IOSR Journal of Business and Management (IOSR-JBM)
e-ISSN:2278-487X, p-ISSN: 2319-7668. Volume 26, Issue 12. Ser. 12 (December. 2024), PP 42-51
www.iosrjournals.org

Impact Of The Ali Program In Promoting Innovation And Competitiveness In Micro And Small Enterprises In São Paulo State

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Abstract:
The Local Innovation Agent (ALI) Program, promoted by SEBRAE, plays a fundamental role in disseminating a culture of innovation and strengthening the competitiveness of micro and small enterprises (MSEs) in Brazil. The analysis of the performance of ALI agents in the state of São Paulo highlights academic training and key skills, at the same time as it identifies gaps and opportunities to improve professional training. The results show that education in areas such as business administration, economics, and accounting is often associated with successful performance in the role, although technical and practical training still presents deficiencies, especially in topics such as digital tools, innovation management, and client relationships. In addition, 90% of agents consider continuous training essential to keep up with innovative demands. The research highlights that the methodology and operational practices of the program have a positive impact on the productivity and innovation of MSEs, especially in organizational and marketing dimensions. However, improving training strategies focusing on live training, practical experiences, and integration with market professionals can enhance and improve program results. The study concludes that the ALI Program is a strategic initiative for the survival and sustainable growth of MSEs, emphasizing the need for gradual and continuous evolution of its structure to meet the specific demands of the market and the innovative ecosystem.

Key Word*: Competitiveness; Innovation; Micro and Small Enterprises; ALI Program.*

Date of Submission: 10-12-2024 Date of Acceptance: 20-12-2024

I. Introduction

Innovation is a decisive factor for the survival and growth of companies in a business environment marked by constant technological transformation and intense competition. In the Brazilian context, micro and small enterprises (MSEs) face unique challenges in adopting innovative practices, often limited by the lack of financial.

To overcome these barriers, the Local Innovation Agent Program, carried out by SEBRAE, to enhance competitiveness and sustainability among SMEs

As highlighted by Ferraz et al. (2020), the Local Innovation Agent Program (ALI) in Brazil supports small businesses by identifying the stages with the greatest degree of difficulty in innovation, acting directly in the diagnosis and overcoming barriers that prevent these companies from implementing innovative solutions.

To operate the program, SEBRAE scholarship holders are trained with personalized support, which subsequently allows them to connect MSEs to tools, methodologies and strategies that boost productivity and foster an innovative mindset among entrepreneurs.

The ALI Program plays a fundamental role in promoting the dissemination of innovative culture, defined as the set of values, practices and behaviors that encourage creativity, experimentation and the adoption of new ideas. This culture is essential for the success and resilience of MSEs in increasingly dynamic markets.

By adopting a personalized approach, the ALI Program not only implements practical solutions, but encourages entrepreneurs to internalize innovation as a strategic pillar, creating conditions to face challenges and ensure their long-term sustainability.

Leadership plays a pivotal role in this process. As pointed out by Villaluz and Hechanova (2019), leadership, role modeling and support for innovation directly and indirectly predict the innovative culture, with different approaches required for sole proprietorships, family businesses and non-family businesses.

In the case of MSEs, the leader's ability to inspire, guide and provide adequate support is a differentiator between the success and failure of innovative initiatives. In this sense, the ALI Program directly helps entrepreneurs overcome internal limitations, adopt effective management practices, and encourage organizational learning and collaboration.

Given the relevance of the ALI Program in overcoming challenges faced by MSEs and promoting a culture of innovation adapted to their particularities, this article's general objective is to analyze the role played by ALI Program scholarship holders in disseminating this culture in micro and small companies from the São Paulo state.

In this way, we seek to understand how innovation directly impacts the survival and competitiveness of MSEs, in addition to identifying the main challenges in the process of implementing innovative practices and thus, evaluating how the training and training of scholarship holders influences the results achieved. Therefore, it is intended to contribute towards strengthening the ALI Program, highlighting its importance as a catalytic process in business and regional development.

