# TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES TO IMPROVE NCP SERVICE QUALITY

A guide for Horizon 2020 National Contact Points

A mobile-friendly version of this guide can be found at
https://ncphorizon2020.atavist.com/ncptools

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# Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| CRM | Client Relationship Management |
| EASME | Executive Agency for Small and Medium sized Enterprise |
| EEN | Enterprise Europe Network |
| ERC | European Research Centre |
| ERCEA | European Research Centre Executive Agency |
| ESIF | European Structural and Investment Funds |
| ESR | Evaluation Summary Report |
| FP7 | 7th European Framework programme for research and technological development |
| H2020 | Horizon 2020, the European Framework Programme for Research and Innovation |
| INEA | Innovation and Networks Executive Agency |
| JRC | Joint Research Centre |
| LEIT | Leadership in Enabling and Industrial Technologies |
| MOU | Memorandum of Understanding |
| NCP | National Contact Point |
| NMBP | Nanotechnologies, advanced materials, advanced manufacturing and processing, biotechnology |
| R&I | Research and innovation |
| RDI | Research, development, and innovation |
| REA | Research Executive Agency |
| REGPOT | Research potential of Convergence Regions, a part of the FP7 "Capacities" sub-programme |
| S3 | Smart Specialisation Strategy |
| SEWP | Spreading Excellence and Widening Participation |
| SME | Small and Medium-Sized Enterprise |

# Summary

This document supports National Contact Points in structuring and improving their service portfolio based on common standards and good practice shared by NCPs. It is a collection of techniques and a source of inspiration for Horizon 2020 National Contact Points for the *Spreading Excellence and Widening Participation* programme, and, by extension, to NCPs for other programmes.

The NCP Minimum Standards and Guiding Principles, a guideline provided by the European Commission, is an important point of reference, but it can be interpreted in different ways.

A prerequisite for the satisfactory implementation of the Commission specifications is a cohesive NCP team. An effective NCP will communicate with their colleagues, their European counterparts, national intermediaries, and the NCP coordinator, while choosing useful IT tools.

NCPs need to build their expertise proactively through reading, or by meeting expert evaluators, for example.

Advising clients is a central task where a proactive approach is required from building lists of prospects to scanning upcoming calls well ahead of their deadlines. Besides client meetings, the NCP service offer may include proposal review and webinars. In many countries, clients need to be contacted proactively, even more so in the case of SMEs, for example. Furthermore, NCPs have the opportunity to extend their expertise to European and national research and innovation policies.

Defining a service range is a further step towards the professionalization of the NCP service offer. This includes the choice of certain activities to the detriment of others, the extension of one's reach thanks to private sector consultants, and the launch of a national mini-grants and other support programmes. Measuring the impact of these services is not an easy task, but some indicators can be tracked as a proxy for the service's effectiveness and client satisfaction.

Dissemination and awareness raising is a central mandate of NCPs. This guide presents in great detail the advantages and limits of new media channels (web and social), and gives concrete tips on how to organise information sessions.

The Annexes describe the methodology of this guide and include a list of resources.

# Introduction

National Contact Points (NCPs) have been appointed in many countries in order to support applicants to Horizon 2020 funding. The European Commission has defined guidelines to establish a common foundation for this role. The "Minimum Standards and Guiding Principles" explain an NCP's mission, core functions, and main cooperation channels. However, these guidelines remain general and there is little guidance as to how they should be put into practice. As a result, their interpretation varies from country to country.

What is more, national research and innovation systems are highly specific to each country. In some of them, NCPs are spread across many organisations and even regions, while in others, all NCPs work in the same organisation. We also know that the human and financial resources dedicated to giving advice on Horizon 2020 are difficult to compare. Under these circumstances, consistent and high quality service to applicants across Europe (and beyond) is not self-evident.

The NCP_WIDE.NET project supports NCPs in enhancing their service offer by taking this context into account. Considerable know-how and experience is present, but not always shared. This guide is an attempt at sharing and systemising this knowledge, in order to create useful guidance for each other. This is especially true for the less experienced NCPs with fewer resources who may find this guide useful. The authors hope that this collection of tools will inspire the readers to see their own work in a fresh light.

# An (informal) typology of NCP systems and SEWP NCPs

Each country organises Horizon 2020 National Contact Points according to national preferences, means, and priorities. NCPs work in environments that vary in size, organisation, and professionalization.

### Size of the NCP system

Independent of their size, certain countries count more nominated NCPs than others. A case in point, France has around 128 nominated NCPs, while the UK has 26. Furthermore, governments may choose to allocate more staff to programme parts with a higher budget, or which are particularly important to the national context.

### Organisation

A centralised system hosts all, or virtually all, NCPs in one organisation, while a decentralised system has distributed nominations across various organisations.

For example, Switzerland's EUresearch has a head office bringing together all NCPs, as well as regional offices.

### Professionalization

Some countries have a professional NCP system where a National Contact Point is the person's primary occupation, often after having acquired experience in research. Other countries nominate NCPs whose primary work is related to the programme domain, for example as a researcher. Those NCPs hold a nomination besides their primary occupation, with NCP work done on the side, in some cases without further financial compensation.

### Spreading Excellence and Widening Participation

The *Spreading Excellence and Widening Participation* (SEWP) programme was preceded by the "REGPOT" (Research Potential of Convergence Regions) programme, a specific programme of the "Capacities" part in FP7. However, the SEWP programme was created in 2014 as a new standalone programme in Horizon 2020. National Contact Points for this configuration either have had experience with similar policy fields, or have been NCPs for other programmes. Some are new to both the policy domain, and the post as NCP.

For most NCPs, SEWP is a part of a wider portfolio. Certain NCPs, however, dedicate themselves exclusively to this programme part (see below).

# Strategies for a powerful NCP system

Many elements contribute to a well-oiled and performant NCP system, such as personal capacities, procedures to advise clients, accountability, and communication. Each chapter includes explanations on the strategy. Often a *Toolbox* explains the process step-by-step, helping you to put recommendations into practice immediately.

## NCP Minimum Standards and Guiding Principles

NCPs support project applicants in their country. The European Commission (EC) has provided a universal framework for these activities by defining guidelines, at least since the 7th Framework

Programme[1] (FP7). These guidelines serve, in fact, as a basic job description for NCPs. without being very prescriptive

National Contact Points are officially appointed by their national administrations – which gives the post a certain responsibility and authority. In general, NCPs seem to perceive their job as rewarding and diversified, and enjoy contributing to policy implementation, and working at the interface of European and national interests. Another common feature is the great autonomy in their work that most NCPs enjoy.

The NCP Minimum Standards and Guiding Principles distinguish between "key principles and minimum standards", and "principal NCP functions".

After conducting interviews with representatives from 20 countries, we find that many NCPs already follow the NCP Minimum Standards and Guiding Principles set out by the European Commission. However, they might do so in an informal way. At any rate, these guidelines are a handy blueprint to setting up and monitoring NCP work.

## TOOLBOX: Using NCP Minimum Standards and Guiding Principles as a roadmap

☐ **Analyse the NCP Minimum Standards and Guiding Principles**. Map requirements and current capabilities. How do you comply with requirements? How can you adapt them to your situation?

☐ **Conduct a self-assessment to know your status quo**. How do clients perceive your work? Do you have a good general knowledge of European RDI programmes? Are your services deemed useful by clients? How do you score on aspects such as closeness to customer, pertinence of your services, your availability? Do clients prefer one-on-one meetings, workshops or conferences, written material? Can you add value to proposal preparation? Are you a "trusted advisor" in your country's research and innovation ecosystem?

☐ Evaluate your current performance based on the grid below.

| Expectations | Status quo |
|---|---|
| **General framework**<br><br>✓ National authorities ensure compliance with these minimum standards<br><br>✓ A National NCP Coordinator liaises with the national authority, ensures operational consistency, liaises with European Commission | *Assess how you cover these points so far* |
| ✓ Confidentiality and absence of conflict of interest must be ensured | |

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[1] "Guiding principles for setting up systems of National Contact points (NCP Systems) for the Seventh Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development (FP7)", European Commission, DG RTD A1, 12/12/2007

| | |
|---|---|
| ✓ Cooperation with EEN must be institutionalised | |
| ✓ Setting up of a Horizon 2020 web portal | |
| Personal qualities and competences<br><br>✓ Staff and equipment shall be ensured by the national authority<br><br>✓ Be accessible during working hours<br><br>✓ Know the objectives, principles of content of the respective programme, and of H2020 in general, even of other EU programmes<br><br>✓ Communicate well and adapt to the audience<br><br>✓ NCPs should be ready to participate actively in transnational networks (as trainer or trainee)<br><br>✓ Respect confidentiality and absence of conflict of interest | |

*Table 1 Key principles and minimum standards*

| Expectations | Status quo |
|---|---|
| **Informing, awareness raising**<br><br>✓ Circulate information,<br><br>✓ Organise promotional activities,<br><br>✓ Raise awareness of Horizon 2020 principles and rationale,<br><br>✓ Provide information on related EC programmes | *Assess how you cover these points so far* |
| **Assisting, advising and training**<br><br>✓ Increase applicants' participation in H2020,<br><br>✓ Support partner search,<br><br>✓ Advise on legal and financial matters,<br><br>✓ Advise on legal project structures,<br><br>✓ Explain funding schemes,<br><br>✓ Train intermediaries and multipliers, | |

| | |
|---|---|
| ✓ Target activities for certain groups (SMEs, universities…) or topics (legal, financial participation, programmes…) | |
| **Signposting and cooperation**<br><br>Refer to<br><br>✓ Other EU support networks,<br><br>✓ National funding<br><br>✓ ERA NET projects | |

*Table 2 Principal NCP functions*

This table is a summary. Details can be found in the original "Minimum Standards and Guiding Principles" document[2].

