

ECOLABNET'S GUIDE FOR EXPANSION

Defining step-by-step strategies and procedure for expansion

ECOLABNET



ECOLABNET

Network of service providers for eco-innovations in manufacturing SMEs

Project number #R077

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MESSAGE FROM PARTNERS

This document is the strategy and action plan for ECOLABNET network expansion. ECOLABNET is a project that is funded by Interreg Baltic Sea Region programme. The vast network of international project partners from six BSR countries aims to create a living network of service providers to support development of eco-innovations among manufacturing small and medium sized enterprises (SME).

Therefore, the main objective of this guide is to present the specific ways (aims and practical actions) to boost the expansion of the network to the potential service providers and SME's, who have complementing competences and infrastructures in BSR region. It also seeks to cover what ECOLABNET network is about and what it should do (*a template for the decision making*) to attract new partners to ECOLABNET. In addition, established procedures will ensure the constant growth of dynamic, sustainable, and living network.

This guide for ECOLABNET's expansion will be constantly updated according to the new needs of SMEs, intermediary organisations (IO) and Research, Development and Innovation (RDI) service providers every year (if needed). This will ensure that ECOLABNET activities are in line with the needs of its members and that all resources are allocated correctly to create concrete and measurable impacts.



INTRODUCTION

Eco-innovation has gained considerable support among researchers, businesses, and policy makers as a relevant though not self-sufficient approach to environmental sustainability. This is because, the underlining's of eco-innovation such as efficient and effective use of material, energy, and human resources, are directly in-line with societal visions for a circular economy and the broader sustainability agenda.

As part of a variety of strategies to stimulate eco-innovation on different societal levels, companies are challenged to engage in the development and/or adoption of eco-innovations. This can be attributed to the environmental pressures associated with production and consumption activities (e.g., depletion of material and energy resources, biodiversity loss, and climate change) but more so with the potential benefits associated with eco-innovation such as the realisation of new competitive offerings, together with material, energy, and financial savings.

However, the process of effective eco-innovation implementation can be challenging. For example, some SME's may be in lack of the competence, resources or partners needed to eco-innovate. Eco-innovators also face challenges in marketing eco-innovations beyond niche markets due to externalities. And oftentimes SMEs use unstructured and non-systematic approaches to manage environmental sustainability-related issues.

Therefore, ECOLABNET's guide for expansion seeks to provide current members with step-by-step instructions and examples that will help to improve their procedures and network growth. Bottom-up management will support members activities and promote expansion of the network in BSR region by sharing the mission, vision, and strategic aims as well as key actions of the network. All project partners will use this guide to boost the growth of the network which will lead to the new partnerships and development of sustainable eco-innovations in Baltic Sea Region.

NEW MEMBERSHIPS – A KEY FOR SUSTAINABLE NETWORK

ECOLABNET aims to create a network of service providers that can support and guide eco-innovation development in manufacturing SMEs. This vision will always have a few barriers and challenges faced by the members such as lack of capital, specific knowledge & external experience or even uncertainty about the market needs. This conclusion was made based on internal and external reports carried out by the project team.

These challenges could be solved with the right expertise and infrastructure. Therefore, it is important to ensure a diversity of highly motivated companies as well as business support organisations within the network during upcoming five-year period. It is also important to ensure that all potential members share a common interest to exchange knowledge, resource or best practices and promote sustainable eco-innovation development within the network. Therefore, during the upcoming five-year period ECOLABNET will focus on ensuring sustainable membership growth in all six project countries.

Membership is our key “reason for being” at ECOLABNET. Therefore, sustainable membership retention and growth must always be our number one priority and will in turn enable growth of partnerships in other areas such as project consortiums and research. To develop constantly growing, dynamic, sustainable, and living network current project team have this strategic membership growth & action plan for expansion. It will focus on identification of successful activities and ways to improve and promote ECOLABNET network.

STRATEGIC EXPANTION OBJECTIVES:

ECOLABNET's strategic membership growth & action plan is the step-by-step process by which promotes ECOLABNET project members (including represented organisations or companies) to come together and:

- Envision the future of the network.
- Establish the goals of the upcoming years.
- Empower ECOLABNET members to support the sustainable growth of the network.

Why do we need it?

