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II. THE CITIZEN AND THE PROVISION OF PUBLIC SERVICES

**« ACTION RESEARCH & ACTION LEARNING AS
MEANS TO IMPROVE SERVICE DELIVERY IN THE
PUBLIC SECTOR: CASE EXAMPLES FROM A
CAPACITY BUILDING PROJECT IN SLOVENIA »**

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ACTION RESEARCH & ACTION LEARNING
AS MEANS TO IMPROVE SERVICE DELIVERY IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR:
CASE EXAMPLES FROM A CAPACITY BUILDING PROJECT IN SLOVENIA

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to

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Abstract

Action Research (AR) and Action Learning (AL) are effective and efficient methods for implementing reform processes in public administrations. Developed first for private sector change processes, they have since been applied in the public sector with great benefits. This paper describes examples of AR and AL as they have been successfully applied during an institution development and capacity building in Slovenia under the auspices of a technical co-operation project involving Swiss and Slovene partner institutions.

Background

Since gaining independence in 1991, the Slovene Government has embarked on a vigorous effort to reform its economy and public administration¹. A project titled Managing Administrative System through Training, Education and Research (M.A.S.T.E.R.²) was carried out in 1994 and completed in December 1996 with the aim of developing the Government of Slovenia's internal capability in reform and modernisation of its public administration. Concretely, One of the objectives of this M.A.S.T.E.R. project was to train 40 Slovene civil servants and to equip them with knowledge and skills to act as catalysts and facilitators of reform and modernisation in Slovenia.

A two track strategy was adopted. On the one hand an *action learning* approach was applied to the process of individual learning and development; on the other *action research* approach was applied to the process of organisational reform. Both approaches entail an “learning by doing” component so that civil servants participating in the M.A.S.T.E.R. project would acquire first hand experience in applying theories and methods of modern management to the Slovene context and also to gain insights as to the actual process of reform within a limited context by actually undertaking reform projects.

¹ For detailed overview of Slovenia's needs for public administrative reforms see Saner & Yiu, 1996

² M.A.S.T.E.R. is a trademark registered at WIPO in Geneva by the Centre for Socio-Eco-Nomic Development (CSEND) of Geneva.

The M.A.S.T.E.R. programme consisted of a series of two-week training workshops consisting of programmed instruction on topics of particular relevance. In conjunction with these workshops, participants of the project were asked to apply their prior and new knowledge to a real project that was supported by organisational sponsors within the Slovene public sector and that had potential value, not only to the participants but also to the organisational unit to which the project was attached. Throughout the programme, participants worked in teams on different group projects with assistance from other teams as well as from qualified advisors and experts who helped them make sense in light of relevant theory and change strategies.

Action research, a methodology spearheaded by Kurt Lewin (1946, 1951) and further developed by Ravens (1971, 1980, 1982), represents a 7-step organisation development (OD) strategy. The key feature of action research is the involvement of the client organisation in defining problems, analysing the problem, giving feedback and generating solutions. This paper will report on different projects which participants of the M.A.S.T.E.R. programme undertook during April-July 1996. Through the illustration of these case examples, this paper aims to shed light as to how to design a management development and training process which couples the reform of public services with action research and action learning methods³.

Organisation of Action Learning Projects

The M.A.S.T.E.R. Project trainees were divided into different project teams with a designated team leader to act as the focal point for project coordination. These project teams met weekly with both the Slovene and Swiss academic advisers to review the issues of their project work.

Individual team meetings were also held on a weekly basis with the Swiss advisers to resolve issues of team work and of technical nature.

Results of these Action Learning projects were reported to the National Project Council for approval and dissemination. The total organisation of the M.A.S.T.E.R. Project is presented in Figure 1.

³ For detailed information on the MASTER project see Saner & Yiu (1997, 1998) and Toš (1996)

