Innovation ecosystem impact report

D5.3



EDIH ADRIA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The European Digital Innovation Hub Adria (EDIH Adria) stands as a pivotal regional initiative accelerating digital transformation in Adriatic Croatia. Coordinated by the University of Rijeka and comprising a diverse consortium of academic institutions, global technology leaders, and regional business support organizations, EDIH Adria focuses on deploying advanced artificial intelligence (AI) and high-performance computing (HPC) technologies with a strong user-centric orientation. Targeting Small and Medium-Sized Entreprises (SMEs), mid-caps, and public institutions, the hub delivers tailored advisory, training, and innovation services that foster enhanced digital maturity and competitiveness. Aligned with the EU Digital Europe Programme and Croatia's National Development Strategy 2030, EDIH Adria's activities contribute to enhancing innovation capacity, digital readiness, and sustainable economic growth across the region. The project prioritizes sector specialization in health and quality of life, maritime transport and mobility, and sustainable energy, supporting digital adoption through multi-level skills development and risk-reducing Test Before Invest (TBI) initiatives.

Key achievements to date demonstrate significant strides in strengthening the regional digital ecosystem, including 221 registered Digital Maturity Assessments (DMAs), of which 177 completed, for 134 organisations, 87 Bootcamp participations by 86 organisations, 1,400 TBI days executed through TBI programs engaging 71 users, and comprehensive training impacting 229 organisations with 3,555 training participant-days. Additionally, the establishment of a digital innovation ecosystem featuring 108 companies, 236 scientists and 38 public organisations registered on the RIMAP platform underscores the project's role in connecting technology providers with end-users, thereby fostering vibrant collaboration.

This report assesses the effectiveness and impact of EDIH Adria's comprehensive activities and ecosystem engagement. It highlights measurable progress against key performance indicators (KPIs), evaluates collaborative frameworks, and identifies pathways for continuous improvement to sustain and amplify the hub's

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transformative momentum—ultimately advancing Adriatic Croatia's position as a dynamic and competitive digital innovation region.

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Introduction

EDIH Adria was established to address critical digital transformation challenges in the Adriatic Croatia region. The project is part of the European Union's Digital Europe Programme, designed to advance digital transformation across industries, public services, and society. The initiative responds to the region's pressing need to adopt advanced technologies, such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) and High-Performance Computing (HPC), to improve innovation capacity and economic competitiveness.

Context and background

The Adriatic Croatia region faces significant challenges in its digital transformation journey, as identified by the European and Regional Innovation Scoreboards (2024)[1]. Key findings indicate the region is classified as an "emerging innovator**"**, which reflects its underperformance in innovation compared to other European regions. Key challenges include:

- Low digital maturity and business adoption of advanced technologies per DESI index, with only 4.2 % adult participation in lifelong learning (EU avg. 12.1%).[2]
- A fragmented innovation ecosystem limiting effective cooperation between academia, industry, public sector, and finance sectors.
- Economic dependence on traditional sectors like tourism and maritime transport with limited digital innovation penetration.
- SMEs face restricted access to financing and lack technical resources for impactful digital adoption.
- Sector-specific hurdles in digitalizing health, transport, and energy systems.

These challenges emphasize the critical need for focused policy and investments to accelerate digital growth and innovation capacity in the region.

[1] Regional innovation scoreboard - European Commission
[2] The Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) | Shaping Europe's digital future

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Strategic importance

EDIH Adria has a strategic and multi-faceted approach to addressing the challenges of low digital maturity and limited innovation capabilities in the Adriatic region. These efforts are aimed at overcoming structural barriers, empowering stakeholders, and creating a sustainable and competitive digital economy.

By addressing gaps in digital maturity, fostering skills development, promoting collaboration, and providing access to state-of-the-art technologies and funding, EDIH Adria is poised to transform the Adriatic region. Its tailored and sector-specific approach ensures that businesses and institutions can overcome challenges and achieve sustainable digital growth. EDIH Adria's tailored services address unique sectoral requirements and organizational capabilities, ensuring relevance and maximizing adoption potential.

Key partners

The EDIH Adria consortium comprises six key partners, each contributing unique expertise and resources to drive digital transformation in the Adriatic region. University of Rijeka (UNIRI) and Juraj Dobrila University of Pula (UNIPU) provide research capabilities, advanced infrastructure, and educational programs. Industry leaders (ENT and Infobip) deliver cutting-edge technologies, professional expertise, and global networks. Business Support (Step Ri) enhance innovation capabilities through advisory services and training. PORIN as a cluster manager has a role in building a collaborative ecosystem for innovation and smart solutions.

Together, these members create a comprehensive framework for advancing digital maturity and fostering innovation in the Adriatic region. The consortium's interdisciplinary expertise and infrastructure assets enable comprehensive support ranging from research and development (R&D) to practical digitalization deployment.

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Innovation ecosystem framework

The innovation ecosystem framework emphasizes the critical collaboration among diverse stakeholders, public and private sectors, academia, policymakers, and financial entities, whose interconnected roles drive innovation and digital transformation. EDIH Adria embodies this approach by fostering synergies across these groups to deliver impactful outcomes in the Adriatic region.

Key Stakeholders and Their Roles:

- Public sector: Public Works Management and Municipal services adopt digital services to improve healthcare, administration, and mobility.
- Private sector: SMEs and mid-caps transform business models and operations through technology.
- Academia: Leads technology transfer, applied research, and workforce training.
- Policymakers and finance bodies: Provide enabling regulatory frameworks and funding to support innovation.

Collaborative Model and Value Chain: EDIH Adria operates a multi-stakeholder collaborative model, facilitating seamless knowledge flow and resource sharing to enhance the efficiency and impact of digital transformation. Critical components include:

- Collaborative R&D and governance integrating all stakeholders.
- Access to advanced resources such as HPC, AI labs, and digitization tools.
- Continuous user feedback loops for ecosystem refinement.
- A user-centric approach tailoring services to digital readiness needs.

