

SHORT PAPER

Two Success Stories as Result of the Horizon Europe Shift-Hub Project

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ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on two success stories emerging from the Shift-Hub project, a publicly funded European Commission initiative. The first success story revolves around the concept and implementation of ‘DemoDays,’ designed to connect supply and demand in smart health innovation. Initially a contractual obligation, the project team chose to take ownership, transforming DemoDays from simple KPIs fulfilment into meaningful, sustainable events. They prioritised demonstrating tangible solutions over mere presentations, focusing on the principle of ‘to see is to believe’. Online format, concise two-hour duration, and a focus on recurring demonstrations contributed to their success. This approach emphasized commitment and risk-taking, contrasting with the common practice of risk aversion and diffused responsibility. The second success story, still in progress, concerns the exploration of smart health ecosystems. Departing from superficial definitions, the team identifies the complex and unique nature of individual ecosystems, recognizing that ‘every ecosystem is different in their own way’. Their research, focusing on mental health and cardiovascular disease ecosystems, highlighted the importance of context-specific analysis over generalized best practices.

KEYWORDS

innovation ecosystems, health, smart health, European Framework Programme, success stories, DemoDays

1 INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT-SETTING

Researchers and scientists engaged in research and innovation projects are eager to report on success stories, especially as the latter may strongly affect their future fundraising and new project acquisition potential. However, it is good to understand that before a success ‘happens’, there may have been several failures.

Nowadays it is common that people share their failures – a term used is also ‘f*** up nights’ for events where people (usually young entrepreneurs) report on their own failures and what they did wrong, as in ‘The Global community to break the taboo of failure’ [1], or in events that are organised in cities like Berlin [2],

Koumpis, A., Stefanut, P., Spyroglou, O. (2025). Two Success Stories as Result of the Horizon Europe Shift-Hub Project. *International Journal of Online and Biomedical Engineering (iJOE)*, 21(4), pp. 171–177. <https://doi.org/10.3991/ijoe.v21i04.54133>

Article submitted 2024-10-28. Revision uploaded 2024-12-13. Final acceptance 2024-12-17.

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or Leipzig [3] or Frankfurt [4]. However, in a publicly funded project by the European Commission and, hence the European tax payer, how much space does one have to report on failures? The less one may do is to report on 'lessons learned' and cover mistakes and failures under the veil of lessons. Or stay on the safe side and report only about successes.

The application field of Shift-Hub project [5] has been of extreme high relevance and importance to us, the team of the Institute for Biomedical Informatics at the University Hospital of Cologne. We were at the time that the application for funding was being prepared still a newly founded institute – so like a start-up institute – and we saw only the potential and the opportunities that related to the Shift-Hub proposal and, sometime after the retainment of the application, the project itself.

Soon after, we saw that to successfully meet our obligations, we needed commitment; there is no need to use here the compound term 'serious commitment' as we believe that commitment is a Boolean entity: it is there or it is not; nothing in between. Commitment also does *not* have to do with resources: one may use the available planned and programmed resources but still not meet the target. If there is commitment, then the people will still put in the extra effort and walk the extra mile to meet the objective. And then, they will be happily able to report on a *real* success story. Everything else lies in the twilight zone of could – should – would and make-believe.

In the project, our main involvement was in the study of the stakeholders in smart health ecosystems as these appear in research and innovation settings and the organisation of what was called DemoDays – a measure to bring close together the two sides of supply and demand of innovation smart health solutions – services – products and technologies. Below we shall briefly elaborate on each, sharing experiences and opinions that may be subjective but still, as we think, worth sharing and facilitating a dialogue.

2 ON DEMODAYS

The term DemoDay was not ours; we were assigned the term that was mentioned as part of our project contractual obligations. For some time, we found ourselves in a position where we needed to understand what we should do with this task, how to approach the DemoDays, how to organise them, and how to position them within the project. At that time several other things were the subject of discussion: people were trying to define many 'things' that were presented (or actually promised) in the proposal, and there was a rather usual game of 'design by committee' [6], where the idea of a (beautiful) horse ends up in an ugly (dysfunctional as well) camel.

After some time of reflection, we saw that there are two options available to us:

1. We either organise the DemoDays in a way to cope with the contractual obligation and show that we met the corresponding key performance indicators (KPIs) with success, and that's it! Never again care for something like this – mission accomplished;
2. Or we try to take ownership and have 'skin in the game' regarding the DemoDays.

We opted for the last option. To this, the first idea that came to our mind was to see this as an opportunity for organising events, where we would aim to attract as many people and thus reach attention and increase visibility. After the event, one may share pictures on social media and professional networks, but given that

the project runs on public money, one may wonder if this is worth it for the European taxpayer to spend their money on.

