

Using a Learning and Communication Platform for Knowledge Exchange in European Project Management. PACE - Project Actors Community in Europe

Maren Satke

die Berater[®] (Austria)

m.satke@dieberater.com

Abstract

The LLP has funded a number of projects which developed tools to support other LLP project actors in effectively and efficiently implementing their projects. But although (parts of) most products would be relevant for the whole programme, the dissemination and exploitation range of these projects is often limited to the sub-programme/education sector in question.

In the light of the expiring programme period PACE (Project Actors Community in Europe) takes care that the valuable European project management know-how generated by the LLP support projects will not get lost and forgotten but be transferred to the new generation of programmes with the high visibility it deserves.

To disseminate these results a learning and communication platform is provided. The platform offers project management supporting tools making full use of multimedia, Social Media and mobile learning. European project actors are invited to join the platform and have access to material and learning tools. A part from this they can benefit from ad hoc peer to peer support for solving EU project management problems and they can use the platform for project development and partner search.

In addition to the platform PACE will develop and implement new forms of self-organised events - PACE BarCamps - for practitioners for networking and sharing good project-management practice. Through these activities, PACE seeks to make sure that European project management support tools will be exploited beyond the boundaries of LLP action lines and education sectors. This paper gives an overview on the project approach and the structure and content of the platform.

Introduction – Challenges in European project management

The lifelong learning landscape has become rather complex, with the extremely diverse needs of learners, the labour market and the society at large to be met. On the other hand it is not only the needs of project target groups or stakeholders which have to be taken into consideration. The official requirements of project management and project administration set by the European Commission become more and more the priority in delivering successful European projects. Another aspect is the change to the new Erasmus+ programme, which brings a lot of new regulations in project application and project administration. But these new rules influence the whole process of project management - starting from the project application through to the exploitation of project products and results. The communication and learning platform, which is developed in the project PACE, collects different LLP project management supporting tools from various EU funded projects within the last years. Another important focus of the platform is to offer learning objects on EU project management, based on established tools and adapted to specific requirements of the new Erasmus+ programme. With the help of the platform PACE wants to establish a network of European project actors to share experiences and develop new supporting tools in an interactive way.

1. Networks in European educational projects

Especially in the setting of EU funded projects the founding of networks can often be regarded as an attempt to overcome the prevalent thinking in terms of isolated projects. A high number of various projects regarding similar or related topics often exist in a kind of "parallel universe". This lack of interaction between funded projects is one of the greatest weaknesses detected in European educational programmes. Many educational concepts and learning products have been developed by ambitious pilot projects, but are not sufficiently visible in the field. Here networks are supposed to play an important strategic role [1].

To take on a key role in the context of European funded programmes in education, a network should fulfill six functions, as defined by Bienzle, Gelabert, et. al [1]:

- Debate function: offer discussion or reflection on key issues in the field concerned
- Research function: provide an overview in the thematic field
- Support function: offer assistance in the networking of projects
- Advocacy function: promote the implementation of innovative results in relevant fields
- Forecast function: identify present, emergent or future needs for stakeholders
- Dissemination function: disseminate innovation and best practice

Only ideal preconditions enable networks to really meet all these six criteria. To establish an active and efficient network, the group who runs the network should focus on a few core functions. This is also important to create a clear position of a specific network or community.

1.1 Motivation to join networks

Networking can be seen as a normal attitude of professionals working in the setting of European educational projects. A second factor which influences the importance of networks is the increasing diversity and fragmentation of the lifelong learning landscape which requires integrated structures. A third motivational factor is the expected benefit of individuals who get involved in a network [1].

Motives to join a network:

- Personal: People want to get to know colleagues in other countries, learn something new or just want to break out the daily routine
- Political: There might be a desire to lobby for certain target groups in education or to promote a certain branch of learning. For the political motivation values play an important role.
- Professional: The wish to improve professional competences, to do a better job through being involved in a network
- Institutional: Membership in a network may raise the profile of the institution concerned

1.2 Benefits of networks

These mentioned motives show that people who join networks expect certain **benefits** – on personal level and/or for their work. Concrete benefits the actors expect are mostly non-monetary and should be explicitly identified. Some examples can be:

- Regular reception of most up to date information
- The chance to test innovative learning material without paying
- A forum for self-presentation and promotion
- Contacts for new projects
- Advice on particular challenges
- New ideas for improving the range of educational offers
- Access to decision makers
- etc.

The extent of contribution to a network depends on how relevant expected benefits are for network members. To meet these expectations is a challenge for the responsible network coordination which has to create an organisational structure which enables all participating actors to contribute and cooperate in a target oriented manner [1].

2. PACE - A communication and learning platform for European project management

The EU funded project PACE – Project Actors Community in Europe - has set the aim to exploit the full potential of the benefit of networks and cooperative platforms in European project management. The main aim of the project is to establish a communication and learning platform to create a network of sharing and learning about project management in the context of European funded projects.