The development of this article is based on a literature review to provide theoretical support for the proposed analysis and offer an in-depth understanding of the topics covered. The section is organized into three pillars: micro and small companies (MSEs), analyzing their characteristics and challenges related to innovation; the culture of innovation, highlighting its strategic importance in the corporate environment; and the ALI Program, exploring its structure, actions and impact. This approach consolidates the theoretical foundation necessary for discussing the results presented.

Micro And Small Companies

Micro and small companies (MSEs) play a central role in the Brazilian economy, not only because of their representation in numbers, but because of their significant contribution to job creation and the Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

According to the MEMP (2024) MSEs are responsible for around 80% of formal jobs in the country and represent approximately 27% of GDP, consolidating themselves as a fundamental pillar of the national economy. These businesses, which include 16.1 million individual microentrepreneurs (MEIs); 6.7 million microenterprises (MSEs) and 1.2 million small businesses (SB), demonstrate how entrepreneurship plays a crucial role in Brazil's economic and social development.

The classification of MSEs in Brazil follows annual gross revenue criteria established by the General Law of Micro and Small Businesses. According to SEBRAE (2022), businesses with gross annual revenue of up to R$81 thousand are categorized as MEI; as Microenterprises (ME), those with revenue equal to or less than R$ 360 thousand; and as Small Businesses (SB), those with revenue between R$ 360 thousand and R$ 4.8 million. This segmentation reflects the diversity and scope of the sector, which ranges from individual ventures to more structured small businesses, with greater operational capacity and economic impact.

The dynamism of the sector is evidenced by the significant growth in the creation of new companies. In 2023, 859 thousand new micro and small companies were registered, an increase of 6.62% compared to the previous year, with an average of 2.3 thousand new businesses per day (ASN, 2024).

These numbers not only highlight the resilience of Brazilian entrepreneurship, but also point to a trend toward greater formalization of small businesses. This formalization has been largely driven by the ease of opening companies, especially in the MEI category, which simplifies bureaucratic and tax processes.

In 2022, the entry rate for MEIs was 18.3%, totaling 2.7 million new registrations, representing almost all the company creations in the country. In the same period, the exit rate was 8.1%, equivalent to 1.2 million closed companies, resulting in a positive balance of 1.5 million MEIs (News Agency IBGE, 2024). This data reflects not only the dynamism of the sector, but also its importance as a gateway to formalizing entrepreneurship. However, MSEs face structural challenges that limit their growth and competitiveness, especially in the context of innovation.

According to a survey by Bigdata Corp (2024), 77.9% of active companies in Brazil are micro-enterprises, with the majority made up of individual companies (MEIs), which represent 75.62% of the total. This predominance of small businesses reflects a business structure focused on basic operations, with little capacity to invest in technology, workforce qualifications, and innovative practices. Furthermore, many of these companies operate as headquarters (94.50%), while only a small proportion operate as branches (5.50%), which indicates the limitation in expanding operations and diversifying markets.

Thus, Brazilian MSEs, although fundamental to the economy, have weaknesses that compromise their long-term consolidation. The lack of financial and technological resources, associated with the difficulty in accessing broad markets, are recurring barriers that make it difficult to adopt innovative practices.

Inovative Culture

Organizational culture plays an essential role in the success of innovation within companies, representing a determining factor for creativity, experimentation and the adoption of new ideas.

According to Büschgens, Bausch and Balkin (2013), managers of innovative organizations are likely to implement a developmental culture emphasizing external orientation and flexibility, while group and rational cultures may be appropriate social control strategies. This multiplicity of approaches reflects the complexity of creating an environment that favors innovation.

Innovative companies not only implement practices, but also create appropriate cultures and climates, stimulating innovation and promoting creativity (Ahmed, 1998). Therefore, it is clear and highlighted the need for alignment between organizational culture and innovation strategies to ensure that the company's objectives are achieved.

The authors Tian et al. (2018) emphasize that culture influences innovation through a variety of culturally related factors, highlighting the complex and idiosyncratic relationship between culture and innovation. This relationship requires a personalized approach, in which each organization identifies and develops the cultural elements that best support its innovative goals.

Building a culture of innovation is made possible by different techniques. Crews, Euchner, and Kates (2022) suggest that strategies such as foresight, customer-centric research, and lean startup principles can be applied, incorporating lessons from humanity's beginnings and myths.

