

# Submitting a proposal and coordinating collaborative EU-funded projects in the life sciences

Results of a survey by the German National Contact Point Life Sciences and corresponding tips for applicants

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# Introduction

In March 2020 the German National Contact Point Life Sciences (*Nationale Kontaktstelle Lebenswissenschaften*), a collaboration between the National Contact Point Health (*Nationale Kontaktstelle Gesundheit*) and the National Contact Point Bioeconomy (*Nationale Kontaktstelle Bioökonomie*), surveyed coordinators of collaborative research projects in receipt of funding under Horizon 2020.

The aim of the survey was to identify the main factors contributing to a successful application for funding and to derive tips for future applicants for EU funding in the life sciences.

The survey comprised 19 questions, nine in relation to proposal preparation and ten concerning project implementation. The participants were asked to provide insights in relation to, for example, their prior experience of EU projects, preparation time and the search for partners, but also regarding project management, budget calculation and any difficulties experienced during project implementation.

In this short report, an overview of the main results of the survey is presented along with corresponding tips and recommendations for those considering submitting a proposal for EU research funding.

# The survey at a glance

99

... coordinators were invited to participate

The coordinators invited to participate in the survey were all based in Germany. They represented all of the coordinators to successfully apply for funding in the years 2014 to 2018 under the following parts of Horizon 2020: 'Health, Demographic Change and Wellbeing' (SC1), 'Food Security, Sustainable Agriculture and Forestry, Marine, Maritime and Inland Water Research and the Bioeconomy' (SC2), 'Leadership in Enabling and Industrial Technologies: Biotechnology' (LEIT-BIOTEC) and the 'Bio-Based Industries Joint Undertaking' (BBI JU).

46

... coordinators responded to the survey, of whom

22

... coordinated a project funded under the programme part 'Health, Demographic Change and Wellbeing' (SC1)

12

... coordinated a project funded under the programme part 'Food Security, Sustainable Agriculture and Forestry, Marine, Maritime and Inland Water Research and the Bioeconomy' (SC2)

4

... coordinated a project funded under the programme part 'Leadership in Enabling and Industrial Technologies: Biotechnology' (LEIT-BIOTEC)

5

... coordinated a project funded under the 'Bio-Based Industries Joint Undertaking' (BBI JU)

... 3 coordinators didn't specify the funding source

## Types of action coordinated

31  
RIA

4  
IA

10  
CSA

... 1 coordinator didn't specify the type of action

# Tips for proposal preparation

# A good proposal needs time

**6  
months**

... before the submission deadline was when the coordinators began, on average, to prepare their short, first-stage proposal in the two-stage process. The preparation times cited by the respondents ranged from three to 18 months.

**8  
months**

... before the submission deadline was when coordinators began, on average, to prepare full proposals in the one-stage process. The preparation times cited by the respondents ranged from one to 24 months.

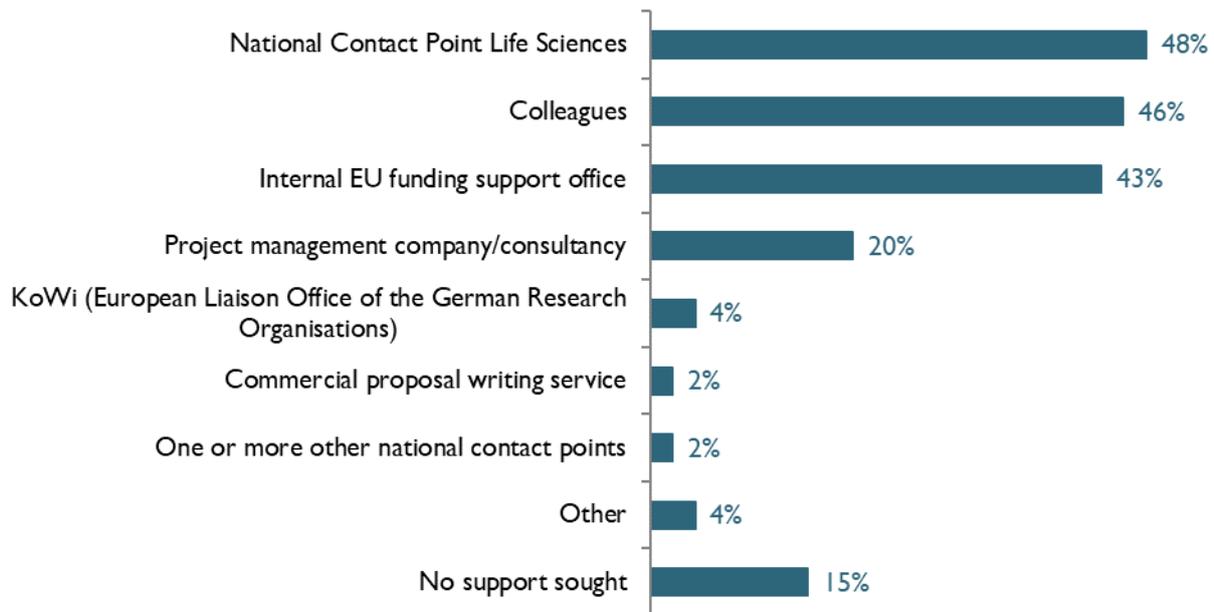
Should you decide to apply for funding for collaborative research, be sure to calculate enough time for the preparation of your proposal. Many underestimate the time needed to prepare a good proposal (e.g., finding potential partners and developing a draft concept). Preparation of the proposal should begin as early as possible.

