

International Educational Project Management: Coordinator's Experience

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Abstract – The paper describes the coordinator's experience with management of an international educational project, based on the example of European Leonardo da Vinci "ELefANTS" project dealing with suitable e-learning solutions for specific target groups (duration: 3 years, partners: 12 institutions from 7 EU countries). We describe the fundamental problems as well as positive experience and benefits for the participating institutions. There following main issues are discussed: benefits of the project, coordination-related problems, problems of content delivery, personal problems, economical and administrative issues and strategic problems. The purpose of this paper is to inform the prospective designers of educational projects about the experiences (including the negative ones – in order to avoid or at least minimize their unnecessary repetition).

Index Terms – e-Learning, Lifelong learning, International cooperation, Project management.

INTRODUCTION

We were really pleased when our Department obtained the Leonardo da Vinci grant in the spring 2004, after the demanding preparations: promising and meaningful topic, reliable partners, experience – all these aspects could convince us that the implementation phase of the project would be easy. However, that feeling was a mistake. Today, after 32 months, our experience is opposite to the original idyllic ideas in many issues. Only 4 months have been left. What went wrong? Why this disillusion?

FOCUS OF THE PROJECT

The purpose of the "ELefANTS" project (E-Learning for Acquiring New Types of Skills – [1]) is to help people from two specific target groups find new employment opportunities through e-learning courses, making them familiar with modern communication technologies. Special e-learning course is prepared for each target group.

The first target group is formed by persons with limited mobility – people handicapped in a specific way, such as parents taking care of little children, persons in household and those who cannot be regularly present at a remote workplace, and persons with health handicaps limiting their ability to move.

The course that is being developed for this group within the project is focused on obtaining of knowledge and skills in

the area of teleworking, accompanied by the basic introduction of working with a PC and telecommunication devices (modems, establishing of data / Internet connection, access to remote databases etc.).

The second target group is represented by employees in industry who need to complement their qualification in the area of automation technology and teleinformatics in order to keep or improve their position in the job market. The course for this group deals with very special and difficult topics, including e.g. control systems, digital telecommunication networks, PLC (programmable logic controllers), logical systems, numeric algorithms, digital systems, regulators, filters, fuzzy logic, industrial diagnostics and safety, artificial intelligence in automation and technological diagnostics and safety.

Besides preparation of both courses, the objective of the project is also to test them within the pilot run (400 trainees altogether), then to adjust the final version according to the obtained feedback, and possibly apply for their accreditation.

THE PARTNERSHIP

The project is an international one. The partnership is formed by 12 institutions from 7 EU countries, representing 7 language areas. Since the courses are being prepared simultaneously in all partners' languages (English, German, French, Czech, Slovak, Slovenian and Polish), one of the planned by-products is the possibility for trainees to improve their knowledge of foreign languages. This is emphasized by the development of a multilingual multimedia dictionary specialized in the relevant topics.

The partner institutions are represented by universities (preparing the specialized content), education and e-learning bodies (providing methodology and approach to the target groups), industrial companies (with employees in the area of industrial automation, providing specialized information) and humanitarian organizations (contacts with handicapped people).

EFFICIENT COLLABORATION

As a coordinator of the project facing the approaching conclusion date, we have to ask, which model is more efficient: peer-to-peer collaboration of many partners (12 in our case), or just one institution (the contractor) outsourcing all necessary tasks as needed? Our experience provides a definite answer: in order to keep the project management under control, it is more advantageous to base it on a single strong coordinator using the outsourcing methods to ensure

all other functions. However, such approach is in conflict with the very basic idea that is behind this type of projects, i.e. equal partnership as a fundamental condition for their acceptance.

BENEFITS FOR THE AUTHORS

What benefits can we expect as the initiators and coordinators of the project? Firstly, we can learn something about our partners – about the areas of their professional interest, their knowledge and expertise, but also about their diligence and reliability. Now we already know who would not be our partner for the future projects... Nevertheless, it should be noted that even the negative experience is quite inspiring in certain sense.

The partnership brings us some knowledge about the education methods and procedures at different universities; the advantageous ones may then be applied in our main area of activity, i.e. teaching.

The project also brings finances to most of the partners. Surprisingly, the granted money may be more interesting for those who behave irresponsibly as we will see hereinafter.

The multilingual nature of the courses also brings new experience: it is not like making seven independent ones, everything must be properly thought out and linked together, and new procedures have to be developed.

As a coordinating institution we got an important experience with management of an international team, which is also geographically dispersed – this means that the people from the team do not have direct personal contact, often for many months. (Regrettably, the planned videoconferencing session that should have substitute the personal meetings did not attract much attention.)

