MORE THAN JUST MONEY

ALERT’S JOURNEY IN THE WORLD OF CORPORATE SECTOR PARTNERSHIPS
More than just Money: ALERT's journey in the world of corporate sector partnerships is a case study produced by the ALERT project and the DEPP Learning Project.

The ALERT project is delivered by a consortium comprising the following members:

- HelpAge International
- Concern Worldwide
- Islamic Relief
- Care International
- Handicap International
- Oxfam International
- Coventry University
WHAT IS ALERT?

ALERT is one of the most ambitious preparedness system projects funded under the Disasters and Emergencies Preparedness Programme (DEPP).

The core output of the project is a bespoke information management system that will enable humanitarian agencies to prepare for and respond to disasters in a more effective and coordinated manner. The ALERT system will help humanitarian agencies to maintain a consistently high level of emergency preparedness by restructuring and systemising the emergency preparedness process, helping agencies to respond quicker, more efficiently and effectively before and immediately after a disaster strikes.

To develop the ALERT Beta software or Minimum Viable Product (MVP) by the end of the project period in March 2018 is an ambitious undertaking. The first MVP alone consists of six complex core modules including for example modules on risk monitoring, preparedness tracking and country office information and will be tested as an interagency preparedness platform.

In addition, there is a wish list for the ALERT system with a number of additional modules including an offline client, online help, mapping and a mobile application. While these functionalities would significantly improve the system and as such could contribute to even more efficient and effective response, these modules currently lie beyond the existing funding committed through the DEPP.

WHY PARTNERSHIPS?

To be able to deliver on this ambitious aim, the ALERT project brings together expertise from various fields including the humanitarian sector, technology, business and academia. This network of partnerships not only provides access to specialised expertise but also to resources that might enable the ALERT system MVP as well as the wish list to be developed. Furthermore, the ALERT project was signed off by the DEPP board based on the caveat the team should actively pursue support from the private sector to leverage additional resources.

There are a number of definitions for a partnership in a work environment. For ALERT, the vision of a good partnership is to go beyond a client vendor relationship. A partnership is not merely based on financial gains but on contributing skills and resources towards shared objectives and values; partners collaborate to achieve a common goal. Resources such as staff time, facilities, expertise, networks and money are not bottomless, and each partner contributes what they can towards the common goal. For ALERT a good partnership is also based on good communication that is clear, transparent and when necessary allows partners to challenge decisions as a ‘critical friend’.

This case study analyses three particular partnerships between the ALERT project and private sector companies, highlighting critical factors of success or failure for these relationships. The case study, developed in collaboration with the DEPP Learning project, is the first of a series accompanying the ALERT project along their journey.

LEGAL SECTOR

One of the longest standing partnerships of the ALERT project has been with the legal sector.

To date a number of law firms have contributed pro-bono legal support to the project. These collaborations were set up through A4ID (Advocates for International Development), a brokerage charity that links development agencies with law firms to provide pro bono legal services.
Pro bono support facilitated through A4ID is also part of a well-established system with clear parameters. Both parties sign a contract that clearly outlines what is covered as part of the agreement. If requests are added that fall outside these original parameters a new request needs to be submitted. This is necessary for both parties to be able to manage expectations which in turn helps to avoid misalignments and disappointments at a later stage.

ALERT’s experience of working with A4ID has been very positive. A4ID throughout has been quick to respond and provided good matches to the particular requests. The law firms ALERT has been matched with to date include CMS, White and Case, Dechert LLP and Bristows LLP.

The support provided by these law firms has been varied, ranging from developing funding agreements and contracts to providing advice on working relationships with other partners. The relationship with Bristows LLP in particular was invaluable for the ALERT project. Bristows LLP has been a pro bono partner of the ALERT project since May 2015, initially providing advice on developing a software agreement and later on transitioning into an advisory role. As of end of June 2016, Bristows had billed close to 100 hours in support of the ALERT project, which amounts to a monetary value of around £30,000 - £40,000.

