

# YOUTH COMPETENCIES IN THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY LABOUR MARKET

A TAXONOMY OF  
COMPETENCIES

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**“Circular economy - sustainable competencies  
for youth” (CESCY project)**

# Youth competencies in the circular economy labour market: A taxonomy of competencies.

“Circular economy – sustainable competencies for youth” (CESCY) Intellectual Output Two.

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## Abstract

This Intellectual Output (IO) is the second within the CESC project. The aim of this project is to develop a competence framework for circular economy, together with the tools to bring it to the practice of youth workers. In this research, 50 circular entrepreneurs across Europe were interviewed on the competences that are relevant in their work. The results provide an overview of the types of skills, knowledge and attitudes that characterize circular entrepreneur- and leadership. It concludes with a discussion of the role of youth workers in developing these competences.

**Key words:** circular economy, competences, entrepreneurship, EU, KSA model, sustainability, youth work

# Introduction

With the European Green Deal, the European Union has set the goal of implementing a circular economy (CE): a system that aims to design out waste and pollution while keeping products and materials in use and regenerating natural systems (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2021; European Commission, 2020a). A CE should create more localised economies through clusters of closed-loop value chains and can strengthen economies and jobs. Meanwhile, it will embrace digital technology, automation, large-scale repair and refurbishment programmes. The CE transition will redefine work, rebalance power, and reimagine using and valuing resources (Dufourmont & Goodwin Brown, 2020).

The transition to a CE is expected to be labour intensive: for every 10,000 waste products and materials, one job can be created if incinerated, six jobs if landfilled, 36 jobs if recycled, and up to 296 if refurbished and re-used ([the United States Environmental Protection Agency, 2002](#)). In addition to increasing demand for existing roles in resource management and repair, it is expected to create demand for different skill combinations and working methods. Meanwhile, employment in extractive industries like mining and manufacturing products from raw materials is expected to decrease ([Dufourmont & Goodwin Brown, 2020](#)).

## Young people and the research question

In order to participate in the CE transition, youth needs to master this new way of thinking and working. In this paper the elements of competences that are essential in the CE are explored. The central question is: *How should young people be equipped to shift the labour market towards circularity and sustainability in terms of knowledge, skills, and attitudes?*

This question goes beyond equipping young people to be competitive in the labour market, as the labour market in itself is changing towards circularity. Younger generations have a strong appetite for sustainable entrepreneurship, potentially becoming leaders in the CE and sustainability transitions (European Commission, 2020c). Therefore, the focus in this research is on these entrepreneurial and leadership competences. This paper concludes with a discussion on the role of youth workers in developing these competences.

## Connection to EU agenda

The aim of this research is to gain an understanding of the types of knowledge, skills and attitudes that are relevant in the practice of circular jobs. In a later phase of the project (IO4), the findings of this research serve as an input to cluster the knowledge, skills and attitudes into competence framework for the circular economy. Thereby, this research contributes to Action 6 (Skills to support the twin transitions to a Green and Digital EU<sup>1</sup>) and 7 (Increasing STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) graduates and fostering entrepreneurial and transversal skills) on the European Skills Agenda (European Commission, 2020c). In box 1, the specific contributions to the European Skills Agenda are outlined.

### Box 1. Connection to European Skills Agenda

<b>Action 6:</b> Skills to support the twin transitions to a Green and Digital EU	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Defining a taxonomy of skills for the green transition, which will allow the statistical monitoring of the greening of our professions.</li><li>✓ Supporting the development of a core green skills set for the labour market to guide training across the economy with a view to creating a generation of climate, environment and health conscious professionals and green economic operators</li><li>✓ Helping to integrate environmental and climate considerations into school, higher education, vocational education and training, as well as professional training.</li></ul>
<b>Action 7:</b> Increasing STEM graduates and fostering entrepreneurial and transversal skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Promotion of entrepreneurship skills at all levels of education and training to provide students with the knowledge and motivation to encourage entrepreneurial activity.</li></ul>

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<sup>1</sup> The digital transition is formulated in parallel to the green transition. By focussing on competences for the CE, this research contributes to the green transition in particular.

