# Reflection on How We Design Support Systems in Interreg

Estimated reading time 8 min.

## Interreg support to applicants and project partners as a system

It might be helpful to think of support not as a collection of tools but as a system. The system of guidance documents, events, checklists, FAQ, Q&A, communities, relationships, tone, trust, and culture.

Where both tangible and intangible elements matter.

Research shows that invisible aspects such as clarity, approachability, consistency, trust and responsiveness often shape behaviour more strongly than any manual. Projects rarely say: "The guidance document was too short."

But they often say: "We didn't feel confident asking. We didn't realise how complicated it would be to correct this mistake later in Jems. etc.

Interreg programmes are good at providing information. We produce comprehensive documents, organise consultations, info days, events for applicants and projects partners, create networking opportunities. However, feedback collected during registration for the webinar "Smart Support – Sronger projects" suggests that we still face several challenges:

- Applicants and project partners do not read the guidance
- Easier to project partners to write a question where responses can be easily found in guidance
- Delivering the huge amount of regulations and expectations in a short, user friendly way
- It is challenging to convey why quality matters
- Reports come late or incomplete, etc.

## Information does not automatically lead to behaviour change

When people struggle to perform, we often assume the problem is missing information – *"If only they had read the manual."* Much of our support design is based on an implicit assumption: if we explain more clearly or provide more information, people will act accordingly.

Yet learning psychology and behavioural science show that information alone is not enough. More information creates risks of cognitive overload. People also need skills, motivation, and the right environment conditions to apply what they know.

**Knowledge → Skills → Motivation → Behaviour change**

Therefore, when designing support systems, we need to be clear about our objective: are we informing – or also aiming enabling practice, building confidence, and motivating action?

To explore this, we could use the approach proposed in book called *Design for How People Learn*: identify the gap between the current learner and the desired performance, and consider what types of gaps – knowledge, skills, or motivation – need to be addressed.

## Identifying gaps

Let's review three potential gaps here below although book provides some more:

### Knowledge gaps

"Something is accomplished when the learner uses the information to do things." (…) Having the information without knowing how and when to use it is like having a really great tent that you don't know how to put up.

"There are lots of easy, cheap ways to convey information. The benefit of the information age is that don't learners necessarily need to carry all the information the whole way on their journey. If they can pick up

less critical information as they go along, you can focus initially on the more critical knowledge that they really need to have with them the whole way."

"If they get the information when they really need it, they'll also appreciate it more."

### Skills gaps

"Having a skill is different from having knowledge. To determine if something is a skill gap rather than a knowledge gap, you need to ask just one question:

Is it reasonable to think that someone can be proficient without practice?

If the answer is no, then you know you are dealing with a skill. To teach skills, that practice must be part of the learning journey design."

### Motivation gaps

If somebody knows what to do but chooses not to do it, that is a motivation gap. Motivation gaps can stem from many sources:

- unclear benefits
- anxiety about making mistakes
- low confidence
- competing priorities
- cognitive overload and constant distractions, etc.

In our complex Interreg programmes environments, **people are rarely unwilling**. Instead, they are having competing priorities, feeling overwhelmed or distracted. In result design of our events and the whole support system becomes essential – to what extent are we responsible for motivation?

While we cannot control individual choices, we can influence behaviour through designing support. Our decisions – how we structure guidance, when we provide support, how we establish and maintain trust, how approachable we are, how we design our events, how much information we expect people to process at once – all shape motivation.

We can either either lower or raise the effort required to act by design of our support system.

## Cognitive overload and the reality of Interreg work

Interreg projects operate in cognitively demanding conditions: multilayered rules for various processes, different working environments and understanding, large volumes of administration.

From a cognitive perspective, this creates overload. Then the brain simplifies: postpone reading, developing of application, postpone reporting, copy previous examples etc. This is not laziness. It is how human cognition protects itself. But we are tended to provide more explanations, add more layers.

## Change requires unlearning

There is another often overlooked challenge: unlearning. Sometimes we expect applicants and partners to unlearn. When we ask applicants or partners to adopt new practices, we are not only teaching something new. We are often asking them to stop doing something they are used to do, easily.

Unlearning is harder. It requires conscious effort to interrupt familiar way of doing. And backsliding in this case does not mean failure. It might mean change is underway.

**Change is a process, not an event.** It requires time, repetition, reinforcement, and support.

## Our role

What is our role in this?

Could it be that the real question is: **Are we designing for people to know – or for people to do?** Because strong Interreg projects are not created by information alone. We cannot force change. But we can create the environment in which it is more likely to happen.

If the aim is only knowledge, then information is enough. If the aim is action, then design should go further. How far we are and how further it is relevant to go?

Let's discover our view and reflect further next week.