

NATIONAL THEMATIC NETWORK SUCCESS STORIES

OVERVIEW ARTICLE THEME F – ADAPTATION TO CHANGE

1. WHY HAVE NATIONAL THEMATIC NETWORKS?

EQUAL's overall aim has been to ensure a long-lasting impact on the world of policy and practice. What innovative tools and approaches have EQUAL projects developed that could be adopted by practitioners in the future? What lessons and good practice have emerged from EQUAL projects that could inform and benefit policy makers from now on? These are the key questions that EQUAL has sought to answer – and most importantly act upon – in undertaking its work. And for this to happen on the EQUAL theme of Adaptation to Change and Communication and Information Technologies (ICT), 12 Member States have successfully set up National Thematic Networks (NTNs).

Whilst varied in their membership, activities and structure, these NTNs have all shared a common purpose: to bring EQUAL projects that have sought to combat discrimination through workplace adaptability and the use of ICT, together with individuals at local, regional and national level who are interested in learning from this project activity.

The road to establishing and running these national networks has not always been easy. The large number of projects (up to 35 in France), the diversity of their activities as well as the broad scope of the Adaptation to Change theme itself have all proved to be challenges. However, Member States have worked very flexibly in dealing with these challenges and ensuring that the networks have achieved maximum impact - as shown by the success stories below.

2. SUCCESS STORIES WORTH SHOUTING ABOUT!

FRANCE'S STORY - IDENTIFYING 'HOT' TOPICS

Adaptation to Change and ICT is a broad thematic area, and even if this has offered NTNs plenty of scope to orientate their networking activities, it has also run the risk of being too vast to handle. The NTNs have dealt with this issue by identifying 'hot' topics that are of local, regional and national relevance to steer the direction of the networks. One such example is the French NTN which chose the theme of age management.

With longer life expectancy, a high fertility rate and an ageing working population, France has been suffering a double handicap in its labour market: the high unemployment rate of young people and the low activity rate of experienced workers. When EQUAL was launched in 2001 and shortly after the French NTN on 'lifelong learning of experienced workers' was set up, it offered a real and long-awaited opportunity to tackle this double handicap. Through the NTN, key stakeholders in the age management debate were able to reflect on and discuss answers to key policy concerns. Moreover, they were able to observe first hand initiatives to promote the employment of seniors, and give a new dynamic to the social dialogue in France in companies, sectors and territories. Bernard Quintreau, member of the French Economic and Social Committee and also member of the CFDT, a major trade union in France, says that:

“the network demonstrated that the main question is not the age of the workforce but the relations between the individuals and the value of the work. The network nourished the debates with the experiences tested under EQUAL. It evidenced that the prosperity of the companies, the economy and the social dialogue comes from the diversity of this workforce”.

The NTN was set up by the General Delegation of Employment and Vocational Training under the French Ministry of Employment, with the support of Racine¹ and nine national EQUAL projects made up of social partners, institutions, training organisation, cities, managers, individuals and policy makers. The network later expanded to include many local and regional projects, and also benefited from the contribution of external experts such as Bernard Quintreau, member of the French Economic and Social Committee who wrote in 2001 the report ‘Age et Travail à l’horizon 2010’ which constituted the ‘inspirations’ of the network.

Following an intensive work programme including visits of projects, meetings, conferences at local, regional, national or European levels, the network published all relevant experiences in the established ‘Les Cahiers Racine’ series, under the title ‘[Experience is capital](#)’. The experiences were described and translated into ten concrete and practical actions targeted at companies, individuals, social partners, and every other stakeholders in the labour market. Example actions were the diagnosis of the impact of an ageing workforce and promoting inter-generational links. These ten recommendations constituted a powerful set of solutions for everyone who wished to adapt the companies, sectors and territories to the current situation of the labour market.

