

Outcomes of the ERW2016 National Coordinators Workshop: Summary Report

Summary of the key findings from a workshop convened by euRobotics under the theme "Evolving ERW2016 and beyond", held at The Squire, Frankfurt on 2nd June 2016

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Introduction

The Workshop brought participants to Brussels from across the European robotics sector, representing many - though not all - countries within the EU. The following objectives had been identified:

- Build a common understanding on:
 - The current state of play
 - Where there is room for improvement.
- Review how far ERW's short and long-term goals for promoting STEM subjects to the public have been achieved.
- Ramp up our media impact and introduce the European Robotics League ('creating the right eco-system').
 - Key messages to be conveyed to citizens, politicians, media and industry.
- Targeting policy makers and forming strategic alliances. Working with other organisations in Brussels.
- Efficient coordination of efforts across the whole of ERW.

As in the previous year, a further informal 'team-bonding' Workshop objective was also pursued, to bring the workshop's participants together as a community.

Workshop process

After the euRobotics team opened the event, welcomed participants and outlined the history and growth of ERW to date, the Workshop followed a conventional brainstorming format, beginning with perspective-sharing and broad discussion, before ideas proposed by delegates were then progressively honed down to a series of practical proposals.

After an initial period of individual reflection, delegates began to work first in pairs, then trios and then larger break-out groups. In this way, thoughts and

perspectives were gathered and then refined and filtered through wider discussion.

As before, a facilitator was used to help the group work through the Agenda on time and focus on the Workshop's desired objectives, stimulating the discussion and ensuring that all voices were heard.

A new feature introduced into this year's Workshop was a series of short showcases in which several delegates took the opportunity to present a summary of their national experiences with ERW15, highlighting both successes and also what was less successful. This approach proved to be one of the day's highlights and the relevant slides would be made available either from euRobotics or via the individual national coordinator.

Outcomes

The majority of this report is devoted to the outcomes from the Workshop discussions, in the form of the ideas, questions and challenges put forward by delegates, within the three broad themes – Business planning, Coordination and Communication – under which delegates were asked to channel their thinking and group their ideas.

The 'raw material' of words in which delegates expressed themselves on the day on flipcharts and sticky notes, are captured in the appendices attached to this report.

Towards the end of the group discussions, delegates were asked to identify any points raised under one theme which they felt were more relevant to another theme. Where they did so, the relevant sticky notes were literally moved from one flipchart sheet to another. Inevitably, some overlapping ideas remain, especially across the flexible boundary between Communication and Coordination.

1. Business Planning

Workshop delegates broke this theme down into a series of sub-themes: Value proposition, Strategy, Activities, Expansion and In-kind. They gave these a rank order of priority from 1 high to 5 low. Their proposals under each one are set out below:

1.1 Value proposition

The Workshop considered the need to define ERW's value proposition from a number of angles. This need was intensified if ERW began to target industry, whether for sponsorship or through more direct forms of participation, as was proposed.

In an attempt to engage commercial interests, it was important to define the return on investment (ROI) that companies and other organisations could receive by getting involved with ERW. This could be expressed in a number of ways including: Knowledge exchange; fulfilment of social responsibility commitments; and profile and visibility, perhaps related to education.

The contribution of robotics to the circular economy (sustainability) was also mentioned.

1.2 Strategy

While considering strategic elements, delegates highlighted several factors.

The first of these was to develop an EU robotics manifesto which will encompass, connect and galvanise the full spectrum of stakeholders within the robotics sector.

There were varying views about sponsorship, but a general consensus among delegates that some form of sponsorship was desirable and even necessary in order to secure the level of funding required to realise all of ERW's ambitions. It was recommended that ERW did not look for a single principal corporate sponsor because this would then discourage other companies from lending their support. Instead, there should be an emphasis on local sponsorship and, indeed, local participation generally ('engage local companies, labs, schools...'). In order to be attractive to commercial interests, ERW should provide a 'strong local environment for sponsors'.