But don't be discouraged if you are late to discover the existence of a suitable topic. If you already have an established network of potential partners, it can still be worthwhile submitting a proposal at short notice. Our survey showed that even proposals submitted with little preparation time can, on occasion, be successful.

**Tip:** The national contact points (NCPs) in Germany, and elsewhere, will gladly provide you with information on open calls, events and developments in relation to EU funding for research and innovation. Be sure to register for the newsletter prepared by the thematic NCP that most closely corresponds to your area of research to keep abreast of all the latest news. The national contact points will also help you find suitable calls and support you during proposal preparation and beyond.

# Seek advice and support

## Who do coordinators turn to for support?



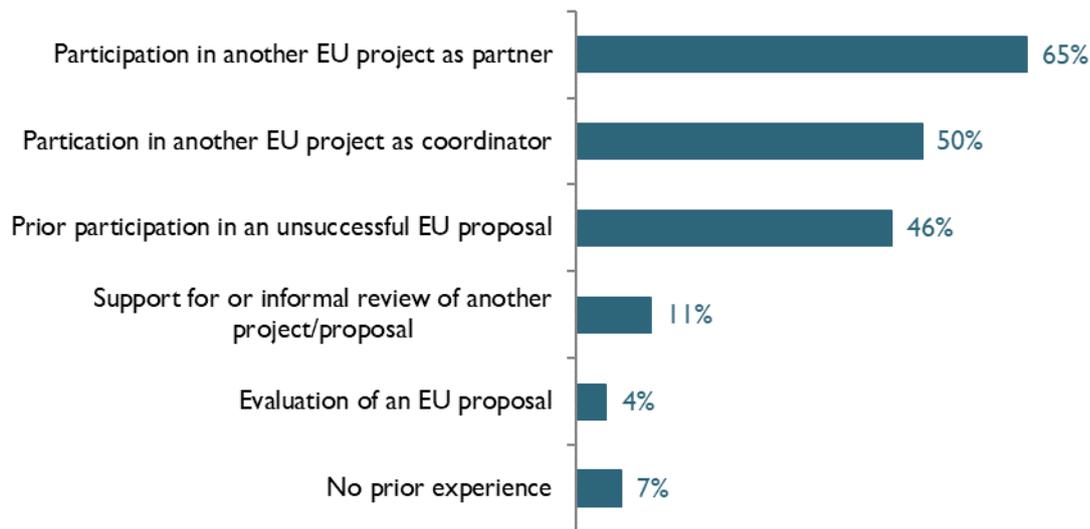
Multiple answers were possible

Almost half of the coordinators who replied to the survey sought advice from the National Contact Point Life Sciences on at least one occasion. The coordinators also tapped a number of other sources of advice and support, however. Altogether 85 % of the successful coordinators indicated that they received support from at least one source. The major sources of advice and support were the National Contact Point Life Sciences, colleagues and the EU funding support office within the coordinators' own institutions. Approximately 52 % of the coordinators sought advice from more than one source. It can prove very beneficial to get opinions from two or more perspectives – for example, from an external, professional advisory service such as a national contact point and also from others within one's own institution with experience of participation in EU-funded research.

According to the survey, only 15 % of respondents sought no support. All of these respondents indicated, however, that they had prior experience of EU projects and, in most cases, they had even coordinated projects in the past (71 %).

