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Creating a consortium

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Abstract

Mälardalen Real-Time Research Center (MRTC) has been a part of several proposals and projects selected and partly funded by ARTEMIS-JU. In this paper we want to present an example how the process of building a consortium can be handled by the main proposer in this kind of calls. The traditional way to do it is a "snow ball strategy" where the consortium lead might lose the control of the development of the consortium. Our approach is to be open, but keep control, by giving successive tasks and instructions to the interested partners, without any promises. When a core team of committed and productive partners is selected, they provide a first draft that is used to select the total consortium. Our strategy is a structured semi-open selection process for the consortium, paired with the development of the proposal.

Consortium building, selection of partners, timeliness, successive tasks, committed partners, productive partners

1. Main text

Mälardalen University and the School of innovation, design and engineering, hosts a major research center with focus on embedded systems: Mälardalen Real-Time Research Center (MRTC). Together with a couple of other groups it constitutes the established research direction Embedded Systems (ES)[i] with 25 full professors, 50 other PhD seniors, 70 PhD students, organized in 6 research areas and 14 research groups. The center is running about 60 research projects, an industrial graduate school and some other projects. Since 5 years there is also a project management office (PMO) there, called Division of Research coordination (RECO)[ii]. The task of RECO is three folded: 1. Pre-award: scouting for new funding and new consortia and support the application process, from counseling to actually writing the proposal. 2. Post-award: Responsibility for the project model,

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with focus on the planning period, writing, scrutinizing and finalizing agreements and contracts, including administrative start-up meetings, in some cases also supporting report and finalization of the project. RECO also overlooks the total project portfolio and has, for example, been driving the process of a procurement to buy a project tool. 3. RECO also rents out project management competence and resources in large and complex projects. RECO-staff is included in the management of several projects, in some cases as project managers, in other cases as sub-project managers or specialists (dissemination, law, project management etc.).

One of the major focusses of RECO is the creation of the consortia for projects where this is needed. MRTC is part of European projects in ITEA2, ARTEMIS and FP7, and has also submitted proposals in Horizon 2020, in MSCA (Excellence) and ICT (Industrial leadership). Now MRTC is preparing proposals for ECSEL, ITEA3 and Celtic-plus. ECSEL is a joint undertaking, which means that it is an agency under the European Commission whose calls are directed by three industrial platforms, ARTEMIS being one. ITEA and Celtic-plus also are constituted by industrial platforms or communities. These communities assist with consortium building events in conjunction with the opening of the call. At these events candidates can post their project idea on the web site, and during the event they can present their project idea, with a poster or with a pitch talk, accompanied with a power point. Upon presentations, industry and academic representatives cluster themselves around the proposals, either just announcing their interest, waiting for the initial initiator to take action or taking part in an intense development on the spot. In some of cases, as in ITEA- and ARTEMIS-events, there is a structure to foster project proposals. After the pitch talks and the clustering of interested parties, there are breakout sessions that will report back to the plenum after some hours how the proposal and the consortium has developed. Usually there are two or three cycles of breakout sessions and back-reporting. In some cases the arranging community is very active and asks groups to join forces, criticize the proposals and so on.

MRTC has been part of several proposals and projects of this kind. In this paper we present an example of how this process of building a consortium can be handled by the main proposer.

1.1. The think big-concept, all are welcome! – an unstructured snowball methodology

Both ARTEMIS and ITEA promote the assembly of very large and complex projects, often involving more than 100 person years, 30 to 50 partners and a budget of circa 10 MEURO. The average project has 25 partners and 7.4 MEURO total budget. The dimension of the projects poses several challenges for its management. Thence, it is not likely that all staff from two partners ever meet in the project. The policy of promoting large and complex projects is also reflected in the support for proposal that is available in the ARTEMIS consortium building events. At the break out session all interested potential partners are welcome. There is no mechanism to allow the consortium leader to sort out un-desired partners. Worst scenario is to walk off with 30-40 interested organizations, all of them expecting to be part of the proposal. Limiting the consortium is a difficult task.

The funding has been 50% from project partners, 17.3% from European Commission and 32.7% from the national innovation agencies.[iii] Each national agency has its own criteria and rules for payment. Most countries ask for an industrial project leader, and a specific budget ratio between industry and academia. That means that one prospective academic partner often has to find one or two other partners from the private sector to be nationally eligible. This means that the consortium will grow at least one extra round, without any real chance for the consortium leader to control the development.

One specific problem is also that large chunks of partners or sub-clusters can fall away, including valued partners, when some sub-clusters cannot create eligible national consortia, or when some countries choose not to fund a specific project, or otherwise run short on budget - or frankly stop to support the funding scheme.

In the end the consortium then is very large, constituted by a large variety of industrial and academic organizations. There is likely also a chunk of “sleeping partners”; not very productive or contributing partners. Even if this is apparent already during the proposal process, it is hard to cut off partners that already have

become an integrated part of the project. Even larger is the risk that these partners will act as proud flesh in the project, demanding but not contributing.

1.2. A structured semi-open methodology

We have performed a more structured process, which fosters narrower, smaller and better consortia. Objectives for this is to gather a large group interested potential partners, but through the process select the most desired.

As an example from this year; in the first step we proposed our project at a consortium building event, 4th-5th February 2014. In this case we presented the project orally in a five-minute pitch talk, together with 50 other presenters in a plenum session. We also presented a poster. The project was also posted on the web a couple of weeks ahead. The result was a list of 37 interested individuals, representing 31 different organizations, where 4 were large companies or industries, 6 SMEs, 12 institutes and 9 universities, from 14 countries. The "usual" process would be to use the breakout sessions to form an initial outline of the proposal, and start assembling the consortium. In this case we had a large interest but actually failed to gather the group of interested potential partners in a break-out session.

Next step was to contact the 37 people large group after two weeks (17th Feb 2014). The message was that we plan to form a consortium out of the group of interested partners. They were all given the task to describe 1. Their own organization, 2. What their contribution would be and 3. If they would be willing to lead any task. They got a three-week deadline (7th March). The result was a detailed list of potential partners, but the list had been shortened to 10 potential partners, whereof 1 from industry, 2 from SME, 3 from Institutes and 4 from universities, from 10 countries. We believe that the action sorted out the better half of the list, those who actually were responsive to joint actions.

At the end of the day eligible country consortia are needed, therefore next step (13th March) was to ask the 10 interested potential partners to provide national rules for the call (if known), and also propose potential partners from their own country if needed, with respect both to national rules and the direction of the proposal. The potential partners had one week to suggest partners and another week to get the same kind of information from these new, suggested partners. At this stage at least one country left, but also a new entered. The result was a detailed list of potential partners, but the list had been extended to 26 potential partners, whereof 5 from industry, 8 from SME, 7 from Institutes and 6 from universities, from 10 countries.

Thereafter (7th April) we selected three *core partners*, from three different countries (Denmark, Italy and Portugal), however the Italian company couldn't commit at this stage. The core team worked out a "write up" and selected partners and partner countries, mostly from the set of already interested partners, but also some totally new, that fitted into the project. Now the first revision of the consortium was Sweden, Denmark and Portugal, plus Norway, Netherlands and Germany. Also Austria was asked to join. A message was issued for all interested organizations that they were currently not included, but that they might be taken into account at a later stage.

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[i] http://www.es.mdh.se
[ii] http://www.es.mdh.se/reco