Interreg Programme Management Handbook

Guide to the 2021-2027 period

The Interreg Programme Management Handbook comprises a series of factsheets. They can be read individually, or collectively, to understand the relevance of certain aspects of Interreg management. They cover the relevance, legal basis, key challenges and approaches to the given subject.

Factsheet | Human Resources

1. What is it? What is the definition of this work?

'Human resources' is understood as the staff involved in the planning, managing, implementing, and monitoring of the programme's objectives, activities, and projects. At the same time, it is also seen as a human resource management process, like resource planning, profiling, recruiting, setting roles and responsibilities, capacity building, leadership, communication, etc.

When referring to human resources as staff, we mean staff from the Managing Authority (MA), Joint Secretariat (JS), branch office(s) of the JS, and National Contact Points, where relevant.

2. Why are we discussing it?

Human resources are essential in the context of Interreg programmes because the success of programmes relies heavily on the capacity, effectiveness, and efficiency of the organisation of resources to manage and implement Interreg. Interreg's mission to foster cross-border, transnational, and interregional cooperation across diverse regions necessitates a well-structured and capable human resource system to address complex challenges and meet programme goals.

Within its mission to support Interreg programmes, Interact sees that the topic of 'human resources' is very relevant for mutual exchange, capacity building and developments across the programmes.

Two important factors for successful programme implementation related to human resources are:

- effective and skilled human resources in the programme bodies relating to staff competence and capacities, expertise, adaptability, communication, collaboration, motivation and commitment, also considering that requirements may evolve during the programme's implementation.
- efficient human resource management relating to sufficient staffing, coordination, training, capacity building, management, clear roles and responsibilities, performance evaluation, process streamlining and simplification, flexibility, planning, knowledge management, etc.

According to Interreg regulation, the MA, after consultation with countries participating in the programme, shall set up a JS, with staff taking into account the programme partnership[1]. This has already been a well-established practice in Interreg in the previous programming periods. This approach provides an opportunity for project beneficiaries and programme countries to be supported in programme implementation, designing and implementing projects, considering diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, enriching the programme with cross-border perspectives and requiring attentive management to foster effective collaboration. Its practical implementation, however, may be challenging.

1. What are the legal references and basis for this topic?

'Human resources' as such are not subject to any of the three regulations (Common Provisions Regulation (CPR)[2], ERDF Regulation[3] or Interreg Regulation[4]). However, they are indirectly referred to as resources to fulfil the functions of the responsible programme bodies and, in the context of technical assistance actions, reinforce the capacity and effective administration of the funds.

2. What are the challenges, key considerations and frequently asked questions?

This factsheet does not propose a one-size-fits-all approach but rather aims to highlight key issues, provide background insights, and share practical solutions implemented by some programmes representing various Interreg strands and geographies. It serves as an invitation for further dialogue, encouraging exchange, inspiration, and collaboration in addressing human resources challenges in Interreg.

Given the diversity of Interreg programmes, the challenges outlined below may be more relevant to some than others. Each programme's unique context and governance model requires tailored solutions.

The challenges listed below address issues identified in the human resource management process, covering aspects from programme governance and implementation models, organisational structure, and work distribution to recruitment, onboarding, performance management, capacity building, competence development, and offboarding. This factsheet does not claim to present an exhaustive list of challenges or solutions and remains open to further input.

After consulting a sample of programmes, the following key challenges (core topics) were highlighted:

1. Meeting the requirement for international staff in the Programme
2. Defining roles and optimising work distribution among programme bodies, including the number of programme staff
3. Recruitment process and onboarding practices
4. Capacity building and wellbeing
5. Knowledge transfer and offboarding practices

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[1] Art.46(2), Regulation (EU) 2021/1059

[2] Regulation (EU) 2021/1060, Common Provisions Regulation

[3] Regulation (EU) 2021/1058, ERDF Regulation

[4] Regulation (EU) 2021/1059, ETC (Interreg) Regulation

1. **Meeting the requirement for international staff in the Programme** (Article 46 of Reg. 2021/1059)

The regulation requires MA to set up the JS with staff considering the programme partnership. However, this comes with some challenges.