☐**Identify strong points and address gaps.** What is going well? What needs to be addressed? Plan how you can address these gaps.

☐**Get inspiration from best practice.**  Many good ideas can be collected from other NCPs' websites, by looking at the resources they share, or the events they organise.

## A cohesive and effective NCP team

The need for cohesion and effective communication among NCPs of a country is acknowledged across the board. While cohesion and trust are seen as by-products of working together, some NCP teams have made conscious efforts to favour cooperation.

### Toolbox: Fostering cohesion and effective communication in NCP teams

☐**Agree on a "National NCP Strategy":** While the European Commission's NCP Guidelines are comprehensive, adapting them to national circumstances can be useful. National guidelines for NCP work, established by the NCP coordinator, the ministry, or similar bodies, give hints as to what activities are particularly encouraged (info sessions? Networking?) while still leaving enough freedom for NCPs to shape their own work.

☐**Meet regularly**. A regular meeting, for example once a week, makes everybody aware of each other's projects and increases motivation thanks to a common direction and sense of purpose.

☐**Be each other's trainer**. Some NCPs hold period "training sessions" amongst themselves, where one NCP prepares a short talk on a topic of common interest. These presentations cannot only help you practice your public speaking skills, they are an effective means to keep everybody's technical knowledge up-to-date, while stimulating team cohesion.

SEWP NCPs must coordinate with their colleagues in charge of other parts of Horizon 2020, with other NCPs of their configuration, with the NCP coordinator, and with national delegates to Horizon 2020 programme committees.

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[2] http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/support/20131125_NCP%20Minimum%20standards.pdf

## Communicating with other NCPs in your country

Communication amongst colleagues is a prerequisite for a fulfilling and effective work environment. Furthermore, keeping abreast of all internal communication flows is necessary to provide relevant advice to your clients.

NCPs in a centralised system enjoy the advantage of a proximity that tends to make communication run more smoothly. Many NCPs share a building or even offices with their counterparts.

It appears that many see this as a clear advantage. If you cannot share physical space with NCP colleagues, go out of your way to develop exchange in both informal and formal ways.

In big or decentralised systems, regular plenary meetings of NCPs across all configurations could improve communication and efficiency.

### TOOLBOX: Making Widening visible to your colleagues
As Horizon 2020 is a vast and multifarious programme, even NCPs of other configurations may not know your programme well. It is important to share knowledge with your colleagues and educate them on your specialisation.

☐Create a short set of slides on SEWP opportunities that your colleagues can use when meeting clients or making presentations. Adapt your language to non-experts and consider points that seem obvious to you but may need to be explained to NCPs not knowing about your programme.

☐Hold short weekly or monthly meetings where each NCP briefs their colleagues on highlights in their domain. In fragmented organisations, bringing together all colleagues might be difficult, but all the more important. In this case, it makes sense to foresee a slot (every first Monday afternoon of the month…) that should be treated with the same priority as external meetings, for example.

## Liaising with other Widening NCPs

While national authorities set up NCPs in their country, the European Commission funds common activities among NCPs of many programmes. The *Spreading Excellence and Widening Participation* programme provided funding for such a network of NCPs, which is implemented through the NCP_WIDE.NET project. These networks notably ease the financial burden to attend common meetings. Beside highlights such as mentoring sessions, NCPs can, and should, rely on their colleagues from other countries, and also readily share their own experience or problems, with others.

In particular, new NCPs should reach out to these networks proactively to check what resources are available to ease them into their job, and do not hesitate to ask common questions.

### TOOLBOX: Using "crowd intelligence" to help you on the job
☐Make sure you are included in the NCP mailing list (for example: widening@googlegroups.com)

☐Ask NCPs from other countries about tricky client queries or unusual situations, before contacting the European Commission or its agencies (such as REA, EASME, INEA, ERCEA…)

☐Obtain the necessary codes to access the project website and to download resources

☐Ask the project coordinator, or task members in charge of training or mentoring, about upcoming activities. Participate in project events.

☐Volunteer to share relevant information with the network yourself in order make yourself known by your homologues.

## Cooperating with the national NCP coordinator

The NCP coordinator is in contact with the European Commission on general matters related to Horizon 2020 services in your country. In some cases, the NCP coordinator will be your superior to whom you report directly or indirectly via your boss. In other cases, you might not be directly accountable to the NCP coordinator. In any case, it is crucial to maintain a functional relationship with this person.

Try to exchange views and experience regularly, for example once a month, or at least twice a year. The NCP coordinator depends on your insights as to what services or initiatives are successful, and what important target groups need to be contacted. You may benefit from a briefing on transversal issues and new recommendations from the EC. Liaising with national delegates to Horizon 2020 programme committees

National Contact Points work to increase participation in Horizon 2020 calls, especially that of newcomers, and to improve proposal quality.

Conversely, the European Commission sees national delegates to programme committees as a primary point of contact for national authorities concerning policy implementation (via the so-called comitology, or committee procedure, see figure below). Programme committee members are informed about upcoming changes, of call outcomes and are even asked to approve the funding of certain projects, after they have been evaluated. Furthermore, the EC consults with member states
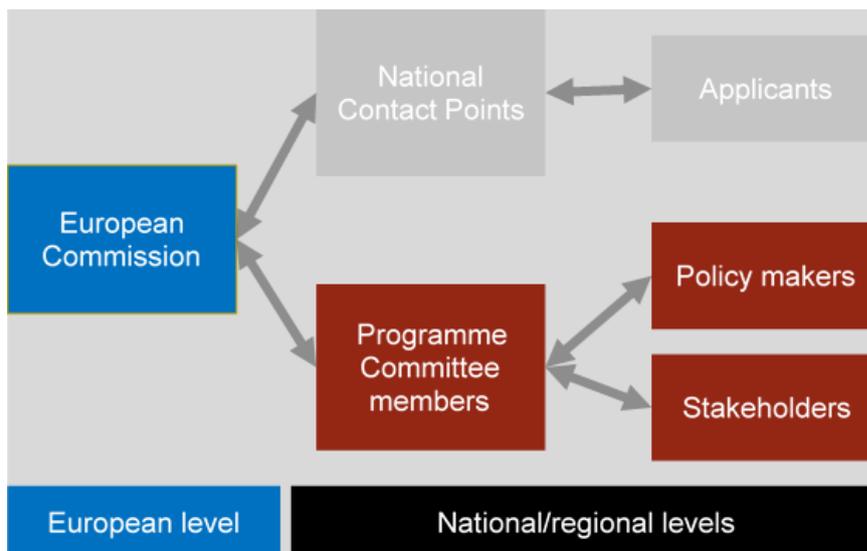


about future work programmes and calls through **their** programme committee members.

*Figure 1 Position of NCPs and Programme committee members*

It is possible that NCPs and programme committee members are one and the same person. If this is not the case in your country, NCPs should regularly consult with the programme committee members (both delegates and experts) of the relevant configurations. Both benefit from this relationship, as delegates learn about issues "on the ground", while NCPs stay informed about long term developments and strategies. Programme committee members also obtain detailed statistics about call outcomes. As National Contact Point who has advised proposers on their submission, learning about the call results, even on a macro level, can be very relevant indeed.

Currently, *Spreading Excellence and Widening Participation* does not have a separate programme committee, but is treated within the Strategic Configuration of the Horizon 2020 programme committees.

### BEST PRACTICE: Harness IT systems for better communication

Staying in touch, and exchanging information with NCP colleagues, programme committee delegates, the NCP coordinator, and national stakeholders such as ministries can become quite overwhelming. Some NCPs have an online, closed access platform to communicate with delegates and other NCPs. Once in place, such an Intranet also allows you to include other groups into the conversation, such as university research offices. This network can be used to post news for example, items frequently shared by the European Commission, upcoming calls, and other noteworthy developments related to the national and European research and innovation systems. This network could also be used to share (non-confidential) files.

