear formats.

- Put the most relevant and recent information where it is easy to see.
- Use short bullets that describe actions and evidence, not long job descriptions copied from somewhere else.
- Include informal, volunteer, project and internship experience when it is relevant.
- Do not include information only because “CVs always have it”. Follow the vacancy and national practice.
- Use a normal file name such as Name_Surname_CV.pdf, unless the employer requests another format.
- Check dates, contact details, spelling and links before sending.

Free CV tool: Europass CV builder
Profile tool: Europass profile for keeping skills and experience in one place

SHOW WHAT YOU CAN DO

For some jobs, examples of your work can say more than a CV. This is especially common in areas such as design, photography, writing, social media, marketing, IT, crafts or other practical and creative work. You do not need to have had a paid job to have work samples.

You can use:

- school or university projects;
- work created during training or courses;
- volunteer projects;
- personal projects;
- photos of things you have made;
- articles, designs, videos or social media content;
- websites, apps or code you have worked on.

A portfolio does not have to be complicated. It can be a short PDF, a simple website, a shared folder or a profile on a platform commonly used in your field. Select a few good examples rather than including everything you have ever done.

For each example, briefly explain what it was, what your role was and what you actually did.

Example: *Social media campaign for a local youth event – prepared Instagram posts and short videos and helped manage the event page.*

Only include a portfolio or work samples when they are relevant to the job or requested by the employer. Never share confidential information or work that you do not have permission to publish.

9. Write a short application message that sounds like a person

Many applications do not need a long traditional cover letter. If the employer asks for one, follow the instruction. If not, a short and specific email or message may be enough.

Part	What to say
1. Opening	State the role you are applying for.
2. Fit	Mention one or two relevant strengths with evidence.
3. Motivation	Explain briefly why this role or employer is relevant to you.
4. Close	Mention the attached/requested documents and provide a simple professional closing.

Avoid messages that could be sent unchanged to 100 employers. “I am highly motivated and believe I am the perfect candidate” is weaker than one concrete reason you match the role.

Free writing tool: Europass cover letter builder

10. Use AI as an assistant, not as your identity

AI tools can save time during a job search, but they can also produce generic language, invent facts or make every applicant sound the same. Use AI to support your thinking and editing, not to create a fictional version of you.

AI can help with	**You still need to do**
Extracting the main requirements from a long job ad.	Check the original vacancy and decide which requirements are really important.
Suggesting clearer wording for a real experience.	Make sure the final sentence is true and sounds natural to you.
Comparing your CV with a job ad.	Decide what to include and never invent missing experience.
Practising interview questions.	Answer in your own words and use real examples.
Checking grammar or translating a draft.	Review meaning, terminology and tone, especially for specialist roles.

Privacy matters. Do not paste identity documents, bank details, medical information, passwords, confidential employer documents or other sensitive personal data into an AI tool. If you use an AI service, check its privacy settings and terms.

Useful prompts can be simple: “Here is a job description and my real experience. Identify the three strongest matches and ask me questions where evidence is missing.” Or: “Make this paragraph clearer, but do not add any experience or skill that is not already in my text.”

11. Prepare for the interview before you know the questions

Interview preparation is not about memorising perfect answers. It is about knowing your own examples well enough to adapt them to different questions.

Prepare these five things:

1. **A 30–60 second explanation of who you are professionally and what you are looking for.**
2. **Three examples that show important skills from the vacancy.**
3. **One example of a problem, mistake or difficult situation and what you did about it.**
4. **Two or three questions you genuinely want to ask the employer.**
5. **Practical details: time, location or video link, contact person, route, technology, documents and accessibility needs.**

You do not have to use the same example for every question. A strong interview feels like a conversation built on real experience, not a set of memorised speeches.

Questions worth preparing for:

Question type	**What the employer is usually trying to understand**
Tell us about yourself.	Can you explain your relevant background clearly and briefly?
Why this role?	Did you choose this opportunity intentionally and understand the work?
Tell us about a difficult situation.	How do you respond when work is not simple?
Give an example of teamwork.	What did you actually contribute to a shared result?
What do you still need to learn?	Are you self-aware and realistic about development?
Why is there a gap/change in your experience?	Can you explain the timeline without becoming defensive?

12. During the interview: slow down and answer the question

- Listen to the full question. It is fine to take a few seconds before answering.
- If a question is unclear, ask the interviewer to clarify it.
- Use specific examples and explain your own role, especially when describing team work.
- If you do not know something, say what you do know and how you would find out or learn it.
- Do not speak badly about a previous employer. Explain the situation factually and focus on what you are looking for now.
- Ask your own questions. Interviews are also a chance to check whether the job is suitable for you.

For online interviews, test the link, microphone, camera and internet connection beforehand. Keep the job description and a few notes nearby, but avoid reading prepared answers from the screen.

Questions you can ask the employer

- What would a normal week in this role look like?
- What are the most important priorities in the first three months?
- How is new staff training or onboarding organized?
- Who would I work with most closely?
- How is performance usually evaluated?
- What are the next steps and expected timeline for the selection process?

13. If you have little or no formal work experience

Do not apologies for being at the beginning of your career. Your task is to show what you have already done, what you learned from it and why you can take the next step.

