Establishment of successful strategies for project communications management

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Abstract: Organisations have shifted their focus towards elaboration and implementation of strategies for project communications management in current dynamic business environment. Communications are key elements for successful management at all phases of the project cycle – from the initial stage of the project proposal development, during the grant preparation process, the following project implementation and monitoring, to the final stage of evaluation and reporting. The paper aims to provide a practical research on four international projects and to explore the management of their internal and external communications during all project phases. On the basis of this extensive research, the article will also present recommendations for establishment of strategies for communications management as a vital prerequisite for successful projects that lead to fostering of collaboration, as well as the exchange of innovative ideas and practices.

Keywords: project communication, project management, digital communication.

Изграждане на успешни стратегии за управление на проектни комуникации

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Абстракт: В съвременните условия на динамична бизнес среда организациите се насочват към създаване и въвеждане на стратегии за управление на проектните комуникации. Комуникациите са ключов елемент от успешното управление на проекти във всички фази от проектния цикъл – от първоначалното изработване на проектното предложение, през процеса на подготовка на споразумение за предоставяне на безвъзмездна финансова помощ, последващите фази на осъществяване и мониторинг на проекта, до финалния етап на оценка и отчитане. Настоящата статия има за цел да представи практическо изследване на управлението на вътрешните и външните комуникации в рамките на четири международни проекта по време на всички етапи от тяхното създаване и реализиране. В публикацията се предлагат и препоръки за изграждане на стратегии за управление на комуникациите като жизненоважна предпоставка за успешни проекти, основани на взаимно сътрудничество и обмен на иновативни идеи и практики.

Ключови думи: проектни комуникации, управление на проекти, дигитална комуникация.

Introduction

Organisations have shifted their focus towards elaboration and implementation of strategies for project communications management in current dynamic business environment. "Delivering a sound management communication plan to all team members, sponsors, stakeholders, is one key to a successful project." [1] According to Ralph L. Kliem "project managers spend at least 80 to 90 percent of their time communicating on projects." [2] Ignoring the significance of communications remains one of the major reasons for failure of projects. In all phases of the project cycle, communications have a critical influence on the management success – from the initial stage of the project proposal development, during the grant preparation process, following the project implementation and monitoring, to the final stage of evaluation and reporting.

Project communications are critical in terms of keeping team members, managers, and stakeholders informed and on track in the project implementation process. Besides, they are also the key to identifying, mitigating, and coping with issues, risks, misunderstandings, and other challenges to project completion. [3]

To explore the specifics of communications management during all project phases, this paper provides practical research on four international projects, realised with the financial support of the European Commission under the Seventh Framework Programme (FP7). For the purpose of this study, the considered projects are chosen for several reasons: they are already completed with a long-term implementation and include immense variety of partner organisations - not only from different countries, but also with different organisational structures, expertise, and field of activity.

- **Consumer Sentiment Regarding Privacy on User Generated Content (UGC) Services in the Digital Economy (CONSENT)**
CONSENT is a *3-year project*, implemented in the period May 2010 - April 2013. It seeks to examine how consumer behaviour and commercial practices are changing the role of consent in the processing of personal data. CONSENT's multidisciplinary team intends to carry out a status quo analysis of commercial practices, and consumer attitudes through quantitative and qualitative study, to examine the legal position, to identify criteria for fairness and best practices, and then to create a toolkit for policy-makers and corporate counsel which will enable them to address problems identified in the analysis. The project includes *19 partner organisations from 12 countries*.

- Measures for Automated Recognition Technologies (SMART)
SMART is a *3-year project*, realised in the period June 2011 - May 2014. Its approach combines a technical review of key application with a review of existing pertinent legislation with the aim to analyse the smart surveillance technologies. On one hand, the project focuses on one meaning of "measures", i.e., it uses expertise from police and security forces from inside and outside the EU to "measure" (as in "calculate") risk factors in a number of priority application areas for smart surveillance technologies. They include border control, crowd control, counter-terrorism and e-government. It also evaluates the available safeguards for online surveillance and associated risks inherent in data-sharing and exchange. *19 partner organisations from 14 countries* are involved in SMART implementation process.

