

IT STAR in Central and Eastern Europe – A Synergy of a Goodwill

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“...within IFIP a new kind of integration has emerged that deserves attention and is worthy of being copied. The initiative was born in Middle Europe, which throughout history has been characterized by a vast diversity of all kinds, but also by an intense common communication. In this region there were always connections that have overcome whatever partitions were current to the times.”

Abstract: The contribution describes a new regional initiative born in collaboration between certain national computer societies and the International Federation for Information Processing. A new, rather informal, regional body has been set up – the Information Technology Standing Regional Committee for Regional Collaboration. Its purpose is to facilitate the cooperative interaction of IT professionals regardless of their momentary employment or any other kind of affiliation. The prerequisites are a professional capacity and a wish to take part in certain kinds of projects. This initiative has attracted rather wide attention and, hopefully, may also be adopted as a paradigm to be used elsewhere wherever such regional collaboration is appreciated.

Key words: Regional cooperation, IT STAR, IFIP, paradigm

THE HISTORY

IT STAR (Information Technology STANDING Regional) Committee has grown from an initiative that was “engineered” by the president of the Slovenian computer society, Niko Schlamberger, and IFIP executive

director Plamen Nedkov. They also came up with the much appreciated name of the committee. It all started some thirty years ago at a Slovenian annual computer conference that has been organized by various entities in collaboration, but, since 1993, is organized by the Slovenian Society INFORMATIKA (SSI), as it is officially called. The conference has seen its revival under the name “Days of Slovenian Informatics” as a national meeting of computer professionals and users from business, universities and administration. Since one ambition was to compare domestic achievements internationally, notable professionals from abroad were invited as guest speakers. In 1998, after SSI became a member of CEPIS and IFIP, the conference was seen as a possible platform for the launching of a more systematic international collaboration. The fact that Slovenia was at the time one of the countries hoping soon to become a European Union member state, where regional cooperation is appreciated, provided an additional stimulus to the idea. Beyond any doubt, the merit for the success of the initiative goes also to former IFIP president Peter Bollerslev who has understood its potential and has taken an active part in preparation for the first meeting.

The official constitutive meeting of the IT STAR took place in Portoroz, Slovenia, in April 2001, as one of accompanying events of the conference. Next to SSI and IFIP representatives who were the initiators, representatives of national computer societies from Austria, Italy, and Hungary were also present at this first meeting. The event was rather appreciated nationally, as the presence of Slovenian Deputy Minister of Information Society Dr. József Györkös bears witness. During the meeting the participants adopted a statement, which was later published and distributed (Fig. 1: Copy from the IFIP web site).

The Regional meeting, jointly chaired by the IFIP Executive Director and the President of the Slovenian Society "Informatika", adopted the following Statement:

MEETING OF REPRESENTATIVES OF THE COMPUTER SOCIETIES OF AUSTRIA, HUNGARY, ITALY AND SLOVENIA

Portoroz, 18 April 2001 - The Computer Societies of Austria, Hungary, Italy and Slovenia met today in Portoroz, Slovenia to inform each other of their national IT priorities, activities and initiatives and to explore areas of common interest for future regional and international cooperation.

The participating societies recognize IFIP's authority and potential to initiate important international activities and are grateful to IFIP for providing its auspices to the meeting and for its willingness to continue supporting the efforts of its members in establishing closer regional links.

The meeting agreed to establish an IT STANDING Regional (IT STAR) Committee for cooperation of the participating societies. Its function would be to assess the current contacts and to assist and monitor the development of bilateral and regional programs for scientific and technical cooperation. IT STAR membership shall consist of one representative of each participating society and IFIP. It will remain open for other societies from the region.

Signed:

For OCG-Austria by V. Risak, Past President

For NJSZT-Hungary by B. Domolki, Honorary President

For AICA-Italy by G. Occhini, Board Member

For SSI-Slovenia by N. Schlamberger, President

Figure 1: IT STAR comes into life

The next meeting, at which the Slovak and Czech national computer societies joined IT STAR, was held in September 2001 in Como, Italy, under the auspices of the Italian computer society AICA. During the Como meeting, the participants further elaborated the outline and organization of collaboration, including a joint information and communication platform, publication of a newsletter, regional workshops during annual conferences, contributions to national journals, and other matters of common interest. After that, meetings were held in November 2001 in Bratislava, Slovakia, and again in Portoro, Slovenia, in April 2002, to which the Croatian computer society was admitted. A further meeting took place in June 2003 in Opatija, Croatia, which was hosted by the Croatian computer society. By then the IT STAR initiative had become popular, and those national societies that had previously expressed an interest were invited to join, with a special mention for the Lithuanian computer society, which filed a formal request to be adopted. In Opatija the Greek, Rumanian, Bulgarian, Yugoslavian, Macedonian, and Lithuanian national computer societies were invited as new members of IT STAR, and Yugoslavian, Macedonian, and Lithuanian national computer societies were admitted.

