

Executive Summary

The Future Panel on SMEs 2017 – An updated Expert Survey on the Challenges for the German Mittelstand

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IfM-Materialien Nr. 256

Institut für
Mittelstandsforschung

IfM
BONN

www.ifm-bonn.org

Impressum

Herausgeber

Institut für Mittelstandsforschung Bonn
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IfM-Materialien Nr. 256

ISSN 2193-1852 (Internet)

ISSN 2193-1844 (Print)

Bonn, May 2017

Das IfM Bonn ist eine Stiftung
des privaten Rechts.

Gefördert durch:



Bundesministerium
für Wirtschaft
und Energie

aufgrund eines Beschlusses
des Deutschen Bundestages

Ministerium für Wirtschaft, Innovation,
Digitalisierung und Energie
des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen



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For the second time after 2014, experts from business, politics and research were surveyed in the context of the IfM Bonn Future Panel on SMEs. The panel aims to analyse current and future challenges for German SMEs. The survey identified 82 topics which have been grouped into ten separate action fields: (1) safeguard innovation capability and competitiveness, (2) maintain and develop the stock of enterprises, (3) carry out international business activities under uncertainty, (4) strengthen education and training, (5) create favourable framework conditions for Mittelstand companies, (6) empower SMEs to go digital, (7) meet the demand for skilled labour, (8) secure the financial basis, (9) use digitisation to foster innovation, and (10) analyse the impact of digitisation. The experts considered all ten action fields as almost equally important.

Digitisation influences various action fields

Among all current technological developments, the surveyed experts ascribe the highest impact to digitisation: Digital challenges affect almost all action fields. Of key importance are topics such as *enhancing IT security, developing digital competences, implementing digitisation in the public administration or improving the digital infrastructure*. This proves that the future challenges for SMEs need to be addressed not only by economic policies, but also by education, research and infrastructure policies.

Digitisation: Short innovation cycles require quick adaptations

In a competitive environment that is characterised by short innovation cycles, digitisation is one of the key drivers for innovation. All innovations ultimately aim to secure the competitiveness of enterprises. A particularly large number of experts consider the exchange of knowledge between research institutions, enterprises and society as a promising way to enhance innovation capabilities. At the same time, a majority of experts see the need for further research into the impact of digitisation on Mittelstand companies, but also on society and work in general.

Differentiated view on the lack of skilled labour and possible remedies

Similarly as in 2014, the 2017 Future Panel identifies again the supply of skilled labour in sufficient quality and quantity as a major bottleneck for the German Mittelstand. However, in 2017 this concerns more strongly Mittelstand companies that are based in less densely populated areas. Possible remedies

include the stronger use of labour potentials offered by foreigners, migrants and refugees. This implies at the same time an important task for Mittelstand companies when it comes to integration. Another suggestion, already strongly favoured in 2014, is to better communicate the attractiveness of Mittelstand companies as employers. However, there is no uniform assessment of these management instruments among the surveyed experts.

Further improve the climate for entrepreneurship

According to the experts, further improvements in establishing a favourable climate for entrepreneurship are essential to maintain the Mittelstand economy. This also includes fostering the interest in business start-up and succession. Both aspects are important ingredients when it comes to creating positive framework conditions for the Mittelstand.

Increased importance for cross-sectional Mittelstand policies that set positive framework conditions

Only few of the identified challenges can be addressed by Mittelstand companies on their own. In most cases, political action is mandatory. A restriction to basic framework conditions (Ordnungspolitik), however, would be insufficient, as illustrated by the multi-faceted challenges in the field of education policies. Hence, it is advisable to include other policy fields such as labour market and migration policies. Furthermore, the experts ask for more public investments at federal and regional level. All in all, the experts emphasized, even more strongly than in 2014, the cross-sectional aspects of Mittelstand policies and demanded corresponding political actions.