

LESSONS LEARNT FROM DISTRIBUTED TEAMBUILDING: COACHING FOR DEVELOPMENT

Daniel Collado-Ruiz

Universidad Politécnica de Valencia

Estuardo Calderón Scheel

SE Group

Abstract

In our ever more complex and interconnected world, millions of people are suffering from poverty, malnutrition, diseases, war, etc. In an attempt to improve this situation, an international team of members of the Young Crews of the different Member Associations (MA) of the International Project Management Association (IPMA) created Coaching for Development. The purpose of this platform is to empower society within the developing countries with modern cross-cultural knowledge in the field of project management, by means developing competencies through coaching and creating networking opportunities. This initiative is intended to constitute a platform for project managers along the world to contribute in developing countries with their best knowledge and skills, enabling social entrepreneurs with tools, methods, techniques and ideas to face the organizational challenges in their projects. The team that is organizing this initiative is a widely distributed group of young volunteers, requiring an intensive use of information technologies. This paper presents some lessons learnt out of the team-building process that got the members together, and the next steps in consolidating the first project and defining a sustainable model to continue hereon.

Keywords: *Distributed teams, Communication skills, Web 2.0, Log frame, Networking*

Resumen

En un mundo cada vez más complejo, millones de personas sufren la pobreza, desnutrición, enfermedades, guerra, etc. En un intento de mejorar esta situación, un grupo de miembros de las secciones jóvenes (Young Crew) de las asociaciones miembro (o Member Association, MA) de la International Project Management Association (IPMA) ha creado Coaching for Development. Esta plataforma busca compartir con sociedades en vías de desarrollo conocimientos inter-culturales en dirección de proyectos, desarrollando las competencias mediante tutelaje y dando la oportunidad de expandir las redes de contactos de los participantes. Esta iniciativa busca convertirse en una plataforma para que profesionales de la dirección de proyectos en todo el mundo puedan colaborar en países en vías de desarrollo con sus conocimientos, ayudando a emprendedores sociales con métodos, herramientas e ideas para enfrentarse a los retos organizacionales de sus proyectos. El equipo encargado de organizar esta iniciativa es un grupo voluntario de jóvenes ampliamente distribuido, requiriendo gran uso de tecnologías de la información. Este artículo presenta algunas lecciones aprendidas a lo largo del proceso de formación de este equipo, en los siguientes pasos a tomar en la consolidación del primer proyecto, y en la creación de un modelo de organización sostenible a partir de este punto.

Palabras clave: *Equipos distribuidos, Competencias de comunicación, Web 2.0, Marco Log, Networking*

1. Introduction

We live in a world that is constantly increasing in complexity and interconnectedness. We benefit from rapidly growing technologies and claim to achieve new levels of progress. However, we are still very far from a balanced and sustainable world order. Millions of people in this world suffer from poverty, malnutrition, diseases, war, etc. In the context of this immense social and cultural complexity, engaged individuals commit themselves to creating a better tomorrow. In their countries they launch projects aimed at improving the lives of their fellow citizens and reaching out to the issues not sufficiently tackled by their governments. These projects operate in extremely difficult settings, sometimes lacking support and acceptance. In many cases, knowledge in project management of people involved in those projects is low. This sometimes results in failures to receive funding for development of potentially good projects, as donors might lack confidence in successful implementation of the projects. There could be many factors of bad performance, but one of the most significant issues is the lack of efficient project management training and exchange of knowledge between Western world and developing countries. To continue to improve their people's living standards, staff from Non Governmental Organizations (NGO) in developing countries need to engage in knowledge sharing projects with their peers around the world.

Coaching for Development is a not-for-profit project, created in 2009 by an international team of young people within the International Project Management Association (IPMA); the oldest international association of project management professionals, with 53 national member associations from the Americas, Europe, Asia, Africa and Australia. This project aims to empower society within the developing countries with modern cross-cultural knowledge in the field of project management, by means of developing competencies and creating networking opportunities. The vision behind it is a world where projects in developing countries have unlimited opportunities for growth, success and co-creation of value for their societies.

The way to fulfill these goals is through sharing information, training project team members on site and expanding networks of practitioners. This platform benefits the participants as well as project managers willing to volunteer in a number of ways. This new initiative of IPMA Young Crew sets the stage for project managers from around the world to join, contribute and learn. It takes advantage of synergy with IPMA's focus on people and the understanding of the holistic structure of project management, as shown in its body of knowledge, the ICB v3 (Caupin et al., 2006). The project is currently led by a group of volunteers under the age of 35 (including the authors), although the qualification of coaches is expected to exceed this frame, allowing any project manager in the world to participate.

