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Communication needs in an international project team in the opinion of the practitioners

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Summary. Managing an international project involving partners from different countries and various institutions is a challenging task. In such a project, with a dispersed international team, proper communication and documentation management seems to be of crucial importance in achieving the project success. For this purpose, appropriate plans, procedures and rules must be established, as well as an effective software tool used. The present paper concentrates on the latter issue and concerns an EU co-financed project BalticMuseums: Love IT! The main goal of the paper is to determine the functionalities and features of a tool supporting communication and documentation processes in this project. The study bases on the opinions and experiences of practitioners employed in the BalticMuseums: Love IT! project.

Introduction

Implementing and managing projects requires following certain rules and principles related to various project knowledge areas. In today's digital world, also using information and communication tools for this purpose is natural and usually indispensable. In the case of projects co-financed from the European funds, there are additional guidelines that must be observed, including regular reporting of the project progress and associated expenses. If in addition it is an international project, involving institutions from many different countries, realization and management of such a project requires the use of appropriate methods, techniques and tools that will enable achievement of its objectives. From the point of view of the

lead partner, who is responsible for coordinating the activities of all partners and ensuring smooth implementation of the planned tasks, appropriate planning of the communication and documentation processes, and the use of the most suitable tools for this purpose is a high priority task. The main goal of the paper is to determine what functionalities and features should a tool supporting communication and documentation processes in such a project team have. For that reason, a survey among the representatives of the project partner organizations was conducted, the opinions and experiences of those practitioners were obtained and analyzed.

This study refers to an international project *BalticMuseums: Love IT! – New brand of gamified tourist products for sustainable development of natural and cultural heritage tourist destinations*, realized within the Interreg South Baltic Programme 2014–2020, which is supported by the European Union from the European Regional Development Fund. University of Szczecin is the Lead Partner of the project and one of the three scientific partners, together with the University of Applied Sciences in Stralsund (Germany) and the Business Academy North in Greifswald (Germany). The list of partners which are museums or cultural institutions includes: the National Marine Fisheries Research Institute (Gdynia Aquarium, Poland), Lithuanian Sea Museum in Klaipeda, Malmö Museums (Sweden), NaturBornholm (Denmark) and Experiment Science Centre in Gdynia. There is also a partner specialized in organizing and conducting creative events aimed at developing IT applications: Foundation of Internet Industry Development “Netcamp” from Poland. Apart from nine main partners there are eight associated partners: two from Germany and Denmark, and one each from Poland and the countries outside the South Baltic Programme area: Russia, Estonia and the Netherlands. The main aim of the project is to develop new IT-enabled tourism products for natural and cultural heritage tourist destinations in the South Baltic Region in a form of multilingual BYOD-guided tours providing an enhanced visitor experience during and after the visit featuring gamification, multimedia content, and augmented reality techniques. The scope of project activities as well as the majority of communication channels among project team members calls for well-thought-of project communication and management methods, procedures and tools.

1. Theoretical background

Communication management is considered to be of crucial importance to the success of a project (i.a. Purna Sudhakar, 2012; Ofori 2013), in particular IT projects carried out by dispersed teams (Han, Jung, 2014; Niinimäki, Piri, Lassenius, Paasivaara, 2012). Effective project communications ensure that the right information reaches the right person at the right time and in a cost-effective manner, and it is a critical element of team effectiveness, both in traditional and virtual teams. It also influences other project management areas like scope, risk or procurement management. The effectiveness of project communication often determines the quality of decisions and their implementation. Without a solid communication plan, strategy and tools, it is impossible to keep

everyone up-to-date and informed. Poor communication can lead to differences in expectations, people not knowing the status of the project and what is expected from them. Therefore, communication is a key element, which has to be applied effectively throughout a project's life cycle.

In order to successfully implement and manage projects it is necessary to follow rules and guidelines specified in project management methodologies or best practices as described by e.g. Kerzner (2013), Meredith and Mantel (2011) or in the internationally recognized standard – *Project Management Body of Knowledge* (PMI, 2013). Depending on the nature of the project different, specialized methodologies can also be used, like Prince 2, Adaptive Project Framework, Agile Software Development, Scrum, and others. Most of them tackle project communication and documentation issues and support appropriate processes, procedures or give some advice and hints on proper communication and documentation management. For example, using the PMBoK guidelines we learn how to: plan communications management, manage communications, control communications as well as how to: identify stakeholders, plan stakeholder management, manage and control stakeholder engagement. The standard gives also some general idea of techniques and tools which should be used for each of the defined processes and how they link to other project processes (PMI, 2013).