1.3 Activities

There were many suggestions for events and activities and examples of some of these were showcased during individual national presentations at various points in the Workshop.

There were references throughout the day to the Maker movement, the obvious 'fit' between making and the demonstration aspect of ERW, and the mutual benefits that could be achieved if joint activities could be organised on a local/national basis.

Open living was also mentioned. This was a reference to the Living Lab movement and the European Network of Living (see also <https://openlivinglabdays.com/>). Opportunities might exist for collaboration between ERW and the Living Lab movement.

Labs, roadshows, hackathons, project weeks and networking activities were also mentioned.

The feeling in the room emphasised the value of open events where people can actively participate by making things and not only engaging passively as spectators.

1.4 Expansion

Delegates who concentrated on Business planning identified 'Expansion' as a distinct sub-theme.

In keeping with the strong emphasis on localisation, delegates suggested that ERW could increase its reach and extend its impact through the organisation of events in collaboration with local libraries, museums, shopping malls and other public gathering points. First time events could be supported with some kind of centrally-produced materials. These did not have to be elaborate or complex - material for a simple workshop with instructions for teachers could be all that was required.

At the same time, the emphasis on local initiatives did not invalidate the desire for common elements that would serve to unify the overall identity of ERW. In this spirit, the flipchart discussion produced the idea of creating an activity that could be replicated in all participating countries: 'a common 'easy' action all over Europe'.

1.5 In-Kind

Finally, Business planning briefly focused on the value of 'In-kind' contributions, in which partners provide services and other non-financial inputs to ERW. Partners contributing in this way could still be considered and described as sponsors and could receive the benefits of sponsorship if they supported ERW in a way that boosted the week or specific activities within it. Examples of this would be the provision of a venue in which an ERW event could take place, or by producing materials which enabled ERW to devote resources (time, personnel, money) to other things.

2. Coordination

Under this heading, the Workshop identified several common themes: Partnerships, Events, Website and Questions of locality/regionalty. Specific points under each one are discussed below:

2.1 Partnerships

Many ideas for coordination raised during the 2015 Workshop re-surfaced again in Frankfurt. For the most part, this was not about repetition but more about the enduring appeal and continued validity of ideas, perspectives and initiatives shared within the group the previous year. Additionally, existing ideas were sometimes given a fresh twist. And occasionally, entirely new proposals were made - one of these was that effective coordination could be achieved by 'twinning' the ERW activities of pairs of EU countries. Benefits identified were about deepening knowledge between members of the respective robotics communities of the twinned countries.

Another 'new' idea – one that surfaced several times during the day – was to involve the Maker movement, for example through co-operation with Maker spaces and 'fab labs'. The prominence of the Maker movement during the day's discussion was a reflection of the growing awareness of 'making', which manifests itself in several ways, not least in the popularity of practical, craft-based TV competitions. This could be a way to tap into public interest and through this 'channel' to bring the appeal of ERW to the attention of a wider public.

Similarly, the Workshop identified the potential for partnership with other ICT movements.

As with the Business planning discussion, corporate sponsorship as a way of creating more impact was also mentioned as another useful form of partnership.

Not least, some delegates favoured the idea of public-funded partnerships with business and schools.

2.2 Events

The boundary between local/national and European dimensions was explored at several points during the Workshop. While there was a strong consensus favouring local events with a clear sense of place, the desirability of European-scale linkages to serve as a booster was also recognised.

Under the Events heading, delegates proposed the adoption of theme days common to all countries participating in ERW 2016. Linked to this was a proposal to create a database or directory of potential ERW events which national coordinators and organising teams could reference. The events could be grouped according to how simple and easy they were to organise or, conversely, how complex and large scale and resource-hungry and ambitious they might be, with various tiers of scale in between. A further 'chapter' in this directory might provide ideas for child-friendly events.

The potential and appeal of gaming was also in the minds of delegates who proposed a Robo-Quest competition.

2.3 Website/App

Although websites were often mentioned as a communication channel, websites were also considered under the theme of Coordination.

