

BUSINESS COACHING REPORT

Developing an online tool that helps entities identify funding opportunities for lake protection and restoration projects

1. Coaching context

The proposed concept involves an online tool designed to help environmental NGOs, small businesses, and local authorities identify funding opportunities for lake protection and restoration projects. In the initial version, users would complete a short form describing their organisation, proposed activities, location, expected implementation period, and estimated budget.

Based on this information, the tool would recommend a limited number of relevant national or European Union funding opportunities. Each recommendation would provide essential information on the programme, eligible applicants and activities, indicative financing conditions, deadlines, application requirements, and a link to the official source.

The concept addresses a practical difficulty. Potential applicants often search across multiple portals, programme documents, newsletters, and institutional websites. Funding information is fragmented, eligibility rules can be difficult to interpret, and calls may change or close quickly. Smaller organisations may lack the time or specialist knowledge required to screen opportunities efficiently.

The participant intends to test the idea with a small number of real users before investing in a complete platform. The coaching assignment therefore focused on defining the minimum viable product (MVP), selecting an appropriate pilot group, and establishing evidence-based criteria for deciding whether further development is justified.

2. Coaching objectives

The overall objective of the coaching assignment was to support the participant in converting a broad digital platform idea into a focused and testable service concept.

The first objective was to define the essential functions of the initial version. The MVP should test the central value proposition, faster and more reliable identification of suitable funding opportunities, without requiring the cost and complexity of a fully automated platform.

The second objective was to clarify the target users and identify organisations that provide meaningful feedback. NGOs, small businesses, and local authorities, all benefit from the tool, although they differ in legal status, funding experience, project maturity, internal capacity, and decision-making processes.

The third objective was to design a realistic pilot based on genuine project scenarios. Testing should examine not only whether users can operate the interface, but also whether the recommendations are relevant, accurate, understandable, and sufficiently actionable.

The fourth objective was to establish practical success criteria. These criteria should combine user value, matching quality, behavioural evidence, willingness to use or pay, and the operational effort required to keep funding information current.

The fifth objective was to identify the main risks associated with further development, particularly inaccurate eligibility guidance, outdated calls, excessive maintenance requirements, user expectations of guaranteed funding, and the handling of organisational or project-related data.

3. Coaching methodology

The coaching methodology followed a lean validation process combining customer discovery, service design, prototype testing, and evidence-based decision-making.

The first stage consisted of an assessment of the proposed customer problem. The analysis considered how target organisations currently identify financing, where time is lost, which information is most difficult to interpret, and what consequences arise when a suitable opportunity is found too late or is incorrectly assessed.

The second stage involved user segmentation. Environmental NGOs, small businesses, and local authorities were examined separately according to their typical funding needs, application capacity, procurement and approval constraints, preferred project size, and experience with national and European programmes.

The third stage defined the minimum testable service. The focus was placed on the smallest set of functions required to generate and explain a useful shortlist.

The fourth stage designed a mixed-method pilot. Users would complete realistic tasks using their own organisation and project ideas, while the participant would collect quantitative measures and qualitative feedback through observation, short questionnaires, and follow-up interviews.

The final stage translated the pilot into a go, adapt, or stop decision. The assessment combines demonstrated user value with technical and operational feasibility, because a well-received interface is not sufficient if the underlying funding data cannot be maintained accurately and economically.

4. Key insights

The business idea responds to a relevant and recurring need. Funding discovery is not a one-time activity: organisations involved in lake protection need support for restoration works biodiversity monitoring, pollution reduction, environmental education, circular-economy solutions, nature-based tourism, research, equipment, or institutional cooperation.

The strongest initial value is not the quantity of funding calls displayed. Users need a short, credible, and explainable selection. A tool that presents many loosely related opportunities would reproduce the information overload already experienced on public portals and search engines.

The recommendation logic must therefore be transparent. Each result should explain why it matches the user profile, which conditions appear to be satisfied, which

issues require verification, and when the underlying information was last checked. Official programme documentation must remain the authoritative source.

A curated database, structured intake form, clearly defined eligibility filters, and partly manual review can test the value proposition more safely and at lower cost. This concierge-style MVP also allows the participant to learn which questions and matching rules matter before automating them.

Data freshness is a core product function rather than an administrative detail. A relevant but closed or amended opportunity can damage trust. The MVP should therefore include an administrator view, a visible last-verified date, an archive status, and a routine for checking deadlines and programme updates.

The tool should be positioned as decision support, not as a guarantee of eligibility or funding success. Results should distinguish confirmed facts from indicative matches and clearly direct users to official guidance. Personal or commercially sensitive information should be minimised during the pilot, stored only when necessary, and handled in accordance with applicable data-protection requirements.

Testing all customer groups is useful at the validation stage, but the evidence may reveal a stronger first market. NGOs value time savings and access to unfamiliar programmes; small businesses prioritise commercial relevance and co-financing conditions; local authorities require auditability, formal approval, and support for multi-partner projects.

5. MVP and validation framework

The framework below summarises the recommended path from a limited prototype to an evidence-based development decision (Figure 1). It connects the essential functions of the MVP with the composition of the pilot group and the evidence required to justify further investment.