An alternative to the above mentioned methodologies and standards are the project communication management patterns (Muszyńska, 2016). The general role of these patterns is to support project managers and teams in effective implementation of communication management practices based on a context-problem-solution approach, but they can be used both to solve encountered problems with communication and documentation processes as well as to avoid them.

Whichever approach to project management we choose, we will not find the characteristics of software tools which should be used to manage communication and documentation processes, as this aspect is strongly dependent on the type and nature of a project, experiences and habits of the team members and organizational issues.

2. Research methodology and findings

Setting up an effective and convenient communication and documentation platform to use by all team members is a prerequisite to effective project management. But finding the most appropriate set of communication methods and tools is strongly dependent on the characteristics of team members and the communication environment they are used to in their everyday jobs. Since even the most effective communication processes and the most powerful tools supporting them can prove ineffective if the team is not willing to use them. To learn about the habits and needs of the BalticMuseums: Love IT! project partners, an online survey was conducted, which included both closed and open-ended questions. The first three questions concerned the communication tools and methods used on an everyday basis in the project partners' organizations for manag-

ing communication and documentation and for storing and sharing project files. In the next three questions the respondents were asked to evaluate the importance of specific functionalities and features of the software which should support communication and documentation processes in the BalticMuseums: Love IT! project team. There was also a question concerning the desired frequency of the online meetings.

All project partners and associated partners were asked to fill in the questionnaire (altogether 17 partner representatives) out of which all 9 project partners and 5 of 8 associated partners gave their feedback. Additionally representatives of two external companies that cooperate within the project also shared their experiences regarding communication and documentation processes.

The answers provided to the first question (fig. 1), regarding the intensity of the use of different methods and tools for daily communication, revealed that electronic mail and telephone are undeniably the most popular tools, email being *used every day* by all respondents and the telephone being *used every day* by 87% and *a few times a week* by the remaining 13%. Also direct talks at the workplace are popular as 12 out of 16 respondents use that direct communication method every day. Meetings are conducted a few times a week by 50% and a few times a month by 38%. Tools which were indicated as *not used* at all by 44% of the respondents were: discussion forum and instant messenger. Audio-/videoconferencing tools were used only a few times a year by 50% of the respondents.

The second question asking about the tools used for managing communication and documentation in projects brought a variety of answers: SharePoint, Redmine, Basecamp, Trello, JIRA, etc., as well as Word, Excel, email. Answers to the third question regarding tools used for storing and sharing project files included mainly: local repository (indicated by 50% of respondents), private or public cloud (Google Drive/One Drive – mentioned by 6 representatives) and a few other specific tools.

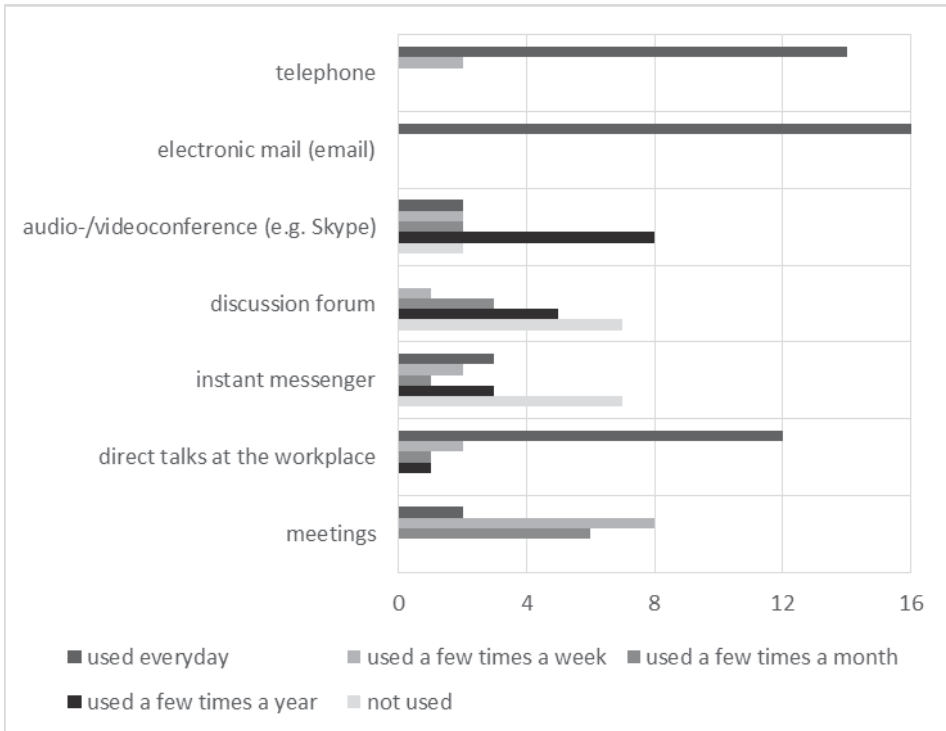


Figure 1. Popularity of communication methods and tools in the institutions of the BalticMuseums: Love IT! project partners

Source: own study.

