

Virtual Campus Hub

Deliverable D3.3 (WP3)

Trial implementation and test of two
examples of incubator processes

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Table of Contents

1	INTRODUCTION	3
2	FUNCTIONAL SPECIFICATION	4
3	CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS.....	8

1 Introduction

The goal of this Deliverable D3.3 is to report on the advancement and test of the Incubator processes (developed in WP4) as they are offered to post-educational users (potential entrepreneurs).

The nature of the present D3.3 is a “Demonstration”-type deliverable, i.e., the on-line website is the actual deliverable. We provide this short document as a guide and explanation for the website design and test.

This deliverable reports about the design and implementation of an on-line tool for innovative start-ups, that is able to support, in a virtual way, some phases of their learning path towards incubation.

The general characteristics of the offered on-line services were already outlined in Deliverable D4.1 “Interim e-Link Evaluation report”. We remind here the main characteristics of the designed service:

- The target users are post-graduate persons, who aim at building new and innovative companies in the Energy Sector.
- The service will follow such users in their pre-incubation phase¹. In this phase, there is a mix of learning activities (about business models, economics, but also technology, market structure, etc) with some initial research and business development. Deliverable D4.1 already analyzed and proposed what on-line functions are best suited to this phase of the innovation/incubation process.
- Functionalities and implementation were designed in collaboration with other VC Hub partners, but also with the I3P Incubator in Torino, Italy.
- Users of the website must be recognized as part of “Innovation Teams” (at this stage, the companies are not formally registered, yet). Each innovation team may be followed by a “Tutor” from a recognized Incubator.

The on-line service for pre-incubation learning support has been called with a short name: **StartApp**. The StartApp name is evocative of the “Start-up” nature of the Innovation Teams participating to the platform, and at the same time it remembers that it hosts a collection of “Apps”, i.e., specific functions suitable for implementing suitable sub-tasks.

¹ This choice also avoids any overlaps with the Virtual Incubator developed in the “EXPLORE Energy VC” project: the two results may be integrated in a future step, since they cover distinct phases of the innovation process.

2 Functional specification

The functionality required by the StartApp on-line service is summarized in the table reported in Deliverable D4.1, and repeated below as Table 1. For a functional description of each of the key functionalities, please see D4.1.

Table 1. Implementation plan of requested items

Item	Effort required	Information availability	Priority
Patent databases access			4
Market and Industry Databases			5
Forums and other social networks tools			1
Value network builders or value network maps			6
Osterwalder's canvas model			3
Smart lists of Web links			2

Starting from the required functionality, a new web site structure has been designed, taking into account both end-user functions, and administration functions. Figure 1 shows the overview of the main development areas (rectangles) and the detailed list of macro-functionalities available (rounded rectangles and ovals).

The service is built by integrating a standard open source Content Management System (CMS), that provides basic functionalities for publishing contents (pages, articles). The chosen CMS was Drupal (<http://www.drupal.org>), and we developed the additional functionality not present in the basic CMS (see Figure 2 for a screenshot).

As we may see in Figure 1, end-user functionalities are grouped in two main areas: **contents** (i.e., articles and information edited by the expert users of the system) and **interactive** features (i.e., tools where end-users may create new content and interact with the experts). As Figure 3 shows, in fact, several different user types (and roles) are supported in the application, to enable regular users to collaborate with expert tutors.

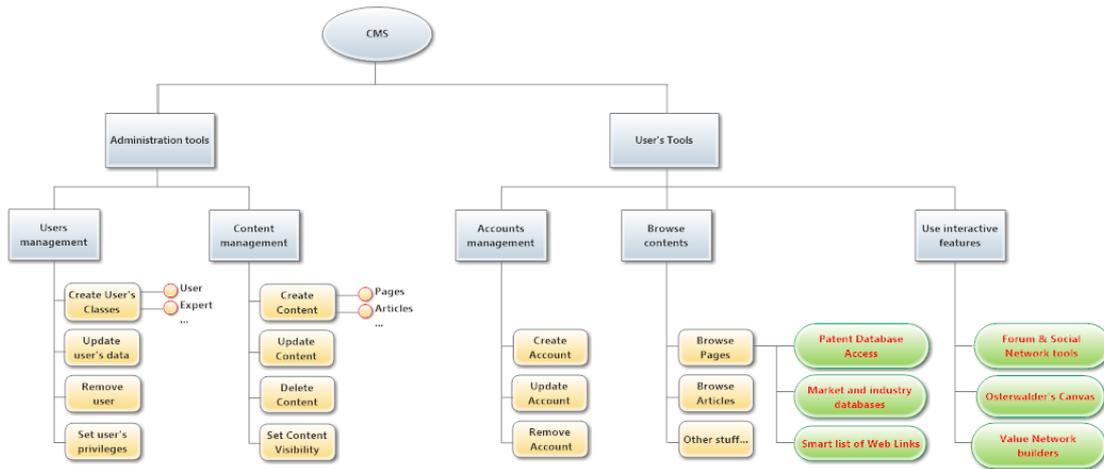


Figure 1. Functional decomposition of the StartApp tool



Figure 2. Screenshot of the home page of the StartApp tool

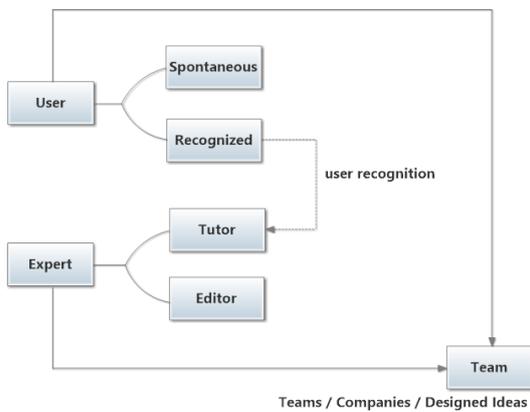


Figure 3. Types of users in the StartApp tool

Concerning interactive features, two of them are particularly interesting:

1. The interactive forum, where all users may discuss among themselves (and with experts) about the different topics. We decided to use an innovative forum platform, that could join the benefits of forum-like interaction, coupled with facebook-like intuitivity, and backed by a reputation system similar to eBay and StackExchange. We implemented the forums based on the extremely innovative platform called Discourse (<http://discourse.org>). A screenshot of the Discourse platform, customized for the VC Hub project and integrated with the CMS, is shown in Figure 4.
2. The Osterwalder canvas, an extremely popular formalism for representing the strengths of a technical and business proposition, and for indicating the main relationship of the company with the market and the supply chain, is a graphical formalism composed of 7 boxes. The pre-incubation process requires users to create such a model for their proposed business, and share it with their tutor, in order to improve the business proposition. The StartApp website features an interactive editor to create, edit, share and comment Osterwalder Canvas sheets for any registered User and Team in the system (see Figure 5 for a screenshot).

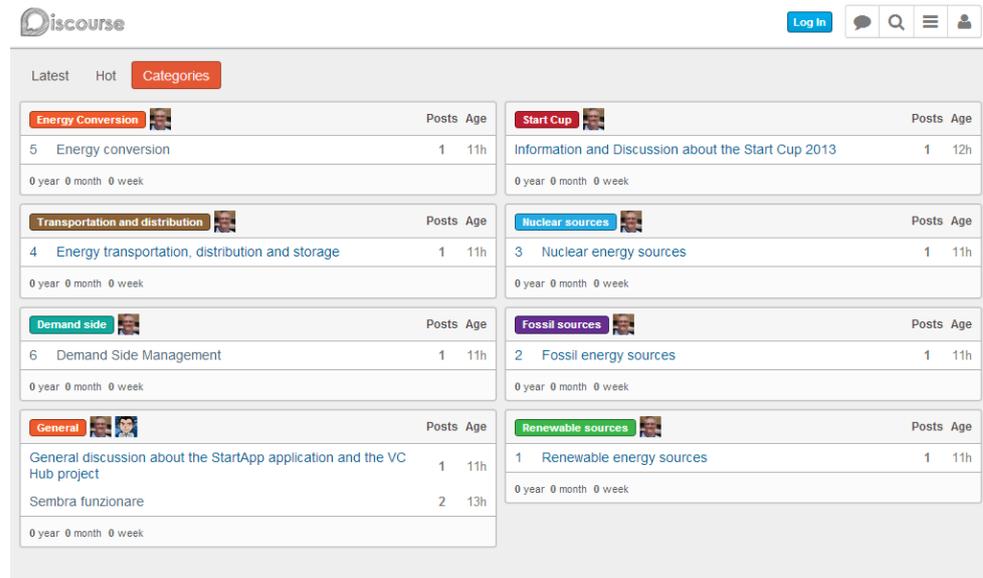


Figure 4. Screenshot of the StartApp thematic forums (based on the Discourse software)

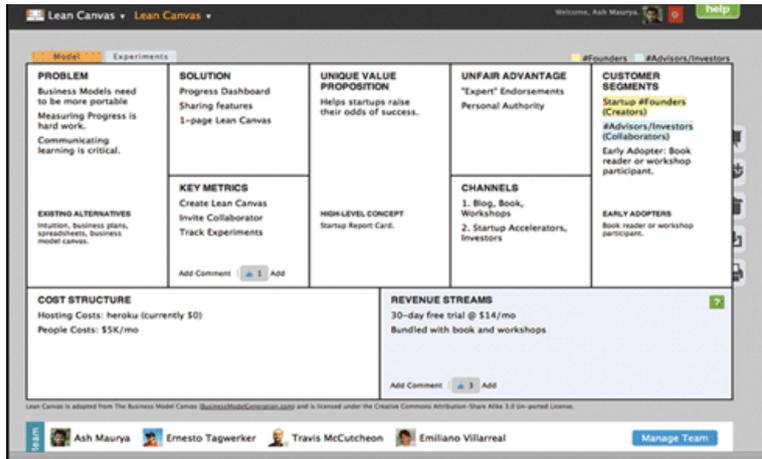


Figure 5. Screenshot of the StartApp Osterwalder canvas editor

3 Conclusions and next steps

The technical part of the StartApp site is ready for usage, and has been built according to the specific needs of the pre-incubation phase of energy-sector innovative enterprises.

The StartApp is available at the address: <http://toce.polito.it/vchub/>

The credentials to login are:

- Username: vchEditor
- Password: vced66

Please note that this address will be active only in the development phase, approximately until April 30th, 2013. Before the start of the testing phase, the application will be moved to a different domain and the credential will be changed.

In the next months, the following activities will be carried on with the system:

1. Information contents, news, articles, links, etc will be uploaded on the CMS system, by a team of experts. Such experts will include users from all VC Hub partners, as well as consultants from the I3P Incubator in Turin.
2. The I3P incubator will manage an annual competition for selecting new enterprises in the next months (called the “Start CUP”, see Figure 6). In particular, new business ideas have to be submitted by April 30, 2013, and full business plans are required by July 19, 2013 (some are accepted also in October). Therefore, the pre-incubation phase of the new enterprises spans 3-6 months that overlap perfectly with the VC Hub project scheduling. Therefore, the StartApp service will be tested with real enterprises participating to the Start CUP 2013 competition, as a free (for the enterprises) service helping them in their business plan preparation, and with the support of the tutors of I3P. After this phase, towards the end of the project, we will be able to evaluate the real usage of the StartApp approach upon real enterprises.



Figure 6. Call for the 2013 Start Cup