The innovation value chain progresses through:

1. **Research & Development:** Academic and corporate R&D produce advanced prototypes and knowledge, supported by EDIH Adria's interdisciplinary collaborations.
2. **Proof of Concept & Testing:** Industry and SMEs validate ideas via feasibility studies, leveraging EDIH Adria's testing environments and expertise.

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3. **Commercialization:** Businesses develop business models and secure funding; EDIH Adria assists in digital transformation planning and financing access.
4. **Deployment & Adoption:** Solutions are implemented with training and advisory support from EDIH Adria, enhancing operational efficiency.
5. **Continuous Improvement:** Feedback and best practices are shared across the ecosystem, facilitated by EDIH Adria's coordination.

Impact and Benefits: EDIH Adria accelerates digital innovation by bridging research and market application, reducing risks through validated prototypes, and fostering economic growth via competitive products and job creation. It promotes knowledge exchange and builds a culture of innovation by connecting industries, academia, and government, ensuring sustainable digital transformation in the Adriatic region.

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Impact on regional digitalization and innovation

This section analyses the tangible and potential impacts of the EDIH Adria project on the Adriatic Croatia region, highlighting economic and productivity gains facilitated by AI-driven innovation and the development of new products and services. It also details capacity-building efforts aimed at closing digital skills gaps and enhancing workforce adaptability. Furthermore, societal and environmental benefits, including improvements in public service delivery, regional sustainability progress, and the promotion of ethical AI use, are addressed.

Achievements of the EDIH Adria core activities

Key activities include TBI programs assisting organizations in piloting innovative solutions; comprehensive digital skills and training initiatives for workforce empowerment; digitalization support services covering assessments, bootcamps, and funding advisory; and ecosystem-building efforts involving networking, supplier catalogues, and cross-EDIH collaboration. These activities form the operational heart of the project, translating strategy into tangible outcomes.

Overview and achievements of the EDIH Adria core activities:

- **Digital Skills and Training**: Focusing on enhancing digital competencies across both the workforce and the ICT industry. Training services **reached 91 SMEs and 138 public institutions**, resulting in 2,961 workforce downstream training participants, **251 participants** in the Digital Workforce learning factory, and **343 digital experts** trained upstream.
- **Digitalization Support**: Assisting in bridging the gap between technology and real-world application for digital transformation. Conducted **16 intensive bootcamps**, engaging **86 unique organisations (87 participations)**, facilitating digital ideation, project drafting, and peer learning. Bootcamps serving as gateway to TBI labs, building capacity to conceptualize, design and eventually deploy digital solutions. Feedback highlighting knowledge gain, networking value, and practical application insights as major benefits.
- **TBI Activities**: Supporting digitalization and innovation initiatives in various sectors and the development of digital solutions, services were delivered to

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71 users, fostering technology adoption while mitigating investment risks, with successful technical and business validation. Notable pilots include AI for mammography in healthcare, smart maritime traffic optimization, and energy consumption IoT monitoring.

- **Innovation Ecosystem Creation**: Fostering networking, collaboration, and ecosystem development across the Adriatic region and beyond. Developed an open-access **Digital Solutions Supplier and Experts Catalogue (RIMAP)** facilitating SME access to regional technology providers and consultants, with 382 active participants. Established formal partnerships with regional clusters in manufacturing, maritime, health, and energy sectors. Active engagement in the European EDIH network via Regional Innovation Matchmaking Platform (RIMAP) platform, enabling cross-border cooperation and service integration. Encouraging bidirectional knowledge transfer fostering academia-industry collaboration.

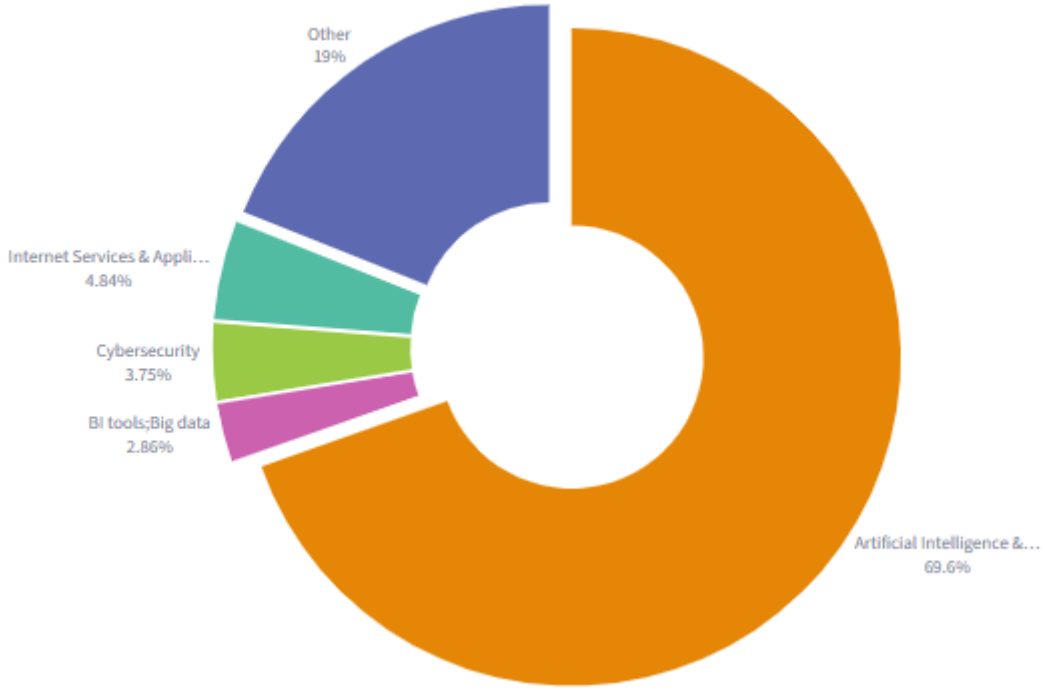
Core technologies and use-cases

The EDIH Adria initiative harnesses a broad and sophisticated portfolio of digital technologies as foundational enablers of regional digital transformation. These core technologies, implemented primarily through TBI activities and other innovation programs, span key areas of AI, Internet of Things (IoT), Big Data analytics, communication networks, business intelligence (BI), and internet services and applications. Their deployment is closely tailored to address the structural and operational challenges of the Adriatic Croatia region's priority sectors: health, transport and mobility, and energy and sustainability.