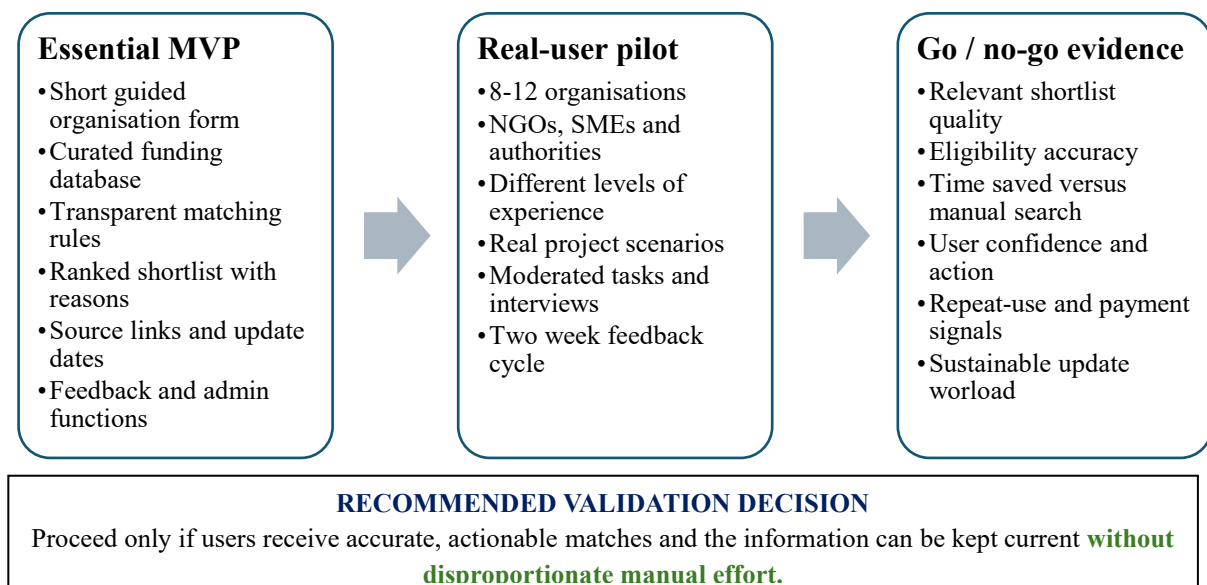


Figure 1 – MVP validation framework
Source: developed by the business coach

The framework reflects an important sequencing principle. The participant should first verify that a small set of functions generate useful recommendations, then test the service with diverse real users, and only afterwards decide whether automation and platform development are justified. This approach reduces technical investment before the customer problem, matching logic, and maintenance model are sufficiently understood.

6. Coaching recommendations

The first prototype should include a concise guided intake form covering organisation type, legal status, country or region, project location, proposed activities, beneficiaries, project maturity, estimated budget, own-contribution capacity, preferred implementation period, and partnership status. Questions should use plain language and provide examples relevant to lake protection and restoration.

The funding database should initially contain a manageable, curated set of opportunities. Each record should include the funding authority, programme and call name, eligible applicant types, eligible geography and activities, financing range, co-financing requirements, deadline or expected timetable, key exclusions, official source, status, and last-verified date.

The matching process should apply explicit rules and return approximately three to five ranked opportunities. Each result should contain a short reason for the match, the principal eligibility conditions, possible gaps or uncertainties, the next action, and a direct link to the official documentation. Where information is incomplete, the result should state that human verification is required.

The MVP should also include a simple administration function for adding, updating, archiving, and reviewing funding records, a user feedback option for rating relevance and reporting errors, and basic analytics showing completed forms, recommendations opened, official links followed, and repeat visits.

The recommended pilot group is 8 to 12 organisations: three to four environmental NGOs, two to four small businesses active in environmental services or lake-related solutions, and two to four local authorities or public lake-management bodies. The sample should include both experienced and first-time applicants, organisations with different project sizes, and users from at least two geographical contexts.

Participants should be selected because they have a real financing need or a credible project idea within the next 12 to 24 months. Testing only with personal contacts who have no active funding need may produce polite feedback but weak evidence. Where possible, the pilot should also include one funding consultant or programme intermediary as an expert reviewer, without treating that person as a substitute for end users.

The pilot should assess relevance, accuracy, usability, actionability, demand, and operational feasibility. Recommended decision criteria are:

- at least 70% of tested users rate one or more recommendations as highly relevant to their real project;
- no critical eligibility errors are identified, and at least 90% of material programme facts are accurate at the date of testing;
- at least 75% of users complete the form without assistance and understand why each opportunity was recommended;
- the median reported search time is reduced by at least 50% compared with the user's current approach;
- at least half of the users take a verifiable next step, such as opening the official call, sharing the result internally, or requesting further information;
- at least 40% express a credible intention to use the tool again, join a paid pilot, or purchase an enhanced service;
- the participant can update the initial funding database within a sustainable weekly workload and can identify a reliable long-term data-maintenance process.

A decision to proceed should be based on the combined evidence rather than on one metric. Strong user interest with poor matching accuracy indicates that the problem is relevant, but the rules require redesign. Accurate matches with little user action may indicate weak urgency, unsuitable users, or insufficiently actionable recommendations. High value combined with excessive manual maintenance may justify a narrower geographic or programme focus, a subscription-plus-advisory model, or partnerships with funding-information providers.

If the pilot is successful, the next development phase should prioritise improved filtering, saved organisational profiles, alerts for new or amended calls, and a clearer update workflow. Monetisation can then be tested through institutional subscriptions, paid expert verification, premium alerts, or project-based advisory support. The participant should avoid committing to a complete platform until the preferred customer segment, willingness to pay, and cost of maintaining reliable data are demonstrated.

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Signature: 

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