

Starting Point

Broadband Internet access is nowadays one of the key factors determining the economic potential and strength of a region.

There are significant gaps in the broadband coverage of the federal state of Rhineland-Palatinate in Germany. Closing them is one of the highest priorities for the government of the state. It has therefore launched a so-called [Broadband-Initiative Rhineland Palatinate](#).

In this framework, the Ministry for Economy, Transport, Agriculture and Viniculture asked us to design a dialogue process and to facilitate a series of workshops in several locations throughout the state. We developed this program in close cooperation with [IHK-Zetis](#), a firm which had been mandated to take care of the organization and logistics of the workshops.

Broadband coverage varies significantly at a local level. The [atlas](#) of the German government which is supposed to map the available technologies by location is in any case not accurate enough. Even when it indicates that coverage is good in a town or village, it might very well happen that no connections are available in a certain neighborhood or even in one portion of a street. This means that solutions for closing coverage gaps must be developed at a local level.

The objective of our mandate was to raise the issue (in rural regions most particularly) to determine the real needs of the users as well as the solutions which they could resort to.

Furthermore, our mandate specified that: (a) the results obtained at the end of the workshops needed to be documented and consolidated; (b) the workshops had to be structured in the same way and take place openly and transparently; (c) in choosing the locations of the workshops, care had to be taken to cover the entire state in a representative manner; (d) the series of workshops was expected to generate useful lessons which could then be made public; and (e) the workshops should be used to identify participants and specialists who could later on take care of implementing specific coverage improvement projects.

Our Role

We quickly realized that coverage gaps were not due to the lack of technical solutions, but rather to the difficulty of letting demand and supply meet locally.

We therefore decided that the workshops should not be used predominantly to describe the different communication technologies available, but to create some sort of a "market square" where the actors concerned – i.e.: users, telecommunication companies, consultants, municipal authorities and economic development agencies – could come together and start a dialogue at eye level on needs (demand) and ways to satisfy them (supply).

We wanted to avoid the deficiencies of classical information meetings. Precisely because the topic is complex and controversial, it was in our view indispensable to actively involve the participants on an equal footing.

Phase 1 (November – December 2007):

The objective of the first phase of the project was to collect and structure ideas for improving broadband coverage. To reach this goal, we organized ten workshops throughout the state. Up to 110 people took part in those events.

We chose large meeting rooms which we transformed into a market square divided into three areas or "stands", each one of them being devoted to a particular topic:

- Topic # 1: What is technically feasible?
Presentation of available technologies, their potential and their limits: DSL, radio, satellites, optical fibers, electric power lines, UMTS, WLAN, WiFi, and other futuristic visions.
- Topic # 2: What do I need?
What are my actual needs as a user? Examples of how broadband networks have been used resulting in added-value.
- Topic # 3: What can I undertake myself and where can I find some support?
Personal initiatives; networking; subsidies (potential and limits); discussion partners; etc.
(This stand was also meant as an "outlet" where participants could get rid of their complaints and demands.)

Participants were free to move from one stand to the other, without any obligation to visit them all. On each stand, an expert was available to provide information and initiate a dialogue. Specialists from telecommunication companies, consultants and representatives from municipal authorities or economic development agencies were chosen as experts. We helped them getting prepared and emphasized particularly that they should not try to convince or teach participants but discuss together with them what could be done to resolve issues. Participants therefore had ample opportunities to ask their own questions and to contribute their own ideas and suggestions. Projects which were drawn up on the stands thus resulted from joint thinking.

At the end of each workshop, the experts summarized the ideas and projects which had been discussed on their stands and we then facilitated a Q&A session. Even if participants had no guarantee that their question would be answered on the spot, this gave them an additional opportunity to express themselves. And in any case, each intervention was duly recorded, which helped us determine the priority of the different issues as the workshops advanced.

