



HARD OR SOFT SKILLS?
HOW THE ERASMUS PLUS PROJECT LEADERS VIEW THE RELATIVE IMPORTANCE
OF SKILLS WHEN CONDUCTING THEIR PROJECTS

Ingunn Jónsdóttir

Thesis of 10 ECTS credits submitted to the School of Science and Engineering, Reykjavík University,

as part of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Project Management (MPM)

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How the Erasmus plus project leaders view the relative importance of skills when it comes to conducting their projects.

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Abstract

As the world becomes more complex, so this complexity is reflected in the projects sponsored and executed in the Erasmus plus (E+) programme. Increasingly, researchers are looking at the role that soft skills knowledge play when managing complex international projects.

The aim of this paper is to evaluate the relative positioning of hard and soft skills within the current processes of application, preparation and support provided by the E+ programme, and contrast to the skillsets which project managers leading these projects find most relevant when conducting the projects.

The E+ programme has a clear focus on hard skills in its structure with less emphasis on soft skills. The research investigates the nature of this current emphasis within the E+ programme, and the forms of correlation with what a sample of Icelandic project leaders consider to be the most relevant skills when leading E+ projects, and seek insight into the potential evolution of E+ programme application, preparation and support processes during execution which might lead to greater project success.

The findings indicate that the E+ programme would benefit from paying greater attention to the soft skill factors of projects led within the programme combined with the use of focused soft skills KPIs (key performance indicator) to support the evaluation of project success. Given the complexity of defining, measuring and self-rating soft skills, this paper also points strongly to a need to research further the role of soft skills in the E+ programme.

Key words: Soft skills, Hard skills, Erasmus plus, project management, international teams.

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1 Introduction

When organizations set up a project, one of the first things to be done is to assign a project manager to lead the project. According to the PMBOK³ Guide (2013), project managers need to deploy a range of specific competences in order to lead a project successfully to achieve its objectives. There are a number of ways to categorise PM skills but they can usefully be summarised in the following three-part structure:

Knowledge - Refers to what the project manager knows about project management

Personal - Refers to how the project manager behaves when performing the project or related activities. The notion of ‘personal’ effectiveness encompasses attitudes, core personality characteristics, and leadership skills, which provide the ability to guide the project team while achieving project objectives

Performance - Refers to what the project manager is able to do or accomplish while applying his or her project management knowledge (PMBOK Guide, 2013, p. 16)

The PMBOK Guide emphasizes the importance of the interpersonal skills of the project manager, stating that project leaders require an appropriate balance of technical, interpersonal and conceptual skills to help them analyse situations and to manage interaction and collaboration appropriately. These interpersonal skills include and cover leadership, team building, motivation, communication, influencing, decision making, political and cultural awareness, negotiation, trust building, conflict management and coaching.

The European Commission has for many years assigned a good amount of funds annually to a programme that supports projects with the objectives to “*enable people, at any stage of their life, to take part in stimulating learning experiences, as well as developing education and training across Europe.*” (Commission, 2016).

When applying for a project funded by the European Commission Programme there are no specific explicit qualification requirements for the project manager. The leading organization itself and its partner organizations which are applying for the grant simply need to be registered.

Historically, within previous iterations of the programme such as Leonardo da Vinci, Comenius and Grundtvig, application involved a great deal of preparatory work by the prospective project manager, similar to what one would expect from a project manager designing a project in the corporate world and with a strongly implied skills set. There were also parallels requirements regarding the management of the project once accepted (Jóhannsdóttir, 2015).

In 2014, changes were made in the programme, now known as Erasmus+ (E+). Today it is operated with a simpler application procedure as well as a lighter management process requirement for the project leader, once funding for a proposed project has been granted.

Nonetheless, for the current application process, familiarity with basic project management tools is needed. Application requires completion of a form regarding the scope of the project,

³ PMBOK: “A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK Guide)” is a book which presents a set of standard terminology and guidelines (a body of knowledge) for project management. (Wikipedia, Project Management Body of Knowledge, 2016)

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proposed intellectual outputs, structures of work packages and budget. The applicant will struggle if he has no knowledge of these tools and concepts, often called *the hard skills*. (Pant & Baroudi, 2008), (Lewis & Boucher, 2012), (Ramsomair & Howey, 2004), (Piante, 2010).

When subsequently preparing for an E+ project which has received funding, the focus of the demand placed by E+ procedures remains primarily one which appeals to hard skills. The project leader must finalize the contracts between the partners, propose a distribution of the budget and sometimes re-evaluate the scope according to the funding.

In summary, the current structure of the application process and preparation support within the E+ programme focuses on hard skills, which seems to presume that applicants for today's E+ programme are able to understand certain project management concepts, and execute successfully E+ projects, within a frame where hard skills have a clear priority.

Notwithstanding these assumptions around hard skills, there is a striking lack of reference to what can be termed soft skills. The PMBOK Guide indicates that PM competence should encompass a broad range of *both* hard and soft. Yet almost nowhere in the E+ application process are interpersonal or *soft skills* addressed apart from two questions:

- *“How will cooperation and communication happen among all project partners and with other relevant stakeholders? What will be the purpose of frequency of the transnational project meeting and who will participate in them?”*⁴
- *“What are your plans for handling project risks (e.g. conflict resolution processes)?”*⁵

Although these questions show a sense of the importance of the “dealing-with-people” factor of a project, there is no integrated and procedural assessment of and support for how the project manager will handle this dimension of the project.

When all preparation has been completed, and the project manager is able to finally start to lead and execute the project, interestingly, the focus shifts from hard to soft skills quite dramatically. For example, the issue of how to handle partners becomes prioritized: How to get them working as a team, how to handle motivation, trust building, conflicts and so forth. Additionally, with the mandatory requirement that partners come from at least three countries (see appendix 1), attention is paid to international communication skills and cross-cultural competence.

