

**ADAPTABILITY – ADAPTATION TO CHANGE THEME**

**‘NTN SUCCESS STORIES’**

Final Report

December 2005

# NATIONAL THEMATIC NETWORKS: ACHIEVING IMPACT

## 1. INTRODUCTION

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From day one, EQUAL's overriding mission has been to influence policy and practice beyond the lifetime of the projects that it funds. 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. For this to happen on the EQUAL theme of Adaptation to Change and Information and Communication and Information Technologies (ICT), 12 Member States have successfully set up National Thematic Networks (NTN).

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.

### 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 have otherwise been able to engage with outside of EQUAL or on their own. On the French and German networks, for example, projects have been able to disseminate their results to representatives from government departments, thereby tapping directly into current policy debates. On the Czech and Spanish networks, they have communicated with social partners addressing both the supply and demand-side issues of organisational change. On the Italian and French-speaking Belgian networks, they have had the opportunity to communicate with universities and other experts.

All the networks have comprised steering groups of some description, but their organisation and structures have varied beyond this. Several have set up sub-groups to address specific sub-themes, whilst other networks have identified individuals or organisations to lead on particular areas. The British NTN has, for instance, given a senior civil servant the role of chairing the network, which has provided direct links to the government's strategic work on adult basic skills. Another approach, adopted by the Finnish NTN, has been to task an EQUAL project itself with leading the network through an open call for tenders.

### IDENTIFYING 'HOT' TOPICS AND AUDIENCES

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 and audiences that are of local,

regional and national relevance to steer the direction of the networks. Diversity management, corporate social responsibility, age management, open learning environments and skills recognition are some of the sub-themes that NTN networks have chosen to focus their activities. Another approach, particularly where the DPs have been fewer in number, has been to merge with other EQUAL themes; in Dutch-speaking Belgium, Adaptation to Change was combined with Entrepreneurship to tie in more broadly with Flemish employment policies.

Beyond the national policy community, employers have been a distinct and clearly important target group for the NTN networks. As such, several of the networks have undertaken activities to engage and raise the awareness of companies in addressing adaptability issues. Particular achievements in this area include a conference on diversity management organised by the Danish NTN, which a large number of employers attended.

## **GETTING ACTIVE**

The NTN networks 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; the Consultation on 'Workplace of the Future', organised by the Irish NTN, is a notable example. 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.

## **2. THE SUCCES OF THE NTN NETWORKS**

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All national networks were invited to provide a general overview of their objectives, actions, results and outcomes through a survey that included all those responsible for networking at national level. This first review helped the identification of three networks (France, Germany and Ireland) that seemed to have been particularly successful. Whilst by no means exclusive, these networks provide a good illustration of the range of actions that Member States have taken, and most importantly the achievements that have arisen from such networking activity in terms of influencing policy and practice beyond EQUAL. Their stories are told below.

For a summary of the NTN networks across all twelve Member States, please refer to Annex 1 at the end of this report.

## NATIONAL THEMATIC NETWORK - FRANCE

### EXPERIENCE IS CAPITAL!

Public authorities, social partners and businesses have gone through a long and sometimes difficult learning curve in addressing the issue of age management. During the 80s and 90s, “age-related measures” were widely used and tended to create a culture of exclusion for older workers in the labour market. The time has come to leave this “culture” aside in order to support the labour force, and change the balance between active and inactive populations. Age is not in itself a reason for “un-employability”. However, it has become such when working conditions and ways of managing human resources do not allow people to maintain their competences and address their physical needs. Accordingly, to improve the employment rate of people who are over 50, it is essential to develop a multidimensional approach and use several levers. Policy makers are seeing that in order to promote a healthy economy, one should look at the relations between the individuals working together and not just focus on those that are over 45 – taking all ages into account.

France has addressed this age management agenda by introducing some important policy innovations. For the first time, the French Government is going to adopt a five-year-Plan for the employment of ageing workers. For their part, the social partners have just achieved an important result in collective bargaining on this subject. The national Plan will include many of the measures decided by the social partners, namely measures concerning working conditions, career development, lifelong learning and the specific situation of the unemployed who are more than 50 years old.

The timing of the EQUAL NTN in France has provided a rich source of information and channels for communication to feed into these policy developments. It has provided key policy actors with ideas of how best to elaborate political strategies. These ideas stemmed from experiences developed “at the grass root level” and from best practice used to solve the problems.

