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COLLABORATION VIA DIGITALIZATION - SEAMK'S EXPERIENCES ON INTERNATIONAL PROJECTS DURING THE PANDEMIA AND BEYOND

*Annika Koskela, M.Sc. (Econ.), B.Sc. (Soc.), BBA (Tech.), Project Manager
SeAMK School of Technology*

*Mika Valkama, B.Eng., Expert, RDI
SeAMK School of Technology*

1 INTRODUCTION

When the first cases of the coronavirus were detected in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, probably nobody could predict what was ahead. By the end of the following month it was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization. At the time of writing, over 22,8 million coronavirus cases have been detected all around the world and the disease has claimed almost 800 000 deaths. It goes without saying that this kind of serious outbreak affects all functions of the society.

In the effort to decrease the virus spreading, governments around the world have ordered either full or partial lockdowns. This means people's movement has been, and still is, limited, stores and business activities have been closed, and only essentials services have been running normally. People are telecommuting and working from home. (Marr 2020.) In Finland over one million people started working remotely during the pandemic (Pantsu 2020). School children were home schooling for two months during spring 2020.

The pandemic obviously also affected Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences as a whole. This article, *Collaboration Via Digitalization*, will investigate how COVID-19 affected the ongoing international projects at SeAMK and how the crises might change project work in the future.

2 DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

This new situation requires organizations to build up their resilience. Digital consultants have already for years tried to emphasize, that in order to persevere and prevail in the future, companies and organizations of all sizes across industries will need to employ a new strategy and mindset in order to implement a successful digital transformation. Now these lessons are proving useful (Kane et al. 2020). Nonetheless, there are still a lot of organizations that widely utilized digital tools before the pandemic. The COVID-19-crisis has widened the performance gap between those organizations that had invested in technology innovation at scale before the pandemic and those that had not. (Marr 2020.)

Digital transformation has usually been described as a path of small consecutive steps. Many CEOs feel unsure or lack the knowledge of where to begin. In this aspect the COVID-19-crisis helped. It forced organizations to plunge into digital, prepared or not. (Kane et. al. 2020.) Many conferences and fairs went online, and seminars were replaced by webinars (Pardes 2020). As travel abroad was suspended, organizations had to come up with other ways of meeting.

Even if necessity is known to be the mother of invention, one important precondition for a successful digital stride is having the appropriate technology for remote work. Many organizations have had the proper technology in place already for a long time. The barrier to use the tools have come more from rigid management culture or resistance to change from the personnel. For a smooth digital transition, even more important than suitable technology is an agile organizational culture and a pro-digital leadership. Third important thing, not the least to overcome the resistance to change, is for the personnel to have access to suitable and necessary training. (Kasvi 2020.)

3 COVID-19 STRATEGY AT SEAMK

At Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences (SeAMK), the preconditions mentioned above existed pre-COVID-19, which secured a smooth transition to telecommuting especially with what comes to research and development personnel. SeAMK has been investing in digital technology already for a long time. Working with web conference and online collaboration tools such as Teams, Skype and Zoom were familiar for project managers already before the pandemic. Documents have been stored and shared in cloud services and remote work has occasionally been possible. This was a good base for the leap to distance working, which

continued until the beginning of August. For teachers and other educational staff, a huge effort in extra digital training was put in place very fast. SeAMK's preparations and actions for the coronavirus pandemic were very professionally led by the Security Management Team which, for its part, secured a smooth transition to the "new normal".

Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences followed the instructions given by the authorities for the COVID-19-situation. In mid-March the Campus was closed and the personnel ordered to telecommute. All trips and mobility periods abroad were prohibited, and no foreign guests were allowed. All planned events were cancelled or moved online. Mobility was restricted also within Finland. The infection situation has been varying a lot regionally. The South Ostrobothnia region has up to this day been spared and has had very few cases of coronavirus. This in mind, also domestic trips were restricted with remote connections and meetings to be preferred. All in all, the transition to remote work and education as well as the transition back to a hybrid model has went smoothly.

