

SHAPING SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS: PRACTICAL RESEARCH ON THE MYNNOVA PROJECT

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ИЗГРАЖДАНЕ НА УСПЕШНИ СТРАТЕГИЧЕСКИ ПАРТНЬОРСТВА: ПРАКТИЧЕСКО ИЗСЛЕДВАНЕ НА ПРОЕКТ MYNNOVA

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Abstract: In the current globalising economy and dynamic business environment, organisations have become more oriented towards strategies based on internationalisation. They have recognised strategic partnerships as a vital prerequisite for progressive development and sustainable results, especially when striving for competing on a global scale. This paper aims to provide a practical research on the project “Mentoring Platform for Young Social Innovators” as a good practice for successfully established strategic partnership. The paper will also present recommendations for shaping of strategic partnership that leads to direct benefits for its participating organisations, resulting in fostering of collaboration, as well as exchange of innovative ideas and practices between partners.

Keywords: Strategic partnerships, recommendations, needs assessment, objectives, indicators, methodology, capacity, risk management, monitoring and evaluation procedures

Резюме: В условията на постоянно глобализираща се икономика и динамична бизнес среда, организациите се насочват към стратегии, основани на интернационализацията. Те разпознават все повече стратегическите партньорства като жизненоважна предпоставка за прогресиращо развитие и устойчив растеж, особено когато се стремят към конкурентоспособност в глобален мащаб. Настоящата статия представлява практическо изследване на проекта „Менторска платформа за млади социални иноватори“ като пример за успешно стратегическо партньорство. Докладът предлага и препоръки за изграждане на стратегическо партньорство, основано на взаимно сътрудничество и обмен на иновативни идеи и практики, което носи директни ползи за всички партньори.

Ключови думи: Стратегически партньорства, препоръки, оценка на потребностите, цели, индикатори, методология, капацитет, управление на риска, процедури за мониторинг и оценка

1. Introduction

In the current globalising economy and dynamic business environment, organisations have become more oriented towards strategies based on internationalisation and global-scale exposure, as “geographic expansion abroad offers the vast potential benefits of a much larger market arena, spread risk, scale- and location-based cost efficiencies, and exposure to a variety of new product and process ideas” (Amann, 2003). Despite the increasing need for expanding geographic reach and extending range of activities across borders, organisations usually face different challenges – lack of specific knowledge of the foreign environment, management capabilities, as well as “formal strategies and expertise to identify and nurture the most beneficial relationships” (Powerlinx, BPI Network & CMO Council, 2014). In order to cope with these issues, organisations have recognised strategic partnerships as a vital prerequisite for progressive development and sustainable results, especially when they strive for competing on a global scale.

For the purpose of this paper, “strategic partnerships” will be defined as cooperative agreements for sharing resources in a way that promotes growth and benefits for all participating organisations. These agreements have different objectives and levels of formality depending upon their specific nature, but the common feature is that it is constituted to allow their partners to “pool resources and coordinate efforts in order to achieve results that neither could obtain by acting alone” (Dussauge & Garrette, 1995).

The Report on the Strategic Value of Business Alliances and Compatible Partner Matching “Grow from the Right Intro” concludes that organisations are recognising increased value in growing the scope of international strategic partnerships globally. More than half of respondents from the research believe that these strategic alliances are extremely important to their businesses, and 15 percent see that the value of these partnerships is growing in importance. None of the respondents felt that partnerships were insignificant or non-existent. (Powerlinx, BPI Network & CMO Council, 2014).

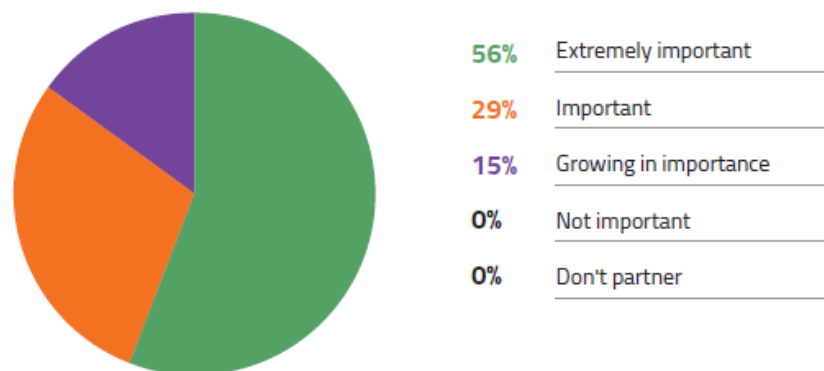


Figure 1. Importance of strategic partnerships and alliances (data by Powerlinx, BPI Network & CMO Council; source: Report on the Strategic Value of Business Alliances and Compatible Partner Matching)

Although strategic partnerships lead to growth and benefits for organisations, success is by no means given. Research shows that between 30 and 70 percent of alliances fail, more often ending up as being “paper partnerships” and not real collaborations that produce meaningful results (Bamford, Gomes-Cesseres & Robinson, 2003). Furthermore, the cost of repairing or terminating an unsuccessful partnership can be high, including losses incurred through a partner’s underperformance; the opportunity cost of executives’ time spent managing a troubled partnership; mediation, arbitration, or litigation costs; the expense of exiting the partnership (Gage, 2004).