Laurence Merlin, representing the French Ministry of Employment said:

*“France made a lot of improvements with regard to understanding and raising awareness of the situation of older workers, through extensive research and reports making recommendations on future policy options. However, it was difficult to see how such recommendations could be put into practice on the ground. The French NTN was a great provider of concrete solutions and practical tools and methods to further realise the policy options and help their evolution”.*

A key strength of the French NTN was the way in which it presented these concrete solutions through publications, regular communication with the press, and finally culminating in a seminar and “showcase” event called Agora.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF A LABOUR MARKET OPEN TO ALL

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With longer life expectancy, a high fertility rate (1,9) and an ageing working population, France is suffering a double handicap with regard to its labour market: the high unemployment rate of young people and the low activity rate of experienced workers. The effects of incentives<sup>1</sup> to

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<sup>1</sup> e.g. “Delalande contribution” instituted by the 10 July 1987 Act

dissuade companies from laying-off older employees and the deployment of measures<sup>2</sup> for people who have most difficulty entering the labour market are taking a long time to be felt, and still employment is increasingly concentrated on the 25-55 year-old age group. This situation is further aggravated by the practice of early retirement which is a common phenomenon for workers and companies.

France is fighting these negative trends. The National Action Plan for Employment 2003-2006 already gave priority to increasing the participation of older workers in the labour market by promoting active age management at work through training and the validation of experience in job. The Plan also encouraged social partners to negotiate health and safety conditions at work, and to motivate businesses, particularly SMEs, to draw up forward plans for human resource management. In the same spirit, the pension reform limits the application of early retirement and the employment of older people is a mandatory domain of collective negotiation. In addition to this, the Act on lifelong learning strengthens the access for experienced workers to training through working lives.

Nevertheless, despite all of these initiatives, France has still a low employment rate for older workers: only 37,3% of people between 55-64 are still working in 2004, which is far from the European target rate of 50% for 2010 (especially when realising that demographically there will be many more older workers to keep in employment by that time). In France, the average age of individuals exiting from the labour market currently stands at 57,5 years old, while the objective for 2008 is to bring it to 59. It's worth noting that the European Council has asked Member states to raise the average exit age five years by 2010.

When launched in 2001, EQUAL offered a real opportunity to explore solutions to improve the employment of older workers in France. This was translated in a more specific and practical way through the set up of the EQUAL network on 'lifelong learning of the experienced workers'. Through the network, the 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".*

He further adds that *"the general employment situation in Europe will only improve if all ages are taken into account, with particular focus on the development of intergenerational links and the diversity of the workforce, no matter what age, gender or origins people have. And that was the force of the EQUAL French thematic network."*

## **THE BENEFITS OF PARTNERS JOINING FORCES**

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The NTN was set up by the General Delegation of Employment and Vocational Training under the French Ministry of Employment, with the support of Racine<sup>3</sup> and nine national EQUAL projects made up of social partners, institutions, training organisation, cities, managers, individuals and policy makers. The network 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.

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<sup>2</sup> the Act on lifelong learning (4 May 2004) and the national inter-professional agreement (5 December 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Réseau d'Appui et de Capitalisation des Innovations Européennes

In terms of focus, network members tried to answer the following questions: How can the concept of age management evolve in companies, so that they move away from a situation where experienced workers leave prematurely to make space for younger workers? And how can the over 50s be motivated to extend their working life whilst taking into account their individual choices and expectations?

A real testimony to success and relevance of the network was its rapid growth. It quickly grew to involve twenty EQUAL projects active at national, regional or local level as well as other institutions like the National Agency for the Improvement of the Working Conditions (ANACT), the Regional Directions of Employment and some Regional Technical Assistance Structures. These institutions actively supported the work of the network. ANACT for example also participated actively to the Agora's steering committee.

The network collected a wide range of tools and methodologies to help anticipate age evolution within the companies, sectors and territories. These included the development of detailed diagnoses and individualised action plans, thereby offering solutions to the workers who are facing difficulties in relation to their age and experience, and to companies who are trying to find the best solutions to stay competitive. This focus on diagnoses and plans gives a new dynamic to human resource policies allowing for more inclusive work practices, as well as a new dimension to the social dialogue. It embraces, for example, the development of better working conditions and strategies for the end of a career, as well as the establishment of collective negotiations with the employee's representatives.

Following its intensive work 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 are 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 are the diagnosis of the impact of an ageing workforce and promoting inter-generational links. These ten recommendations constitute a powerful set of solutions for everyone who is wishing 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 French experience influenced the objectives of the European network, leading to the development of a two-fold approach: a proactive approach to encouraging older workers to develop new skills and take on new roles; a preventative approach responding to the current skills needs of an ageing workforce and promoting the recruitment of older workers in firms. The results of the ETG were largely presented 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 a 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 an European event of this scale marks the true drive and impact of a network tackling complex, but all important age management issues.