The main mission of the “ECOLABNET” action plan for expansion is to promote a network of innovation professionals that will support eco-innovation process in manufacturing SMEs of the Baltic Sea Region (**long term-goal**). Therefore, we will use this strategic membership growth & action plan to achieve our long-term goals. They go as follows:

- a) eliminate the gap between SME's, RDI's and IO's and promote professional network by providing expert services in eco-product development for SMEs.
- b) increase awareness about eco-minded SMEs, RDI's and intermediary organizations in BSR.
- c) promote positive energy among various potential members to seek support in the BSR region.
- d) support all members to reach a common goal and promote ECOLABNET as dynamic and living network.
- e) organise various events for SMEs, intermediaries, and general public about eco-innovations in manufacturing sector.

RESPONSIBLE ROLES AND ACTORS INVOLVED:

- The Presidency.
- The editorial board members.
- Initiating project team - Current project team representatives.
- Current and potential ECOLABNET network members (SME's, RDI's & IO's)

What steps should be taken?

It is important to note that ECOLABNET project team have already undertaken several steps over the last year to promote network growth. Such activities will continue and/or be expanded to achieve the long-term objectives listed above.

ECOLABNET project team have already developed various surveys, research and blogs that were shared through project website and social media channels as well as partners internal communication channels. ECOLABNET project team have launched the networks platform (Digital Collaboration tool (DCT) - an open-nature WEB 4.0 application), initiated several thematic meetings and public events with SME'S, RDI's and IO's to enable interaction between current & potential network members. To boost the expertise of the network project team have also conducted on-boarding process where potential new RDI service providers and intermediary actors were contacted to involved then in future activities of the network.

Building on these activities, ECOLABNET project team will collaborate to meet the following goals to grow the sustainable network (**short-term goals**):

1

Develop bottom-up oriented networks cooperation environment aimed to create regional membership outreach to involve and energize more network members.

2

Promote networks growth-oriented communication activities (through ECOLABNET website blogs, current network internet platforms: Digital Collaboration Tool and LinkedIn, as well as emails) by sharing members achievements, success stories and main benefits offered by the network.

3

Straighten *communication & marketing* of ECOLABNET services for members and public. It will be achieved through virtual or physical public events and thematic meetings where available services and support mechanisms will be presented.

4

Involve new service providers and intermediary actors to support core ECOLABNET vision & mission of the project results. It will be achieved via participation in various external events and networking activities (organised by other organisations and target groups)

5

Monitor network status and perform statistically relevant membership evaluation survey. It should be completed and analysed before each new year - period.

STRATEGIC TACTICS FOR NETWORKS EXPANTION

To accomplish all above mentioned near-term goals for networks expansion — a strong tactical plan is required. It will accelerate and strengthen the implementation of the growth strategy. Therefore, ECOLABNET project team have set a goal to increase and expand the network by involving more RDI and intermediary actors.

Below you can find all recommended procedures, “tactics” and steps (including minimal amount of time and needed resources) that should be taken to implement and support the strategy for ECOLABNET sustainable growth.

1st network (strategic) expansion step



Develop ECOLABNET's bottom-up oriented cooperation environment aimed to create regional membership outreach to involve and energize more network members.

“One can't do it alone”. change oriented and sustainable management of international ECOLABNET community will be a collective activity. Current project team have decided to ensure that ECOLABNET network (as a member-based network) will be managed by ECOLABNET members.

To facilitate network expansion and professional eco-innovation development - all network activities and procedures will be managed by elected ECOLABNET member called *The President* (more details about the role can be found in ECOLABNET governance and action plan). **The President** of the network will be selected by all network members for at least 1 year.

Rotation of members will provide network with new perspectives and expertise needed to improve network performance. Diverse management team will also benefit networks expansion by: a) supporting internal collaboration & attracting new members; b) promoting new communication opportunities via current ECOLABNET channels; c) developing ECOLABNET community based on RDI, SME and IO needs & feedback.

The President of the network will be supported by the regional representatives in each project country. Each initiating project partner will assign one representative (specific team member or department, etc.) to act as a contact point for various network support initiatives (e.g. to participate in yearly ECOLABNET members meeting hosted by the President of the network). Contacts of regional representatives will be uploaded and publicly accessible in DCT tool.



Each Presidency (with support of regional representatives) will have a basic list of performance indicators to support sustainable expansion of the network:

- a) share expertise and reply to the emails of interested companies. Questions and emails will be forwarded to regional network representatives by the President for additional support (if needed).
- b) Identify specific needs of the company and forward them to potential service providers on national and international level.