The key issue of the Bratislava meeting was a proposal for an IT STAR Professional Pool of Experts (IT PP) with the objective of developing a regional database of information technology experts. The idea was to set up a data base containing those experts who are qualified and willing to take part in national or international projects for non profit-making entities such as governments, societies, universities, international organizations, such as the United Nations and its affiliated bodies, the European Union and such-like.

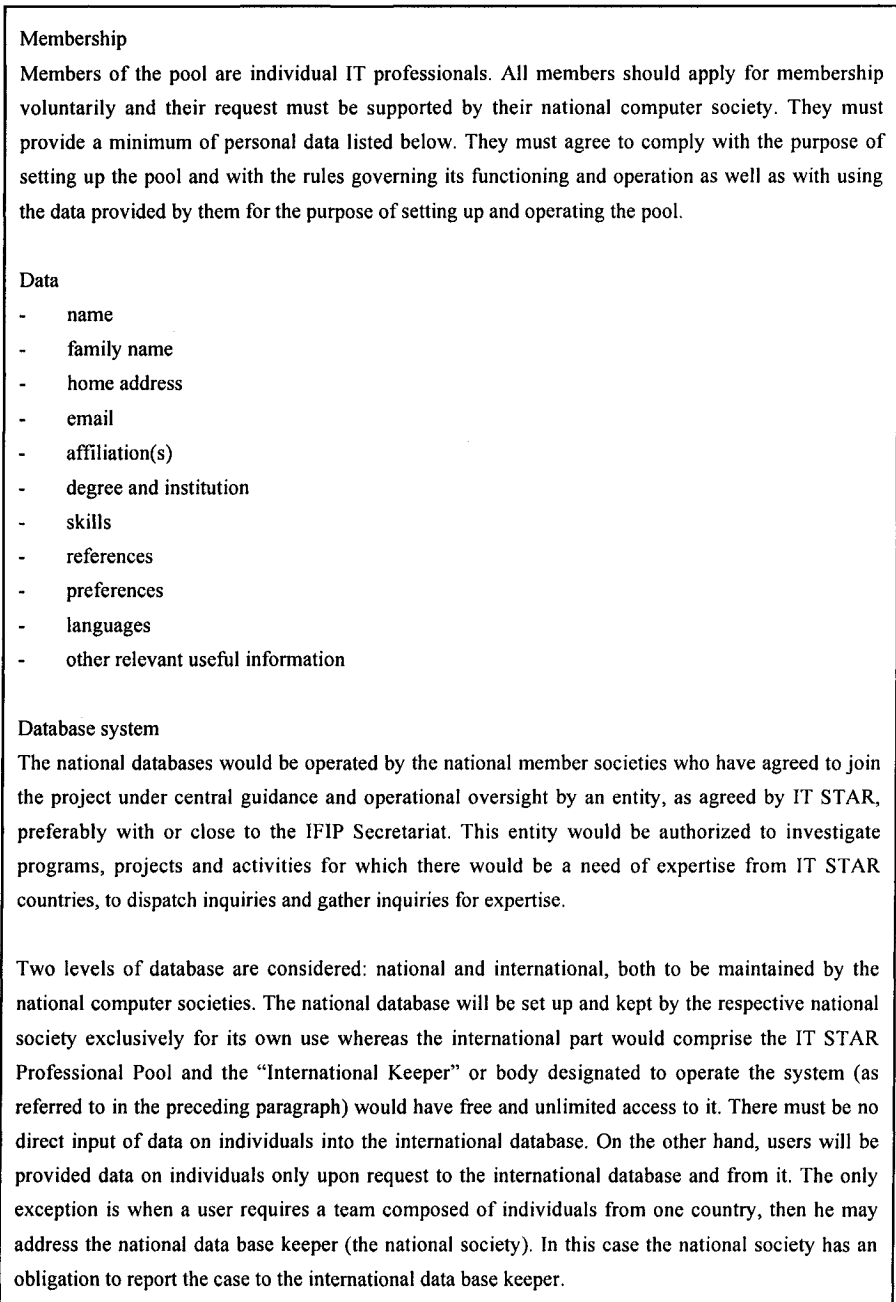


Figure 2: IT Professional Pool setting

It still remains to establish the criteria and requirements regarding who qualifies, and what certification is acceptable to be included in a system

