

The role of communication in the project conducted within European Framework Program based on VIDE project

The effective communication is a key success factor to any project. But what does effective mean exactly for the multicultural, spread across whole Europe research projects such as those funded within EU framework program? At a starting point when we just become the VIDE coordinator we have had already experience in managing big industrial projects. We were sure that the communication scheme used in the past would be sufficient for this project as well. But soon after we had to rethink and reorganize our methodology to match the unique communication requirements of the multitasked project managed across several organizations with different communication patterns in a semi-virtual environment. This paper was written with the aim to present the several challenges we were faced with while looking for the most effective way to assure the seamless communication flow within and beyond the VIDE consortium. We hope this paper will prove to be useful for any organization that is running the international, research project for the first time. But don't be mistaken it is not the guidance, neither the comprehensive communication plan as each project is different and needs individual treatment. We do not pretend we know all the answers but at least we have came up with the important questions each of the team has to address. Therefore this paper shall be treated as food for thinking and points of consideration.

To give more background to the communication challenges we were facing it is important to outline the very nature of the **VIDE project**.

It is the STREP type research project funded under FP6. It lasts 2,5 years and consists of analytical, implementation and evaluation phases as most of the projects do. The difference was the ambition to prepare an early prototype in order to get the feedback from the market as soon as it was possible. The main objective of the VIDE Project is to improve model driven methods and tools for application development focusing on data-intense business applications. This will be achieved by the specification, design and implementation of a system which will enable easy and fast creation of new systems and make the process more accessible to business people. The product will be introduced to the business world and is expected to be adopted by industrial leaders.

The project is aimed at strong standard compliance (especially to the Unified Modelling Language (UML)) in order to build upon existing toolsets and to simplify language adoption. However, although UML is a visual language, it lacks a visual means for specifying the logic of data intense business applications. VIDE is going to fill this gap, and potentially contribute to the further development of the standard.

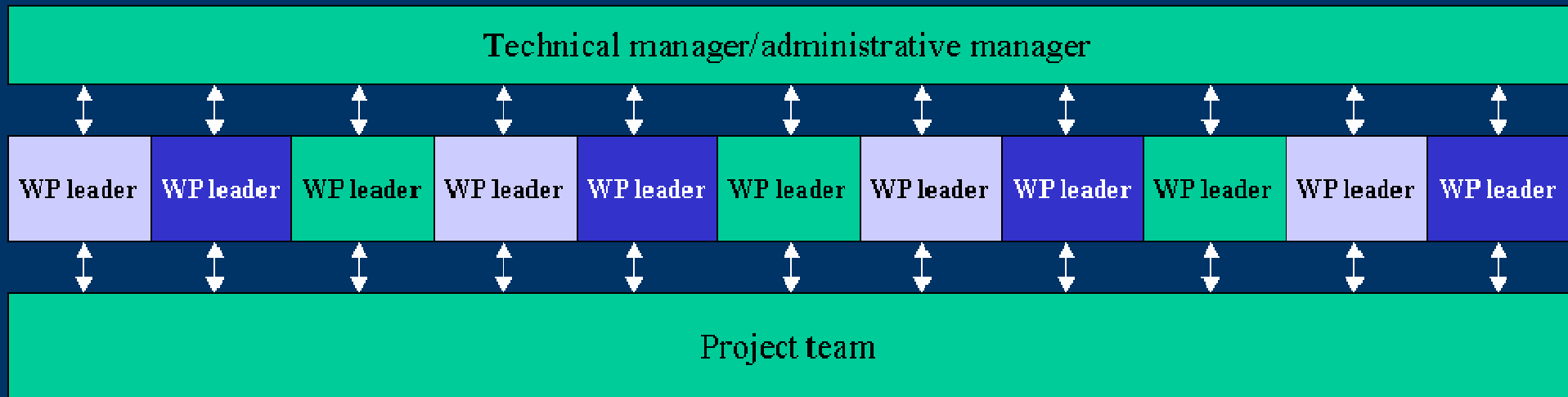
The main perceived benefits of the toolset based on such a language are:

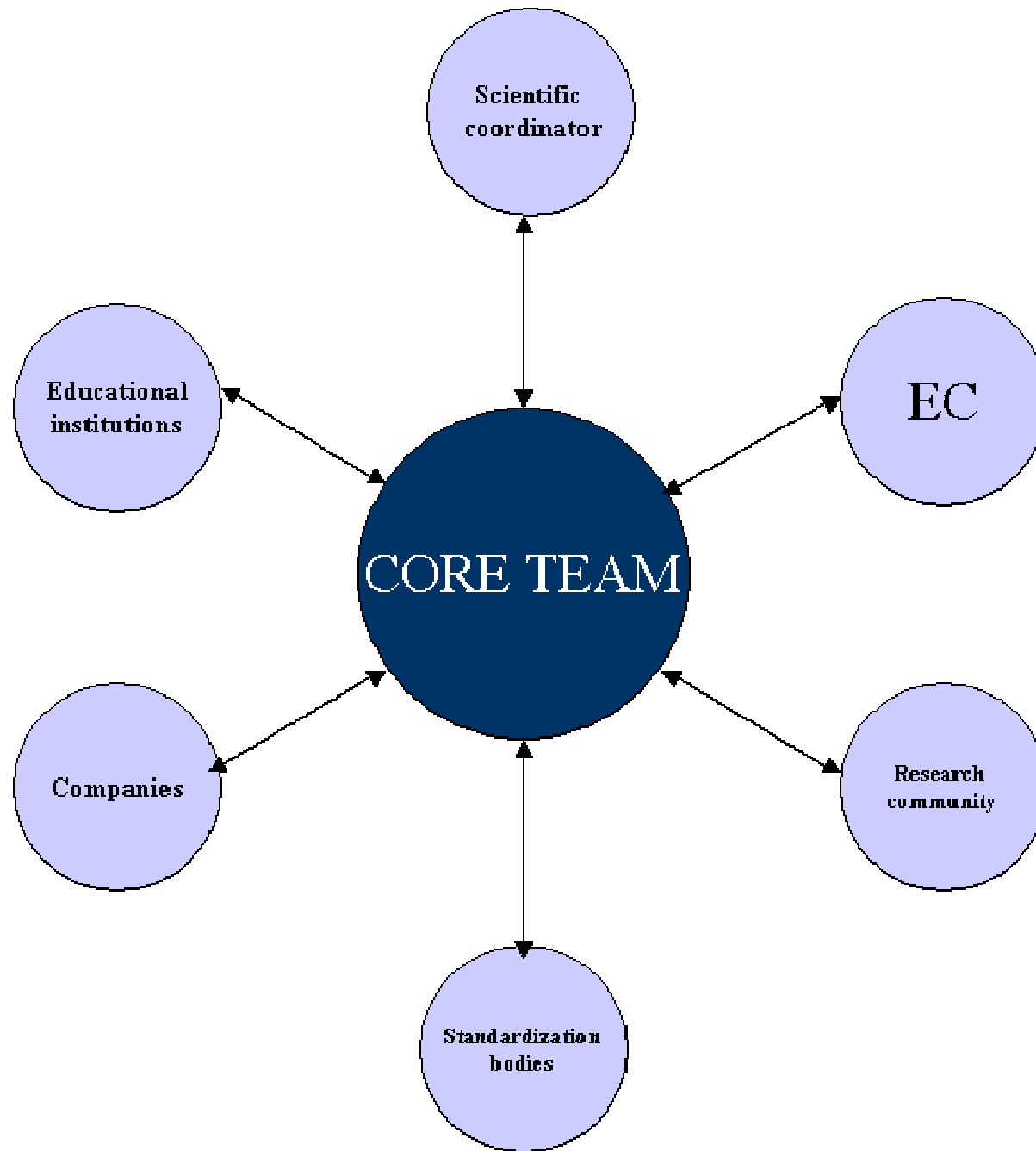
- Expressiveness and user friendliness resulted from the visual syntax and seamless connection with higher-level model artifacts,
- High automation of the coding process by following the executable modelling approach,
- Simplification of the development process and increased reuse by shifting most of the development activities to the platform-independent model level.
- Streamlining the communication with stakeholders by making the modelling environment more accessible to non-IT professionals.

The VIDE consortium consists of 10 partners from the UK, Germany, France, Poland and Greece. The complexity of work is best visible in the number of Workpackages and in the fact that most of them require participation of most of the partners. The different backgrounds of participants add to the communication challenge since there are different communication patterns in the companies and in the educational or research organizations. Due to the work organization the communication had to be adjusted to the multi layered managerial structure.

