Learning to succeed in European joint projects: The role of the modern project manager – the flow-keeper

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Abstract

The constellation of an EU-funded project-consortium is often of very disparate culture, languages, level of knowledge and technology, social competences, experiences, ideals and ambitions that may clash with one another. Hence, coordinating and managing successful European joint projects is not an easy task. This paper addresses the learning experience of managing international research projects and, through the author’s own experience and literature review, attempts to exemplify the role of the flow-keeper – a modern project manager whose particular skills are to ensure the success of EU joint projects of considerable complexity. Propositions for developing the management of international joint projects are also provided.

Keywords: EU-funded projects, modern project manager, international joint projects, flow-keeper

Introduction

Increase in the number of international joint projects provides evidence of globalization. Collaborative activity has thus become an important element of strategic behaviour – a determinant of competitive advantage (Buckley, Glaister, & Husan, 2002). The Framework Programme (FP) of the European Commission (EC) is an illuminating example of such an occurrence. The FP wants to integrate and strengthen European research by setting high scientific and technological objectives and to which a certain number of participants are required to collaborate in order to secure EC funding. Reaching such objectives should, in turn, enable Europe to compete with the USA and Japan guaranteeing it a prominent role in new and profitable markets such as ICT and biotechnology, as the EC suggests (Pavitt, 1998).

In order to apply for EC funding, a requirement is joint collaboration between three or more European partners. New European members – former East European countries – are invited to participate and, at times, even required to participate to form new consortia to
spur their developing economies. Furthermore, consortia must include commercial partners prepared to invest in the project and possibly capitalize on the results. This, of course, creates a consortium of very disparate cultures, languages, levels of knowledge and technology, social competences, experiences, ideals and ambitions that may clash with one another. However, the EC is very keen to homogenize, to globalize the European scientific and technological market make-up by offering alluring financial contribution that are very hard to resist.

This encourages organizations and institutions from the 27 European member states to plan and propose projects to be submitted to reviewers for very rigorous scrutiny. The competition is extensive and only a few will receive a budget, usually less than the one for which they applied. The EC has provided several schemes for funding, depending on the size of consortia and scope of the project. Funds can therefore run from a few thousand to several millions of euros and from a minimum of three partners to theoretically no limit. Projects can run from a minimum of a year to a maximum of five. It sounds like an idyllic proposition, but it is not without problems.

Because of the complexity of the EC as a governmental body, its vast contributions, its unlimited bureaucracy and the large combinations of possible project fields and consortia, coordinating and managing successful European joint project is not for the faint of heart. The EC does offer financial support to undertake research, but in exchange requires continuous feedback in terms of reports to ensure that the project reaches its set objectives. A program officer in Brussels is appointed to every project and carefully monitors its progress and issues a “good to go ahead” or a “red flag” when grading it. The red flag would stop the funding until each partner completes a full review (for an explanatory practice of the FP contractual context the reader should refer to the FP web page: http://cordis.europa.eu/fp7/home_en.html). The administrative and managerial tasks may be overwhelming, especially for smaller partners including academia and small enterprises which may not have the required skills to cope.

This paper addresses the learning experience of managing international joint research projects and attempts to exemplify the role of the flow-keeper – a project manager whose particular skills are to ensure the success of joint projects of considerable complexity, like many EC-funded projects. This paper is based on the author’s experience of working in three such projects funded by the EC and on the evaluation papers of two of the projects (reference omitted to protect anonymity). All three projects examined learning under different conditions between 2002 and 2007.

This paper is organized as follows: the author’s experience and observations while working in three joint research projects within the European Union (EU) are set out next. Then a brief literature review is included on those aspects observed by the authors in the projects, with the addition of critical factors for the success of international joint projects. The next section builds on the previous two sections and elaborates on the role of the flow-keeper. Finally, a discussion and development of propositions for the management of international joint projects is followed by a concluding section.

