

# Expert Corner: My Experience of European Funding With Dr Ritchie Head

*Article submitted by Rebecca Erskine, Head of Training*

As part of our 'Expert Corner' series, members of the Idox Information Solutions' team ask different funding experts to talk about their personal experiences of funding.

Dr Ritchie Head – a North-West based research manager who has worked on over a hundred European projects over the last 15 years – shares his expertise on getting involved in Europe.

Difficult to access, bureaucratic, centred on new Member States – these are all misconceptions that are bandied around about EC funding. Not so, protests Dr Ritchie Head, whose efforts to secure European funding has paid dividends for his organisation as well as others he has advised over the years.

Here he tells Idox's Head of Training, Rebecca Erskine, how he has managed to navigate the European landscape to secure several millions of pounds of funding.



## So Ritchie, when did you first become involved in Europe?

It was 1996 and I was working as a research scientist on someone else's project seeking to identify ways in which to keep underwater cameras clean. It was a project which involved universities and companies based in the UK, France, Portugal and the Netherlands.

I gained further experience on other EU-funded projects before applying for my own project. My first application was to Framework Programme 5, the European Commission's flagship research and technological development programme (now known as FP7). My first application was unsuccessful (I don't recall why and the Commission still has work to do in terms of the feedback they offer to allow those who have failed to improve their applications in the future) but I was successful with my second attempt.

## Tell me more about that success...

Although I wrote the application, it helped that there was a lot of expertise in the guise of partners with whom I'd worked previously. We were awarded €2.5 million for a partnership of marine biologists, material science experts and engineering companies to devise a marine

coating substance that would allow boats to remain free from barnacles and other fouling and sail through the water more easily.

Of course, not all the bids I've submitted to the Commission over the years have been approved, but, the more bids you get involved in, the greater your chances of success. I've either been an active participant in or advisor to well over 200 funding applications. A big factor in determining success is whether you are able to read between the lines and truly understand what the Commission is asking for. So when the work programme says, "we are likely to fund projects in the following area..." the likelihood is that work that falls outside those specified areas will not be supported.

## What's been your best partner experience?

Actually, that first project was probably the best as it all ran incredibly smoothly. That success can be attributed to a really good project administrator (PA) who was highly organised and efficient, and who proved to me that you don't need to have an in-depth knowledge of project management to be successful.

Building a good rapport with the Commission is also important. If the worst happens and the

project hits a crisis (as projects often do!), don't be afraid to pick up the phone and speak to the Commission. The best coordinators will communicate regularly with the Commission and, if there is an issue – for instance if the work is behind schedule for some reason or one of the partners is not performing very well - they will discuss it first with the relevant Project Officer before taking any action.

## And your worst partner experience?

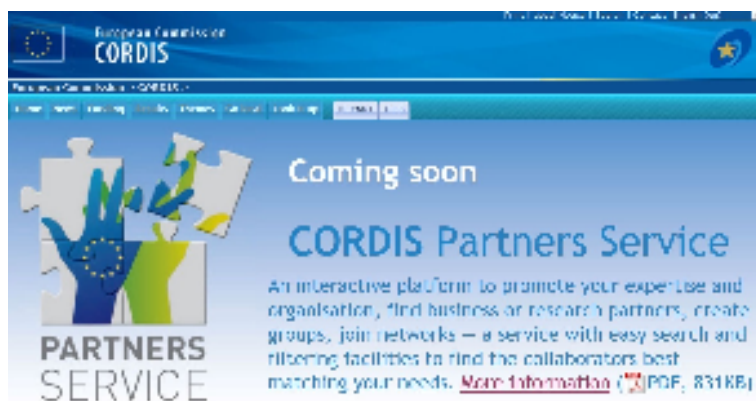
I don't want to name anyone in particular! But I do remember a project which was being run by an academic who was a very poor communicator. This led to fragmentation between different elements of the projects and the partners themselves, and I don't think the required team spirit ever really developed.

For anyone who finds themselves in this position, I would say use the project meetings to really focus on the work that needs to be done – ie what's going really well and what's going badly.

Relying on a project coordinator who will tell everyone what to do sounds well-organised in theory but you also want your partners to be proactive rather than passive in order to keep the momentum of the project going. It's a collaboration after all so a strong team effort leads to the most satisfying projects.