The next three questions aimed at learning what functional and non-functional features should a software supporting communication and documentation processes in the BalticMuseums: Love IT! project team have. Respondents were asked to rate the importance of each function or feature on a five point scale, ranging from *absolutely crucial* to *not important*. The presented charts (fig. 2, 3) show only features indicated as *absolutely crucial* or *important* by jointly at least 50% of the surveyed partners. Fig. 2 presents the results for the functional features and fig. 3 for the non-functional ones.

Some functional as well as non-functional features, like: “instant messenger with thread register”, “issues/problems register”, “configurability”, “availability of tutorials (for individual training)” and “possibility of withdrawal and deletion of data at the end of the project”, were indicated as *desired* by more than 50% of the respondents.

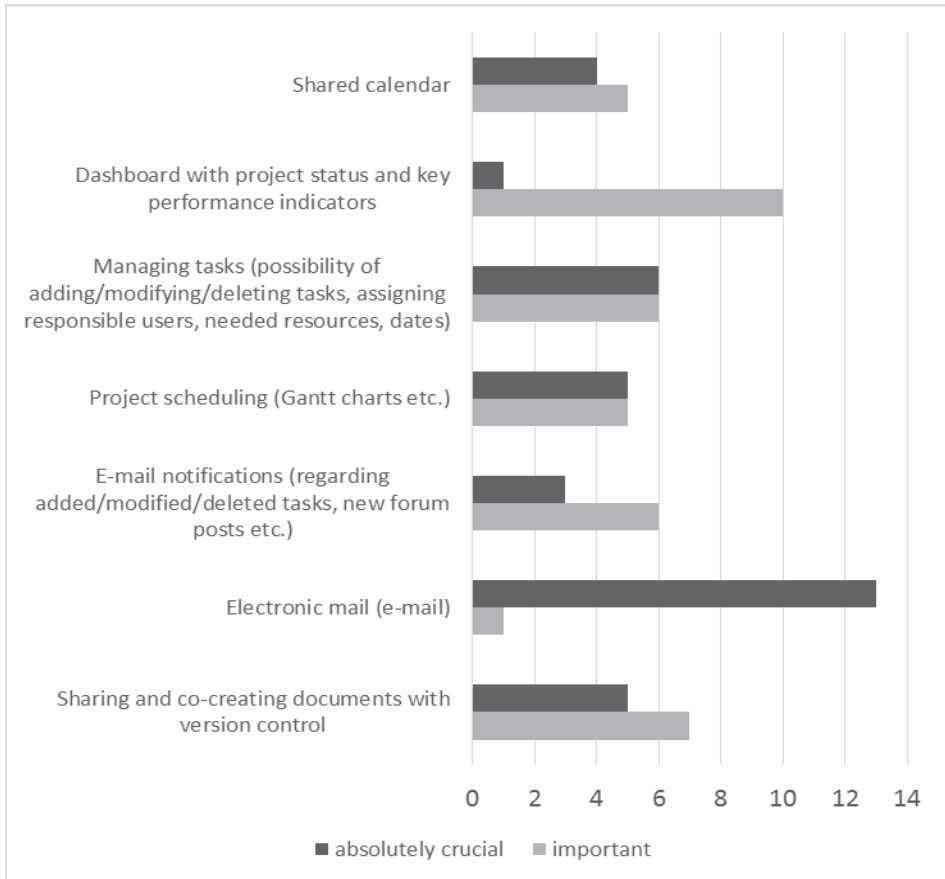


Figure 2. The most important functionalities of a communication and documentation management software according to the BalticMuseums: Love IT! project partners

Source: own study.

A feature which was judged as being *of little importance* by 50% of the surveyed partners was the “possibility of group trainings with a trainer”.

The last question in the questionnaire concerned the desired frequency of the online meetings and in that case two most frequent answers – 44% and 25% were respectively *once a month* and *once every two months*.

3. Discussion of findings

Opinions gained from the project partners and associated partners of the BalticMuseums: Love IT! project show that there are two main tools used in most of the institutions for daily communication, which are telephone and email. Fortunately both

of them can be also used in the BalticMuseums: Love IT! project team, because there are no significant time differences among project partners and telecommunication fees for international phone calls within the European Union are acceptable, and also VoIP technology (Skype, etc.) can be used for that purpose. The usefulness of these tools was also proved by research conducted by Fotoyi and Jiang (2016) showing that these two communication tools were highly effective in communicating project information to management, sharing project information among project teams and communication with clients and suppliers.