Observations

The work experience in joint EU projects was surely without detachment. For this reason, I chose to write only this section, about observational research, in the first person. The collaborative research I undertook with colleagues from several European countries was personally very rewarding in terms of learning, but not without its setbacks and disappointment.
The projects are described very briefly. Project A was carried out between 2002 and 2004. It was a large “Network of Excellence” that involved researchers and practitioners from 14 European institutions of higher education. Project B was initiated in 2004 and ended in 2005. The consortium was composed of 12 funding partners of large and small firms. The partners were divided into special interest groups (SIGs). Each SIG involved actors from different backgrounds and different research interests in order to support greater cross-fertilization of ideas. Finally, project C started in 2005 and was completed in 2007. It comprised eight “core funding partners”, including six universities, a non-governmental organization and a small company. In addition, there were eight non-funding, associate partners.

The issues and problems

Issues and problems are described in terms of communication, culture, administrative complexity and lack of commitment and continuity.

It is easy to be overwhelmed by the composition of the consortia. People meet for the first international meeting. We look in the face people with whom we are not familiar and some of whose languages are foreign; we start wondering who the others are, what they do, whether we are going to get along or if we personally and scientifically are on a par. Personal emotions, beliefs and stereotypes run freely during this phase of the meetings. Then we start a round of presentations and the composition of the consortia starts to delineate, and we learn about the blend of academic and industrial titles and professions, covering all corners of Europe. We all speak at least two languages (more or less!), some three or even more, but we all communicate in English, the language of science.

Communication

Lack of an effective means of communication between various systems is a component which can determine failure (Fortune & White, 2006). The first issue I personally faced with communication was the different meaning we all attributed to English words, both work related and not. I remember spending most of two days of a SIG meeting to explain to ourselves what we meant by a few words we used daily in our working practice. Even though all SIG participants worked in a community with the same interests, because of the language, our own smaller communities and personal experiences, we were attributing different meanings to our community discourse. So at the end of the two-day SIG meeting we thought it necessary to draw up a small dictionary to which everyone would have agreed before proceeding with the beginning of the actual SIG work. Obviously, that was not the most effective way of using EC funding and was not accounted for by EC standards.

The other issue to come to terms with was the complexity with which the EC wanted us to report our spending. In all honesty, it was not so much the complexity of the reporting that disappointed me, but the misunderstanding of it because it had not been explained to me by the competent person. During the first international meetings, the project coordinator or project manager in charge of managing the joint project meets with the group leaders of each participating organization. The reporting process is explained to them, hoping then that the leaders will go back and fill in the details to the group members. This is where the first breach of communication occurs; this time between the group leader and the single participants about filling all the paper work. It becomes a hassle for everyone, especially for the coordinator who “patiently” waits for every report before assembling a single document to be sent to the EC evaluation officer for reviewing. Deadlines were missed every single

The third communication issue is the online community. During face-to-face meetings, the groups in each SIG decide on the work to do for the following months before the next project meeting. Much of the work is then performed at the group’s site, but communication with the others is kept through electronic mail. However, contrary to what happens when one is physically present in his or her network of responsibilities which requires constant attention, the electronically linked community can easily be pushed back and forgotten. Stress of those waiting for feedback rises. I admit that I personally was guilty of that too. The problem is that the linked community is theoretically a wonderful concept that should save us time and money for travelling, but to which we are not accustomed yet and will take time to get adjusted.

Lack of dissemination of a strategic vision or clear goals is another communication issue. In the literature, the clear definition of goals and project objectives and their acknowledgement is a critical factor related to the success of a project (Belassi & Tukel, 1996; Fortune & White, 2006). The project manager’s failure to communicate clear goals from the very beginning was in fact a drawback in two of the projects. In turn, that affected teamwork and participation by lowering efficiency and motivation. Yet little effort was spent on project tasks until towards the end of the project, decreasing productivity.

Culture

The diversity of culture may bring broader experience and enrich a team, but it also brings problems. The issue of culture is usually, but not intentionally, handled as a minor issue in international joint research projects (Fortune & White, 2006). One reason for this may be that the participants are all adults and mature people who should rise above those issues.

The first cultural issue I noticed was the use of job titles between the participants. In some countries the title is usually not used. A person when presenting him or herself does so just by name. While in other European regions, the use of the title is recommended and denotes the hierarchical attitude. This can put people who are not used to such hierarchical structures into an uncomfortable position; the opposite situation is also true. The issue of hierarchy surfaces again with senior members having to come to terms with a younger authority as in the project leader or SIG leader. For example, I was involved in one of the projects when I was still a doctoral student. I remember clearly having troubles getting my work and ideas through in the SIG. The SIG leader, an older professor, did not seem to listen much to me or anyone else and had his own agenda that he took faithfully through to the end. So the work I did seemed like a waste of time then, but after a few years I did find a way to utilize it for my own publication.