Furthermore, Kwan, Leung and Liou (2018) highlight that culture influences creativity through values, norms, multiculturalism, and dialogical co-evolution between culture and creativity, suggesting that the interaction between diverse cultural factors is vital to foster creative potential of the organizations.

A culture of innovation also generates significant impacts on organizational performance, as noted by Steele and Murray (2004), who state that an innovative culture is crucial for a company to become proactive, entrepreneurial, and continue to be successful, as it generates agility and the ability to respond to changing market conditions.

This perspective is supported by Dobni (2008) who proposes an innovative culture scale with seven main factors: innovation propensity, organizational constitution, organizational learning, creativity and empowerment, market orientation and value orientation.

However, the influence of organizational culture on innovation is not uniform. Parveen et al. (2023) indicate that hierarchical culture negatively affects inbound and outbound open innovation, while market culture positively impacts both inbound and outbound open innovation.

These dynamic highlights the importance of an organizational culture focused on flexibility and learning, driving open innovation. Zhang et al. (2023) complement that open innovation is driven by the appropriation strategy, formal organizational structure, learning culture and top management competence, highlights absorptive capacity and is an essential moderator for innovative performance.

Open innovation strategies are advantageous, as noted by Sá, Ferreira and Jayantilal (2023), who point out that these practices increase the value of the business by combining internal and external knowledge, resulting in sustainable competitive advantages.

In addition, Dencik et. al. (2023) suggests that organizations that are more advanced in developing strategy and culture, ecosystem capability, internal capacity, and technological capability perform significantly better on key financial and innovation metrics. These findings emphasize the importance of aligning organizational culture with robust and collaborative innovation strategies to maximize results. Innovation in Brazilian micro and small companies, although often limited by financial and structural barriers, can be facilitated by the inherent flexibility of these businesses.

According to Armiliato et al. (2021), innovation in Brazilian micro and small companies occurs more easily due to their financial capacity, and open innovation can be an assertive possibility, and it involves collaboration between different actors in the business ecosystem, such as customers, suppliers and strategic partners. In this way, it can be particularly effective in overcoming internal constraints and boosting the competitiveness of SPEs.

This approach allows companies to explore external solutions and integrate new knowledge into their operations, enhancing their innovation capacity.

In this connection, programs like the Local Innovation Agent (ALI) play a crucial role in offering technical and strategic support, connecting these companies to tools and methodologies that boost their competitiveness. The interaction between the structural characteristics of MPEs and market challenges makes it essential to strengthen public policies and programs focused on innovation, as a way of ensuring not only the survival, but the sustainable growth of these organizations.

Ali Program

The ALI program is an initiative that promotes technological extension action and encourages the research and development of innovative processes. With the support of incentive scholarships, the program aims to improve SEBRAE's performance in the innovation ecosystem, promote technological autonomy and boost the development of small businesses through its own methodology.

The program is aimed at serving small businesses that face challenges such as seasonality in sales, inadequate financial management, inadequate sales values, employee overload or idleness, high turnover, excess inventory, layout and space problems, among others.

The proposed solutions range from the development of marketing plans and digital positioning to financial consultancy, goal setting, improvement of inventory management, actions to increase sales, team training, improvements in the recruitment and selection process, among other strategic actions (ASN-SP, 2024).

In this connection, ALI agents are selected and trained by SEBRAE to perform technological extension activities, bringing small businesses closer to the best innovative practices. With a multidisciplinary profile, these agents work directly in companies, diagnosing difficulties and implementing customized solutions. One of the notable impacts of the program is its contribution to increasing innovation in dimensions such as marketing and organization.

According to De Carvalho et al. (2018) the ALI program improved marketing and organizational innovations more than product and process innovations in micro and small Brazilian companies. This demonstrates that the program promotes creativity in products and strengthens managerial and strategic practices, which are essential for the competitiveness of these companies.

Although Brazilian MSEs historically have a low level of innovation, the ALI program has contributed to a constant evolution in this aspect. According to De Carvalho et al. (2020), MSEs Brazilians have a low level of innovation, but the ALI program helped all of them improve innovation over time. This highlights the program's effectiveness in encouraging continuous learning and creating an environment conducive to the adoption of innovative practices.

