

“The workshop was a milestone”



"This workshop was crucial for the development of the IT Pool of Excellence. It gave the participants the possibility to take three essential steps:

- 1. They could make explicit their unspoken knowledge, while looking at the situation and their relationships.*
- 2. They could define common goals based on this shared understanding of the situation.*
- 3. An atmosphere of respect and trust was created among the participants.*

"After the workshop, the needs of the parties in the region were very clear. A core group of committed stakeholders was established. That was decisive for the further development of the consortium, defining its goals and organizational structure. This resulted in the formal establishment of the consortium, which is still operating satisfactorily to this day. Moreover, it has also enabled a number of participants to jointly develop complex project proposals for the Romanian Structural Fund."
Corneliu Berari, ADR Vest, Timisoara.

IT Development in a Romanian Region: How to Envision a Path and Create Practical Steps Forward?

by Charles de Monchy



It is 2007 and the western region around Timisoara in Romania finds itself in a transitional phase. European investments (private and public) flow into the region. Plenty of opportunities for the local IT sector occur, but the sector lags behind. Other industries move faster than the IT sector. Regional Development Agency ADR Vest wants to change that. Along with four universities and two professional associations ADR Vest has established a consortium to boost the Research & Development within the IT sector.

Support from EU funds is possible if they present a broad-based approach. A few directors of large organizations agreed at the policy level to create a consortium, but the operational specialists did not talk to each other yet. In addition, the regional IT companies, the main target group of this initiative, are hardly involved.



Together we want to develop the IT, but how do we get everyone on board?

Raluca Cibu-Buzak of ADR Vest asked me to provide a workshop with all parties to develop a strategy for cooperation. In total they would bring together up to 25 people in a meeting, lasting at most one working day, but certainly not more. Is it possible to lay the foundations for an IT cluster in the region in one day?

A strategy session at breakneck speed

The invited persons haven't had in-depth conversations about the project yet, therefore a classic strategy meeting would be needed. In such a meeting, participants first look at what needs to change in order to achieve their ambitions in their region. Then they map opportunities and determine which approach is most appropriate. There was only one problem: taking all the steps would take at least two days. We didn't have that time.

We designed a program that could be done if we worked at high speed. The time we could spend on open discussion was limited, because we needed half the time for the inventory of the challenges, the opportunities and activities. Luckily, most participants were used to communicating in English.

1: Introductions and sharing expectations

The group agreed to the ambitious program without hesitation. We shared the responsibility to keep up the pace. The following parties were present : ADR Vest, three universities, Alcatel (a telecom giant, whose head office is in the region), a business incubator, and a delegation of six small and medium sized enterprises in IT.



They expected answers to several questions:

- How should companies and universities work together in the IT?
- How can we increase market share for IT services in the region?
- Who is going to play which role in the new consortium?

2: Facing the challenges: what do we want to be improved?

We asked participants, in small groups, to write down their challenges regarding IT in the region on yellow cards. A challenge is something that is going wrong or bothering the parties that should be addressed by the initiative. We grouped similar challenges and gave each cluster a title indicating what the companies would gain from addressing this challenges. This was the first step towards formulating shared goals. Within an hour five goals and associated problems were identified: transparent rules for procurement and cooperation in the IT, increased local demand for better IT services, shared project developed, competent technicians and access to capital.

3: The opportunities: what do we focus on?

We asked participants to identify opportunities in the same way. The following clusters appeared: e-services for the Government, e-learning environment in schools and universities, improving the infrastructure and integrating IT applications in the regional industry. It was concluded that ICT companies needed assistance to develop software applications on demand of clients in the region.

4: Rules for cooperation

At lunch time, a number of entrepreneurs said they could not stay until the end of the day. So right after lunch, we discussed the rules of cooperation. In an open discussion, we listed the principles. My question was: *"Which principles do you want to apply to make this initiative successful?"* By carefully listening, summarizing and asking supplementary questions we drew up quite a list of principles within half an hour. A major conclusion was that SME's should have the same vote as large organizations. Interestingly, the universities and Alcatel saw the SME's as a welcome addition and agreed.

5: Ambitions and activities

The key question in determining the ambitions for the consortium was simple: *"What do you see has happened in 3 or 4 years in the region, when looking back with pleasure on this initiative?"* We derived qualitative and quantitative statements for each of the five goals. So: how much should there be, and how good? For example: *"Leading regional institutions support multi-stakeholder purchase and tenders in the IT and have adjusted their internal rules accordingly."*



Again I facilitated an open discussion, asking questions and writing down the answers on a flip chart. Then we set up thematic groups to formulate for every ambition activities to which the partners would contribute. While doing this, they made agreements on mutual cooperation. For example, a young university professor agreed to develop a special Masters program together with ICT companies.

Six years later: the established consortium is functioning satisfactorily

At the end of the workshop, participants agreed about the ambitions, the approach and the control of the consortium. They all wanted to contribute. The IT Pool of Excellence was founded in July 2011, and has functioned until today (2013).

Working from the outside in

In one day we created the foundations for an IT Cluster in the region. By supporting in formulating the results concretely during the open discussions, the group came to the nub of the issue. Everyone's input was respected and confidence needed to get started grew. Even before the official founding of the ICT Pool of Excellence was created, sub-projects were awarded by the Romanian structural funds. The participants gained quick results. This was, in my opinion, was a requisite for the subsequent success of the initiative.



The crux of this workshop was to enable the participants to look at the whole situation and explain to each other what to change and why that mattered. Rather than directly focus on the goal, we mapped the context first, then the pieces of the puzzle fall into place.

We only need a work format to record the insights and conclusions in words and images. That is the role of the facilitator. The participants take care of the content.