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## NATIONAL THEMATIC NETWORK – GERMANY

### AGE MANAGEMENT PRACTICES IN A BOX!

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'. The network's clear focus was in addressing the issues concerning age management, as stated by Dr Eckart Severing, a university lecturer and member of the NTN:

*“The network and particularly the German Equal Administration could deal with the different issues such as overcoming prejudices, training for older and younger employees and job seekers, motivation and career perspectives for older workers and finally work place, work organisation, work place conditions and ergonomics.”*

The network was not just a talking shop where issues such as these were explored and debated. It was very much concerned with going beyond discussion, and identifying practical solutions to issues that could be communicated to policy figures at national level. Dr Severing explains that the network:

*“could present the first steps to a solution for the implications of demographic change to politicians and public with a higher impact - acting on a national scale.”*

To achieve this higher impact, the NTN successfully communicated and made links with other networks such as the Bavarian Employers' Association for the metal and electronic industry and German INQA (which is the 'New Quality of Work Initiative' under the former Federal Ministry of Economics and Labour, now Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, aimed at making society, industry and companies more aware of demographic change). At the political level, the network also engaged with the Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Affairs of Northrhine-Westphalia, as well as the national and regional labour administrations.

Communicating effectively with such networks and organisations is always a challenge in any setting. However, the German NTN demonstrated an ingenious approach to getting its messages across in the form of a 'tool box'. The network – quite rightly – recognised that the strength of the EQUAL projects was the successful and highly practical tools that they had developed. It therefore saw and capitalised on an opportunity to bring all of these tools together in a toolbox for immediate reference and use by those working in the field of age management. This toolbox provided businesses and consultants with ideas and approaches to maintain their competitiveness in the face of the demographic change, and at the same time to counteract the exclusion of older workers from the labour market. Moreover, it provided a very clear means for policy makers to see and understand the outcomes of EQUAL projects, and relate these to policy challenges they were dealing with.

### ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGE OF AN AGEING WORKFORCE

Demographic change presents a real challenge for Germany in terms of maximising employment levels and remaining competitive within a global market. As the following figures show, there is a clear risk of shortages in skilled labour over the coming years if Germany does not address the phenomenon of its ageing working population: there are currently more 'over 50s' than younger employees in the labour market; employees between 55 and 60 years old already represent 23%



of the unemployed population; and according to recent prognoses, only 17 % of the workforce will be under 30 by 2010 and more than half will be 30-49 years old.

In recent years, the effects of an ageing working population have been exacerbated by the introduction of part-time schemes and early retirement regulations. Early retirement schemes in Germany, for example, have been used largely by employers and employees who both concluded a termination agreement before the legal age of retirement. According to the agreement and the personal situation of the employee, he could either get an unemployment pay or a compensation pay and the eligibility for an old age pension entitlement could also be brought forward. These agreements have proved extremely attractive to employees looking for early retirement.

Having recognised the negative impact of these and other trends, the German government has been exploring measures to keep older workers employed for longer. This is clearly stated in the recent Joint Employment Report (2004-2005), which supported the development of a comprehensive strategy for active ageing to ensure that people stay in work longer, especially after the age of 60. The emphasis behind any such strategy is on increasing contractual flexibility for older workers and introducing financial incentives that encourage older workers to stay employed. At the same time employers are encouraged to employ *and* keep older workers. Moreover, it is not just concerned with practical and financial measures, but also attitudinal change; both employers and employees need to see the benefits of extended employment for real shifts in employment patterns to occur.

One recent step to making working life more flexible and attractive has been the Semi Retirement Act as an alternative to the social plan regulation. The Act enables employees over the age of 55 to reduce their working time by half (but to no less than 18 hours a week), thereby providing opportunities to keep older staff in work rather than losing them to retirement altogether. Any such semi-retirement arrangement hinges on a voluntary agreement between the employer and the older employee, and therefore once again is very much dependent on the attitudes of the parties involved.