- **Rules, Expectations & Security through Privacy Enhanced Convenient Technologies (RESPECT)**
RESPECT is a *40-month project*, implemented in the period February 2012 – May 2015. It seeks to investigate if the current and the foreseeable implementation of informational and communicational technologies for surveillance of the citizens is balanced, determining on the grounds of different indicators "level of balance", where a lack of balance may exist and how it is perceived by the citizens. The project studies the options for redressing in the "balance" through a combination of Privacy-Enhancing technologies and different operational approaches. RESPECT produces an aggregate of tools that enable policy-makers to better understand socio-cultural, operational and economical significance of the surveillance systems. The project also prepares operational guidelines for the incorporation of protection of personal data by design approaches which enables the executive authorities to implement similar systems with lowest privacy risk and maximum-security gain to

citizen upon usage of their personal data. The project achieves its results with contribution by *18 partner organisations from 15 countries*.

- **European Informatics Data Exchange Framework for Courts and Evidence (EVIDENCE)**
  EVIDENCE is *32-month project*, realised in the period March 2014 - October 2016. It aims at providing a road map (guidelines, recommendations, and technical standards) for realising the missing Common European Framework for the systematic and uniform application of new technologies in the collection, use and exchange of evidence. This road map incorporates standardised solutions and enables policy-makers to realise an efficient regulation, treatment and exchange of digital evidence, legal enforcement agencies, as well as judges/magistrates, prosecutors and lawyers practising in the criminal field, to have at their disposal as legal/technological background a Common European Framework. Furthermore, it allows them to gather, use and exchange digital evidences according to common standards and rules. *8 organisations from 6 countries* participated in the EVIDENCE implementation.

The current paper explores the specifics of communications management in the four previously mentioned international projects, outlining the entire process via a matrix, developed specifically for the study. On the basis of this extensive analysis, the paper also presents recommendations for establishment of strategies for communications management as a vital prerequisite for successful projects that lead to fostering of collaboration, as well as exchange of innovative ideas and practices.

Conceptual framework
Within this paper, a variety of definitions need to be clarified, specifically definitions concerning the correlation between project management and communication processes within a project.

The PMBOK definition of project management is "application of knowledge, skills, tools and techniques to project activities to achieve project requirements. Project management is accomplished through the application and integration of the project management processes of initiating, planning, executing, monitoring and controlling, and closing." [4] According to Larry Richman project management is a "set of principles, methods, and techniques that people use to effectively plan and control project work. It establishes a sound basis for effective planning, scheduling, resourcing, decision-making, controlling, and re-planning." [5] Another definition suggests that the project management process includes scientific application of modern tools and techniques in different project stages to produce desirable outputs in accordance with the preliminary determined objectives within the constraints of time and cost. [6]

All of these definitions specify project management as a process related to application of certain tools and methods for achievement of predefined goals. This process is based on general management, as it uses the same primary function principles: *planning, organising, leading, and controlling*. However, the "use of general management methods did prove in many cases to be inadequate, with the result that time and cost targets were allowed to slip." [7] For that reason, project management becomes a separate discipline with its own specifics, tools, phases, and life cycle.

Figure 1 shows the main project stages - initiation, planning, execution, and closure, as well as the management processes that occur in the project life cycle - project definition, detailed planning project execution, monitoring and control, and post implementation review.

Within the *initiation phase*, a problem or an opportunity are identified, then an appropriate solution is appointed and on that basis the project itself is defined. At this stage, the project costs and benefits should be documented, the specific objectives and scope identified, and project consortium and teams appointed. The next step is *project planning*; there should be "detailed planning to ensure that the activities performed during the execution phase of the project are properly sequenced, resourced, executed and controlled." [8] The execution stage is implementation of every aspect that has been envisaged during the previous phases. To ensure all activities will be executed according to the predefined plan, monitoring and control processes are performed. The purpose for these procedures is to "track all major project variables – cost, time, scope, and quality of deliverables". [9] The final stage is project closure, which corresponds with the review of the project completion. Actually, this process is the final evaluation, carried out on the following levels: internal level (project and organisation), content level (subject area), external level (impact, exploitation, sustainability).
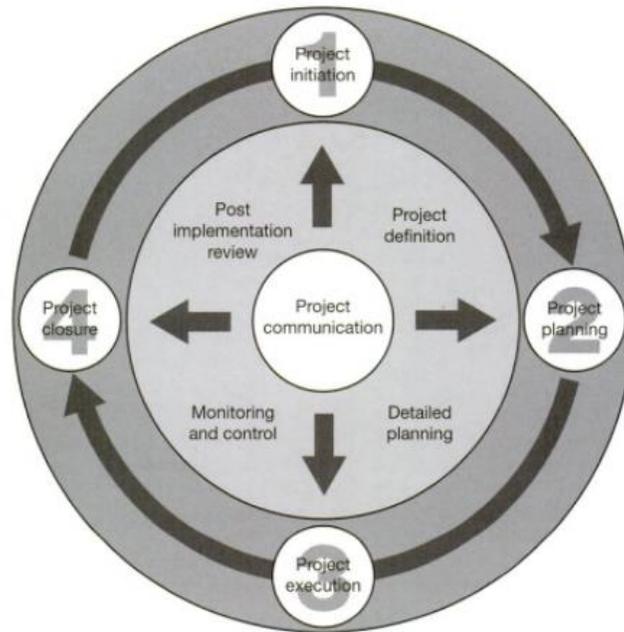