The active and successful contribution of this network to age-related questions in France and in Europe was really valuable for the work of the EQUAL European Thematic Group (ETG) working on Age Management. This thematic group benefited from the wide experience of the French NTN through various meetings held during 2003 to 2005. The results of the ETG were presented in one of the workshops in Warsaw in February 2005, a conference which welcomed policy makers, employers and journalists from all over Europe. During this event, the ETG held sessions on the specific subject of age management, and presented three policy briefs highlighting the lessons learnt from EQUAL projects. All of this interaction between the French NTN and the ETG gave a real impetus to the concept of the Agora, described below.

The [Agora](#) event took place in June 2005 and showcased in an interactive way the results of the most successful projects, tools, methods and concrete experiences from across the EU in the fields of age and diversity management to an large, European audience. The scale and significance of the delegates attending the event speaks for itself: it included Gerard Larcher, the French Deputy Minister for the delegation of Employment and Vocational Training from the Ministry of Employment; major companies like Air France, the television giant France 3 and Grand Optical; as well as many SME’s managers and ground-level actors, the biggest national organisation for vocational training, and the prestigious French business school ESSEC. Agora remains a highlight for the NTN. To have pulled off a European event of this scale marks the true drive and impact of a network tackling complex, but all important age management issues.

GERMANY’S STORY - GETTING ACTIVE!

The NTNs have certainly been busy in designing and delivering activities to ‘capture’ the outcomes of EQUAL projects and communicate these in the most effective way to interested parties. To give just a flavour of the activities undertaken, there has been a wide range of events, ranging from large-scale conferences to smaller, more intimate gatherings for policy debate. There has also been the publication of thematic reports, magazines and good practice guides, and the development of ICT-based products such as CD-ROMs and websites. Out of all these

¹ Réseau d’Appui et de Capitalisation des Innovations Européennes

products, the German NTN's 'toolbox' provides an ingenious example of how to effectively collect the results of EQUAL projects and communicate them to wider audiences.

What is the role of enterprises, employees, trade unions and policy makers in the face of demographic change? How can the experience of older workers be fully utilised, rather than marginalised as part of this change? These are some of the questions that Germany sought to answer in setting up and running its EQUAL NTN on 'Older Workers', which was made up of six EQUAL projects and led by the former Federal Ministry of Economics and Labour now the Federal Ministry of Economics and Labour.

From the very beginning, the network was clear in its ambitions. It did not want to be just a 'talking shop'. It wanted to go beyond mere discussion and identify real, practical solutions to issues that could be communicated to policy figures and other stakeholders at national level.

An ingenious solution to this endeavour came in the form of a 'toolbox'. The toolbox was developed by the German NTN to disseminate project information in a very practical and meaningful way. The box offered the opportunity to address ALL interested parties (companies, employees, older workers and the public) and included ALL the EQUAL products (questionnaires, suggestions, learning concepts, media tools such as films, instruments of analysis, etc.).

In developing the box, the network identified four different categories of audience that it felt should be approached differently: politicians and the general public, researchers, public and private companies, and individuals. The toolbox included instruments for these four types of target group. It also contained a range of project outcomes including an approach for the systematic personal development of semi-skilled and unskilled older employees within companies; publicity campaigns to raise awareness; tools and methodologies for undertaking an age structure analysis and work ability profiles for HR managers in SMEs; an employment concept for the integration of disabled people and a profiling tool for older employees and jobseekers.

A positive indication of the success of the network and its toolbox was the fact that it was asked by the German Managing Authority to propose topics of special interest for the establishment of so-called mainstreaming forums, which were devised to transfer good practice and raise awareness amongst the target groups.

"We face the major challenge that we have to transfer to the national policy makers. It is much too early to speak about the impact at political level, but the impact of the network is well reported in a lot of documents for policy – e.g. discrimination measures – in Germany" comments Hilke Berkels from INQA (the 'New Quality of Work Initiative' under the Ministry of Employment aimed at making society, industry and companies more aware of demographic change).