What we did was to *understand the need* for a modality that would allow the people who build solutions or products or services or work on concepts and ideas and develop prototypes of what will potentially become a solution or a product, service, etc., and try to give it some form and structure. This is not new at all, as TEDx talks [7] were based on this process – and several other modalities that are widespread, like e.g., science slams [8] [9] or hackathons [10] that are conceived and implemented as events where people engage in spontaneous and collaborative engineering of e.g., mobile apps or some sort of game development, or events that are devoted to a cause or purpose, as in the case of [11]. So, we intentionally tried to attribute to the DemoDays some meaning and substance that would hopefully outlive the duration of the Shift-Hub project so that it would eventually become part of the project legacy and for us as partners a tangible exploitable item.

In retrospect we see that what we did was not difficult at all, but it is something that organisations try to avoid. And to not blame the (impersonal) organisations, this has to do with the people: They are usually afraid to commit because this means that they will take risks, and if things go bad, which sometimes or usually do go bad, they will be left alone to receive criticism from their project partners and eventually from their managers and supervisors in their organisations. Hence the dominant practice leads concerned parties to (i) avoid risk, (ii) avoid taking ownership, and (iii) in case they may commit to something, try to dilute their responsibility by involving others in the task and defining exactly the tasks so that there is no grey area and little chance that one may end up with a failure. Such a culture of fear that is fostered takes worrying dimensions [12], while there have been research actions like [13] dedicated to the exploration of well-being and mental health within academia.

European Framework Programme actions have been planned since their origins [14] to be the result of people committed to sharing ideas and opening their minds and their individual horizons on the basis of collaboration. This is not a trivial process at all, and it is the same spirit that proliferated also later developments such as the European Research Area [15]. It is this spirit that we had been inspired by when we came up with the concept of the DemoDays that we consider a success story of the Shift-Hub project. The idea is as follows:

- DemoDays take place online to keep the costs low and have the ability to organise them with no care to exceed the project budget.
- Though they take place online, they are still associated with a different place each time – as of now, we organised them at Cologne, Leipzig, and Berlin – where a ‘local’ host organisation takes care to set out the agenda and help choosing the focus area and the respective participants.
- The overall duration of a DemoDay has been set to an average of only two hours. Initially, the idea was to have a whole day or half-day events with coffee and lunch breaks and lots of invited guest speakers and presentations from our side on the Shift-Hub project structure, methodology, and services. However, we considered that this might not help attract the attention of an audience and decided to limit this to a 10 minutes presentation in the opening of the DemoDay and another 10 minutes by the end of the event. Practice we gained convinced us that this was a good decision, as no one from the audience would miss anything while they would also appreciate the respect to their time.

- We take care to have for each DemoDay a small number of persons or companies that we invite to demonstrate their solutions (or products or services), so between 3 and 5. The average time slot for each is about 20 minutes. And most importantly: there needs to be something that is demonstrated – so not only PowerPoint slides and stories (as in a TedX talk).

The concept of ‘to see is to believe’ has been of core importance for our DemoDays success story. Even if a technology or a system is still at an early phase of its development lifecycle, with what one would call a technology readiness level (TRL) of 2 or even 1 [16], there is a need to *demonstrate* something that feels as ‘specific’ and ‘tangible,’ providing a lead to its usage in a given context (in our case, this may be a hospital setting, a clinical practice, needs of a patient, etc.). Stories are important, but they should accompany something specific, something that an investor might be *seriously* motivated to finance or something that an organisation might *seriously* consider including in their future plans for pilot projects.

We also took the liberty to invite some of the teams in our next events – so we did not consider that for any new DemoDay there is a need to have new organisations or teams that present their solutions; there is space for having recurring demonstrations as long as there is commitment from their side to invest time with the Shift-Hub project and take ownership in the organisation of the DemoDays.

For the time this worked quite well and we shall see to continue with this format also in the future during the entire project lifetime. However, and in order to have continuity and longevity, several other parameters need to be taken into account. We may proactively think to find some way to protect the sustainability of this success story by building, e.g., a partnership with some other organisation that shall take care of the organisation of the events. For the authors of the report, DemoDays do not need to bring any profit, as we organise them currently as part of the project activities, and in the future, we regard them as value-creating activities that allow us to widen our engagement in research and innovation ecosystems in the field of health.

Many important things happened because there have been few – though still sufficient and ‘good enough’ – resources: this is the story of the success story of the World Wide Web: Tim Berners Lee didn’t have a generous budget of several million euros for the project when he developed his proposal and delivered a first prototype [20]. Less is more not only in the architecture but also when planning research and innovation activities. This is an important lesson that we got by spending a little more time to reflect on how to meet a contractual obligation, namely the DemoDays, in a sustainable and value-adding way.

3 ON ECOSYSTEMS

This second success story is not as easy to describe as the previous one. In fact, it is a success story in progress – so nothing that is done but something that relates to an open-ended commitment that the authors have taken and goes beyond the timeline of the Shift-Hub project.

More specifically, in the original application we had submitted to the European Commission, the term *ecosystems* was mentioned several times and had been associated with *smart health* and *research and innovation* (R&I) (‘smart health ecosystems’ and ‘R&I ecosystems,’ respectively).