Figure 1. Phases of the Project Life Cycle [8]

The current paper is focused on practical research of four international long-term projects, funded by the European Commission. When the project is implemented with a grant financial support, the phases of its development and realisation have different specifics. All of the projects considered have performed within four distinctive phases, shown in Figure 2.
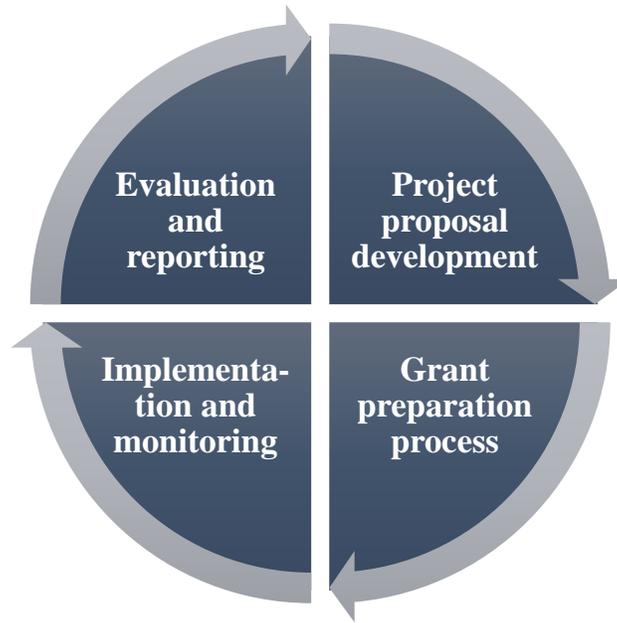
Figure 2. Phases of Grant-funded Projects

The first stage is *project proposal development*. This process is focused on the elaboration of a persuasive proposal, which identifies what is to be done; explains why these activities need to be executed; persuades the grant providing organisation that the proposal has a plausible management plan and technical approach, as well as the resources needed to complete the tasks within the stated time and cost constraints. This phase is quite similar to the *project initiation*, as it requires the same actions.

The second phase is *grant preparation process*. It is related to a compulsory procedure specifically defined by the grant providing organisation. Usually it establishes the key points of the grant agreement (when the project starts, reporting periods, amount of pre-financing, need for consortium agreement, and, if applicable, ethical issues, third parties linked to the beneficiaries, in-kind contributions provided by third parties, subcontracting). This process corresponds to the *project planning* stage, as the grant agreement describes detailed planning of all activities performed during the execution phase.

The next step in the project implementation process is *implementation and monitoring*. All activities from this stage aim to provide summative and formative ongoing control and assessment of quality and performance, in order to meet the project objectives. The purpose is the same as that of the *project execution* phase.

The final stage is *evaluation and reporting*. This phase is related to *review of the project completion*, but also includes a very specific for grant-funded projects aspect – reporting. It shows the grant providing organization the main results of project implementation. In the best scenario reporting is used also during the implementation phase as a monitoring tool. In this case, reporting provides tracking, identifies potential risks that contribute to the project risk management strategy, as well as facilitates cost management, showing full visibility of the budget and expenditures.

For the purpose of this research, another definition needs to be analyzed. Communication and its interaction with project management, leading to another dimension – project communications management, is of crucial importance to every project.