Importantly, the question arises as to whether the E+ programme acknowledges the importance of soft skills sufficiently, recognized as highly relevant by The PMBOK Guide, either within the application and preparation phases, or even the execution phase when soft skills do receive some more explicit attention, the latter evident in formal E+ programme procedures.

When initiating the research, a decision was taken to target Icelandic E+ project leaders (and their predecessors) and to investigate their experience. A list of 60 previous and current Icelandic project leaders from the before mentioned programmes was provided by the Icelandic National Agency (NA) of the European Commission Programme run by Rannís, the Icelandic Centre for Research.

To get the broadest view, a questionnaire was sent to all 60 people included on the list from the NA. In addition, to deepen research insights, three people from the list were interviewed.

⁴ Question number 4 in section E. of the KA2 - Cooperation for Innovation and the Exchange of Good Practices Strategic Partnerships for vocational education and training *Description of the Project*

⁵ Question number 3 in section F.1. of the KA2 - Cooperation for Innovation and the Exchange of Good Practices Strategic Partnerships for vocational education and training *Project Management*

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The research focuses on the project manager and what he regards as the skillset most relevant when it comes to leading an E+ project, and how far it is felt that the Erasmus Programme prepares and supports project managers for success within E+ projects. The research question is the following:

How balanced is the focus on hard and soft skills within the E+ programme during the application, preparation and execution support phases and how far does this skills balance correlate with the E+ project leader view of the relative importance of hard and soft skills when conducting these kinds of projects?

The aim here is not to provide conclusive solutions of any kind, but rather to investigate if the current emphasis of the E+ programme correlates with what the Icelandic project leaders consider to be the most relevant issues when it comes to leading the project, and to seek insight into the potential evolution of E+ programme application, preparation and support processes during execution which might lead to greater project success.

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2 Literature Review

In the following chapters the focus is on examining what is considered as a good balance between what is usually referred to as the “hard and soft” skills of project managers. These findings will then be compared to what is expected of a project manager in the E+ programme, based on explicit and implicit expectations expressed within official application, preparation and execution support processes.

The terminology of “hard skills” and “soft skills” is popular in project management terminology. According to Katz (1974) *hard skills* refer to qualities such as “*technical skill that implies an understanding of, and proficiency in, a specific kind of activity, particularly one involving methods, processes, procedures, or techniques.*” (Katz, 1974, p. 91) as well as conceptual abilities, such as being able to see the organization as a whole and recognizing how various internal aspects relate to and depend on each other. In contrast, soft skills refer more to human skills, namely the ability to work effectively as a group member and to build cooperative effort and collaboration within a team, particularly a team which one leads. In this paper, the terms “hard and soft skills” will be used with these definitions.

2.1 Which skills matter in project management

According to Piante (2010) project managers must possess two different kinds of hard skills. Firstly, they need to have technical skills within the domain of the project they are managing. Additionally, they must possess project management specific technical skills such as creating Gantt charts, conducting status meetings, calculating earned value and other skills necessary for conceiving ideas, solving problems and overall manage projects. This position is supported by the research of Lewis and Boucher (2012) which states that “*one cannot ignore or devalue the importance of the hard skills*” (Lewis & Boucher, 2012, p. 2), partly as it is the hard skills that allow us to become known for certain technical competences in our chosen profession. They argue that these competences are a key ingredient in every project life as they address the technical requirements of project endeavour. However, to fully succeed in a project, it is suggested that a manager needs more than technical skills; “*The most effective project teams report that interpersonal abilities or soft skills are essential when managing projects and people, and often make the biggest difference in retaining key talent growing the business, or losing one project after another*” (Lewis & Boucher, 2012, p. 1).

Goleman’s (1998) research found that qualities like intelligence, toughness, determination and vision, usually associated with leadership, are important. However, truly effective leaders also need to show a high degree of emotional intelligence, including self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills. His research showed a direct tie between emotional intelligence (usually classified as a soft skill) and measurable business results. This is supported by Jónasson & Ingason (2012) when they suggest that social and emotional intelligence and the ability to show compassion is an important feature in communication between people. In the context of management, they identify a variety of ways in which empathy can work to benefit the projects goal.

However, there is still little agreement among educators and training programs directors in the field of project management as to what precisely defines a good project manager (El-Sabaa, 2001). In response to El-Sabaa’s own research, conducted to answer the question: “*what*

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observable skills does an effective manager demonstrate” (El-Sabaa, 2001, p. 1), 85,3% defined ‘human skills’ as the those which have the greatest influence on project management practices over other categories defined as conceptual- and organisational skills, and technical skills. Interestingly, technical skills seemed to have the least influence, scoring only 50.46%.

On a similar note, Fisher (2010), based on interviews with ten project managers in a focus group over the period of a year, concluded that project managers would benefit from adopting six specific skills identified in his research, namely, understanding behavioural characteristics, leading others, influencing others, authentic behaviour, conflict management and cultural awareness. Through adoption, it was suggested that they would strengthen their people management skills and, therefore, improve delivery of successful projects.

In conclusion, there is a strong consensus that managing projects successfully requires a blend of skills including interpersonal ability, technical competence and cognitive aptitude, along with the capability to understand the specific situation and people, and then dynamically to integrate appropriate leadership behaviours (Pant & Baroudi, 2008) supported by Strang (2003)

2.2 Soft skills drive project success

According to researchers (Goleman, 2004) (El-Sabaa, 2001) (Fisher, 2011) (Lewis & Boucher, 2012), soft skills are at least equivalent if not more valuable than hard skills in driving project success. Lewis & Boucher (2012) takes this even further when they suggest that soft skills actually act to complement hard skills and elevate them beyond the constraints of classical training, learned disciplines, and personal beliefs, ultimately leading to innovation and creativity – the key ingredients of excellence and adaptability highly valued in today fast-paced project environment.