What stands out in ALERT’s partnership with the legal sector is the quality of the support received. This can be to a large extent be attributed to the fact that pro bono work, providing legal assistance without payment or at a reduced rate as a public service, is firmly embedded in the legal sector.

"Law firms are well set up for pro bono work structurally and culturally. Even for pro bono clients we have to meet certain standards, we are accountable to deliver the same quality of legal services."

Adrian Sim, Partner, Bristows LLP

“The advice and counsel provided by Bristows in managing both the complexities and successful conclusion of the ALERT/EPAM relationship, without any negative fallout, is testament to their quality support and commitment to the ALERT project.”

Andrew Collodel, ALERT Project Manager, HelpAge International

Pro bono support is a well-established part of the legal sector with most law firms committed to contributing a certain percentage of staff time to pro bono work. Aside from raising the profile of firms by gaining broader sector experience, offering pro bono services has other, less tangible benefits to law firms.

“We don’t put [our pro bono work] on flyers but it is helpful when it comes for example to recruiting – it helps us to convey our office culture. Applicants can feel that there is a channel for them to give back to society which is important to many – so this is a good benefit for us.”

Adrian Sim, Partner at Bristows LLP

Bristows LLP, unlike many other law firms do not have billable targets for associates or targets for staff having to spend a certain percentage of their time on pro bono work, allowing teams to get involved in pro bono cases because they want to do it rather than having to do it. This flexible approach to cases was what enabled the team at Bristows LLP to provide continued support even when the timeframe of the original scope of support was extended.
The enthusiasm, interest and effort invested by Bristows LLP and ALERT’s other legal partners often went ‘above and beyond’ what could be expected from a professional pro bono relationship. While this is largely due to pro bono work being so firmly embedded within the sector, it is also clearly related to the nature of the project and the ALERT project team who shared their passion and vision for the project with their partners early on.

“We thought it could make a big difference to the humanitarian sector. If you do pro bono work you want to know that it is for a project that benefits the wider community. Also the scale of the project meant it is quite complex – from a legal perspective this makes it interesting and it kept us engaged throughout.”

*Adrian Sim, Partner at Bristows LLP*

**GRAPHIC DESIGN SECTOR**

*Blast*, a London based communications and design company, developed the ALERT brand and communication materials for the project in 2015. While on paper the relationship between ALERT and Blast started off as a normal service contract, the support Blast provided went beyond their contractual obligations and as such is also regarded as a partnership by the ALERT project team.

Blast was selected as provider based on their portfolio of work, as well as their willingness to offer a reduced rate and free extras for the project following an open procurement process. Creating the best value for money possible has been important for the project team throughout; any funds saved can go directly towards system development. In total, Blast designers approximately spent double the amount of time than budget was available for on project work for ALERT.

Financially and business wise taking on this project did not make sense for Blast, so what were Blast’s motivations for taking on this job anyway? While the partnership in the end provided positive PR for the agency, it was not a deciding factor at all in undertaking the work.

The main driver for taking on this project was Paul Tunnicliffe, one of the design directors of Blast. Paul wanted to support a cause that he believed in, and after being approached by ALERT and speaking to the team about the project, its vision and potential he championed the project internally.

“Personally I really wanted to do it but business wise this project did not make sense. The budget would have had to be double of what it was. I wanted to do something for a cause that I believed in.”

*Paul Tunnicliffe, Design Director, Blast*

A key part of the contract was developing a project logo. However, this took much longer than anticipated. The initial four logo designs provided by Blast were not suitable, which can be attributed to the fact that Blast initially did not consult about the project (a common practice amongst design agencies). However, after receiving feedback from the ALERT team about the reasons for rejecting the logo proposals (e.g. one logo featured a radar, a symbol often associated with the military) Blast provided a further 20 logo options without further charge, one of which became the current logo.
The agency also went beyond the contracted scope of work on the design of promotional power point slides, providing 20 slides instead of the four budgeted for by ALERT. These slides have been a useful resource for the project team in their outreach work.