Beyond the obvious value of providing information about ERW and specific events, the Workshop also recognised the role that a dedicated website could play in promoting ERW partners.

Under this heading, delegates also identified the value of creating an app, especially for a major ERW event or perhaps for ERW overall. The app could provide maps, event information, a timetable and an introduction to event partners.

The merits of integrating several communication tools and channels together (social media, a web-based forum plus phone and email) were also mentioned.

2.4 Questions of locality/ regionality

The sense here is that delegates were grappling to find the right balance – if indeed a balance is the appropriate position to find – between ERW’s pan-European vocation and the practical reality of delivering events at a local or national level.

This was sometimes expressed in vague terms: ‘Take a global view with local actions’. Other delegates proposed collaborative action to bring local and national efforts together, by linking national hubs and the key national figures involved in ERW. The objective was to create something truly European rather than purely local or national: ‘Cross-border events – something to make the event completely pan-EU’.

Another proposal added under this heading was to create an industry/technology/robotics platform in EU states. However, there was no specific detail and this would need further elaboration.

2.5 Excluded ideas

Several other ideas were proposed under the theme of Coordination. These were not taken forward during successive phases of Workshop discussions but they are worth recording in case some value is found in them after further reflection:

- Exchange of visits to central events in countries
- Give more authority to National Coordinators (document, certificate)
- Some cascading structure
- Distribute work in countries
- More regular membership of the group
- Establish regional coordinators.

3 Communication

Understandably, a lot of the Workshop delegates’ time, thought and discussion was devoted to communication. During the group work on the flipcharts, initial ideas for communication were refined and categorised, and delegates sorted these ideas into four distinct sub-themes: Goals, Messages, Methods/Channels and Tactics. These were then prioritised in rank order (1 high, 5 low) as set out below:

3.1 Goals

The first communication priority identified by the Workshop was to reach out to business and to the general public. The second priority was to ensure that every educational institution was informed and made aware of ERW.

Beyond these priorities, the Workshop identified other goals. Recognising part of the ‘image problem’ of robotics, one of ERW’s goals was to help in the process of

‘humanising’ the technology involved and altering perspectives about robotics by demonstrating the increased potential for empowering and ‘democratising’ society that robotics offered.

3.2 Messages

The top three priority messages ranked in 1-2-3 order were:

1. **Robots are a force for good**
 - Example, if you are elderly, robots will help you to live independently
 - Example, if you are a child, you will create the future with robots.
2. **Robotics are the ‘vehicles’ that will provide new skills and new ways of thinking**, especially in terms of creativity and problem-solving.
3. **Robotics is important for your children’s understanding** (together with a responsible use of ICT).

Other messages varied from the specific...

Your car is more safe and secure [thanks to robotics!].

In a few years your kitchen can become ‘intelligent’.

Doing robotics helps you upgrade your career.

... to the general...

Robotics isn’t so hard.

Robotics is diverse – there are many types of robot with many purposes.

3.3 Methods and Channels

Delegates chose to bracket specific channels together with broader communication methods and approaches. Within this varied mix, three priorities were identified in rank order (1-2-3):

1. Select 3-5 top messages you want to see spread and focus on those
2. Target key market segments: a) Industry b) Elderly
3. Hire a PR expert for industrial communication (local)

Other offerings under the Channels and Methods heading included conventional channels:

- Social media
- TV
- Streaming – live video
- Journals
- Traditional media (including local media)

The targeting of specific networks was also proposed:

- Reaching schools through official channels
- Professional networks
- Schools/universities/ministries
- Committee of the Regions

Delegates also suggested other methods to boost ERW's communication:

- Campaign for non-tech group/market
- Media contact lists – collect them all [together]

3.4 Tactics

There are clear overlaps between channels and methods on one hand, and tactics on the other. The distinctions are not always clear, but that is a natural consequence of a brainstorming workshop with around 20 delegates working under considerable time pressure. The most important thing is to be able to generate a rich diversity of ideas in the first place; categorisation can come later.