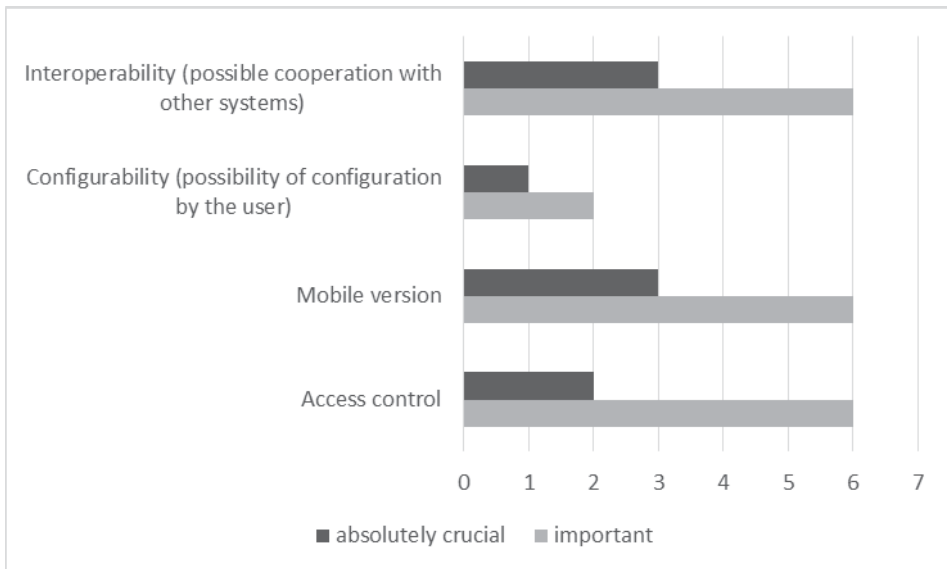


Figure 3. The most important non-functional features of a communication and documentation management software according to the BalticMuseums: Love IT! project partners

Source: own study.

Both meetings and direct talks at the workplace also play a significant role in everyday communication in the respondents' institutions, and these elements should also be used in the project, although direct talks will be limited to the on-spot meetings of all project partners, which are scheduled only twice a year. To ensure more frequent synchronous communication among project partners, online meetings will be conducted once a month or once every second month, as desired by the majority of the respondents.

Basing on the needs expressed by the project partners concerning the most important functions of a communication and documentation management software, the chosen tool should have: a shared calendar function, email client, dashboard showing the project status and key performance indicators and make it possible to share and co-create documents, manage project tasks, display project schedule and receive notifica-

tions about changes. The most important non-functional features regard access control, the availability of the mobile version, interoperability with other systems and configurability.

Conclusion

The responsibility of successful coordination of an international multi-partner project calls for establishing an effective team- and project-adjusted communication and documentation platform. The performed study gives some insights on how communication and documentation processes are managed in the partners' institution and what functions and features of the communication management software, supporting the BalticMuseums: Love IT! project, they find important. This knowledge will be used to choose the most appropriate tool from the vast variety of those available and configure it to the needs of the project team.

Next steps will concentrate on preparing a project communication plan, including all necessary procedures, responsibilities, templates, etc., to ensure an effective project repository and communication environment.

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The contents of this paper are the sole responsibility of the author and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union, the Managing Authority or the Joint Secretariat of the Interreg South Baltic Programme 2014–2020.

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POTRZEBY KOMUNIKACYJNE W MIĘDZYNARODOWYM ZESPOLE PROJEKTOWYM W OPINII PRAKTYKÓW

Słowa kluczowe: zarządzanie komunikacją i dokumentacją, projekt międzynarodowy, potrzeby komunikacyjne

Streszczenie. Zarządzanie międzynarodowym projektem, w którym uczestniczą partnerzy z różnych krajów i rodzajów instytucji jest wymagającym zadaniem. W tego typu projekcie o rozproszonym międzynarodowym zespole, właściwe zarządzanie komunikacją i dokumentacją wydaje się mieć kluczowe znaczenie dla osiągnięcia sukcesu projektu. W tym celu należy opracować odpowiednie plany, procedury i zasady, jak również użyć skutecznego narzędzia informacyjnego. W niniejszym artykule skoncentrowano się na tej drugiej kwestii, dotyczącej projektu BalticMuseums: Love IT!, współfinansowanego z środków UE. Głównym celem artykułu jest określenie funkcjonalności i cech jakie powinno mieć narzędzie wspomagające procesy komunikacyjno-dokumentacyjne w tym projekcie. Badania wykorzystują opinie i doświadczenia praktyków – partnerów projektu BalticMuseums: Love IT!.

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Cytowanie

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