BENEFITS FOR THE TARGET GROUPS

People from the target groups are the main beneficiaries of the entire project. Thus, the access to the prepared e-learning courses and to the multilingual multimedia dictionary is most important for them. In the pilot phase this access is free of charge; the first course (fundamentals of teleworking) will be free also after finishing of the pilot run.

Taking of the courses should help the trainees from both groups find new employment possibilities. Even if only few people are successful in looking for new job thanks to our courses, we will be proud to conclude that the project will have fulfilled its purpose.

COORDINATION PROBLEMS

The coordination and management of the entire project appears to be much more complex and demanding than we could imagine in the beginning. The first pitfall is the big number of partners. If they were fewer, possibly geographically dispersed, they would be controlled and managed much more easily; there would also work the following psychological effect: if there are only several partners, the role of each one is very important – which is not the case of a 12-partners team (however the role of each partner is the key one, even in larger teams).

The coordination tasks consume much time, which was not properly reflected in the budget. Because of that, we are desperately missing several control elements on the management level.

Another problems are slow reactions of the individual partners. The assignment of almost all tasks is made through e-mail messages, containing also the required deadlines. We have to note that not a single task has been completely fulfilled by the partners in time.

Special chapter could be written about the reactions of the “play dead” type. The principle is very simple: the initial e-mail is not responded within the given deadline, neither after its urging, then the coordinator is informed that the message was missed somehow or that there was no time to answer it, and so on. The result is a new deadline, which is usually not met, again, the cycle repeats and the delay rows. The worst thing is that the coordinator does not have any efficient means to force the delivery of results.

CONTENT DELIVERY PROBLEMS

The preparation of electronic multilingual courses is a demanding process comprising the following steps:

1. Preparing the outline (script) in the original language,
2. Preparing the full text in the original language,
3. Review of the text in the original language
4. Translation of the full text into the reference language (usually English),
5. Preparing the electronic version (including images and multimedia elements) in the reference language,
6. Translation of the electronic form from the reference language to the national ones (5 languages in our case),
7. Implementation of all national versions in the electronic learning system,
8. Program debugging,
9. Reviewing (with subsequent corrections and repeated implementations).

All these steps must be performed for each of 20 modules forming both courses.

Because of the high number of partners, the described process converges towards the final state only very slowly. The technological procedures take much more time than we expected, which is another source of growing delay. It is also not negligible that the individual phases are directly bound to each other, i.e. the next one cannot begin if the preceding one is not completed. Problems emerge when the key partner for the current phase does not deliver the results in time and the others must wait (although they have enough capacity at that moment).

As for the authoring itself, we should note that before the formulation and routine performing of the described procedure we had to define standards for the delivered materials, including graphic and text formats, and also decide about the learning management system (LMS) to be used. All the activities were consulted with (some) other partners, which resulted in slight delay even before the initiation of the implementation phase.

Originally, the period for the entire “ELefANTS” project was set to 2.5 years. Due to the delay we have been forced to ask for a 6-months prolongation.

PROBLEMS OF PARTNERS AND PERSONNEL

This category of problems is perhaps the most critical one. If there is a good will of all parties to complete the project successfully, the results will probably be achieved despite some time slips. On the other hand, if a partner limits or even stops the cooperative activities, it will probably have catastrophic consequences for the project. What is the solution? Logically, the easiest way should be to cancel the contract with the problematic partner and to transfer the respective tasks (and budget) to another one – simple and efficient. The catch is that, ironically, the problematic partner must agree to this solution – but such partners usually do not like similar ideas. However, the coordinator, who is responsible for the results, usually does not have any means to force the partners to deliver some useful outputs.

Our experience in this is more than negative. One of the partners stopped efficient cooperation (delivery of outputs) for some reasons; we suggested that we could take over some part of the respective tasks (or perhaps all of them) and rearrange the financial flows accordingly, i.e. get the adequate part of the partner's budget. The partner agrees that we could do the work but does not understand why the money should be taken by us. And the precious time is running... What is the way out of this situation? Any other than do the necessary work and forget about the money?

Compared to this, the other interpersonal problems are negligible, but they also influence the time plan of the project quite a lot.

The first issue is staff turnover. Most of the people engaged in the project have changed during the implementation phase. The problem is that the new colleagues must be acquainted with the overall project objectives, with their own tasks, and also with the rules and logistics. This is acceptable in one or two cases, but our project has been affected by more than ten such ones.

