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## **SOFT SKILLS FOR THE SUCCESS OF INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATIVE PROJECTS: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY**

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### **Abstract**

*Research collaboration is expected to offer many advantages, including the pooling of ideas, the creation of a shared identity and efficiency in the production of resources. This viewpoint has led to the development of a Europe-wide project involving several partner universities over 9 years. Many researchers are joining forces to work on collaborative projects, in the hope of benefitting science and the common good. However, these projects can be hampered by a number of difficulties, including too little recognition of the importance of cross-disciplinary skills in bringing a group project to a successful conclusion. Our presentation will review the*

*specific features of the collaborative research context and focus on the specific cross-disciplinary skills required with the objective to successfully complete collaborative research projects. Our methodology based on qualitative research will show our experience of several international collaborative projects, which we will supplement with a corpus of exchanges and interviews. Our findings from this project show that among the causes of the difficulties encountered, those relating to cross-disciplinary skills are central and among the skills required for collaborative research projects to run smoothly, our results highlight some of them. Our research shows the importance of the social link and soft skills in collaborative research projects and could be useful in future to those who want to start a new project and who may have underestimated the central importance of these soft skills.*

**Keywords**

Soft skills, Projects, Partnership, Management, Collaboration, Commitment.

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**1. Introduction**

Our work falls within the framework of collaborative research in training engineering. We explore the relevance and limitations of the collaborative approach to project engineering, and look more specifically at the prerequisites and skills needed to successfully complete international collaborative projects. How important are cross-disciplinary skills in international collaborative research projects? The main theme of the three projects we are studying is the training of higher education staff, which is the focus of our attention, particularly in the search for better practice in research training, mentoring, and developing the professional skills of new researchers.

Dealing with the requirements and difficulties associated with research collaboration is a sensitive subject that concerns all academic disciplines. For this reason, we should point out from the outset that we need to conduct our research work in accordance with professional ethics, which consider a code of research ethics. Out of respect for the people interviewed in three projects, we have decided not to name them to respect their anonymity, which allows us to take a distanced look with a view to improving research practices. In addition, for each of the projects, we have undertaken to respect precise communication clauses.

## **2. Collaborative Research Projects**

### **2.1. Good Will and the Merits of Collaborative Research in Literature Review**

*“And yet nothing truly valuable can be achieved except by the unselfish co-operation of many individuals. Hence, the man of good will is never happier than when some communal enterprise is afoot and is launched at the cost of heavy sacrifices, with the single object of promoting life and culture.”* Albert Einstein (2011, p.20).

For many researchers, loneliness is a typical experience, as they may spend long periods working alone and have no regular opportunities for social interaction or collaboration. It should be noted, however, that in scientific publishing, collaborative production is becoming increasingly well established, with publications co-authored by several authors (Fu & al., 2020). This collaboration, which seems to have become the norm in scientific knowledge (Weinmann et al., 2023), is leading to some interesting scientific advances: scientific knowledge is increasingly the result of collaborative research (Baker et al., 2017). It is therefore a culture of scientific collaboration in areas of research leading to useful collaboration for the publication and promotion of researchers for them to stay relevant within the academic community (Plume & van Weijen, 2014).

The collaborative process is especially challenging when it takes place as part of a project, since it involves linking collaboration and teamwork. Teamwork between partners is already well established in action research projects (Amstrong, 2019) usually on a national scale and sometimes on the scale of two or more countries. Collaboration is currently becoming the watchword of new practices that tend to erase boundaries in project design (Karrbom & Gohary, 2012). Disciplinary hard skills, the curriculum and scientific expertise are obviously necessary, but they do not guarantee the smooth running of the research group, which also requires cross-disciplinary skills indispensable to carry out the project.

In the case of European projects, teamwork is rooted in a political will, which involves a process of cooperation (working together within a structure) that can take several forms. Sometimes these projects stem from economic needs, expressed in terms of complementarity, as is the case of the European airbus project. In other cases, they are the result of synergies aimed at pooling efforts to make advances in a very specific field, as in the case of European fostering partnerships for cooperation projects (Deyrich, 2021). The political and social dimension of these projects creates a sense of purpose: if a project is to exist, it is for the common good, and from then on involvement in this cooperation becomes a matter of social responsibility for researchers. In social sciences, the praxeological aim is clearly announced,

particularly in the field of education. This is an incentive to do everything possible to bring projects to fruition that are likely to change a situation.