Although the impact is not yet fully apparent, as Hilke Berkels points out, the groundwork for creating impact has firmly been laid by the German NTN. It has developed an active programme of networking, engaged with key stakeholders from the business, private and public sectors, and developed a range of outputs such as the toolbox to address Germany's policy challenges.

IRELAND'S STORY - KEY STAKEHOLDERS 'UNDER ONE ROOF'

Where the NTNs have really made a difference has been in bringing key stakeholders in the field of workplace adaptability together 'under one roof'. This has provided EQUAL projects with a ready-made and influential audience who they might not otherwise have been able to engage with, outside of EQUAL or on their own. The Ireland NTN provides an excellent example of this networking potential.

The Irish labour market has been faced with an ageing workforce, increasing cultural diversity and rapid technological change, all of which have presented pressing issues for Ireland at the policy level. The Irish NTN made a real difference against this backdrop by providing a structured platform for EQUAL partnerships to enter into direct dialogue with policy makers on these very labour-market issues. Although previously there had been other platforms for communication in

existence, these tended to be unstructured and ineffective in matching up the 'right' people. The network was innovative in comparison in that it helped to open up discussions with national authorities, while developing informal alliances and promoting exchange between relevant partners. As Philip O'Connor of the EQUAL at Work partnership explains:

"Though in the past there has been some engagement through local partnership which has existed for over 10 years in Ireland, the network set up under EQUAL was very welcome as it provided a new opportunity to engage directly with state regulatory agencies working on labour market policy and in this way to have fruitful engagement with the relevant people."

By way of background, the Irish NTN was originally set up in autumn 2002 involving five EQUAL projects focusing on adaptability and another two working on equal opportunities. Since that time, project representatives met regularly to develop common synergies and explore possibilities for collaboration. Most importantly, they participated in various public events and consultations, and the drafting of policy documents, thereby feeding their results directly into policy and practice. This is clearly supported by Tony Tyrrell from the Irish National Support Structure, who was responsible for the coordination and facilitation of the network, and who sees that the:

"inputs made by the Adaptability network will have an impact and be reflected in policy-making because the documents and consultations produced have significant leverage in national planning."

One such input was the organisation of and participation in a Mainstream Engagement Event held in March 2004, focusing on education, training and employment policies. This event enabled a two-way interaction such that EQUAL projects could respond and react to current policy debates, on the one hand, and policy-makers could learn about EQUAL project results and innovations, and get a true sense of what was happening at the grassroots level, on the other.

The Adaptability network was also involved in a national-level consultation on the 'Workplace of the Future', which aimed to foster discussion and debate between a wide range of actors on how the workplace can best adapt to pressures and changes occurring in Irish society and the economy. An influential paper was produced from the consultation, which most significantly included contributions from members of the network presenting key messages from their project activities.

"The projects served as a laboratory, as a way of identifying needs at the local level and then examining responses. I have built the results from EQUAL into my business plan for the first time and have used elements of EQUAL in my own work."

As these words from Shira Mehlman, Director of Social Inclusion at FAS (the Irish training and employment authority) clearly demonstrate, the Irish NTN was able to give key individuals and organisations first hand insight into the innovations of EQUAL projects and as a result create a real impact.

3. WHAT HAVE BEEN THE LESSONS? AND HOW DO WE BUILD ON THESE FOR THE FUTURE?

EQUAL now has over five year's NTN experience under its belt and clearly a lot has been learnt from this experience. So what have been the key learning points and achievements for national networking under EQUAL?

Bringing about change at company level

A key achievement of many of the EQUAL projects has been in supporting the work organisation of companies by developing new tools, providing support and raising awareness of adaptability issues. Training adapted to the workforce, tools for job rotation, information to help analyse

human resource structures, and tools to foster social dialogue have all been made available to companies.