In many organisations, Intranets and enterprise social networks are managed centrally. If this is not the case in your country, online solutions can be interesting alternatives.

For example, *Yammer* is a major "enterprise social network" that integrates with *Microsoft Office* and is used by 200,000 companies. Cloud storage services, such as *dropbox*, *Google drive*, or *Onedrive* allow you to manage shared document folders across organisations.

## Empowering Multipliers

Universities, research and technology organisations (RTOs) and larger companies often employ grants management staff and other support staff who are entrusted with the European project lifecycle, from project proposal to grant management. In Germany, for example, these professionals are organised in their own national network, KoWi (*Kooperationsstelle EU der Wissenschaftsorganisationen*, European Liaison Office of the German Research Organisations).

It is hugely beneficial to NCPs to establish good working relationships with these multipliers, or intermediaries, in their country.

- First of all, even in the Internet age, multipliers can relay information from European Commission or government sources within their organisations.

- Second, these professionals manage European projects, and grant submissions, on a daily basis. They can make you aware of emerging issues, especially related to the "legal and financial" NCP function.

- Third, it is beneficial for these project management officers to exchange among themselves, to discuss issues common to all, to start initiatives, or to exchange good

practice. Unless a formal structure is in place (like KoWi in Germany), the Horizon 2020 National Contact Points are in an ideal position to organise this exchange.

- Finally, multipliers can ease the workload of NCPs. Proposers will tend to contact local officers before reaching out to the National Contact Point.

## TOOLBOX: Empowering Multipliers

☐Get to know the European grants and project management staff in your country's universities and research institutions. In the case of too many individual entities, you may solicit university associations, research funding councils, or the ministry of research to reach as many organisations as possible.

☐Suggest common communications channels, such as a simple email distribution list, and a file sharing system.

☐Bring multipliers together. With the support of the NCP coordinator and management, kick off cooperation by bringing together all multipliers during a meeting, where speakers could present important developments in Horizon 2020, speak about their organisation's ongoing Horizon 2020 projects, or make a presentation on EU-related initiatives in their university/research organisation (for example, a streamlined service, a new incentive scheme, tips on cooperating with consultants).

☐Make it a habit to relay updates sent by the European Commission to this network of multipliers, provided the information is not confidential.

☐Go out of your way to respond to questions from multipliers and share answers of general interest with all, as resolved matters will be passed on within their organisation.

# The well rounded NCP

You, as a person, invest in your role and make a difference. Your background, skills, and attitude determine how clients respond to you, and how your work as National Contact Point is perceived. Interviews with *Spreading Excellence* NCPs paint a positive picture – in many cases, NCPs appear to be busy, driven and proactive professionals.

## A snapshot of the *Spreading Excellence* NCP

49 countries have nominated National Contact Points for the *Spreading Excellence and Widening Participation* programme.

There are a total of 64 nominated National Contact Points. 23 of them, or 36%, hold only one nomination. Three quarters (75%) of *Spreading Excellence* NCPs hold one, two, or three nominations concurrently.

Individuals whose sole NCP nomination is *Spreading Excellence* do not necessarily devote all of their time to this mandate. In fact, these people may either cumulate their NCP nomination with other, policy-related activities (such as COST or JTI), or honour another main job, often as researchers.
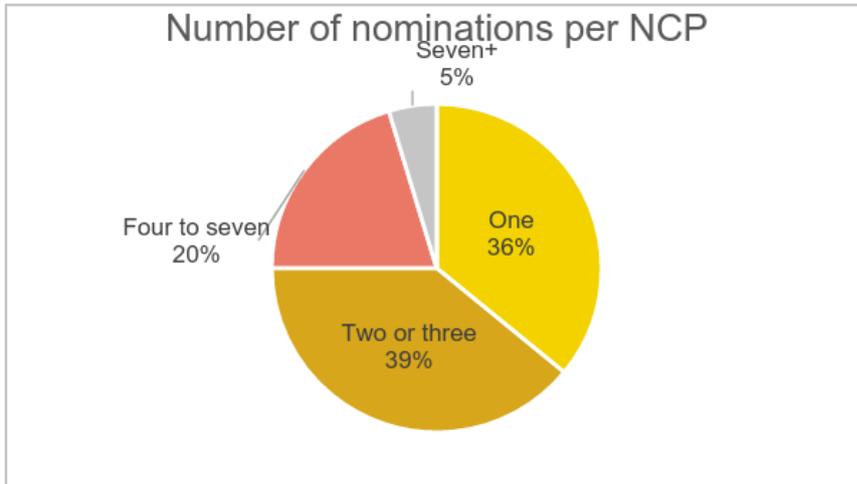
*Figure 2  Number of nominations per NCP*

In three quarter of all countries, there is only one NCP for SEWP. Still, 26% of countries have two nominated NCPs. One country has three.
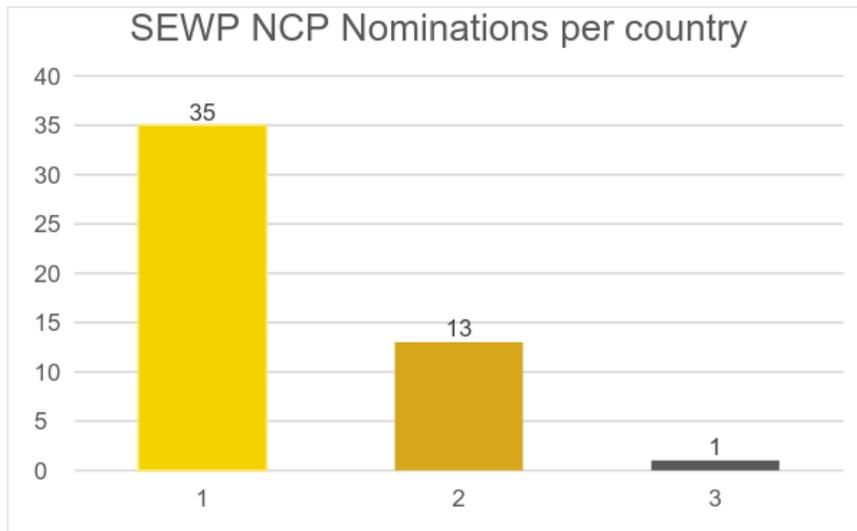


*Figure 3 SEWP NCP Nominations per country*

## Competences

National Contact Points need to display a wide range of both "hard" and "soft" skills. They draw their authority from a solid knowledge of European research and innovation policy, besides being well aware of the national innovation ecosystem. NCPs either have a law, economics, or social sciences background, or a scientific career in engineering, life sciences, materials, or other Horizon 2020 priorities.

As National Contact Point, you will communicate with middle to upper management, solicit speakers for events, review highly technical and complex project set-ups, and speak in front of educated audiences when presenting funding opportunities or proposal writing tips. It is up to you

to hone your communication, client-facing and technical skills, while keeping up to date on policy developments!

## TOOLBOX: Become a well-rounded NCP

**Attend EC info days.** European Commission staff organise information days on specific work programmes or even calls. These events mostly take place in Brussels and allow you to deepen your understanding of call requirements thanks to first-hand presentations by EC project officers. They are also an ideal occasion to meet researchers or industry that consider submitting collaborative projects to a call. At the very least, watch the event online and download the presentations – livestreaming has become more and more common for these events.

**Attend NCP network meetings**. Network meetings are organised pending budget by the European Commission. Each project has a limited amount of resources to organise these meetings. Attending them should be a priority, as it allows you to mingle with your European counterparts, or European Commission officials.

**Attend NCP Academy courses**. As a transversal project, the NCP Academy organises training courses on transversal subjects such as legal & financial matters, or how-to sessions on communications, for example. Classes are another way to exchange on issues shared by all in a European context. Participants bear travel costs themselves.

**Do your essential reading**. Do reading on essential texts of Horizon 2020 and your configuration. These include the Horizon 2020 Regulation of Establishment and the Rules for Procedure (in particular the annexes related to your domain), the Work Programme and call texts, the proposal template, the evaluation form, and FAQs. Some examples of essential reading on Horizon 2020 are listed in the annex.

**Do your advanced reading.** Many initiatives are linked to the Horizon 2020 framework programme, and even many specific funding priorities This patchwork of advisory groups, joint initiatives, or technology platforms offers a fragmented picture to those not familiar with European policy making. Further personal research is necessary to deepen your knowledge of these initiatives.

**Improve your public speaking skills.** Present your material (slides) in an effective way. Do not be afraid to innovate, and to find creative ways to engage the audience.

## BEST PRACTICE – Meet Evaluators

Horizon 2020 project proposals are assessed by experts acting on their own behalf. These individuals, who volunteered to evaluate proposals, can contribute invaluable insights. The European Commission periodically discloses these experts' names. As NCP, consider reaching out to them and requesting an interview. These conversations can turn out to be genuine training session for you, and will help you advise your clients in the future. On the other hand, the expert evaluator does not necessarily know very much about Horizon 2020 or European R&I policy as such. He or she might find it useful to talk to you as well, in order to benefit from your (and your clients') perspective on the framework programme.