STREP/STIP Activity type										
	PJIT -1	RODAN -2	IWi -3	IESE -4	BU -5	FIRST -6	Softeam -7	TNM -8	SAP -9	ALTEC -10
RTD/Innovation activities										
Assessment of tools, standards, methods and requirements	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
The VIDE language	x		x		x		x	x	x	
Aspect Oriented Composition on the PIM level						x			x	
Quality Assurance on the PIM level				x					x	
The visual user interface	x		x		x				x	
Model compilers	x						x		x	
Computation independent modelling	x	x	x		x			x		
System architecture	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
System prototype development	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Dissemination and exploitation	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
System validation and evaluation	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x

Core team





Communication – the starting point

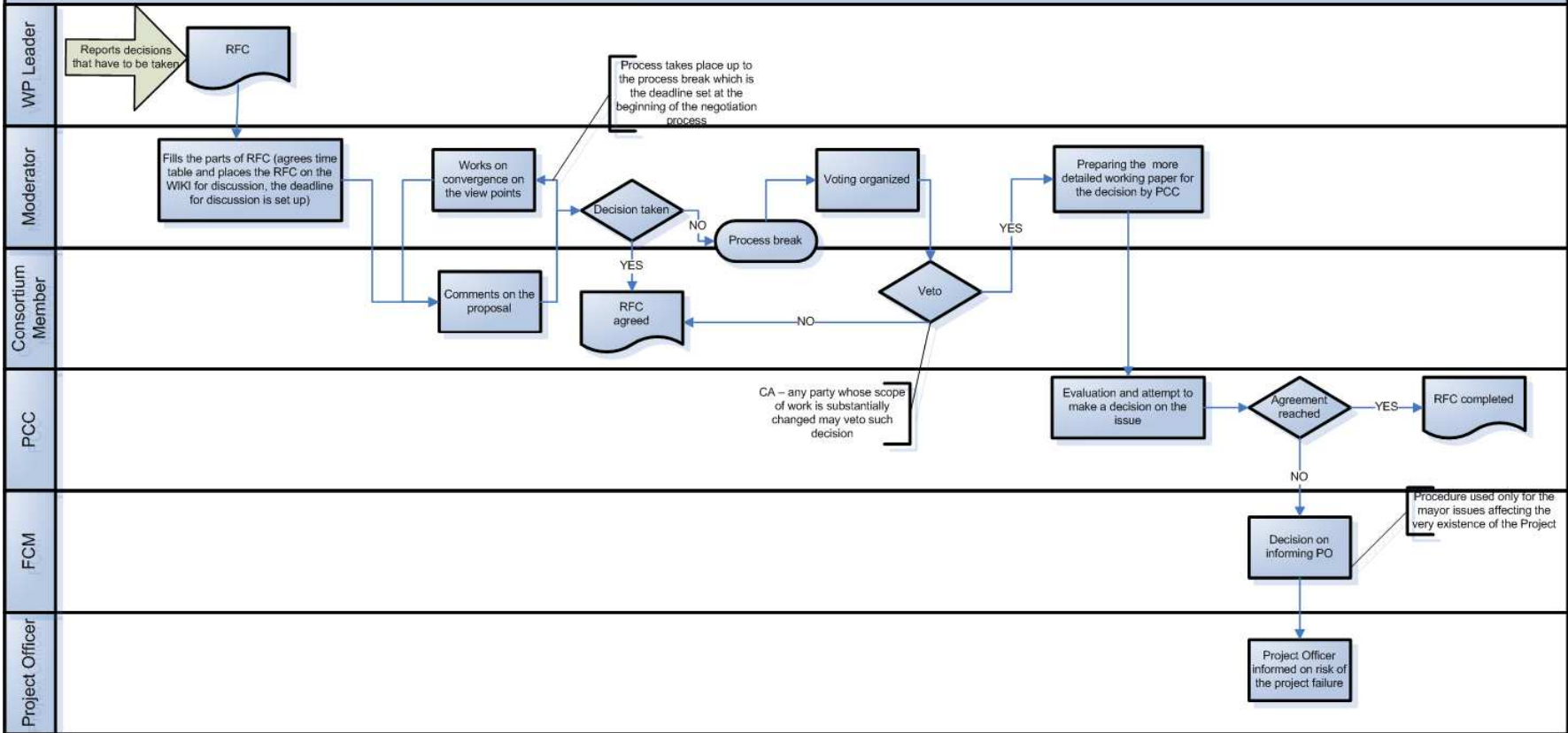
At the beginning the communication concentrated on including provisions for project rules, partners' obligations and rights in Consortium Agreement as well as organizing the procedures for formal reporting of project achievements. There was a feeling that having the detailed plan and job description would allow to successfully manage the project through such communication channels like e-mail (the mailing list was created) and direct discussion during the face-to face consortia meeting that was to be organized on the quarterly basis. The common repository was also created to store the data – for the simplicity of use the WIKI was chosen – which has proven to be a good idea later on. The reporting scheme set of reports with time table was created. There was also a plan to create a more detailed dissemination strategy in the future to accompany the web-page that was developed as an external communication tool. Soon this scheme had to be changed to address the challenges that appeared.