The impact of the ALI program varies according to the degree of maturity of the companies served. Cardoso et al. (2020) observed that the program effectively leveraged innovation in MSEs, with higher efficiency rates in most innovation dimensions for the most developed cluster.

The data suggests that the program is more effective in companies that already have some level of organization and structured management, indicating the need for strategies adapted for different business profiles.

In addition to promoting innovation, the program reinforces its alignment with the national science, technology, and innovation system (CTeI), using extension as a mechanism to connect academic knowledge to the needs of the productive sector (CNPq, 2024). This integration allows not only the development of the companies served, but the training of extension agents, expanding their activities in the Brazilian innovation ecosystem.

The ALI program adopts a systematic and structured approach to promote innovation in Brazilian MSEs. Among the methodologies used is the Productivity Improvement Cycle, a process that integrates several stages, from initial diagnosis and mapping of problems to the implementation of innovative solutions and measurement of the results achieved.

This cycle includes activities such as personalized feedback, collective meetings, specialized consultancies, business rounds and events such as ALI Day, fostering a collaborative and strategic environment for exchanging good practices and the continuous development of companies. Figure 1 illustrates all the stages of this cycle, highlighting their contribution to the competitiveness and productivity of MSEs.

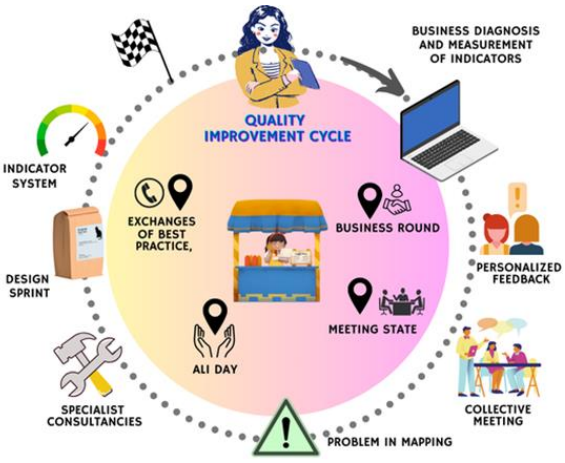


Figure 1: Productivity Improvement Cycle

Evaluating the Productivity Improvement Cycle, it can be said that it emphasizes the centrality of the company in the process.

II. Material And Methods

To conduct this study, a literature review was adopted, on a conceptual basis, in order to theoretically support the concepts that supported the research applied through the Survey technique, an approach widely used for collecting quantitative data in a systematic manner. is structured. The survey was carried out using a questionnaire prepared in Google Forms, containing closed questions that sought to analyze the relationship between Local Innovation Agents (ALIs) and their training, with the objective of evaluating the training of these professionals and identifying possible needs to improve your performance on the program.

The conceptual foundation, as a type of literature review, has the main objective of providing the theoretical basis necessary for research. Instead of conducting an exhaustive survey of all existing literature on a given topic, it focuses on the selection of key concepts that are relevant to the problematization of the study. This selection is made intentionally, aiming to build a cohesive and consistent theoretical framework that allows for an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question. By establishing relationships between the different concepts and contextualizing them within social reality, the conceptual foundation contributes to the construction of richer and more significant knowledge (Jabareen, 2009).

The Survey technique can provide valuable insights for professionals, educators and leaders, but it requires the right questions and methods to overcome low response rates and present evidence in a clear and objective manner (Goodfellow, 2023). Based on this premise, the questionnaire was developed to ensure clarity and objectivity, prioritizing the obtaining of answers that allow identifying critical points in the training of ALIs and guiding future improvements in the training process of these professionals.

The collected data was analyzed in a qualitative and quantitative way, allowing trends, gaps and patterns to be identified that supported the proposal of more effective strategies for training agents.

The analysis of the responses sought to correlate the training of the ALIs with their performance in carrying out their activities, contributing to a better understanding of the skills necessary to maximize the impact of the program on the micro and small companies served.

