

4.2 Interview results

The six interviews highlighted further significant aspects of the project's effectiveness. The actions undertaken (mainly the relational and training moments) generated additional awareness and new willingness on the part of the entrepreneurs to learn and acquire new managerial skills, helpful in repositioning the company in the changed market scenario and inducing new operational attitudes, search for new markets and collaborations.

For example, an artisan operating in the glass sector said: "At the beginning, I thought the project was another waste of time that would produce nothing. Then, when I realised the increased visibility gained from the promotional activity and received the first direct phone calls due to the website and the first orders, I reconsidered and started to invest more in the web, with a new awareness of the direct and indirect benefits". In an interview with an artisan working in the mask industry, it emerged that "finally someone has realised the importance of telling the difference between our authentic products and counterfeit ones. I knew this but could not tell it correctly and with the right materials. This project and the training courses I attended made it possible for me. Thanks to the project's training courses, I could develop further how to use the web, and nowadays, I fully use social networks to promote the company". Again, an artisan in the fine metalworking sector claimed, "I did not think that the American market could be so accustomed to buying online and via smartphone even products with important prices. I have just started to invest more in this market and create an English section of my website, and I am already seeing the first results".

Besides the variables where the effects are directly measurable, the project activities involved more than 70% of the participating firms in the training program, helping to broaden the strategic awareness of the participating artisans regarding the importance of undertaking specific digital actions and investments. The training and coordination meetings carried out online and in-person (events and meetings) have also fostered connections between businesses that knew each other only marginally and are now beginning to build relationships and, in some cases, co-design products or initiatives. A young entrepreneur in the fashion industry underlined that "Thanks to the project, I have been able to have many contacts with producers with whom I can collaborate and compare myself. I have already had the opportunity to meet with another artisan to discuss possible new products and initiatives to be made together. We are hypothesising the creation of a line of products jointly made by our two brands". An entrepreneur in the nautical sector pointed out, "Before these moments of discussion and reflection developed by the project, I never thought about being able to find customers on the web. Perhaps, because I am over seventy years old and never needed to, I have always worked through word of mouth without any problems. Of course, today, I could think of exploiting the Internet to make myself more known to the rest of the world, also because the market is no longer what it was in the past decades, and one must adapt so that the business continues after me". A carpenter also pointed out the following change in focus: "Doing exclusively custom-made products, I never had any interest in working with the Internet, as I thought I certainly could not sell via e-commerce a product that is not bought with a click. Instead, I changed my mind! Venice Original has brought me more than a few custom frame orders, completed with prepayment for the product! Now, I find myself having many new potential customers without having the anxiety of collecting all the money at the end of the job!".

Overall, the interviews highlighted that thanks to the interventions developed on digital aspects, through an essential part of the services provided to firms via the project activities, the project has helped firms to question and subsequently redefine some of the business model building blocks (see discussion in next section).

Table 3 summarises the main aspects emerging from the interviews regarding artisan micro-enterprises business model innovation.

Table 3: Aspects emerging from the interviews related to micro-enterprise business model innovation

Firm sector	Before project activities	Innovations introduced with the project activities
Minor shipbuilding	No firm interest and action in developing a service offering aimed at the target audience given by potential customers on the web.	New awareness regarding the importance of adapting to changing market scenarios and customer acquisition using the web.
Glass processing	No confidence on external business support measures and the potential of the web.	First investment on the web and reception of feedback in terms of sales on the promotional investments made.
Precious metal processing	Poor knowledge of the selling potential through e-commerce and smartphones. Orientation to the customer who physically comes to the store.	Investment in web and e-commerce. Creation of an English website section. Opening to new target markets.
Woodworking	No interest in new sales channels coming from the Internet.	New awareness related to e-commerce. Expansion of sales channels.
Mask production	No use of social networks and digital communication.	Investment in additional training on how the web works. Development of integrated firm's communication using social networks for storytelling.
Fashion/clothing	Few contacts with potentially competing firms, uncooperative orientation.	Orientation to collaborations, development of a product line between different brands.

5 Discussion

Under the Venice Original project initiative, a group of micro-enterprises expressing traditional Venetian craftsmanship were supported by providing services and training.

The initiative has helped firms overcome the strategic and operating difficulties they might have encountered due to limited organisational and administrative capacity. In addition, it provided ways for money lenders to monitor the proper use of the delivered resources.

With the actions introduced, the project seems to have contributed to the renewal of the firms' business model, in terms of direct or indirect effects concerning different business model building blocks of the micro-enterprises involved. This conclusion, which is preliminary given the limited time frame of observation and, conversely, the long time required for the full deployment of the project effects, is broadly consistent with the effect of the initiatives implemented to renew competencies and adjust strategies and products to achieve a competitive advantage, as identified by, among others, Klammer et al. (2017).

Specifically, direct effects are concerned with the use of digital technologies and, more generally, marketing action. The results summarised in Table 2 document that the project induced a more significant presence of artisan micro-enterprises on Google and social networks, increased the number of businesses with a website, and positively affected the approach to enhancing the firm image and products.

These results, clearly expected, as they relate to the inherent project objectives, were, however, accompanied by indirect results in terms of business model innovation that were not obvious.