# Gather experience

## Relevant prior experience gleaned by coordinators



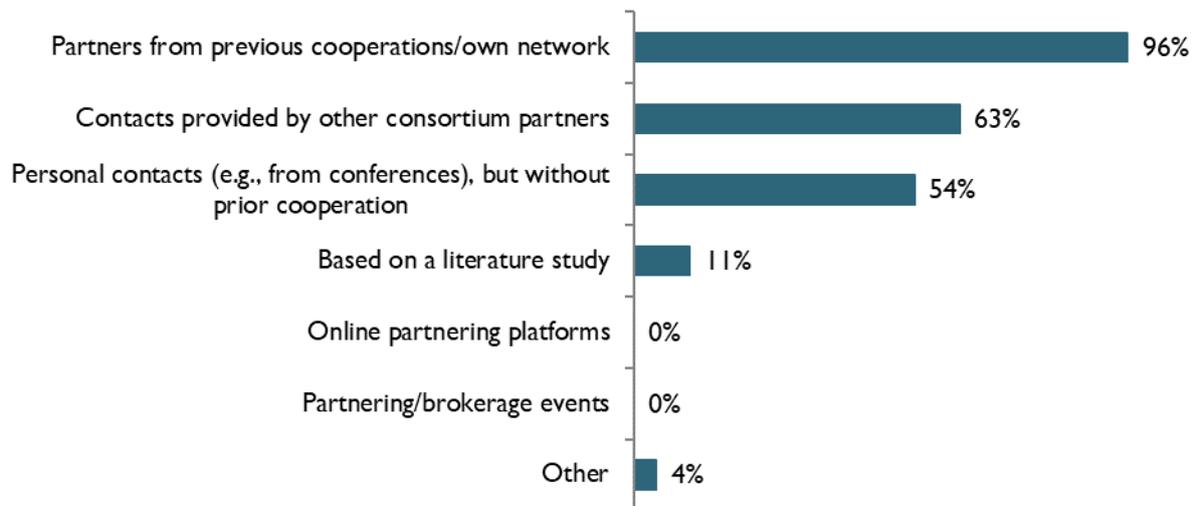
Multiple answers were possible

A total of 65 % of the respondents indicated that they had previous experience of participation in a collaborative EU research project as a partner. Half of the respondents had even coordinated a project of this kind before. This suggests that the majority of the respondents deemed participation in an EU research project to be advantageous and worth repeating. This assumption is supported by the fact that 91 % of the responding coordinators stated that they would be willing to coordinate again in future.

At the same, 22 % of the respondents indicated that their *only* prior experience of EU research was as a coordinator. In general, it can be beneficial to gain experience as a partner in a project before attempting coordination. The results reveal, however, that even newcomers to EU funding can be successful as coordinators. In this case it helps, though, if others within your institution have coordinated projects in the past so that there is a pool of experience of EU funding amongst the research and administrative staff within the organisation. Above all the results show that you should trust in yourself and glean your own experiences of participation in EU-funded collaborative research projects!