Nearly 70% of the ecosystem's activities are concentrated in AI and Decision Support, underscoring its pivotal role in driving innovation. Other key areas include Internet Services & Applications (4.84%) and Cybersecurity (3.75%), illustrating a service portfolio that, while heavily focused on AI, also encompasses a range of complementary technologies.

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Figure 2 Technologies applied in EDIH Adria Services



- **AI & Decision support** - AI technologies form the backbone of decision automation and intelligent process optimization across multiple domains. EDIH Adria has implemented AI based solutions in diverse applications such as:
    - Customer interaction enhancements via AI-powered chatbots on platforms like Viber, WhatsApp, and Livechat, enabling seamless two-way communication during events and service delivery.
    - AI-enabled process improvements combined with IoT data for operational efficiency in energy and transport management.
    - Innovative applications of AI fused with retrieval-augmented generation (RAG).
    - Specialized AI prototypes for visual systems capable of detecting corrosion, assessing damage severity in industrial settings, and analysing satellite/ortho-photo imagery for advanced terrain and environmental monitoring.

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- Business process digitization through standardization and consolidation supported by AI analytics to optimize workflows, staff scheduling (via BI tools), and resource allocation

- **IoT** - IoT technologies integrate physical assets with digital monitoring and control capabilities, supporting sustainable management of energy and environmental resources. Key implementations include:
  - Photovoltaic system monitoring and energy consumption tracking via MODBUS protocols.
  - Real-time water consumption monitoring and energy production analytics enabling smart energy grids.
  - Traffic optimization through IoT-enabled digitization of parking services and people counting in enclosed or open spaces enhanced by machine learning and AI capabilities.
  - Development of IoT and data management platforms for comprehensive environmental and infrastructural oversight.
- **Communication networks** - Robust cybersecurity and network improvement initiatives provide the critical infrastructure foundation necessary for resilient digital services:
  - Enhancements in communication security frameworks.
  - Network upgrades ensuring reliable connectivity for IoT and cloud applications.
- **Big Data Analytics** - Big data technologies facilitate the capture, storage, and processing of large datasets to generate actionable insights for urban and industrial applications:
  - Macro- and micro-level traffic optimization supporting demand-responsive transport systems.
  - Detailed data collection enabling simulation-based forecasting and optimization of transport flow and public mobility.
  - Process digitalization utilizing big data for enhanced operational transparency and efficiency.
- **Internet Services & Applications** - Complementing core hardware and analytics technologies, bespoke internet services and applications consolidate functionalities to enhance user experience:
  - Aggregated platforms offering unified mobile applications integrating multiple digital solutions.
  - Visualization tools supporting 3D model rendering for industrial and urban planning applications.

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- Migration efforts integrating open-source tools and modern frameworks ensuring sustainability and extensibility of deployed solutions

The diverse and layered application of these technologies across the Adriatic region underscores EDIH Adria's comprehensive digital capacity-building approach. For example, AI-powered customer interaction tools increase organizational responsiveness and user satisfaction, contributing to digital maturity and service innovation. IoT deployments optimize scarce resources such as energy and water, promoting sustainable development aligned with EU Green Deal objectives. Big data analytics enable informed decision-making in transport and mobility, facilitating smarter, greener urban environments.

Moreover, the integration of communication network enhancements ensures the security and reliability essential for scaling these advanced digital services. Together, these technologies empower SMEs, mid-caps, and public institutions to adopt innovative, data-driven business models, optimize operations, and improve public service quality.

As EDIH Adria continues to implement and expand these core technologies, the region is poised for accelerated digital transformation, higher competitiveness, and enhanced resilience in the face of evolving economic and environmental challenges.

Economic and productivity impact

EDIH Adria serves as a catalyst for economic and productivity growth in Adriatic Croatia by delivering tailored digital transformation services that enable SMEs, mid-cap companies, and public institutions to adopt advanced technologies. By addressing the unique needs of these stakeholders, the initiative drives improvements in operational efficiency, stimulates the creation of new digital products and services, and encourages innovative business model development.

Although TBI activities are pilot projects focused on validating and de-risking innovations rather than full commercial deployments, they play a crucial role in accelerating technology adoption and guiding informed investment decisions. Collectively, these efforts contribute to regional economic vitality by fostering a skilled digital workforce, enhancing competitiveness, and improving access to

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finance, ultimately supporting sustained innovation-led growth and job creation across the region.