Communication is a core function of business, a wire, a mechanism and means of exchanging information in the organisation. "Whether written or spoken, it is the channel through which the business speaks to its users. It is the mechanism by which management influences employees and guides their work. It is also the means by which workers provide information and feedback that management needs in order to make informed decisions. An organisation that delivers clear, meaningful, and effective communications with customers, employees, shareholders, creditors and the public, has good chances to build trust and can rely on cooperation. [10] Nobody could imagine business functioning without communication - it cannot be done and cannot function, respectively, cannot be planned, organised and developed. [11] Business communication is interpersonal or inter-group communication that is subordinate to management and entrepreneurship goals. Its tasks are related to the transmission and acceptance of professional information in order to ensure the normal functioning of the organisation, as well as to the efficient elaboration and implementation of the management decisions, including control over their implementation.

Much has been written about how people interact and especially about communication difficulties and gaps that arise from differences in age, gender, expectations, ethnicity, or education. [12]

In the classical communication model developed by Shannon and Weaver in 1948, there are various concepts presented like information source, transmitter, noise, channel, message, receiver, channel, information destination, encoding and decoding. Following the basic concept, **communication** is the process of sending and receiving messages or transferring information from one part (sender) to another (receiver), whereas all disturbances of this process are described as noise.
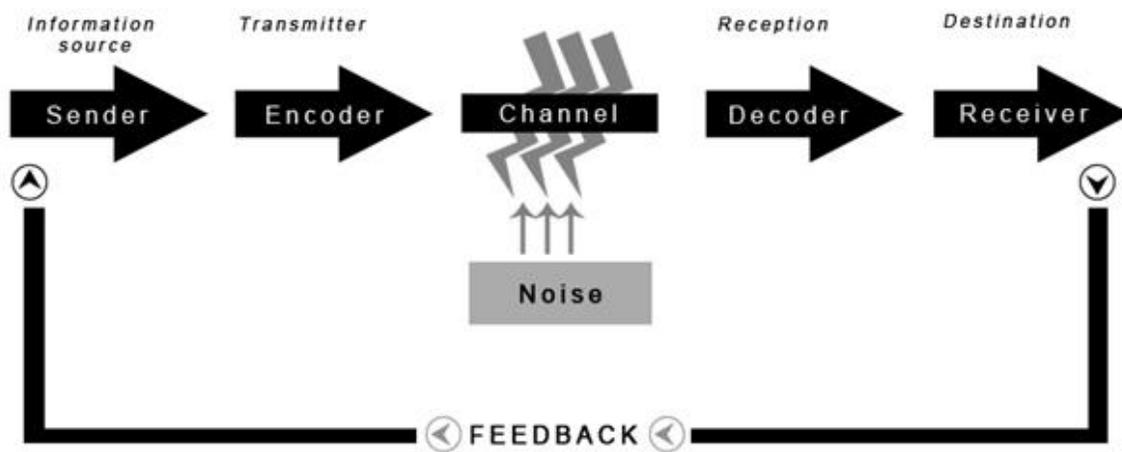
Figure 3. Shannon-Weaver's Model of Communication [13]

This simple model presenting the communication process, passed through evolution and reached to the more popular nowadays Transactional Model. The Transactional Model assumes that people

