

## BUILDING STRENGTH AMONG EQUALS

Mainstreaming is without a doubt one of the most important principles of EQUAL. Mainstreaming means integrating and incorporating new ideas and approaches on the ground, and also transferring good practice resulting from the partnerships, to policy makers and key stakeholders. It also means identifying the lessons learnt and clarifying the key factors leading to successful results. Mainstreaming can be supported in different ways; one of them is through 'Peer Review'. But what exactly is a Peer Review and what is its added value?

The Peer Review (known as 'refereeing' in some academic fields) is a process of subjecting an author's work or ideas to the scrutiny of others who are experts in the field. The Peer Review process is aimed at getting authors to meet the standards of their discipline by sharing their work with someone with special expertise or experience in the field. The underpinning principle of the Peer Review is that showing work to others increases the probability that weaknesses will be identified, and with advice and encouragement, rectified.

The 'Adaptability Peer Review' organised by the Polish EQUAL Managing Authority on 3-4 October 2006 was specifically conceived to provide the participating Development Partnerships (DPs) with the opportunity to exchange their experiences and examples of good practice. As Piotr Stronkowski, from the Polish Ministry of Regional Development said:

*"Our goal was to organise an event that would be different from others. We wanted to create a fruitful ground for debate and experience sharing for DPs, going beyond the formal contacts that they usually have".*

### EXPLORING ADAPTABILITY: FOUR DIFFERENT APPROACHES WITH A COMMON GOAL

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In addition to the DP partners, the event also gathered representatives from the EQUAL Managing Authorities of different countries and the Polish Ministries of Regional Development, and of Labour, as well as Polish trade unions.

All these actors stressed the fact that the 'Adaptation to Change' theme is constantly gaining importance and visibility within European and national strategies. This is due to the fact that Member States have to face and manage the consequences of amplified social exclusion due to recent economic and social changes, such as the globalisation of markets and restructuring, as well as ageing populations. Within this context, great importance has to be given to the mainstreaming of bottom-up approaches, such as the ones provided through the EQUAL DPs. Direct action on the ground is the only way to effectively tackle social exclusion, to benefit the most vulnerable, and to address the gaps that sometimes arise in social dialogue.

With this message in mind, the DP representatives from seven countries, namely Belgium, Ireland, Great Britain, Spain, Portugal, Greece and Poland, exchanged their experiences and shared knowledge relating to results and tools put in place to support vulnerable workers or the unemployed. What were the challenges? How were they addressed? How were tools implemented? How can mentalities be changed? These were the questions asked and answered by 24 DPs during the 16 workshops organised.

The event was structured around four main themes, each of them constituting a strand of the Adaptability pillar: age management, IT skills, flexible work management and restructuring. This thematic spread was both an opportunity for the partnerships to share their experiences in a specific area of competence, as well as an effective way to cover as far as possible a broad theme such as Adaptability.

The workshops, each lasting 90 minutes, were based on interaction of the participants: after a brief presentation of one DP, the debate was launched. Another DP working in the same field was asked to comment on the presentation and share its experience with the other participants. The participants had also the opportunity to put questions to the DP representatives or compare the activities presented with their own.

This is the basis of the Peer Review: the exchange of experiences among equals fosters the knowledge about a specific issue and opens new horizons and ideas for improvement!

## **FLEXIBLE WORK MANAGEMENT: LEARN HOW TO MANAGE YOUR TIME!**

Flexible work management is an issue gaining visibility and importance: many EQUAL Round 2 DPs focus on activities fostering the balance between working and private life. The rationale for these projects is based on evidence: when asked what changes they would like in the workplace, most employees, both women and men, say: "greater flexibility". Evidence shows that when managed well, flexible work options such as flexi time, compressed working weeks, telecommuting and reduced appointments can be of benefit to both employees and business. The EQUAL DPs working in this field and participating in these workshops, such as the Spanish *E-micro*, Polish *Efez.pl*, Portuguese *E-change* and the British *Adjust the Balance*, undertake crucial steps and actions to implement and maintain sustainable and flexible work practices.

The Spanish *E-micro* DP was conceived to support micro-firms (enterprises with between 2 and 10 workers) in the process of modernisation of their organisation. *E-micro* helps both employers and employees of micro-firms through the development of their IT, managerial and administration skills. The underpinning idea of the project is that flexible working leads to a better balance between professional and family life and increases the possibilities of integrating the most vulnerable groups (especially women, older people and those with a disability) within the labour market. With this message in mind, the partners designed special training packages for employers and employees with children: during training hours, the partners set up a childcare system so that the parents could leave their babies while undergoing training. Another sort of support to micro-firms given by *E-micro* was the direct contact between businesses and tutors through the organisation of tutoring sessions organised in the workplace with 77 enterprises. During these meetings, the tutors helped both employers and employees in practical tasks: how to save time by paying taxes or obtaining bank services on the net, how to use an electronic agenda and how to put in place effective organisational strategies. After a detailed analysis of the staff's agendas, the tutor proposed a tailor-made logical intervention to foster effective time-management and find a suitable work-life balance for each worker.