# Choose the partners in your consortium carefully

## Where do coordinators find their project partners?



Multiple answers were possible

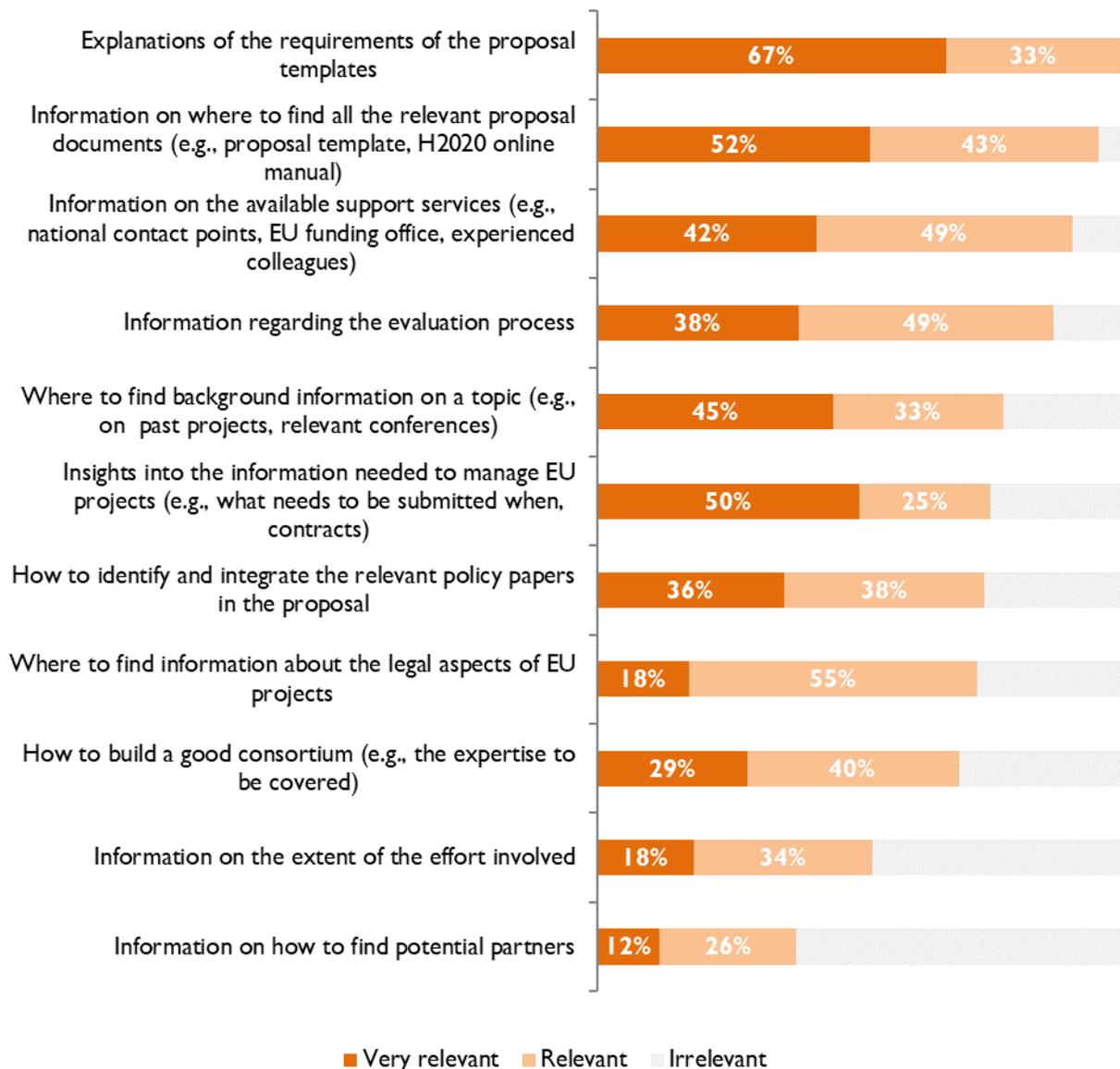
The most important factor contributing to the success of a project is the selection of the right project partners. Almost all of the respondents indicated that they obtained their partners from established networks or through personal contacts. A well-developed network, therefore, is a good basis for the establishment of a project consortium.

The coordinator does not have to have sole responsibility for finding all of the partners in a consortium, however. Up to 63 % of the respondents indicated that they tapped into the networks of their partners to complete their consortia.

**Tip:** Although there are clear advantages to working with partners you already know, any cooperation must fulfil the needs of the project. Cooperation with previously unknown partners can also be beneficial as they bring new expertise to the table and can open up entirely new perspectives. It can, therefore, be worthwhile participating in partnering events, using online partnering platforms and searching the web to find new collaborators. The European Commission's [Funding and Tenders Portal](#), for example, includes a partner profile field (directly below the relevant topic) and allows you to actively search for [partners for EU projects](#). The Commission's [Horizon Dashboard](#) is another means to identify potential partners.

# Collect information in advance

Which of the following information was or would have been relevant for you during proposal preparation?



Multiple answers were possible

It is vital that you collate all of the necessary information before beginning work on your proposal. The results depicted in the figure above show just how important it is to obtain information about

the various requirements involved in applying for funding and which aspects are worthy of particular consideration. The fact that all of the coordinators identified information relating to the proposal template as being either relevant or very relevant underlines the importance of obtaining the necessary information before you start writing your proposal. Irrespective of how well-structured and detailed the proposal template may be, the requirements are not always easy to comprehend. What's more, certain terms used in the template are not necessarily self-explanatory and there is always the danger that one's own interpretation does not correspond to the requirements of the European Commission.

**Tip:** Use the information materials prepared by numerous national contact points. Many national contact points provide a range of resources for applicants on their websites, such as infosheets and annotated proposal templates. The national contact points can help you find the answers to all of the issues highlighted in the figure above.