Another factor, which is of course behind the control of the partners, is the health. Two key players have become seriously ill during the implementation period of our project, and it is quite difficult to find adequate deputies, especially in the situation when the work is already in progress.

An interesting issue that negatively influences the progress is the cooperation of more than heterogeneous team – such personalities as the theorist, programmer, teacher, clerk and manager can be only hardly forced to cooperate efficiently, since each of them follows different partial objectives. The coordination meetings are usually affected by the differences of their opinions.

Also, the team members do not have enough time: almost each of them has the project only as a “part-time job”; their priority is the main occupation, and if their capacity is fully utilized there, no time remains for the project.

ECONOMIC AND BUREAUCRATIC PROBLEMS

The most serious problem in the economic areas is the correct estimation of expenses: when we write this text, the budget of the project is already four years old. It is not necessary to emphasize that almost everything has changed

since then – so, who wants to propose a project of a similar type, must be a visionary.

We underestimated especially the demands of the management work – only “full men”, not just “volunteers” are required. However, we are afraid that if we had demanded budget for full-time workers, the project would have been rejected as too much expensive. (Note: Even the proposed budget was substantially reduced by the agency.)

Concerning the incompatibility of economic and accounting rules – one procedure is defined by the project rules, another one (based on national legislation) is used by the coordinator's institution, and different ones by the partners (again, in accord with the respective national legislations). Nevertheless, everything must be handled so that all the procedures are globally compatible in result.

The fundamental problem is that not all expenses required for project implementation are eligible. If we add the compulsory financial contribution (participation) of the partners, the project itself becomes quite serious financial burden for all participants.

STRATEGIC PROBLEMS

For our international e-learning project, the selection of LMS (Learning Management System) was a specific problem. Originally we intended to use a LMS that was prepared within another Leonardo da Vinci project, but its support would be problematic (or even none).

The commercial LMS that is routinely used for education at our faculty had two principal constraints: licensing policy (the system must be operated by/for 12 partners, the licenses are very expensive and the budget did not take them into account) and multiple language versions (totally incompatible).

The only solution was to take an open-source LMS and adapt it for the purposes of the project. The adaptation itself was extraordinarily demanding (i.e. expensive).

The strategic mistake in this case was relying on the originally promised system. On the other hand, our strategic mistake was the promise to deliver quite large volumes of printed materials, approaching the standard load of a truck. Even the logistics for distribution of such quantity through available channels is not trivial.

PROBLEMS WITH THE AGENCY

Our national agency was quite helpful and supportive from the very beginning. After submitting the Interim Report we obtained a good evaluation and most of the expenses were accepted as eligible. But: then the national agency changed (the supervision of the project within the Czech Republic was given over to another institution).

That meant two major problems for us. During the transitional period we had nobody to communicate with (to discuss the problems). Although two months may seem to be a short time, they are almost endless in the project life. And then the financial issues (already approved after the Interim Report) were revised, with conclusions different from the original ones, which resulted in many confusions and extra work for everyone.

The positive experience is that the new agency also supports our work, offering administrative help and advices even above its duties.

SUMMARY

What are our recommendations for prospective project applicants? We can offer the following ten items:

1. In the project proposal promise only the things you can handle alone even in the case of failure of your partners.
2. Invite only proven partners to take part in the project.
3. Fewer partners can do more useful work.
4. Employ the key managers (general and account ones) for full time.
5. If the project is an international one, plan twice more time than usual for the implementation phase.
6. Do not underestimate the budget for management tasks.
7. Insist on keeping of the approved time schedule.
8. Multiply the estimated budget by two.
9. Think thoroughly what you can take from the previous work and what can be done from the scratch.
10. Do not make any preliminary “gentlemen agreements”.

CONCLUSION

The “ELefANTS” project is now in the final stage. Pilot testing of the courses has already started in some countries; on the contrary, there is a considerable delay in other ones.

Will we succeed to start the courses in all countries, so that they are run in the right time and in the adequate quality? What will the reactions of the trainees be? Will we be successful with the accreditation application (at least in some countries)? How will we manage the preparation of final report and final version of all information materials? The answers should be revealed in the coming weeks. Most of the issues should be clear by the presentation of this paper at the conference.

It is not easy to say, but our experiences with implementation and management of the project could be summarized as: much work, little joy. We hope this paper will bring useful information to our colleagues...

It is more than advisable that immediately after the initiation of a project, the coordinator (or the key managers) takes a course focused on correct application of rules (especially management and financial ones) as well as on practical experience obtained from former coordinators.

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REFERENCES

- [1] ELefANTS (online), <http://elefants.cvut.cz>