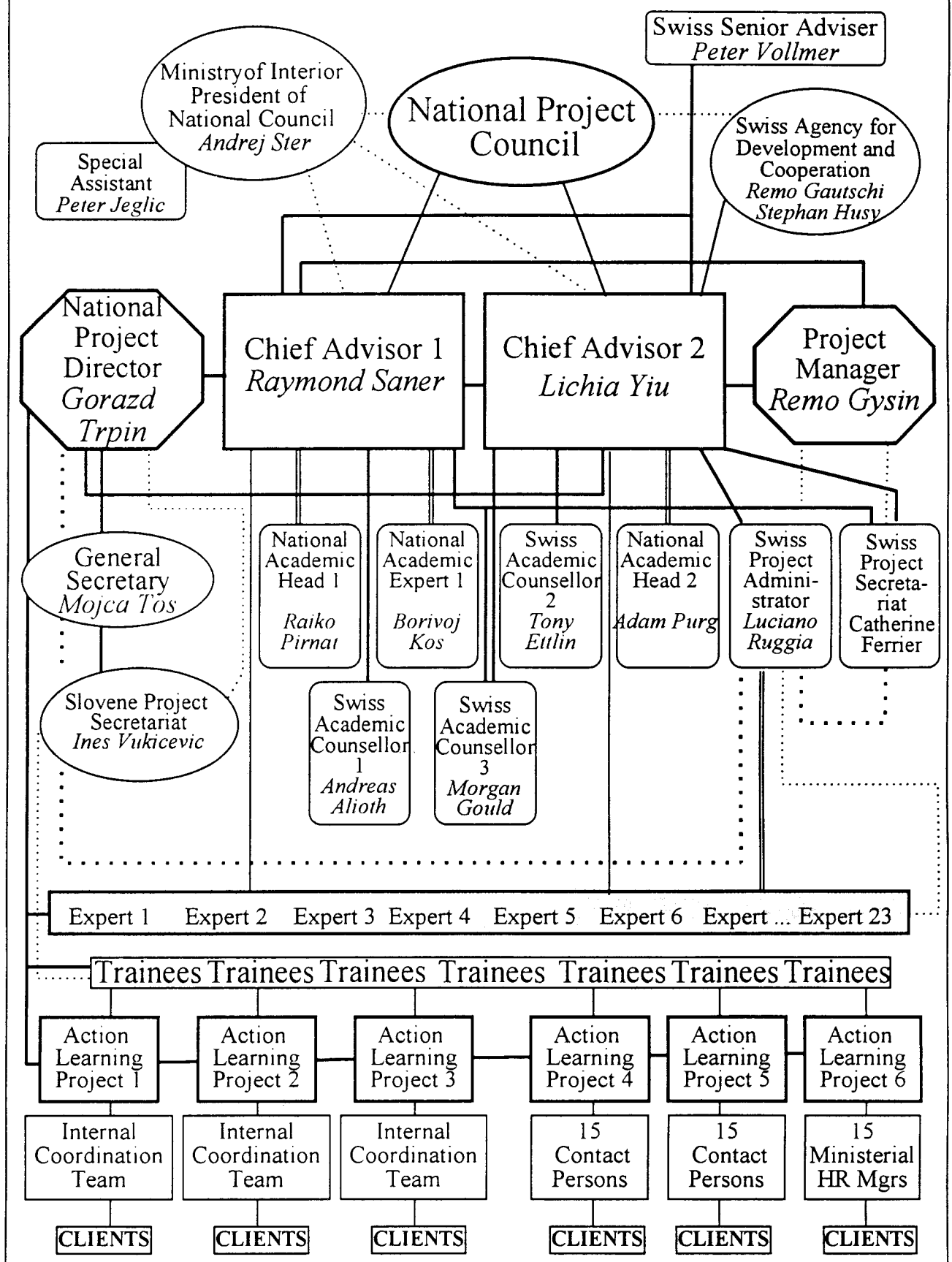


Figure 1: Organisational structure of the Slovene M.A.S.T.E.R. Project

Organisation & Management Studies (O&M)

Seminars

After completion of an intermediate programme phase in Switzerland, 22 trainees were given more in-depth training inputs before being assigned to their first O&M study project. These additional technical training inputs were taught during four weeks in March 1996 by international experts and covered the following four topics:

- advanced financial analysis and audit,
- project management methods and techniques,
- strategy and decision making in public sector,
- how to be an internal consultant.

Application and Pilot Projects

The major vehicle of learning for the trainees was hands-on applications. In other words, the O&M trainees developed their competence through conducting O&M studies in the Slovene public administration. Under close supervision of the international experts, the trainees were assigned to an O&M study project and asked to design the study method(s), to develop strategies, to collect and analyse data, and to prepare written recommendations in the form of project reports. There were two consecutive study project cycles each lasting for approximately three months. The Ministry of Science and Technology, the Municipality of Ljubljana and the Slovene Telekom were studied during the first cycle and the Ministry of Interior, the Chancellery and the Institute of Metrology were studied during the second cycle. In total, the 22 trainees conducted the following seven Action Learning projects from April to December 1996⁴:

Cycle I (April to July 1996):

1. The Efficiency of Administrative Procedures for Defining the Fulfilment of Conditions for Licensing Businesses
2. Rationalisation of the Procedure for Obtaining a New Telephone Line (Slovene Telekom Office)
3. Improving the Procedures for Selection and Financing of Scientific Research Projects by the Ministry of Science & Technology

Cycle II (September to December 1996):

4. The Procedure for Preparation of Government Sessions (Chancellery)
5. Improving the Process of Issuing Permanent Residence Permits to Foreigners (Ministry of Internal Affairs)

⁴ One of the trainees was given special status and carried out an individual AL project instead.