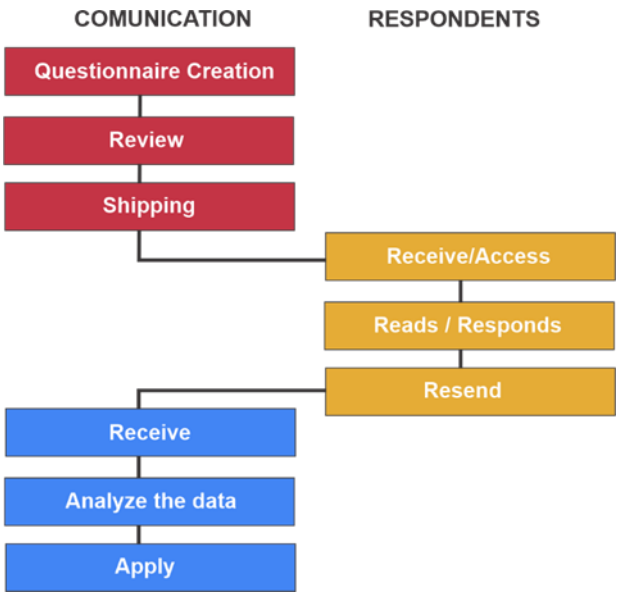


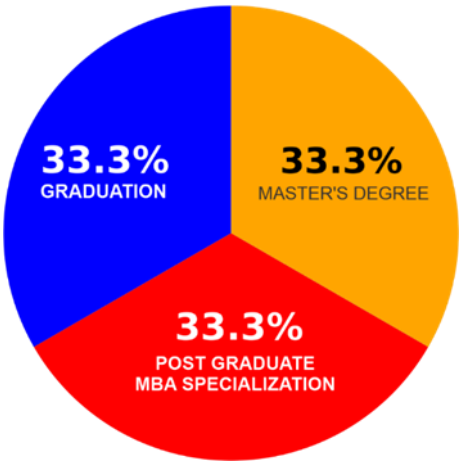
Figure 2: Survey Responsibility

The research was carried out with 12 Local Innovation Agents (ALIs) linked to SEBRAE's regional offices Bauru and São Paulo (West Capital). These agents were invited to participate in the research due to their activities in different regional contexts, enabling a comprehensive analysis of the needs and challenges faced in their activities. A pre-test was carried out with 5 N4 agents from the regions and the questionnaire was administered in November 2024, ensuring the timeliness of the collected data and allowing a detailed view of the conditions and perceptions of ALIs in relation to their training and capacity building.

III. Result

The proposal for this work focused on presenting the Local Innovation Agents - N4 as disseminators of the culture of innovation and the competitiveness of micro and small companies of São Paulo state.

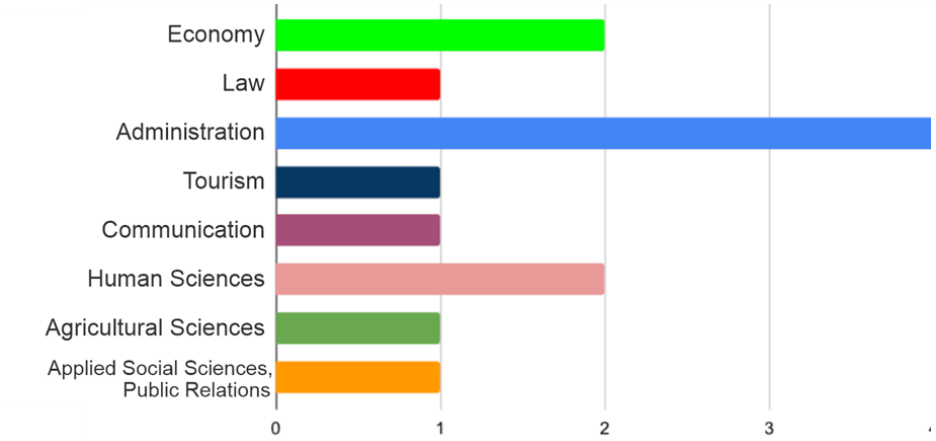
To this end, research surveyed the academic training of the agents, which demonstrated that 33.3% of the participants have a bachelor's degree, while 33.3% have a specialization degree and 33.3% a master's degree, as shown in Graph 1.