- National and regional administrations may not be designed to support and accommodate international staff, making it challenging for them to align with rules or institutional processes and feel fully integrated within the organisation (e.g. administrative rules and requirements, language barrier, disconnect to hosting institutions' processes). Hiring non-EU citizens to member states' administrations poses an extra challenge.
- National and regional administrations might be unfamiliar with or even rigid about adapting to Interreg's specific job requirements, roles, and competencies needed for jobs and conditions required to perform the tasks (e.g., competitive salaries, travel frequency, flexibility in work conditions).
- Public administrations find it more challenging to adapt to hybrid and remote work for staff. This may challenge hiring the most experienced and knowledgeable staff.

The programme countries have set up different programme governance models to respond to specific programme needs and contexts. Exchanging on those could serve as an inspiration for change.

2. **Defining roles and optimising work distribution among programme bodies**

Effective organisation and distribution of responsibilities between MA, JS and other programme bodies is essential for the smooth management and implementation of a programme. Interreg programmes adopt different governance models and approaches to task allocation between MA and JS and/or its branch offices or other bodies. This can create structural complexities and administrative burdens, demanding more coordination efforts.

Clearly outlining job descriptions and responsibilities across programme bodies is crucial to ensuring smooth implementation and avoiding duplication of efforts or conflicts of interest.

3. **Limited number of MA/JS staff (positions)**

MA/JS face the challenge of having a sufficient number of staff members to ensure that assigned functions are covered. The governance model of the programme would predefine the number of staff in the programme bodies. However, some guidance and exchanges of approaches could be valuable.

4. **Recruitment process and onboarding practices**

Being fit for Interreg jobs requires specific capacities and competencies. Besides, it requires openness and opportunities for continued development and growth. Promoting Interreg positions and making them attractive remains very important, especially thinking of young generation.

Therefore, exchanging approaches in recruitment, employment conditions, incentives, and onboarding practices can be valuable.

5. **Ensuring competence, capacity and wellbeing**

Interreg programmes benefit from professional and experienced staff, and they need to ensure that staff has the right competencies and capacities. Staff must not only be capable of fulfilling their tasks, roles, and responsibilities but also willing to grow and adapt as programme requirements evolve. Therefore, structured and systematic capacity building efforts are essential.

Working in an international and multicultural environment presents valuable opportunities but also requires intercultural competence, adaptability, and strong communication skills to effectively navigate different working styles, administrative systems, and cultural expectations.

Staff well-being is also essential for a motivated and engaged team. Feeling valued, included, and supported fosters a sense of belonging and commitment, enhancing individual performance and overall programme success.

6. Sustaining team expertise – offboarding practices

Changes between programming periods often lead to staff fluctuations, with turnover affecting institutional memory, knowledge and expertise. Therefore, offboarding practices and approaches are important.

3. How are they addressed in practice? Good practices and innovative approaches.

The following section of the factsheet summarises inputs and practices collected from Interreg programmes. These examples can be considered good practices and innovative approaches that have been applied and tested in different contexts. However, it is important to note that each programme develops its own human resource management model and strategy, tailored to its specific implementation conditions, governance structure, and context. Therefore, these practices are by no means presenting any preferred model, nor are they exhaustive.

Governance and staffing models

Interreg programmes apply different governance and staffing models, reflecting their specific contexts and implementation needs. These include various approaches to the structures of how MA and JS staff are employed.

- **Integration into public administration structures or employment under private law**

The programme staff may be fully integrated into the public or regional administration (e.g. following civil servant employment rules), offering standardised conditions such as salary scales, benefits, and job security. However, this may limit flexibility and attractiveness for international staff or younger professionals to join the team. In some programmes, part of the staff can be employed under private law within public organisations, allowing for greater flexibility in salary, working hours, and benefits while offering access to civil servant benefits. This model supports international recruitment but may create disparities among staff employed under different rules.

- **Multi-country JS office structures**

Establishing JS offices in multiple programme countries facilitates the recruitment of international staff with local language and cultural knowledge and enhances accessibility for beneficiaries. However, this structure requires strong coordination, more efforts to establish and maintain joint working conditions and methods, and additional team-building efforts across locations.