# Advising Clients

## Identifying candidates for SEWP in your country

*Spreading Excellence and Widening Participation* is a fairly new programme, and potential beneficiaries might not necessarily be aware of the opportunities. National Contact Points need to work proactively to inform them about the programme.

### Building a database and distribution list

Build a database of potential applicants using various sources, such as questions you have already received about the programme, or your own Internet search. You can also rely on databases such as Cordis on EU-funded RDI projects, or national directories of research and innovation players. National interest organisations, such as the National Information Network for EU framework programmes (NINET) in the Czech Republic, can be used to disseminate information about Horizon 2020 *Spreading Excellence and Widening Participation*.

Make it clear that you, as NCP, are open for questions and collaboration. Include contact details and examples of what services researchers can expect of you. Your contacts should have the opportunity to opt out of this information, or to mention interested colleagues to you. Manage your distribution list wisely.

However, it happens that emails remain without a response. You may be reaching out to your prospects, providing them with strategically useful information and offering a potentially rewarding collaboration, but getting little response. Various reasons can explain this situation

- Your messages are unsolicited, and might therefore not be read with priority.

- Your emails might not make it clear enough that a response is required. They might be seen as informational emails only.

- Your addressees are not interested, or only passively interested.

- Your addressees are forwarding your email to their teams and colleagues, but are not taking action.

Programme committees are informed about unsuccessful proposals, whereas only funded projects are public knowledge. Consider reaching out to programme committee members to learn about "unsuccessful" applicants whom you could contact. This strategy is both potentially rewarding, and time-consuming. Last but not least, make sure this proactive approach is endorsed by management.

## BEST PRACTICE - Be proactive

Work Programmes are announced well in advance, calls are advertised well before their deadline. This gives you ample time to schedule your actions with a longer timeframe in mind. Being proactive is especially important for smaller countries.

Keep abreast of upcoming calls by using an excel file or a calendar function. Plan your actions (info sessions, consultations), three to six months (or even longer) in advance of deadlines.

## TOOLBOX: Getting a response to your emails

☐ Make it clear in your email that your actions are endorsed at a higher level. Send personalised emails.

☐In your email, set a deadline until which a response is desired.

☐Follow up written communication with a phone call, to establish a personal connection

☐Over time, schedule one-on-one meetings with as many prospects as possible, to expand your network and build trusted relationships, which in turn is bound to increase the response rate to your emails. Besides, some people simply do not like emails, or even telephone calls, as a way to communicate. These individuals respond much better to, and are more satisfied by face-to-face meetings as an effective way to "do business". Cultural, and generational differences, might explain this.

☐Eventually, you must also know when to stop "chasing them". It might be more fruitful and rewarding to engage with a smaller group of committed individuals than it is to feel that your (virtual) presence is not esteemed.


## A successful client meeting experience

Being able to meet clients in person is a privilege. The prospective applicant benefits from a one-on-one consultation. As National Contact Points, following clients bilaterally, seeing their project idea mature into a proposal, and even eventually a funded project, is a rewarding experience.

You may be trained in effective client interaction through other work experience. Furthermore, your supervisors or the NCP Coordinator may suggest guidelines and best practice for all NCPs. Nothing replaces meeting prospective Horizon 2020 partners on your own, as this will raise your awareness on specific issues, fears, or questions project partners from your country may have. After having met various clients seeking support for their project idea, you may think about ways to streamline the process.

## TOOLBOX: NCP client meeting best practice

☒**Be respectful**. Clients will reach out to you by phone or email, while their project ideas may still be fuzzy or they may be ignorant of European funding principles and requirements of specific programmes. Give clients the benefit of the doubt, assuming, unless you have evidence to the contrary, that their project idea is promising and that matching European funding can be found.

☐**Request information beforehand**. A meeting will more likely be productive if prepared in advance. It is good practice to request some written elements from your clients before the meeting, such as an abstract of their project idea, or in the absence of a concrete idea, references of their capabilities, or a list of questions that they would like to discuss during the first meeting.

☐**Follow-up.** As a matter of course, the NCP should take notes during the meeting and swiftly follow up on any point that was raised, and where a follow-up was promised.

☐**Subsequent meetings.** Organising another meeting a few months later can open up discussion on the state of progress made and allow follow up on issues that have arisen as the preparation of the proposal progressed.

☐**Slides, templates.** As NCP, you can bring along a standard set of slides, a print-out of the call text and the proposal template, and a list of eligibility conditions, which you can go through by means of a checklist. While each client meeting tends to be highly individual, it can make sense to create a blueprint to standardise the planning of meetings.

## Proposal review

Providing feedback on proposal drafts is a common service offered by NCPs. NCPs offering this service report that proposers often find it very useful, and that remarks often help to improve their proposal substantially. As this service is in principle free of charge, the added value is unquestionable. While the scientific, technical, or administrative aspects are best known by the project partners, National Contact Points add a fresh external view, and are more familiar with the European Commission's perspective.

A case in point is the utmost importance of a flawlessly developed "impact" section, of the inclusion of communication and dissemination activities, and proper risk management. In the face of similarly excellent scientific projects, proposals that demonstrate their grasp of these issues enjoy an advantage.

In Teaming calls, important aspects include the long-term feasibility and the business plan, as well as references to the smart specialisation strategy (S3). Candidates can benefit from this advice, even alongside private consultants.

NCPs that were researchers or European project managers benefit from this experience when reviewing Horizon 2020 projects. However, building a credible and appreciated proposal review service is possible for NCPs of all backgrounds.

TOOLBOX: Building a Proposal review service

☐**Establish the "four-eye principle"** - Explain that your NCP office adopts a "four-eye principle" when reviewing proposals, which means that two experts share their comments prior to handing their feedback over to the client. This is not only a sign of superior service quality, but also an excellent tool to train less experienced "reviewers" (new NCPs) on the job, as the inexperienced reader will be able to discuss his or her impressions of the proposal with the experienced reviewer prior to being exposed to the client directly. Exceptions can be made when only one reviewer is available to read the proposal. But why not rely on colleagues from other programmes in some cases?

☐**Be clear about your internal deadlines.** Proposers will always tend to finish drafting their proposals close to the deadline. It is common that NCPs are faced with an influx of proposals to be reviewed on a very short notice. To avoid this, clearly communicate the deadline by which proposers need to have submitted their draft texts to you in order to benefit from a useful review. For example, communicate indicative deadlines on your website or brochures.

☐**Consult Evaluation Summary Reports**. ESRs are shared with Horizon 2020 programme committee delegates, but not directly with NCPs. However, you might be able to obtain ESRs for selected projects. Studying them periodically gives you a good sense of what constitutes a good proposal.

☐**Study basic documentation and training material.** Being familiar with the proposal and the evaluation templates is crucial. Furthermore, it is important to have the call text in mind before reviewing the proposal. Other useful information includes slides from European Commission info sessions, or training material from NCP meetings. Contact the NCP network to learn if training material from past years is available, of which you might not be aware.

☐**Practice, build confidence**. Whatever your level of experience in reviewing proposals, it is likely that you will be able to highlight at least one or two suggestions for improvement in the proposal draft. These suggestions, if implemented correctly, might well make the difference between a rejected and a funded project. Writing, and reviewing, proposals is not a "rocket science". Bear in mind that an element of subjectivity will always prevail.

## Keeping track of clients

Much work can be achieved with a well-managed inbox, a notebook, and a pen. However, to manage client relations across team members, and across time, an IT-based client management system (CRM), is useful. Most organisations have implemented a CRM across all teams. The system, however, is only as good as the information provided. If many, or all NCPs are within the same organisation, it can be helpful to agree on using the CRM homogeneously. If your employer does not use a CRM, simple and cost-effective solutions can be found online and be implemented among NCPs only.

Each client, and organisation should be entered into the system. Correspondence should be tracked, and meeting notes should be shared. A client management system ensures a quality service shall an NCP be absent or have left the organisation. It is a crucial tool for professional teamwork.

## Reaching out to SMEs

SMEs are at the heart of the European Union's concerns. They create most jobs and are considered the bedrock of the European economy. The European Commission insists that 20% of the overall budget of the Horizon 2020 LEIT and Societal Challenge budgets benefit SMEs.

However, innovative companies are a dispersed group and they might not necessarily reach out to NCPs themselves. NCPs who would like to foster SME participation in Horizon 2020 might need to reach out to them proactively.



*Figure 4 Poster for an event dedicated to SMEs*

This might be less relevant to the *Spreading Excellence* programme, as it targets mostly universities and research organisations. Still, SMEs can be subcontractors or take over tasks such as technical advisory, or dissemination.