The NTN has provided real opportunities to tackle these aforementioned issues. It has been able to aggregate the approaches tried and tested by projects to address problems of attitudinal change and promote actions in support of active ageing. Guenter Klassen, an official at the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and head of the German network on 'older workers' said that:

*"the network is proposing solutions and tools to the companies to face the demographic changes and to best use the experience of all workers. German policy sees that there is a real need to change prejudices in companies concerning older employees and to change the attitudes of employees. The network is responding to government policy by giving solutions and tools."*

This quote from Guenter Klassen underlines the NTN's ability to tap into and respond to current policy issues, but exactly how did they do this? The answer to this question follows.

## **CONCRETE SOLUTIONS TO POLICY CHALLENGES**

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The network on 'Older Workers' was made up of six EQUAL projects dealing with older workers and was led by the former Federal Ministry of Economics and Labour, now Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. It was set up at a very early stage of the EQUAL programme. Its overall goal was to bundle the results of individual projects covering areas such as: providing ageing employees with a personal development perspective; promoting intergenerational collaboration enabling firms to ensure that the experience and know-how of retiring employees is transferred to their successors; and establishing balanced qualifications and age structures in specific areas of work and throughout the company, with the aim of avoiding waves of recruitment and retirement.

The initial idea was to create a questionnaire to analyse the situation of older workers in the companies the projects were working with, and to collect the initiatives and products developed

by the projects themselves. The thinking was that this information and accompanying tools could then be passed on to policy makers and practitioners working in the field of age management.

However, discussions between the projects and the ministry revealed that the questionnaires were restricted to a relative small target group and would not provide useful information for outside audiences. In response, the network finally developed the concept of a 'toolbox', which was seen as a way of disseminating project information more effectively. This toolbox would offer the opportunity to address ALL interested parties (companies, employees, older workers and the public) and to include ALL products (questionnaires, suggestions, learning concepts, media tools such as films, instruments of analysis, etc.).

The network identified four different categories of audience that should be approached differently: politicians and the general public, researchers, public and private companies, and individuals. The toolbox includes instruments for these four types of target groups. It contains 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. Although still in development – the final product is due for completion in two years at the end of the EQUAL programme – the toolbox approach shows a very constructive and targeted means of communicating the outcomes of EQUAL projects to outside audiences.

In terms of general activities, the members of the network met regularly and each meeting was organised by a different project. This process allowed the members to have an in-depth knowledge of each project, but also to build a comprehensive toolbox for adequate personnel planning. The members were also in constant contact through an internal web-based communication platform developed by the National Support Structure which allowed them to discuss and exchange information in between the meetings, and thereby provide ongoing, mutual support.

A positive indication of the success of the network 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. In terms of events, the network members also organised 'The end of early and partial retirement - concepts of vocational education for ageing employees' seminar within the framework of the yearly national EQUAL conference in Berlin (16-17 November 2004). The event included an open discussion with representatives from the ministries, universities, companies and social partners.

*"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"* commented Hilke Berkels from INQA.

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 in relation to age management.

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## NATIONAL THEMATIC NETWORK - IRELAND

### GETTING THE MESSAGE ACROSS

EQUAL partnerships have faced the difficult challenge of finding the right platforms to communicate the results and lessons arising from their activities and experiences to wider audiences. The Adaptability NTN in Ireland, made up of EQUAL projects addressing adaptability and equal opportunities issues, has dealt with this challenge and succeeded in communicating key lessons and good practice arising from EQUAL activity and bringing them to the attention of national policy makers. As such, this network provides a good example of how EQUAL project partners can have a significant influence on national planning and the policy-making process.

Through participation in various public events and consultations, and the drafting of policy documents, EQUAL project partners have been able to come in contact and engage directly with officials responsible for policy formulation in Ireland to feed 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 has been 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. These messages included the importance of keeping equal opportunities and the accommodation of diversity at the heart of all strategies relating to lifelong learning, work-life balance, flexible employment arrangements and changes in work organisation. Another key message was the need for collaboration between social partners, employers and employees, as well as state agencies and government departments.

Network members also presented their project results at a conference held in May 2004 ‘Innovation for an EQUAL labour market’. This event showcased the achievements of the EQUAL programme more broadly in Ireland under its first round and officially launched the second round.

### LOOKING FOR A COMMON AND STRUCTURED PLATFORM

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. EQUAL partnerships have provided a test-bed for addressing these issues insofar as they have been focusing on the promotion of a diverse workforce and the development of a flexible labour market to help to foster equal opportunities for all members of Irish society. The NTN itself has provided a structured platform to bring these EQUAL partnerships together with the policy issues they address.