Thamhain (2004) considers that effective project leaders inspire their people and make everyone feel proud to be part of the project organization and its mission. Clarity, purpose and alignment of personal and organizational goals are necessary for a unified team culture to emerge. He suggests that effective people project managers encourage their people, show personal recognition for work achievements and make details of contributions highly visible to others within the organization. This refuels and sustains people’s commitments and unites the team behind its mission. El-Sabaa (2001) agrees, and suggests that crisis, uncertainty and suspense are continually recurring in projects to test the quality of project managers. There is the constant issue of deciding how to implement projects in the face of uncertainty, diversity and enormous quantities of relevant data. Additionally, project managers have to try to get things done through a large and diverse group of people despite having little direct control over most of them. (El-Sabaa, 2001).

Bourne & Walker (2004) also argue that skills in managing relationships are critical to achieve stakeholder satisfaction throughout all stages of the project. Relationship skills complement the effectiveness of hard skills because project outcomes are achieved through people. (Bourne & Walker, 2004). This view is supported by Pant & Baroudi (2008) who claim that more and more organisations realise that people management skills are vital for project success (Pant & Baroudi, 2008).

The internationalisation of the work environment is another key phenomenon which makes soft skills critical to project success. As noted previously, one of the criteria when applying for E+

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funding is that the participating team comes from at least three different countries. Comfort & Franklin (2014) describe the challenges of this context well then they argue that managing internationally can be experienced as more complex than working at home for many reasons, stating that:

Working internationally is ... complex because of different time zones, the coordination of agendas and sometimes the unreliability of communication technology. A major reason why managing internationally is so complex is because managers are confronted with context in which their unspoken values, unconscious norms and accustomed management practices – in short the effects of their home culture – are not shared to the same extent by the organizations and people they are working with. At home, our culture helps us to manage the complex context we live and work in, but this mechanism for managing complexity does not work so well internationally where we are likely to encounter a multiplicity of cultures. (Comfort & Franklin, 2011,2014, p. 3).

According to Barinaga (2007) the performance of nationally homogeneous workgroups differs in compared to heterogeneous ones. Fisher (2011) quotes Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner when he says that ‘understanding different cultures is an important people skill’. It suggests that managers need to understand the values and beliefs held by people from different backgrounds, and their impact on work situations (Fisher, 2011).

One can, therefore, argue that a need for high cultural intelligence (CQ)⁶ is important to drive the performance of culturally diverse teams. Moon (2013) investigated the relationship between CQ and multicultural teams. The investigation demonstrated the importance of high CQ within multicultural teams to alleviate the adverse effect of cultural diversity on team performance with findings concluding that higher levels of CQ moderates the relationship between cultural diversity and team performance. Those findings are supported by research done by Barakat et al. (2015) where the aim was to examine the effect of CQ on the job performance of global managers. Their findings suggest that global managers high in CQ exhibit more job satisfaction in an international setting, and, therefore perform better at their job and achieve better project results.

2.3 Reasons for neglect of soft skills and perspectives for change

Despite solid research and anecdotal evidence, soft skills remain neglected at various levels of project management practice. Pant & Baroudi (2008) argue that the project management literature taught at university level, as well as that represented within the PMBOK itself, emphasises hard skills at the expense of soft skills. Reasons for this may be complex. However, Ramsoomair & Howey (2004) state bluntly “*Soft skills are ignored because of an obsession with tactics at the expense of strategy. Pressed with immediate needs, firms put their emphasis on individuals who excel at primary or core skills. While they may grudgingly admit to some belief on the value of soft skills, it is falsely felt that these non-core skills are a priority that can be deferred.*” (Ramsoomair & Howey, 2004, p. 231). They argue that the main reason for this is that the impact of soft skills is often hard to quantify.

⁶ Cultural Intelligence, CQ, is a term used in business, education, government and academic research. Cultural intelligence can be understood as the capability to relate and work effectively across cultures. People with higher CQ's are regarded as better able to successfully blend into any environment, using more effective business practices, than those with a lower CQ. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_intelligence). CQ is categorized as a soft skill.

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Yet, as argued by Lewis (2012), with ever-changing expectations of diverse stakeholders, people skills are likely to become more important than ever before, arguably driving hard-core outcomes more effectively by, for example, reducing absenteeism and improving relationships with stakeholders.

Ramsomair & Howey (2004) conclude:

Soft skills aren't soft at all. They require broader thinking, a wider focus and a more subtlety of execution. But ultimately, they bring a competitive advantage. They lead to a more intergraded operation, more effective management at all levels and most importantly, they help integrate strategic goals with all levels of an organization. There is much to be done in the field of soft skills and hard realities. Hopefully, the discussion engendered here will lead to a veritable host of other voices and ultimately, the glory and heraldry of concerted action. (Ramsomair & Howey, 2004, p. 238).

3 Research method and approach

As concluded above, it can be strongly argued that it is important for those leading projects to deploy soft skills in order to fully succeed. This is likely to be even more crucial when dealing with international projects, taking into account the mixture cultural differences as mentioned by Molinsky (2015).

In the following research the aim is to compare this literature-based perspective to what is expected of a project leader in the E+ programme based on the criteria used within its current application, preparation and execution support phases for specific projects. The question asked is whether there is an appropriate balance in what the E+ programme emphasises as important and which skills the project leaders consider as the most critical in relation to perceived pressing issues.

The research sample consists of 60 project leaders, previously or currently running a project in the E+ programme (or its predecessors).