4 PROJECT WORK AT SEAMK

At Seinäjoki University of Applied sciences internationality has already for years been a core part of its strategy. As the vision states: SeAMK is international and entrepreneurial. In 2019 SeAMK's budget for Research and Development was 7,66 million euros in total of which 171 000 euros came from EU Framework Program financing and 631 000 euros from other international funding sources. The same year the organisation had 600 external partners of which 63 percent were companies. (Mäkelä 2020.)

SeAMK's goal is to double the incoming funds for international projects, naturally also increasing the number of projects running. According to the RDI-development group, the number of international staff is intended to increase significantly at SeAMK during the next five years. This will also support internationalization of research, development and innovation (RDI). SeAMK is doing a lot of co-operation with the companies and organizations in the region. South Ostrobothnia being the third least international region in Finland, SeAMK has an important role in changing the situation for the better. Networking as well as research and development work are important ways of doing this. (Mäkelä 2020.)

5 THE SURVEY

All the changes due to COVID-19 also bring a significant impact on projects and project management. How do these general observations apply to project work? We conducted an online survey via Webropol inviting 30 persons working on 26 international projects in SeAMK to tell us about their experiences during the pandemic. We received answers from 12 of them, giving a response rate of 40 percent. Ten of these were project managers. The answers came from all four different units of SeAMK: School of Technology, School of Business and Culture, School of Food and Agriculture and School of Health Care and Social Work. The answers covered 15 projects.

The survey consisted of 34 questions, some which were optional depending on previous answers and two specifically for RDI managers. The survey studied three main topics:

1. How has the pandemic affected the way of working?
2. How has the pandemic affected the communication with project partners and other partners?
3. Are there any noticeable differences between different countries as to managing the digital leap caused by the pandemic?

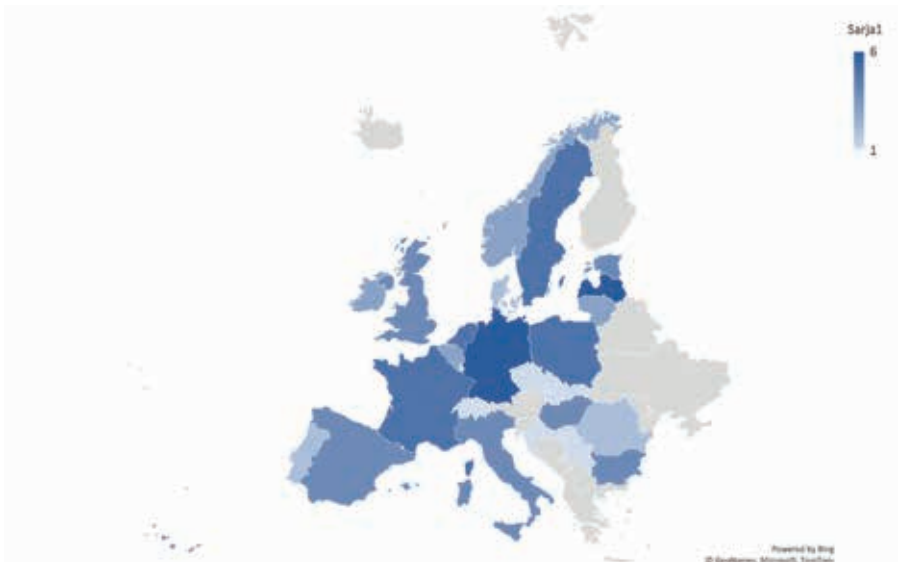


Figure 1. Distribution of projects by country from responses.

5.1 Partner countries and digital competence

The most common project partner countries in the projects represented were Germany and Latvia (50 %). The next common partner countries were Sweden, Poland, France and the Netherlands (44 %). (Figure 1.)

With these few responses, finding trends is difficult, but overall, when asked to rate the digital competence of partners from different countries on country level, almost all countries received above an average score. A couple of low scores were given to countries that otherwise had been rated as having high digital competence, one even with high ranking in DESI index (Digital Economy 2020), this most likely illustrates that exceptions exists.

We also asked if the digital competence in countries had changed during the pandemic, this appears to have been a difficult question as most responses were either “stayed the same” or “cannot say”. Of the 25 countries six had slight improvements and for three the level of competence had appeared to have decreased. Based on free form responses, this might be due to local limitations and restrictions placed.