For that reason, strategic partnerships need to be established and further developed according to a methodology, preliminary discussion and agreement between partners, to bring benefits to all parties included in the alliance.

This paper provides a practical research on the project “Mentoring Platform for Young Social Innovators” (MYNNOVA) as a good practice for successfully established strategic partnership. On the base of the project development, the paper will also present recommendations for shaping of strategic partnership that leads to direct benefits for its participating organisations, resulting in fostering of collaboration, as well as exchange of innovative ideas and practices between partners.

2. MYNNOVA Project

The project “Mentoring Platform for Young Social Innovators” is funded by the “Erasmus+” Programme and co-organised by five organisations (two NGOs, a university, youth centre and training company) from five EU countries in a concerted effort to develop an online mentoring platform for young people, aspiring to design, plan and carry out social innovations to address current pressing national and European challenges. The platform is focused on offering a flexible and freely accessible opportunity for young social innovators to receive quality mentoring support from youth workers and in a long-term perspective from young entrepreneurs, based on peer mentoring and collaboration.

The MYNNOVA online mentoring platform bears the following innovative features:

- The online mentoring services are based on a commonly agreed mentoring methodology, reflecting existing knowledge base of partners on academic, school education, business and youth work levels. The methodology is based on tailor made strategies, content and methods, which reflect the mentoring specifics of three age groups of young people addressed by the project (young social innovators at school level, young social innovators at university level, as well as young professionals in the field of social entrepreneurship).
- The methodology provides guidelines for both youth workers and young people in delivering online mentoring. Peer mentoring is a key element to the project concept, since it provides close collaboration between different age groups of young people in the field of social innovations, paving the way for long-term sustainability of results.

- The self-sustainable design of the platform envisages the involvement of those who were mentored as being mentors once they fulfil their social entrepreneurship projects (mentees turn into mentors).
- The online feature allows mentoring of young social innovators from any European country. In terms of language coverage, mentoring is available initially in EN, BG, RO, DE, SI and EL. The self-sustainable design described allows attracting young social entrepreneurs from other language groups, thus ensuring complete coverage.

The main impact dimensions can be summarised as follows:

- Young social innovators are able to successfully implement and sustain their ideas in the field of social innovations and social entrepreneurship.
- Youth workers have the opportunity to learn and apply an innovative online mentoring methodology and engage in peer collaboration on an international level.

Partners of the MYNNOVA Project are: Junior Achievement (Romania), Celje Youth Centre (Slovenia), priME Academy AG (Germany), Law and Internet Foundation (Bulgaria), and University of Nicosia (Cyprus).

3. Characteristics of successful strategic partnerships

Successful strategic partnerships are distinguished by some common characteristics, which create the necessary conditions for shaping strong international alliances with direct benefits for all participating organisations. In order to establish and further develop prosperous and sustainable strategic partnerships, there should be familiarity with these prerequisites and the required actions to guarantee and make full use of them should be undertaken.

The following characteristics are summarised on the basis of careful research on the MYNNOVA Project as a good practice for productive and successful strategic alliance between five organisations from different countries and more important with different specific expertise and activities.



Figure 2. Characteristics of successful strategic partnerships

4. Recommendations and implications

In order to provide recommendations for shaping of strategic partnerships that lead to collaboration and exchange of innovative ideas and practices between partners, a focus will be placed on the development process of MYNNOVA Project as a good practice for successfully established strategic alliance.

The first and most important characteristic of beneficial strategic partnerships is related to the choice of partners and more specifically to their *diversified complementary expertise and available resources*. The founding base of any strategic alliance is integrating the specific assets and advantages of participating organisations to create and bring additional added value for them, which cannot be achieved by acting alone. In the case of MYNNOVA Project there is a combination of different knowledge, experience and know-how of five different organisations – two NGOs (Junior Achievement Romania, Law and Internet Foundation), a university (University of Nicosia), youth centre (Celje Youth Centre), and training company (pri ME Academy). The partnership is based on the Quadruple Helix Innovation Model, which is “not yet a very well-established and widely used concept in innovation research and in innovation policy” (Arnkil, Järvensivu, Koski & Piirainen, 2010). A more recognised methodology is the Triple Innovation model focused on university-industry-government relations. “The Quadruple Helix Innovation model is even broader and more comprehensive by contextualising the Quadruple Helix and by additionally adding the helix (and perspective) of natural environments of society”; in the case by adding NGOs as representatives of the civil society’s interests and welfare (Carayannis, Barth & Campbell, 2012). Different expertise and resources are not the only significant prerequisites for establishment of sustainable strategic partnership in the context of MYNNOVA – partners come from different countries (Romania, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Slovenia, and Germany). Therefore, they bring background and knowledge specific for their own regions, guaranteeing beneficial exchange of best practices and complementary approaches for development of the innovative mentoring solution.