The main communication challenges and answers to them

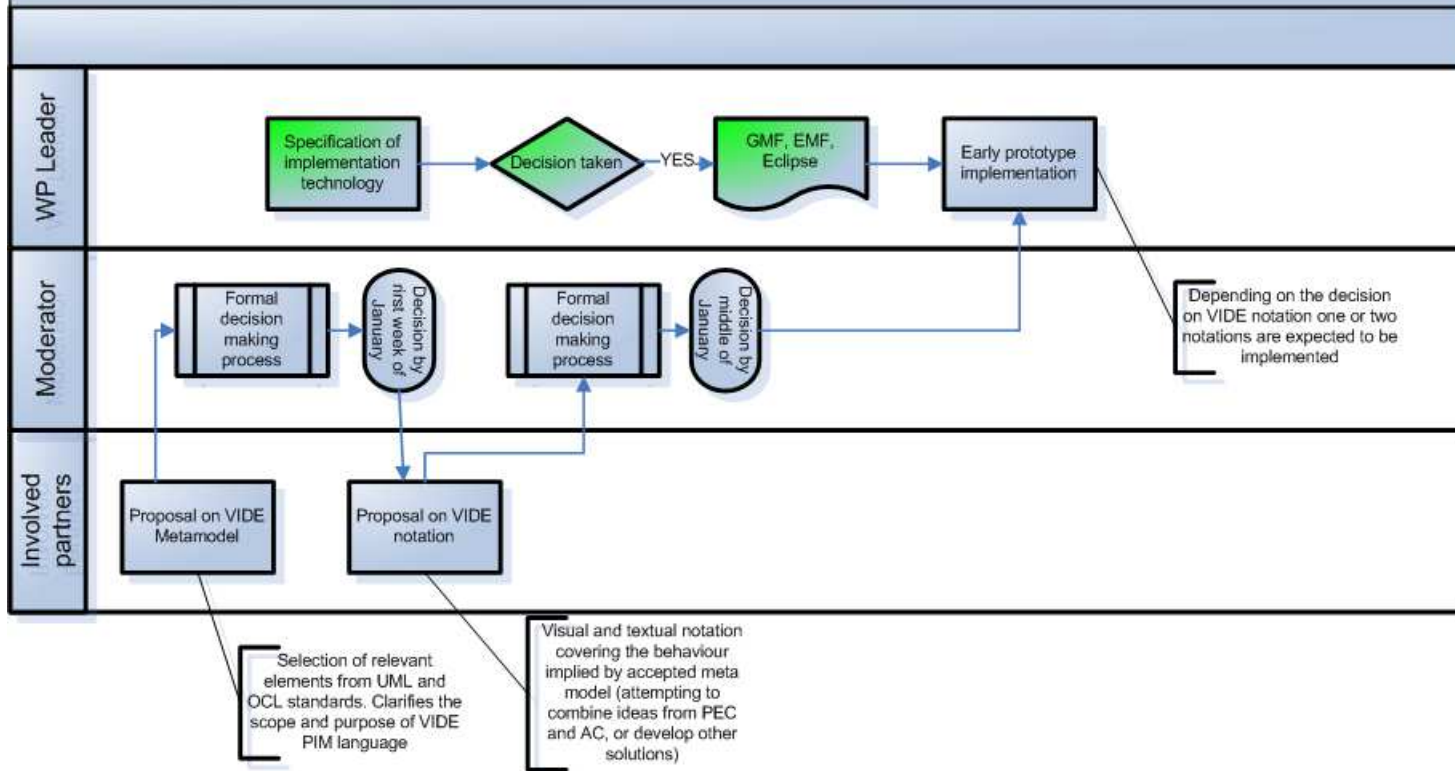
- *Ambiguity of the Description of Work resulting in the necessity to create common ground for the project.*