- Use school, university or vocational projects when they show relevant tasks.
- Include volunteering, internships, youth work, community activities and sports responsibilities when they demonstrate skills.
- Use personal or practical projects: a website, repaired equipment, photography, tutoring, an online shop experiment, organising an event or helping with a family activity.
- Show reliability through specific commitments: regular attendance, deadlines met, responsibility for money, equipment, people or information.
- Mention short courses or certificates only when they are relevant and be clear about the level reached.

The strongest entry-level application usually combines realistic confidence with willingness to learn: “I have not used this exact system, but I have worked with X, learned Y quickly, and I understand the basic task.”

14. After the interview: follow up without chasing

If the employer gave a timeline, wait until that timeline has passed before following up unless they asked you to contact them sooner. A short message is enough: thank them for the conversation, confirm continued interest, and ask whether there is an updated timeline.

If you are rejected, you can ask for brief feedback, especially after a later-stage interview. Some employers will not provide it, but the question can still be useful. Keep the vacancy, your application and your interview notes for a short review: what worked, what was difficult, and what you would change next time.

Silence or rejection is not reliable evidence that you are “bad at job searching”. Employers make decisions for many reasons you cannot see. Use patterns across several applications to decide what needs to change.

15. Before accepting an offer, check the actual conditions

Getting an offer is not the end of the decision. Make sure you understand what is being offered before you accept. Exact rights and procedures depend on national law, so use official national sources for final checks.

Check	Questions
Role	Job title, main tasks, reporting line, place of work, travel, remote/hybrid expectations.
Contract	Permanent or fixed-term, start date, duration, probation period, notice rules.
Pay	Gross/net basis, payment frequency, overtime, bonuses, allowances, travel or meal payments.
Time	Weekly hours, shifts, weekends, breaks, overtime and schedule predictability.
Leave	Annual leave and any other relevant leave arrangements.
Costs and equipment	Who provides tools, phone, computer, uniform, transport or remote-work equipment?
Training	Is required training paid? Is there onboarding or supervision?
Special conditions	Licence, medical/safety requirements, confidentiality, non-compete or other clauses.

EU rules set minimum standards in several areas, but national rules and collective agreements can provide stronger protection. Always check the rules that apply in the country where the job is based.

EU guidance: Employment contracts and basic information employers should provide
EU guidance: Equal treatment at work

16. Protect yourself from fake job offers and unsafe recruitment

Fraudulent offers can look professional. Verify the employer and slow down when someone creates pressure or asks for information that does not make sense at an early recruitment stage.

- Check the sender's email address and the exact spelling of the domain.
- Confirm the vacancy through the employer's official website or another reliable source.
- Be cautious when the salary is unusually high for very little information or no selection process.
- Do not send money to receive a job, "release" salary, buy cryptocurrency, transfer funds or process payments on behalf of an employer.
- Do not provide bank-card details or other financial information through an early recruitment form.
- Be careful with unsolicited messages asking for passport or identity-document copies before the employer and process have been verified.
- Check claims about visas, permits or EURES services through official sources.

Safety guidance: EURES: how to spot fraudulent job offers and misinformation

17. If you are looking for work in another country

Cross-border job searching adds practical questions that do not exist in a local search. Before accepting an offer, check the right to work, recognition of qualifications where relevant, language requirements, taxation, social security, housing costs, transport and the realistic cost of relocation.

For EU citizens, freedom of movement provides broad rights to work in other EU countries, but procedures and local conditions still matter. For non-EU nationals, the right to work depends on nationality, status and national immigration rules. Do not rely on a recruiter's informal explanation of visa or permit rules.

Mobility support: EURES living and working information
EU guidance: Your Europe: working abroad
EU guidance: Your Europe: work permits

18. Adapt the strategy to your situation

Situation	Useful adjustment
First job	Lead with projects, volunteering, practical tasks, learning and reliability rather than apologising for limited employment history.
Changing sector	Identify transferable skills and use examples that show the same task in a different setting.
Returning after a gap	Explain the timeline briefly and focus on current readiness, skills and recent activity.
Rural or remote area	Search a wider radius, include remote/hybrid roles where realistic, and check transport and schedule before applying.
Migrant/refugee or cross-border applicant	Check work status, qualification recognition, language expectations and official support services early.
Disability or accessibility needs	Focus on the role and skills. Where an adjustment is needed for recruitment or work, use the relevant national process and official equality guidance.
Seasonal or short-term work	Check accommodation, transport, pay deductions, contract length, working hours and who covers travel or equipment costs.

Different situations may require different support. Public employment services, EURES advisers, youth organisations, career centres, trade unions, equality bodies and specialised services can help with issues that go beyond a normal application.

19. Practical templates and checklists

19.1 Skills evidence sheet

Skill / requirement	My example	What I did	Result / evidence

19.2 Job ad decoder

Question	Notes
What are the three main tasks?	
Which requirements are essential?	
Which requirements are preferred?	
Which of my examples match best?	
What do I need to research before applying?	
What practical conditions matter to me?	
What is the deadline and application method?	