# Tips on project implementation

# Managing your project

48%

... of the coordinators divide project management activities up internally within their organisation

22%

... of the coordinators have engaged a project management company

13%

... of the coordinators undertake all project management activities themselves

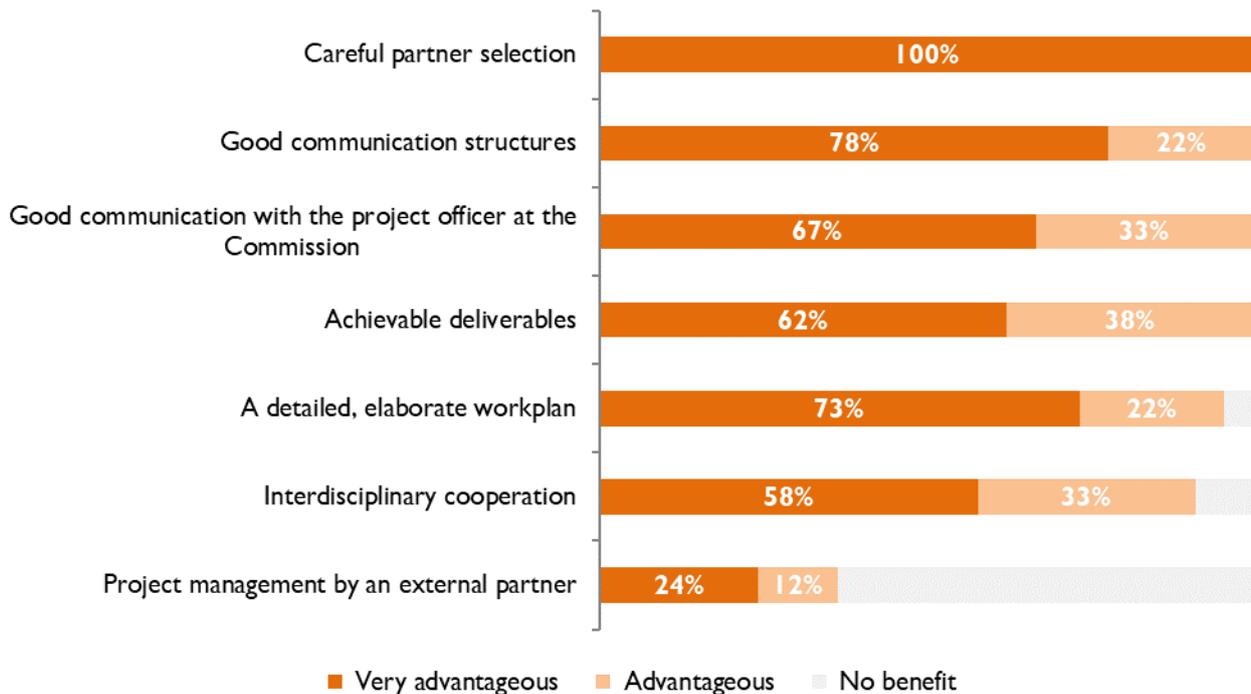
A coordinator is not required to undertake all of the activities necessary for the management and the implementation of a project alone. Establish a management team within your project to support you in the running of the project. In many cases it is advantageous to differentiate between the **scientific/technical management** of the project and the **administration** of the project.

Don't skimp on your project management budget. The coordination of an international, collaborative research project is expensive and, above all, time-consuming. The plans for the management of the project must be realistic, if you are to fulfil your role as coordinator well, and lead your project to a successful conclusion.

The vast majority of organisations have internal structures that can support you in the management of your project. There are also numerous project management agencies on the market that are specialised in the European framework programmes for research and innovation. Whether one of these agencies is right for your project or not depends on a number of issues, including the resources available internally, and is an individual decision.