The strengthening of the firms' strategic awareness about the importance of incorporating digital tools and the web into their business model indicated to the entrepreneurs the possibility of introducing additional business model adaptations. These involved the building blocks related to customer orientation (expansion of target customers, distribution, and relationship channels) and the value proposal, but also the opportunity to create alliances to achieve through collaboration goals that small size and insular location seemed to preclude. The main results of semi-structured interviews, summarised in Table 3, highlight the initial effects of the project initiatives on the overall configuration of the firms' business model, where the changes implemented are consistent with the concept of complex innovation formulated by Taran et al. (2015).

Thus, the project has achieved a dual objective. On the one hand, it has led to the achievement of a minimum level of presence and use of digital tools, guaranteeing individual businesses and the entire sector of Venetian craftsmanship greater visibility on the web and greater authority obtained through the Venice Original brand and adherence to the highlighted guidelines. On the other hand, it has contributed to spreading awareness of adopting a business model with a proactive attitude towards the tools and dynamics of the web and the opportunities arising from e-commerce, enabling the change of strategic approach sought in the project design phase. This appears to be in line with the considerations of Ferrero and Fortezza (2007), who point out how marketing approaches and methodologies consistent with the organisational and managerial specificities of SMEs and effective in meeting consumer expectations can support more extensive managerial changes.

The project has, therefore, forced entrepreneurs to question their initial beliefs concerning their market positioning and environment, as well as the coherence between the resources made available to their companies and their new strategic goals. In addition, the project has induced among companies a greater awareness of the need for a renewal of strategic thinking, although focused on the dynamics related to the firm digitalisation, as the basis of entrepreneurial renewal and the strengthening of competitive capacity (Pencarelli et al., 2010; Sacerdote and Sicca, 2020).

A relevant impact was gained in assessing future business prospects due to the expansion of the potential market driven by e-commerce, especially regarding the foreign market. In this sense, the project actions activated and challenged entrepreneurs' beliefs about their companies' strengths and weaknesses, inducing an updated strategic approach.

6 Conclusions

Considering what has been discussed, it is possible to conclude that the series of actions managed by the trade association CNA Metropolitana of Venezia, as part of the Venice Original project, have facilitated business model innovation of the Venetian artisan micro-enterprises involved. The project promoted digitalisation and customer orientation processes and the adoption of changes to different business model building blocks.

The contribution of this article is twofold. First, the evidence presented shows that an external supportive intervention, in this case, carried out by an intermediary entity such as the trade association, can foster the competitive evolution of micro-enterprises and push them toward innovation in their business models. Involvement in project initiatives has stimulated changes to established beliefs that are difficult to overcome, as they are shared with the organisation's internal and external environment (competitors, colleagues, and collaborators). Evolutionary processes in the entrepreneurs' awareness were then encouraged, and the possibility of expanding their operational horizon was demonstrated, thus constituting a necessary first step toward a strategic renewal process. The first results that it has been possible to report already clearly show signs of an overall adaptation of the configuration of the business models adopted through incremental changes in more building blocks, in the direction of customer orientation, the adoption of a more sophisticated business approach suitable to enhance better the attributes of the products offered, and the network of relationships. The companies benefiting from the intervention, or at least some among them, have triggered a path of incremental renewal, amplifying the tendency of the entrepreneurs involved to strategic thinking, improving the cooperative attitude and

production of social and relational capital, and through the introduction of new products and distribution channels.

Further, the changes generated have not compromised the firms' identity linked to artisan know-how but enhanced it and made it usable to a broader set of target audiences. Secondly, the project development and the analysis of project effects underline the role that an external actor, namely a trade association, can play in promoting strategic innovation and improving the entrepreneurial environment. The reported results would likely not have been obtained if the intermediary entity had not intervened, and its proximity, knowledge and authority could trigger the dynamics necessary for project initiation and management and ensure the homogeneous delivery of services. The case study suggests that the intervention mediated by the relevant trade association was more effective than it could have been if managed independently by individual firms in the market or directly by public and private lenders. This implies, in line with the results of previous studies (Rakicevic et al., 2016), that proper identification of the problems and needs of micro-enterprises, made possible in the specific case by the proximity and knowledge of the trade association, may allow for a better definition of the goals of the external support action, the resources and actions needed to achieve the goals, and an appropriate implementation of the actions themselves, including through concomitant and ex-post monitoring activities. Effective support action could also form the basis for planning subsequent actions in a logic of continuous improvement and efficient use of resources.

This article, of course, is not free of limitations. First, the evidence reported is partial and preliminary, confined to a relatively short time interval and, as far as the interviews conducted are concerned, limited to a few enterprises. Further evidence can be obtained through longitudinal observation and on a more significant number of firms to reconstruct the development trajectories toward business model innovation.

Second, the selection of the entrepreneurs involved in the project was not random. A pre-selection was mediated by direct knowledge from the trade association, effectively distorting the neutrality of the intervention, which in this case excluded micro-enterprises that were known to be less receptive and inclined to change. Entrepreneurs were asked to participate in the support initiative through an invitation email that generated a self-selection process, likely attracting entrepreneurs facing more change or uncertainty or those closest to the Venice Metropolitan CNA. Therefore, the effectiveness of the interventions may be overestimated.

Even with these limitations, this study's contribution may be of interest since it considers the issue of the competitive recovery of SMEs in traditional sectors, which is urgent for our economy. SMEs have significantly contributed to Italy's well-being but are in danger of succumbing to environmental dynamics against which they are unable to react alone.

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