6. Improving the Procedure of Adopting International Norms and Standards in Slovenia (Standardisation and Metrology Institute of Slovenia)
7. Reorganisation and Human Resource Management in the Ministry of Transportation and Communication

The projects focused on the following aspects of the organisation processes:

1. *Process Mapping*. A workflow analysis of the business process which aims to identify all the steps required to fulfil a procedure and to measure time and workforce needed to carry out every aspect of this workflow
2. *Service product specification*. A content analysis whose goal is to define the expected outputs at each identified step of the workflow.
3. *Client/user survey*. A survey whose objective is to obtain feedback from relevant internal and external customers of the administrative unit concerning the quality of services/work they provide to their customers.

Action Research

Trainees applied the action research approach to consulting when they carried out their pilot projects. The procedures that they followed were⁵:

- Step 1: Contact with the client organisation after initial contact was made by National Project Director.
- Step 2: Drafting and signing of the consulting contract between trainees, clients and National Project Director.
- Step 3: Data collection
- Step 4: Data analysis
- Step 5: Feedback to the client organisation based on the first results of the data analysis
- Step 6: Recommendations
- Step 7: Implementation and follow-up

Learning Reviews

After the completion of each study project cycle, a *learning review session* was conducted by Slovene and international experts supervising the pilot studies to integrate the learning process and to modify the working methods. At the end of the second cycle, the O&M working methodology applicable to the whole administrative system and other public service agencies was finalised. It was expected that by documenting the individual action learning projects, the work method and model will become available for other interested parties to consult.

⁵ For an example of a work flow, see Annexe A
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Summary of Individual O&M studies

1. The Efficiency of Administrative Procedures for Defining the Fulfilment of Conditions for Licensing Businesses (Municipality of Ljubljana)

This project aimed to assist the Administrative Unit Ljubljana and its Branch Office Siska in finding ways to increase their efficiency with regard to the business license application procedures by both companies and individuals, in order to commence their business transactions. With the support of the Branch staff, the M.A.S.T.E.R. team collected data on relevant legislation and used the process mapping method to record and measure the various operations necessary for the entire application procedure. Customer satisfaction surveys were conducted with 22 clients by phone to obtain their opinions on current procedures and recommendations for improvements.

Based on the results of the collected data, the M.A.S.T.E.R. consulting team made recommendations in the areas of human resources (selection, monitoring and training), office information technology, documentation and location of files, authorisation for signing documents, inspection of business offices, and the providing of information to customers.

Most importantly, the team recommended that the work process be reorganised by assigning one person to handle the whole application process. This would result in a higher level of accountability, greater motivation through job enrichment, and the potential reduction of cycle time of the whole application process by 4.5 months, from 222 days to 85 days.

The Administrative Unit Ljubljana and the Branch Office Siska have studied the results of this project and started the implementation of key results at Siska and other branch offices in September 1996. Institutional learning obtained has been dissimilated to other administrative units in order to streamline the application of similar procedure.

2. The Rationalisation of the Procedure for Obtaining a New Telephone Line (Slovene Telekom Office)

Slovene Telekom wished to have a consistent approach in the handling of applications for new telephone lines. This project therefore focused on the internal work procedure for obtaining a new phone line and number. The M.A.S.T.E.R. team conducted a mapping of various business processes within different Telekom business units. These business units represented metropolitan, suburban and rural areas. In addition to studying the legal framework within which Telekom, as a public company had to operate, the team's data collection process included employee interviews and case studies.

The team found that the cycle time necessary for each application procedure was contingent on technical aspects of the process, which prolonged the application procedure considerably. The cycle time also differed substantially among different business units. To improve the application procedure, new equipment would be needed but the approval for new infrastructure investment depended on the revision of the Law on Telecommunications, which was taking place at that time but which needed more time to be completed. However, the M.A.S.T.E.R. team was able to make recommendations in the areas of information system, communication with service users, and unification of the number and document format. The

main result of the project was that the recommendation for standardisation of application procedures has been implemented in all business units of Slovene Telekom by the end of November 1996.