To gather data for the research the “*Concurrent triangulation approach*” (Creswell, 2009) was used, a method which uses separate quantitative and qualitative data collection as a way to minimise the weaknesses inherent in one method with the strengths of the other (or conversely, the strength of one adds to the strength of the other). In this approach, the quantitative and qualitative data collection is concurrent, happening in one phase of the research study. Ideally, the weight is equal between the two methods (see fig.1)

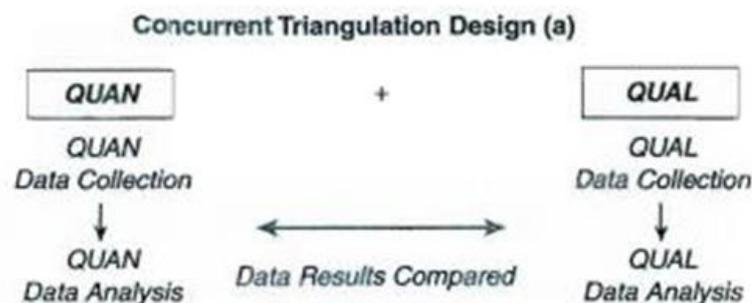


Fig 1.

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The quantitative method consisted of a questionnaire sent to all 60 project leaders. It provided general answers on how the project manager sees himself as a leader in projects he is leading.

The qualitative method consisted of interviews done on three of the project leaders from the same sample. Interviews allowed for a more detailed investigation of each participant's personal perspective regarding the matter at hand and helped to focus on what is important for the research results.

The reason for using the concurrent triangulation approach was the suggestion that either quantitative or qualitative approach would not be sufficient in providing answers. Interestingly the results from each method were not the same although the findings seem to highlight similar issues, as will be discussed later on. These findings gave confidence regarding choice of method.

3.1 Structure of the questionnaire

When designing the questionnaire, the most important issue was to get an overall feel of how the project managers see their use of skills during a project and to see if they themselves put more emphasis on using one skillset (hard or soft) rather than the another.

A list of ten questions, designed in Survey Monkey⁷, was sent to participants. The first part focused on general information about the project leader, whether he is a certified Project Manager (with D certification or similar) and project complexity (i.e. how many partners participated and what was the scope). The second part had questions regarding personal perception on issues related to the programme's framework and personal progress in the project and the participants were asked to check a box on the scale of 0-5. The third and final part focused on personal perception regarding skills, both soft and hard, as well as the leadership part and how the participants viewed themselves. The list of the ten questions can be found in appendix 2.

3.2 Structure of the interview

Regarding the interviews, the most important issue was to get participants' opinions on the skillsets needed to lead an E+ project, as well as on what they felt about the framework provided by the E+ programme. The participants were asked about their background as project leaders in the programme and their experience (number of projects led, leadership experience in general, education and current job position). The three interviews were conducted during a one-week period and all took place face to face at the interviewees' office. The interviewees consist of two women and one man reflecting the balance of project manager gender in the E+ programme in Iceland, although gender was not investigated as a core variable in this research. It does, however, figure in some of the answers given by the interviewees and is, therefore, mentioned. Each interview was recorded but made in confidentiality and took approximately one hour. The first part of the questions focused on the leadership part of the project from the viewpoint of individual skillset. The second part focused on the framework provided by the E+ programme and the participants' personal view on that. Questions can be found in appendix 3.

⁷Survey Monkey provides free, customizable surveys, as well as a suite of paid back-end programs that include data analysis, sample selection, bias elimination, and data representation tools. www.surveymonkey.com

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4 Research results

The following chapter investigates the findings from both the questionnaire and the interviews. Analysis will be done separately but then compared in chapter 5 – Discussion.

4.1 The survey questionnaire

The questionnaire was sent by email to a list of 60 former and current E+ (or predecessor) project leaders, addressing individuals by name with a personal note to each one. Of the 60 who received the email, 28 people participated, 46% of the sample. Participants were free to ignore questions. There were, on average, about 25 answers on each survey question.

The first part of the survey focused on participants' background as well as the scope of the project they were leading. It concluded that about 15% of the participants had certification as a Project Manager (e.g. with D certification from IPMA – International Project Management Association – or similar), with two people reporting an MA degree in Business and MA degree in Cultural Administration. 26% of the participants had led a total of three projects but not one had led more than that. 78,5% of the projects lasted two years. The findings from the last question in part three, which asked about the number of participants in current/last projects, are inconclusive as part of the participants seemed to have misunderstood the question. The findings, nonetheless, suggest that the average number of total partners, both domestically and internationally, are around five.

In the second part of the survey, participants were asked to mark their answers on a scale of 0-5, zero to two being “*not at all, little and moderate*” and three to five being “*reasonable, well and fully*”. The first question asked about knowledge of project management as a subject before starting their project. Almost 54% answered on the scale 0-2. When asked on how well prepared individuals thought they were at the start of their project, 55.5% answered on the scale 3-5. When asked to look back and reassess how well prepared they felt they really were, the number lowered by 5.5%. Asked about how satisfied they were with the training and support they received from the national office at the **beginning** of the project, 44% said reasonable (3) and 32% answered on the scale 0-2. But when asked about the support project leaders got **during** the project, the number changed dramatically with 88.5% answering on the scale of 3-5 of which 38.5% indicated fully (5). No respondent marked zero. When asked how far the project reached its original objectives, 96% answered on the scale 3-5 with 52% answering well (4) and only 4% answering little (1). The final question in part two asked about the participants' perception of their role as a leader in the project and how well they succeeded in that role. 56% said well (4) and only 8% said little or moderate (1-2).