are connected through communication; they engage in transaction. Firstly, it recognises that each of the participants in the communication is a sender-receiver, not solely a sender or a receiver. Secondly, it recognises that communication affects all parties involved. The transactional model also contains ellipses that symbolise the communication environment - how participants interpret the data they are given. Where the ellipses meet is the most effective communication area, because both communicators share the same meaning of the message. For example – talking/listening to friends. While someone is talking, the other party is constantly giving them feedback on what they think through facial expression or verbal feedback without necessarily stopping the speaker from talking. [14]
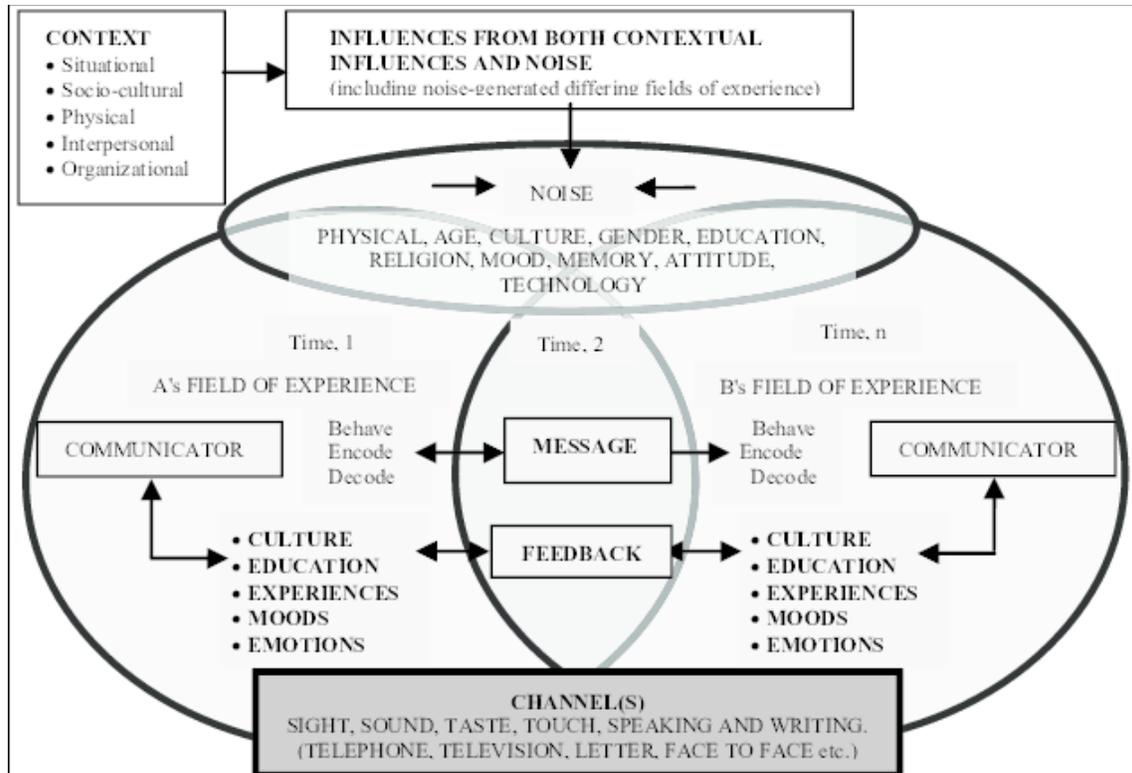

Figure 4. Transactional Model of Communication [15]

The Transactional Model is more complex one and could serve for better presentation of the project management communication process. There is no need to analyse all communication models in order to define the way communication occurs within project communication. In all projects, communication takes place at multidimensional levels, between many communicators, involving a large variety of cultures, educational levels, experience and expertise, geographical differences, time zones, etc. Within the project timeframe, the sender and receiver, or as per the transactional model – communicators, communicate digitally, in face-to-face meetings, through telephone or teleconference conversations.

The Office of Project Management Process Improvement defines project communications as "exchange of project-specific information with the emphasis on creating understanding between the sender and the receiver." [16] According to PMBOK, project communications management is

the "knowledge area that employs the processes required to ensure timely and appropriate generation, collection, distribution, storage, retrieval and ultimate disposition of project information" [17] The authors of this paper decided to apply the definition of William Dow and Bruce Taylor according to which project communications management is a combination of four complementary processes: *communication planning, project information distribution, performance reporting, managing communication of internal and external stakeholders*. [18] *Communication planning* includes effective and detailed planning of all project information and communication in the implementation process that can be both *internal* (between the project team members) and *external* (between the project and its target groups and other stakeholders). *Project information distribution* consists of acquisition and further distribution of project information, again internally and externally via proper means and in a timely manner. The project status, measurements, means of verification, forecasting, and further analysis are demonstrated through *performance reporting*. *Communication of internal and external stakeholders* corresponds to management of "all communication to satisfy the requirements of the project stakeholders, while addressing all communication issues occurring during project execution". [19]

Development of Matrix

To explore the specifics of project communications management, as mentioned before, this paper provides practical research on four long-term projects, funded by the European Commission as a grant providing institution. The management of communications is explored at all project phases, as the different stages have own specifics and characteristics, and also require different strategies and techniques.

In the four projects considered (CONSENT, SMART, RESPECT, and EVIDENCE), the *project proposal development* phase includes both internal and external communications. During this stage one of the most important aspect is conducting of *needs analysis*. This procedure is extremely important, as it defines the needs for development of the project, its scope and objectives, as well as the necessary activities that should be fairly distributed between the participating organisations according to their specific know-how and available resources. In these cases, needs analysis is made on two main levels, using the same approach for all of the considered projects. First, project partners assess their own needs, resources and capabilities to contribute to the partnership in the best possible way, bringing added value for the rest of partners, and also expanding their individual potential. This stage is closely related to management of *internal communications between the project team members*. On the other hand, needs assessment is also made in the context of target groups and key stakeholders as direct beneficiaries of the future activities. In this case the communications used are *external*, because they have "the objective of facilitating cooperation and collaboration with the various stakeholders that are outside the formal structure of the organisations, participating in the projects". [20] However, in both of the cases during the project proposal development stage, *communications are managed digitally, without any face-to-face interaction.*