3. Improving the Procedures for Selection and Financing of Scientific Research Projects by the Ministry of Science & Technology

This project aimed at developing a shorter and more efficient procedure for selection and financing of basic and applied research projects. The M.A.S.T.E.R. team studied the legal framework determining project selection, conducted interviews to map the current selection process and surveyed customers. In addition, the team used the bench-marking method as a means to comparatively analyse the selection processes of similar ministries of science and technology in Switzerland, Croatia, Canada, and the Housing Fund of the Republic of Slovenia.

Based on this data collection, the team was able to make the following recommendations for improving the project selection procedure: streamlining the selection procedure resulted in shorting it by 9 months, from 15 to 6 months; adopting the project method of management for the procedure; posting a public tender announcement with information on the selection criteria and the mode of their entry; the public opening of bids and the rejection of incomplete applications; a collective review procedure; and a proposal of lists of priorities. The proposals were presented to the Minister and his team and project findings are currently under review.

4. The Procedure for Preparation of Government Sessions (Chancellery)

This project aim was to analyse the preparation procedure of Government sessions and to propose recommendations for improvement. The preparation procedure comprised the reception of documents from the Ministries in the Chancellery up to the execution of governmental decisions after the government sessions.

The project started with process mapping. Interviews with employees in different governmental offices were conducted, the corresponding documentation and the legal framework were studied and the applied information technology examined and a customer survey among Ministries undertaken.

Based on the analysis of these data, the following key areas of the preparation procedure of governmental sessions were identified:

- The legal framework and regulations which define the procedure and set the relationships and communications processes in the Chancellery and with its client organisations.
- The work organisation: the actual performance of the procedure.

Based on the identified key areas, the M.A.S.T.E.R. consulting team recommended the following improvements:

- Legal framework: The rules of the standing order on time-limits and the harmonisation of documents should be followed more closely.
- Information technology: An uniformed information system should be used in the Chancellery and its counterparts in the different Ministries. The use of electronic mail for information exchange should be intensified, together with corresponding training and education.

- Work organisation: Transparency should be assured for the so-called "urgent procedure" through definition of decision criteria. The job description of the employees of the Chancellery should be redesigned in the sense of job enrichment which may also affect the organisational structure.

The M.A.S.T.E.R. consulting team presented its recommendations to the Chancellery in early December 1996. The client organisation showed interest to continue its relationship with the M.A.S.T.E.R. consulting team during the implementation phase of this action research project in 1997.

5. Improving the Process of Issuing Permanent Residence Permits to Foreigners (Ministry of Interior)

The Ministry of Interior wished to have recommendations for higher efficiency regarding the procedure of issuing permanent residence permits for foreigners. This action research project therefore focused on the internal work procedure, in other words on how residence permits were actually issued and proposed ways to streamline it.

The M.A.S.T.E.R. consulting team analysed the work procedures at specific administrative units, namely the Department for Foreigners at the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the administrative units in Ljubljana, Novo Mesto and Celje. For bench-marking purposes, the corresponding situations in Croatia, Switzerland, Sweden and Hungary were also analysed.

The first phase of the project consisted of an analysis of the legal framework and the mapping of the existing procedure in the three selected administrative units and the Department for Foreigners and an analysis of the twice-yearly published reports of the Department for Foreigners.

The analysis showed that there was no essential time difference between accepted and declined permit applications in the three administrative units. However, a different situation existed in the Department for Foreigners.

The average processing time for resident applications turned out to be 312 days. Only 4.3 % of all applications were found to have been processed within the time envisaged by the law, which is 60 days. More data were collected through surveys with the remaining 55 administrative units. The surveys confirmed the hypothesis, that a significant difference exists regarding the procedures and practices of individual administrative units. The majority of the responding administrative units proposed to change the norms of the procedure while a minority favoured a different form of work organisation. The response rate was approximately 75%.

Based on the study of the legal framework, the analysis of process-mapping and the bench-marking methods, the M.A.S.T.E.R. consulting team recommended the following improvements of the administrative procedure:

- Standards and norms: Main reason for the slow processing of resident applications was found to be legislative which was not clear and resulted in varying interpretations. Furthermore, the distribution of responsibility between the administrative units and the Ministry was not clearly divided. The provisions of the Laws on Administrative Procedures should therefore be respected in such way that the administrative units immediately transfer the applications to the responsible body, the Department for Foreigners. The Department for Foreigners should support the administrative units in their work process by providing specific application forms and a description of the rules to be followed.
- Time management: The duration could be shortened on the conditions that applications are processed speedily on the basis of specific times for individual activities.