After selecting Tactics as a sub-theme, delegates chose the following three priorities (1-2-3):

1. Commercialisation: create packages that you can sell to companies (eg pop-up commercials on an ERW events website)
2. Storytelling: tell more stories about people who work with robots
- 3. Campaigning: produce a range of content and media materials in different languages to support ERW, including posters and video for TV presentation.

Other tactical proposals included:

- Contacting teachers
- Upgrade the robots we are using now / moving away from Lego, etc., to something more sophisticated
- Highlight to the media:
 - look how cool the things that our robots could do
 - select the most entertaining robot
- Identifying an ERW spokesperson/personality to make media guest appearances in every country (it would need to be established if this would be one European figure or a series of national figures for each participating country).

Finally, under Tactics, some conventional communication channels were also mentioned, including websites and members' newsletters.

3.5 'Out of scope'

A few communicated-related proposals were felt to be 'out of scope'.

The suggestion that the EU could apply 'pressure on local politics' was judged to be problematic and so was not taken forward.

Nor were the ideas of coining 'A common phrase or subject' [a slogan or strapline] or of organising 'An international roundtable with politicians with robots present'. Finally, the suggestion of 'bringing in people from different countries' sounded incomplete.

4. Summary of Priorities

For convenience, the top three priorities under each of the three overall themes are grouped together below:

Business planning priorities

- Value proposition: Knowledge exchange; fulfilment of social responsibility commitments; profile and visibility, sustainability.
- Strategy: Robotics manifesto addressing all robotics stakeholders, sponsorship (from a range of local sponsors),
- Activities: Links with the Maker and Living Lab movements; roadshows, hackathons, project weeks and networking; emphasis on active spectator participation (doing, not merely watching).

Coordination priorities

1. Theme days common to all countries; global view, local action; web-space to promote ERW partners; cross-border events
2. Directory of potential events; develop an ERW event app
3. Social media group.

Communication priorities

- Goals: Reach out to business and general public. Ensure all educational institutions know about ERW.
- Messages: Robots are a force for good. Robotics will provide new skills and new ways of thinking. Robotics is important for your children's understanding.
- Methods/Channels: Focus on 3-5 top messages; target key market segments: a) Industry b) Elderly; hire a PR expert for industrial communication (local).
- Tactics: Create commercial packages to sell to companies; tell more stories about people who work with robots; produce a range of content and media materials in different languages to support ERW.

5. Final thoughts

The balance of Workshop activity was notably different this year compared to the previous year. The Brussels event in 2015 was the first of its kind, most delegates were meeting for the first time and the event's emphasis was firmly on building a sense of a common endeavour and achieving mutual understanding through working collaboratively in brainstorming discussions, and at the same time establishing the role and position of euRobotics as the coordinating body and source of stimulus for ERW.

This time, there was a greater sense that the role and place of euRobotics was already clearly understood and recognised as such by a majority of the national coordinators present. It was also clear that many delegates already knew each other, although some were also joining the group for the first time.

Also, this year's Workshops format allowed a substantial amount of time (either scheduled in advance or accommodated on the day) for individual presentations to showcase national approaches. So the Workshop's value and interest for delegates lay both in being able to see and hear how ERW activities were delivered in other countries as well as in being able to work together collaboratively to share ideas and spark fresh thinking.

The 'fruits' of that collaborative work are summarised in this report. The content of the national showcases will presumably be made separately available by the relevant national coordinators via euRobotics. Within these, one 'new' idea that seemed to capture everyone's interest was the use of micro- and macro-stories, revealing the way robotics can positively transform individual lives. This was memorably captured during the Workshop via the 'voice' of a disabled person whose life experience had been improved enormously: 'I can stand up again thanks to robots'. Perhaps more than anything else in this report, developing stories that play so strongly on the humane benefits of robotics will help establish a powerful emotional connection with the general public, and delegates identified that as a clear priority.

[End of report]