A problematic issue was authority, both strong and weak. I found some of the participants to be very opinionated and always wanted to get their ideas through, certainly they were not shy. Some of the English speaking participants instead were given leading roles because of their ability to speak English fluently. There were plenty of occasions for loud and lively discussion between all participants, and people of course took sides for cultural proximity or out of pity. Stubbornly, we all thought that we were better than the others because we came from this country or the other, because we had this much history and traditions on our shoulders and longer experience in whatever domain. Interestingly enough, all exacerbation disappeared when evening social events started. Good food, a good glass of wine or beer, interesting and fun conversation replaced the resilient behaviour of few hours earlier, and...
laughs and talking about personal matters levelled out all cultural issues and made us all European citizens.

**Administrative complexity**

The EC has provided several Programmes to which to apply for funding. Each Programme has also its own funding and reporting schemes. However, the administrative burden of reporting remains a complex affair, despite the scheme of the Programme, to the point that smaller partners, or any for that matter, who have no help in such issues could doubt further participation in European projects, possibly precluding the contribution of knowledge. This was definitely the case of one of the projects, where the participation of our institution in the project was reserved since the work needed from us to complete all the administrative and management reporting was prevailing over the actual work in the project although we sorted it out at the end.

**Lack of commitment and continuity**

Setbacks are inevitable in projects comprising large European consortia, and lack of commitment and continuity are only two of them. Rotation or withdrawal of personnel – management of people – can influence the performance of a joint venture (Glaister, Husan, & Buckley, 2003). In one of the projects, the SIG of which I was part comprised a small group of people. It started with six participants from four different universities, but it ended with only three from two universities. That put more pressure and a heavier work load on the remaining participants. In the other project, my colleague and I drew back from our participation for various reasons, and our institution placed a new person to fill the vacancy. Needless to say, the contribution of the new person and therefore the participation of our institution to the project were reduced to a minimum. The sense of ownership, motivation, and tacit understanding of the meaning of the project was lost with the rotation of personnel.

**Requirements on project leader**

Internal and external communication, from project leaders to single researcher or participant, should be better implemented. The project manager (PM) should make sure that team members work at the pace agreed and that deliverables are constantly measured by conferencing with, and emailing often, the team members. Continuous flow of information and communication from and to the project leaders should never be prevented.

There is a need for a PM with many interpersonal skills and competence about managing international joint projects. Having a prominent figure with extensive scientific experience like a professor managing a project is not sufficient for the well-being and success of an international joint venture.

**Research on project management**

This section briefly presents the research on project management by first introducing the literature on critical success factors (CSF) which are deemed important for the success of projects. Then it comes to the literature on the issues and problems highlighted previously by the author which either confirm or add on the literature on CSF, following the same structure as the previous section.
Critical success factors

Project management is today a key activity in many organizations, but it has long focused on project scheduling problems, believing that better scheduling techniques would result in better management and therefore project success (Belassi & Tukel, 1996). Recent literature, however, has highlighted other factors, many of which considered outside the normal management sphere are referred to as critical success factors (Belassi & Tukel, 1996; Fortune & White, 2006). Fortune and White (2006) completed a review of 63 publications that focus on CSF and found that there is only limited agreement between the authors on the factors that influence project success. The most cited factors were: support from senior management, setting clear and realistic objectives, and producing and updating an efficient plan. However, only 17% of the respondents named all three together. Others, identified CSF in order of citation count, were good communication/feedback, user involvement, skilled team, effective change management, competent project manager, sound basis for the project, well allocated resources, good leadership, proven technology, realistic schedule etc.

Communication

Lei and Skitmore (2004) write that communication is the biggest gap between skills needed and skills possessed by project managers. Proactively communicating, in the sense of reaching people, listening, sharing and collaborating, makes problem solving easier for the PM, and it resolves in a smoother road to project success. Still, even though this seems quite an obvious answer, in the experience of researchers who worked in EU joint projects (Asch & Jackson, 2001; Somekh & Pearson, 2002) it seems that much of the problem within large multicultural networks lies in getting work effectively to and from people. An exacerbation point may be that between industry and public sector. It may be that industry's concept of project management does not reflect that of universities’, and since in many joint EU projects the PM comes from the public sector, there is a “clash of personalities”.