There were difficulties in reaching consensus on the vital project issues such as the concept of the programming environment, the language construction and standardization level, the future user etc. There has been major difference in frequency of communication. Frequent face to face meetings and video and tele-conferences took place. In order to structure the discussion and assure timely decision making, the detailed decision making process has been defined and communicated. The Request for Comments document for formal decision making has been introduced for use in the most conflict prone issues. The process is presented below, as well as the roadmap used to reach agreement on the conflict-prone issue. The Vide consortium used it twice and at both times it allow us to reach the final agreement without necessity to vote the decision. The FRC template is also presented – although the best method is to implement in within the WIKI Page to allow parallel work on some sections.

Decision making process within VIDE Project



Early prototype creation process





**SPECIFIC TARGETED RESEARCH PROJECT
INFORMATION SOCIETY TECHNOLOGIES**

FP6-IST-2005-033606

**Visualize all model driven programming
VIDE**

Request for Comment

Project name: Visualize all model driven programming

Start date of the project: 01 July 2006

Duration of the project: 30 months

Project coordinator: Polish - Japanese Institute of Information Technology

Organisation providing

the Request: (insert organisation name)

Workpackage: WP (insert reference number of WP)

Deadline of the (dd.mm.yyyy)

negotiation process

Status developed / draft / final (select)

Document type: Circulation document

Document acronym: RFC

Moderator (insert name of moderator)

Reviewer(s) (insert name of reviewer/s)

Version (insert reference number of the version)

Dissemination level CO

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Project supported by the European Commission within Sixth Framework Programme

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The decision to be taken:..... - 10 -
Filled by the Moderator (filling this part can take no longer than 3 working days)..... - 11 -
Filled by the Consortium Members (using WIKI) - 12 -

The part to be filled by the WP Leader reporting the decision to be taken:

The decision to be taken:

(insert the description here)

The context, detailed description of the technical aspect of the decision:

(insert the description here)

The other WPs affected by the decision:

(insert the description here)

Proposed evaluation criteria:

Criterion	Importance of the criterium	Judgement

Proposed time table

Action	Starting date	Ending date
Agreeing process		
Deadline of the negotiation process		

Filled by the Moderator (filling this part can take no longer than 3 working days)

Time table

Action	Starting date	Ending date
First round of negotiation		
Second round of negotiation		
Deadline of the negotiation process		
The voting (if needed)		
Decision presented to the PCC		

Agreed evaluation criteria

Criterion	Importance of the criterium	Judgement

Filled by the Consortium Members (using WIKI)

1 Round

By each parnter:

(insert the description here)

Moderator: Summary and proposed solution

(insert the description here)

2 Round

By each partner:

(insert the description here)

Moderator: Summary and proposed solution

(insert the description here)

Decision (if agreed):

(insert the description here)

Voting results (if no consensus)