Here are the main economic impacts that EDIH Adria has:

- **Process optimization through AI:** Pilot projects demonstrate integration of AI-driven solutions that enhance operational workflows, reduce costs, and improve data-driven decision-making. These pilots set the groundwork for future deployments expected to yield cost savings and productivity improvements for participating SMEs and public bodies.
- **Ecosystem for digital product development:** Through TBI environments and collaborations with research institutions, EDIH Adria fosters innovation across healthcare (e.g., e-health systems, AI-based diagnostics), transport (e.g., smart maritime solutions, autonomous mobility), and energy (e.g., smart grids, green technologies). While pilots do not represent commercial rollouts, they lay the foundation for revenue generation and attract investment, positioning the region as an emerging innovation hub with expanding international partnerships.
- **Business model transformation support:** Advisory services and digital transformation bootcamps support organizations in modernizing their business models toward subscription and service-oriented strategies. This capacity-building improves market preparedness and competitiveness, enhances public service efficiency, and contributes to increased profitability and customer satisfaction.
- **Average service value:** With a total service value delivered of €2,652,512, EDIH Adria provides an average financial support of approximately **€2,837 per service delivered (935 services; approx. €7,871 per supported organisation)**. This metric reflects the tangible economic value generated through EDIH Adria's services, serving as a key indicator of the ecosystem's impact and user engagement. It underscores the platform's capacity to deliver meaningful value across sectors, fostering sustained innovation and collaboration.

Digital transformation

EDIH Adria is strategically designed to support regional stakeholders, including SMEs, mid-caps, and public institutions, in navigating the complexities of digital

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transformation. It aims to bridge the digital divide and equip stakeholders with the tools, skills, and strategies needed to thrive in the digital economy. Here's how EDIH Adria facilitates this transition and boosts digital maturity:

- **DMA:** Conducted for **134 organisations (221 registered assessments, 177 completed)**, DMA activities diagnose digital gaps and inform personalized action plans, significantly enhance digital readiness and driving successful innovation adoption.
- **TBI pilot activities:** By facilitating risk-controlled experimentation with new digital solutions, TBI labs allowed **71 different organizations**, particularly those with limited prior experience, to better understand technology applicability and risks. This process boosted their confidence in making digital investment decisions.
- **Advanced technology access:** Partnerships with Ericsson Nikola Tesla and Infobip provide stakeholders with hands-on access to AI, IoT, and Big Data analytics, enabling predictive operations and automation that address regional digital adoption shortfalls.
- **Digital Innovation and Transformation Bootcamps:** Completed by **86 organisations (87 participations),** these intensive workshops realign stakeholder value propositions, facilitate digital strategy development, and foster customer engagement. The bootcamps enable scalable, customer-centric business model innovation or transformation critical for maintaining competitiveness in a digital economy.

Capacity building

The focus is on training and education as critical enablers of the digital economy. The subsection presents data on the scale and reach of workforce digital skills programs, lifelong learning initiatives, and expert-level courses. It underscores how knowledge-sharing events and practical training build competencies across industries and public institutions, helping bridge skills gaps and prepare a future-ready workforce. The capacity-building dimension encompasses extensive training programs at multiple levels, including:

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- **Workforce Digital Skills Training:** 2,961 participant-days focusing on building foundational and advanced digital competencies within SMEs and public institutions.

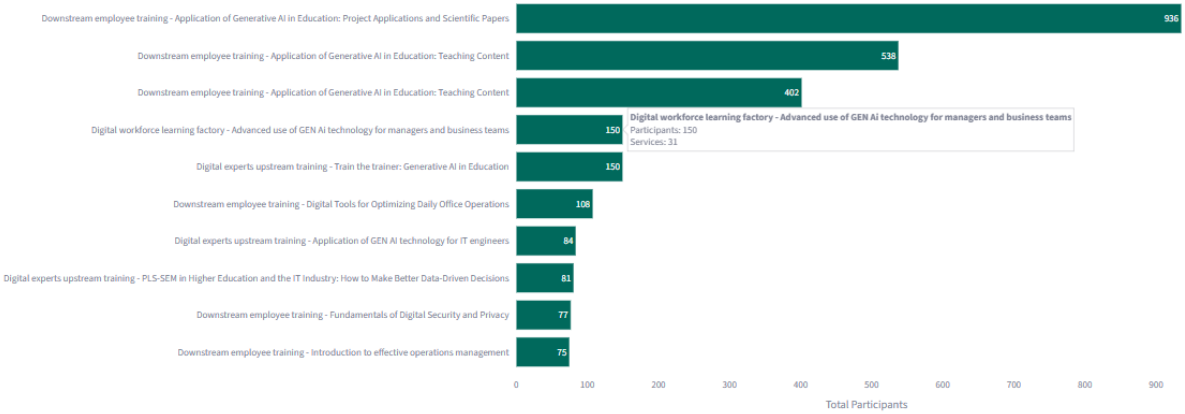


Figure 3: Leading 10 educational topics by number of participants

- **Digital Workforce Learning Factory:** Lifelong learning programs contributing over **250 participant-days,** delivering practical, ongoing education to maintain ICT workforce relevance.
- **Expert-Level Training:** The ecosystem has delivered **343 digital experts** upstream training sessions, demonstrating strong progress in developing expert-level skills. Efforts are actively underway to expand advanced training programs for digital leaders, particularly in **AI and emerging technologies**, to further enhance the region's innovation capacity.
- **Specialized Workshops:** Dedicated sessions addressing the **AI Act** and **GDPR compliance** have been conducted, equipping stakeholders with crucial knowledge on legal and ethical considerations surrounding AI technologies. These workshops enhance responsible digital transformation practices and regulatory readiness.

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- **Peer Learning and Knowledge Exchange:** Bootcamps and networking foster communities of practice, encouraging collaborative learning and innovation capacity development.



Figure 4 Delivered educations by the course

- **Capacity Building through European Collaboration:** Within the framework of the EDIH Network's Digital Transformation Accelerator (DTA), EDIH Adria consortium members actively participated in a variety of capacity-building activities including webinars, "Train the Trainer" programs, working groups, and matchmaking events. These engagements significantly enhanced the consortium's digital expertise in critical innovation areas such as cybersecurity, IoT, and AI, aligning project activities with EDIH Network standards. Notably, consortium members contributed to sector- and technology-focused Working Groups, facilitating valuable exchanges of good practices and collaborative project development ideas. Participation in DTA activities also provided up-to-date knowledge of evolving digitalization trends and fostered new cross-European connections, thereby positioning EDIH Adria as a digitally advanced and

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innovation-ready hub poised for future growth within the European ecosystem.