The process that follows generally includes the following steps: setting up an international consortium with the help of university research departments, which prepares a substantial institutional and collaborative project dossier which, once selected, is likely to obtain a substantial budget to bring the project to a successful conclusion with all the partners. Successful partnership in this type of project relies on commitment at both individual and team level (Bransletter, 2006). The altruism it implies for the partners, involved is therefore fully justified, since active, unselfish contribution to this work can lead to research that improves society for the common good. Goodwill people join forces and efforts, and teamwork is established with joy and even enthusiasm at the outset, but in the long term, the results are sometimes more bitter, particularly in the assessment to be drawn up at the end of the project.

## **2.2 What Skills are needed for Collaborative Research Projects?**

Collaborative research projects require a mix of hard and soft skills. Disciplinary hard skills, curriculum and scientific expertise are obviously necessary, but they do not guarantee the smooth running of the research group, which also needs soft skills to run the project.

Both social psychology and management science have considered these issues and shown the importance of skills such as communication, leadership, problem-solving, time management, risk management, cultural awareness, or adaptability. Interpersonal relationships are central to all human endeavours, and hence to project partnerships. Soft skills are therefore of considerable importance in any social life involving teamwork as Jana & Satpathy (2017, page 6173) explain:

“It is the interpersonal people skills, social skills, communication skills, attitudes, social intelligence and emotional intelligence quotients what matters over here, because these skills help people to work and perform well in a suitable environment.”

The inventory of soft skills drawn up by this author highlights the importance of developing the following points for successful projects: “Managing exceptions, Leading, Decision-making, Influencing, Negotiating, Conflict resolution, Critical problem-solving, Coordinating and communicating, Motivating.” (idem, page .6178) Furthermore, adaptability and flexibility are essential skills as well. In addition to conflict resolution and negotiation skills, group regulation is also a necessary skill and one that is often practiced in teaching contexts, for example.

In the projects we have worked on, the importance of certain soft skills has unfortunately been clearly underestimated, and the difficulties for the partners involved in developing them have led us to examine the causes and resulting problems more closely.

### **3. Soft Skills Put to the Test of Collaborative Project Implementation**

#### **3.1 Addressing the Issue of Soft Skills: Organizational Aspects.**

The empirical data used to support this study are based on our experience of participation in 3 international projects: the first with partners from universities and civil society: scientific expert roles, the second one as coordinator, the third one as partner. These multiple experiences have put us in contact with around twenty other partner teams, which we have been able to observe and investigate. From the outset, with the distribution of roles and responsibilities for the description of these 3 projects, the collaborative dimension has been an integral part of the process.

However, we can see that the course of these three projects posed problems that sometimes made the partnership difficult. Weinmann (2023) points out that “when substantial problems arise in the interaction between members of a research collaboration (RC), the success of the collaboration is at risk”. This observation leads us to address what we consider to be the most critical aspects of the interactions. For this reason, despite the successful completion of three consecutive projects, we feel the need to look back at the mixed feelings of the various partners. Why did several partners experience these collaborative projects so painfully? Why was the gap between an enthusiastic start and such a chaotic and time-consuming process? Why was there a feeling that the investment made in the project was not worthwhile?

We want to highlight the skills required for this type of project, so as to enhance the experience of future participants.

#### **3.2 From Assumptions to Working Hypotheses.**

We have explored several hypotheses likely to provide explanations for the difficulties encountered. The most common challenges include Language and Cultural Barriers: working with partners from different countries could involve overcoming language and cultural barriers which often lead to frustrating management dilemmas (Brett et al., 2020). The administrative complexity is also a big challenge for any team because of all administrative processes involved. Nor should we overlook the importance of differences in educational systems (Madani, 2019): educational systems and practices vary across countries, which can pose challenges when aligning curriculum, learning outcomes, and assessment methods.

Partners must thus invest time and effort in understanding and harmonizing. Moreover, the issue of sustaining partnerships is also at stake: building and maintaining long-term partnerships require ongoing commitment and effort (Bransletter, 2006). Finally, effective project management and coordination are crucial for such projects (Sacco, 2020, Pavez et al, 2022). It requires clear roles and responsibilities (Weinmann et al., 2023), efficient communication, and regular monitoring and the evaluation of project activities to ensure that the project goals are achieved within the allocated timeframe. This last point seems the most difficult to deal with, because these skills have not necessarily been put forward and yet they have been central.