### TOOLBOX: Increasing SME participation in Horizon 2020

**Go where they are.** Research events that will be attended by SMEs. Possible ideas could be industry-specific events ("Cybersecurity conference", "Manufacturing of the future"), or events organised by the chamber of commerce or the chamber of skilled crafts. Contact the organisers to see if you could host a Horizon 2020 parallel info session or have an information booth.

**Map them.** Create communication processes. Create a list of high-potential innovative SMEs in your country or region. You could be helped by cluster organisations, the chamber of commerce, the Enterprise Europe Network in your country, or other SME support services. Contact them by offering more information on joining an EU-funded research and innovation project.

**Communicate**. Reflect in your communication channels an explicit focus on both public and private participants. Project the message that Horizon 2020 can be a real opportunity for companies, too. Address issues that are of particular concern for private companies, such as intellectual property rights, pre-financing, or success rates.

**Invite them**. Info-sessions addressing SMEs specifically tend to work well. Co-organising such an event with an NCP for "Innovation in SMEs" or EEN could provide more visibility. If you can, invite an SME that is already successfully participating in FP7 or Horizon 2020 projects, to share their testimonial. Choose a catchy title, such as "The Innovative Company in Europe. How to join and fund an innovation project by the EU."

## Going beyond: NCPs and policy making

There is a possibility to go beyond the standard requirements of the National Contact Point function, and sometimes it might even be necessary to do so. The *Spreading Excellence* programme in particular addresses a certain type of audience and links to wider national policy issues. NCPs who are aware of the broader context are able to advise clients more effectively.

The "Smart Specialisation Strategy" (S3) initiative is an excellent example of how national and European policy making are interlinked. Each national authority must define in which areas of research and innovation each region is already excelling and would like to develop further. The European Commission, via the Joint Research Centre (JRC) orchestrates this Europe-effort. It has built an extensive online platform on smart specialisation strategies, including academic resources and methodological guidelines.

EU member states are required to present their smart specialisation strategies to be eligible for structural funding. In fact, European structural & investment funds (ESIF) are the European Union's main investment policy tool, and with €454 billion for 2014-20, their budget is almost six times the budget of Horizon 2020!

However, for some Horizon 2020 calls such as the *Spreading Excellence* programme, embedding project proposals within the national smart specialisation strategies is a must. It is further encouraged to combine funding from Horizon 2020 and ESIF in a single project. Setting up such

projects requires creativity, coordination across national authorities, and a sound understanding of both funding programmes. National Contact Points can act as true catalysts in this process.

*Spreading Excellence* NCPs in particular gain from seeing "the wider horizon". A first step in this direction would be to gain a working understanding of their national innovation ecosystem, which includes industry associations, research and higher education organisations, clusters, innovation agencies, technology transfer offices, as well as managing and regional authorities.

Innovation and European funding matters are relevant to these players, but keeping abreast of EU-funding at all times is not practicable for all. National Contact Points can bring these different stakeholders together around European research and innovation funding.

## TOOLBOX: Linking national and European research and innovation policies

☐Know relevant organisations and points of contact, such as associations or clusters

☐Build relationships. They can be informal or formal, for example by signing Memoranda of Understanding (MoU)

☐Organise info sessions on *Spreading Excellence*, Smart Specialisation, and European structural funds. Include ESIF representatives in these sessions. Present project opportunities with a focus on your country's strong points.

☐Listen and understand their perspectives and needs.

☐Encourage and coordinate consultation processes among your new network to refine the Smart Specialisation strategy

☐Inform national innovation funders of European priorities, thereby ensuring a continuity (or complementarity) between national and European research and innovation funding mechanisms (Horizon 2020 and ESIF)[3].

### Teaming – a government priority?

Official guidelines or national priorities influence research labs' behaviour. Government priorities and impulses from above are important motivators. In the case of *Spreading Excellence* proposals, a clear political endorsement is a central ingredient of a successful proposal. If National Contact Points may not always be able to provide impulses to policymakers in their country, the strength of government endorsement for *Spreading Excellence* projects at least gives them an indication of how much their country is likely to participate in these calls.

## Going beyond: NCPs as networkers and experts

It is impossible to separate European policies in a field (transport, energy, or health…) from scientific and business agendas. Being such a vast programme, themes covered by Horizon 2020 are in a way a useful representation of the major issues of our times. Beyond the grants as such, Horizon 2020, in turn, is tied to numerous expert groups, European industry associations, or

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[3] This chapter draws on the presentation "The role of NCPs in Policy Making & Smart Specialisation", held by Vassiliki Kalodimou, FORTH/PRAXI Network, Greece, during the third mentoring visit organised by the NCP_WIDE.NET project.

university networks. As a Horizon 2020 National Contact Point, you might have a better overview of these initiatives, bodies, and policy dialogues than anybody else. Therefore, extending one's field of activity from "standard" NCP tasks to a broader definition – including expertise, advisory, and networking – can be a natural and stimulating perspective.

In a certain way, cultivating one's networks in Brussels and at home, and making sure one remains up-to-date on developments in one's field is the foundation (or "back end") of proposal reviews and client advice (the "front end").

This understanding of the role of NCP is less common, and it requires both freedom and responsibility, as individuals are encouraged to manage their time independently, while also being held accountable for results.

## A convincing service range

The European Commission guidelines and minimum standards are a good common denominator for what types of services National Contact Points are likely to offer. However, in your country you might have further developed a certain activity. For example, you might offer info sessions for certain target groups, or on different levels. It is therefore advisable to invest in thinking through your service offer and presenting it a clear way. Clients should no longer be puzzled by your role and ask "what, exactly, can you do for me?"

Your service range can evolve, according to available human resources and public demand.

Make it clear that all information that clients share with you is treated confidentially.

### Toolbox: Create your service range
☐In cooperation with management, the National NCP Coordinator, and colleagues, agree on a common service range that NCPs in your country offer to their clients

☐Advertise these services clearly, for example on your website and in brochures

☐If possible, include client testimonials in your communication material

☐Periodically assess your activity – which services are in highest demand? How can they be taken further?

### BEST PRACTICE – Focus!
The Smart Specialisation concept posits that defining and focusing on specific areas of research and innovation in each region makes investments more effective. Similarly, National Contact Points need to prioritise one programme over another. As a result, non-strategic areas are not neglected but rather treated reactively. Of course, the choice of focus areas must be periodically reassessed against changed priorities.


### Extending one's service range with consultants

National Contact Points can enlist the support of private consultants to support more proposers than a one-on-one follow up by the National Contact Point can accomplish.

In this approach, consultant fees are seen as a necessary investment, or "start-up cost", to obtain funding that should recoup this investment by far.

An NCP unit might be endowed with an annual envelope to enlist the support of consultants, either as speakers at info sessions or training courses, or as reviewers of proposal drafts.

## Finding consortium partners

"How do we find consortium partners?" is among the most asked question NCPs hear in their career. Most framework programme-funded projects are collaborative in nature. On the other hand, no unique, user-friendly platform exists to date. Many NCP networks have created their thematic online platforms that allows participants to browse a database of profiles and submit their own. Dedicated tools exist for calls in, Health, Space, Transport, NMBP, or Social Sciences and Humanities. Further partner search websites include the Enterprise Europe Network (EEN) database, and a database managed by the European Commission (Cordis).

There is no specific platform for SEWP calls.

Other players are discovering the market, such as Lab Explorer[4], a platform that allows labs to present their competencies and browse other profiles. Lab Explorer, with its user friendly design and growing user base, may well hold much promise for upcoming research labs that wish to grow their network in general, and look for European project partners in particular.

"Brokerage events" are organised by NCP projects with the support of the European Commission. Participants can book meetings with interesting profiles in advance of the event. The system optimises meeting schedules. This "speed dating" approach allows one to meet many potential partners in person in a short period of time. NCPs should advertise brokerage events to their clients as a way to connect oneself to a wide community of researchers or industry with views to Europe.

However, experience suggests that most consortia agree to cooperate without recurring to online partner search, or even to brokerage events. If you bring long-standing knowledge of the European R&I ecosystem to your job as NCP, you might have adequate partners for your clients as a top priority. Otherwise, go around ways may yield a list of potential partner institutions for your client.

### TOOLBOX: Helping your clients find consortium partners
**At meetings, be a facilitator**

Your client knows their domain, network, and project idea best. However, often the added value that a "facilitator" can provide is simply to guide the thinking process. Many partner ideas for consortia come up during meetings when an NCP and a client discuss the project idea. A better understanding of Horizon 2020, *Spreading Excellence* calls, and how the project idea can fit in, is all it takes to think of good partners.

**Past EU-funded projects**

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[4] https://www.labsexplorer.com/

A first understanding of your client's project idea will allow you (and your client) to browse for projects on similar topics funded under previous calls, thanks to the Cordis advanced project search[5]. The Cordis database goes back until FP1, and includes abstracts, consortium partners, funding amounts, as well as deliverables. Beneficiaries of these projects are likely to be experienced in, and interested by, European projects.