19.3 Application tracker

Employer / role	Date	Source	Status / next step

19.4 Before sending

- I followed the exact application instructions.
- My CV/application highlights evidence that matches this vacancy.
- Dates, contact details and links are correct.
- I did not claim experience or skills I do not have.
- The file names are professional and the documents open correctly.
- I checked the employer and the vacancy source.
- I saved a copy of what I sent.

19.5 Interview preparation sheet

Prepare	Your notes
My 30–60 second introduction	
Example 1: relevant skill	
Example 2: relevant skill	
Example 3: challenge / problem	
Why this role	
Questions for the employer	
Practical details / accessibility	

19.6 Offer check

- I understand the role, location and expected working pattern.
- I know the contract type, start date and probation conditions.
- I understand the pay structure and any deductions or allowances described.
- I checked working hours, overtime and leave arrangements.
- I know who provides equipment, training and work-related costs.
- I received or will receive the required written information/contract according to the applicable rules.
- I know who to contact if something in the offer is unclear.

20. Useful European tools and sources

These sources are useful across Europe, but they do not replace national employment services, labour law, immigration rules or sector-specific requirements. For legal or administrative questions, check the relevant national authority and the date of the information.

Source	Useful for
Europass	Recording skills and experience; creating CVs and cover letters; career planning.
ESCO	Exploring occupations and identifying skills linked to different types of work.
EURES	Job vacancies, advisers, mobility support, European Job Days, living and working information.
Your Europe	Official EU guidance on working abroad, contracts, equal treatment and related rights.

Europass: Main portal
Europass: Career planning tools
ESCO: European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations
EURES: Jobseekers portal
EURES: Living and working information
Your Europe: Working abroad
Your Europe: Employment contracts
Your Europe: Equal treatment at work

Links checked: October 2026.

Final reminder: A good application is not the one that sounds the most impressive. It is the one that makes it easy for an employer to understand what you can do, why the opportunity makes sense, and what evidence supports your claims.

WORKING RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES – COUNTRY-SPECIFIC RESOURCES

Understanding basic employment rights and responsibilities is an important part of entering the labour market. Employment contracts, working hours, wages, leave entitlements, social protection and employer obligations are regulated differently across countries.

The following resources provide country-specific information to help young people better understand their rights, responsibilities and working conditions before starting or accepting employment.

Explore the resources for your country:

- **SERBIA**
- **CZECH REPUBLIC**
- **DENMARK**
- **IRELAND**
- **ITALY**
- **ROMANIA**

PART III

EXPLORING ENTREPRENEURSHIP

1. What a business plan is and why it matters

A business plan is a structured explanation of how a business will work. It describes the problem or need the business addresses, the customers it wants to serve, what it will sell, how it will reach customers, what resources it needs, how much it expects to earn and spend, what risks it faces, and what the next steps are.

The document itself is useful, but the planning process is just as important. A good business plan forces the founder to turn an idea into assumptions that can be checked. It helps answer practical questions before money, time and reputation are put at risk.

Why prepare one?

- To test whether the idea can work in practice, not only whether it sounds attractive.
- To understand customers, competitors, prices, costs, capacity and possible risks.
- To plan cash needs and identify when the business may run short of money.
- To organise responsibilities if more than one person will run the business.
- To communicate the idea to a bank, investor, grant programme, incubator, partner or mentor.
- To create a reference point that can be updated as real information becomes available.

Important. There is no single business plan format that is mandatory across Europe. Banks, grant programmes, investors, incubators and national employment or self-employment schemes may each use their own forms and criteria. If a specific template is provided, use it first and adapt the content of this guide to that template.

Who will read the plan?

Audience	What they usually care about most
You and your team	Whether the model is realistic, what must be tested, what resources are needed and what the next priorities are.
Bank or microfinance provider	Cash flow, ability to repay, founder contribution, realistic sales assumptions, costs and financial discipline.
Investor or business angel	Growth potential, market opportunity, team, competitive advantage, scalability, traction and possible return.
Grant or public support programme	Eligibility, objectives, target group, expected results, eligible costs, sustainability and compliance with programme rules.
Partner, supplier or landlord	Stability, seriousness, capacity to deliver and the terms of the proposed cooperation.

A business plan should therefore be written for a real purpose. A 12-page plan for a local service business may be more useful than a 40-page plan full of generic market statistics. The reader should be able to see where the numbers came from and why the assumptions are reasonable.

2. Choose the right planning format

Not every idea needs a full business plan on day one. Use the lightest tool that helps you make the next decision, then add detail when the idea becomes more concrete or when an external programme asks for it.

Stage or need	Useful format	Purpose
Early idea	Business Model Canvas or one-page business model	Map customers, value, channels, activities, partners, costs and revenue on one page.
Testing the idea	Lean or one-page plan	List the most important assumptions and decide what should be tested with potential customers.
Preparing to launch	Full business plan + financial model	Plan operations, marketing, start-up costs, sales, cash flow, risks and milestones.
Applying for finance	Funder/lender template + supporting calculations	Answer the exact questions of the financing provider and show how money will be used and repaid or converted into results.
Running the business	Updated plan + rolling cash-flow forecast	Compare plan with actual results and adjust prices, costs, sales targets and priorities.