With the competence framework at the core of the manual for youth workers (IO5), this paper links to the competence framework as proposed in the *Competence Model for Youth Workers to Work Internationally* as part of the ETS2020 (SALTO Training & Cooperation, 2016). More specifically, it elaborates on the environmental competencies that were not included in the model.

## Definitions

As the main concept in this research, competences are understood as an integrated set of knowledge, skills and attitudes (European Commission, 2019). Knowledge consists of established theories, concepts, facts and figures that contribute to an understanding of a given subject. Skills comprise manual and cognitive abilities to put acquired knowledge into practice. Attitudes represent a mindset or tendency to behave or react in a particular way in a particular context.

## Methods

To understand the necessary competencies for a circular economy, we set out to identify and interview established circular businesses. Through their experience, an understanding is derived on which competencies are needed for youth to set up or work in a circular company.

We have interviewed in total 50 companies from Estonia, the Netherlands, Spain, Portugal and Italy (see Table 1). To be included in the sample, a company had to have a circular economy characteristic: fully implements circular economy principles or contributes in some way to the circular economy. Questions were asked on their current business model, which skills they are looking for in their employees and others, and the role of youth work in preparing young people for a circular economy. Interview questions can be found in Appendix 1. Interviews were conducted between December 2020 and April 2021.

Table 1: an overview of the companies interviewed by country.

Country	Companies interviewed	Company sizes	Industries covered	Patterns
Estonia	9	Small and established companies, one international big company	Fashion and textile, wood waste, cosmetics, second hand sales, repair	Most led by women (8), one by a man.
Italy	9	Mostly small companies	Urban farming, textile, manufacturing, food, waste management, consulting, design	Small companies led by young men
The Netherlands	7	Company sizes ranging from startups (1 FTE) to SMEs	Fashion, electronics, construction, plastics, health care, waste, sharing economy	Companies are founded on a circular proposition
Portugal	12	Small companies	Textile and fashion, repair, upcycling, footwear, tech, food, agriculture, recovering and reusing materials	Most (10) are start-ups founded by young entrepreneurs. 11/12 founded during or after 2017.
Spain	13	Mainly new and small enterprises	Fashion, food, agriculture, recycling, manufacturing, transportation, regional social, robotics & AI, consulting & marketing	Majority were in Fashion, AI and new technologies. Mostly small and medium companies, no national or international corporation.

## Results

The outcomes of the interviews with CE related companies are presented below. A summary of the identified attitudes, knowledge and skills is presented in table 2. Note that the findings are *tentatively* clustered into knowledge, skills and attitudes, based on the most dominant characteristic of that competence. Later on, these will be integrated into definitive competencies under the IO4 research paper.

First, some criticism has been placed on the uniqueness of circular competencies among the respondents. The argument here is that the competencies that are needed in a CE are similar to those in a linear economy. The difference is in the context/content rather than the competency itself (e.g., designing a circular product requires the same designing skills as creating a linear product). One respondent stressed that it is more about knowing one's competencies and using them in a circular context.

Second, in some cases it seems more appropriate to place the competencies on a spectrum rather than formulating them separately. For example, 'systems thinking' goes into relating oneself to other parties in the system (collaboration), realising different impact areas (circular business modelling), etc.

*Table 2: summary of the main attitudes, knowledge and skills relevant for youth circular economy competencies.*

Attitudes	Knowledge	Skills
Adaptation and flexibility	Circular economy and circular business	Leadership and working in teams
Creativity		Collaboration
Motivation and mindset		Communication
Ethics		Critical thinking
Vision		Systems thinking
		Design thinking

## Attitudes

### **Adaptation and flexibility**

Adaptation and flexibility are about the capability to appropriately respond to unforeseen circumstances. Different company types may require different ways of adapting. In a startup, one needs to wear different hats and not stay closed within the scope of one discipline. In a multinational, it is essential to know different countries and territories within them in-depth. As CE is based on local, country-based connections, you need to know the local stakeholders (companies, craft, communities, needs) and resources available to make a short production cycle and generate more benefits to local communities. Flexibility is required to cope with barriers such as 'linear' legislation (e.g. not being able to reuse material that is classified as waste) or a lack of customer awareness.