**Individual Partner Search**

In some cases, NCPs propose to support their clients in their partner search by contacting potential partners individually. In this case, you or your client can reach out to targets that you have identified in the Cordis database, for example. Ideally, you can think of interesting partnerships within your own, or your organisation's network.

Make sure to share information about the project proposal's research objectives, the targeted funding instrument, and the call deadline, bearing in mind confidentiality. Specify partner profile sought, for example by describing: required expertise, work to be carried out, the type of partner sought, and whether your client is looking for a coordinator or further consortium partners.

**Partner search via intermediaries**

Intermediaries and their networks can further help you reach the right consortium partners. According to their specialisation, intermediaries provide a springboard towards a host of players in any area, such as technology, innovation, science, or also coordinating and managing services.

Some examples of intermediaries include

- **The European Enterprise Network**. EEN maintains an extensive partner search tool and connects with SMEs all over Europe

- **National or regional industry clusters**. Cluster associations offer a privileged access to industry partners within specific technological sectors

- **National Contact Points**. NCP networks spread Europe-wide and specialise in certain sectors, such as space, ICT, or nanotechnologies, which might be relevant to *Spreading Excellence* projects.

- **European associations**. Many professions are organised in European associations which might be helpful contacts to find European project partners.

**Partner search with LinkedIn groups**

Social media can be a breeding ground for serendipitous partnerships!  On LinkedIn, hundreds of specific groups have organised around science and technology that allow you to with potential partner organisations. Create a profile in your name, join a group and follow their activity. Reach out to group members by posting an update in the group where you explain your search request. Follow up with responses to your update and make introductions with your client.

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[5] http://cordis.europa.eu/search/advanced_en?projects

## Creating and managing a support programme

To increase the leverage of their actions, National Contact Points may create and manage programmes to support Horizon 2020 proposers. These programmes must define their scope and eligibility. For example, the Luxembourg scheme "Fit4Horizon2020" targets small and medium-sized companies only, while the Turkish support scheme can only benefit potential coordinators. An advantage of these schemes is a relatively light administrative burden.

These programmes depend on budget availability and political will. A way to argue in their favour is to set up pilot programmes for a predefined period of time (or a predefined budget). A dedicated project manager should know the programme's details, advertise the scheme to the relevant audience, follow-up requests (or supervise the implementation officers), and conduct periodical impact assessments.

In the European Union, such support programmes are likely to fall under the *de minimis* regulation, a European framework that prevents undue subsidies by capping amounts companies can obtain from their government.

A support programme, even with a relatively limited budget, can prove to be an effective promotion tool. It might just be the "affirmative action" that some clients with potential need to be able to succeed at Horizon 2020.

### TOOLBOX: Creating and managing a support programme

☐Gather political and managerial endorsement for the creation and funding of a Horizon 2020 support scheme

☐Name a project owner and executive officers (administrative staff, other).

☐Define the target groups (any Horizon 2020 participation in your country? SMEs? Other?), funding amounts and eligibility criteria. Estimate desired outcomes (number of applications, effect on success rate in Horizon 2020).

☐Draft and validate a fact sheet by and application forms.

☐Advertise the programme. Handle incoming requests and execute payments.

☐Periodically assess the performance of the support programme. Have allocated funds been spent? Is there evidence that beneficiaries of your national scheme enjoy better results in Horizon 2020?

## Accountability and measuring results

The NCP Minimum Standards and Guiding Principles do not define if, and how, NCPs are to be held accountable for their achievements, and how results should be measured.

Some NCPs have found ways to measure their activity and its impact through various indicators, while others do not. In some cases, you might be obliged to provide proof of your achievements as part of a general policy of your organisation. Detailed measurement of NCP work seems to be mostly lacking in governmental or para-governmental organisations that adopt a policy-advisor view of the NCP function.

**How to measure results**

An "obligation of effort" type of measurement would take into account the number and quality of consultations done, or the number of attendees of info sessions. An "obligation of result" type of measurement occurs when NCPs are accountable for the evaluation result, or the European financial contribution perceived by beneficiaries in their constituency.

**Example: Switzerland**

Certain NCPs, such as Switzerland, have external evaluations conducted by a service provider mandated by the organisation's board. Consultants may be granted access to the client relationship management software and are mandated to contact NCPs' clients. Results are shared with all concerned parties to define future objectives together.

**Example: NCP Brussels**

- Annual satisfaction survey sent to clients whom NCPs dealt with during the year

- Satisfactory response rate; allows to identify what works best, and what further demands need to be addressed

**Example: Luxembourg**

- The NCP team is assigned KPIs as part of the overall oversight policy of the management board. These Key Performance Indicators, chiefly the perceived EU contribution and the number of projects obtained, are designed to measure what matters most to national policy, rather than measuring employee performance

**Example: Bulgaria**

- Bulgaria introduced a "NCP of the year" prize. NCPs, who are distributed across many organisations, benefit from added recognition rather than financial compensation.

**Measuring client satisfaction**

A way to measure results is by learning about client satisfaction. To know how their service is perceived by clients, some NCPs use formal procedures to measure feedback and NCP performance, while others rely on simpler methods or no standardised method at all.

## TOOLBOX: How NCPs can measure client satisfaction

NCPs and their managers should consider processing feedback in a way or another. This feedback can help you to adapt your service to better respond to your clients' needs, and thereby reach your organisation's objectives better, however they may be defined.

☐**Client satisfaction surveys after events**: Distribute satisfaction questionnaires after each information session or larger event that you organise. Using the same template each time allows you to track developments over time.

☐**Annual client satisfaction surveys**: Some NCPs, such as in Belgium, send out an annual satisfaction survey to clients with whom they interacted in a given year. Response rates may be low, but the periodic approach allows to measure changes over time.

**Example: Greece**

The Greek NCP institution, Help-Forward, has developed a survey and benchmarking system, which allows to track changes of responses to identical questions over time.

# Communication: informing, raising awareness

## Spreading the word on Horizon 2020 to your clients on and offline

Nowadays many communication channels exist, which make spreading the word on Horizon 2020 opportunities easier. When it comes to online communication, most NCPs use a standard triad of website, newsletter, and social media. Further online and offline media include published magazines, brochures or leaflets. In fact, having a website on Horizon 2020, or a dedicated section within another website, in your country's language or in English, is one of the NCP Minimum Standards and Guiding Principles requirements.

### Website
It is not useful to duplicate the Horizon 2020 participant portal or the EC website on Horizon 2020. A short overview, in your language or in English, makes more sense. Your national website should at least contain a description of Horizon 2020 as a whole, a link to calls for proposals, a news section for national news, and an event section to announce national or European info sessions and other Horizon 2020 related events. Your national Horizon 2020 portal is also your business card: It should make clear how to reach the NCP and what services you offer.

### Using English or your country's language(s)?
Using your language(s) to spread the word about EU funding makes sense, as it makes the content immediately relatable to nationals. It is an opportunity to provide added value, by explaining EU terms beyond simple translations. Using English makes your content accessible to a much wider audience. As all communication on EU funds is conducted in English anyway, you can expect your national target audience to understand English. Use English if you can reasonably claim that written material will be (almost) free of language mistakes.

### Media
Traditional media outlets should not be neglected, even though your own website, news, and social media accounts give you much flexibility and control over your communication activities. As NCPs are mostly associated with national authorities, publications specialising in research and innovation news, industry journals, or even regional newspapers may be interested by their news and events. Newsworthy pieces might include an overview of your country's performance in Horizon 2020, major national conferences related to EU funding, or success stories. These articles will require a jargon-free style, walking the fine line between technical accuracy and interest to the general public.

### Using Social media as an NCP
Succeeding at social media is hard. It is a whole new field of occupation! You should open a social media account after mature reflexion, and after having consulted and validated the project with your hierarchy. Taking care of social media will take a portion of your time and you should at least have a broad idea of what you would like to achieve, and who you would like to reach, with your social media account. On the other hand, as the initial investment is rather low (it literally takes a few minutes to set up an account), anybody can experiment with social media, and you may well be up for a positive surprise.

For NCPs, a social media account might be managed centrally by the communications department or by one NCP that deals with social media on behalf of all NCPs. Your host organisation might also have policies (and social media accounts) in place that you might have to comply with.

You can use social media for various purposes, on a spectrum of passive to active use.

**To monitor information** – you can use your social media account chiefly to monitor other accounts. The EU runs many official accounts (for example the European Commission page on Google+ or the @EU_H2020 account on Twitter). Reading these sources often can be an efficient way to stay abreast of news.

**To disseminate information** – broadcast information coming from the European Commission related to Horizon 2020 and research and innovation policy via your social media accounts. Repost information you read on other accounts or post newsworthy information you read elsewhere via your social media accounts.