The second phase of grant-funded project management is *grant preparation process*. This stage usually is very short compared to the rest of the phases, but also crucial for the future project execution, because in this case the signing of a grant agreement determines if the project will be implemented or not. The four international projects used the same approach to communications management for this specific phase, as they are implemented under the same EU programme (FP7). During the process of grant preparation both external and internal communications are

managed at the same time. Firstly, project negotiations and the production of a grant agreement are the results of constant communication between the project team and the European Commission. The grant providing institution is external to the project consortium, so the communications used in this context are also *external*. Secondly, grant preparation is related to *internal communications*, as the process requires coordination between partner organisations, taking into account that the grant agreement needs to be signed by all partners and additional consortium agreements have to be further applied as a mandatory condition, defined by the Commission. In the context of CONSENT, SMART, RESPECT, and EVIDENCE*, communications between project partners, as well as the project negotiations with the grant providing institution and signing of a grant agreement, are managed completely digitally*. The European Commission uses an integrated system for proposals submission and management of projects, which requires entirely digital communications during the whole grant preparation process.

The next stage is *implementation and monitoring*, which includes the actual execution of the project. In this stage communications take place at multidimensional levels, in various forms, according to the purpose and tools specifically required for the type of communication. Both internal and external communications are implemented. The four considered projects maintain constant communication between project partners, as this is a critical prerequisite for successful project management. In the specific context of *internal communications* during the project implementation process, leadership and team-building skills are critical. Project leadership should be demonstrated by project manager, as well as by team leaders in any of the partner organisations. This involves "shaping goals, obtaining resources, building roles and structures, establishing good communications, seeing the whole picture and moving things forward to a successful conclusion." [21] Besides, during this phase *constant external communication* is maintained with the European Commission, which is used as an additional monitoring tool. *External communication* occurs also with interaction with the direct target groups and key stakeholders of CONSENT, SMART, RESPECT, and EVIDENCE. An interesting observation is that here for the first time face-to-face communication between project partners occurs. During the four projects' implementation, several face-to-face meetings are implemented. Usually, at the very beginning of the execution process a kick-off meeting is conducted, where the project consortium approves a project implementation plan, and also a project quality plan containing a detailed evaluation strategy. This design must be agreed upon by all partners. The detailed plan of activities and the project quality plan provide the basis for the monitoring of the progress of the project and evaluate the quality of the results achieved. The mid-term meetings are devoted to a mid-term internal evaluation, and the final meeting at the end of the project to an internal final evaluation. During the implementation process of CONSENT, the *face-to-face meetings are conducted within 18 days*. For a 3-year project this means that *98.4% of the project communications management is implemented digitally*. Taking SMART as an example, there are *28 days of face-to-face communication*, which means that for a 3-year project *97,4 % of the project communication is digital*. Respectively, for RESPECT the results show the *proportion between face-to-face and digital communication is exactly 2% to 98 %*, as there are 25 days of face-to-face meetings held and duration of the project 40 months. The same proportion is applicable also in the case of EVIDENCE. Again, there are *2% face-to-face communication* with a number of 20 days for meetings, compared to *98% digital communication* in the period of total 32 months.

In the last phase of the grant-funded projects there are both *internal and external communications*. The internal communication is related to internal evaluation of achieved results inside of the project consortium, assessment of the benefits for the partner organisations and their individual

team members. However, the more important evaluation is necessary to be made by the final beneficiaries of the project - its target groups and key stakeholders. The communication with them is external, *mainly digital, but in some cases face-to-face* (e.g. via a final conference). The communication with the grant providing institution is also external and in the case of the four considered international projects - fully digital.

On the basis of the literature review and subsequent practical research on four long term projects, a matrix for description of project communications management specifics was developed. It is used for definition of the main characteristics of project communications management, outlining the whole process and taking under consideration all project phases.