Culture

In international joint projects cultural factors are added to CSF, both at a national and corporate level (Glaister et al., 2003). The national culture is dictated by language and national work practice, while corporate culture is the firm-specific operating culture or, in the case of academia, the values, norms, working procedures and discourse of the “community of practice”. Linked to these hard-to-control factors are resulting factors such as communication, trust, problem-solving, bridging of cultures and the use of a lingua franca. The success of a relationship then is dependent on levels of “psychic distance”: “the more ‘different’ the other person’s culture seems, the greater the degree of cultural distance” (Conway & Swift, 2000). Therefore, PM’s cross-cultural skills turn out to be a necessity for successful relationships between participants of a project (Buckley et al., 2002).

Although a review article (Fortune & White, 2006) has reported that cultural factors are only marginal CSF for the success of international joint ventures, they nonetheless have an augmented dimensionality in EC-funded projects and play an important part that can create difficult situations during the process of a project (Somekh & Pearson, 2002). Learning across cultures is unquestionably not without problems.
Administrative complexity

The assessment of EU projects is based on accountability, i.e., partner organizations have to demonstrate their effective and efficient use of funding (Hyatt & Simons, 1999). This system of evaluation looks at the completion of “deliverables” – easily computable outcomes – but overlooks the fine-grained analysis of processes such as learning, collaboration etc. Sociologists, psychologists and educationalists are usually not involved in these feasibility studies (Schwarz, 2005). This is not to say that EC programs are easily assessed, on the contrary (Luukkonen, 1998). Because of this process, human factors, i.e., social and cultural, are disregarded, even though they may well be a key to learning, disseminating of knowledge (Asch & Jackson, 2001; Somekh & Pearson, 2002), globalization and probably project success.

Lack of commitment and continuity

The impact of human resource management (HRM) – the effective management of people – is considered one of the most important assets of an organization (Ahmad & Schroeder, 2003). The performance of an organization is sometimes measured against corporate HRM policies and practices (Hiltrop, 1996). Nonetheless, managing people and motivating them to succeed in international joint projects is complicated.

Requirements on project leader

The notion of the traditional PM as a person whose tasks of technology development and innovative work is daily carried out is fading. A PM today should successfully draw together administrative, technological and human resources competences (Blackburn, 2002; Styhre, 2006). This role has been replaced by a champion, a change agent. In the case of international joint projects, the PM has to possess cross-cultural skills necessary for undertaking successful alliance (Buckley et al., 2002). The economies and societies are shifting into a globalizing gear, so a PM should expect to blend sooner or later competences such as project and human resource management, technology, sociology and endurance into a future career.

The flow-keeper

The two previous sections set the ground for the introduction of the modern PM. A recent study by Dvir and colleagues (2006) looked at critical management factors affecting the success of military defence projects. They found that the most important figure in a project team is the manager. Also, four other CSFs were common: the end-user’s sense of urgency and essentiality of the project; team cohesion; the need for learning mechanisms for dissemination of lessons learned during the execution of the project; and clear definition of operational and technical requirements of the product. In other words, when comparing these findings with those described earlier, we still observe that PM, appropriation of project, cultural factors, learning and clear definitions of goals are again critical factors important for the success of projects. These skills are necessary to answer to the emergent needs of society through globalization and collaboration. An “emergent PM” has to possess additional skills like the following: “learning by doing, deep familiarity, total immersion, a research spirit, dialogue and debate, and patience. Consequently, an ideal PM has to be able to play multiple roles such as a learner,
teacher, participant, anthropologist, linguist, epistemologist, researcher, communicator, and debater. [...] Such a manager is more likely to learn locally and act globally” (Ramaprasad & Prakash, 2003). Such skills may allow us to recognize flow – deep enjoyment due to full involvement in an activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) – that should consequently set free the full potential of project members. Creativity becomes then an important feature of project management (Simon, 2006). A manager with these skills should in theory be able to manage EU joint projects to success.