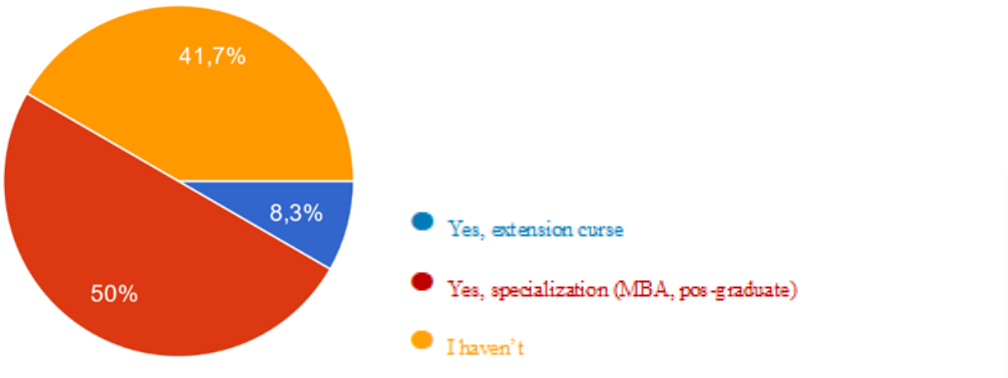
GRAPH 1: Training of N4 Agents

This diversity demonstrates a qualified academic profile, essential for acting as an ALI, especially in complex projects. The absence of agents with a doctorate reflects that N4 agents are professionals with a technical and strategic level.

Seeking to identify the higher education and complementary training of agents, it is noted that over 60% have higher education around Applied Social Sciences and 58.3% have additional training, such as specialization/MBA and extension course, in entrepreneurship and innovation, as shown in Graphs.2, 3.

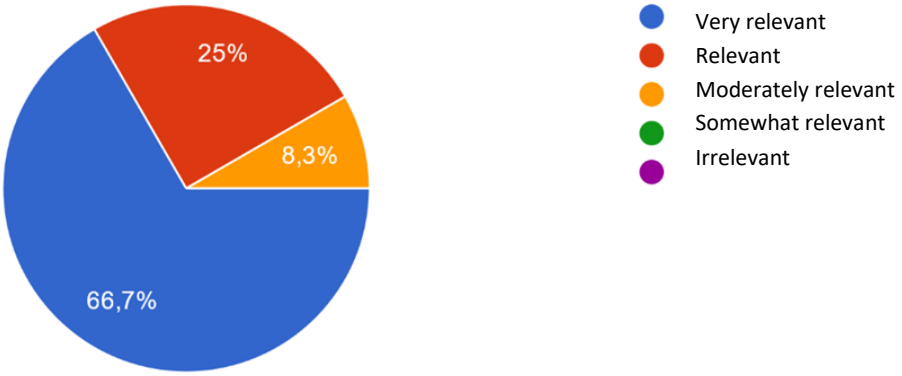


Graph 2: Higher-level training area for N4 Agents



Graph 3: Complementary training for N4 agents

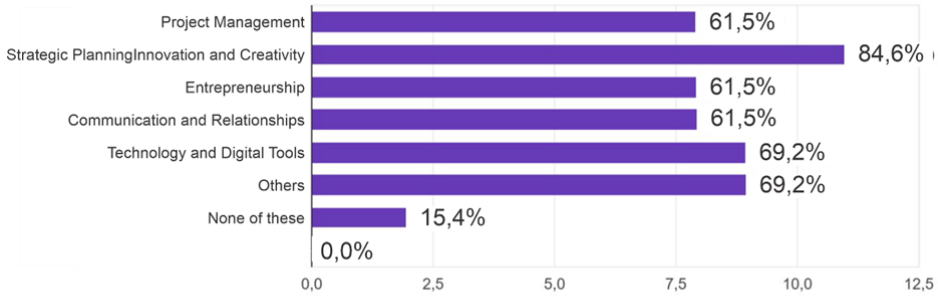
Higher education and complementary training for agents with a focus on entrepreneurship and innovation demonstrates an important trend in the training of ALIs, given the program's focus on promoting innovation in micro and small companies combined with the academic preparation of agents. Accordingly, the agents evaluated the importance of university education, corroborating the results presented and more than 90% of the respondents understood it as relevant for working with agent N4 (Graph 4)



Graph 4: Impact of your university education on your performance as an ALI

Thus, it is important to integrate practical skills into academic training.