A practical planning sequence

1. Clarify the purpose of the plan and who will read it.
2. Define the customer problem or need and the product or service that addresses it.
3. Collect evidence: customer conversations, competitor prices, supplier quotes, official statistics and local information.
4. Map the business model and identify the assumptions that still need to be tested.
5. Build the numbers: price, sales volume, variable costs, fixed costs, start-up costs, cash flow and break-even point.
6. Write the full sections of the plan. Keep sources and assumptions visible.
7. Write the executive summary last, review the whole document, and ask another person to challenge the weak points.

Useful starting tool: Business Model Canvas

The Business Model Canvas is a one-page tool for describing how a business creates, delivers and captures value. It is useful before writing a long plan because it makes gaps visible quickly. Treat each box as a hypothesis to test, not as a fact.

Resource: Download the official Business Model Canvas from Strategyzer

3. Core elements of a business plan

The exact order can change, but a complete plan normally covers the following areas. For a small or first-time business, clarity is more important than jargon. Use real evidence, simple tables and short explanations.

3.1 Executive summary

The executive summary is the first section the reader sees, but it should usually be written last. It gives a short picture of the entire plan and should make sense even if someone reads only this page.

Include	Questions to answer
Business idea	What does the business do and what problem or need does it address?
Customer	Who will buy and why would they choose this offer?
Business model	How will the business make money?
Evidence	What has already been tested or confirmed?
Financial picture	What are the expected sales, main costs, break-even point and funding need?
Next step	What is needed now: launch, registration, equipment, financing, first customers, pilot, partnership?

For most small businesses, one page is enough. Avoid company history, slogans and unsupported claims such as “there is no competition”.

3.2 Business and company description

Explain who is behind the business and how it will be organised. If the business is not registered yet, say clearly that the legal form is planned and will be confirmed under national rules.

- Business name and location or intended area of operation.
- Founder(s), ownership and roles.
- Current stage: idea, testing, pre-launch, registered, already trading, or scaling.
- Planned legal form and ownership structure, if known.
- A short mission: what the business aims to provide and to whom.
- Key milestones already achieved, such as prototype, pilot customers, supplier agreement, qualification or licence.

Do not copy national registration rules into this common chapter. Legal forms, taxes, permits, licences and registration steps differ by country and sector. Check official national information and refer to the country-specific resource section of the NextGen publication.

3.3 Product or service and value proposition

Describe exactly what the customer will receive, how it is delivered and why it is useful. Focus on the customer benefit, not only on technical features.

- Main product or service and any different packages or versions.
- The customer problem, need or job it addresses.
- What is different or better compared with current alternatives?

• How quality will be controlled.
• Price or planned pricing method.
• Current development stage: concept, prototype, tested offer, minimum viable product (MVP), or existing product/service.
• Any relevant intellectual property, brand, design, licence, exclusive know-how or data asset.

3.4 Customers, market and competitors

Market analysis should explain the specific opportunity for this business. Avoid quoting a very large global market if the business will initially serve one town or one narrow customer group.

Define the customer

• Who pays? The user and the payer may be different.
• Where are they located? Local area, country, EU market or online worldwide?
• What do they currently use instead?
• What matters most to them: price, speed, quality, trust, convenience, design, sustainability, accessibility, status or something else?
• How often might they buy and what might stop them from buying?

Estimate the market

Start from the part of the market you can actually reach. For local businesses, a bottom-up estimate is usually stronger than a global headline number. Example: number of realistic customers in the service area × expected purchase frequency × average spending.

For scalable or investor-oriented businesses, you may also use TAM, SAM and SOM: Total Addressable Market, Serviceable Available Market and Serviceable Obtainable Market. Explain the method and source for every number.

Analyse competitors and alternatives

Competition includes direct competitors, indirect competitors and the option of doing nothing. Compare real offers rather than saying that the business has no competitors.

Competitor / alternative	Price	Strengths	Weaknesses or gaps	Why a customer may choose you
Example: Local competitor A	€___	Strong location, known brand	Limited customisation	Flexible service / niche focus
Example: Online alternative	€___	Convenient, large choice	Delivery time, less personal support	Local availability / personal advice
Your business	€___	_____	_____	_____

Use evidence, not invented numbers

Useful evidence includes official statistics, national or regional data, industry reports, company registries, competitor websites and price lists, customer interviews, short surveys, supplier quotations, pilot sales and letters of intent. AI-generated market sizes or competitor facts are not evidence until they are checked against the original source.

European data source: Eurostat business demography
European data source: Eurostat structural business statistics

3.5 Marketing and sales strategy

Marketing explains how people will discover and understand the offer. Sales explains how interest becomes a purchase. A plan should show the path from first contact to payment, not simply list social media platforms.

- Main acquisition channels: referrals, partnerships, local presence, events, website/search, social media, marketplaces, direct outreach, distributors or paid advertising.
- Key message: what should the customer understand in a few seconds?
- Sales process: enquiry → quote/demo → decision → payment → delivery → repeat purchase or referral.
- Expected conversion rates, if there is evidence. If there is no evidence yet, label them as assumptions and test them.
- Marketing budget and staff time required.
- Customer retention: repeat purchase, service quality, follow-up, loyalty, subscription, community or after-sales support.