- **Specialized programs focusing on practical applications of innovative technologies** in business and education:
    - Generative AI in Education: Training educators to enhance learning through AI-powered content creation, personalized learning paths, and interactive digital materials, thus improving educational effectiveness and efficiency.
    - Generative AI in Business: Equipping employees with skills to apply AI in automating routine tasks, streamlining business processes, and innovating in marketing and product development to maintain competitive advantage.
    - Digital Tools for Business Optimization: Providing practical knowledge of cloud computing, project management, and digital communication platforms to optimize workflows and improve organizational productivity.
    - Cybersecurity and Privacy: Delivering essential cybersecurity and data privacy training, particularly addressing GDPR compliance, to help organizations protect sensitive data and mitigate cyber risks.
    - LEAN Methodology and Operations Management: Promoting efficient business operations through training on LEAN principles, reducing waste and enhancing supply chain performance.

These programs complement the broader capacity-building efforts and prepare stakeholders for the complexities of digital transformation in a rapidly evolving technological landscape.

Tailored training programs are offered for various stakeholders, including basic training for beginners, lifelong learning for employees, and advanced training for experts in AI and emerging technologies, to create a skilled digital professional pipeline. Knowledge sharing through workshops like Bootcamps and Challenge Lab fosters peer learning. Overall, these initiatives equip the workforce with essential digital skills and reduce skill gaps hindering digital transformation in industries and public institutions.

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- **Research and Innovation Contributions:** In addition to delivering extensive training and capacity-building programs, members of the EDIH Adria consortium have actively advanced the knowledge base supporting digital transformation, AI, and Industry 4.0 technologies. Their ongoing research efforts have culminated in multiple scientific publications addressing key topics such as digital innovation strategies, technological breakthroughs, and sector-specific applications of AI and HPC.
  These research outputs provide valuable insights for a wide spectrum of EDIH Adria stakeholders, including entrepreneurs adopting new technologies, researchers developing innovative solutions, and policymakers crafting effective digital agendas. Available in accessible PDF format, these publications strengthen the intellectual foundation of the ecosystem, promote evidence-based decision-making, and support the sustainable progression of Adriatic Croatia's digital innovation landscape.
  The full collection of papers is published and available for readers at the EDIH Adria website: SCIENTIFIC HOUSE -

Innovation culture

This final impact subsection reflects on the qualitative transformation of mindset and collaborative networks. It highlights networking events, knowledge exchange platforms, and cluster partnerships that foster a culture of innovation. The strengthened ecosystem facilitates co-innovation, funding readiness, and collective innovation capacity which underpin sustainable digital growth. The qualitative evolution of a collaborative, innovation-driven mindset within the region is vital for enduring impact:

- **Networking and partnerships:** Regular events have nurtured strong ties among academia, industry, policymakers, and finance, promoting co-innovation activities and joint projects.
- **Funding readiness:** Through advisory services and ecosystem support, more organizations are motivated and prepared to seek financing, advancing digital project implementation.
- **Ecosystem strengthening:** The growing innovation culture underpins regional competitiveness and sustainable digital growth, fostering resilience and adaptability.

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Social impact

Although EDIH Adria's primary target groups were SMEs, mid-caps, and public entities, the project ensured that its results were communicated widely beyond these audiences. Efforts extended to local and regional public authorities, relevant infrastructure and public service providers, higher education and research institutions, various business support organizations, and the broader public. This inclusive communication strategy amplified awareness and fostered multi-sectoral engagement with digital transformation initiatives.

The UNIRI led content development for the EDIH Adria Annual Conference, which became the cornerstone networking and dissemination event. Complemented by regular stakeholder meetups, these forums provided accessible and informal platforms to promote dialogue, knowledge sharing, and collaborative innovation.

To recognize and encourage outstanding contributions within the ecosystem, the **EDIH Adria Awards** were established and are annually bestowed upon users and institutions demonstrating exceptional leadership and impact. These awards, honoring both overall social impact (Social Impact Award) and general excellence (Annual Award), have played a crucial role in celebrating success stories and raising the profile of EDIH Adria's work across the Adriatic region.

Noteworthy award recipients, such as PRIGODA – Regional Development Agency of Primorsko-Goranska County, IDA – Istrian Development Agency, and the Kvarner Health Tourism Cluster, exemplify leading ecosystem contributors. In particular, IDA was recognized for its proactive public engagement and effective stakeholder linkage, significantly amplifying EDIH Adria's social impact.

In 2025, the Social Impact Award was presented to the City of Opatija and Koprivničko-križevačka County. For outstanding contributions in collaboration with the small and medium-sized enterprise sector, entrepreneurs Smart Aqua and CENOSCO were honored. Additionally, for their collaboration with local government units, awards were given to the City of Cres and the Tourist Board of the City of Pula.

Through sustained outreach and collaboration, EDIH Adria has significantly enriched the social fabric of Adriatic Croatia. The project strengthened connections among public institutions, regional development agencies, business clusters, and communities, facilitating inclusive participation in the digital economy.

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Collectively, these activities foster social inclusion by empowering businesses, public entities, and society at large to access digital opportunities. By promoting regional cohesion, expanding economic access, and improving public services, EDIH Adria contributes to enhanced quality of life and societal resilience throughout the Adriatic Croatia region.

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Stakeholder Feedback and Success Stories

EDIH Adria's impact is vividly illustrated through the rich collection of success stories published on its website, reflecting tangible benefits realized by diverse users across multiple sectors. These stories demonstrate how the hub's services have enabled innovative digital transformation initiatives, showcasing measurable improvements in operational efficiency, customer engagement, and service delivery.