*E-micro*, together with the other DPs participating in the workshop, stressed how important it is nowadays to find an optimal balance between work, training needs and family responsibilities. As they said, this balance fosters social inclusion of vulnerable workers as well as increases the efficiency of micro-enterprises. Another advantage of flexible working methods is that they are simple to apply and thus can be easily transferred amongst different sectors of the economy as well as in different countries. As the DPs have also underlined, the involvement of social partners such as trade unions and employer organisations is of vital importance in order to negotiate flexible solutions that could bring benefits to the whole company. Finally the conclusion of the workshop was evident: flexible working forms foster social inclusion, profitability of companies, flexibility of economic sectors as well as social dialogue.

## **AGE MANAGEMENT: CHANGING MENTALITIES, FINDING NEW APPROACHES**

Age management is one of the most important issues to be the focus of the European Agenda over the past decade. The increased participation of older workers in the labour market is increasingly seen as a major factor contributing to achieving more sustainable economic and social development in the European Union. As Vladimir Spidla, Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, said: "*by remaining in the workforce, older workers can continue to contribute to the economy, to society at large, and also maintain their own personal dignity and well-being*".

Age Management is also an issue tackled by many Round 2 DPs, among them, and present at the Adaptability Peer Review, were British *Skills Analysis*, Polish *Dynamism and Experience*, Portuguese *B.Sapiens* and Greek *Emperia*.

The British DP, *Skills Analysis*, operates in the South West of England with a twofold aim: on the one hand, to influence SME employment policy in the recruitment and retention of older workers by identifying undiscovered competences, and on the other, to enable the older worker to influence potential employers by providing evidence of their individual competencies. To achieve these aims, the project designed and developed an extremely useful ICT toolkit, enabling older workers to identify their competencies. This innovative approach will provide a much clearer picture of how older people can fill identified skills gaps and also help them in influencing potential employers by providing evidence of their individual competencies. Having identified clear gaps in older workers competencies, the DP also provides tailored training in the workplace on different subjects such as customer service skills, management skills, supervising and financial capability.

After the presentation, discussions with other DPs highlighted that dealing with older workers is not always simple. Often they are sceptical about the effectiveness of learning at their age and they are reluctant to undergo school-type training. That is why the DPs from different countries try to develop interactive forms of learning in order to motivate and engage older people. The DPs also stressed the importance of putting in place awareness-raising campaigns for employers who still do not recognise the importance of being age positive. As Hilary Shipley from *Skills Analysis* DP put it: “it is of vital importance to encourage businesses to recruit and use the knowledge of 50+”. In other words, the EQUAL DPs have understood that it is important not only to work with beneficiaries, but also to change the mentalities of employers and businesses towards older workers.

## **RESTRUCTURING: HOW CAN CHANGE BE ANTICIPATED?**

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Although restructuring itself is not new, the speed, complexity and scale with which it occurs certainly is. Global competition, technological innovation, demographic trends, shifts in consumer demand, changes in regulatory frameworks and other such pressures are all impacting on the way in which companies do business. In addition, they are seriously affecting individuals whose skills and circumstances may no longer be compatible with the requirements of our time, nor sufficiently flexible. The consequences of not responding effectively to this fast-moving and highly pressured environment lie at the heart of why restructuring forms an important subject of EU debate today.

That is why many DPs are putting in place innovative strategies to anticipate change and reduce the consequences of organisational changes within regions and companies. This is the case of Belgian *Decrire* (also present in the first EQUAL Round), Spanish *GESSCANT*, Greek *Navigator*, and Portuguese *INOCOP*. All of them have developed tools and methods to support workers and companies as well as reinforcing vulnerable industrial sectors.

The *Navigator* DP is a sectoral project whose aim is to reinforce the adaptability of the Greek shipbuilding industry, a sector currently undergoing a profound crisis. The DP is trying to improve companies' industrial change culture, reinforcing their communication and organisational skills. This action is carried out through seminars and empowerment workshops provided in the workplace and attended by employees of all levels. Navigator has also developed a knowledge management system which enables the transfer of competences and tacit knowledge from older workers to the younger generation. Older workers are filmed during their work and are asked to explain the procedures and the techniques related to a specific task. These shorts are then stocked in an E-library and shown to younger workers during training sessions. As far as direct action on beneficiaries is concerned, Navigator has also planned and developed an Adaptation Support Centre, providing counselling and vocational guidance, both for shipbuilding staff and for the unemployed. The workers have the opportunity to develop their skills (especially skills related to new technologies) while the unemployed have a chance to gain the competencies needed to find a job in another sector.