The first event will take place at the end of September 2010 in Kathmandu, Nepal. Project managers from all over the world will meet in Nepal to coach a group of project management professionals and enthusiasts from several projects, to share experiences and information and to extend the networking of all participants. Nepal stands out for having many critical problems, even when compared with other developing countries. It ranks 144th out of 177 countries on the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development Index (UNDP, 2009). The GNP per capita is US\$200. Nepal has major issues relating to provision of health care, education, and the economy in general. Though development work is on-going and there has been progress in some areas, it has been slow in many others. Better network with the Western world and efficiently implemented project management training will strengthen individual programs and teams, improving the overall situation.

2.- From idea to team

Socially oriented projects have notoriously increased in the previous years. However, if project management professionals want to volunteer with their time and good will, options for that are limited. Many people would have been willing to invest their knowledge and experience, but could not do it because of lack of initiatives, and most especially in a discipline that is so emergent and critical for the development of a country.

This thought inspired a group of young project management professionals during the event of the 23rd IPMA World Congress on July 2009. If such a possibility was not yet available, and we thought the world needed it, why not start it up? Throughout the event some participants gathered in an initial group of committed people that were willing to bring this initiative to life.

The foundations behind Coaching for Development were based in the wisdom in “give a man a fish and he will eat for a day; teach a man to fish and he will eat for a lifetime”. The target should thus not be for volunteers to manage projects in developing countries and then leave with all the know-how. The aim was to deliver project management, not to “just” do it. Progressively it seemed more and more reasonable that the way to do so was to carry out coaching and training events in developing countries, assisting local project managers. Coaching was the way to leave the knowledge where it is most needed.

Every journey starting with a first step, this group decided to take this motto to its greatest extent and start up what would later be called as Coaching for Development, with a first event. Due to an existing initial network in Nepal, and the country's current socio-economic situation, the first workshop was defined to be in this country, and a team started to be prepared for for this endeavor. The initiative was communicated through the IPMA Young Crew channels to get many potential collaborators and volunteers to join this initiative, and the first steps were planned for the workshop. IPMA grasped and supported this initiative from a first moment, and gave the infrastructure to keep this project in motion.

The team was further established along the next months through personal contacts that were inspired by the idea. This was a key to success, as personal contact constituted a very inspiring and useful factor to generate team cohesion. By the end of 2009, the first project was taking shape: a training-coaching workshop in Nepal.

3.- Timeline and development of the project

It is important to divide at this point of the discussion Coaching for Development into two different concepts, that should be dealt with separately:

- Coaching for Development as platform. As such, it has a long term vision, and aims at contributing at a worldwide level. The workshop in Nepal is a first initiative that will showcase the concept.
- Coaching for Development – Project Nepal. This constitutes an independent project, with its specific team and resources. At the time of writing this paper, this is the only one from which conclusions can be drawn, as all tasks have been performed to reach the specific goals of this project.

In the latter, three key stakeholders have to be considered thoroughly:

- Participants of the workshop: young project managers from Nepal that are currently contributing – or will contribute – to projects with a strong social impact. Hereon they will be referred as **participants**.

- Volunteers that come from any country in the world, going to Nepal to share their knowledge with the participants. They are required to have experience and/or training in coaching as well as in project management. They will be referred hereon as **trainers**.
- Companies or institutions – be it private or public – that invest in the project, seeking some revenue beyond mere philanthropy. They will be referred as **sponsors**.

In Nepal, there is still much work towards adopting a standard body of knowledge such as the PMBoK (PMI, 2008) or IPMA ICB3 (Caupin et al., 2006) in teaching, training, and application. Coaching for Development aims to bridge the gaps in project management knowledge for participants, as well as for project managers in this country in general, by fulfilling to:

- Promote the awareness of a global body of knowledge such as ICB3 (Caupin et al., 2006).
- Provide participants with the opportunity to share knowledge as well as to learn from one another, whilst gaining better understanding from other countries and sectors.
- Promote project management through information sharing.
- Build a network of professionals interested in enhancing their project management competences.
- Provide participants the opportunity to form partnerships and linkages to project management professionals in other parts of the world.
- Establish a connection between local practitioners and more experienced project managers to mentor and guide them, long after the workshop is concluded.
- Encourage project management practitioners in Nepal to structure and define their personal development in project management according to certification schemes such as IPMA certification.
- Form a community of project management practitioners who can help and guide others in their communities.

