

## INSIGHTS FROM CROSS-COUNTRY FOCUS GROUPS IN 2025

### DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION IN SMALLER AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES: KEY FINDINGS FROM AUSTRIA, GERMANY, FINLAND & LITHUANIA

#### Why conduct focus groups?

Following the cross-country survey presented in Newsletter 2, the DEI4SME consortium conducted coordinated focus groups to **validate and further improve the DEI4SME Framework**. While the survey highlighted broad trends across Europe, the focus groups offered deeper insights into how SMEs perceive, interpret and apply DEI in their daily reality – and what they need for the Framework to become more practical, accessible and SME-friendly.

Between June and September 2025, focus groups were held in Austria, Germany, Finland, and Lithuania, involving SMEs, DEI experts, HEI experts, and members of underrepresented groups. Together, they provide a more complete and nuanced picture of DEI dynamics in European SMEs and point to clear opportunities for strengthening Framework Version 2.0.

## What did we do and who participated?

The national focus groups followed a unified methodology combining:

- **a Google Form questionnaire**
- **a moderated discussion round**
- **a shared template for national reporting**

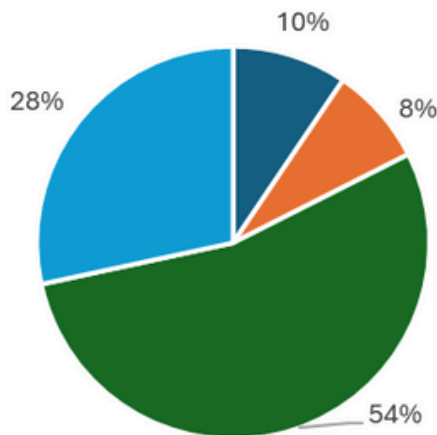
This ensured comparability and consistency across all partner countries.

In total, the project collected **77 valid Google Form responses** and confirmed **more than 60 focus-group participants** across the four countries:

Country	Austria	Germany	Finland	Lithuania
HEI Expert	2	0	2	3
DEI Expert	1	1	2	2
Diversity representatives	10	10	10	10
SME	1	10	7	3
Total	14	21 <sup>[1]</sup>	21	18

[1] In Germany, some participants identified with more than one target group. This resulted in “double counting,” meaning that individuals were recorded in multiple categories because they belonged to more than one stakeholder group at the same time. In other countries, participants also had multiple identifications, but represented one main identity in the focus group discussion.

Distribution of the participants



■ HEI Expert   ■ DEI Expert   ■ Diversity representatives   ■ SME

## General Cross-Country Insights

Despite differing national contexts, the focus groups revealed remarkably consistent patterns across European SMEs.

### Inclusion is often practiced informally – without naming it DEI

Across all countries, SMEs described inclusive behaviours already present in their everyday operations – such as respectful communication, flexibility or informal support.

*Yet these actions are rarely labelled as “DEI.”*

The Framework helped participants articulate what they already do and identify where more structure or clarity is needed.

### The Framework is clear and relevant – but needs practical tools.

Participants in all four countries considered the Framework clear, logical and easy to understand.

However, they consistently asked for:

- simpler, more accessible language
- clear definitions of key terms
- concrete examples from real SMEs
- short case studies
- checklists and ready to use templates

### Leadership is the strongest enabler

In every focus group, leadership commitment emerged as the **most decisive driver of DEI**.

Managers shape psychological safety, communication culture and the credibility of DEI activities. Without leadership buy-in, DEI tends to remain informal, unstructured or dependent on individual effort.

### Resource constraints remain a major barrier

SMEs highlighted several limitations:

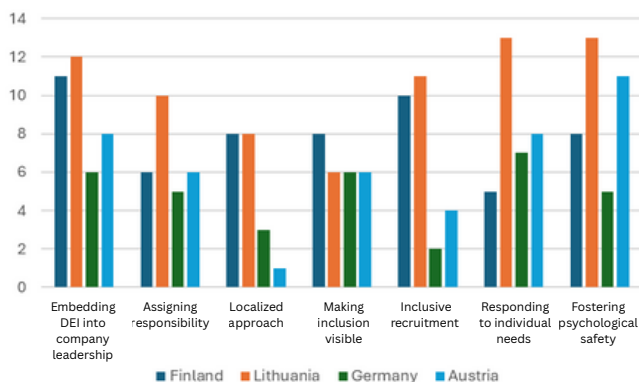
- lack of time,
- lack of expertise,
- low capacity to formalise DEI processes,
- uncertainty around data protection and indicators.

Most SMEs expressed a preference for **low-threshold, time-efficient, and easy-to-implement** DEI tools rather than complex organisational strategies.