The second characteristic of successfully shaped strategic alliances corresponds to *clearly identified target groups and key stakeholders*. Strategic partnerships, especially when they are established with an international scope, affect “a number of stakeholder groups in the environment external to the organisation. Identification of these groups is the essential first step. This is actually achieved substantially in the initial stages of the transformation initiative while defining the vision and objectives” (Satyanarayana, 2012). In the case of MYNNOVA Project the identified direct target groups include young social innovators at school level; young social innovators at university level; young professionals in the field of social entrepreneurship; youth workers from partner organisations; other partners’ staff; youth workers and young people engaged via the envisaged dissemination and exploitation activities. Key stakeholders who also benefit indirectly from implementation of the project are youth training providers, entrepreneurship platforms, and mentoring communities that will improve their awareness as to the methodological aspects of delivering online mentoring services to youth social innovators, as

well as their prospects for cooperation with peer organisations from different countries and sectors.

The next significant characteristic is ***preliminary implemented in-depth needs assessment***. This procedure is extremely important, as it will define the needs for establishment of the strategic partnership, its scope and objectives, as well as the necessary activities that should be fairly distributed between the participating organisations according to their specific know-how and available resources. Partners in MYNNOVA Project have started their collaboration long before developing the project proposal. They have implemented needs analysis on two levels. First, they have assessed their own needs, resources and capabilities to contribute to the partnership in the best possible way, bringing added value for the rest of partners and also expanding their individual potential. Besides, they have made needs assessment in the context of future target groups and key stakeholders as direct beneficiaries of the future activities. According to the Community Needs Assessment Guide, there are five needs assessment techniques (Sharma, Lanum & Suarez-Balcazar, 2000).

- ***Existing Data Approach*** – this approach uses existing statistical data to obtain the necessary information;
- ***Community Attitude Survey Approach*** – where information is gathered from a representative sample of the community;
- ***Key Informant Approach*** –this approach identifies community leaders and people who are knowledgeable about the group and can accurately indicate priority needs and concerns;
- ***Community Forum*** – a public meeting where representatives of the community are encouraged to attend, discuss and summarise their needs;
- ***Focus Group Interview*** – a form of group interaction where a group of people, selected for their particular experience and competences, is asked a series of questions in order to obtain detailed information about their opinions and needs.

Another important characteristic of successful strategic partnerships is definition of ***clear, focused, specific and measurable objectives***. According to the current tendencies, it is crucial for objectives to be **S.M.A.R.T**: ***specific*** (so clear and well-defined that anyone with basic knowledge can understand them); ***measurable*** (setting a defined methodology of indicators that will measure the achieved results in full correspondence with the preliminary identified objectives); ***agreed-upon*** (all participating organisations in the strategic partnership should agree that the end result will solve the problem or respond to the opportunity defined); ***realistic*** (given the available resources, know-how, time and budget, objectives should be rational and achievable); ***time/cost-limited***(the amount of available time and budget and any available flexibility needs to be preliminary indicated and taken into account) (Richman, 2011). On the basis of the implemented needs assessment, partners of MYNNOVA Project have defined its aim to establish a suitable mentoring mechanism for young social innovators in 5 partner countries and Europe as a whole through implementing the following objectives:

- Design and develop an online multilingual mentoring platform;

- Organise a 5-day Joint Staff Training to prepare 5 youth workers for piloting the platform;
- Deliver a 4-month pilot mentoring to 25 young social innovators;
- Train 10 young entrepreneurs from the pilot group to deliver online mentoring;
- Promote the online platform across youth and youth workers' communities in 5 partner countries and across Europe;
- Put forward policy guidelines to policy makers and other stakeholders in enhancing social innovations.

Foundation of prosperous strategic partnerships is also the ***consistent correlation between objectives, indicators and means of verification***. In MYNNOVA, partners have chosen to use the Logical Framework Matrix. This is usually a 4 x 4 matrix in which the first column summarises the activities, outputs and goals in a hierarchical order as delivered from the objectives analysis. The second column defines indicators required to be able to determine the objectives that have been reached. The third one describes means of verification, while the last column represents assumptions and risks as external factors (Abraham, 2014).