## Most European funds expect a transnational element. How do you normally go about finding and selecting a partner?

I tend to use my own networks first, so really my list of contacts that has grown organically over the years. On occasions, I've also used partner search databases. My best advice is to use these cautiously – organisations that are included don't usually go through any type of vetting process so you won't necessarily know that they're any good! That said, if you are looking at a partner database, the chances are that you already have a core group of partners and are just looking for that one missing link. It's likely then this particular partner will only play a modest role in the project. Partner databases are very often provided on the web pages of the programme you're looking to participate in.



The [CORDIS website](#) for example hosts a database of potential partners for research and development projects. Similarly, the vocational training arm of the [Lifelong Learning Programme, LEONARDO](#), also hosts its own partner search.

Some European projects like [SME Fit for Health](#) were set up specifically as networks of expertise to link businesses and others into proposals. We approached a German partner in this way who we wanted to join a project we were running to develop antibacterial technology.

When selecting a partner, I would look at the following:

- o Their track record in previous projects.
- o How responsive they are to requests for information. It's important also that they provide you with the right *type* of information. If you are compiling information from lots of different partners at the same time, it will save time to provide them with a template or table (preferably including a section you've completed as an example) so they know exactly what you're asking for.
- o Fairly simple due diligence to identify whether the organisation you are considering partnering is in fact a going concern. Don't overdo it though! Universities in particular can be too cautious about the nature of a private business - the danger being that it's easy then to miss out on a potentially excellent partner.

## What's been your biggest learning curve?

I coordinated a project with 23 different partners, around half of which were SMEs. Dealing with so many different individuals and organisations was a particularly steep learning curve, simply in the amount of time it took to get information from all the different partners.

## What's been your experience of working closely with people from different countries?

I've worked closely with partners in Sweden, Germany, Greece, France, Spain, the Netherlands, Denmark and Portugal and I have to say European stereotypes do exist in my experience. And, whilst individuals





themselves may not necessarily live up to them, I have noticed a difference in approach in North and South Europe. Whilst it's difficult (and dangerous!) to generalise, I would say that partners based in Northern Europe tend to be very efficient with the information they provide but also very exact. Partners in the South tend to have a more relaxed attitude to responding but can often provide a better-rounded, inclusive response to a question.

Working practices do differ depending on the country so you need to bear in mind, for example, when organising meetings and working days, that, in some cultures, an extended lunch is very much an important part of the networking event as a whole. Often good creative ideas come from that more relaxed environment.

### **A lot of people become involved through a baptism of fire — a colleague leaves and they have to take over administration or running of the project at short notice. What advice would you give to them? What should their starting point be?**

First of all, ask for help! Talk to the other partners and the coordinator about how they're doing things, as well as colleagues in your organisation who have worked on EU projects in the past. Don't feel the need to learn from scratch; rather tap into the experience around you.

### **What's your experience of dealing with the Commission?**

It's true that the Commission will impose strict timelines and they don't like surprises so, if there are any problems, let them know early on.

On the whole though I've found working with the Commission a really positive experience and have often found them to be approachable and open to discussion not only on existing projects but new ideas to help them deliver their remit.

### **What's the best bit about being involved in a European project?**

Getting exposure to different ways of working definitely helps you approach your own work in novel ways. You

end up working closely with people you wouldn't normally and this bonding will generally turn into strong long-term collaborations, and very often friendships.

On a personal level, you get to visit places that you perhaps wouldn't normally. And of course there's the social element of touring a different country; eating meals with people; learning about different cultures and languages - and trying different cuisine!

### **Which three top tips would you give to anyone considering applying for funding for the first time?**

1. Give yourself enough time to get involved and do your application justice. I would suggest you allow 3 to 6 months to prepare for and build a partnership.
2. The basis of any good project is a smooth and functioning partnership - so choose who you work with carefully!
3. Take the pressure off yourself and your colleagues by playing the role of partner in your first few projects rather than project lead.

### **And on a final note?**

Applying for funding from the Commission has never been as bad in my experience as people say. If you are organised and have decent project management in place, you are well placed to deliver a really successful project.

At the end of the day, it is in the Commission's interests for your project to work in the best way it can and it will do its best to support you in doing so.

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If you are interested in learning more about Europe and hearing about Ritchie's experiences firsthand - why not join us at one of our one-day European Funding for Beginners training courses.

For further information on European training courses, see: <http://www.grantfinder.co.uk/index.php?t=1&p=eurotraining>

Are you an expert in a particular funding area and feel that others may benefit from your insight? If so, we'd love to hear from you! Contact the Idox Training Department at [training@idoxgroup.com](mailto:training@idoxgroup.com) to see how you