- **Consolidating MA and JS under one hosting organisation**

In some cases, Interreg programmes have transitioned from having separate MA and JS hosting arrangements, even across different countries, to being hosted under one organisation. This shift has enabled stronger team integration, clearer workflows, and increased administrative efficiency. In some

programmes, this change has been accompanied by a coordinated change management process and, where relevant, staff relocation support.

- **Establishing hosting agreements and clarifying roles with Member State support**

To ensure effective governance and cooperation, some Interreg programmes have introduced agreements between the hosting organisation for the MA/JS and the MA/Member States. These agreements outline the principles under which the hosting organisation agrees to host the MA and/or JS, including its commitments and responsibilities, as well as the contributions and expectations of the programme countries. Such arrangements form a clear governance backbone, helping to define roles, manage responsibilities, and strengthen mutual understanding in programme implementation.

- **Attracting and supporting international staff and young people**

Some Interreg programmes face challenges attracting international and young professionals, even when offering competitive salaries. Factors such as high living costs in host cities and limited flexibility in remote work arrangements - particularly cross-border home office options - can discourage potential candidates. In some cases, administrative rigidity and a lack of awareness or support from host organisations cause the challenge. To address it, programmes have implemented practical solutions:

- In response to evolving work expectations, some have introduced internal regulations for homeworking that are aligned with national legislation but offer greater flexibility for staff. Despite the progress made, programmes continue to advocate for change and cultural adaptation within host institutions to support international staff better.
- A detailed onboarding guidebook, available in English, outlines key rules and procedures (e.g. working hours, travel reimbursement, administrative requests) and includes valuable tips for living and working in the country. This supports the smoother integration of international staff and enhances their sense of inclusion.
- To compensate for differences in salary structures, programmes have introduced pre-defined salary corridors and progression rules, ensuring transparency, fairness, and consistency in remuneration practices. Other incentives for people willing to move and settle in a foreign country should be considered. This helps manage expectations and improves the long-term attractiveness of Interreg jobs.

Defining roles, optimising work distribution among programme bodies and addressing staffing limitations

Work distribution and defining roles between programme bodies (MA, JS) are essential for efficient and effective implementation. Approaches vary depending on the programme size, territorial scope, number of participating countries, and institutional setup, but common principles and practices have emerged across programmes to support clarity, coordination, and continuity:

- Clear and detailed descriptions of roles and responsibilities are considered essential. Such documents help ensure that each team member understands their tasks and those of others, facilitating collaboration, accountability, and smoother onboarding of new colleagues. Internal documents are also used as reference tools during training and programme implementation to clarify responsibilities and support continuity.
- In some programmes, the MA and JS assume complementary roles based on their institutional setup. The MA teams often focus on strategic programme management, including financial oversight, legal compliance, budget monitoring, and technical assistance administration. The JS team cover operational responsibilities, including project development and support, proposal assessment, communication, coordination of contact point networks, and cooperation with external actors, e.g. macro-regional strategy stakeholders or other Interreg programmes.
- In some cases, all key programme functions (e.g. communication, project management, financial management) are fully integrated within the JS. The MA may retain overall responsibility but have no independent operational resources outside the JS. This model streamlines implementation and places the JS at the centre of programme delivery, directly linking to other relevant authorities.

Even well-functioning governance models face challenges when there is significant staff turnover. These shifts can create uncertainty around responsibilities and decision-making. To manage this, teams

establish internal structures, distribute responsibilities, and implement oversight mechanisms (e.g. the four-eye principle). Programmes that invest in knowledge transfer mechanisms and clear governance frameworks are better equipped to maintain continuity during transitions.

It is recognised that Technical Assistance (TA) allocations should better reflect programme size and staff capacity. Greater flexibility in TA distribution would help smaller programmes maintain adequate resources without overstretching their teams.