When one of the authors (PS), who was also the main architect of the project used the term *ecosystems*, it was meant as a foundation for collaborations. And even

though one may need to start from local communities to reach out to a broader local ecosystem, the driving force has been to bring people together in order to solve real-world problems that doctors and patients have and co-create value in terms of efficiency and under all its relevant forms, such as improving accuracy, increasing the capacity to do things that were not possible before with a mix of technologies, etc. So, all in all there was no intention to take advantage of the *ecosystem* term as a ‘catchy’ one. In the past there were similar terms used widely, like ‘virtual enterprises’ and ‘value-adding constellations.’ What happened with us is that we tried to consider the term *literally*, so leaving the surface and going a little deeper to the substance of the term. There we recognised the obvious: ecosystems are complex and complicated structures and not something that one may examine effortlessly or superficially. And same as the Tolstian principle in the opening sentence of Anna Karenina that ‘Happy families are all alike: every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way,’ we were able to see that ‘ecosystems are all alike’ only if you stay at the surface and talk about ecosystems in general without taking care to focus on some of their specific constituents. Once you start going into the details, ‘every ecosystem is different in their own way.’

So while the principles that guided us in our stakeholder analysis may be *replicable* and the approach we took is *repeatable*, it is absolutely unworthy to generalise on them and devise some best practices or some commonalities. This is a common mistake that researchers as well as research performing and research funding organisations commit, usually as they are blinded by their goal of success, while they fail to see that the most important aspect is to increase their own individual as well as their collective learning: in research but same also in business, what is important are *not* the answers that one comes up with but the questions that dares to ask. Here again, and same as with the DemoDays presented in the previous section, we tried to leave our comfort zone as partners in the Shift-Hub project and set the bar higher by means of trying to go a little deeper into the question of what does a smart health ecosystem look like? We did not come to some type of a general theory or a general answer on the nature of ecosystems, however, and as reported in [17] and [18], we had the opportunity to examine differences related to the application areas such as mental health and cardiovascular diseases that demonstrate the complexity of the addressed field.

We understand that in Europe, same as all over the world, our societies need innovators and a widely shared spirit of entrepreneurial risk-taking mindset. But the routes that individuals and organisations will take to achieve this shall be highly diverse and will not come as a result of following common routes or deployment practices.

One may here see the fine difference that Joseph Weizenbaum recognised back in 1976 *between deciding and choosing*, where the first (deciding) is an activity that can be, eventually, programmed, while the latter (choosing) is the product of judgement and not of calculation [19].

Do we want to engineer ecosystems in Europe that will meet the market needs and will be engineered following Lego-block principles? Same as with massive, industrial, and intensive animal farming, there have been some good reasons why we ended up with this, but it is also a common place that the latter contributed to a dystopian situation with extreme difficulty to transform into some sustainable paradigm. One may see this as an early warning for what to avoid regarding research and innovation ecosystems, namely that in times when we try to abolish the paradigm of massive animal farming, on the other hand, we envision breeding future generations of entrepreneurs in co-working spaces, accelerators, and incubators, where

they will all be educated to carry out elevator pitches, exhibit high competence in the use of the business model canvas, have capacities in the use of agile management principles, and hold motivating lightning talks. If this is the vision for achieving diversity in research and promoting excellence in science, we may still have time to change our minds and, most importantly, our ways of handling.

We studied, amongst others, medical ecosystems in the fields of mental health and cardiovascular diseases, limiting our exploration only to Cologne [17], and also made a first attempt to analyse stakeholders of cardiovascular innovation ecosystems in Germany [18] by also considering an example, and we found out that this is not a trivial exercise at all. It needs to take place for each individual case from a zero basis, and it is only the knowledge and the expertise that people will develop in carrying this exercise that will justify the efforts to build and maintain such an ecosystem.

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

We aim to invest in the legacy of DemoDays and transform them into a tangible outcome by connecting it to a variety of modalities, such as the Open Days of higher educational institutions where students and young researchers can find a forum to present the results of their work, not necessarily with the aim to establish a marketplace but rather a multifaceted instrument allowing for multilateral communication and exchange. To the field of ecosystems research, the increase of the visibility of the Shift-Hub project results shall also help us find partners equipped with complimentary knowledge and know-how that will also contribute to the increase of the quality of the conducted research. It is time to see that commitment is the only safe way to increase the value of a researcher's and a scientist's work, and it is this quality on its own that contributes to a success story. It is time to go back to the basics of thinking more than spending time on superficial activities. For science communication, one needs a solid part of science to use as a starting point for all communication activities. The time of low-hanging fruits in terms of funding opportunities for research is now bitterly coming to an end; the future shall belong to the agile, highly connected, and extremely motivated individuals and the organisations who shall be capable of supporting them in achieving excellence.

5 ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Part of the activities related to this work have been financed. under the Shift-HUB project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101095720.

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