On the basis of these premises, the needs suggested in the previous sections, and the need to further develop project management competences, the author would like to define then the modern PM as:

The flow-keeper, that is, enabler, flow facilitator. A modern PM with technical artefacts at his/her disposal whose role is to get communication, information, negotiation, listening and explaining, and focus flowing between all international participants of a large European network; A modern PM whose social skills are redefined to understand and endure cultural differences; A modern PM whose skills are needed to effectively manage the complexity of the EC and the “special needs” of the participating individuals.

Effective coordination of resources, and therefore possession of administrative skills, is also required by the modern PM to support the socio-economic goals of Europe (Georghiou, 2001).

**Propositions for managing joint EU projects**

In EC-funded international joint projects, the role of the flow-keeper is most probably the key to project success; success not in terms of the EC’s evaluative eyes and accountability of “deliverables”, but in terms of social, cultural and human triumph. Such triumph in turn should take care of, what the author believes to be, the most critical problem of joint European projects: communication between individuals from different European countries, organizations and institutions, from different domains of work, with different levels of expertise, with different native languages, cultural codes, discourses and community of practice. Communication of this sort seems rather simple, but when we add the historical suspicions for Central and Eastern European countries (Hyatt & Simons, 1999) and companies’ fear of leakage of sensitive information (Luukkonen, 1998), communication halts and misunderstanding reigns. This is where the skills of the flow-keeper, the modern PM, could be exemplified.

The project coordinator of a joint EU project happens to be often a professor with high scientific and educational qualifications. However, when this person is then confronted by the uncountable cultural and personal characteristics of each group leader and his/her co-workers, tight deadlines for submission, unfinished work, and need of thorough revision of work matters only exacerbate.

In the first place therefore the lack of a competent PM becomes an issue that plays against the success of the project. Then a question comes to mind: can it be so easy to just employ a PM who can manage the joint EU project? This paper answers this question by suggesting that having a PM managing a joint European project is not a sufficient condition to ensure effortless development. The specific skills that several authors (Milosevic, 2002; Ramaprasad & Prakash, 2003) have highlighted, and those of the flow-keeper necessary for the modern PM, are not usually taught in school. Another important aspect is that joint
European projects are rather the result of modern research collaboration and therefore a PM with such skills is difficult to find. However, active capacity building – EU-project management training – in research organizations should not be overlooked.

The flow-keeper’s role can be covered by a person who has skills to manage projects, but who also has experience in terms of managing people. Managing people though in terms of social and cultural issues, so a project manager who is also an anthropologist or psychologist (Ramaprasad & Prakash, 2003). Social interaction and informal discussion in the construction of knowledge is thus as important as technical and managerial skills.

The flow-keeper should evaluate the project constantly by informal and colloquial discussions – via telephone or video conference – in order to build solid relationships and commitment between groups. Short group-reporting structures for the formal evaluation of the project are also necessary. The flow-keeper should try to learn the local knowledge by maybe asking in advance a friendly member of that community, so as to avoid making irreparable mistakes and compromising the success of the project (Ramaprasad & Prakash, 2003). As part of the emergent project management, immersion in the culture and environment facilitates learning, but it is probably too much to ask to a PM who leads a joint European project with many international partners. So learning about that community would probably be adequate. A PDCA cycle (Plan, Do, Check, and Act) for iterative problem-solving should be put into operation by the flow-keeper to ensure quality control of the project. In addition, the EC should actively support the use of coaches to help the PM in a joint international venture ensure successful outcomes and a better management of time and resources – effective coordination.

Conclusions

The model of the PM is the focus of this article and the modern role that this person should assume in the knowledge society and global economy. Given the increase in funding by the EC for joint collaborative EU projects, there is interest in learning about the current lineage of PMs spawned by such projects.

The flow-keeper, the modern PM, is an individual with technical artefacts at his/her disposal whose role is to get communication, information, negotiation, listening and explaining, and focus flowing between all international participants of a large European network. The flow-keeper is culturally aware and holds social skills redefined to understand and endure cultural differences. The flow-keeper is not reticent to access a coach, or trouble-shooter, in times of difficulty. The modern PM holds skills that are needed to effectively manage the complexity of EU joint projects and the “special needs” of the participating individuals. Ultimately, universities and research organisations ought to give attention to the practical needs of research management. It is important though to recognize that the role of the flow-keeper is only a theoretical perspective which needs empirical recognition.

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