Providing structure, particularly to enable dialogue between EQUAL partnerships and policy makers, has been one of the main purposes of the Adaptability NTN. Although previously there were other platforms for communication in existence, these tended to be unstructured and made it difficult to enter into direct dialogue with the right people. Also, those who had advocated such dialogue in the past, for example NGOs and local community groups, were often not best placed to reach the right people in the right places. The network was innovative in comparison in that it helped to open discussions with national authorities, while developing informal alliances and promoting exchange between relevant partners. As Philip O'Connor of the EQUAL at Work partnership explained:

*“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.”*

## **EXPLORING POSSIBILITIES FOR COLLABORATION**

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In practical terms, the Adaptability network has been the result of joint cooperation between five EQUAL adaptability projects and two working on equal opportunities in Ireland. The network was originally set up in Autumn 2002 and since then has met regularly to develop common synergies and explore possibilities for collaboration. The network is split up into different thematic groups according to common activities or areas of concern: migrant workers and ethnic diversity in the workplace, work-life balance issues, lifelong learning, job rotation, and equality and diversity awareness and training.

The Irish National Support Structure coordinates and facilitates the network, using an open agenda for meetings which allows its participants to determine the most important issues to be addressed. Though it is made up of EQUAL project representatives, the network does not have a formal membership and other interested parties have been invited to attend meetings. The network's actions and activities have focussed on the promotion of equality and diversity principles by involving relevant actors such as trade unions and employers. It has also worked to identify the needs of project beneficiaries in order to inform planning, design, delivery and feedback processes.

## **SUCCESS FACTORS FOR NETWORKING**

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The network has been particularly successful in identifying good practice coming out of the EQUAL projects and developing methods to disseminate these to wider audiences. Collaboration with the Mainstreaming Policy Group (MPG) has been one of its key dissemination methods. The MPG was set up by the EQUAL Managing Authority in Ireland to encourage the communication of experience and learning from EQUAL projects (across all the themes) with service providers, and key policy makers in government departments and agencies. It has provided an important communication channel for the Adaptability NTN by building on – and most importantly extending – the policy engagement of the network. Through the MPG, policy-makers have been able to learn about and be influenced by the results and good practice which have emerged from EQUAL projects sitting on the Adaptability network. Philip O'Connor described why the MPG was a successful tool for the NTN: The MPG

*“was, from the start, the important place where people could come with objectives. EQUAL partners and senior decision-makers and policy shapers came together around the same table, and were able to agree on common aims and come up with proposals. The MPG got the network working and made sure that the right people were at the table.”*

The fact that in Ireland mainstreaming structures such as the NTN and MPG have been put in place from the very beginning of the EQUAL programme has been an innovative way of ensuring that key messages reach the right people.

Another reason the network has been particularly successful in disseminating results has been the high priority given to the EQUAL programme by the Irish government. The Minister for Enterprise, Employment and Trade and the deputy Prime Minister at the time, Mary Harney, was a very prominent figure who was keen to remove labour market barriers and give high political importance to EQUAL. She was instrumental in bringing together important officials and relevant state organisations at a very early stage.

*“As a laboratory, as a way to identify needs at local levels and then examine 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”* says Shira Mehlman, Director of Social Inclusion at FAS, the Irish training and employment authority.

As a member of the MPG, Ms Mehlman saw the EQUAL programme via its networks as an innovative opportunity to see what potential exists from the bottom-up. The Irish NTN therefore played a key role in engaging with policy at national level.

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Conference 'Innovation for an EQUAL labour market and showcase event, the Helix, Dublin, May 2004 market'.



The Work Life Balance Network exhibiting at the Helix, Dublin, May 2004

### **3. LESSONS LEARNT**

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#### **Bringing about change at company level**

A key achievement of many of the EQUAL projects was 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 were all made available to companies.

The key advantage of the NTN in this situation was in collecting together all of these company-orientated tools and approaches. The networks provided a 'critical mass' of products that were more attractive to the business world compared with single products presented by projects acting alone. As such the networks were able to engage with companies in a way and to a greater extent than individual projects, thereby adding value. This is exemplified by the German NTN on older workers which developed a comprehensive 'toolbox' presenting all of the good practice and products developed by the projects. Thanks to this presentation format, businesses had the opportunity to 'pick and choose' from a range of solutions in dealing with issues of age management. Moreover, INQA (the 'New Quality of Work Initiative' in Germany) chose to incorporate the toolbox into its own database, which reinforced its appeal for companies and marks a clear success for mainstreaming by an NTN.

#### **Formulating political recommendations**

Most of the NTNs issued 'political recommendations' targeted at policy makers, which 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 was that they outlined solutions to policy problems in a very succinct, targeted and assertive way. They did not waste the policy maker's time by presenting lengthy documents, but focused on the key issues in a very direct fashion.