The third part focused on the participants' skillset. The first question asked about the status of their hard skills at the beginning of their project. 42.3% said fairly competent and 31% said very competent with 19% indicating low. When asked about their soft skills, the number went up to 73% indicating very competent, with only 3.85% marking themselves as lacking competence. The subsequent question asked participants to write down the top factors (soft or hard skills) that they thought were most important regarding leadership in E+ projects. For the first factor participants mentioned a skill belonging to the soft section in 22 of 25 answers. The second factor had soft skills listed in 15 of the 25 answers and for the third factor, 14 were listed as hard skills of the 24 answers gathered. The finding showed that 65% of the factors listed had to do with soft skills and when looking at the ranking (factor 1-2-3) soft skills are 88% of the first named, 60% of the second named and 46% of the last named. Although participants were not asked to rank the factors by value, answers seem to indicate that soft skills are prioritised. When asked about which aspects of their leadership style improved/developed most during the

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process of the project, participants' answers indicated equally hard and soft, but when asked about the "biggest lesson learned" from the project 64% of the answers referred to a factor linked to soft skills.

4.2 The interviews

The interview started with questions regarding the interviewee background as project leaders in the programme and level of relevant project experience (number of projects led, leadership experience in general, education and current job position).

Project manager 1: She has been a partner in many projects and led two major ones. She has a PhD and a background in teaching and middle management in school institutions.

Project manager 2: He has been both a partner and a leader in two big projects. He has a PhD and a background in management both as a College principal and as a CEO of public institutions. He also has a degree in management and strategy.

Project manager 3: She has been a partner in at least eight projects and led two. She has a BA degree and is currently finishing her diploma in her own field.

The first half of the questions had to do with project leadership and the project managers' view on the positive aspects of the project, its difficult aspects, what they could have done better and what they were happiest with.

Project manager 1: *"The best thing was meeting all these new people and aspect of dealing with people. But that was also the hardest thing. You meet a lot of people who share your academic background and that is very rewarding. And there is always some kind of product that these project produce so you are actually making something. But when you have partners that don't deliver or are late delivering it can be really frustrating and it's hard to know how to handle it because even though you are the leader, you are all on the same ground really. I would have wanted some help in the beginning regarding how to address that. I also thought that maybe I should have made more of an effort regarding some kind of a team building regarding my last project. It was a big group, maybe too big, and even though the product that came out of it was fine I felt that the group wasn't functioning too well as a group and I didn't feel the ownership of the project from all the participants. I think it might have something to do with the fact that I am a woman and the leading partners from the other countries were all men, maybe with one woman as an assistant but usually just men. But this is just my feeling. I got quite a lot of compliments regarding my organisational skills, which I found funny because I don't see myself as particularly organised but it was nice to hear. I think my way of not taking issues that come up to seriously help me deal with what comes up each time and I have a rule of not letting frustration come out on work meeting but deal with it in one-on-one conversations."*

Project manager 2: *"The best thing is seeing the product being produced, that there is actually something being made. Also new connections and new ideas. It is extremely necessary for Icelanders as well as Icelandic institutions to be a part of a network like this because of our small population and our island mentality. As a leader you have to make sure everyone has the resources they need to do their job, you have to lead them in the right direction. But it is always hard to get people to do what they are supposed to. It is important to think about that regarding the budget and not pay anyone unless he had delivered if you possibly can. And the bureaucracy can also drive you crazy, I think to simplify that would help a lot. I also should have put my fist down more from time to time, sometimes I can be too soft. I just always want to believe that people are doing their best, and usually they are but still, a firm hand does a lot. For my overall*

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performance I am best at seeing the big picture and to eliminate what is not important. I also have a way of getting people on board and to explain this big picture so others understand. But I am careful of not getting too close and personal with the people I'm leading, to work with your friends can really complicate matters."

Project manager 3: *"I managed to deepen my own knowledge in my field of subject and that was the best thing for me. I wrote the project and therefore led it and probably got the most out of it. What was difficult though was that this team had worked together for some period of time in other projects and knew one another maybe too well, which in this case was not good. I had to be tough for them to listen to me. I think we would have benefitted from getting in new partners. I think I did the best I could and the product was what we set out to have. But I was really emotionally bankrupted at the end. I am happy that I didn't give in and was firm on what should be done and therefore I manage to finish it. But it took a toll and I was really tired afterward and I can't bear to think of participating in a project again just yet, let alone lead one."*

The second half focused on the programmes framework from the viewpoint of project issues and asked about the relevance of management and/or leadership knowledge, preparation before taking on a leadership role, communication with the NA and, finally, gave the interviewee the option of adding something believed to be relevant.

Project manager 1: *"It is good to have some management knowledge or experience for example when it comes to conducting meetings. And with handling the budget, I would have wanted to have someone do that for me. In other countries there are sometime special departments that just handle these kinds of work. The budget part is not in my field of interest. Regarding the framework from the programme itself, because of the new E+ programme there was big gap between what was expected of the people working in the project regarding filing and what they provided regarding templates and such. We have to re-do a lot of things because of that and I don't think that is too professional on their part. I also would have wanted to have some kind of a seminar on how to get the teamwork together and other team related issues. And it would have been great to get more of a mental support for me as a leader, to have someone to turn to regarding the "human" problems. Teams can be so unlike between projects that when it comes to communication you can't just do what you did last time. I would like to see some kind of a seminar or something that focuses on what is expected of the leader specifically regarding these issues."*

Project manager 2: *"This is really just like any other management. You get funding to work on a project and you have to use the resources you have as best you can to make the end product. So have your goal clear and always think of the end product. The journey is great but the product is the main issue. Experience and education is important when it comes to being a leader in a project. If you don't have much experience, start with a small and manageable project. If the project is big or complex, get an outside assistant i.e. hire a project manager to lead it. I also think that projects gain a lot by getting external evaluators to monitor the work and I recommend that for all bigger projects. I think that the framework is consistent with the criteria set by the E+ programme cf. that no management or leadership experience is required for project leaders. Maybe the programme would benefit from demanding that projects hire project managers to lead these projects, especially the bigger ones. But that might be difficult to execute. Perhaps applications should get extra point if they have an experienced project leader. Regarding other issues, I would like to see a decrease in the amount of reports handed in. The focus should be on the product. The Icelandic NA is a bit different from many other NAs when it comes to reports I think. They focus more on the end product and that you deliver*

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what you set out to. We are quite lucky when it comes to them. I think that in the new programme there has been some changers regarding that and if so, that is a good thing.”