### **3.3 Methodology**

The main hypothesis of this research is thus that major difficulties stem from insufficient consideration of the soft skills needed for a project to run smoothly (Jena & Satpathy, 2017). This is to be considered in conjunction with other hypotheses which can help to bring critical issues to light: e.g. remote collaboration and/or cultural differences in the uncovering of critical issues.

To verify this hypothesis, the methodology of qualitative data collection, as practiced in the human sciences (Liamputtong, 2020) and in particular in the field of education research (Ward & Delamont, 2020), seemed to us to be the most appropriate, and so we chose to investigate and focus on the participants' feedback on their feelings during the project.

We looked at the data collected during these three international projects. The collected data consist of a corpus of exchanges and surveys with a selection of 20 members of these projects over 9 years between 2013 and 2023 (3 per project) and several interviews of participants and researchers. We have coded the names and projects to respect the anonymity of the participants.

### **3.4 The Corpus under Investigation**

We worked on 3 successive projects, the first (PR1) of which involved building a network, the second (PR2) building on its achievements to carry out collaborative work on a specific training course, and the third (PR3) involving the experimental implementation of this training course. See the table below

Figure 1: Factual Data on the Three Projects.

	Pr1	Pr2	Pr3
Theme	Languages for inclusion	Language teacher training	Language teacher training course
Objective	Network building	Teacher training course development	Online teacher training course implementation
Members	3 partners: 2 associations Including 1 university	5 partners European universities	8 partners European universities
Our role	As partner: expertise in linguistic policy and educational sciences	As coordinator: expertise in teacher education research	As partner: expertise in teacher training skills

*(Source: Authors' Own Illustration)*

#### **4. Main Findings and Discussion**

As mentioned above, it is sometimes difficult to put together a team for projects with multiple constraints linked to the allocated budget, and to work with people you don't know and who don't necessarily have the same working habits. The coordinator must therefore assume a leadership role, with the cross-disciplinary skills needed to work cooperatively to bring the project to a successful conclusion.

In these projects where many partners have been involved, we have realized the extent to which non-technical skills are needed to avoid the most common difficulties. Among the soft skills that are lacking in the projects studied, the surveys allow the following points to be highlighted:

- Coordination,
- Communication,
- Regulation,
- Online management
- Motivation.

#### **4.1 Coordination as a Major Issue to Be Addressed**

Coordination presupposes controlled communication, which will help to motivate and therefore commit the teams to the project: the tone of the messages is very important, as are the length and clarity of the instructions. In the comments we collected, the majority of participants complained that the multiplication of messages discouraged them. Here are just a few examples taken from all the messages: "too many messages", "we need a clear line", "short instructions please" "when do we have to send this file back please say so directly", etc.

Using a courteous and measured tone is specifically necessary because teamwork can be complex, especially at a distance with no social links to facilitate exchanges so the tone of messages must be very controlled.

- B3 emphasizes the chaotic nature of coordination: "The coordination was both cheerful and excessively demanding."
- J1 for one points out: "Lack of solidarity and courtesy, and sometimes a lack of trust that is detrimental to the smooth running of the business" and adds the following remark: "Particularly in terms of the variations in the detail required for tasks that at first sight seemed to be carried out according to the rules of the trade."

#### **4.2 The Sensitive Issue of Regulation**

The second important point is regulation within the group, which we also found to be a problem because of the link between regulation and group dynamics. The leader or coordinator is supposed to organize regulation between members: if this is not established, some members take precedence over others and impose their own way of working. Some participants feel they are being devalued by others who are overstepping their role, or overzealous to the detriment of others. This is what emerges from the testimonies of K3 and G1, for example:

- K3 "I feel that my work is never well done, I'm asked to review insignificant details when the overall content doesn't seem to interest them. Some members find themselves obliged to function without really being able to participate in decision-making".
- G1 "I don't feel involved in the decision-making process, it's always the same people who impose their point of view. I would have preferred the coordinator to give the same importance to everyone".