**To advertise your services and events** – use your social media accounts as multipliers to reach a larger audience for your own news or events.

**To showcase your expertise** – spreading meaningful information via social media demonstrates your knowledge and interest in the topic, and shines a positive light on your competences

**To tap into unknown markets** – Target groups you might not know about might find you via social media and reach out to you to solicit your services.

## What channel to choose
You might feel compelled to join all familiar social networks, but this choice might unnecessarily increase workload (despite tools such as Hootsuite that ease this process). It might make more sense to focus on one channel that fits your needs and ambitions best.

**Twitter**: Researchers and innovative companies tend to be active users of Twitter, as is the European Commission and related institutions. This social network is very open (no "liking" is required to see most tweets) and is best used for casual interaction. Twitter provides useful basic statistics on how many users you reach and engage. Adding hashtags to your tweets make them more visible. Twitter is useful to raise your awareness to new clients. Regular activity and engagement with other users is crucial to building a meaningful Twitter presence. If you choose to pay for sponsored tweets, you can choose which audience should see or engage with your content (specifying the interests, or geographical location of your target audience, for example).

**Facebook**: The ubiquity and notoriety of Facebook is its main advantage. On the other hand, many researchers prefer to use Facebook for personal use only. An open Facebook page will provide you with great statistics on each post you make. A Facebook post easily accommodates larger pieces of text, videos, or slideshows. You can choose to pay to have your Facebook post viewed by a specific audience.

**LinkedIn**: As a business network, LinkedIn might be a natural choice for NCPs to engage with their target audience. You can create a LinkedIn group that allows you to post news items. A lively LinkedIn group is one where all members engage by posting relevant content themselves. You can also launch discussions or ask questions that, ideally, will spur a meaningful discussion among members of the group.

Cultivated as a privileged meeting place for professionals with common interests, a LinkedIn group can become a true catalyst for Horizon 2020 project consortia. To make this happen, you should define the remit of your group carefully, by choosing an intersection of two or three fields of interest (for example, "Horizon 2020", "*Spreading Excellence and Widening Participation*", and your country). As with all social networks, it takes time and dedication to build a name for yourself (and your group), but a thankful community and better results (in Horizon 2020 calls) might be well worth the while.

## TOOLBOX: Using Social Media as NCP

Use the below checklist to inform and guide your decision to use social media for your work as NCP.

☐Determine whether creating a social media account makes sense in your situation and what you would like to achieve with it, such as reaching more national stakeholders with news on Horizon 2020.

☐Make sure creating a new account is endorsed by your organisation's communications and social media policy, and comply with their guidelines

☐Choose a social network that will help you best reach your ideas and objectives

☐Carve out time to update your social media account and to engage with users, for example 15 minutes daily, or assign this task to a motivated and knowledgeable colleague.

☐Establish a list of sources that you can monitor to feed your social media account. Make sure to update your account whenever you organise an info session, or have relevant internal news to share.

☐Monitor your account's success.

☐Learn from other social media accounts, especially from other NCPs or, more broadly, the public sector.

☐Consider launching a paid campaign to reach a relevant audience (filtering for location and interests, for example)

### Newsletters

A regular newsletter is a way of building a lasting relationship with your clients. It allows you to spread factual information (on events, new calls…) by adding the local and personal flavour best suited for your national context.

In the sales profession, newsletters are considered a royal route for engaging with clients. They are used as part of "permission marketing", a way of engaging with clients in a loose fashion while trying to convert them into paying and returning customers. While National Contact Points do not sell in a strict sense, sending out email newsletters to a list of people who have explicitly given their consent to receive these emails can be useful.

First of all, newsletters deliver relevant information conveniently and more directly than a website or even a social media account do. A regular newsletter helps build trust in your services: Your clients might be more likely to contact you, as your periodic updates are a constant reminder of your expertise.

Second, each newsletter sent yield interesting statistics, such as open rates or click through rates, which allow you to see which topics your readers found particularly interesting.

Last but not least, anybody with an interest in your activity (and speaking the language you write in) can subscribe to your newsletter, thereby extending your influence beyond your circle of usual clients.

### Brochures and posters

Even in the Internet age, printed information can still be an effective communication channel. Some people prefer reading information on paper. For others, a physical publication, or paper invitation cards make the presented information appear more important.

### Toolbox: Using paper-based communication materials

☐ Send an information package on Horizon 2020 and the *Spreading Excellence* programme to major universities or research organisations.

☐ Create posters for info-sessions and larger events. You can either send the file to your intermediaries or encourage them to print them out in colour, or print them and send various copies to each intermediary. If the budget allows, consider a professional typesetting and print.

## Organising information sessions

Information sessions are a good way to provide introductory information on Horizon 2020 opportunities. NCPs concur that info sessions are well received and deemed useful by participants. Furthermore, nothing can replace the direct contact with your "customer base". Planning an info session will increase your notoriety and allow you to get to know your clients better. What is their level of knowledge and interest in Horizon 2020 calls for proposals? What are their main concerns and doubts? What information or service would they need next (a consultant, a consortium partner, a one-on-one meeting)?

Who asks questions, and what kind of questions are being asked can be revelatory. By judging the quality of the questions after your presentation, you can assess which organisation is seriously considering applying for upcoming calls, and who are asking questions for the sake of asking.

### Go where your clients are

Your clients might find it impractical to travel large distances to attend an information session. Many NCPs go where their clients are. They visit all major cities or speak at major universities. Seeking out your client base on a regular basis, for example twice a year, will establish you and your team as a known and respected contact person for Horizon 2020.

Many different formats are possible, for example combining presentations on related parts of Horizon 2020 by teaming up with your colleagues, joining a university event, or following an information session with a course on proposal writing. Earmarking budget for these "roadshows" should make sense to your organisation.

### TOOLBOX: Organising information sessions

☐ Check the call calendars. An information session is best planned six to four months in advance of the call deadline.

☐ Liaise with internal services to set up a date and place for the information session, and manage logistics (catering, invitations, and registration)

☐ Advertise your event broadly, but follow up individually where needed to ensure that relevant stakeholders consider attending the event

☐Automate invitations, registrations and follow-ups as much as possible. Online services, such as Eventbrite, allow you to create an appealing event page, accept registrations, manage check-ins, and send out messages to participants. Eventbrite, for example, also allows you to host paid events, and provides useful analytics.

☐ Prepare your presentation. European Commission presentations, the Work Programme and other texts provide ample inspiration. Make sure to adapt the content to the level of knowledge and interest of your audience. You may also include statistics and stories of projects from your country. Prepare readable and enjoyable slides.

☐ Rehearse your part and ask for feedback.

☐Make it interactive. Include some questions to the audience, or even a short exercise (evaluating a fictitious passage in a project proposal, for example), a technique which is often highly appreciated by the participants.

☐ Focus on follow up. Send a thank you mail to participants and respond to attendees who had further questions. Prepare a link to a short satisfaction questionnaire, if you didn't distribute it during the information session.

☐ Optional: prepare a news feature for your website or your social media account

☐ Optional: have photos taken for accountability

Evaluation Summary Reports (ESRs) of project proposals provide great insight into what is well received by experts, and what are common problems. ESRs are shared with the national delegates of the Horizon 2020 programme committees. The *Spreading Excellence and Widening Participation* programme is covered by the Strategic or Horizontal configuration of the programme committee. Being able to peruse some ESRs might give you additional insight into the makeup of a successful project proposal.

## BEST PRACTICE – At events, chunk your information
One tested strategy is to structure information according to modules, starting with more general information on Horizon 2020 a year to six months before a call deadline, while offering specialised sessions three months before the call deadline.

## BEST PRACTICE - Multi-NCP info-sessions
Various NPCs can work together to host an information session. In the case of SEWP, one could even imagine a common session with ESIF contact points.

Natural fits could be

- An info-session on Excellent Science – organised by the NCPs for ERC and the NCP for Marie Sklodowska-Curie Actions

- An info-session on "Smart Cities and Communities" – organised by the NCPs for Energy and Transport

- An info-session on *Spreading Excellence* – organised by the SEWP NCP and ESIF authority contact points

## BEST PRACTICE - Info session modules & focused target groups

Many NCPs are prolific organisers of info sessions and events. What works well is to present content based on "modules". Beginner information is distinguished from advanced content. Presented this way, National Contact Points act as genuine "consultants".

Another good practice is to narrow down target groups. Info sessions can be geared towards young researchers, social scientists, entrepreneurs, or ambitious Europe-minded researchers (*Spreading Excellence*). Bringing together an audience of like-minded individuals with a common level of knowledge also enables interesting exchange among them.

## Info sessions 2.0: Webinars

Webcasts or webinars can complement, or even replace, physical info sessions. Spreading the word about funding opportunities over the web is a cost-effective solution for both organisers and participants, saving time and money.