The project in Nepal has valuable implications not only for the participants, but also for the trainers and organizers. In this regard Coaching for Development will:

- Address the societal needs in the developing world and contribute to international development.
- Offer experience of voluntary and socially beneficial work.
- Foster networking of motivated individuals among participants and trainers.
- Allow for connecting with businesses and foundations.
- Give an opportunity to exercise the role of a trainer and a coach.
- Provide the ground for practical implementation of project management knowledge in a field different to one's own.
- Develop the new skills – cross-cultural competences, communication and other soft skills, fundraising, budget planning, etc.
- Expand leadership potential of the trainers.
- Create the learning practice of managing a project in a virtual team.

- Initiate the framework for sustainable knowledge sharing even after the completion of the workshop in Nepal.

Sponsoring Coaching for Development is also an interesting, different and flexible approach to investment. While providing aid to the project on its first stages, the sponsors continue observing its profound impact and expanding their global presence as the project grows. Providing aid for innovative leadership and development projects like this will be beneficial for the sponsors as they will get to work with active young people who commit social change. Sponsors are benefited by:

- Gaining publicity and becoming known for contributing to international development and providing help to the most vulnerable societies. Coaching for Development offers its sponsors visibility in online media (the official website, Twitter, Facebook), publications and in events.
- Deriving marketing benefits from being associated with a socially beneficial project.
- Being in contact with modern cross-cultural project management.
- Leveraging knowledge sharing and contribute to the growth of social capital in developing countries, as well as making the project real, the content and value being provided by the project team and the knowledge growing as the project proceeds.
- Aiding the development of the project participants as well as the project team members, two categories of beneficiaries being targeted simultaneously.
- Sharing company-related competences and knowledge.
- Investing in a project supported by IPMA – a well-known trustworthy organization.
- Gain access to the creative potential of young professionals, both in Nepal (participants) and from all over the world (trainers), who are open to knowledge sharing and co-operation in their fields of expertise.

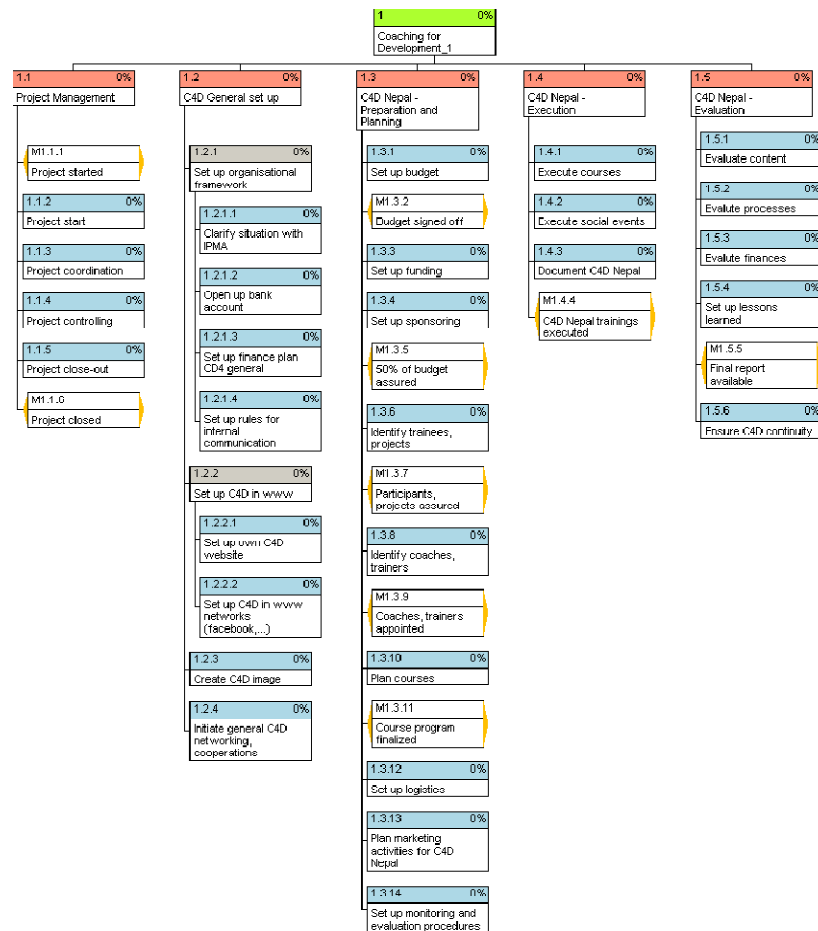
To be coherent with the expectations presented above, the goals of the Project were specifically defined in the project charter (Coaching for Development, 2009). Its aims transcend the immediate impact during the workshop. Goals to be accomplished are:

- Short-term goals
 - Improve the project management competences of participants from Nepal.
 - Create awareness of the learning curve of participants on project management.
 - Develop participant's interest in certification in project management.
 - Create media impact of the importance of project management (open events with press releases).
 - Build a community of young engaged project management professionals in Nepal.
 - Increase the practical experience of trainers in coaching for development aid and in project management for very different cultural contexts.
 - Increase the social contribution and commitment of trainers.
 - Start an international network of committed project management professionals around the globe.
 - Development of a consistent knowledge-sharing framework for research and case studies.

- Development of a first batch of case studies exemplifying project management competences and potential conflicts.
- Mid-term goals
 - Create awareness on project management in Nepal.
 - Develop and sustain a community of young engaged project management professionals in Nepal.
 - Nourish the creation of other project-management-related development initiatives in Nepal.
 - Development of a consistent knowledge-sharing framework for research and case studies.
 - Development of additional case studies exemplifying project management competences and potential conflicts.
 - Create an awareness and conscience about Coaching for Development among IPMA members.
 - Create global awareness about the existence and projects of Coaching for Development.
- Long-term goals
 - Sustain and expand a community of young engaged project management professionals in Nepal
 - Facilitate the development of other project-management-related development initiatives in Nepal
 - Increase the number of international Young Crew initiatives with participation from Nepal
 - Improve the efficiency in project management practices in development-related projects in Nepal
 - Cultivate project management knowledge contributing to the growth of social capital in Nepal
 - Maintain a knowledge-sharing community of project management professionals that transcends the limits of the workshop's participants
 - To have the knowledge-sharing framework become a reference for project management professionals worldwide
 - Ensure visibility of Coaching for Development as a reference platform (and program) in developing aid through project management excellence
 - Ensure continuity of Coaching for Development as a development aid program

For that, the work breakdown structure (Coaching for Development, 2009) shown in Figure 1 was developed.

Figure 1 – WBS for the first Coaching for Development Project in Nepal (Coaching for Development, 2009).



The project has been planned (and will continue to be) along the months between September 2009 and 2010. In the end of September 2010, the workshop itself will take place, consisting of almost two weeks of direct interaction with the participants.

The workshop itself will consist of one week of training on the different competences of the IPMA Competence Baseline (Caupin et al., 2006), and a week of on-site coaching. On this last one, trainers will work side-by-side with the participants, and have reflection sessions in which experiences and points of view are shared.

After the workshop, there are still some tasks planned to:

- Ensure the creation of a strong platform of young Project Managers in Nepal.
- Ensure the continuity of Coaching for Development, along with its long term vision and strategic definition of further workshops.

For this, all sorts of communication tools will be used to ensure post-workshop continuity of the initiative.

4.- Procedures and issues in a fully distributed team

As was exposed in section 2, the team was created once the initial target of developing a workshop was defined. Initial communication was carried out through existing IPMA Young Crew channels, by using the mail-list resulting from the Young Crew Workshop in Helsinki. All those that received the e-mail were asked to echo it throughout their national networks, to reach a maximum amount of potential collaborators. Additionally, personal contact was used to get additional team members.

Although the very first team members knew themselves personally and had had the chance of communicating directly about the project – even though just for a few hours – this facilitated the communication of the main idea. It becomes surprisingly more difficult to transmit an idea through text, presentations and/or voice as it does through personal communication (Derks et al., 2008, Kraut et al., 1990).

Since the beginning, the team has been an evolving and ever-changing set of volunteers that have devoted time and effort to different tasks in the project. At the beginning, an internal communication strategy was defined, and periodical virtual meetings through Skype were established. Meetings happened once every two weeks approximately, to coordinate the different global topics, and smaller meetings were set to plan the smaller tasks that were carried out by each team, e.g. website definition, communication to IPMA or marketing strategy development.

Additional meetings were held with newcomers to the project, to ensure that they were kept up-to-date. This task was defined when the team started to grow, and it became overwhelming to dedicate time from general meetings – and therefore from the whole team – to such tasks.

Due to the size of the team, there was normally much overlap from the teams, and those that had few people often pooled resources from the global team. At critical points of the project, general meetings have been happening on a weekly basis.

