

# Framework partnering with a stranger

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**Abstract:** This paper presents a case study which describes how a small Polish company, unknown on the “EC research market”, made its own way towards partnering in Framework Programme (FP) projects. The way seems to be a good example to learn from because, after one and a half years of effort, ASM had become a partner in six FP projects and co-ordinated one itself. The ASM case shows how to find potential areas for participation and how to develop a strategy for entering the Framework Programme, and identifies common mistakes made by newcomers. Finally, it shows that participation in the Framework Programme brings returns which are higher than the effort required. So it is worthwhile to go for it.

## 1. Introduction

Imagine you are a stranger from one of the pre-accession countries, who has just started to be interested in the Commission’s Framework Programme (FP). After working your way through all the documentation and web sites, finally you have an idea for a project and a lot to offer to other consortia. You sit in the front of your PC, Internet connected. What you need now is to find European partners for your project and co-ordinators who wish to include you in their consortia.

That is a real *e*Challenge.

We are a small company located in Poland, with 30 employees, good experience in the Polish market, and specialised in business and social studies and surveys. Two years ago we started to look for possible co-operation under the 5th Framework Programme, which eventually led us into co-operation in seven projects in 2002. Quite a success for beginners without international connections!

## 2. How do you start to tackle the Framework Programme?

After a few years of successful work on national market, each company considers looking for new areas. Especially now, in the pre-accession countries, there is general feeling that the European Commission offers a range of opportunities. However, nobody really knows how to start and who can help. ASM decided that it might be worthwhile to search for European projects. One possible source to start with was the Internet. However, the more efficient way was to participate in seminars. ASM’s initial information about EC funding concerned the Leonardo da Vinci programme. We first learnt about the Framework Programme in the middle of the year 2000. It was a seminar about Improving Human Potential, part of Framework Five.

Here we learnt our first lesson. Commission staff responsible for a specific priority within the Framework Programme believe that all audiences know very well what the Framework Programme is. So they start talking about their priority without giving good background about what it is, how it is linked to main programme etc. etc. So it takes quite a long time before a newcomer understands what it is all about. But this is just the beginning of the painful process of finding your place in this programme.

The next, maybe the worst thing, was to understand what it is really about and whether it is something for us. What is a Call for Proposals? What is a Guide for Proposers? Why do

I need a Workprogramme? What are the differences between all those documents? Why are all consortia are bigger than the minimum requirements?

Lot of organisations gave up here because they cannot see the practical potential of the Framework Programme for them.

After two or three months of investigation we came to the point when we could see a light for our organisation, a light which give us hope that there are priorities and measures which refer to our expertise and where we can try to compete.

### **3. Strategy development**

The next step after gaining some understanding of goals and objectives of the Framework Programme was to define how we should organise our work. An important question had to be answered:

“Shall we write the proposal ourselves or become a partner?”

We decided to go for both options. The main reason was the hope that if “you invite you will be invited”. Simply, we hoped it would help us to become involved in other proposals as a partner if we could offer something similar. When the idea for our proposal was defined, we asked the next question:

“Where can we find a partner?”

Of course some clear answers come here, like CORDIS partner search etc. When you have a look into the CORDIS data base and those thousands of companies and some messy information, you would quickly give up, as we did. For the beginner it is not that easy to select relevant partners.

Then we had some good luck. We found the call for integrating Newly Associated States (NAS) into ongoing projects very useful. From this we learnt that the best way to learn about the FP is to read and analyse projects which are already funded. Firstly, it helps to understand what a project should look like and what type of work can be done. Secondly, it allows you to identify experienced partners in specific areas.

We decided to invite a number of such partners to participate in our project. We had a strong feeling that, if we offered somebody the opportunity to join a consortium without the effort of preparing the proposal, we would have a lot of e-mails from excellent partners who would be delighted by our invitation and would immediately invite us to join other projects.

However, it was not true. The main problems which we encountered were:

- Such excellent partners were already involved in lots of activities so they did not really have time
- They seemed to be not so enthusiastic about joining an unknown consortium which lacked experience of EC research programmes
- In some cases, they already had bad experience with NAS partners.

Finally, we managed to get on with one experienced partner. It was worth the fight. The most important thing was that he gave us a lot of practical advice which we would have never learnt from any formal document.

The second part of our strategy was to become a partner in other consortia. The next question had appeared.

“How could we be invited to join other projects?”

