

# How to work intersectorally and agilely in administration? A brief practical guide for administrative staff.



Visual by Aleksandra Schreiber  
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The “Consortium for Employment of Migrants Consistent with their Education” is a project within the **Regional Integration Network Berlin (RIN Berlin)**, established by the Senate Department for Labor, Social Affairs, Equality, Integration, Diversity, and Anti-Discrimination. The project aims to facilitate complex problems thanks to specific solutions and has been proven over a three-year project period. It consistently uses agile methods and processes that are user-oriented, fast, intersectoral, and iterative. Solutions are developed, tested, and optimized collaboratively in a very short time, and then scaled and implemented. I wish to present this approach to you and inspire you.

## WHY did we choose to work this way?

Everyday life and challenges we face have become more complex. Changes are accelerating. Expectations towards public administration are high. We are expected to think ahead, identify pressing issues, address them, and quickly respond to multidimensional questions with answers that have an immediate and lasting effect and can be adapted as needed. At the same time, our society is more diverse today than it used to be. This makes the challenges we face more complex and the answers to them not always straightforward. Time and human resources are scarce. We have realized that sitting alone at our desks and brooding doesn't help either. Whether it's a project, a committee, or an event, we have to work together. Specifically, this means inviting experts and users to collaborate in the development of solutions, quickly implementing the promising ones, testing them, making the tried and tested ones visible, thinking big, and consolidating our efforts!

## WHAT specific changes will this bring to work of public administration?

### Focus on users – rather than work as an end in itself

At the beginning of the process, we consider for whom the planned project is intended and what specific improvements our work should bring about for users. We should focus on people and positive change in their lives.

### **Work that is enjoyable – rather than working strictly by the book**

We work with diverse perspectives and expertise from the civil society and the business sector to find the most appropriate solution possible, which is developed from the outset together with the target group (i.e., the users). This gives rise to ideas that would not be possible in an administrative apparatus with silo mentality.

Our work is engaging and varied because we avoid unnecessary meetings and working groups that follow a rigid agenda and yield little in the way of results. We only hold meetings with a clear focus on a problem. Once solved, the focus group disbands.

### **Participatory – rather than silo mentality**

We are embracing genuine participation. In specialized meeting formats, we give experts from a wide range of fields, such as administration, civil society and business space to propose solutions, free from hierarchy and open to collaboration. This allows us to elicit ideas that would otherwise never be voiced. The process is also resource-efficient as it allows us to arrive at possible solutions more quickly.

### **Transparent – rather than everyone for themselves**

We use agile and digital project management tools that give everyone a chance to participate: It is easy to join, participate in, and leave the process, regardless of time and place. It saves us time, as these tools make it possible, for example, to elaborate appropriate documentation during the meeting.

### **Visible and effective – rather than working behind closed doors**

Since the process is intersectoral and participatory, it not only achieves targeted networking and impact, but also greater visibility. Ultimately, all participants can share the solutions using their internal and external communication channels. Thus, we can reach further.

### **Iterative and scalable – rather than on the first of never**

We test the most promising ideas in practice as quickly as possible. In doing so, we accept the risk that it may not be perfect at the beginning. We learn and pass on the improved solutions to the decision-makers so that the model approach can be turned into a standard solution and scaled up.

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## **HOW does this approach work in practice? Five steps to success!**

### **Step 1: “Identifying structural barriers” and “Establishing an interdisciplinary focus group”**

Start by asking yourself: What do you want to change in people’s lives and, above all, for whom exactly? It is essential to clarify who you want to take with you on this journey and who you need to make the change happen. For this purpose, you initially need a small group of people from different sectors who work in your area of expertise and want to discuss complex barriers, hurdles, and problems as well as develop solutions. It is important that the group is as diverse as possible, for example, people from administration, civil society, and business and that the user perspective is represented. If the target group has experienced the obstacles firsthand, even better. The task of the target group is to tackle the tough issues and ultimately define the actual problem from the users’ perspective as specifically as possible. An example: International professionals are unable to find suitable work despite having their degrees and qualifications recognized. The problem: The matching of skilled workers and companies is not working. Women are most affected by this.

> **Expert tip:** It is worthwhile to hold the first meeting in person, as this builds trust and commitment. All subsequent focus group meetings can be organized remotely. This saves time and lowers the barrier to participation.

### **Step 2: “Identifying barriers”**

In the next step, for example in a digital exchange format, further expertise and new perspectives on the specific hurdles can be brought in through a co-creative/participatory process (for example: We looked at the mismatch not only from the perspective of international professionals, but also exchanged ideas with employers. We presented the most important obstacles on a whiteboard on which everyone involved in the process could add ideas).

> **Expert tip:** When working in collaborative focus groups, be sure to avoid any expression of rank or hierarchy. This can be achieved, for example by assigning roles in a meeting only for the duration of the meeting. Or you can agree at the beginning that everyone can speak openly and that the list of speakers is not based on hierarchy. This makes the ideas more diverse and the group more resilient. Because even if obstacles arise, everyone is aware that the solutions came from the group and no one will be held responsible. This was a very positive experience for me personally!