The EDIH Adria team developed three specialized AI microservice sections within the EDIH Adria E-tool, each serving as a dedicated resource hub tailored to critical regional sectors:

1. **AI Tools for Business Optimization (AI tools for business optimization -)**
2. **AI Tools for Energy Transition (AI Tools for Energy Transition -)**
3. **AI Tools for Traffic Optimization (AI tools for traffic optimization -)**

These sector-specific microservices curate relevant information, practical digital tools, and highlight real-world AI use cases and success stories. By addressing the unique needs of diverse industries and user groups, these platforms facilitate targeted digital transformation initiatives.

The AI microservice sections exemplify EDIH Adria's commitment to advancing thematic digital innovation and create a sustainable knowledge base designed to support users well beyond the project's lifespan.

Key domains highlighted in these success stories include:

- **Chatbot Assistants for Sales and Services:** AI-powered chatbots have streamlined customer interactions, enhanced service responsiveness, and automated routine communication tasks, markedly improving user experience for businesses.
- **Document Security and Automation:** Digital solutions introduced have increased the security, accuracy, and efficiency of document handling processes in both public and private organizations.

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- **Business Process Optimization:** Through bespoke digital tools and analytics, numerous companies have optimized workflows, reduced operational bottlenecks, and increased productivity.
- **Citizen Engagement:** Innovative platforms have fostered greater personal involvement of citizens in local governance and public services, enhancing transparency and responsiveness.
- **Support for EU and Croatian Project Implementation:** EDIH Adria has facilitated access to funding and expertise, smoothing the execution of nationally and EU-funded initiatives.
- **Tourism Experience Optimization:** Digital technologies have upgraded tourist services, enabling personalized experiences and efficient resource management in this vital regional sector.
- **Smart Spatial Control Systems:** Advanced IoT and AI solutions have been deployed for intelligent monitoring and management of public spaces, improving safety and operational oversight.

The consistently positive feedback from beneficiaries underscores the value of EDIH Adria's advisory, training, and piloting services. These success stories serve not only as proof points of regional digital progress but also as inspirational case studies driving continued ecosystem engagement and innovation adoption.

Several users within the ecosystem, including Smart Aqua, City of Opatija, City of Karlovac, and City of Cres, have successfully validated their innovation and digital transformation projects through EDIH Adria's support. Building on this validation, they are preparing applications to available public funding opportunities, both national and regional calls in Croatia, to scale and implement their solutions, demonstrating effective alignment between the ecosystem's capacity-building efforts and tangible project deployment.

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Partnerships and networking within the EDIH network

EDIH Adria leverages a strong collaborative approach to amplify its impact across regional, national, and European levels. By engaging in joint platforms, cross-border initiatives, and formal cooperation frameworks, the hub fosters a seamless innovation ecosystem focused on supporting SMEs and the wider digital transformation agenda.

Collaboration between European Digital Innovation Hubs (EDIHs) is achieved through the following strategies and initiatives:

Platform and joint events

- EDIH Adria implemented the **RIMAP** as a central nexus for knowledge exchange and networking among economic actors, entrepreneurs, researchers, public sector organizations, and non-governmental stakeholders. RIMAP fosters two-way interaction and proactive networking by connecting ongoing development projects with the specific needs of the economic and public sectors, leveraging research and innovation solutions emerging from the scientific community. The platform effectively maps regional needs in advanced digital technologies and promotes the creation of high-value products and services through a multidisciplinary approach. By facilitating connections between universities, research institutes, and businesses, RIMAP cultivates an ecosystem where innovation thrives, particularly in cutting-edge domains such as artificial intelligence, digital security, and sustainability.

  Currently, RIMAP hosts **108 registered companies**, **236 scientists and 38 public organizations** providing targeted matchmaking that links solution providers with potential users. The platform underscores the pivotal role of SMEs as drivers of digital innovation and exemplifies how the integration of academic research, industry expertise, and technological development can accelerate the region's transformation. By serving as a robust bridge between academia and business, RIMAP contributes significantly to the digital transformation objectives of EDIH Adria, promoting a more innovative, connected, and sustainable Europe with global impact.

- Cross-Border Matchmaking Events: Participation in cross-border matchmaking events, innovation challenges, and joint training sessions allows EDIHs to share

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knowledge and best practices, fostering collaboration and innovation across regions.

Integrated client journeys

- Shared Service Model which was developed to enable SMEs to access multi-network services from EDIHs, Enterprise Europe Network (EEN), and clusters without redundancies. This approach provides SMEs with a seamless process for digitalization, covering stages from funding to implementation.
- By signing into the RIMAP platform, SMEs gain access to specialized tools and demonstration platforms for regional and cross-regional use. This ensures that businesses can:
    - Test advanced digital technologies.
    - Leverage shared infrastructure and expertise for their innovation needs.

European collaboration frameworks

European collaboration is encouraged through Memorandums of Understanding, which formalize cooperation between EDIHs. These agreements define mechanisms for resource sharing, service alignment, mutual referrals among hubs.

By implementing these strategies, EDIHs strengthen their capacity to support SMEs and the broader innovation ecosystem, fostering digital transformation across Europe. Each initiative aligns with the goal of leveraging resources and expertise to drive innovation and competitiveness. Through mentioned initiatives and strategies EDIH Adria foster connections and cooperation between Adriatic Croatia and other regions of the European Union to encourage cross-border innovation.