This way network will be lean, simple, and straightforward. Moreover, each member will have an opportunity to contribute to ECOLABNET development. This process will be managed and guided by The *President* of the network. However, the **success of this process** will be based on **bottom-up cooperation** model that will motivate members by giving them a voice.

RESPONSIBLE ROLES & ACTORS	TIME NEEDED	RESOURCES & TOOL NEEDED
 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Presidency - Initiating project team 	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 50 to 60 hours / year 	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ECOLABNET governance and action plan - Virtual meeting tools (Ms Teams, Zoom etc.) - DCT tool

2nd network (strategic) expansion step



Promote networks growth-oriented communication activities (through ECOLABNET website blogs, current network internet platforms: Digital Collaboration Tool and LinkedIn, as well as emails) by sharing members achievements, success stories and main benefits offered by the network.

“Talk about real work and benefits”. To foster engagement of the network it will be important to renew already developed ECOLABNET communication and social media strategies (more details about developed communication tools can be provided by initiating project partner - MUOVA). This will be a task of **ECOLABNET’s editorial board** (more details about the roles and responsibilities can be found in ECOLABNET governance and action plan). However, previously mentioned Presidency will provide expertise and support the board by participating in yearly task planning event (hosted by the editorial board).


Each initiating project partner will assign one representative (specific team member or department, etc.) to act as editorial board member. Selected board members must be qualified to contribute and assist in editorial work (must have expertise in communication strategies and policies). This will help to connect ECOLABNET members and attract new companies through multiple channels.

In order to adjust already developed ECOLABNET communication content and social media strategies editorial board members will have to:

- a) **evaluate** the need of current and potential ECOLABNET network members (main target groups - SME's, RDI's & IO's). Gathered information should be combined with communications pathways and strategies developed in previous periods.
- b) **develop** renewed communication strategy or action plan for member engagement through networks communication initiatives and events.
- c) **create** master mailing contact lists (including names of organisations and representatives, email addresses and other needed information) to communicate and advertise all eco-innovation related matters (research, articles, and other publications), as well as newest achievements and development done by ECOLABNET member. List should be segmented by key groups (SME's, RDI's and IO's). Review it every year to meet GDPR standards.



- d) **plan yearly blog topics** that will be disseminated through ECOLABNET website, current social media platforms and emails. Create yearly calendar reminders for responsible members to digitalize this process as much as possible.
- e) **foster continual** relationships with other networks and ECOLABNET's intermediary actors by exchanging various content to expand networks reach in the field.
- f) **create and publish ECOLABNET calendar of relevant events** up to a year in advance (rolling basis) to ensure availability for interested parties (RECOMMENDED)

RESPONSIBLE ROLES & ACTORS	TIME NEEDED	RESOURCES & TOOL NEEDED
 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Editorial board - The Presidency 	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 20 to 30 hours / year 	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ECOLABNET social media communication & strategy - Virtual meeting tools (Ms Teams, Zoom etc.) - DCT tool - www.ecolabnet.org - www.linkedin.com - www.google.com/sheets

3rd network (strategic) expansion step



Straighten communication & marketing of ECOLABNET services for members and public. It will be achieved through virtual or physical public events and thematic meetings where available services and support mechanisms will be presented.

“Host events that professionals will want to attend”. Networks are known for their professional events – whether it is an annual conference, informal lunch & learn or an online webinar. These types of professional events drive SME's, RDI's and IO's to attend and improve their contact and potential partnership list each year.



TIP: Live virtual conferences are the most cost-effective way to reach current and prospective international members on a large scale (Based on COVID-19 pandemic experience).

Therefore, ECOLABNET team will organise main international event based on already gathered network needs. It will be up to each Presidency to organize & host one yearly international network meeting / conference or experience exchange sessions (online - lasting at least 3 hours) based on ECOLABNET guidelines for meeting places and key requirements specified in this document.

Already developed guidelines and requirements will help to identify specific actions that is needed to:

- a) **enable** current network members (e.g. invite them as “fresh speakers” - those that haven't participated in any other ECOLABNET event).
- b) **involve** available stakeholders and policy makers within the field of eco-innovation.
- c) use events for network growth and benefit.

In order to find out the need for event content responsible Presidency could involve as much members as possible (via face-to-face or virtual meetings) ore use already gathered data from implemented workshops with current network community and main target groups (SME's, RDI's and IO's). This would also help to gain credibility and the opportunity to attract additional members.