The platform is based on the results of a variety of European projects which were supported by the European Commission within the last five years. Many of the support products take a rather conventional form: paper-based guidance publications, conventional face-to-face-trainings and conferences, as well as

static websites are prevailing. They often lack an attractive feel, and they do not make sufficient use of the potential of multimedia and Social Media. Moreover, they often “fossilize”, i.e. they are produced at a certain point of time, but are not regularly updated and further developed.

In PACE the results of these projects are systematically collected, and analysed so that they can widely be disseminated across education sectors. But PACE will not offer only the collected storage of project products – it will also further develop project management related results making full use of multimedia, Social Media and mobile learning.

PACE address European project actors in (adult) education and will enable them to get involved in an interactive exchange and development process of project management tools.

2.1 Technology of the platform

The technical backbone behind the PACE platform is a multi-functional cloud solution which allows integration of diverse communication, authoring and learning tools. It offers ample opportunities to network, share and learn, communicate and jointly produce content. It also has an integral interface to mobile devices to allow for working with smartphones and tablets. Thus, European project actors are able to access the project management resources anywhere and anytime.

2.2. Structure and content of the platform

Within the platform certain groups are created which have different permissions to see and create content on the platform. On the one hand, the PACE platform serves as a project management and coordination tool for the PACE project group itself. This part of the platform is internal and external users have no right to access this area. On the other hand it is an overall aim to create a community of practice – so the offer for active participation and involvement is crucial. European project actors can register PACE under <http://pace.sabacloud.com> to reach the public area of the platform. This area is the heart of the communication and learning platform since here the user/PACE member can find information, resources and current discussion on topics of European project management.

The PACE project partners defined five main topic areas for the delivery of project management supporting tools, resources and learning objects:

- Planning and Organisation
- Administration
- Evaluation and Quality Management
- Dissemination and Exploitation
- People Management

In a first stocktaking process relevant EU funded projects which have already produced European project supporting tools were analysed and researched. The aim in this process was to define strengths and weaknesses of tools and their potential for a further development in the framework of PACE – to create user friendly and multimedia follow-up products. Supporting tools which are provided in the PACE platform should meet the following quality criteria:

- Clearly linked to EU project management
- Consideration of new rules of the ERASMUS+ programme
- Usability for old and new programmes
- Accessibility
- Coverage of different aspects
- Possibility of organised sharing

Following these criteria all researched project management supporting tools were classified. To deliver the resources in a structured way, they are three sectors:

I. Read: The PACE library

PACE delivers a collection of publications tools and other resources on European project management which have been developed in EU funded projects during the last 5 years. The PACE library contains these links, tools and other useful material.

II. Learn: PACE learning objects



Referring to the five topic areas defines, multimedia learning objects – such like videos, presentations, audio-files, quizzes, etc. are produced and made available for e- and mobile learning on the basis of previously developed supporting tools. Each topic area starts with a general e-learning introduction on the topic, followed by additional learning objects.

III. Discuss: The “PACERS”

Apart from information and learning objects the PACE platform offers opportunities for European project actors to share experiences, discuss relevant topics and they can actively contribute to the development of learning objects. In this way the platform works as a one-stop shop for accessing useful project management tools but also offers active peer support to project challenges faced.

Table 1: Structure of the PACE platform

| | Planning & Organisation | Administration | Evaluation & Quality Management | Dissemination & Exploitation | People Management |
|----------------|--|----------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------|
| Read | The PACE library: A collection of resources, publications and other project management products from former LLP projects which have been researched and analysed. | | | | |
| Learn | The PACE learning objects: are based on already existing PM tools which were further developed (e-learning sessions, webinars, screencasts, case studies, etc.) | | | | |
| Discuss | The “PACERS”: the interactive element of the platform – members can discuss, share experiences or comment on learning objects /resources. | | | | |

2.3. BarCamps as places of knowledge exchange

In addition to the communication and learning platform PACE develops and implements new forms of self-organised events - PACE BarCamps - for practitioners in European educational projects and test them as places for the exchange of knowledge and experience. A BarCamp is a user-generated “unconference”, open, participatory workshop-event with content provided by the participants themselves. The first BarCamps came up in 2005, focused on early-stage web applications and were related to open source technologies, social software and open data formats. In the last years, the format has also been used for a variety of other topics, including education, healthcare, political organising etc.

At the PACE BarCamps the participants will bring along and share best practice tools for EU project management. They will decide on the agenda to a large extent. Before and after the events the participants will be actively encouraged to contribute to the PACE platform and its materials. The BarCamp sessions will be recorded and provided and made publicly accessible as learning objects on project management issues. So many more project managers than those participating face-to-face will profit from the events.

3. Conclusions

PACE aims at creating a robust organisational framework for further exploitation and further development of EU project management resources. Through the presented activities, the project seeks to make sure that European project management support tools will be exploited beyond the boundaries of LLP action lines and education sectors. The project’s outcomes are ultimately targeted at present and future coordinators and partners of multilateral projects in all sub-programmes of the LLP and its successor programme. Find more information: www.projectactors.au.

References

[1] Bienzle, H., Gelabert E. et.al (2007), The Art of Networking. European Networks in Education, 17-27