### **Creativity**

In a CE, resources are treated in a fundamentally different way. Products are offered as a service. Old products find new applications with completely different functions. New products are created out of waste. This requires disruptive thinking and creativity.

Creativity is not just limited to art, it's also about combining and implementing different ideas. Creativity is not supported by isolation from the world, but by coming into contact with other ideas. Here, a spirit of initiative, connecting personal passion to the workplace, practising self-development, using imaging, exploration and improvisation with a sense of fun is necessary to solve problems and find answers. Creativity helps mental and emotional agility to handle stress and complexities.

### **Motivation and mindset**

Mindset and motivation are the core aspects that set the 'circular entrepreneur' apart from the linear one. Interviewees mention that employees without passion for their work are not likely to deliver the desired results in the end. Shared values with the company and a passion for sustainability help employees to push forward even when desired results are not immediately achieved within the expected timeframe. Motivation helps to see failure as a new challenge. It is the ability to be aware of desires, thoughts, behaviours to motivate and improve oneself and be proactive. Besides, motivation reduces stress, stimulates continuous growth and fosters entrepreneurship.

Respondents reported a solid internal deeper meaning at the core of their doing. They define their success through the lens of social and environmental impact instead of just profit.

Their work is about being connected to a higher purpose, sometimes even perceived as a spiritual development. Respondents sometimes distinguish between a 'regular entrepreneur' about ego and beating everybody in the market versus a 'circular entrepreneur' about collaborating and creating environmental and social impact. When asked about the criteria to hire a young employee, one respondent states that it is more important *who* someone is rather than *what* they are capable of. What is the driving force behind this person, and is (s)he sincere?

This internal drive allows the employees to persevere, push through the tedious work, and keep questioning the system. It is a mindset that is oriented toward the long-term and incorporates multiple values. They do not (only) spot economic opportunities but see opportunities in material flows and consuming patterns that need to be changed.

It is noted that this internal drive should be in one's nature. Some argue that it *is* within the core of young people. "It is no longer cool to work for big multinationals. It is cool to create impact," to paraphrase one of the respondents.

## Ethics

To capture CE ideology into the actual impact, one must know what they stand for and know their why. The why is a basis for formulating a vision that should be made as specific as possible. This is where reflection and self-awareness (efficacy) skills are essential. It fosters an ability to cope with the frustration that comes with the continuous confrontation with the system that one is trying to change. Some of the characteristics that are appreciated by the respondents include:

- **Empathy** for colleagues, society and nature;
- **Coherence** - it is not easy, and you have to allow mistakes and contradictions;
- Ability to **personally reflect** on daily activities needs, nature costs and waste for optimising the resources available to them to the maximum;
- **Resilience / persistence** - not becoming overwhelmed by the difficulty of living the principles 100%.
- **Transparency** - being open and transparent about the production process.

In addition to personal characteristics, the interviewees also pointed out valuing nature and future generations, ability to reflect and act accordingly:

- Understanding through **environmental ethics** that humans are part of society as well as other living creatures and respecting that.

- Awareness of nature and its interconnection with cities and cities with nature.
- Ability to understand that the **planet's resources are finite** and that we are not here to squander them but conserve them for **future generations**. *We are not planet owners but its custodians'*
- **Commitment** to making the world a better place for current and future generations.

## Vision

The current economic system is less than 9% circular according to Circularity Gap ([CGR, 2021](#)). That means that currently, there is not an abundance of examples of circular businesses in different fields. Therefore, one must think outside the box to have a long-term vision of a circular world as an entrepreneur or designer. This world has different rules and systems and the designer or entrepreneur should imagine themselves as a part of this world. The vision stems from understanding **how social and natural ecosystems work and interconnect**: life cycle, customers, supplies, minimising and using waste, products lifecycle. The goal in simple terms, is to put this environmental sustainability and ecodesign knowledge into a circular organisation.

