



Dr Susanne Rahner, Yggdrasil
Berlin, Germany

International project management training on a European Level for scientists, administrators and business people.

The management of international collaborative research projects involving academia and industry, public and private organisations presents a number of challenges for research managers. These projects are especially difficult to control. This is due to the various sources of potential and actual conflict that could occur between the respective partners.

It is highly likely then that at some stage over the lifetime of a research project the research manager will be drawn outside of his or her comfort zone. With the ever increasing demands placed on the research manager it is possible that he or she may be expected to advice on differences of opinion between two or more partners.

EARMA offers a variety of training courses which fall under the broad heading of research management. In this article Susanne Rahner of Yggdrasil provides an overview of how training in project management can help delegates develop completely new ways of thinking, harness their creativity and improve their project management and team leadership skills - thus, equipping them with the skills necessary to help them overcome the types of difficulties encountered in collaborative research projects.

The training courses provided by EARMA cover a range of different topics which are all part of research management:

- Introduction to project management
- Introduction to the management of complex projects
- Advanced international project management
- Risk management
- Financial issues
- IPR topics
- Negotiations
- Proposal writing

Unless the client requests a different course structure, our workshops on Advanced International Project Management are two-day courses, restricted to a maximum of 15 delegates. This helps us to provide high quality training, good subject depth and sufficient time for exercises, discussions and networking opportunities.

Overall, delegates usually fall into three categories:

- Scientists working in their scientific fields, who manage one specific EU project and take part in the scientific work being carried out too

- Scientists who have moved to the administration and management units of research institutions, who manage several EU projects at one time but are not part of the scientific work
- Non-scientists working as administrative personnel in European management and research support units, who manage more than one project on an aggregated level and are not part of the scientific work.

All of these people work at different aggregation levels in their day-to-day work and need different tools, knowledge and skills to be successful.

Moreover, the delegates all come to the workshops with differing needs and expectations and are looking for information and advice in specific areas including:

- General theoretical input
- Hints and tips to improve their daily work
- Help with leading a team while not officially being in charge
- Specific project management tools for research projects
- Exercises on general topics, or on in-depth topics for specific projects
- Networking and sharing experiences
- Discussing own projects and problems and how these can be handled

In our experience, delegates often face three key problems when managing large projects:

1. Senior scientists have advanced scientific and technical skills but no interest in the day-to-day obstacles they might meet in the non-scientific world
2. Junior scientists although very talented in their own fields, can have their leadership questioned if they are not given a formal position and job title. They find it difficult to tell senior staff what to do in order to make the project move forward and meet deadlines
3. Language problems among science and research, private business, industry, SMEs and administrators

These three key problems are only partly solved by technological solutions, like software tools for instance. To solve them properly requires a profound theoretical knowledge in the first place. But delegates need much more than this. They have to make the decision to change and then have the determination, the willpower and the stamina to change deeply ingrained personal habits.

All in all, the importance of project planning is without question and the key factors of implementation, risk planning, contingency and empathic listening are all crucial in managing a successful project.

All of these skills and talents are combined in a strong project manager. The good news is that all of these skills can be learned, and anyone can change their habits to acquire these new skills.

Of course, it's not easy. To provide all this information and guidance in a two-day course over 16 hours, at all levels for all participants and all projects would require something like:

“The wool-delivering, milk-giving, egg-laying meat-pig”

Famous among the German-speaking population, this is known as ‘Eierlegende Wollmilchsau’ or ELWMS. In English, this translates as:

“It does everything except make the tea”

To summarise, within the two days of the workshop we can introduce new techniques, discuss problems, give tools and open doors in your mind.

However, changing habits and building this new knowledge into your work each day takes time. There are no black magic switches that make projects work automatically. Ideally, these topics should be taught to school children and should be constantly reinforced. Until then, our two-day courses are the next best option.