Project manager 3: *“I would never let anyone lead a project that has never been a participant or a partner before. The experience you get from observing others leading a project is the best thing you can get as a lesson. When I took the role of a project leader I had been a partner in so many project before that I knew what to do. But there is no real preparation for the new leaders on behalf of the programme. Not really. But there should be. Even for someone like me with this experience. All these little things are so good to know. All this cultural difference that you really don’t realise until it hits you in the face. And the pressure of leading a big or a complex project can have on you and even your home life. Just to let them know what to expect so it will be easier to deal with if it comes up. And as a word of advice, don’t take part in too many project at once. This is a lot of work, and usually on top of your other work.”*

4.3 Return visit for deeper understanding

When reviewing the content of the interviews to contrast against the research question of the E+ programme focus, it was felt necessary to address the feedback loop within the E+ programme with respect to the initial question asked in the application process regarding cooperation and communication, and the progress and management of project risk/conflict resolution.

According to Andrés Pétursson (2016) Senior Adviser at Rannís, who runs the Icelandic part of the E+ programme, there are follow-up questions in both the interim and final reports regarding the initial questions from the application, where the project leader is asked to reflect on the process by answering the following question:

“Which monitoring activities have you carried out so far in order to assess the extent to which your project is reaching its objectives and producing its results? If relevant, how are you measuring the level of success of your project? Have you defined quantitative and qualitative indicators? What measures are being used to handle project risks (e.g. conflict resolution process, etc.)?”

The Icelandic NA has the discretion to monitor these answers but there is no substantial feedback loop regarding these issues, mostly due to insufficient staff and other recourses. However, if/when serious problems occur, project managers usually contact the NA directly and get the help they need to resolve it. Andrés said he would like to have the feedback process more efficient.

To follow up on this issue of feedback and its efficacy, the three interviewees were contacted again with this question:

- Do you recall having specifically disclosed in either/both the interim and final report, how the collaboration went and if there were any conflicts that needed handling?

Project manager 1: *“I did not discuss any problems in the reports. The issues that had come up had not been reported to the NA so I didn’t mention them.”*

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Project manager 2: *"I don't recall having written anything about the collaboration in the reports, I didn't think it was relevant in the reports. I do recall talking to Andrés at the NA that there should be more emphasis on communication in the preparation seminar held by the NA."*

Project manager 3: *"No I did not address it in any way. I didn't want to put it in the report because I was afraid it would affect the budget. I don't know if it would have but I didn't want to take the chance."*

The reporting of a high success rate of projects within the survey, i.e. 96% that were rated as being successful, gave another reason for a revisit to deepen understanding of the meaning behind the term 'success' and associated reporting processes. The interviewees were asked the following question:

- When you are evaluating the success rate of the project, are you thinking of the product produced by the project or are you evaluating the whole project, including assessment on communication and collaboration (e.g. would you devalue the project success if the communication and collaboration was bad, even if the product itself was what you aimed for)?

Project manager 1: *"I was mostly focusing on the product when I wrote the reports and the amount of work all partners did."*

Project manager 2: *"I was first and foremost evaluating the quality of the product and if the project met its initial objectives. I did not evaluate the communication part of the project but I think this should be included in the training of new project leaders."*

Project manager 3: *"I only evaluate the product that is produced. If the product is what was proposed in the application I can say the project was a success even though I don't feel it was a good project because of how the team functioned together."*

5 Discussion

Applicants need a certain amount of project management technical know-how to process the application form of the E+ programme. Therefore, one can assume that a project which is accepted has people on board with basic knowledge of how to manage some of the hard skills of a project. It seems, however, that there is little emphasis on project managers having knowledge of what is classified as soft skills, which has to do with communication, cultural differences and team work to name a few, all of which are success factors for leading a project (PMBOK Guide, 2013). In light of this, the question arose as to whether the skills that seem to get most attention in the application and the preparation within E+ processes are the same skills that are actually most used by the project managers when executing the project.

The research that was conducted aimed at exploring the skillsets of Icelandic project leaders in the E+ programme and its predecessors. The mission was to find out what skills were believed to have been most used and, therefore, influential during the projects, and then to compare those answers to the E+ programme and its framework and emphasis.

The first part of the research was a survey in which the project managers were asked various questions related to their skills and about their opinion of the E+ programmes framework. This was to establish a kind of a base line of the project managers' views of their competence.

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When asked about the most pressing issues of leadership, the answers did not correlate to the skills most emphasised by the E+ programme regarding application and preparation. When looking at the survey answers, it seems that respondents' issues regarding the soft skills are high on the list. When asked to name which skills they regarded as most important when it comes to leading an E+ project, 65% were categorised as soft skills. When asked about the biggest lesson learned from the project, the numbers were similar or 64%. This was supported by the interviewees, who said that matters regarding soft skills were the hardest to handle.

When looking at how balanced the skill focus of E+ programme is, it has been established that the focus of the application and preparation is mostly on hard skills. However, as mentioned in the introduction, the application form does address soft skills in two specific questions. These questions are revisited in the interim and final reports, where the project leader is asked to account for if and how he has handled projects risks by means such as conflict resolution processes, where conflict resolution can be presumed an aspect of human relations and soft skills. However, according to the Andrés (2016) it seems that any feedback from the NA regarding these issues is extremely limited due to alternative prioritisation and scarce resources. Consequently, there is little emphasis by the NA regarding monitoring and feedback on the communication part of the projects. Indeed, success seems primarily defined in terms of an 'output' or 'product' as compared to the collaborative process which delivered the said result. Evidently, project managers do not take soft factors into account when evaluating their projects in the reports, keeping this part of the project "as something for their bank of experience". Accordingly, it is very challenging for the E+ programme to assess the impact of communication on the project, let alone the relevance and impact of other soft skills. This is insightful and provokes questions given that a core component of the E+ programme is to focus on sharing, developing and transferring innovative practices in education between participating countries (Key Action 2, 2016), all of which fall within a soft skills definition. This may suggest that a lack of emphasis in the feedback process on the critical role of soft skills in dealing with projects challenges conspires to maintain a focus on hard skills in the E+ programme. With a lack of visibility for soft skills in both the application/preparation and feedback part of the project there is no driver to increase the presence of soft skills and, therefore, little immediate opportunity for change.