As the world is constantly changing, a circular company should also be flexible and open to change, constantly reviewing, evaluating and improving its vision. Everything starts from the entrepreneur's vision and the question "what is the added value": longer-lasting, proximity and/or usability? Here, making a product reusable is often the core of the circular economy.

## Knowledge

### Circular economy and circular business

Many interviewees pointed out the importance of youth understanding the CE and how it can be applied in many different fields. They argue that youth should be alerted to the concept of scarcity of natural resources and be encouraged to rethink how we view consumption in general.

One of the essential skills for working in a CE identified by the interviewees is – "...to learn how to quickly learn things from different areas - to have a systemic and multidisciplinary view."



- Understanding the company's **strategic and lean management model**, considering CE as a critical concept in that strategy and implementing it for effective projects/action and reducing risk.
- Understanding of the diversity of **CE business models** and added value to take from each.
- Ability to make the **CE run through all company processes**: in services, in purchases, in the use of materials, in the manufacture of products, in energy consumption, etc.
- Knowledge of the company's **competitive advantage** - reusing a waste stream could be cheaper than utilizing raw materials.
- How to find solutions to waste problems - find a market niche.
- Finding a balance between profit and making a positive impact in society and nature.
- Preference for **local self-management** in the municipality and small communities over externalisation to big corporations.
- Preference for **local raw material and industry** over foreign markets.
- Understand **consumer behaviour** and ways to nudge consumers towards more sustainable alternatives.
- Prioritize **waste prevention** and envision what happens to a product at the end of life.

## Skills

### Leadership and working in teams

It rarely happens that an innovative idea can be realised by one person alone. Sooner or later the team needs to expand and include more people. Particularly in a circular business model, extensive collaboration with suppliers and customers is required. In order to motivate others for this purpose, circular leaders are needed with a strong and positive vision. It requires a participatory and engaging form of leadership in which employees and partners are regarded as collaborators towards a common goal. The leader should lead in a transparent way, informing openly about the decisions that are to be made and create a space for employees and partners to incorporate their ideas into the shared vision. Furthermore, a safe space for experimentation, failure, teamwork and learning from others should be encouraged.

## **Collaboration**

CE requires a multidisciplinary approach. Working in a multidisciplinary team means listening, questioning one's beliefs/actions, expressing one's ideas, empathy, and using participatory system approaches and tools that support system analysis. For these skills, young people need to learn management tools of agile work and the facilitation techniques for working groups (dynamics of collaboration), essential in a circular economy.

Respondents often mentioned a need to operate in a multi-stakeholder context. Some claim to be or mention the need for a 'chain director' who manages the interest of different parties in the production chain and facilitates collaboration.

Some advice from respondents:

Realise that one cannot do everything by oneself. Be curious and open-minded. It is not about acquiring more skills but rather about reaching out to other companies with skills you lack and linking them.

Trust is the currency. Some respondents state that they are unwilling to do business with people with the wrong incentives (i.e. those who are just about making a profit). It has to be sincere. Sometimes even a genuine personal connection is needed to do business.

Internal communication is also essential. Gather a counsel of young people and senior advisors/entrepreneurs around you. "It is within this dynamic that real change happens."

## **Communication**

This competency is closely related to the previous one. Communication could be perceived as a skill within the broader competency of collaboration. It is about understanding and being able to speak the different 'languages' of other stakeholders. It requires empathy and active listening skills.

A sustainable vision alone is not a point of sale. At least, not for the masses. It needs to be translated into a business model that everybody understands. This requires communicating a different message to different customer segments. 'Disguising' the ideology without losing sight of it.

Engage in an open dialogue with customers. If you want to encourage customers to make long-term decisions, you need to engage with them in a long-term relationship. Here, a circular organisation knows how to clearly and empathetically talk about its vision, goal, values, and circularity as a starting point of its actions. Storytelling with measured results and

transparency show that a product has a soul. It fosters the creation of communities and social movements that are a driving force to change consumer behaviour.

### Critical thinking

Critical thinking is rationally reflecting on one’s thoughts and deciding what to think or do. This is done through analysing and evaluating information, experiences and situations in the most objective way possible. This means thinking about cascading effects, cause-effects, and sharing feedback. Critical thinking is useful in the context of designing a project, product and reducing risks. In the case of CE design, you have to think critically about the necessity of your solution and its impact. You have to be able to answer critical questions that others may have in the future before them: how does this product save resources, prevent waste and pollution and restore natural systems?