# What benefits a consortium?

## What aspects of your project are especially important to ensuring its success?



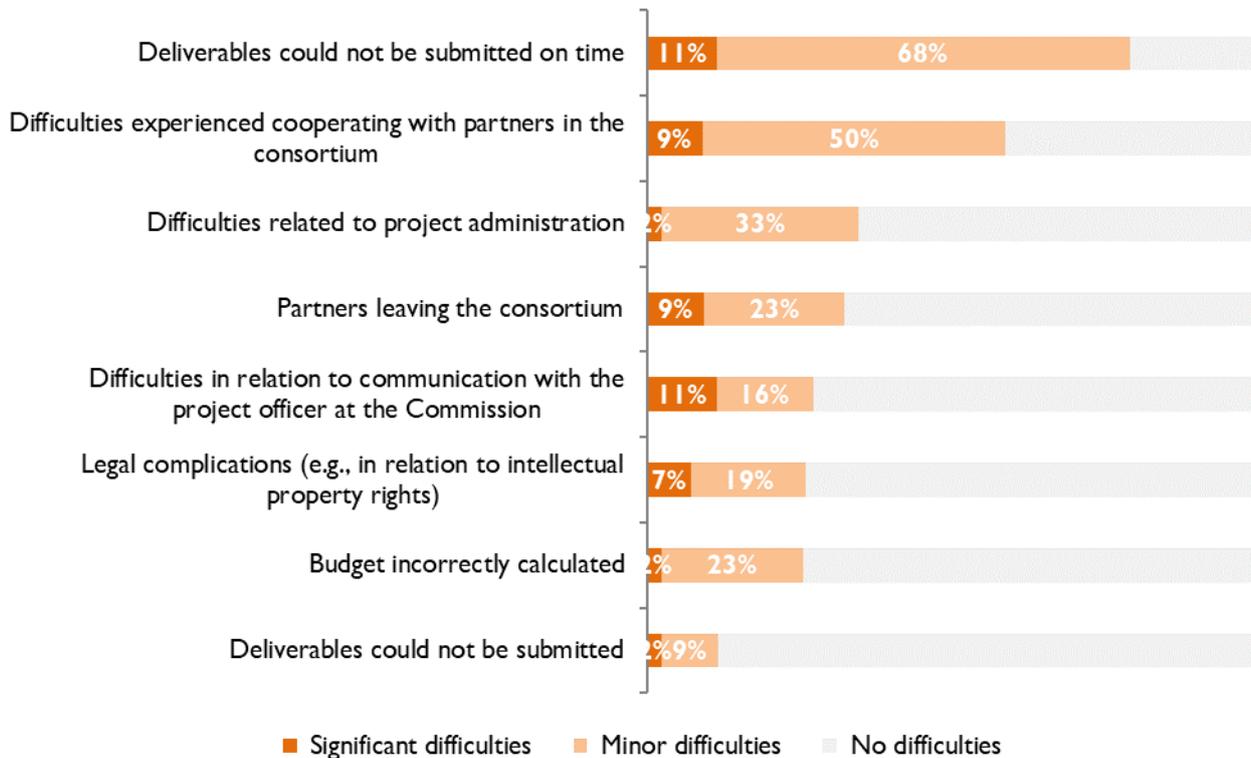
Multiple answers were possible

All of the coordinators ranked the careful selection of project partners as being especially important to the success of their project. Good internal structures and processes for communication were also deemed important. Both of these aspects should be taken into consideration during the preparation of the proposal. Choose partners that are a good fit for your project and who contribute the expertise you require. If during proposal preparation you are already experiencing difficulties communicating with a particular partner, or if they are failing to meet deadlines or make a meaningful contribution to the proposal, you should consider carefully whether a prolonged collaboration with the partner in question is really worth pursuing.

The coordinators also stressed the importance of planning achievable deliverables. The deliverables that you identify in the proposal will accompany you until the end of the project. Therefore, the individual deliverables should be clearly described in the proposal and the number of deliverables adopted should also be appropriate.