Secondly, when examining the research findings relating to how the E+ skills balance correlates to how E+ project managers view the relative importance of hard and soft skills, there were some interesting results. In the survey the project leaders were asked about their competence regarding hard skills at the beginning of their project. 42.3% said fairly competent and 31% said very competent with 19% indicating low. This indicates that over 70% of the project leaders considered themselves able to work through technical and other hard skills issues related to the projects.

When asked about their competence regarding soft skills the number went up, with 73% marking themselves as very competent, and only 3.85% indicating lacking competence. Yet within their projects, managers seemed to struggle with issues related to communicating, team building and other soft skill matters. This raises doubts about the initial self-confidence of the project leaders, and the veracity of their competence self-rating. According to Yammarino (1997) there is a long history of research that demonstrates the problematic nature of self-evaluation. In fact, research findings document that the accuracy of self-ratings suffers often due to factors such as inflation, unreliability and positive bias. A good example of this comes from the Interpersonal Skills Self-Assessment (2016) which aims to help people to discover their interpersonal skills strengths and weaknesses. It is often stated in this assessment that people think that they are effective listeners and, therefore, don't need to improve and develop

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their listening skills, without any clear evidence to indicate that they are good listeners. It is Yammarino's conclusion that positive self-bias can cause the person to ignore or discount criticism or failure, leading to slowness in learning appropriate behaviours and an ongoing negative impact on performance. This correlates with the research findings in this survey which show that even with a high self-rated level of social skills, the E+ project leaders struggled with challenges related to soft skills in their projects. Interestingly, collaboration problems were identified as relating to others, as to how partners had conducted themselves. This initial 'othering' of collaboration issues shifted to a more introspective position when project leaders were asked directly what they could have done better themselves. Then all were willing to name activities they could have conducted better. This clear disconnect between initial self-rating and post-project reflection may also derive from a lack of clarity on the meaning of soft skills. It is not wholly clear if pre and post comments related to the same series of skills in the same way. This might make for a separate research.

Related to the research question interrogating the efficacy of different phases of E+ processes, of support, the project leaders gave some indications as to their experience of the framework and support from the E+ programme. There was a clear distinction between perceptions of the Icelandic NA and the official E+ programme. There seems to be an overall satisfaction with the work performed by the NA, including the remark that it always does all it can to help. This correlates with the view that if something comes up regarding the projects, the Icelandic project leaders find it easy to contact the NA for help. All the criticism that the project managers commented on had to do with the framework and regulations of the programme itself but never of the Icelandic NA.

Although not a central component of the initial research question, when going through the conclusions of the interviews, the issue of "dealing with the team" was quite prominent. There was a clear request to enlarge the project managers' seminars held at the beginning of a project and/or have some kind of mid-term meeting for project managers to discuss issues that come up in the projects and share knowledge and best practice. Linked to that was the discussion of qualifications and how to evaluate experience. The question raised by the interviewees on whether and/or where to separate the project manager from project experts, raises a number of questions. Should there be more support for the project leader when it comes to dealing with the people aspect of the project or is it better to get an outside project manager with experience to lead the project and let the applicant just be a part of the expert team. The interviewees all said that the bigger the project and larger the funding, it should be mandatory to have a separate project manager that is not part of the expert team. This is a matter that is important to investigate further.

6 Conclusions

As with many projects in the corporate world, the issue of dealing with people seems to be one of the main focus points for project managers in the E+ programme. Despite this, the E+ programme focuses mainly on hard skills when viewing applications for projects, managing their progress and in the final evaluation of delivered outcome. Yet the importance of interpersonal skills, or soft skills, has been established; skills which require demanding levels of introspection and self-awareness and self-leadership. People with such qualities can be predicted to be more likely to be successful in their leadership role, thus producing better projects (Fisher, 2011). There is a reason to believe that the E+ programme would benefit from paying more attention to the soft skill factors of the projects being led in the programme as well

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as looking at ways to have soft skills KPIs to support tracking and evaluation of projects. There is a strong case to research the role of soft skills in the E+ programme even further.

As findings suggest that more support could be given to project managers on issues around “leading a team”, one potential consideration would be to enhance forms of support dedicated to this or associated topics. For example, more resources could be offered during preparation and support phases of the project in terms of soft skills training and / or associated learning materials. The findings also raise questions around selection and staffing processes in terms of who is most qualified to lead or participate in an E+ project, and how this might be determined. One interviewee had an idea for a solution: *“I think it would benefit the project if there were some kind of interviews with the project leaders that have admitted their application, to find out how they conduct themselves, how they propose to resolve issues regarding communication and just to get a feel of their general approach. That could help evaluate what projects to fund when applications are equally interesting, because a good application does not necessarily mean a good project”*.

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9 Appendix

Appendix 1.

3/24/2016

Apply for vocational education and training partnership funding

Apply for vocational education and training partnership funding

UK organisations involved in vocational education and training (VET) can apply for funding to run collaborative projects aimed at improving VET provision.

This part of Key Action 2 is managed in the UK by Ecorys UK as part of the UK National Agency.

What activities are possible?