Again the NAS call was very useful. And again we believed it would be very easy to join a consortium if we could offer our own finance and add an NAS country. Again we were not right. The first important step was to identify interesting projects and e-mail lots of letters to co-ordinators. The co-ordinators of the most interesting projects were contacted personally, by phone. What we learnt was:

- Already existing, interesting consortia were quite closed and did not need additional, unknown, partners and additional risk without real added value.

- We did not present our input to the project, we presented our general skills. It was a mistake or lack of experience and misunderstanding of EC language. What co-ordinators wanted to see was what we could add to their specific projects. Nobody would be creative for us.
- We should not prepare requested materials just in time – we had to do it ahead of schedule to show that we were a reasonable and trustworthy partner.
- We supported the co-ordinator in looking for other partners from the NAS countries as much as we could
- Being an NAS country was a positive thing, too – it was one of the priorities in the Framework Programme, which worked to our advantage.

What we did was to read proposals carefully and define what our organisation could offer. Such an offer can be split into main two types: one pointing out national specialisation, which means that you do a similar job to other partners but at your country level. The second is to become an expert in a certain area in the consortium and develop this work at the European level. Each approach depends a lot on the project profile and objectives as well as the profile of the partners. These things should be carefully considered before final proposals are submitted. Most important of all is not to try to take a place which is already booked by another partner. Here a “political” approach must be implemented.

#### **4. Business benefits**

When we started the work under the Framework Programme, we did not know what would be the real benefits from such participation. However, now we can clearly define some which apply to most organisations:

- Development of pan-European contacts with high quality partners, which surely can lead to profits through improved market knowledge, better understanding of the competition in the European market, and creation of further projects and long term co-operation
- Gain experience in the latest European achievements in areas of company expertise
- Obtain a refund of the investment made in developing innovative research, surveys, products etc.
- Give your employees the opportunity to co-operate on the daily base with European partners, improve their competence, skills and build their self confidence
- Attract the best skilled staff by giving them opportunity to work on interesting projects in the international environment (plus travel)
- Give a unique (at least in NAS) and prestigious position on the national market: participation in European projects is a strong advantage in the home market. It shows that the company can work successfully with European teams, it can demonstrate the activities of the company, and it can indicate the high skill levels of its staff.

#### **5. Lessons to be learnt**

Nowadays we meet lot of companies who seem to be interested in the Framework Programme, but they give up at the first obstacle. There are many lessons to be learnt from ASM’s participation in the Framework Programme which should encourage other institutions of different types to be more positive and patient in their efforts.

- Select one or two persons in your organisations to search for opportunities – it is a kind of knowledge which is not easy to gain or transfer so it is better to keep the same people developing the projects
- Define the areas of your potential participation – try to see previous projects, to define what companies of your type did in the Framework Programme

- Talk and read a lot, ask lots of questions, participate in seminars, meetings, visit National Contact Points and use other opportunities to define what you can do and to revise your ideas.
- Contact potential partners directly, by email and by phone to discuss what they really think about your potential participation and what are their objectives are, to get their advice on what to do to become a better partner
- Before you contact a potential partner or/and co-ordinator, think carefully what you can offer and bring to the project
- When designing the consortium for your project remember that the type of partner is the most important, not friendship relations
- Do your job quickly and very well – better than others – because you must prove that you are reliable in all terms
- Be patient and remember it will take some time to be successful.

## **6. Conclusions**

Our successful entry into the 5th FP was a mixture of good luck, hard work and kind of strategy.

Firstly, we took a risk and invested in FP. One person was dedicated to work only on looking for EC projects. Our first money from the EC arrived after almost two years of work, which means it was a long term investment.

Secondly, we implemented a kind of marketing approach to Framework Programme “partnering”. We defined our “market” e.g. IST, ESD – socio-economic studies. We defined potential partners and projects in this area. We understood that partners should be treated as clients so we had to think why they would wish to work with us. It is crucial to understand what they need or might need from us in their projects. Then we prepared descriptions - proposals for co-operation - and we communicated extensively with our “market”. We presented how we could add value to existing consortia or what our project could give to a potential partner.

All these efforts have enabled the company to work in the European research area, meet very interesting people and work with them, and learn from each other, which gave us a new perspective. What we finally learnt is that we have very good qualifications, comparable with western consultants, and that we can add to the co-operation as much as we learn from it.