The key advantage of the NTN in this situation has been in collecting together all of these company-orientated tools and approaches. The networks have provided a 'critical mass' of products that are more attractive to the business world compared with single products presented by projects acting alone. As such the networks are able to engage with companies in a way and to a greater extent than individual projects, thereby adding value.

Formulating political recommendations

Most of the NTN have issued 'political recommendations' targeted at policy makers, which have proved to be an effective way of translating practice on the ground into something tangible that policy audiences could relate to. The advantage of such recommendations is that they outline solutions to policy problems in a very succinct, targeted and assertive way. They do not waste the policy maker's time by presenting lengthy documents, but focus on the key issues in a very direct fashion.

However, recommendations do not automatically have an impact. For them to be picked up and noticed by the policy community, the network has to spend time and effort in ensuring that the recommendations address the 'burning' political issues at the time.

Involving non-EQUAL players

Effective networking very much depends on the quality of other institutions that come from outside the EQUAL sphere. For example, the link that the French network had with ANACT (the French national agency for better working conditions set up by the Ministry of Employment) was really important for transferring EQUAL good practice into other sectors and engendering a new sense of teamwork with the Synthesis Department of the French employment ministry.

Links do not have to be confined to the public sector. For example in Ireland, major partners like IBEC, the enterprise network, were very helpful in giving the network good connections with the business community.

Working with external experts and dedicated resources

The added value of the external experts has certainly been recognised by some Member States. These experts have generally been nominated by the National Authority and recognised in their field of business. The experts are able to provide external input and contribute their knowledge and experience to the network activities. Moreover, thanks to their expertise and connections to other experts and/or policy makers, they have helped to open up debates beyond the world of EQUAL.

Nevertheless, whether the networks recruit an expert or draw on the resource of a DP internally, all Member States agree that a full-time, dedicated person is critical to running and managing the network. NTN co-ordination and management cannot be done in one's 'spare time'; it needs direct and substantial resource in order to achieve good quality results.

Targeting the NTN

Most of the NTN encountered difficulties at the beginning, particularly in deciding on the targets and objectives of the NTN. The NTN came to decisions at this stage either by following the objectives of the DPs, the national priorities or the objectives set up by the European thematic group, or by mirroring the pillars defined under EQUAL. All of these approaches have had relative

pros and cons, which have been very much dependent on the specifics of each country. However, there is a clear message here about the importance of defining clearly the aims and focus of the network, whatever the approach. Moreover, it is important to make sure there is buy-in and ownership of this vision that is set out for the NTN.

What about the future?

Whilst the EQUAL NTNs have experienced a great deal of success, there is still scope to do things differently – and even better. Here are a number of concluding questions to help reflect on how this might be achieved.

Would it have been positive to involve more representatives of the public services? This could have allowed a stronger impact on the media and public opinion, but also on companies and in political circles. One sensitivity of increased public-sector representation is however the link between national, regional and local organisations. Political priorities do not always focus on the same objectives, and some issues really correspond to a region or city, but not the country as a whole.

The publications coming out of EQUAL and the thematic networks are no doubt a source of innovation and good practice that can support any work organisation. However, one remark made by some EQUAL users is that the publications are only targeted at an exclusive readership, mainly specialists in the field. In looking ahead, NTNs might benefit by increasing the accessibility of the documents to a wider audience, including the general public.

Most of the NTNs defined their objectives, but not always defined their target audiences. Some countries like Great Britain developed tables identifying the different organisations to be targeted and outlining how they could be reached. Other countries preferred a more spontaneous, evolutionary approach, whereby the target groups were identified as the network members had opportunities to build relationships in meetings, events and other settings. Based on the experience of Round 1, it would be good to develop a strategy to clearly and effectively relay the outcomes of EQUAL to target audiences.

Undoubtedly these questions will prompt different answers from different NTNs, but they at least provide food for thought for the ongoing development of national networking in the future.

For more information on the success stories mentioned in this article and the lessons learnt from the NTNs in general, please refer to the full [NTN Success Stories report](#).