One of the most significant characteristics of successfully established strategic partnerships is their ***credibility and clear methodology for implementation***. “Without a clear methodology, projects can fail miserably because business objectives are not being met.” (Charvat, 2003). Partners of MYNNOVA with former experience in Erasmus+ projects have proposed to cluster the main processes into activity groups (A1, A2, An). The main groups are as follows: A1 - Management, A2 - Development, A3 - Train youth workers in online mentoring delivery, A4 - Pilot mentoring, A5 - Train young entrepreneurs in online mentoring delivery, A6 - Dissemination and exploitation. Each activity group aims at a number of results to be achieved, linked to respective qualitative and quantitative indicators. Roles and responsibilities have been agreed and distributed between partners in a way to ensure balance, efficient use of expertise and cost-effectiveness. For each activity, a leading partner has been assigned and draft action plan developed to specify related tasks and deadlines. The activity leader is supported by an activity group of experts, consisting of representatives of each partner (1 person per organisation). A steering group (comprising of 2 representatives from the coordination organisation and 1 representative from each partner) has been set up in preparation phase to ensure all major decisions are taken in a transparent way and all partners will deliver on their roles. In addition, the steering group provides overall monitoring of quality, budget expenditure and risk mitigation. Clear methodology is crucial for strategic partnerships not only at the establishment phase, but also when it comes to their implementation. For that reason, credible methodology framework must be guaranteed as an initial step to avoid critical problems at a later stage.

The next characteristic of advantageous strategic alliances is ***appropriate capacity of the partner organisations and key staff***. As the case of MYNNOVA proves, key team members play an active role in the project and have direct impact on its implementation (Parker & Craig, 2008). The project assembles five partners from five different EU countries, which complement one another with expertise in the field of youth work, mentoring and coaching, social

entrepreneurship and social innovations, dissemination and communication with stakeholders. The partnership brings together various types of organisations, invited on the basis of their proven capacity in the context of successful work on previous projects in this domain. The value of the strategic partnership manifests itself in competences of all team members, since the project consortium brings together leading experts in the field.

Another condition for successfully shaped partnerships is appliance of an adequate methodology for *risk management*. In the MYNNOVA Project this characteristic is taken into account, envisaging a Quality Manager who is in charge of all quality assurance processes, which can be transferred to establishing the quality framework of the project. There is a mutual agreement between partners that they would identify as risk any negative impact to which the project may be exposed as a result from a given action, activity and/or failure to meet the key performance indicators set. The risk procedure is covering the following aspects: risk identification; risk measurement; risk response; risk monitoring and control. Each potential risk is matched by probability of occurrence (low, medium, high), potential impact on project (low, medium, high) and mitigation measures. “The aim is not to avoid risk, but to take calculated risk, make more informed decisions, avoid unpleasant surprises, identify opportunities and encourage people to think more carefully about the consequences of their decisions.” (Loosemore, Raftery, Reilly & Higgon, 2006).

Last but not least, to be sure the strategic partnership will be successfully established, there is a need to envisage *monitoring and evaluation procedures*. Project monitoring and evaluation are used to ensure the alliance is making satisfactory progress to its preliminary defined goals. The purpose for these procedures is to “track all major project variables – cost, time, scope, and quality of deliverables” (Gudda, 2011). In terms of quality assurance and management, partner organisations of MYNNOVA have explicit expertise and know-how in applying international quality standards in their work, which have formed the basis of project’s quality procedures. All monitoring and evaluation activities aim to provide summative and formative ongoing control and assessment of quality and performance, in order to meet the project objectives. Monitoring and evaluation is carried out on the following levels: internal level (project and organisation), content (subject area) level, external level (impact, exploitation, sustainability). Concerning external level, an external evaluator is recruited to carry out an independent assessment of the two intellectual outputs – online platform and policy guidelines, as well as their applicability and further exploitation, and verify the quality of activities and results implemented. A Quality assurance plan has been developed at the beginning of the project, which defines the expected level to be reached, qualitative indicators to measure the real level achieved per outcome planned, time-frame for assessing quality, mitigation actions, roles and responsibilities of staff members of the partnership. The plan also contains a list of quality standards to be complied with by all partners, the main quality assurance instruments to be used and reporting procedures to be followed.

5. Conclusion

This paper aimed to provide a practical research on the project “Mentoring Platform for Young Social Innovators” as a good practice for successfully established strategic partnership.

The literature review demonstrates that in the current globalising economy and dynamic business environment organisations have recognised strategic partnerships as a vital prerequisite for progressive development and sustainable results, especially when they strive for competing on a global scale. To establish and further develop prosperous and sustainable strategic alliances, some recommendations should be applied. The paper presented these recommendations summarised on the basis of the development process of MYNNOVA Project as a good example of successfully shaped strategic alliance that leads to collaboration and exchange of innovative ideas and practices between its participating organisations.

NOTES

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