Recruitment and onboarding practices

When it is about recruitment practices and onboarding, programmes explore diverse opportunities:

- Vacancy announcements are designed to highlight the added value and appealing opportunities of working in a small, international team, the possibilities for training and professional development, and the quality of life in the host region. This framing makes positions more attractive - particularly for younger professionals - while ensuring realistic expectations about working within a public administration context.
- Vacancies are shared through multiple channels, including programme websites, social media, Interact, partner country networks, and EC platforms. While recruitment is open, inclusive, and based on skills and experience, programmes acknowledge recruitment challenges such as wage differences with high-income countries or more complex and time-consuming administrative processes.
- In some programmes, Monitoring Committees are involved in shortlisting, recruitment interviews and final selection of the candidates, ensuring transparency and oversight.
- Close cooperation with the Human resource departments of host institutions significantly improves the recruitment process and further exchanges to serve international staff.
- New staff undergo introductory administrative training to understand the programme's institutional environment. In addition, the onboarding manual provides practical guidance and supports integration. Some programmes practice conducting an entry talk four months after a new staff member joins. This provides a structured opportunity to gather feedback on onboarding, identify improvement areas, and learn from the new colleague's experience.
- While programmes attract enthusiastic young professionals, a lack of understanding of the programme implementation framework or limited opportunities for promotion may lead to early departures. The best outcomes occur when new team members understand the programme's operational context and align their ambitions accordingly. Positive experiences of national contact points transitioning into JS staff demonstrate the value of long-term engagement and internal career development.

Retention of the staff and offboarding practices

Interreg programmes recognise that staff competence, retention, and wellbeing are essential. Maintaining a motivated and stable team requires building internal capacity, fostering an inclusive and supportive work environment, and providing growth opportunities.

- Simple practices such as team meetings and internal workshops create regular opportunities for knowledge exchange and togetherness.
- Targeted external support and training opportunities are also explored. Interact's training courses are highly valued, especially for younger or less experienced staff. They offer relevant and tailored insights into Interreg programme implementation, which is particularly important in contexts with limited internal capacity or TA resources.
- Programmes emphasise team-building activities, in-person meetings, and jointly defined guiding principles to strengthen a caring and inclusive team spirit. Regular communication across sub-teams (e.g., project, finance, communication officers) ensures no one feels excluded from important developments or decisions.
- Programmes also support integrating international staff into host institutions and local communities. This includes participating in or organising various events (e.g., team trips, open-door days), encouraging language learning to bridge cultural gaps, engaging with regional initiatives for international residents, and others.

- Inclusive leadership and support play a key role in connecting JS teams and the administration of the hosting institution, encouraging better understanding and collaboration.

Maintaining institutional memory and knowledge continuity is essential, especially during staff turnover between programming cycles. While some programmes benefit from long-standing staff with deep programme knowledge, they also have developed structured offboarding and knowledge transfer practices to ensure smooth transitions.

- Staff members share their expertise and conduct regular internal training. This helps all team members understand the full scope of programme implementation and promotes cross-functional knowledge, structured internal training, and peer learning.
- Senior experts act as reference points and mentors, passing on programme knowledge and guiding newer colleagues. Their role has evolved from informal support to a more systematic approach in some programmes.
- Programmes also practice internal coordination for knowledge maintaining and sharing. Heads of units and senior colleagues holding meetings to ensure the transfer of institutional knowledge and consistency in programme implementation.
- New staff members are offered individual training plans and team up with a colleague who provides day-to-day support, background information, and practical guidance.
- In contexts where overlaps between outgoing and incoming staff are impossible, responsibilities are temporarily redistributed among existing staff. Departing colleagues prepare handover notes, and the JS head communicates changes to all programme bodies to ensure continuity.
- Exit interviews are conducted to collect feedback from the leaving team member on what worked well and what could be improved. A departure checklist ensures that all relevant administrative and knowledge-transfer tasks are completed.
- Structural changes, such as relocation of the JS office, can lead to temporary disruption and staff turnover. However, clear recruitment strategies, onboarding processes, and internal support mechanisms help stabilise the team and rebuild continuity.

At the heart of every Interreg programme are the people who make cooperation happen. Their skills, motivation, and commitment are essential to implementing the programmes. Investing in staff – through supportive working environments, clear roles, training and knowledge sharing, continued support, mentoring, and coaching – is key to building strong, resilient teams. In the end, people are Interreg's most valuable resource.