Fortunately, one very sensitive team had the possibility of meeting personally. Three team members – even though coming from different countries – were residing in Berlin during part of the project, and that facilitated personal meetings to brainstorm and structure the marketing and communication strategy, and to define a set of key milestones for the project.

This fact actually reflected strongly on the way the team performed. It can be clearly seen that processes critical in teambuilding such as communication or trust have a greater difficulty to happen if contact is only present through telephone or Skype. The Berlin team was not only more motivated to invest time than other differentiated teams, but was also coordinated in a more efficient manner. Results came in more compact and confident packages as what happened with other teams, which needed to rely more on the feedback given in the general meetings.

A general feeling because of this type of communication is that the team takes more time to connect. Motivation must be kept by the content of the project rather than by the team, so this can constitute an additional burden if the people feel less motivationally linked to it. Another topic regarding the feeling of connection to the team is the location – “physical” location if any – of that team. Since meetings are virtual, there is no association of the team, and the perception might become also that the project is basically “some voices inside a computer”. This was extremely difficult to deal with, since it affects elements of communication, motivation and compromise with the team. Constancy is more difficultly guaranteed, as the project “can be easily switched off”, so the final commitment depends on personal attitude more than a set of rules that are approved during the teambuilding process.

An almost direct conclusion of this is the effect on sociality: the physical and the social environments (Manstead et al., in press, in Derks et al., 2008). Neither of them is clearly defined, but in both cases computer-based communication represents a difficulty for basic communication in the first sense, and a delay in the teambuilding time in the second. Common awareness as a source of informal communication (Gutwin et al., 2008) is difficult to achieve, and this has probably had an effect on the spontaneity of idea generation.

This context is strengthened by the additional factor of a lack of informal communications. A great amount of the motivational conversations, or quick feedback, is carried out during coffee breaks, quick interruptions, post-meeting chatting and hallway conversations. Most of

this informal communication can be defined as unscheduled, interactive and rich in content. Kraut et al. (1990) define several levels of spontaneity, with a measure of almost 40% of intended unscheduled communication. In the Coaching for Development team, such communications receive a more formal nature from the starting point, since approaching a team member entails explicitly opening the channel of a Skype call. Even small talk becomes explicit prelude of a more formal conversation.

Nevertheless, a big percentage of communication happened in this way between team members. For some team members and periods of time, communications could consist up to approximately 80% of the time in quick feedback conversations before and after meetings. However, even with this, since most communications are intended and are not expected to be brief (not being that easy to initiate), reminders of the project become easily delayable, and it is easy to switch off from the project with not many consequences.

Many computer tools show some lack of support to informal communication (Whittaker et al, 1994), particularly when it comes to efficiently transmitting non-verbal cues, emotions, social sharing, feedback or mimics (Derks et al., 2008). Also cues based on language could have constituted a problem (Marschan-Piekkari, 1999), since for most participants English is not mother language. Current tools normally require a high effort and complete compromise of the participants, even beyond privacy issues (Gutwin et al., 2008). Since this is a voluntary project with few resources, relying on complex tools and strict structured task plans was not an option to consider.

For all the aforementioned reasons, some attempts of “informal meetings” were planned, most specially in holidays or special occasions. Also, some informal conversations were held at the end of the meetings, to compensate part of the difficulties. The team was also encouraged to provoke face-to-face meetings as often as possible. Whenever some team members had the chance (because of participating in a common activity or workshop, or merely being in the same city) they met and commented on topics about the project. In addition to formal meetings, team members tried to socialize and become part of a common team.

One of the consequences of lack of constancy and of informal communication is the difficulty in keeping a common vision of the project. People that loose contact for one month lose track of the status and decisions made, and conversations to update on that can take for a long time, or leave much relevant information behind.

Other Web 2.0 tools were used, mainly for external communication, but also as a tool for information exchange. Beyond e-mail, Twitter, Facebook, Ning and Google Wave were also used. Although none of them was fully effective in internal communication (not as much as a combination of e-mail and Skype conversations), they constituted a common ground for socializing. Google Wave, although a failure as project management communication tool, was successful in providing some common shared leisure time to the team after one of the meetings.

Additionally to the virtual meetings, several shared documents were created to co-work on the different topics. In the initial definition of the project, a LogFrame or logical framework (Norad 1999, Nancholas 1998, Schubert et al. 1991) was developed collectively through a Google Spreadsheet. Elements of the marketing plan and the project charter were built up from a Google Document. One of the lessons learnt is that sharing information is critical, but common creation of documents ends up in delays and lacks of structure or common vision. It is necessary to appoint a person that will be responsible for each document, and will take care of the contribution of different people. Furthermore, teams of more than 3 or 4 people require a considerable time to manage, that must not be neglected in planning. It is naïve to expect the person managing the document to be capable of also writing several of the

sections due to the final workload (the amount of re-writing is considerable due to the number of participants). Keeping coherency becomes difficult at these points.