- **Work organisation:** Although the residence application procedure represents only one out of six procedures of the Department for Foreigners, however it represents 75% of all case loads. A division of work, by designating responsible personal, would improve the efficiency. Closer supervision of the process of application in the Department of Foreigners could also increase the efficiency. The information available for applicants could be improved by providing more written materials and by introducing specific office hours for receiving applications.
- **Staff:** The consulting team suggested that supervision and permanent professional education should be organised on a continuous basis; information exchange meetings be set up at regular intervals; consultation be organised for difficult applications; and the number of instructions issued to administrative units be limited.

Findings and recommendations of this project were presented to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The main recommendation was that the process of issuing permits could be completed within the legally specified duration provided the administrative units would accept and follow the detailed recommendations made by the M.A.S.T.E.R. team. This recommendation was accepted and confirmed by the client organisation. The M.A.S.T.E.R. consulting team drew also attention to the required legislative changes by stating that successful implementation of the recommendations should be closely linked with the changes of the current legislation.

6. Improving the Procedure of Adopting International Norms and Standards (Standardisation and Metrology Institute of Slovenia)

This project aimed at developing a shorter and more efficient procedure for the implementation and adoption of foreign standards for the Standards and Metrology Institute of the Republic of Slovenia (SMIS). This Institute is, together with technical committees, responsible for the implementation of international, European and other foreign standards to the Slovene standard system.

With support of the staff of SMIS, the M.A.S.T.E.R. team collected data which included legislation, annual reports of the institute, the SMIS Bulletin and the Catalogue of Slovenian Standards. Process mapping based on interviews with the SMIS employees helped record and measure the various administrative tasks. Further, a survey by telephone was conducted with 50 members of the technical committees, representing experts from the economic and public administration field. The purpose was to obtain their opinions on current procedures and their recommendations for improvements.

The collected data were summarised and analysed regarding time management, document flow and individual workload and the required time for the whole implementation process was estimated based on the data gathered and the interview findings.

The M.A.S.T.E.R. consulting team made recommendations in the following areas:

- **Working methods and procedures:** to leave out the preparation phase of a working draft, to conduct simultaneously the meetings of the editing and proof reading committee and the public inquiry and to define the required time for individual activities. These proposed changes could result in a potential reduction of work time by 105 days from 338 days to 233 days.
- **Organisation:** to reduce the workload of technical secretaries and proof readers by e.g. preparing a dictionary of technical terms, to differently distribute the tasks between the information centre and the sector for standardisation and to expand the premises for better working conditions.

- Documentation: The consulting team suggested to use a standard form for the initials forms and to establish central archives for all standard documentation.
- Information technology: The team proposed to create a central data base including all data on the whole work procedure and a data base on all Slovenian standards to improve the possibilities for comparison between Slovenian initiatives and international standards.

Recommendations were well received by the top management of SMIS. The M.A.S.T.E.R. consulting team was requested to provide further assistance with the implementation of their recommendations in 1997.

Conclusion

The Action Learning and the Action Research method, though quite unknown in Slovenia, soon proved to be the most effective way for the trainees to develop their own consulting, training and project management skills. Trainees made the important leap from knowing management methods in theory to applying them in real-life situations. They got to know how to assess the needs of the Slovene public administration, how to enlist the support of all tiers of the administration - top officials, middle management and civil servants on the operational level - and how to work together on the administrative reform process.

On a more personal level, the team work that these challenging project imposed on the trainees forced them to learn how to listen to others and express one's own opinion with respect. They learnt to resolve conflict in a constructive fashion.

The assessment showed that the learning objectives of the M.A.S.T.E.R. Project were achieved, especially the application of theory to real problems through the Action Learning approach.

The Organisation and Management Track trainees mastered successfully new working methods such as work flow analysis, product specification, project management, process mapping tools and customer satisfaction.

The professional standards achieved by the trainees and the generated values are comparable to Western European and North American consulting outputs. Through the project work, the trainee-consultants created an atmosphere within the client organisations that had not existed before, an atmosphere in which civil servants of all levels reflected on their work, discussed it openly and proposed ways for improvement.