The outcome of the restructuring workshop was clear: the only solution to effectively tackle restructuring is to anticipate change by putting in place an early intervention mechanism. This

action should support workers (by raising their skills and developing their competencies), companies (by raising their awareness and improving their industrial change culture) as well as the sector as a whole (by raising its flexibility and productivity).

## **IT SKILLS: INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS WITHIN EVERYONE'S REACH**

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IT skills are becoming increasingly important for individuals and companies, as well as for the European economy as a whole. The availability of adequate IT skills is an important condition for the competitiveness and the innovation capabilities of enterprises. It is also a challenge for vulnerable workers as the development of e-business is increasing the demand for individuals with creative and higher-level conceptual skills. This is why more and more projects are working to improve the availability of E-skills for small businesses as well as fostering the information and communication skills of workers. This is, for example, the case for Spanish *Mikrogunea*, Irish *Meath Investment in Training and Employment*, Polish *Entrepreneurship on the Web* and the Belgian *Magusine*.

The web-based DP, *Entrepreneurship*, was set up and developed with the aim of supporting the growth and competitiveness of 400 Polish micro-enterprises in an innovative and effective way. The DP designed an electronic tool, a portal providing different types of services to small businesses: a comprehensive "library" including news on new IT products and useful information for companies, a 'library' containing E-learning and self-learning courses as well as a range of consultancy services. By logging on to the system, entrepreneurs can look at publications and articles on management strategies, finance issues and updated EU and national regulations, or download training courses from the vast choice provided by the portal. The E-learning system is seen as overcoming the most common obstacle for companies in relation to training: lack of time. E-learning is the most flexible form of learning as it can be done at any time and in any location. In addition to these choices, the portal also offers consultancy services for companies wishing to complement self-learning courses. As Dorota Koprowska put it: *"it is important for businesses to be able to use an electronic tool providing different services but it is equally important to install direct and personal cooperation with companies by way of an advisor or a consultant"*. This blended approach is believed to make the portal less depersonalised.

The DPs participating in the workshops agreed on the fact that IT and E-learning will gain more and more importance in the future and it is thus vital to extend and develop new interactive methods and tools. E-learning is particularly effective when dealing with the adaptability of companies and workers, especially those companies located in deprived urban areas and remote areas. In other words, the message of the EQUAL DPs working in this field is clear: fostering IT skills is of vital importance for businesses wishing to stay competitive and flexible in the new global market.

## **LEARNING THE WAY TO SUCCESS: MAINSTREAMING, TRUST, DIALOGUE AND LOCAL COMMITMENT**

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The Adaptability Peer Review was without doubt an innovative event, gathering projects from different backgrounds with a clear aim: to discuss, share experience, establish informal relationships and mainstream successful results.

The surprising thing about this event was that although the themes discussed during the thematic sessions were diverse, the conclusions which were drawn had many similarities. Social problems throughout Member States are alike: regions affected by restructuring trends; vulnerable groups threatened by unemployment and social exclusion; SMEs and micro businesses struggling to improve their flexibility and productivity. In this situation, sharing innovative solutions and methods to tackle these common problems is of vital importance. The tools proposed by the partnerships can be mainstreamed, transferred from country to country or from region to region, in order to produce the same successful results. Also, forging links between DPs is essential: direct and informal contact makes mainstreaming more smooth and effective.

All the participants renewed their commitment to the EQUAL initiative as an original bottom-up approach to address the gaps in social dialogue and, especially in countries with high unemployment, as an effective tool to reduce social exclusion. Special attention was also given to the issue of sustainability of the projects: how to extend the benefits of the EQUAL activity after the end of the European initiative? The solution envisaged by the partners was clear: build strong partnerships at local level involving the co-operation of social actors on the ground (trade unions, employer organisations, local governments and education institutions). Also, the DPs stressed the importance of improving dialogue and trust between employers and employees so that everyone could benefit from increased adaptability and flexibility. This has to be done through the organisation of awareness raising campaigns as well as through common activities such as learning in the workplace.

So, here is the perfect recipe for success: developing links among peers, mainstreaming successful approaches, building strong local partnerships and increased dialogue and trust in the workplace!

## **CONTACT DETAILS**

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