EDIH Adria's event participation and outreach

EDIH Adria representatives have actively engaged in numerous high-profile Croatian and European events, attending more than 50 different events and reaching over **9,000 participants**. Key events include major conferences and summits such as the DATA & AI Summit 2023, the EU Digital Assembly 2023, the Crikvenica International Health Tourism Conference, and the Softcom IT Conferences (2023 and 2024). Additionally, EDIH Adria has participated in strategic business forums like the Upper Business Austria Meetup, Croatia–España Business

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Forum, and thematic gatherings such as Skills & Future of Jobs and the Western Balkans Energy Transition 2024 conference.

These engagements have been complemented by specialized seminars, including the Intelligent Cities Challenge (ICC) seminar and Erasmus project meetings focused on digital skills development. Through these activities, EDIH Adria has established a strong presence in regional and European innovation dialogues, facilitating valuable knowledge exchange, partnership building, and promotion of digital transformation initiatives.

Collaboration between EDIH Adria and the EEN

The close and structured collaboration between EDIH Adria and the EEN has significantly strengthened the regional and European innovation ecosystem by creating a seamless, multi-faceted support framework tailored to SMEs' digital transformation needs. By integrating EDIH Adria's deep technological expertise with EEN's vast experience in innovation support, internationalization, and access to finance, this partnership enhances the capacity of SMEs to adopt advanced digital technologies and scale their businesses globally. The established cooperation model—comprising regular "Networking the Networks" meetings, aligned referral systems, coordinated promotional activities, and joint participation in sector-specific networks—has fostered stronger interconnections among regional clusters, research institutions, and business support organizations. This, in turn, nurtures a more cohesive and collaborative landscape conducive to innovation-driven growth.

Moreover, leveraging EEN's comprehensive technology scouting and matchmaking platforms has accelerated SMEs' access to cutting-edge digital solutions and strategic partnerships, thereby reducing market entry barriers and improving the relevance and impact of digital transformation efforts. The coordinated financial advisory services further ensure that companies not only identify but also secure crucial funding, enabling sustainable innovation and competitiveness. Through active engagement in sector groups and participation in EU-level events, such as the EIC Accelerator support forums, the collaboration reinforces alignment with European industrial strategies and policy objectives. Ultimately, this integrated ecosystem approach catalyses SMEs innovation, strengthens regional economic development, and contributes to Europe's leadership in advanced digital technologies, establishing a replicable model for future digital innovation support initiatives.

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Barriers and challenges in implementing digital transformation

This section analyses the primary obstacles faced by stakeholders in adopting AI and HPC technologies, including technological readiness gaps, financial constraints, workforce skills shortages, ecosystem fragmentation, sectoral limitations, and cultural resistance to change. It underscores the complex environment in which digital transformation unfolds and the multifaceted challenges that must be addressed to achieve sustainable adoption.

Technological and structural challenges

Stakeholders in the Adriatic region face significant challenges in adopting AI and HPC technologies, which hinder their digital transformation efforts:

1. **Low Digital Maturity**: Many organizations lack awareness of the benefits of AI and HPC, rely on outdated systems that are often not ready for the implementation of AI-based solutions, and have insufficient strategies for integrating advanced technologies. Collaboration between key stakeholders is fragmented, limiting knowledge transfer and innovation
2. **Financial Constraints**: The high costs associated with implementing AI and HPC solutions, combined with limited access to appropriate funding instruments, represent a major barrier for SMEs and public institutions. Although funding exists at EU and national levels, it is often not aligned with the actual maturity level, needs, or procurement constraints of these stakeholders. As a result, investments are postponed or never initiated. For example, during the three-year duration of the EDIH Adria project, no public call was announced that would specifically enable public institutions to finance AI or HPC-related solutions.
3. **Workforce Challenges**: There is a shortage of skilled workers to implement and manage advanced technologies. Low participation in lifelong learning programs and the ongoing brain drain exacerbate the talent gap, while resistance among employees slows adoption.

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4. **Fragmented Ecosystem**: Weak collaboration and coordination between academia, industry, and public institutions hinder the development of a cohesive digital strategy and the transfer of research and technology into practical applications.
5. **Sector-Specific Barriers**: Key industries like healthcare, transport, and energy face unique challenges, such as legacy systems and insufficient digital infrastructure, which slow the integration of AI and HPC solutions.
6. **Cultural Resistance**: Fear of disrupting established workflows, combined with a lack of leadership commitment to digital transformation, results in hesitancy to adopt new technologies.
7. **Administrative Complexity:** Many SMEs and public institutions in the region lack sufficient knowledge, resources, and competencies to efficiently navigate EU funding mechanisms. Complex, overlapping application processes require extensive documentation, which burdens applicants and reduces uptake of available digital transformation support services. Fragmented and inconsistent advisory support exacerbates uncertainty among users about eligibility and procedures, limiting the reach of innovation programs.

These challenges emphasize the importance of initiatives like EDIH Adria, which address these barriers through targeted services such as DMAs, training programs, funding access, and fostering collaboration to enable successful adoption of AI and HPC technologies.

Corrective measures and recommendations

To effectively address the complex challenges impeding the widescale adoption of AI and HPC technologies in the Adriatic region, EDIH Adria has instituted a comprehensive set of corrective actions and strategic initiatives. These measures are designed to overcome barriers related to technology readiness, skills, financing, organizational culture, and administrative processes, thereby fostering a sustainable and competitive innovation ecosystem.