TIP: Expand network and attract more members by emphasizing the opportunity for attendees to bring a “guest” or any interested company.

Public events and thematic meetings - Yearly public international events or roundtables as well as other thematic meetings on several topics with SMEs, intermediary organisations and RDI actors should be held once a year to boost ECOLABNET expertise. Thematic meetings should be based on specific needs of the members. Ideas for such events should be gathered based on short surveys or discussions within the network. Physical and virtual events are used to implement the strategic aims of the network.

However, Regular meetings (based on needs of each Presidency) are also important because it will provide additional opportunity for members to network with each other and access specialized and/or current information within the field of eco-innovation development.

RESPONSIBLE ROLES & ACTORS	TIME NEEDED	RESOURCES & TOOL NEEDED
 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Presidency - Initiating project team - Current and potential network members (recommended) 	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 40 hours / year 	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Guidelines for organising ECOLABNET meeting places - Virtual meeting tools (Ms Teams, Zoom etc.) - DCT tool

4th network (strategic) expansion step - optional



Involve new service providers and intermediary actors to support core ECOLABNET vision & mission of the project results. It will be achieved via participation in various external events and networking activities (organised by other organisations and target groups)

“Create high-value target list of potential new members”. By engaging ECOLABNET's leadership: **Initiating project team** - current project team representatives as well as current ECOLABNET network members (SME's, RDI's & IO's) and regional representatives in the process of potential members contact lists development.

Develop already created value proposal for all potential members (that are working within innovation development). It should work as a promise of benefits that will be delivered by the ECOLABNET. There are three important criteria that should be met while developing network value proposition:

- a) **specificity** - name specific benefits that members will receive.
- b) **pain-focused** - describe how their problems could be tackled with ECOLABNET help.
- c) **exclusive** - highlight the importance of eco-innovation development support with the help of the network.



REMINDER: All new members should agree to membership rules specified in “Statement of commitment” form after registration to ECOLABNET's Digital Collaboration Tool.

High value target list should be segmented (contacts or relationships identified) by regions and provided to the Presidency of the network. Use newly created list of potential members to schedule online meetings (via online tools - Zoom, Ms Teams etc.) with ECOLABNET team to build trust and promote network more. If needed call or send, follow up emails to these target companies to follow up on correspondence and other outreach efforts.

A simple spreadsheet (or a data set of existing complementing competences and infrastructures) with tracking fields would be enough to show and mark the status of this process. However, it is important empower as much network members (as well as industries) as much as possible.

RESPONSIBLE ROLES & ACTORS	TIME NEEDED	RESOURCES & TOOL NEEDED
 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Presidency - Initiating project team 	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 10 hours / year 	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ECOLABNET governance and action plan - Virtual meeting tools (Ms Teams, Zoom etc.) - DCT tool

5th network (strategic) expansion step – optional



Monitor network status and perform statistically relevant membership evaluation survey. It should be completed and analysed before each new year - period.

“Collect feedback from current members”. Tracking and measuring network status and engagement is an important part of sustainable growth strategy development. Development and integration of statistically relevant membership survey will help to adjust ECOLABNETS membership benefits. Therefore, an annual member survey is needed to collect relevant feedback. All survey questionnaires should be designed in practical and time-consuming manner. Gather network input will help to:

- a) **evaluate** member needs in advance (by talking or surveying all current members) and retain all members in the best possible way.

- b) **measure** network effectiveness and gather feedback on how it could be improved.
- c) **reinforce** the interests of public & private companies to seek professional support for eco-innovation development in their countries.
- d) **foster** the development of high-quality services that respond to ECOLABNET community need.

All results of the survey should be communicated and promoted in various forms and available channels to encourage cooperation of the current members. If the responses evoke a change in member benefits, make sure to broadcast this to as much external actors as possible. This will also boost the process of sustainable growth because it will promote the willingness of potential companies to join and cooperate in order to improve their eco-innovation development process.



TIP: Identify "inactive" members and implement program to support and embrace such members to share their expertise and achievements.

Constantly renew and execute current strategic membership growth & action plan / campaign. Each plan and data set should be renewed in order to highlight and track all recent changes in the ECOLABNET.

RESPONSIBLE ROLES & ACTORS	TIME NEEDED	RESOURCES & TOOL NEEDED
 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Presidency - Initiating project team 	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 10 hours / year 	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ECOLABNET governance and action plan - Virtual meeting tools (Ms Teams, Zoom etc.) - DCT tool