For businesses that use paid marketing, calculate customer acquisition cost (CAC): total sales and marketing cost used to acquire new customers ÷ number of new customers acquired. For subscription or repeat-purchase models, compare CAC with the expected value of a customer over time. Do not use a “healthy ratio” as a universal rule; acceptable levels depend on the sector, margins and cash cycle.

3.6 Operations and resources

Explain what must happen every day for the business to deliver what it promises.

- Premises, workspace, equipment and technology.
- Suppliers and important external partners.
- Production or service-delivery steps.
- Stock, storage, fulfilment and delivery, if relevant.
- Quality control and customer support.
- Licences, permits, insurance, safety or professional requirements that must be checked nationally.
- Capacity: how many units, clients, bookings or projects can be handled with the available people and equipment?
- Contingency: what happens if a key supplier, platform, machine or team member is unavailable?

3.7 Management and team

A small business still needs clear responsibilities. Explain who will make decisions and who will handle sales, delivery, finance, administration, marketing and customer support.

- Founder and co-founder roles and relevant experience.
- Skills already available in the team.
- Missing skills and how they will be covered: hire, freelance expert, accountant, lawyer, mentor, agency or partner.
- Planned hires and when they become financially realistic.
- Advisers or mentors, if they have an actual role.

3.8 Financial plan

The financial plan converts the business model into numbers. It should be understandable even to someone who did not build the spreadsheet. Every major number should be linked to a clear assumption.

Minimum calculations for a new small business

- Start-up costs: one-off spending needed before or at launch.
- Sales forecast: expected quantity of sales × selling price.
- Variable costs: costs that rise when more units are sold or more services are delivered.
- Fixed costs: costs that continue even if sales are low, such as rent, base software subscriptions or certain salaries.
- Profit and loss forecast: expected revenue minus costs.
- Cash-flow forecast: when money actually enters and leaves the bank account.
- Break-even point: the sales level at which contribution covers fixed costs.
- Funding need: how much cash is required, when it is required and what it will be used for.

Profit is not the same as cash. A business can show an accounting profit and still run out of cash if customers pay late, stock must be bought in advance, taxes are due, or loan repayments fall before cash is collected. For a new business, a monthly cash-flow forecast is one of the most important tools.

For external financing, a lender or investor may request additional statements, such as a balance sheet and two- or three-year projections. Follow the requested format. Use the same assumptions consistently across all tables.
State the currency, the period covered and whether amounts include or exclude VAT or other taxes according to the national rules that apply. When unsure, verify with an accountant or the competent public authority.

3.9 Funding request and use of funds

If external money is needed, state the amount, type of finance and use of funds clearly. If no external finance is needed, explain the self-funding plan and the milestones that will allow reinvestment.

Funding type	**Plan should explain**
Self-funding / bootstrapping	Founder contribution, minimum cash reserve, what will be delayed or limited, and when revenue will finance the next step.
Loan / microfinance	Amount, repayment assumptions, cash available for repayments, interest/fees where known, and what the financed asset or working capital will produce.
Equity investment	Amount, ownership offered if applicable, growth plan, use of funds and how the investor may eventually receive a return.
Grant / public support	Eligibility, objectives, eligible costs, co-financing if required, timing of payments/reimbursements and measurable results. Do not treat a grant as guaranteed before approval.

3.10 Risks, milestones and appendices

A credible plan names the main risks and shows how they will be reduced, monitored or accepted. Risks can be commercial, operational, financial, regulatory, technological, environmental or related to key people.

- List the most important risks, not every imaginable risk.
- For each risk, define a prevention or mitigation action and an early warning sign.
- Set 6-12 month milestones with measurable evidence, for example “sign 10 paying customers” rather than “increase sales”.
- Use appendices for supporting evidence such as detailed financial tables, supplier quotes, CVs, licences, customer research, letters of intent, product specifications or images.

4. Adapt the plan to the type of business

The core logic is the same for every business, but different models have different risks and numbers. Add the information below when it is relevant.

Business type	Extra information to include	Useful measures
Products, crafts or small manufacturing	Materials and suppliers, unit production cost, production time, capacity, minimum order quantities, inventory, packaging, storage, defects/returns, shipping and quality control.	Unit cost; gross margin per unit; units per month; stock turnover; return/defect rate.
Café, food or hospitality	Location and footfall, rent, capacity, opening hours, food/safety licences, average spend, suppliers, perishability, waste, staff shifts, seasonality and delivery-platform commissions where relevant.	Average transaction value; seats/rooms/bookings; occupancy or table turnover; food/material cost %; labour cost; daily break-even sales.
Service, freelance or consultancy	Skills and qualifications, delivery process, available working hours, billable vs non-billable time, packages/rates, client concentration and pipeline.	Billable hours; average project value; utilisation rate; repeat clients; revenue per working day.
Digital, IT or subscription business	MVP/product roadmap, user problem, development cost, hosting/cloud/software, cybersecurity, data protection, onboarding, recurring revenue, churn, product support and scalability.	MRR/ARR; active users; conversion; churn; CAC; customer lifetime; gross margin.
E-commerce	Platform and payment fees, web conversion, digital advertising, fulfilment, shipping, stock, returns, customer service, marketplace dependence and cross-border rules where relevant.	Conversion rate; average order value; CAC; return rate; fulfilment cost; contribution per order.
Agriculture or rural business	Land/production capacity, seasonality, weather and climate risks, equipment, inputs, storage, transport, veterinary/food requirements where relevant, buyers and subsidy dependence.	Yield; cost per unit/kg; seasonal cash needs; capacity utilisation; loss/waste rate.
Social enterprise	Social or environmental objective, beneficiaries, revenue-generating activity, grants/donations if relevant, impact indicators, governance and how the mission affects pricing or cost structure.	Earned income share; cost per beneficiary; impact indicators; repeat revenue; funding concentration.