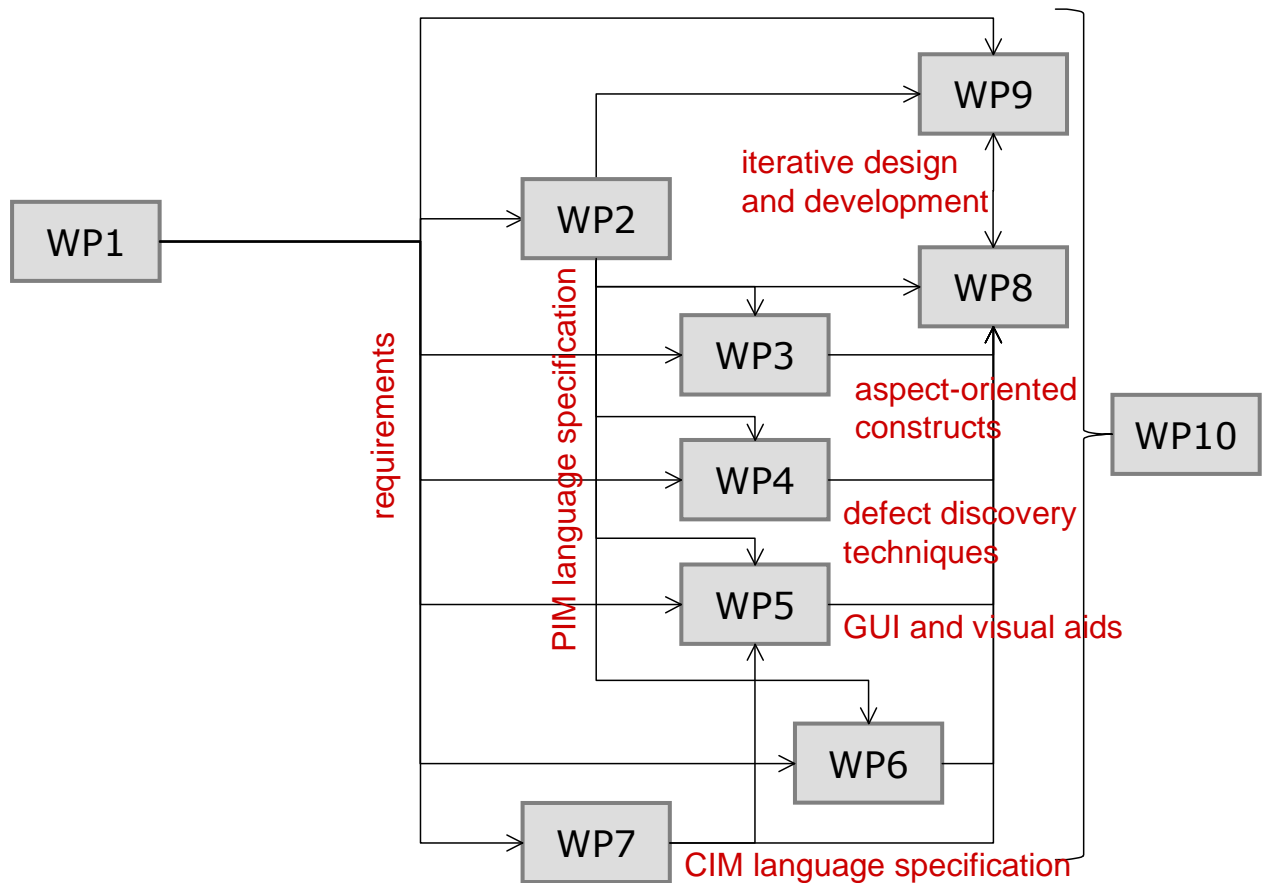
(insert the description here)

Optionally (if needed)

Evaluation Table									
Criteria	P1	P2	...						
.....									
.....									
.....									
.....									
.....									
.....									

Complexity and interdependencies between simultaneously run workpackages - clear communication of priorities to the Project team

To overcome this challenge extra attention has had to be given to the planning procedures for example, a very detailed work plan has been developed and updated every two months. The WP leaders were required to analyze the interdependencies between their own and other WP and perform risk analysis to acknowledge and communicate the impact of their work on other WP. The risk analysis was also used to cover timing issues. Some of the tasks have been shifted in order to allow for better elaboration on the issues that create the input for them. The complexity of the work plan has led to the creation of a new time table and better alignment of certain tasks – this allowed the project to finish on time despite quite large changes in the work organization. The effective communication between the WP leaders and technical manager was a key issue here. At that time the communication scheme was enlarged by teleconferences that were run at the bi-weekly basis. The WIKI page allowing for a fast and seamless communication was also chosen as the most efficient way to exchange ideas, place working documents and comments.