Continuing the research, it was asked which skills or competencies acquired during graduation that the agent uses most frequently in their work and in which they stand out: strategic planning (83.3%), technology and digital tools (66.7%) and communication and customer relationships (66.7%), among others, as shown in Graph 5.

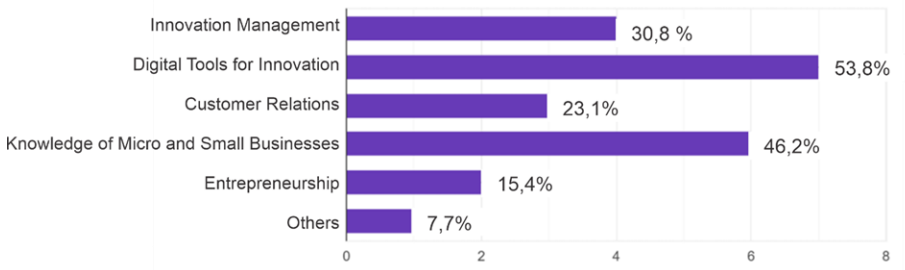


Graph 5: Skills or competences acquired during graduation that the agent uses most frequently in his work

These skills and competencies are aligned with the demands of the ALI program and the market needs for making companies innovative and productive.

As such, of the universe research, 100% of agents believe that their university education adequately or partially prepared them to deal with the demands of innovation in micro and small companies.

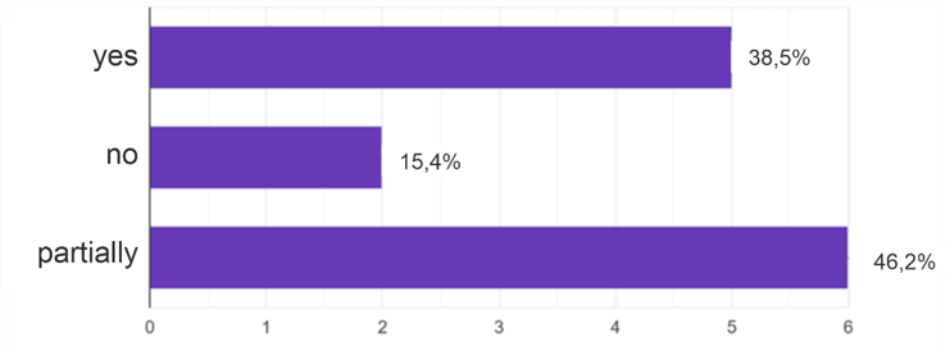
Thus, the agent was asked what the greatest lack of training for working in the field was. The result focused on digital tools for innovation (58.3%), followed by knowledge about micro and small companies (41.7%), innovation management and customer relationships (25%), according to Graph 6.



Graph 6: Areas considered by the ALI to be most lacking in training for field work

The use of digital technologies has been widely debated in the last decade. Digital technology is considered an alternative to solve several challenges, facilitating information collection, processing, analysis, delivery and decision-making in response to dynamic external factors (Abashidze, 2023). In this context, it is important that ALIs are trained in these new technologies, to demonstrate their benefits.

After verifying the importance of training in the Agent's work, they were asked about their training to work in the ALI Program and only 33.3% felt fully qualified for the activities. The other 66.7% felt partially qualified or insufficiently qualified (Graph 7).



Graph 7: Areas considered by the ALI to have the biggest laço foi training for work in the field

The results indicate opportunities for improvements in the training methodology to achieve excellent results, as corroborating this result, when asked about the need for continuous training to keep the performance as an ALI updated with innovation trends, 91.7% of participants consider continuous training necessary to keep up with innovation trends, highlighting the importance of continuous learning in the area.

In the second part of the survey, qualitative questions were organized to understand the reality of ALIs and the first question sought to relate perceived aspects in relation to the difference highlighted between ALIs with different academic backgrounds.

Analysis of the responses revealed that differences between ALIs with different academic backgrounds are evident in several aspects relevant to the execution of their functions.