which is intended to facilitate the establishment of expert and professional teams. Such teams would be available to execute international and national projects and other short to medium term activities. The following has been agreed upon regarding the content, keeping, and operation of the data base (A copy of a part of a material prepared for the Bratislava meeting)

There are still some open issues about the privacy of personal data and the distribution thereof, but considering that entering into the data base is only voluntary and that the data base keeper may not use the data for purposes other than those declared and collected for, there is no real underlying legal problem. A practical matter of more concern is currently the role of IFIP in the future, since it has been involved all along and has also agreed to serve as a focal point in the process of collecting requests and relating data. It is to be hoped that the present uncertainties will be resolved before long.

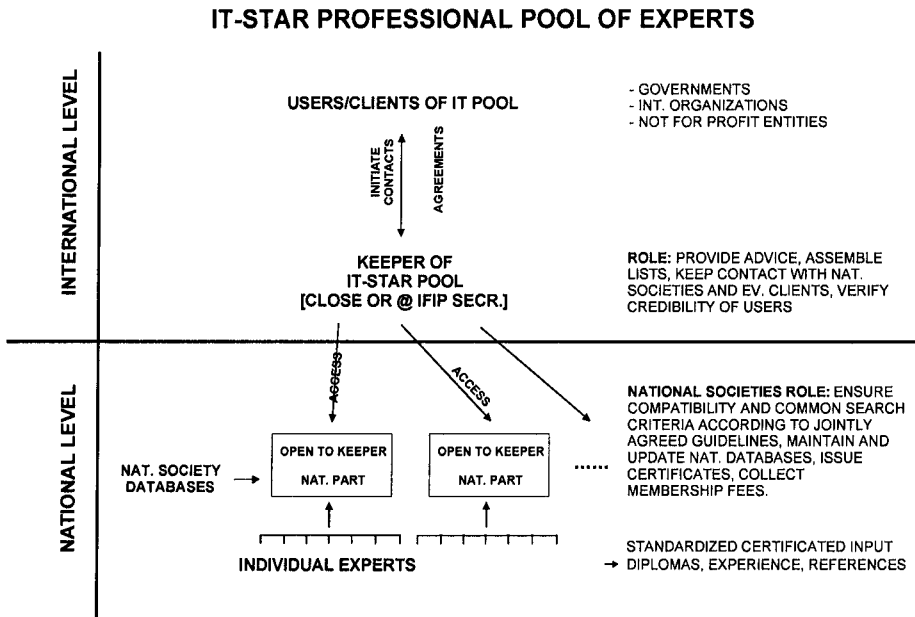


Figure 3: Operation of IT Professional Pool

It was agreed in the beginning that just the goodwill to collaborate should be considered enough, so there is no membership fee, no affiliation of any kind required, no presidency and governing bodies nor any other type of formal organization, except that the computer society of the host country has the responsibility to prepare everything needed for the meeting. It is also true that all the IT STAR member societies are IFIP members as well. For

the goodwill to last, and for the interest in collaboration to persist, there must be more than just a meeting. As desired and feasible products, a newsletter, a web page, and a project were envisaged. The IT STAR newsletter can be reached via the IT STAR web page at the address <http://www.ifip.org/>. The project that has been proposed and accepted is a database on IT professionals qualified and certified to take part in national and international IT projects for non profit-making organizations such as: societies, governments, universities, foundations and the like. Interest in joining IT STAR has been expressed by several national computer societies from the region, but also from those not quite a part of the region. Hopefully, no one will be turned down, as the idea is also to extend the paradigm of cooperation.

THE WIDER PERSPECTIVE

It is rather obvious that within IFIP a new kind of integration has emerged that deserves attention and is worthy of being copied. The initiative was born in Middle Europe, which throughout history has been characterized by a vast diversity of all kinds (cultural, ethnic, economic, political, linguistic, geographical), but also by an intense common communication. In this region there were always connections that have overcome whatever partitions were current to the times. A recent example is the Alps-Adria Common Venture.