Management Function Principle	Project Management Phase	Grant-funded Project Management Phase	Type of communication according to the purpose	Type of communication according to the tools
Planning	Project initiation	Project proposal development	Internal/ External	Digital
Organising	Project planning	Grand preparation process	Internal/ External	Digital
Leading	Project execution	Implementation and monitoring	Internal/ External	Digital/ Face-to-face
Controlling	Project closure	Evaluation and reporting	Internal/ External	Digital/ Face-to-face

Table 1. Matrix for description of project communications management specifics

Recommendations and implications

Some common characteristics of successful communications management practices can be distinguished, based on the previous analysis and practical research on the communication strategies of CONSENT, SMART, RESPECT, and EVIDENCE. In order to establish and further develop prosperous and sustainable communication strategies, there should be familiarity with these prerequisites, and the required actions to guarantee and make full use of them should be undertaken.

| Development of Communication Management Plan |
| Clear, focused, specific and measurable communication objectives |
| Mapping of target audiences |
| Definition of communication tools and techniques |
| Identification of communication channels |
| Tracking and reporting |
| Consistent correlation between objectives, indicators and means of verification |

Figure 5. Recommendations for successful communication strategies

The first and most important characteristic of successful communication strategies is *development of Communication Management Plan*. "A communications management plan is needed to describe creation, management, and the distribution of project information and how project communication is organised, managed, and controlled." [22] The Communication Management Plan sets the communications framework for the project and serves as a guide for communications throughout all phases of the project lifecycle. It is recommended the Communication plan to be "shared openly with all internal project stakeholders help them understand how they should communicate and with whom. For external project stakeholders, the communication plan is normally filtered to present information only germane to their role and use." [23] Usually the Communications Management Plan outlines three key phases:

- *Start up*: identification of target audiences, creating visual identity pack, finalising key messages and modes of communication;
- *Implementation*: delivery of communication activities, maintenance of relations with audiences and media, and spreading excellence at a European level;
- *Follow-up*: Evaluation of communication success and measurement of impact.

The second specificity needed for development and implementation of effective communication strategies is *setting of clear, focused, specific and measurable objectives*. Without this element, tracking, reporting, and evaluation cannot be provided. It is especially important to be able to *measure* the communication objectives, setting a defined methodology of indicators, which can be done as a monitoring tool in the project implementation process or as final evaluation of the communication activities.

Another significant characteristic of successful communication strategies is *mapping of target audiences*. The Communications Management Plans of CONSENT, SMART, RESPECT, and EVIDENCE apply stakeholder matrices, including a detailed account of the characteristics of each of the different actors, involved or targeted by the project activities and an outline of the adequate communication tools required to reach out to these actors. The Communication strategy also focuses on dividing interested parties and stakeholders into content specific target audiences. The

method ensures communication content can be customised to suite recipients based on their specific interests, expertise and background.

An important recommendation for implementation of effective communication strategies is the *definition of appropriate tools and techniques*. They strictly depend on the specifics of the project, its target audiences, and predefined communication objectives. For example, in CONSENT, SMART, RESPECT, and EVIDENCE establish different tools according to the preliminary identified target audiences. Another aspect is that for different target groups and key stakeholders, the project needs to outline distinguished tailor-made key messages.

The next step is *identification of communication channels*. "Since any project has many external and internal stakeholders, all of which need to be able to deliver different types of information in different ways, it is important to realise that you can plan and use various communication channels depending on the situation, the type of information transferred, the type of person receiving information, and the type of feedback you need." [24] Again, the channels should be chosen in correspondence with the project general objectives, target audiences, communication tools and techniques. Partner organisations use their own communication channels, but sometimes it is needed to go beyond and provide broader used communications platforms in order to reach a specific group.

Tracking and reporting are crucial for the implementation of communications strategies. These processes show if there is *consistent correlation between objectives, indicators and means of verification*. According to the predefined indicators, evaluation if the communication strategy has reached its goals or not can be made, if there is a need for adjustment of the defined communication tools and channels. CONSENT, SMART, RESPECT, and EVIDENCE apply also Quality Management Plans that secure additional qualitative indicators to measure the real level achieved per outcome planned, time-frame for assessing quality, and mitigation actions. These plans also contain quality standards to be complied with by all partner organisations, including regarding communications management.

Conclusions

The paper provided a practical research on the specifics of communications management in four long-term international projects, funded with the financial support of the European Commission. The conceptual framework was clarified, discussing a variety of definitions, specifically ones concerning the correlation between project management and communications process within a project. On the basis of these analysis, the paper developed a matrix for description of project communications management specifics. Combined with the given recommendations, this matrix can be used for establishment of strategies for successful communications management, taking under consideration all project phases.

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