5.2 Communication

Questions related to communication methods and tools unsurprisingly revealed that physical meetings had been nearly completely stopped or postponed and videoconferences had seen large take up. Email and regular telephone usage had mostly remained the same although few had seen either increasing or decreasing use. Only a couple of respondents reported using chat tools (like Slack). As these are typically already used by distributed teams, their usage had not changed, nor did any one report having started using them during the pandemic. Some projects already had distributed teams so the way of working for them did not change radically. Most had adjusted the way they were using the existing communication tools to adapt into the situation. (Figure 2.)

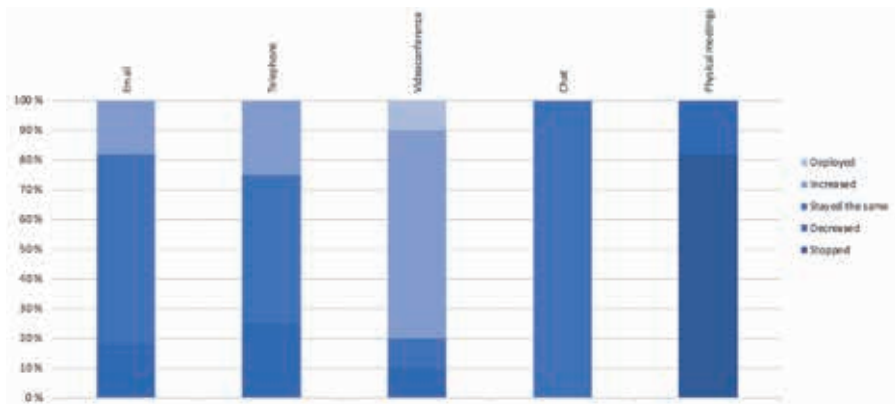


Figure 2. Change in the usage of communication methods.

As seen in answers about communication tools, the dialogue with different project entities has moved on to online platforms like Microsoft Teams, which has become a replacement for traditional face-to-face meetings. The free text answers revealed that some have even experienced that the co-operation between different partners has become better with the introduction of new tools and limitations set by the environment. (Figure 2.)

5.3 The way of work

The effect of the pandemic on the project work itself has been mostly minor, with the natural exceptions being projects which had planned visits, interviews, demonstrations or such that cannot be completed at this time. One project was supposed to gather research material from schools via personal visits during the spring. Because of the pandemic, this was impossible. If the situation continues during the next fall semester, it could endanger the project results even if this project had been granted and extension.

Generally, the managing authorities were seen accommodating to the difficult situation. Some projects had been granted extensions without additional budget. As Mäkelä (2020) says: the situation is the same all around the world, generating more understanding for deviance in plans.

As one would expect, the travel budget has seen most variance from the plans as both national and international trips have been cancelled. The overall bureaucracy experienced by the projects for most was not increased during this time as there were less meetings and travels to plan, but cancellations of these had also added complexity.

6 LEARNINGS

In summary, it is easy to state that if a project already is working with partners around the world, an exceptional situation like the pandemic is not likely to affect the daily work too much. But as soon as there are workshops, pilots or information gathering in person, more creative and compensatory means are required. As for telecommuting, working from home and never seeing the other project partner face to face was already a norm before the global pandemic for some participants. This radical change in the work life has brought the tools and methods to the masses, which these people have been using already for years. Many of the more traditional CEOs have been suspecting working from home makes people less productive. However, the pandemic has brought surprises as some companies have noticed that productivity has in fact increased (Gelles 2020). A good guess is that these practices stay in use as organizations around the world are starting to see how this increases work efficiency.

For project planning, remote work has proven to be a feasible way of working, especially with partners that know each other. At SeAMK, an application process was successfully conducted online. We are already seeing new applications adding clauses for exceptional events that can heavily affect how the project is run. Managing authorities are also directing projects to take situations like this into account. (Mäkelä 2020.)

Seinäjäki University of Applied Sciences has coped with the pandemic very well. Project work has continued mostly as planned, and where changes have been needed, suitable measures have been seized.

The well-working IT infrastructure and support team were essential in helping guide the novices of through the hurdles of digital leaps. This backed by lean management of crisis are something that the organization need to maintain to be able to face the future challenges and brush them aside as well.

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