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EU Projects Going Virtual – The ONE Meeting Approach

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Innovative impact

The ONE meeting approach aims to equip EU project managers and HE leadership with skills and competencies needed for making EU projects more efficient, greener and more sustainable. Our target groups can pick out what is relevant for them: The ONE Business Case provides evidence and offers tools to check the potential benefits for the environment; the ONE Virtual Toolkit offers a systematised collection of tools for virtual collaboration; and the ONE Guide presents a proof of concept and a step-by-step approach for switching to a ONE meeting only format.

In the long run, we hope to impact project work on a regional, national and international level to become more sustainable and effective, while still focusing on the social and personal factors as well as mutual cultural understanding. We see project managers and leaders who use our resources for their own work as possible change agents. Following this, we hope to see our outcomes further developed, enriched and undergirded by our target groups through their own experiences, their innovative practices as well as their successes and failures. We are aware that what we have achieved is only a first step towards a sustainable, green and smart approach in transnational collaboration. Many more steps have to follow – supported by the experiences of projects using the ONE approach and by EU policies advocating a greener and more sustainable Europe.

Keywords: virtual collaboration, sustainability, green transition, virtual tools

Introduction

The European Union and national governments have adopted ambitious environmental goals towards a climate-neutral EU by 2050. However, face-to-face transnational partner meetings, and related high levels of pollution due to cross-border travelling, are typically a key component of EU project collaboration in higher education.

The ONE Meeting Project is an Erasmus+ initiative, funded under the ‘Key Activity 2. Strategic Partnerships for Higher Education’, running from December 2020 until November 2022. The ONE consortium is formed by seven partners from seven different countries (i.e., Germany, Belgium, United Kingdom, Ireland, Italy, Spain, Finland) and includes four universities (FernUniversität in Hagen, University of Jyväskylä, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca), two business partners (Canice Consulting Ltd., Momentum) and the European Association for University Continuing Education (eucen). The project is coordinated by the FernUniversität in Hagen in close collaboration with EUCEN.

The ONE Meeting Project explores virtual possibilities of collaboration for designing or working on EU-funded transnational projects, and raises awareness about how

virtual collaboration can substitute face-to-face meetings but also face-to-face work in general. Our approach favours a dynamic and digital form of collaboration that is in real time and teamwork-oriented. It aims at providing evidence, tools and resources for switching to the ONE meeting only format. Within ONE, all partners are both actors and investigators of our experiences from virtual, collaborative work in a transnational project. As a consortium, we will show how to run transnational projects with only ONE transnational partner meeting by achieving it ourselves through the project and sharing the lessons. Our own experiences are complemented both by an early consultation of 38 project managers of EU projects and their experiences with virtual collaboration as well as by user testing and user participation in each step of our project to countercheck our results. In this article, we will present central outcomes of our project work encompassing the ONE meeting approach: (1) The Business Case for ONE Meeting Projects in Europe, (2) The ONE Meeting Project Virtual Toolkit and (3) The All-You-Need-To-Know Guide to Running ONE Meeting Projects (see Figure 1). Finally, we will point out important criteria that are based on our experiences so far.



Figure 1: The three ONE Meeting Project Outputs

The Business Case for ONE Meeting Projects in Europe

In general terms, it has been argued that online meetings are less efficient for several reasons: First, casual social interactions are less likely to occur; second, workers lack knowledge about the existing tools to conduct online meetings[1]; third, there is the fear of losing visibility and networking opportunities[2]; and fourth, online meetings go against organisational culture[3]. However, experts in the field have identified various good practices that could overcome these barriers to conduct optimal online meetings, such as replacing coffee breaks with 'Chat Roulettes' or organising 'virtual lunch tables' or 'speakers' lounge' rooms[4]. Others have suggested using polls, surveys, virtual whiteboards and trivia to foster engagement in small group sessions[5]. On top of this, virtual meetings offer several other positive impacts such as allowing for a higher level of diversity in participants or a reduction in the cost and time losses due to travelling[6]. Most importantly, the implementation of the ONE meeting only format enables European projects to reduce their environmental footprint. There exists a growing body of literature that looks at the environmental cost of physical meetings, conferences and seminars[7]. In the framework of this project, with the Business Case for ONE Meeting Projects in Europe[8] we have provided evidence on the gains of switching to our proposed model. In particular, we calculated the environmental cost in terms of CO₂ emissions for the project under the ONE meeting scenario, and under the normal scenario, in which all meetings are held physically. The results exhibit a difference of 10 tons of CO₂ emissions between the all-physical meetings scenario and the ONE project model. Additionally, we showed the environmental gain from 13 EU projects in which partners in the consortium were involved. The switch to the ONE meeting only format would result in an overall reduction of 160.7 tons of CO₂ emissions.