## DEI Priorities in the Google Questionnaire

The Google Forms provided two additional insights:

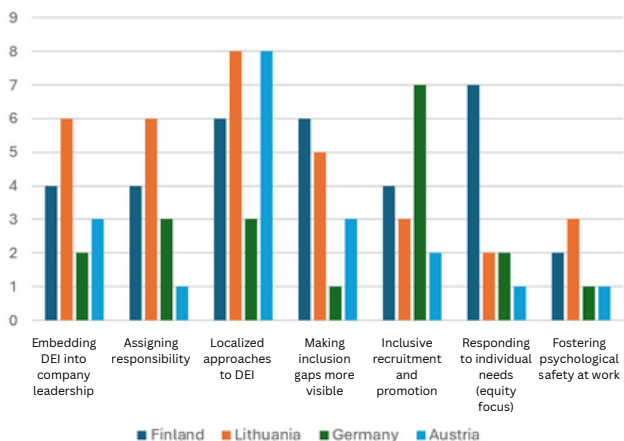
Q13: Most relevant topics in each Country



### Most relevant across countries:

- fostering psychological safety,
- assigning DEI responsibilities,
- inclusive recruitment,
- responding to individual needs.

Q14: Least relevant topics in each country



### Least relevant across countries:

- localised DEI approaches,
- making inclusion gaps visible,
- formalised transitions between DEI stages.

These items were often ranked lower because participants felt less familiar with these concepts and were unsure how such actions would translate into the everyday realities of small and medium-sized enterprises.

## Insights from the National Focus Groups



Austrian participants praised the clarity of the Framework but emphasised the need for highly practical examples, simplified language and tangible tools. DEI practices often remain informal, and leadership plays a crucial role in determining priorities.



German participants valued the clarity and relevance of the Framework and requested concrete templates and realistic indicators. Intersectional issues such as gender roles, care responsibilities and LGBTQ+ inclusion were especially visible, while the topic of measurement created uncertainty.



Finland recorded the highest clarity ratings overall. Participants highlighted the need for visual elements, simple language for SMEs and real examples from practice. Some suggested adding an intermediate step to reflect gradual DEI learning processes.



Lithuanian participants perceived the Framework as clear and impactful but noted that some terminology was too academic. They requested simplified vocabulary, clearer explanations and more localised examples.



## Partner Reflections: Key Takeaways from the Sessions - AUSTRIA -

In September 2025, the Austrian team organised two online focus group discussions. The discussions highlighted that, in Austria, DEI is still widely understood as a cultural and leadership matter, with psychological safety and everyday behaviours regarded as the strongest drivers of genuine inclusion. Participants appreciated the clarity of the three-step model, but emphasised the need for simpler language, concrete examples, and small, practical actions that reflect the realities of small organisations and SMEs. The low level of SME participation itself emerged as a notable finding, indicating the still limited visibility and perceived relevance of DEI topics within Austria's small-business landscape.



## Partner Reflections: Key Takeaways from the Sessions - GERMANY -

In September and October 2025, the three hybrid #DEI4SME focus groups in Germany created an inspiring exchange between SMEs, DEI experts and representatives of diverse communities. The discussions highlighted how many SMEs already practise inclusion intuitively and how real progress often begins with small, practical steps. Open communication, shared responsibility and simple everyday tools emerged as the most important drivers for strengthening DEI in the German SME context.





## Partner Reflections: Key Takeaways from the Sessions - FINLAND -

In June and September 2025, the Finland team organized two hybrid focus group discussions gathering 21 individuals. During these sessions representatives of multiple profiles gathered and energetically discussed the proposed framework base of the digital tool to be created. SMEs, Higher Education, under-represented group representatives, alongside DEI experts raised practical concerns on the tool such as its need to include practical actions and best practices, the importance to consider company's current lack of resources, or the need to have a low-threshold to use the tool. Amongst many others, these recommendations helped the local team to edit the framework to further advance its practicality and real-life usability.





## Partner Reflections: Key Takeaways from the Sessions - LITHUANIA -

The DEI4SME KTU team hosted a focus group in September 2025 to better understand stakeholder needs and gather insights on managing DEI in the workplace. We were joined by SME and HEI representatives, DEI experts, and individuals representing various diversity dimensions. Key takeaways highlighted that what works for large organisations may not suit SMEs or micro-enterprises. Participants also stressed the value of a bottom-up approach – starting with tangible, real-life practices before moving to strategy and legal compliance. One participant summed it up perfectly: “We need to see the person in the case – and their needs – not just the strategy.”



## What does this mean for the Framework and for SMEs?

The focus groups point to several concrete improvements for the DEI4SME Framework:

- add a clear “Getting Started” chapter,
- include SME-friendly examples, tools and templates,
- provide simple, non-sensitive indicators,
- strengthen leadership guidance and reflection questions,
- enhance visuals for accessibility,
- adapt elements to country, sector and organisation size.

**Overall, the focus groups confirmed that SMEs do not need complex DEI strategies.**

**They need clarity, visible responsibility, everyday inclusion practices and supportive tools that fit their reality.**

The focus group summary for this Newsletter was prepared by  
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## NEXT UP: TESTING THE DIGITAL TOOL WITH YOUR SUPPORT!

Based on the [European survey \(find out more in Newsletter 2\)](#) and the [focus groups discussions](#), the DEI4SME project is currently developing a **DIGITAL TOOL** for planning, implementing, and managing DEI.

This tool will enable SMEs to comply with the EU ESG reporting requirements in an easy and resource-efficient way and will help SMEs reflect on the potential of DEI to enable their business development and growth.

**This is your opportunity to participate and weigh in on the creation of the DEI4SME DIGITAL TOOL!**

[CLICK HERE  
TO REGISTER FOR  
TESTING THE DIGITAL TOOL](#)

# DEI4SME

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