Strategic Partnerships in VET can last between **12 and 36 months** and are a flexible way of working with partners from different countries. Strategic Partnerships in the VET field allow you to focus on activities designed to improve VET provision across the participating countries. Activities include:

- developing, testing and implementing innovative approaches and practices for study programmes, learners, staff and organisations;
- facilitating the recognition and certification of skills and competences;
- training, teaching and learning activities such as blended mobility of learners, joint staff training events, and teaching and training assignments;
- transnational activities to encourage active citizenship and entrepreneurship.

In order to be funded, Strategic Partnerships should also address at least one of the horizontal or VET-specific priorities (for example the use of [credit transfer systems](#)). You can find more about these and read full details of activities, including durations and eligibility criteria, in the [Programme Guide](#).

New for 2016

There are two different kinds of Strategic Partnership projects that you can apply for: projects supporting exchanges of practices and projects supporting innovation. Further information is available in our guidance for applicants.

How many partners are needed?

Strategic Partnerships in VET must include a minimum of **three partners from three different Programme Countries**, including the applicant organisation. However, organisations from Partner Countries can be involved in a Strategic Partnership if their participation brings an essential added value to the project. There is no maximum number of partners but the budget for management costs is capped and equivalent to ten partners. The number of partners and funding will vary depending on the project's aims and activities. Strategic Partnerships can receive a maximum of 150,000 euro in funding per year.

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Appendix 2.

Project management in Erasmus+ projects

Introduction

Dear project manager. Thank you for taking the time to answer this survey which is an effort to investigate the background of Icelandic project managers who have worked as project leaders in the Erasmus + EU programs and comparable predecessors of that plan.

The aim is to find out and highlight if there is a need to increase / improve support for project managers before or during their project and if so, what issues are most in need of training and support.

You have been selected to participate in this survey because of your experience as a project manager in the Erasmus+ KA2 and / or its predecessor, Leonardo Transfer of innovation. It is important that you take the time to answer the survey so it will give the most accurate conclusion, for not many Icelanders have managed these projects. From the group I will then select two to three participants to interview on individual aspects of the survey for further elaboration. If you are interested in such an interview please check the box at the end of the survey.

Many thanks and warmest regards,
Ingunn

1. How many Erasmus+ projects (or its predecessor "Leonardo Transfer of innovation") have you led?

2. What was the scope of your last project?

2 years

3 years

3. How many project partners (people) where there on your last project?

Domesticly

Internationally

Next

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Part two

Thank you again for participating in this survey, now we start the second part.
Please read the response provided and check the box you feel applies best for each question. If you are a certified project manager you can state that in the "other" box, or use it to add to your response if you feel the need.

4. Please answer the following questions on the scale of 0-5 (please put "PM" in the "Other" box if you are a certified Project Manager)

	not at all	little	moderate	reasonable	well	fully
How well did you know project management as a subject before you started your project?	<input type="radio"/>					
Other (please specify)	<input type="text"/>					
How well prepared did you think you were when you started your project?	<input type="radio"/>					
Other (please specify)	<input type="text"/>					
Looking back, how well prepared do you think you really were?	<input type="radio"/>					
Other (please specify)	<input type="text"/>					
How satisfied were you with the training and support that you got from the national office before you started your project?	<input type="radio"/>					
Other (please specify)	<input type="text"/>					
How satisfied were you with the support that you got from the national office during your project?	<input type="radio"/>					
Other (please specify)	<input type="text"/>					
If there had been more thorough training available, how would that have helped you?	<input type="radio"/>					
Other (please specify)	<input type="text"/>					
When evaluating projects success, how much do you think that a program like Erasmus+ (former Leonardo program) would benefit from training their project leaders better?	<input type="radio"/>					
Other (please specify)	<input type="text"/>					
How far did your project reach its original objectives (regarding scope, cost, schedule and so forth)	<input type="radio"/>					
Other (please specify)	<input type="text"/>					
How do you feel you succeeded as the leader of the project?	<input type="radio"/>					
Other (please specify)	<input type="text"/>					

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Part three

This is the last part of the survey so you are almost done.

Please provide written answers where asked to but note that answers can be written in Icelandic if that is more convenient.

5. How confident were you regarding the „hard skills“ tools (i.e. financial reports, strategic planning, organizations and so forth) of your project?

- not confident, these tools were all new to me
- fairly confident, not used to using these tools but know how they work
- very confident, I use these tools allot
- Other (please specify)

6. How confident were you regarding the "soft skills" tools (i.e. communication, cultural difference, language, stress and so forth) during your project

- not confident, I had never delt with those factors specially
- farly confident, I was not used to dealing with those factors but had some idea on how to do it
- very confident, I was quite used to dealing with those factors
- Other (please specify)

7. What three factors ("soft" and/or "hard" skills) do you think are most important when it comes to leadership in Erasmus+ projects?

1.
2.
3.

8. Which aspects of your leadership style improved/developed most during the process of the project?

9.

What is your biggest "lesson learnd" from leading an Erasmus+ (Leonardo) project?

10. I am willing to participate in an interview following this survey

- Yes
- No

Prev

Done

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Appendix 3.

Questions for interviews

Regarding the project's leadership (from the viewpoint of individual skillset):

- 1) What was the most positive thing about leading a project as a whole?
- 2) What was the most difficult thing about leading a project as a whole?
- 3) What would you have wanted to do better as a leader, as a whole?
- 4) What were you most happy with in your leadership of the project as a whole?

Regarding programme's framework (from the viewpoint of project issues):

- 1) Do you think that it is important to have some kind of management and/or leadership knowledge when leading this kind of a project?
- 2) How do you feel the programme handles preparation for the project leaders?
- 3) How do you feel the programme and its national office handles the framework, communication, help or other regarding these projects and its leaders?
- 4) What else would you like to discuss regarding project leadership in the E+ (and the predecessors)?