When defining the risk management plan for the project, several of these issues were considered. Even though most of these risks are completely internal, it is important to include them, as sometimes the risk can be minimized through the teambuilding. Furthermore, some additional tasks spawn from the reflections above, sometimes in a rather improvised manner. One of the lessons learnt would be to consider the previous in advance, and allocate time to creating and starting up the team, as well as new team members.

One final remark that adds a burden to the planning of the project is the voluntary nature. Tasks must be taken as suggestions or encouragements to some extent, since people are devoting their free time to this endeavor. The way in which different tasks and deadlines are presented has a very sensitive effect on the way those tasks are performed, as well as if they are performed on-time, or at all.

5.- Conclusions

This paper does not intend to create a scientific background for this sort of project, but more likely to serve as a case study of a rather complex teambuilding experience. This project is one out of many, and the idiosyncrasy of each other one is surely different. However, some ideas, conclusions or even awareness can be extracted from the reflections about the case.

In general terms, this project can be defined by the following traits:

- Voluntary for all the members.
- Motivational-based.
- No budget initially allocated (funding had to be gathered).
- Distributed.
- Virtual (some team members did not know each other).
- The whole team had to be developed from scratch.

As was presented along the paper, this had a set of effects that should be considered while planning similar projects. Among them, it is convenient to extract:

- Difficulty of communication.
- Almost absence of informal channels of communication.
- Motivational issues.
- Lack of constancy, and at some points reliability.
- Higher risks to be managed.

All in all, the all the issues have been dealt with in one way or another. The mentioned burdens have constituted challenges for the team, and due to the strong motivational background of the project, they have been dealt with at all moments. Team members have shown a strong compromise with the final outcome, and that has ensured that the team has built in a relatively cohesive way, specially a very motivated central core team. The lessons learnt presented in this paper, combined with those obtained in the months to come, will constitute valuable know-how for future initiatives of Coaching for Development.

References

- Caupin, G., Knoepfel, H., Koch, G., Pannenbäcker, K., Pérez-Polo, F. and Seabury, C. (eds), 2006, ICB. IPMA Competence Baseline. Version 3.0. International Project Management Association (IPMA).
- Coaching for Development, 2009, Coaching for Development – Project Nepal. Project charter. Unpublished.
- Derks, D., Fischer, A.H., Bos, A.E.R., 2008. The role of emotion in computer-mediated communication: A review. *Computers in Humna Behavior*, 24(2008), pp. 766-785. Elsevier.
- Gutwin, C., Greenberg, S., Blum, R., Dyck, J., Tee, T., McEwan, G., 2008. Supporting informal collaboration in shared-workspace groupware. *Journal of Universal Computer Science*, 11(9), pp. 1411-1434.
- Kraut, R.E., Fish, R.S., Root, R.W., Chalfonte, B.L., 1990. Informal Communication in Organizations: Form, Fucntion and Technology, in Oskamp, I.S., Spacapan, S., (Ed.), 1990, *Human Reactions to Technology: The Claremont Symposium on Applied Social Psychology*. Sage Publications.
- Marchan-Piekkari, R., Welch, D., Welch, L., 1999. In the shadow: the impact of language on structure, power and communication in the multinational. *International Business Review*, 8(1999), pp 421-440. Pergamon.
- Nancholas, S., 1998. How to do (or not to do) a logical framework. *Health Policy and Planning*, 13(2), pp. 189-193. Oxford University Press.
- NORAD, 1999, *The Logical Framework Approach (LFA)*. Handbook for Objectives-Oriented Planning.
- Schubert.B., Nagel, U.J., Denning, G.L., Pingali, P.L., 1991. A logical framework for planning agricultural research programs. International Rice Research Institute.
- UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), 2009, *Human Development Report 2009. Overcoming barriers: human mobility and development*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Whittaker, S., Frohlich, D., Daly-Jones, O., 1994, Informal workplace communication: What isi it like and how might we support it? *Human Factors in Computing Systems*, April 1994.

Correspondencia (Para más información contacte con):

Daniel Collado-Ruiz.
Phone: +34 667 856 373
Fax: + 34 96 387 9869
E-mail : dacolrui@dpi.upv.es
URL : www.idea.dpi.upv.es