# What hinders a consortium?

## Which aspects of the project posed difficulties?



Multiple answers were possible

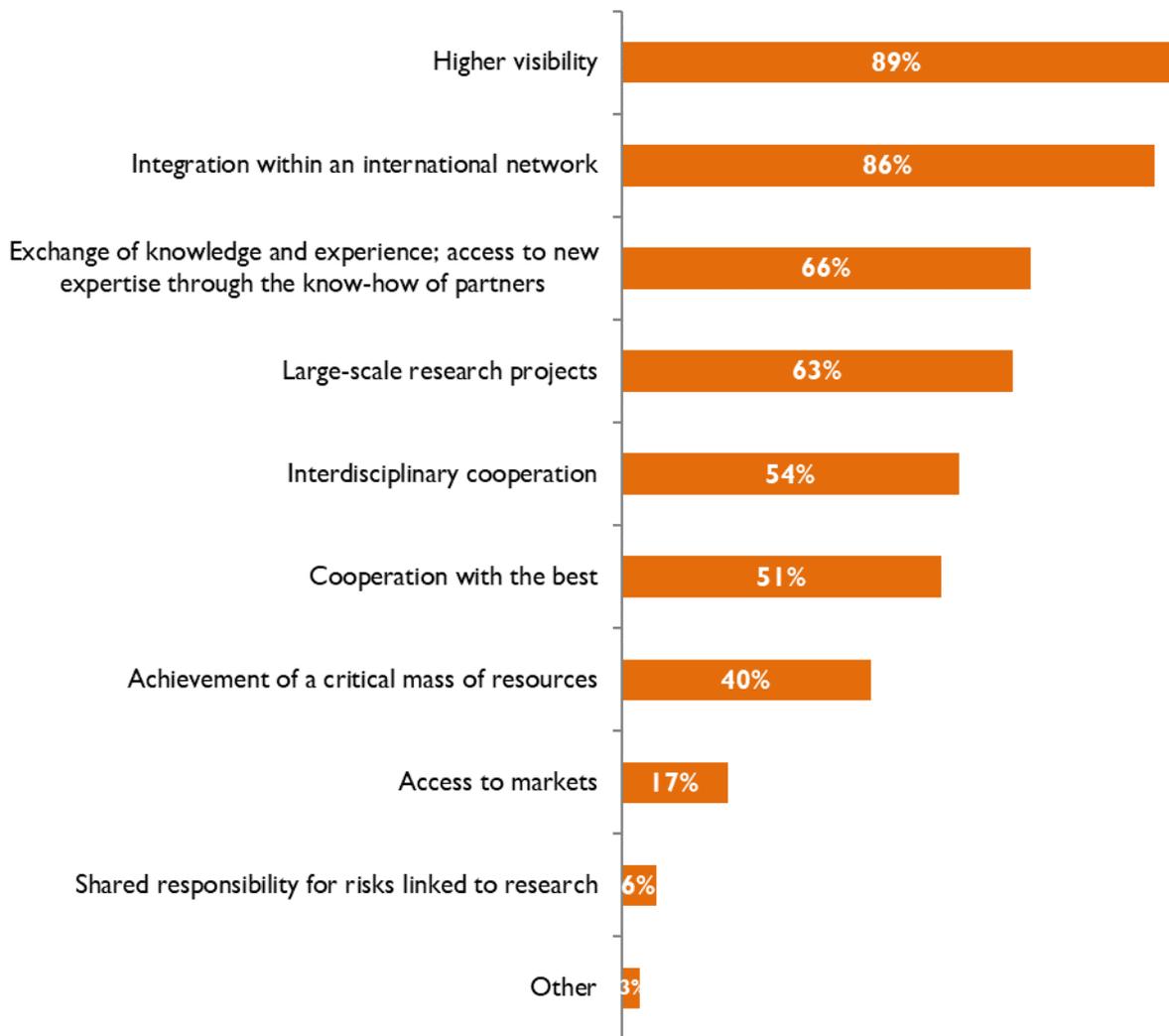
Difficulties may arise even in the best of consortia. In the majority of cases, however, the coordinators responding to our survey indicated only relatively minor issues. These related in particular to the punctual submission of deliverables, cooperation with project partners and in the administration of the project.

Only 25 % of the respondents cited difficulties in relation to the budget calculations. In most cases these problems were deemed to be minor and related to an unrealistic calculation of the person months and insufficient budget allocated to project management.

Contrary to the fears of many potential applicants, the difficulties of coordination appear manageable – certainly when you have chosen the right partners and been realistic in your planning.

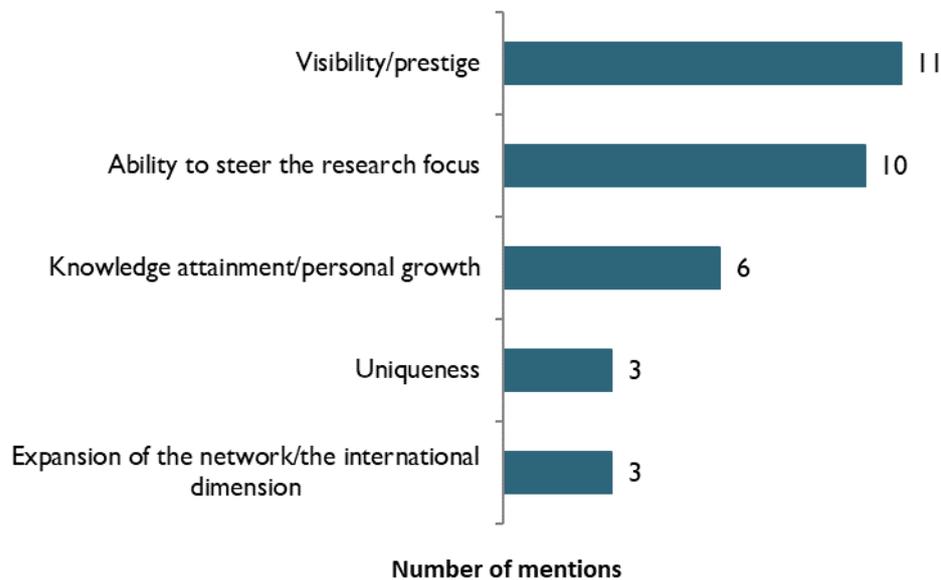
# Why coordinate a collaborative EU research project?