**Step 3: “Developing solutions”**

The next step is to develop a concept for a potential solution. This is where ideas for implementation are needed. A digital tool can help with this, enabling us as public administration to collaborate with external partners. This can be done simultaneously or not, organized according to tasks and responsibilities. In addition, we as the RIN Berlin team also work in formats such as sprints, retrospectives/reviews, and, when we have specific projects, daily meetings. We use whiteboards for documentation and do not write minutes.

> **Expert tip:** It is worthwhile to make even greater use of collaborative digital tools. We are working on avoiding unnecessary emails and minutes so that we have more time for projects instead of administration. And don't be afraid of the transparency of tasks that comes with using such a tool. It is not about strict control, but makes it clear to everyone what needs to be done, when, and by whom. This results in real synergies, creates momentum, and simply makes it more fun to work together!

**Step 4: “Building and testing prototypes”**

The next step involves quickly testing the concept in real-world situations. You want to gather insights in order to learn and improve your idea. For example, our idea was to bring together international professionals and companies at a special matching event. We didn't know if the concept would work. Nevertheless, we arranged a venue, prepared the professionals and companies thoroughly, and held the event. Afterwards, we were able to measure what we had achieved from the target group's perspective using specific criteria.

> **Expert tip:** Trust among managers and allies is essential for truly embracing agility. Make sure you have this trust! In practice, this means a paradigm shift for the administration: In these changing times, not everything can be “watertight” before it is implemented. The administration must also slowly dare to try something new. This sounds trivial, but it is not easy at all... Accepting mistakes as steps in the learning process is not common practice in the administration or in the society. That is why good communication is important to explain the process within the focus group and also to the outside world.

**Step 5: “Refining solutions” and “Sharing and applying good practices”**

In the final step, you refine the tested formats and incorporate the feedback provided by the target group into the concept in order to optimize it. By implementing a second project, you are already implementing a good practice project and then passing on the concept to the decision-makers, for example in the form of guidelines, in order to scale up and consolidate the improved solution.

> **Expert tip:** This approach is particularly effective for complex tasks. Contrary to our intuition, which tells us to invest a lot of time and effort in the details when dealing with difficult tasks, it pays to be bold. Test the prototype of your idea in practice with actual users as early as possible and get their feedback. They will tell you precisely whether it works and what you should improve. This also allows you to react more quickly to changes.

**WHERE can this approach be applied?**

The methodological approach can be applied in project work, in the work of a committee, at an event, or when working on a strategic process. It always makes sense when the focus is on the users, different stakeholders come together, and innovative solutions for existing or new formats are sought.

**Why is it important to work in an agile and intersectoral manner? What does science say about this?****Three questions about intersectoral work for Verena Schmid, PhD, and Carla Runde | Intersectoral School of Governance Baden-Württemberg****• What does intersectoral work mean in administration?**

Intersectoral work refers to cooperation between different sectors such as the government, the private sector and the civil society. Such cooperation – for example, municipal climate advisory boards or roundtables on urban safety – is already a common practice in many areas of administration. In order to be effective, it requires awareness of the differences, strengths and limitations of the sectors involved, as well as a process that considers both common goals and individual benefits. Successful intersectoral work therefore requires transparent negotiations on power, resources and political framework conditions.

**• Why is intersectoral work worthwhile? What makes it so special?**

Although intersectoral processes are challenging, they offer advantages that cannot be achieved with isolated forms of work. They bring diversity together: Different perspectives and expertise have been shown to lead to more creative, sustainable and

innovative solutions. At the same time, resources are used more efficiently, which increases impact and fosters stable, trusting relationships among participants. This in turn increases acceptance and willingness to implement the jointly developed measures and strengthens their social embedment. Overall, bringing together different sectors with their perspectives creates common dynamics that make it possible to solve problems which would otherwise be difficult to solve on one's own.

• **What do I need for this?**

Clear frameworks, transparent rules and a step-by-step approach that enables early visible successes and strengthens trust are essential for effective intersectoral work. Active communication, personal interactions and a process management that promotes participation and balances different voices are equally important. In addition to these structural prerequisites, the competence of the people involved is crucial for success: Analytical, communication, conflict-resolution and process skills, as well as integrity, form the foundation of intersectoral work. These skills are necessary to constructively bring together diverging professional logics, resource situations and interests. The “Executive Programme Intersectoral Governance” at the Intersectoral School of Governance (ISOG BW) supports professionals and managers in developing precisely these skills and applying them effectively in complex interface contexts.

You can find more information at:

<https://www.isog.dhbw.de/angebot/executive-programme-intersectoral-governance>

The ISOG BW provides information about further specialized training courses and intersectoral topics in its newsletter and on LinkedIn: <https://www.isog.dhbw.de/kontakt/newsletter> & <https://www.linkedin.com/company/isogbw>

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