Example. A local café should not spend pages calculating the global food-service market. It should know its location, realistic daily customer volume, average transaction value, food and labour costs, opening capacity, nearby competitors and the daily sales needed to cover fixed costs. A software start-up, by contrast, may need a larger market model, user acquisition assumptions, recurring revenue, churn and product-development milestones.

5. Practical models and calculations

5.1 Keep an assumptions and evidence log

Before building the financial model, write down the assumptions that drive it. This makes it easier to update the plan and prevents numbers from appearing without explanation.

Assumption	Current value	Evidence / source	Date checked	What if it is wrong?
Selling price	€____	Competitor prices + customer interviews	___/___/___	Test lower and higher price
Monthly customers	____	Footfall / enquiries / pilot / market estimate	___/___/___	Build conservative scenario
Material cost per unit	€____	Supplier quote	___/___/___	Find second supplier / adjust price
Rent	€____	Landlord offer	___/___/___	Alternative location / home-based start

5.2 Revenue and sales forecast

The simplest revenue formula is:

Revenue = number of sales × selling price

If there are several products or services, forecast each separately. For a service business, capacity can be a useful reality check: available billable hours × realistic price per hour or average package price.

Product / service	Expected monthly quantity	Price	Monthly revenue
Offer A	____	€____	€____
Offer B	____	€____	€____
Offer C	____	€____	€____
Total			€____

5.3 Costs and contribution margin

Separate variable costs from fixed costs. This makes pricing and break-even calculations easier.

Contribution per unit = selling price – variable cost per unit

Gross margin % = (revenue – direct cost of sales) ÷ revenue × 100

Variable costs may include materials, packaging, delivery, card or platform fees, production labour directly tied to output, or commissions. Fixed costs may include rent, insurance, basic software, accounting, certain salaries, internet or base marketing expenses. The exact classification depends on the business.

5.4 Start-up cost model

Start-up item	Estimated cost	Source / quote	Essential before launch?
Registration / permits / professional fees	€____	_____	Yes / No
Deposit / premises preparation	€____	_____	Yes / No
Equipment / tools	€____	_____	Yes / No
Initial materials / stock	€____	_____	Yes / No
Website / software / POS	€____	_____	Yes / No
Branding / launch marketing	€____	_____	Yes / No
Insurance / safety / compliance	€____	_____	Yes / No
Working-capital reserve	€____	_____	Yes / No
Other	€____	_____	Yes / No
Total start-up need	€____		

5.5 Monthly operating plan

Monthly item	Amount
Revenue	€____
Direct / variable costs	€____
Gross contribution	€____
Rent / premises	€____
Salaries / founder pay / contractors	€____
Utilities / phone / internet	€____
Software / subscriptions	€____
Marketing / sales	€____
Transport / delivery	€____
Professional services / insurance	€____
Other operating costs	€____
Operating result before taxes/financing	€____

5.6 Cash-flow model

Cash flow follows the timing of real payments. Build it month by month for at least the first year when preparing to launch. Add tax, loan repayment, equipment instalments, grant reimbursement timing or other items that affect cash when relevant.

Closing cash = opening cash + cash received – cash paid

Month	Opening cash	Cash in	Cash out	Closing cash
Month 1	€____	€____	€____	€____
Month 2	€____	€____	€____	€____
Month 3	€____	€____	€____	€____
…	…	…	…	…
Month 12	€____	€____	€____	€____

5.7 Break-even calculation

Break-even shows how much must be sold before contribution covers fixed costs. It is useful for checking whether the sales target is physically and commercially realistic.

Break-even units = monthly fixed costs ÷ contribution per unit

Simple example. A product sells for €20. The variable cost is €8, so contribution is €12 per unit. If monthly fixed costs are €1,200, the business needs to sell 100 units per month to break even (€1,200 ÷ €12 = 100). This calculation does not replace a cash-flow forecast, but it gives a useful minimum sales target.

5.8 Scenarios and sensitivity

Do not build only one optimistic forecast. A simple three-scenario model helps show what happens when sales are slower, costs are higher or launch is delayed

Assumption	Conservative	Expected	Optimistic
Monthly sales volume	____	____	____
Average price	€____	€____	€____
Variable cost per unit	€____	€____	€____
Monthly fixed costs	€____	€____	€____
Result / cash need	€____	€____	€____

Also test the variables that could hurt the business most. What happens if the selling price is 10% lower, supplier cost is 20% higher, sales start two months later, or a major customer leaves?