France, Portugal, Spain, Germany and Denmark all developed recommendations of varying kinds. However, their observation was that the 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.

Recommendations were not just confined to the written word. Some NTNs experimented with other methods of identifying and/or communicating recommendations. For instance, the Irish NTN chose to hold a consultation on the 'workplace in the future' where project representatives could openly express views and ideas based on their project experience. However, it was still important – even in this consultative setting - to ensure that the messages being put across were addressing 'hot topics' for policy makers.

#### **Involving non-EQUAL players**

Most of the success stories have demonstrated that 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. In particular, the French Economic and Social Committee helped to steer the work of the EQUAL projects and their partners, showing them that age was a really central question that they needed to address.

Similar links were made in Germany, as shown by the new relationship between the NTN and INQUA, 'the New Quality of Work Initiative' which is a joint project of the Federal Government,

the Länder, social insurance institutions and the social partners, the national and regional labour administration and Employers' Association.

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

These links with non-EQUAL players show how the NTN have extended the partnership approach of the EQUAL projects themselves. The number and range of organisations - social partners, employers and employees, state agencies and government departments, to name but a few - have been magnified through the networking activity of the NTNs.

### **Working with external experts and dedicated resources**

The added value of the external experts has certainly been recognised by some Member States. These experts were generally nominated by the National Authority and recognised in their field of business. The experts were 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 helped to open up debates beyond the world of EQUAL.

The choice of nominating external experts usually gives more flexibility and reactivity to the network. However a question remains: if the network is run by an official body, does it give more opportunities to communicate with policy makers? It certainly helped in the case of Germany. The German NTN received a lot of support from the Ministry of Economy and Labour, which helped to ensure a connection with many other institutions/ministries and raised the awareness of NTN members.

Although many NTNs drew on external expertise, it has not been the only successful approach. Nevertheless, whether the networks recruit an expert or draw on the resource of a DP, all Member States agree that a full-time, dedicated person is critical to running and managing the network.

### **Targeting the NTN**

Most of the NTNs encountered difficulties at the beginning, particularly in deciding on the targets and objectives of the NTN. The NTNs 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 had relative pros and cons, which were very much dependent on the specifics of each country. Ireland, for example, expressed that a cross-pillar or subject-driven approach could have possibly been better. The different interests of the partners were just too broad under Round One. Ireland is now examining how to sub-divide the issues from different vantage points for Round Two. They are also looking at forming networks with specific tasks, instead of forming them for project cycles.

### **Some reflection about the future:**

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, it would therefore be good to increase the accessibility of the documents to a wider audience, including the general public.



Most of the NTN's defined their objectives, but not always defined their target audiences. Some countries like the 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.

## 4. ANNEX

Austria	One Adaptability NTN focusing on the "optimisation of supply and demand for further education possibilities"
Belgium (FR + DE)	One Adaptability NTN focusing on the "employment of older workers"
Belgium (NL)	No specific NTN on Adaptability, but the adaptability project joined the Entrepreneurship NTN
Czech Republic	One Adaptability NTN focusing on adaptability as a broad theme
Denmark	One Adaptability NTN focusing on "companies and diversity"
Finland	One Adaptability NTN focusing on "supporting firms and their workers in adapting to structural change in the economy, and facilitating the adaptation of IT and other new technology"
France	One Adaptability NTN focusing on the "adaptability of individuals and organisations"
Germany	Two Adaptability NTNs: one focusing on "older people (45+)", and the other on "lifelong learning" (which in turn set up 2 sub-groups on SMEs and individuals)
Greece	One Adaptability NTN focusing on the "validation of skills and competencies"
Ireland	One Adaptability NTN focusing on "lifelong learning and inclusive work practices"
Italy	The Adaptability NTN did not carry out its planned activities following a ministerial change in 2002
Luxembourg	No NTN
Netherlands	One Adaptability NTN focusing on "the link between education and work, and ICT for disadvantaged groups"
Portugal	One Adaptability NTN which focused on 3 main themes: on-the-job training, lifelong learning and skills certification
Spain	One NTN focusing on "business creation and adaptability" with a specific subgroup on adaptability
Sweden	One Adaptability NTN focusing on "the promotion of learning environments and informal learning"
UKgb	Two Adaptability NTNs: one on "promoting lifelong learning and inclusive work practices" and the other on "supporting the adaptability of firms and employees"
UKni	No NTN