What are the benefits of collaborative EU-funded projects relative to other (e.g., national) projects?



Multiple answers were possible

## What are the added benefits of coordination?



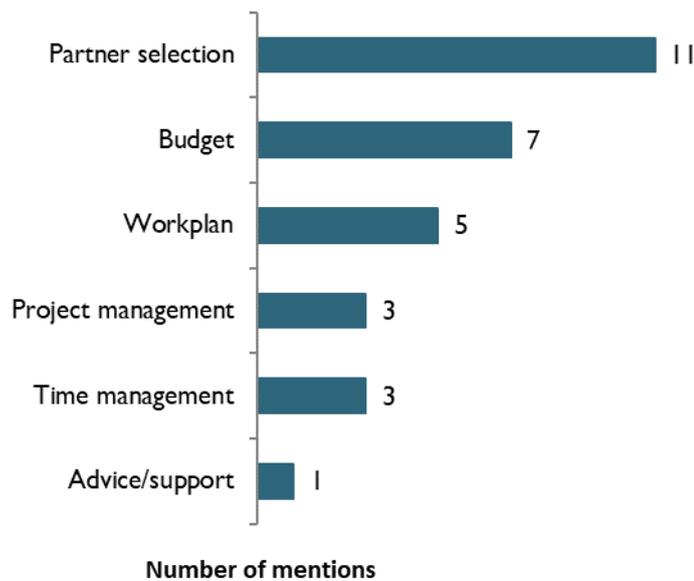
Open question with no pre-defined answers

There are certainly very many reasons to submit a funding proposal under the EU framework programmes for research and innovation as the coordinating partner. One of the most prominent reasons revealed by the results of our survey is the high visibility that comes with being the coordinator of an international research consortium. Your visibility is increased both within your organisation and externally; among colleagues, the European Commission, international committees, associations and also amongst potential future contracting entities in industry. The coordination of a European research project vastly increases your international network, often extending well beyond your own particular discipline.

As a coordinator you also enjoy the greatest freedom to steer and design the work you do within your project and so have the opportunity to place a particular emphasis within the project on your research interests. In summary then: Coordination is worthwhile!

# The things that matter most

## The benefit of experience: What aspects are especially important?



Open question with no pre-defined answers

In summing up their experiences of coordination, the respondents to our survey revealed the things that they felt matter most for the successful implementation of an EU-funded research project. The majority of the respondents indicated that the single most important aspect is the choice of partners, followed by a realistic calculation of the budget and a good workplan. These are all issues that, provided they are addressed will, will contribute to the success of your project, and to the contentment of all of the partners within the consortium. The fact that the many German coordinators who responded to our survey were happy in their role was underlined by the fact that 91 % of them revealed that they would be willing to assume the task of coordinator again.

# Getting in touch with the German National Contact Point Life Sciences

The German National Contact Point Life Sciences (*Nationale Kontaktstelle Lebenswissenschaften, NKS-L*) combines the National Contact Point Health (*NKS Gesundheit*), hosted by DLR Projektträger (DLR-PT), and the National Contact Point Bioeconomy (*NKS Bioökonomie*), hosted by Projektträger Jülich (Ptj). We are available to offer you support on a range of issues related to the relevant thematic areas of the European Framework Programme for Research and Innovation Horizon 2020 (2014–2020).

More information can be found on the [website of the National Contact Point Life Sciences](#) and per email: [nks-lebenswissenschaften@dlr.de](mailto:nks-lebenswissenschaften@dlr.de).

There will be national contact points for the respective thematic areas under the coming **European Framework Programme for Research and Innovation Horizon Europe (2021–2027)**. Please note that over the course of the transition from Horizon 2020 to Horizon Europe there will be some changes to our contact details but, rest assured, we will continue to be available to you to offer guidance and support.

# Corporate information

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