5.9 Simple risk matrix

Risk	Likelihood (1–5)	Impact (1–5)	Prevention / mitigation	Early warning sign
Supplier delay	3	4	Second supplier; safety stock for critical items	Lead time starts increasing
Sales below plan	3	5	Pilot first; reduce fixed cost; test channels	Low enquiry-to-sale conversion
Key person unavailable	2	4	Document processes; backup contractor	Workload concentrated in one person
Your risk	_	_	_____	_____

6. Using AI tools responsibly

AI can make business planning faster, especially for first drafts, brainstorming and checking whether important questions have been missed. It should support judgement, not replace research, professional advice or responsibility for the final numbers.

Good uses of AI

- Turn notes into a clear business-plan structure.
- Ask for questions that challenge the business idea and expose missing assumptions.
- Rewrite complex text in simple language or adapt it for a bank, investor or grant audience.
- Create a first version of a competitor-comparison table using information you provide.
- Suggest cost categories or operational steps you may have forgotten.
- Create conservative, expected and optimistic scenarios from your verified inputs.
- Explain financial concepts or formulas in plain language.
- Proofread grammar and consistency after the plan is complete.

Do not delegate these decisions to AI

- Do not use invented market size, competitor revenue, legal requirements, taxes, licences or funding rules as facts.
- Do not submit AI-generated financial projections without checking every assumption and formula.
- Do not paste confidential customer lists, passwords, unpublished intellectual property, bank details or sensitive personal data into a public AI tool unless you understand its privacy and data-use terms.
- Do not assume that an AI citation or link is real. Open the original source and verify the information and date.
- Do not let AI choose a legal form, tax treatment or regulated-business requirement without qualified national advice.

A **reliable AI workflow**

1. Give the AI only facts that you already know and label assumptions clearly.
2. Ask it to separate facts, assumptions and questions that still need evidence.
3. Ask it not to invent numbers or sources.
4. Verify every market, legal, financial and funding claim in the original source.
5. Replace generic wording with concrete information about the actual business.
6. Check that all sections use the same price, customer numbers, costs and timeline.
7. Have a mentor, accountant or relevant specialist review the areas where mistakes would be costly.

Useful prompt examples:

Prompt 1 – challenge the idea. "Act as a critical business-planning coach. Based only on the information below, list the 10 assumptions that could make this idea fail. Separate assumptions about customers, price, costs, operations and regulation. Do not invent facts. For each assumption, suggest a low-cost way to test it."

Prompt 2 – improve the market section. "Turn my notes into a concise market-analysis section. Use only the data I provide. Mark any missing evidence with [NEEDS SOURCE]. Do not create market-size numbers, competitor revenue or citations."

Prompt 3 – test the financial model. "Using these verified inputs, calculate conservative, expected and optimistic monthly scenarios. Show each formula and assumption. If information is missing, ask a question instead of estimating it."

AI business-plan generators

Specialised generators can be useful for creating a first outline, but they are not a substitute for evidence or a financial spreadsheet. “Free” conditions change frequently, so check the current terms before use.

Tool	Current free use (checked 4 October 2026)	Best use / limitation
QuillBot AI Business Plan Generator	Free to use and states that no sign-up is required.	Fast first draft. Verify all facts, numbers and legal information.
Bizplanr	Free first business-plan draft; advanced editing/financial features are paid.	Useful guided starting point, but not fully free for a complete planning workflow.
Upmetrics free AI business-plan generator	Generates a free draft; full workspace and advanced tools are premium.	Useful for structure and prompts; treat market research and projections as material to verify.

7. Useful European resources and free planning tools

Use official sources first for registration, regulation, funding and statistics. Third-party templates are useful for structure and design, but they do not replace national rules.

Official European resources

Resource	Use it for
Your Europe – starting a business	Starting a business, registration, permits, support and links to national information in EU countries.
Your Europe – start-ups	Overview of legal forms, registration, permits, VAT/accounting links and support for start-ups.
EU Access to Finance	Search for EU-supported loans, microfinance and venture-capital providers by country.
Enterprise Europe Network – local contact points	Local business advice, internationalisation support and partner-search services; includes Serbia as well as EU countries.
Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs	European exchange programme for aspiring/new entrepreneurs; a solid business plan is part of the application for new entrepreneurs.
Eurostat – business demography	Official statistics on business births, deaths, survival and high-growth enterprises.
Eurostat – structural business statistics	Data on sectors, enterprise size, turnover, employment and business structure.
European IP Helpdesk	Free first-line information and support for European SMEs on intellectual property in cross-border business.
EDPB data protection guide for small business	Practical GDPR guidance and tools for small businesses processing personal data.
Access2Markets	EU tool for businesses researching tariffs, procedures, product requirements and rules for trade with non-EU markets.

Free or low-cost planning templates

Resource	Use it for
Strategyzer – official Business Model Canvas	Free official one-page canvas download. Best for mapping the business model before writing the full plan.
Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs – guidance on business plan requirements	Official program guidance explaining what a business plan should contain for an Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs application. The program does not prescribe one mandatory template, which makes this a useful reference for understanding the minimum content rather than copying a fixed format.
HubSpot – free business plan templates	Free full and one-page templates in editable formats; useful for structure and prompts.
Canva – business plan templates	Many editable free templates for layout and presentation; some individual designs or assets may require a paid plan.