Furthermore, info sessions over the web can capture potential clients at an earlier stage of maturity. They increase the number of participants by allowing junior staff or other staff categories to dial in. Most webinar platforms are not one-way streets at all, but include chat or Q&A functions. Last but not least, the webinar platform will keep logs of registrations, attendees, attention spans, and chat histories, and also includes a feedback form.

Hosting successful webinar requires practice. Technical problems are common and the organiser team either needs to test the platform thoroughly before their first info session, or enrol a technically competent person that will ensure the platform is running smoothly. A host of solutions exist, ranging from free web-based solutions, such as *AnyMeeting*, to fully-fledged paid business solutions, such as WebEx. It is recommended to test various platforms to understand their strengths and limitations.

Capturing the interest of your audience is even more difficult on the web than in person. It is a challenge to conduct a successful webinar, but you can increase the quality of your webinar info session by heeding some pieces of advice.

| Pros | Cons |
|---|---|
| Cost effective for organisers and participants | Technical problems |
| More "democratic" and open | Start-up costs (benchmark and test solutions, subscription fees) |
| Bigger reach; lower barrier of participation | Low attention span |

| | |
|---|---|
| Captures prospective candidates at an earlier stage of commitment or maturity ("just getting the information") | Confident speaking skills and thorough preparation required; "speaking for the web" |
| Interactivity possible | No networking effect among participants |
| Analytics (registration vs attendees, attention span, log of questions) | |

*Table 3 The advantages and inconveniences of info session webinars*

### Toolbox: Hosting an info session webinar

☐Start on time. Greet your audience and thank them for joining you.

☐Present yourself and your role briefly. Extensive CVs are not appropriate, but briefly explaining the role of the National Contact Points and the reason for this webinar is useful, as not everybody might be aware of NCP services.

☐Speak slowly and deliberately. Ideally, you have written out keywords of your speech, and practiced to avoid ahs and uhms, as these fillers are even less tolerable online than in a person-to-person interaction. Avoid digressions.

☐Either upload a photo of yourself, or of the speaker, or enable the camera to add a visual element to your speech.

☐Upload and go through slides as you speak, just as you would during a "real" presentation. Share the material with participants.

☐A webinar should not last longer than 45 minutes. Take questions through the chat window during or just after your presentation, and answer them as you speak. If you are the host to an external speaker, make sure to prepare questions before, or during, the presentation.

☐Thank the audience! Send a follow-up email swiftly, including a link to slides, and a satisfaction questionnaire. Include contact details and invite participants to schedule individual follow-ups shall they wish to discuss their project proposal in detail.

# Concluding remarks

National Contact Points have created many good practices that can be adopted by their colleagues in other countries.

The NCP Minimum Standards and Guiding Principles are the first and foremost guiding principles, but we saw that they can be interpreted in various ways. Key ingredients of a successful NCP structure are effective communication channels both in the office and across Europe, a solid professional network, and a proactive attitude towards clients' needs. It pays off to choose web tools to establish client relationships. If resources and time are constrained, a wise choice of one communication channel over the other can be an effective strategy.

Whatever the size of the country or the structure of the organisation, each system must often deal with similar challenges, such as rooted in team work, management, partnership building, effective communications, and maintaining a relevant range of services. Some techniques can be implemented on a local level and might contribute to a rewarding and effective work environment for Horizon 2020 National Contact Points.

# ANNEX: METHODOLOGY

## Description of work

The description of work suggested to create three groups according to size of NCP system and degree of centralised structure (small, big decentralised, big centralised). NCPs in these groups would then identify best practices among the NCP systems across Europe.

● These groups would propose three tailor made guides on "how to do the job" (D2.7) according to three work environments. Tools would also be developed allowing the NCPs to improve the quality of proposals made by the applicants (such as pre-proposals checks, quantitative and qualitative analysis of Horizon 2020 participation).

### Methodology: further details

"Big centralised NCP system" does not refer to the size of the country, but to the number of NCPs in that country, as well as their organisational allegiance.

We might define a "small NCP system" as a country with 0-15 NCPs, while a big NCP system might include 15 to 40+ NCPs (France currently has 128 nominated NCPs, while the UK has 26). A centralised system hosts all or virtually all NCPs in one organisation, while a decentralised system has distributed nominations across various organisations.

A question on the NCP system was included in the survey conducted at the beginning of the project (T2.1). Available responses were taken into account and were supplemented by the authors' own assessment, based on experience and data on the H2020 participant portal[6].

The task team suggested the following division of teams:

● **Widening NCPs from "big centralised" NCP systems**: FCT/Portugal, APRE/Italy, IPPT PAN/Poland, EUResearch/Switzerland, RVO/Netherlands, Slovenia, Turkey

● **Widening NCPs from "big decentralised" NCP systems:** Bulgaria, Germany, Greece, Spain, Finland, France, Hungary (?), Ireland, Romania, Serbia (?), Sweden, United Kingdom

● **Widening NCPs from the following small NCP systems**: Albania, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Faroe Islands, Hungary, Israel, Iceland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Latvia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Malta, Slovakia

Despite this analysis, some cases remain where it is difficult to assign a country into one of these three groups.

### Creation of "expert groups"

Despite the task team's efforts, a critical mass of NCPs in each group could not be achieved. We therefore adapted our methodology to better engage NCPs and encourage them to share their experience.

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[6] http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/portal/desktop/en/support/national_contact_points.html

## Adapted methodology

### Discussion forum

The task team set up an online forum and submitted ten questions to stimulate the discussion and exchange of good practice. An online forum has the advantage over an online questionnaire, as every participant can read, and react to, each other's comments. However, NCPs were reluctant to use the forum and no discussion took place.

### One-on-one interviews

The task team resolved to one-on-one semi-structured telephone interviews. A list of questions was used to guide the interviews. In total, 17 *Spreading Excellence* NCPs agreed to share their perspective during these interviews. This guide attempts to summarize and to expand the feedback shared during these discussions.

### General observations

The interviews took on a fruitful dynamic, and most interviewees generously shared their impressions and experience with the interviewer. Each interview took one hour to complete. A certain organisation effort was needed to schedule the interview slots. In most cases, the prepared questions served as a springboard for an animated discussion. However, sometimes NCPs failed to see through their own ways of working, by explaining that they did everything "normally". It may be natural to be unaware of one's own ways of working! Making implicit working methods more explicit, and therefore replicable by others, was indeed the purpose of this guide.

### Methodology: final remarks

The methodology and this guide did not intend to provide a comprehensive, analytical view of European National Contact Point systems in general, or the SEWP configuration in particular. The NCP Academy, the network of NCP coordinators and legal and financial NCPs, have foreseen an extensive study of European NCP systems.

The approach is voluntarily subjective and qualitative, aiming to stimulate exchange and better cooperation, and to be immediately practical. We hope that this work will provide inspiration to NCPs, helping them to reflect, and maybe adapt, their ways of working. If anything, it is a reminder that constant exchange is key to innovation, in NCP systems, and beyond.

| Country | Name | Organisation |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Belgium** | Tania van Loon | The Brussels Enterprise Agency |
| **Bulgaria** | Yanita Zherkova | Ministry of Education and Science |
| **Cyprus** | Constantina Makri | Research Promotion Foundation |
| **Czech Republic** | Anna Vosečková | Technology Centre of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, TC ASCR |
| **Faroe Islands** | Maria Husgard | The Faroese Research Council |
| **Finland** | Outi Kauppinen | TEKES |
| **France** | Emmanuel Pasco-Viel | Ministère de l'éducation nationale, de l'enseignement supérieur et de la recherche, MENESR |
| **Hungary** | Orsolya Tóth | National Research, Development and Innovation Office |
| **Ireland** | Catriona Ward | Enterprise Ireland |
| **Lithuania** | Agne Paleviciute | Research Council of Lithuania |
| **Luxembourg** | Katharina Horst | Luxinnovation |
| **Moldova** | Elena Zamsa | Center of International Projects |
| **Netherlands** | Lieke Michiels van Kessenich | Netherlands Enterprise Agency |
| **Slovakia** | Jakub Birka | Centre of Scientific and Technical Information, CVTISR |
| **Slovenia** | Meta Dobnikar | Ministry of Education, Science and Sport |
| **Switzerland** | Cornelia Spycher | Euresearch |
| **Turkey** | Mert Uçanok | TUBITAK |

*Table 3 List of NCPs who participated in one-on-one interviews*

# ANNEX: ESSENTIAL RESOURCES

**Horizon 2020**

Horizon 2020 regulation of establishment

Horizon 2020 rules for participation

Horizon 2020 standard proposal template

Horizon 2020 standard evaluation form

***Spreading Excellence and Widening Participation***

Spreading Excellence and Widening Participation, Work Programme 2016-2017

A library of guides by the NCP_WIDE.NET project

**Projects**

Cordis: database of all projects funded under EU framework programmes

Horizon Magazine: The EU's research & innovation magazine