One of the most mentioned points was knowledge in finance, considered crucial to guide the data necessary to calculate productivity and to offer support to micro and small companies. This aspect was highlighted as a significant differential for the more efficient performance of the agent. Respondents also highlighted that training in technological and industrial/production areas tends to contribute positively to their performance.

IV. Discussion

It was observed that the lack of knowledge in finance and management, common in some academic backgrounds, represents a barrier to fully meeting the program's demands. This gap can result in specific difficulties, such as cost management and proposing practical solutions to entrepreneurs.

In addition, skills such as problem-solving and communication and business relationship skills were frequently cited as areas where academic differences become noticeable.

Therefore, the respondents believe that ALIs with training in finance or related areas, such as administration and accounting, have a better capacity to contribute to the specific demands of micro and small companies. This finding reinforces the importance of considering both academic training and the continuous development of practical skills to meet the requirements of the ALI program.

Corroborating the previous question, respondents were asked which type of academic training and experience is most important to perform the ALI role well. Based on participants' responses, the academic background most frequently cited as essential for performing the ALI role includes areas of administration, economics and accounting.

These training courses were highlighted for their ability to provide a solid foundation in business management, finance and organizational processes, and fundamental skills to meet the demands of micro and small businesses. In addition to frequent mentions of training in technical areas, some respondents emphasized that interpersonal relationships and dedication to work are equally important factors, regardless of specific training.

Seeking to contribute to the growth of the ALI program, agents were asked for suggestions to improve the training of future Local Innovation Agents, and the following results were obtained, organized in Table 1.

Table 1: Suggestions for improving the training of future Local Innovation Agents

ACTION	JUSTIFICATION
Broad and Multidisciplinary Training	Addressing all themes from the innovation radar, providing a broad and integrated vision.
Training in Technological Tools	Practical training in the use of essential technologies, such as the Office Package and professional communication tools, including SEBRAE domain emails.
Critical Techniques and Functional Areas	Technical training in marketing, finance, processes, and people management. Use of key agile tools to enhance efficiency in activities.
Methodology and Real-life Experiences	In-depth training in the specific methodology applied in the ALI program. Promotion of on-site and field training, including real-life experiences in companies to understand business environment dynamics.
Specific Mini-Courses	Offering mini courses focused on essential topics, such as finance, marketing, and processes.
Engagement with Market Professionals	Invitations to recognized market professionals to share experiences and practices. Conducting visits to reference and research centers, expanding contact with trends and best practices.
Structured Online Training	Implementation of a structured synchronous online training process with practical activities, including simulations of the entrepreneurial journey.

It is worth highlighting that SEBRAE has already adopted practices that aim to contribute to the continued training of agents, with monthly online episodes of "Ready to Take Off" which involve themes of real needs, providing integrated training for Agents N4 and N6. However, these suggestions reinforce the need to combine theory, practice and real experiences to form capable agents to promote innovation effectively among micro and small companies.

V. Conclusion

The ALI program is a strategic tool to promote a culture of innovation and competitiveness among MSEs. In view of this, the research highlighted the relevance of academic and complementary training for ALIs, highlighting the importance of skills in areas such as administration, economics and accounting, in addition the need for practical skills in technological tools, people management and innovation.

The study sought to identify the main challenges in the process of implementing innovative practices and thus evaluate how the training and training of fellows influences the results achieved. Accordingly, despite the advances observed, there are opportunities especially related to the practical application of knowledge and training continuous action of agents. The inclusion of technical training, real-life experience and practical simulations in the training process was widely suggested by participants to improve the performance of ALIs, aligning their skills with specific market demands.

Additionally, strengthening personalized training strategies and direct interaction with experienced professionals were identified as essential elements to maximize the impact of the program. The research reinforces that innovation is a strategic need for the survival and growth of MSEs, and the ALI program positions itself as a catalyst in this process, connecting companies to practical solutions and effective methodologies.

The strategies proposed to improve the ALI program aim to contribute to the strengthening of the ALI program and ratify the importance of business and regional development for participating companies.

Finally, the continuity and improvement of the ALI schedule is fundamental to consolidating its contribution to the Brazilian innovation ecosystem, promoting the sustainable and competitive development of micro and small companies.

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