While we are inclined to combine information and communication technologies (ICT) with globalisation, it is also true that they open new prospects of regional integration. It would be strange if the peoples between the Alps and the Adriatic Sea - the Middle Europeans – did not take advantage of this new communication potential. There are many general reasons for connecting within the domain of information:

- the region is a historical junction of south-to-north and west-to-east directions and is actually one large node in the international traffic network;
- the peoples in this area have a considerable history in common about which they may have a lot to say to each other and which also speaks for itself with a common, private language;
- the region is a meeting point of many different cultures that are of interest to one another and benefit from one another;
- there are many excellent scientific and research centres that generate new knowledge which is of importance for the whole world.

Information science and practice has a great responsibility to provide for the efficient exchange of electronic information promptly and at a high level

of quality. In Middle Europe this is a very demanding mission, as until recently the area was governed by diverse kinds of governance, and even some that were opposed to each other. This legacy is reflected in a lack of standardization which is of utmost importance for successful deployment of ICT. The countries are trying hard to make up for lagging behind in computerization, which is in part also due to a negative attitude of the former regimes towards information technology. It is important that Middle European countries assist each other in specifying visions for their development and in providing prerequisites for their information society.

Successful growth and sound maintenance of information systems may in many cases depend on the logic of the economies of scale. If global monopolies in the field of information are to be avoided, cooperation beyond country borders is of the utmost importance. Professional associations of computer specialists can prepare the ground by improving personal contacts and bringing people together. This has been the mission of IT STAR from the outset and we have strong reasons to believe that we are bound to succeed. The intention is to exchange information, experience, and documents regarding all elements of transition into an information society. This will provide the grounds for assessing the best practices as well as the convergence of particular systems, such as education and the training of computer professionals, public information services, broadband lines, the role of information technologies in making politics more democratic and more.

In history there were intrepid pioneers who made the shape of Middle Europe, construction workers, followed by printers, glassmakers, railway men... Tomorrow the place of these former-driving occupations may well be taken by information professionals. It is important to understand that none of these changes happened by themselves. Rather, an actual historical challenge was the impulse that provoked a particular reaction. Middle Europe has the potential to be on the leading edge of ICT developments, provided that it makes wise moves in good time by establishing links in the area. On the other hand it may become a white patch on the map of Europe and lag behind if it renounces the potential of synergy. The IT STAR initiative will help to formulate awareness about the importance of ICT for the development of the region, it will offer grounds and suggestions for political and business decisions and – lastly, but most important – it will mercilessly criticize anyone responsible for the missed opportunities.

CONCLUSIONS

Advantages of Scandinavian countries in implementing ICT have undoubtedly risen from cooperation of informatics professionals in the region. It is very likely that such examples are to be found elsewhere and the underlying common feature of success is a tradition of common projects. A possible success of IT STAR would demonstrate that informatics professionals are able to create a development synergy even in less favourable environments and that we are not offering just a new technique, but a new understanding of a development paradigm. Following such a course would provide a rather novel additional model for the organizing and functioning of IFIP that would be applicable in many parts of the world.

An important issue in practically any collaboration is that meetings are not enough. The same issue has been raised at the first IT STAR meeting where it was agreed that the body should meet to discuss matters of common interest, that a kind of an information bulletin and a web site should be set up to demonstrate to the world that there is a life in IT STAR, and, very important, that a product should be devised of interest to most if not all members, as only this is a guarantee of a lasting interest for our common endeavour. The latter was found to be the IT PP.

As a conclusion let us add that the above described initiative is very open. It requires no substantial funding beyond the regular cost of operation of national computer societies, although it is also clear that additional funding would help. It requires no extra resources to collaborate in common projects, beyond those already at the disposal of those societies. It requires no extra administration, neither for the body, i.e. IT STAR, nor for the projects, as their administration is part of the project itself. Projects should be of a specific kind so that they can be of real use, as well as suitable for non profit-making entities such as information societies. While it seems that projects like that are not easy to find, it is an actuality that there are suitable enterprises to be found if we only look around and observe what is needed. As an example, let us point at the domain of culture, the variety of which is a European asset that is just presently coming into focus through the enlargement of the European Union. But surely there are more. The ambition of the IT STAR initiative is therefore to enhance regional collaboration, to offer a model to IFIP, and to provide a paradigm to the rest of the world that may need it and want to use it.

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