### Systems thinking

There is a consensus on systems thinking within the literature as a critical competence for the circular economy. The outcomes of the interviews underline this statement. Interviewees have quite different understandings of what the concept of systems thinking exactly entails. To take one definition from Sumter et al. (2019): “(...) *the ability to collectively analyse complex systems across different domains (society, environment, economy, etc.) and different scales (local to global)(...).*”

From this perspective, systems thinking is necessary for the transition to a CE, especially when opposed to *a sectoral approach/silo thinking* in which sustainability/CE is organised within an isolated department (see figure 1.1). This makes systems thinking a vital competence for policymakers and leaders of big companies. However, ‘on the ground’, organisations quickly realise that they cannot close a circular business model on their own, especially if they want to scale up. Other parties in the value chain need to play a role as well.

This reveals a close link with systems thinking and collaboration as another key competency for CE. It is about positioning oneself in a broader ecosystem of parties in the value chain. What are the dependencies? What is the common goal? How do we distribute value? Etc.

Figure 1.1 Silo thinking in business and education

FINANCE	HR	OPERATIONS	IT	CE
ECONOMY	BIOLOGY	GEOLOGY	MATH	SUSTAINABILITY

From an educational perspective, societal issues are mainly studied in isolation. It is noted that systems thinking perspectives in education require a multidisciplinary approach in which scholars/students learn through working on practical cases and see how different disciplines interrelate.

## **Design thinking**

Given the context of complex systems, there is no one best way to design a circular business model. CE in practice is a continuous discovery. It is a daily test bench for some of the interviewees, and what you try out may not necessarily work. Therefore it is necessary to constantly experiment with the business model by applying design thinking principles to business model innovation. Adopt a continuous learning mindset by continuously setting up assumptions/hypotheses and validating them, ask “why” constantly, go further and question even your initial idea after a constructive debate.

## **Role of youth work and trainings**

During the interviews respondents were also asked what could be the focus of youth work in equipping young people with necessary competencies for the CE labour market. Most of the suggestions mentioned by the interviewees overlapped with their responses regarding overall competencies for running/starting a circular business. Topics mentioned are as following:

- Creativity and innovation;
- Demonstrate to young people that the capacity for transformation is in their hands;
- Expectations management;
- Explaining the concept of “product's life” and “product's service life” and what the impact is when we choose a reused product instead of a new one (using real products and numbers, explaining it so that it is tangible);
- How to communicate and motivate;
- Inform about the current process of extraction, production, distribution and disposal of products;
- Problem-solving in an adaptable way;
- Show various models of CE in different areas and sectors;
- Teamwork.

## Discussion and conclusion

This research gives an overview of knowledge, skills and attitudes that are relevant for the practice of circular businesses. Youth workers can use this overview to understand what directions to take in organizing circular economy activities. These could range from 1-to-1 coaching to group training and experimentation in a business setting. In this section, a number of limitations and opportunities for the use in practice of youth work is discussed.

### Limitations

First, it is important to know the target audience for which underlying competencies are of added value. Not every young person has an ambition to become a circular entrepreneur. In a consultation with youth work practitioners, it was mentioned that youth up to the age of 18 are mainly concerned with their individual identity. Matters such as career and sustainability are generally raised at a later age. Besides, the concept of CE mostly resonates with youth in higher education.

Second, youth work is about finding a connection with the needs of young people, without forcing them in a particular direction. It was mentioned in the interviews that attitudes like mindset and motivation, vision and personal ethics should be in someone's nature. These are personal attributes that cannot be taught. The role of the youth worker here is limited to raising ethical questions and assisting youth in formulating their beliefs and values.

The third limitation is that youth workers do not create curriculums. Providing specific knowledge on CE and circular business models belongs to the domain of formal education. Our earlier research in IO1 (mapping of the status quo on Circular Economy) shows that currently it is not widely spread among youth organisations to give knowledge about sustainability, waste minimisation or circular economy. The role of the youth worker here is limited to triggering curiosity and motivation by bringing up interesting circular economy topics and examples.