The ONE Meeting Project Virtual Toolkit

The ONE Meeting Project Virtual Toolkit[9] is an easy-to-use collection of virtual tools. It presents a selection of usable virtual tools for project staff in EU projects. Because the target group of this project is higher education professionals in the European Union area who work in cross-national projects in management, administration, research or technical support, this target group was also used as an informant of the virtual tools needed in collaboration and co-creation in various phases of transnational projects.

The creation of the Virtual Toolkit included several phases. First, a total of 38 EU project professionals from 18 countries were contacted with a request to list their favourite virtual tools used in different project phases in transnational projects. In addition, seven partners in the ONE Meeting Project complemented this tool list with their own favourites. The six tool categories of the Virtual Toolkit were created based on this data collection, the categories being: (1) Project Management Tools, (2) Collaboration and File Sharing Tools, (3) Research Tools, (4) Meeting and Webinar Tools, (5) Polling, Presentation and Animation Tools and (6) Digital Content Creation Tools.

The final selection of 23 tools for the Virtual Toolkit was based on the ranking of the tools selected by the partners using the following criteria: usability, universal design (accessibility) and price. Further feedback for the Virtual Toolkit was collected through pilot testing both internally among project partners and externally through 48 professionals working in projects in the field of higher education in EU countries. The final version of the Virtual Toolkit was edited based on this feedback.

The All-You-Need-To-Know Guide to Running ONE Meeting Projects

The All-You-Need-To-Know Guide to Running ONE Meeting Projects[10] (ONE Guide) complements the ONE Business Case (which provides evidence on the benefits of our approach and focuses on raising awareness) and the ONE Virtual Toolkit (which presents a systematised collection of tools for virtual collaboration). It aims at project managers who need to or want to change the way of conducting transnational projects and provides a step-by-step approach to implement transnational projects with just ONE meeting. To achieve this, our experiences in ONE as well as learnings, failures and successes of our own work are cornerstones of our proof of concept – paired with valuable experiences and resources from outside the ONE consortium.

The ONE meeting approach consists of three components:

1. Agile project management: a way to continuously assess and reflect on project development
2. Sustainability: contributing to sustainability on the project level and within partner organisations
3. Accessibility: understanding accessibility as a relevant part of virtual collaboration

Furthermore, the ONE meeting approach offers tips and advice for making a difference in different phases of an EU project, outlining a step-by-step approach on how to manage and conduct your project with ONE meeting only: from proposal development, project planning and

implementation to dissemination and exploitation to quality assurance and evaluation. An integral feature is the ONE meeting itself: This face-to-face meeting is of special importance for the partnership and could take place at different stages of the project – as a kick-off at the beginning, for re-bonding and mid-term evaluation in the middle of the project or as a closing event and a possible start for new collaborations at the end. Within the ONE Meeting Project we had plans for this ONE meeting for each of these stages of the project. Due to the circumstances, we now hope to have it as the closing event of our project.

Conclusion

While developing the ONE meeting approach within our own project work, we determined some important criteria – based on our own experiences – that could serve as prerequisites for transnational EU projects following this approach. They are closely connected to collaboration and communication and need to be considered to successfully implement such an approach.

Firstly, *personal and social aspects* are of high relevance when it comes to virtual collaboration. Partners need to have spaces of informal social exchange. Secondly, a clear and transparent *communication paired with social presence* from the project coordinator helps the partnership to stay connected and attuned. Thirdly, the *inclusion of intercultural experiences and understanding* has to be thought through when collaboration and communication is mostly taking place online; it is not enough to pin it solely on the ONE meeting. Another criterion is the *allocation of time and exclusiveness for virtual collaboration*. Because one central threat to online collaboration is digital or Zoom fatigue, it is important to rethink online and offline working and to carefully decide about synchronous and asynchronous work and collaboration. And last but not least: Successful *online meetings require effort* – both didactically and technically.

Comparable examples

The Creative Change project develops a set of resources to support project managers and staff to embrace creative, people-centred and impact-oriented practices. Creative Change is funded under the Key Activity 2 of the Erasmus+ Programme (project n° 2020-1-AT01-KA227-ADU-092553). Read more: <https://creative-change.eu/>

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