First plenary session (April 9, 2008):

On April 9, 2008, we facilitated a plenary session with approximately 180 participants, in the presence of the Minister for Economy, Transport, Agriculture and Viniculture. The main purpose of this session was to present the plan of action which the government had decided to implement in the meantime, based on the results of the workshops, to improve broadband coverage throughout the state. In addition, a phase of dialogue during which participants dis-

cussed how to move forward the projects resulting from the first series of workshops was again included in the program.

Phase 2 (May – November 2008):

After the plenary session, the project entered in a second phase devoted to implementation. The objective of this second phase was to make sure that local initiatives designed to improve broadband coverage would indeed materialize. To reach this goal, we organized seven workshops, again throughout the state, with up to 85 participants per event.

These workshops were structured in the same way as the first ones – which means that participants again got an opportunity to get involved together with experts in developing solutions and contributing their own experiences. The following questions were raised on the stands:

- Topic # 1: How could a solution be found which will fit *my own* needs?
- Topic # 2: How could *I* take advantage *myself* from publicly funded programs?
- Topic # 3: How could *I* benefit *myself* from the experiences made by others in circumstances which are similar to mine?

Second plenary session (March 18, 2009):

Again in the presence of the Minister for Economy, Transport, Agriculture and Viniculture, we facilitated on March 18, 2009, a plenary session, this time with more than 220 participants. The purpose of that session was to take stock again, to present projects which had been implemented successfully in rural regions and to address forthcoming challenges and initiatives. During the dialogue phase of this session, participants could delve deeper into the discussion of those challenges and initiatives.

Results

Our role during the workshops was one of a "pilot". We defined a methodological and thematic "thread" running through the entire program, took care of time management and made sure that each workshop would end up with results which could be documented. The success of the workshop did not only depend on the quality of our "piloting", however. The ability of the experts to facilitate true discussions on the stands was a determining success factor too.

Despite some initial skepticism with regard to the readiness of the participants to get actively involved, the concept of the workshops proved to be adequate and robust. Our decision to advise the experts not to "teach" participants, but on the contrary to involve them in a dialogue was particularly appreciated. Participants highly valued the possibility given to them to ask *their* questions and to express *their* ideas and suggestions. There have been very few critical remarks regarding the workshop design. A couple of very positive articles were even published in local newspapers.

Interestingly enough, it seems impossible to capture and manage the vast number of opinions and statements expressed in this kind of workshop. We observed several times that the process was becoming even rather chaotic. But at the end conclusions always emerged from

the chaos and we were able in all workshops, without exception, to systematically structure and summarize those conclusions in a way that allowed participants to take something back home which they visibly found valuable.

The experts (especially those who represented telecommunication companies) would of course have liked to promote their products. But it quickly became very clear to everybody that any attempt to improve broadband coverage on an individual and isolated basis is doomed to fail. Suppliers therefore understood that there is no way to do business in this field unless different actors pool their information and ideas and start working in networks.

The workshops obviously contributed to the creation of networks between users, telecommunication companies, consultants, municipal authorities and economic development agencies, with the goal of combining resources and making real progress in improving broadband coverage at a local level.

The transparency of our approach and our willingness to promote a real dialogue between experts and users helped avoid the usual stumbling stones in information meetings regarding controversial issues. Participants never used the workshops as a kind of Wailing Wall. They realized that those workshops gave them a unique opportunity to combine resources and experiences in order to move broadband coverage improvement projects forward. As a matter of fact, the majority of the suggestions made by participants and summarized in our reports to the Ministry have rapidly produced an effect.

Our contribution was only one piece in a larger program and all the broadband coverage gaps will not be closed for the short term. However, our client considers that the workshops have been a success: "The dialogue process which you have designed represents for us a new concept which worked perfectly well and opens for us interesting perspectives for the future."

Thanks to the creation of a Secretariat of the "Broadband-Initiative Rhineland Palatinate", the process which was ignited during the workshop rapidly and visibly led to concrete projects.

Already during the first plenary session, the Minister in charge of the broadband coverage improvement program told us that he views the workshops as an enrichment of the governmental problem-solving process.

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