The ALERT team also showed some flexibility when they agreed to scrap the component of creating an ALERT banner which was included as a pro bono component in the service contract. The ALERT team felt the Blast had already gone above the contractual obligations and as such were willing to give up this particular aspect of their agreement. Blast confirmed that by that point they contributed approximately 60 hours of designer time, double of the amount that was budgeted for.

Another factor that made this partnership successful for both parties was the generous timeframe that was agreed for the deliverables. Blast confirmed that having a tighter timeframe would have been an issue for them in being able to deliver on the work agreed without experiencing a more significant financial loss.

“If you have more time you can fit it in around other work. Not being rushed has helped.”

Paul Tunnicliffe, Design Director, Blast

This ability to compromise and showing flexibility contributed somewhat towards maintaining a good working relationship with Blast, but it also hinged on ongoing good communication and clear parameters. From the start, both sides were clear about the objectives and obligations of their partnership. Blast provided a clear timeline and structured breakdown of tasks so that the ALERT team knew exactly what they could expect. Communication was perceived as successful from both sides. The only challenge arose from the fact that Blast did not have direct contact to the consortium management team who were the ultimate decision makers on the design of the ALERT logo. This resulted in delays since it took time to get approval from the consortium management team about the initial logo designs.

Undoubtedly though, the most important factor for the successful partnership was that the scope of work provided at pro bono basis by Blast was not too big. A significant number of staff hours were provided pro bono, but this amount was small enough to not affect Blast’s profitability overall.

“We are a small agency. We know what we can take on. If we were bigger, and the project was bigger it would have been a problem to justify this. What NGOs need to realise is that while the private sector has more money, it is also harder as you need to
make sure you do not damage the business. Profit margins [for many agencies] are not very big, and so you need to be able to justify this kind of work.”

Paul Tunnicliffe, Design Director, Blast

SOFTWARE DESIGN SECTOR

The process of developing a partnership in the software design sector proved to be more challenging.

Developing the ALERT software lies at the heart of the project success. Therefore, finding the right company that would share the ALERT vision and would be willing follow the partnership approach that ALERT was obligated by the donor to pursue was crucial.

The ALERT team contacted 12 software design companies in total, outlining the project, funding available and partnership approach. Eight companies declined straight away and only four considered taking on the project with a pro bono element.

After sharing further information and project vision, travelling to meet and present to management teams and boards of the four companies still on board, two offered quotes that were limited to the smaller project of prototype development and one declined. The reason for this was unanimously related to money; the companies that offered quotes for the smaller project component were small companies and therefore the pro bono component of partnership represented a clear challenge. Forecasting beyond six month into the future to make a long term commitment was not possible in business terms. So in the end only one potential partner remained.

EPAM, a global provider of software engineering and IT consulting services headquartered in the US, showed great interest and enthusiasm for the project and proposed a 50:50 partnership. ALERT was in line with EPAM’s CSR strategy and the humanitarian aspect of the proposed product was of particular interest to one of the design teams based in London.

“Our CSR has to be in line with some sort of strategy. ALERT would have gotten press and would be a story we could tell. This would have commercial value for the company. Staff personally also wanted to get involved; people want to make a difference.”

Matt Farrar, Vice President for Design, EPAM

Once the rough parameters of the product were established and EPAM’s interest was reaffirmed, approval from EPAM’s CEO was obtained to pursue a 50:50 partnership on the basis that unused existing company resources could be used. The funds for the full scope of work available amounted to around £600,000 at a reduced rate; EPAM verbally pledged to cover the rest of the time needed to complete the building of the ALERT software.

The partnership was approved by the DEPP board in August 2015 and from the start a good working relationship was established between the ALERT project team and a design team at EPAM. Initially, no legal framework was set up; before being able to legally commit to the project EPAM needed to fully understand the scope of the work required. Based on the verbal sign off by EPAM’s CEO, in September the team started to commit resources for the ALERT prototype ‘at risk’, as the team did not want to jeopardise the tight timelines around the delivery for the ALERT prototype.

However, soon after problems started to emerge.