- Frequent changes in the project plan – communication with the EC

The complexity of work has led to unforeseen tasks and research work at the further stages of the project also the additional implementation work as well as changes of responsibility and fund shifts occurred. As a corrective action, the Coordinator proposed a significant change to the project schedule and organized the process of agreeing the changes, with the EC. Most importantly the Commission each time was presented with the explanation document requesting and justifying the changes needed. During the 2,5 years project 3 Annexes were prepared and accepted. The Consortium believes that it is of crucial importance to communicate changes that may result in the work description, time table, financial issues as early as possible. Below there are topics that were presented in the Request for Changes:

1. The reasons for introducing changes
2. The new M/M plan
3. New budget allocation –
4. Rational behind the shift of responsibilities and subsequent M/M and budget reallocation between partners
5. Rational behind the remaining M/M shifts – partner level

6. Impact on the Work Packages (only on ongoing or going to start WP)
7. Impact on the overall scope of the work
8. Impact on the work allocation amongst the Partners
9. Impact on the budget
10. Impact on the duration of the Project
11. Other minor changes

- *Frequent changes in the project team – rework of communication*

The only method to overcome such problem is to store all the data, so the newcomers have an easy access to the results of work. Also if the Project Activity Reports are done properly there constitute the good source of knowledge in a nutshell to the new project team. To assure that the data is well organized the To assure an easy access to the most important project documents the Document Repository has been prepared. We have implemented the open – source CMS system.

- *Several groups of potential beneficiaries and ambition to receive an early feedback from the industrial community*

The receiving entities	The aim of the communication	Relation to the milestone	The message	The channel	Exact communication method	Timing	Responsible partner
European Commission							
IST Community – especially related projects							
Scientific society							
Standard bodies							
The industry							
Potential workshops' participants (SME)							
Universities -(students)							

The Consortium assured that the information about the project will reach all the interested parties. There was a full visual identification created at the beginning with logo brochure, web page which was treated as a main communication engine. To ensure, that all of the potentially interested parties will be informed the detailed plan based on the template presented above was prepared and followed. Unfortunately we have not found the solution to the problem with gaining the feedback from the community. Several ideas were implemented – from creating a database and direct mail, to e-form questionnaires, attending the meetings etc. The response was still too small to derive any conclusions. This may be a subject to the EC, how to create the panel of responders who would evaluate the EC funded projects. At this stage we have not found a solution here.

The main questions that one shall answer are:

- What is the most appropriate level of formality in communication for this particular project?
- What kind of changes in the project are important enough to be communicated to the Commission and what is the best form to do so?
- How to assure the information flow between several work packages led independently by WP leaders without creating unnecessary communication noise?
- How important is to state clearly at the beginning the rules for the “sensitive matters” communication – such as IPR issues?
- How to overcome the communication limitations resulting from semi – virtual work and geographical spread of the project members?
- How to solve the major scientific conflicts within Consortium and most importantly how to remedy appearance of such conflicts ?
- What is the most reasonable frequency and content for internal reporting?
- What tools are most effective to assure the full utilization of networking within project?
- How to assure that the general public is well informed about the project and will provide feedback?
- What is the method of assuring that the knowledge gathered during the project is available after it ends?

Some of these questions remained unanswered and we have not found remedies to all the communication problems, but this list can be treated as a check for any coordinator.

The lessons learned

It is of utmost importance to agree as many details of the project with the consortium before the paper is presented to the EC. Incompliance to this requirement may result in the project failure at the very beginning. May also lead to prolonged discussions and hard feelings later on that make team creation an mission impossible.

The role of the technical manager shall be stated and followed clearly – this person has to be as independent of his own organization as possible while looking for solutions going beyond the interest of particular partner.

It is a good idea to have the tele-conferences on regular basis (in VIDE project there were bi-weekly conferences). Despite the reservation expressed by many managers towards any form of regular gathering (as a time consuming and hence very costly form of communication), the teleconferences prove to be a critical mean for communication and assuring timely responses. The periods delimited with such meetings set natural iterations in the work plan of the project. To make this efficient, reports containing minutes, to do lists and attendance lists should be created for each of such meetings by coordinator and reviewed during the next teleconference.

Since those teleconferences are to be attended by all partners, they should not be prolonged. Hence additional small meetings (for example grouping just the teams of one WP) can be more effective than the big gatherings that tend to focus more on the reporting than co-working.

It is usually a good idea to include some guidance on the most important issues in the Consortium Agreement. However the formal communication plan, that is usually developed for the implementation projects may be rather a burden, since the research project needs more flexible attitude and hands-on management.