A note about Serbia and other non-EU countries. EU resources can still be useful for market research, internationalisation and business support, and Enterprise Europe Network has contact points in Serbia. Registration, tax, labour, licensing and national support rules must be checked through Serbian official institutions and the country-specific NextGen resource section.

8. Quick quality check before submission

Before sending the plan to a bank, investor, programme, mentor or partner, check the following.

□ The plan follows the exact template of the programme or lender, if one was provided.
□ The customer is clearly defined and there is evidence that the problem or need exists.
□ Competitors and alternatives are named and compared realistically.
□ Prices are supported by customer research, competitor information or a clear pricing logic.
□ Sales volume is physically possible given capacity, location, working hours, stock or production limits.
□ Supplier, rent, software, delivery and other major costs come from real quotes or documented assumptions.
□ Profit and cash flow are both calculated; they are not treated as the same thing.
□ The funding amount matches the start-up and cash-flow need and every major use of funds is explained.
□ Legal, tax, licensing and support information has been checked against current official national sources.
□ Risks are named and there is a realistic response to the most important ones.
□ AI-generated content has been verified and generic text has been replaced with business-specific information.
□ The executive summary matches the full plan and the same numbers are used throughout the document.

APPENDIX A. SIMPLE BUSINESS PLAN TEMPLATE

Use this template when no external organisation has provided its own form. Keep answers concrete and add supporting evidence or hyperlinks where useful.

Section	Questions and information to include
1. Executive summary	What does the business do? Who are the main customers? What makes the offer valuable or different? How does the business earn revenue? What stage is it at now? What funding or next step is needed?
2. Business and team	Business name and location / area of operation; founder(s), roles and ownership; current stage; planned legal form, if known; relevant skills, experience, qualifications and missing skills.
3. Product or service	What exactly is sold? What customer problem or need does it address? How is it delivered? Price or pricing method; current development/testing stage; any IP, licence, brand or special know-how.
4. Customers and market	Primary customer group(s); geography; customer need and buying behaviour; market-size method and sources; customer research completed; important trends.
5. Competitors and positioning	Main direct competitors; indirect alternatives; competitor prices; their strengths and weaknesses; why customers may choose this business.
6. Marketing and sales	Main channels; key message; sales process; marketing budget; expected leads/customers and how they will be measured; retention/repeat purchase strategy.
7. Operations and resources	Premises/workspace; equipment and technology; suppliers and partners; delivery/production process; capacity; licences/permits/insurance to verify; quality control and contingency.
8. Team and organisation	Who is responsible for sales, delivery, finance, administration and customer support? Planned hires/outsourcing; mentors/advisers and their real role.
9. Financial plan	Start-up costs; sales forecast; variable costs; fixed costs; monthly cash-flow forecast; break-even point; conservative/expected/optimistic scenarios; main financial assumptions and sources.
10. Funding and milestones	Amount and type of funding, if needed; use of funds; founder contribution; repayment/return logic where relevant; key milestones for the next 6–12 months.
11. Risks and mitigation	Top 5 risks; likelihood and impact; mitigation action; early warning sign; backup plan.
12. Appendices	Detailed financial tables; supplier quotes; customer research; CVs/qualifications; letters of intent/pilot evidence; technical information or images; relevant permits/licences once available.

APPENDIX B. SHORT GLOSSARY

Term	Plain-language meaning
Revenue	Money earned from selling goods or services before costs are deducted.
Variable cost	A cost that changes with the number of units sold or services delivered.
Fixed cost	A cost that usually continues even when sales are low.
Gross profit / contribution	Revenue minus the direct costs associated with producing or delivering the sale. Exact accounting definitions can differ, so use consistent terms in the plan.
Net profit	What remains after all relevant business expenses are deducted from revenue for the period.
Cash flow	Actual movement of money into and out of the business.
Break-even	The sales level at which contribution covers fixed costs.
Working capital	Cash tied up in normal operations, for example stock and customer payments, minus short-term obligations.
CAC	Customer acquisition cost: sales/marketing cost used to acquire new customers divided by the number of new customers acquired.
Churn	The rate at which subscription customers or users stop using or paying for a service.
MVP	Minimum viable product: the simplest version of a product that can be tested with real users.
TAM / SAM / SOM	Optional market-sizing terms: total market, the part the business can serve, and the realistic share it may obtain.

HOW TO REGISTER A BUSINESS – COUNTRY-SPECIFIC RESOURCES

Developing a business plan is an important first step, but turning an idea into a registered business also involves legal and administrative requirements. Business registration procedures, available legal forms, taxation, permits and other obligations differ between countries.

The following resources provide country-specific guidance on the main steps and requirements for registering a business, helping young entrepreneurs identify relevant procedures and institutions.

Explore the resources for your country:

- **SERBIA**
- **CZECH REPUBLIC**
- **DENMARK**
- **IRELAND**
- **ITALY**
- **ROMANIA**

NextGen OPPORTUNITY

KOM 18 · RRA JUG · Beyond Borders · ATDD · YOUTH PROGRESS · Blackwater Training & Consulting · THE NORDIC CREW

Co-funded by the European Union