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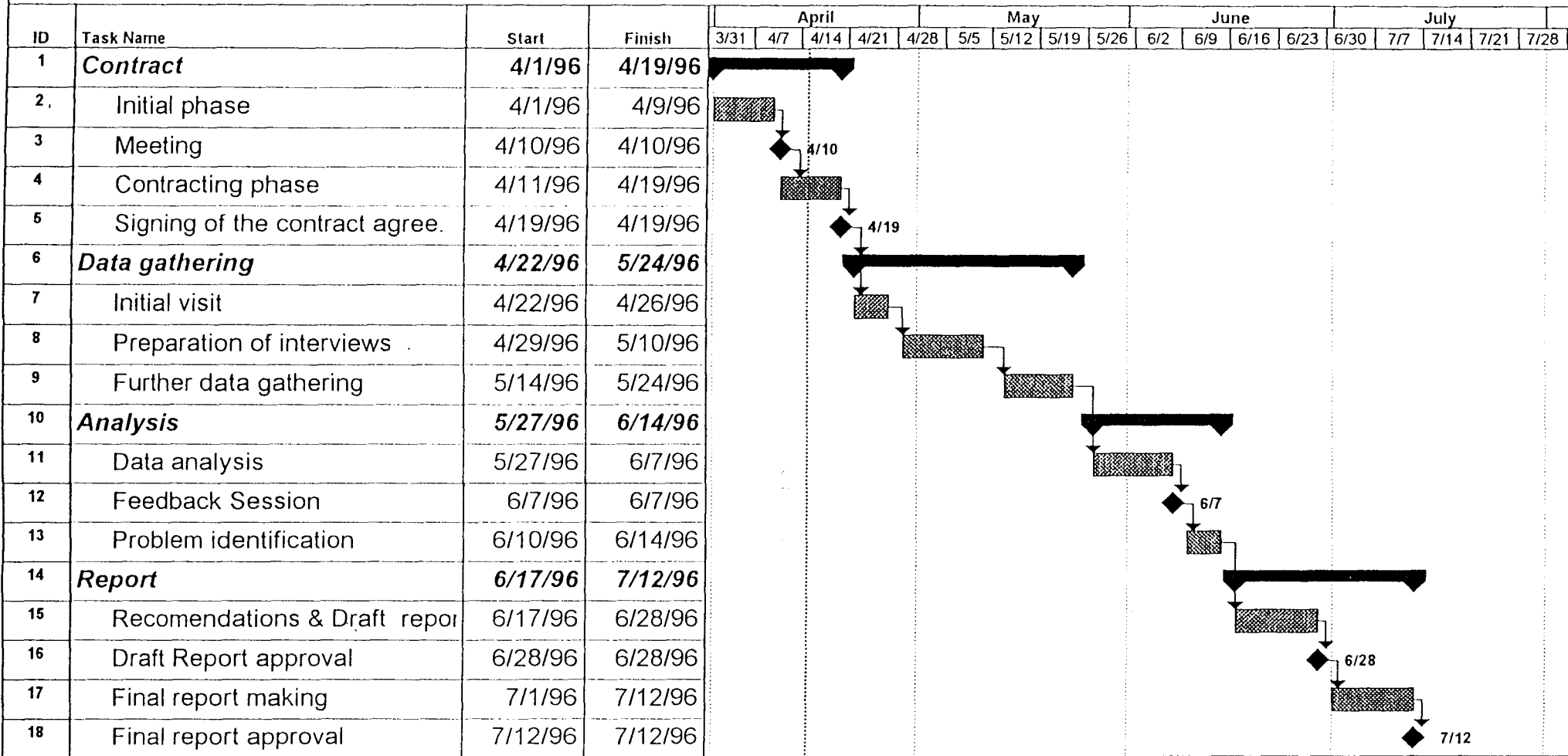
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Author's Background

Dr Raymond Saner is Director of the Centre for Socio-Eco-Nomic Development in Geneva, a visiting professor at INSEAD in Paris and a lecturer at the Economic Sciences Centre of the University of Basle, Switzerland. He has 18 years of experience in designing and implementing large system change projects in the private and public sector. Dr Saner has work experiences in Europe, North America, Asia and Africa. He has been a consultant to the UN Agencies, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and several European and Asian government agencies. As a long time member of the IIAS, Dr Saner has been rapporteur of panels, co-rapporteur of scientific research project and presenter at IIAS congresses and round tables since 1988.

Appendix to the agreement on the pilot study between TELECOM and MASTER project



Project: TELEKOM
Date: 4/15/96