Table 1. Overview of strategic focus area with proposed corrective actions

Strategic focus area	**Corrective actions and initiatives**

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Administrative assistance enhancement	Simplify application processes by reducing extensive documentation requirements for SMEs, particularly concerning state aid applications submitted separately for each service (e.g., Bootcamp, training), to lower administrative barriers and accelerate engagement. Enhance administrative assistance to SMEs during application preparation to expedite access and reduce errors.
Training and Workforce Development	Offer multi-level training programs (basic, lifelong learning, and expert-level) to bridge digital skills gaps. Foster knowledge-sharing through workshops, bootcamps, and innovation events.
Financial Support	Strengthen advisory services guiding SMEs and mid-caps to national and EU funding opportunities. Increase collaboration with financial institutions and investor networks to diversify funding channels. Implement targeted initiatives to improve funding readiness, simplify grant application processes and clarify eligibility criteria. Enhance training programs focused on building competencies in navigating funding mechanisms, ensuring consistent advisory quality across regions.
Collaborative Ecosystem Building	Strengthening partnerships among academia, industry, and public institutions. Promote cross-border collaboration with other European Digital Innovation Hubs (EDIHs). Maintain and update a comprehensive catalogue of digital solution providers and experts to facilitate access to services and collaboration.
Sector-Specific Solutions	Apply customized digitalization support tailored to specific sectoral needs in healthcare, transport, and energy. Provide focused expertise and guidance to address legacy system integration and regulatory requirements.
Change Management	Deliver leadership and change management training to address resistance and foster digital innovation culture.

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	Promote awareness of ethical AI use, privacy protection, and human-centric design. Encourage proactive employee upskilling and proactive communication to drive adoption.
Risk Management and Continuous Improvement	Use feedback to refine approaches and ensure scalability of solutions. Ensure scalability and reproducibility of successful digital transformation models.

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Long-term sustainability and outlook

Sustaining the impactful outcomes achieved by EDIH Adria beyond the current project lifecycle requires a multifaceted strategic approach. This involves institutional embedding, robust funding diversification, continued stakeholder engagement, ecosystem scaling, and keen adaptability to evolving technological and market landscapes. This section presents EDIH Adria's roadmap toward securing enduring relevance and expanding its transformative role in Adriatic Croatia's digital future.

Sustainability of the ecosystem

To ensure the lasting health and vitality of the innovation ecosystem, EDIH Adria will implement the following critical actions:

- **Institutionalizing KPI Monitoring and Reporting:**
  Formalizing real-time and periodic monitoring systems to track ecosystem performance, user engagement, and innovation outputs will enable timely interventions and continuous refinement. An embedded KPI framework will ensure accountability, transparency, and data-driven governance that outlives the project's funding timeline.
- **Securing Diversified Funding:**
  Transitioning towards a sustainable financing model which entails attracting and combining resources from multiple streams — European Union instruments, national government programs, private sector investments, and service-generated revenues. This diversified funding will reduce dependence on single sources and enable long-term operational stability and growth.
- **Embedding Digital Competencies in Regional Education:**
  Collaborating closely with regional educational institutions to integrate its digital skills frameworks into formal curricula and continuing education programs. This institutionalization will nurture a steady pipeline of digitally literate professionals aligned with regional innovation needs and reinforce workforce readiness sustainably.

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- **Maintaining and Expanding Strategic Partnerships:** Recognizing that ecosystem success depends on collaborative networks, EDIH Adria will sustain and broaden partnerships across academia, industry, government, and finance entities both within Adriatic Croatia and across European innovation hubs. Dynamic alliances will enable resource sharing, innovation diffusion, and joint scaling of impact.

Future growth and expansion

EDIH Adria plans to expand its impact and services in the future, with a focus on scaling operations, reaching new stakeholders, and ensuring the continuous growth of the innovation ecosystem through:

- **Developing EDIH Adria 2.0 with Broadened Funding Landscape:** As part of future phases, efforts will prioritize securing new EU, national, and private investments to deepen service offerings, extend geographic reach, and invest in infrastructure, enabling scalable and financially resilient operations.
- **Scaling Modular Microservice-Based Digital Support:** Advancing toward a modular architecture will enable the efficient tailoring of service bundles to sector-specific and organizational needs. This flexible approach will enhance accessibility and relevance, which are key to driving greater digital transformation adoption while minimizing overhead.
- **Expanding Expert-Level Training and Acceleration Programs:** To meet growing demand for high-level digital skills and rapid innovation development, EDIH Adria will enhance specialized training and scale acceleration initiatives that foster technology leadership, entrepreneurship, and cross-sector innovations.
- **Enhancing Cross-Sectoral and Geographic Inclusivity:** Planned outreach campaigns and remote-access programs will ensure that underrepresented regions and sectors benefit equitably. This includes targeted engagement of rural enterprises, public institutions, and emergent industries.
- **Strengthening EU-Wide Collaboration and Ecosystem Integration:** Deepening formal and operational collaborations through joint projects, shared infrastructure, and aligned service models among EDIHs across

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Europe will position EDIH Adria as a vital node in the continent-wide innovation fabric, accelerating knowledge transfer and market impact.

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Conclusion

EDIH Adria has established itself as a transformative force in the digital evolution of the Adriatic Croatia region. By leveraging cutting-edge AI and HPC technologies and fostering strategic collaboration among academia, industry, and the public sector, the project has significantly contributed to strengthening existing innovation ecosystems. Through targeted interventions, including DMA, TBI pilot projects, comprehensive training programs, and robust networking platforms, EDIH Adria has catalysed digital adoption, innovation capacity, and economic competitiveness across the region.

The creation of a sustainable innovation ecosystem is a cornerstone achievement of EDIH Adria, characterized by continuous knowledge exchange, inclusive stakeholder engagement, and dynamic partnerships extending beyond regional and national borders. This ecosystem equips SMEs, mid-caps, and public institutions with the tools, skills, and support necessary to navigate and lead in the digital economy.

Looking forward, sustained success depends on persistent engagement, deepened collaboration, and ongoing capacity building. Continuous investment in workforce development, adaptive innovation support, and ecosystem expansion will be essential to realize a full-scale digital transition that drives economic growth, societal benefit, and technological leadership for Adriatic Croatia.

EDIH Adria stands ready to lead this journey, ensuring the region's evolving digital landscape fosters prosperity, inclusivity, and resilience well into the future.

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