#### **4.3 On the Difficulties of Managing Remote Work**

For one of the projects, the online process was an additional difficulty. Working remotely accentuates communication difficulties, as well as a lack of trust, as the various partners do not meet each other. Some partners who need more social contact, including in



their professional relationships, feel frustrated and may express dissatisfaction that would probably have been dissipated in physical contact. Several respondents complained about this, insisting that this was indeed an additional difficulty.

- E3 made the following observations about the difficulties encountered with videoconferencing: “When this organization is carried out remotely, meetings become essential to harmonize the work to be carried out. [...] I want to stress the way we lived with this experience. During transnational meetings, interim assessments are made and the next stage of the work is defined. When these meetings were face-to-face, they were often social moments we enjoyed. So notions of group and team work were important. Pandemia upset this balance. Well, meetings became online meetings and we couldn’t talk as we wanted.”
- E2 agreed on communication issues: “Online discussions became more formal, reduced to functional aspects. Discussion were not spontaneous any more, the only important point was to complete the tasks with scheduled deadlines. We were under pressure because of increasingly pressing requirements. I felt mistrust”

Indeed, several partners shared this point of view and some even stressed that all that remained were the restrictive aspects of collaborative working, without the pleasure of human relations. Managing this new difficulty of online working required even more cross-disciplinary group management skills: skills for which few people were prepared.

#### **4.4 The Delicate Question of Task Distribution**

The lack of an overall perspective was gradually felt, giving the impression that the work was fragmented and, above all, time-consuming. Interaction between the members of this research collaboration was progressively reduced to a minimum, except for problems in the progress of tasks. This was a far cry from the image of a network of valued collaborators. The major problems arose in the interaction between the partner members, who found themselves overwhelmed by the multiplicity of tasks, which lost their meaning. As a result, the success of the collaboration was threatened on several occasions.

- C3 says: "With all these messages and deadlines and the multiplicity of tasks, I'm at the end of my tether. If only I'd been able to choose a bit, but now we're being forced into a rhythm with pointless tasks, it's a shame!"

#### **4.5 Motivation as a Pillar of Participation and Commitment.**

In any collaborative project, motivation is central to maintaining the commitment of the various partners, and if particular attention is not paid to this dimension, the project may lead to discouragement or even the cessation of participation. The success of projects depends

largely on the motivation that will enable everyone to invest in it, and to feel personally successful in the actions carried out during the project.

However, in the experiences we have described, the difficulties mentioned in relation to a lack of soft skills have above all had a negative impact on the motivation of the participants and given rise to a feeling of failure. Some even gave up, and many of those we surveyed expressed their waning interest, discouragement and difficulties in continuing to get involved.

- D2 explains: "I have to continue with the project because my university requires it, but I've lost heart in it."
- C3's discouragement is clear: "I can see that the problems are endless [...] I'm tempted to stop everything".
- E2 said in an exchange: "I don't know about you but I definitely need some time off."
- Finally, B1 says: "The tone of the messages is unbearable for me, I find this way of working awful, if it wasn't for the rest of my team, I'd definitely have dropped everything."

## **5. Conclusion: of the Value of Soft Skills and Ethical Worth**

We could cite other typical examples of these soft skills shortcomings, which contribute to the deterioration of the team and can therefore hinder the project. In fact, we studied the difficulties that our respondents cited on numerous occasions during these 3 projects. It was their testimonies and their exchanges that showed that coordination, communication, regulation and online management needed to be taken into account, and above all that care needed to be taken to preserve and develop the motivation of the participants. We have chosen the most significant ones, but in a subsequent study, research into the various official reports could also show the extent to which soft skills are necessary and supplement our results. Admittedly, "the ideal of collaboration is often disappointed" (Sacco, 2020, page 20).

As we have seen in the scientific literature, many researchers have stressed the importance of soft skills, but we have shown why these skills are particularly important in collaborative research projects. Using qualitative research based on long and varied experience of this type of project, we have been able to highlight the skills needed to ensure that these projects run more smoothly and that the overall operation is improved for the common good. Of course it would be interesting to develop this research and not limit it to these 3 projects and their surveys, which show a trend. That's why we're planning to carry out a quantitative study at a later date in further projects. It seems somewhat paradoxical that in these projects,

where the emphasis is on cooperation, the experience of the partners can be so difficult. It is to be hoped that taking soft skills into greater account will subsequently help to enhance the value of projects and partners.

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