### Opportunities

The aforementioned skills are partially aligned with what youth work already provides to young people, especially in the case of soft skills such as communication, collaboration, creativity, leadership and teamwork. Youth workers could address these competencies in a circular economy context through collaboration with local circular entrepreneurs. In doing so, youth can be placed in a business setting in which they can experiment with designing circular products and services. This creates a space for reflection and discussion: asking

about drive and motivation, bringing up ethical questions and making people formulate their ideas.

Youth workers that are active on the ground know the specific needs of youth in their communities. This allows them to identify individuals that could benefit from participating in circular economy activities. The findings presented in this research reveal a competence profile that supports this match-making process. Depending on the appetite for sustainability and entrepreneurship, 1-to-1 coaching may be the most appropriate form. Group training and workshops could be pursued in collaboration with schools and universities.

We propose some non-formal education activities that youth workers undertake to transfer knowledge about CE.

In the end, knowledge, skills and attitudes are useful if they lead to useful implementation in a circular economy context. Trying to be creative, stating your ideas, working on an idea and communicating with your team and different stakeholders can be a matter of just deciding to do it. Sometimes, you may not even have a certain attitude like courage or motivation, but you count from five to zero and just start doing things. Execution is key in the end.

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# Appendix: questionnaire

## 1. The business

Please, describe the following details about your business.

- What do you do (activity sector and specific activities)?
- Size of the company (employees, interns, volunteers)
- Did the company introduce new people (positions) to adapt to the circular economy market?
- Does the company provide training on circular economy or sustainability?
- Location(s)
- Which year was the company established?
- Was the company established by a young entrepreneur?

## 2. What is your definition of circular economy?

- Share that there are different views on circular economy and we would like to hear their personal definition, the one that fits their practice. These are possible questions, which is best for you?
- How did your understanding of circular economy change once you started applying it?
- Why do you define your company as circular?

### 3. Examples of Circular Economy in your business

- While providing the definition some examples might come up, we use this question to ask for other specific examples of what they do and consider contributes to CE.
- How is your company applying/following CE principles in your daily work? In which phase of the product life cycle you apply CE principles? Please share a couple of examples. (+why? *Why investing time and effort on these activities?*)
- How does your company contribute to the Circular Economy?

### 4. The %

- Subjectively, and rating from 0%-100%, how circular is your company?
- Please elaborate your rating (why did you rank it the way you did).

### 5. Competences

This section elaborates on four questions about competences, and education. As we address competences, non formal education and youth work, the concepts will be defined in the interview for clarity.

- Introduce the concept of competence as knowledge, skills, attitudes and values  
You can set some examples as the competence of cooking includes the knowledge of the recipee, the skills to do each step and make it look good, the attitude to actually cook instead of ordering something and a value connected with that motivation for cooking in you.
- Which competences youth should have for circular economy? Connected to

Vision	
Governance	
Communication	
Ethics	

c) Given two candidates for a job position with the same profile, what is making you decide for one over the other?

d) What training does youth need in order to enter the circular economy?

e) Introduce the concept of Non formal education and Youth work

Non-formal learning is the learning that takes place outside formal learning environments but within an organisational framework. Non formal methodologies are used in formal education, through projects, collaborative work, the use of body and senses, personal reflection and group dynamics.

Youth work are activities with and for young people of a social, cultural, educational or political nature. The main objective of youth work is to provide opportunities and education for young people to shape their own futures.

f) Which of these trainings could be the role of the youth field?

- If we as an organisation run a training for young people, what do you want us to focus on?
- Having a specific degree is the technical part. What else could bring value to the young person?

## 6. Challenges for the Hackaton

- What are the main challenges you're facing in your business?
- Is there any challenge that you would like to bring to the Hackaton for youth groups to help you find solutions to?

This report is the second intellectual output of the Circular Economy - Sustainable Competencies for Youth ("CESCY") Project, co-founded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union and written by the partners in said project, as follows:

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