Tool 16 – How to communicate with partners from a distance[1]

In a cooperation project partners should aim to maintain close contact and a continuous information flow. Many of the existing tools help facilitating communication among European partners and with partners from more remote or third countries, sometimes free of charge: do not hesitate to make the best use of all of them. They are efficient and environmentally friendly since no paper, no ink and no fuel is spent to transfer your messages from one place to the other! They also make you win a lot of time... so give it a try and you will see!

A. Tools to communicate from a distance

A.1 Voice communication

- **using personal computer (PC) connection on both ends**

There are web-based facilities that support conversation between 2 persons (including video-conferencing options), and some of them allow the involvement of more than 2 persons. Specific equipment requirements on both ends of the line of communication are:

- o software download (you may prefer to opt for those free of charge to give it a try),
- o head set and microphone (sometimes already included in your PC),
- o web-cam, if you want to make use of the videoconferencing possibility.

- **connecting personal computer with land line or mobile phones**

This possibility is offered by many different providers and often involves charges, but at very competitive rates compared to usual charges. For this type of service, which sometimes also include answering machine systems and transfer options to your other phones, in general registration is required.

A.2 Immediate written communication (chat)

This option can be used to complement voice communication or e-mail. It is immediate, as it enables the exchange of text messages or files (up to several MB) with your partners in real time. Furthermore, chat systems display the connection status of the person you are trying to reach (if online or not, and if available or busy), which is very convenient for you not to disturb somebody or wasting time with unsuccessful contact attempts. Some chat systems are open to more than 2 participants at a time.

A.3 Conferences gathering more than two participants

The systems mentioned above are very easy and convenient for exchanges between 2 or 3 persons. For communication involving more participants, they might turn out inappropriate and cumbersome to use

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[1] *Some of the material in this tool is adapted from 'DAC Criteria for Evaluating Development Assistance' – OECD*

For such purpose voice conferencing tools exist that gather e.g. up to 12 persons. You can talk, chat and transfer documents from one participant to the other, all at the same time. Furthermore, some of these systems also offer to record the conference, so you keep track of what has been agreed and this facilitates e.g. writing up meeting minutes afterwards.

B. Collaborative tools

B.1 Distant collaboration

Internet offers a series of possibilities for distant collaboration in the sense of: managing a project; exchange and store files; share contacts and/or a calendar; write training support documentation; or jointly elaborate a document.

Some platforms are free of charge, others offer a free trial period, sometimes restricted by the number of users currently exploiting the service. In order to obtain a tool that is accessible to several users and to obtain additional features, a price/offer request needs to be submitted to the platform administrators. Provided the quote is modest, the expense is quickly recovered by the economy of time and resource the tool provides for. Some systems even offer distance training facilities which may be considered a 'plus' for less experienced users... keep it in mind when making a choice.

B.2 Shared agenda

For maintaining a joint calendar for a cooperation project or inviting partners for a cooperation meeting (trying to find the partners' availability) different service providers offer web-based shared agendas, a very practical solution.

B.3 Creation of a blog

Many different options exist to support the creation a blog free of charge, which represent an easy way for partners to share documents and to communicate. A blog may be an interesting solution to facilitate the exchange between partners and to share documents and... to communicate about the cooperation project with a wider range of people: stakeholders, citizens, co-financers, and others can be invited to visit the blog from time to time to obtain the latest news about the project.

C. Exchanging 'heavy' files via internet

It is possible to exchange files of several MB between cooperation partners, avoiding the use of classical email systems, which are usually subject to MB transfer capacity limits. In any case, broadband access is required to achieve reasonable transfer speed.

Some of the solutions developed offer to share files by storing them on a server specifically designed for that purpose (one may only send one file at a time). One should indeed remember

to carefully note down the URL provided by this service from which the file can be downloaded. The addressee can then simply visit the server to download the file. The URL may be used as often as needed, but a particular file can be downloaded only by one user at a time. In certain cases files that have not been downloaded for more than 24 hours will be deleted by the system administration.

D. Exchanging photos

Cooperation project partners often like to share photos to present the specific features of their rural area, or to exchange photos after the first preparation or project meeting. Different internet tools have been put in place to share photos (with the possibility to restrict access or to keep it open to the general public).