The first stumbling block emerged in October after the EPAM legal team supporting the ALERT project accidentally sent the wrong legal framework to the EPAM board. While a small problem that usually could be rectified easily, the language in the framework referring to ALERT as ‘a system
that can save lives' became a sticking point. Concerns were raised about liabilities and whether EPAM could be held accountable for the death of people if the project failed. While this issue was cleared up, it stalled the initial prototype development. However, all the way through there was goodwill from both sides and issues were being resolved from a legal perspective, albeit slowly.

Then, the next issue emerged. EPAM missed its profit target in the third quarter of 2015 which greatly affected the appetite of the business to commit immediate resources on a pro bono basis. EPAM is a public company listed on the US stock exchange and as such is ultimately accountable to its shareholders. With shares dropping pressure was put on the company globally and work on the prototype once again stalled. While EPAM felt confident they could still deliver, timelines needed to be reviewed.

The funding for the ALERT project through the DEPP and pressure by the donor however meant that the scope of the project could not be altered, and there was no flexibility on the timeline for the project deliverables.

A new approach was proposed; to use ‘bench time’ towards project delivery. For software companies, bench time refers to the time period when engineers or developers are not working on a client-specific project or assignment and as such not producing revenue. One of EPAM’s ‘bench’ teams felt confident they could deliver the project on time with their current available resources, if ALERT could be built using Microsoft Office 365 as the foundation platform. However, ALERT is required to remain open source, free from licencing constraints, therefore using a Microsoft foundation platform would defeat the project objectives of free software for any humanitarian agencies. This is particularly important for small Southern NGOs who might be interested in using the ALERT software. Therefore the EPAM proposal of using MS Office 365 as the underlying platform was rejected.

While ‘bench time’ is a useful concept for smaller and non-urgent projects, this arrangement did not pair well with the mounting pressure on the ALERT team to meet their deadlines. By January, EPAM conceded that a full 50:50 partnership was no longer an option if current timelines could not be altered. This brought to an end the long term partnership prospects between ALERT and EPAM.

However, neither side wanted to write off the time invested in the prototype to date. To complete the prototype, EPAM proposed an ‘agile’ or ‘time and material’ approach to project delivery. For this approach both parties agree on a number of days funded, and once those days are used up the work stops. EPAM however could not commit to fixed deliverables within this arrangement as they felt the scope of the prototype was still not finalised and components kept being added by the ALERT team. For the ALERT team, not agreeing on fixed deliverables was too risky as it was not clear whether the money available for the prototype would be enough to cover the time needed to complete the prototype to their specifications. With this, deadlock was reached and the relationship between EPAM and ALERT was dissolved in March 2016.

“It is an unfortunate outcome and with a heavy heart, but it simply did not work out.”

Matt Farrar, Vice President for Design, EPAM
Unfortunately this is not where the story ended for EPAM. As a result of the failed partnership, a number of staff felt that EPAM as a company was not able to deliver on CSR projects, something that is important to many employees. A number of members of the design team that worked on the ALERT prototype cited the failed partnership as a key reason for their resignation.

On paper, this outcome did not look good. The ALERT team had lost nearly six months pursuing the partnership; EPAM had lost a number of staff members as well as the time and money invested in the prototype. So what went wrong?

There were a number of factors that negatively affected the partnership.

The first issue was that the legal framework was put in place too late. While this in itself was not the biggest problem, clarifying the liabilities, timelines and deliverables at the beginning would have brought up problems much sooner. Although this would likely not have averted the end of the partnership, it may have done so much sooner, saving both parties time, money and heartbreak.

“Having a legal framework in place sooner could have helped and we should have pushed this sooner. At the time there was a lot of goodwill and so we did not feel it was needed.”

Matt Farrar, Vice President for Design, EPAM

Second, and the main reason for the end of the partnership, was that the scope of the project was too big and not flexible enough for a 50:50 partnership. Honouring the 50:50 partnership would have constituted an estimated 1,500 work days amounting to an estimated £600,000 at a 50% reduced rate. The software design sector is innately competitive, and even for a large company like EPAM all it takes is one bad quarter before having to start tightening the belt. When this happened, due to pressure by the donor the ALERT team was not able to accommodate changes to the timeline that would have been necessary for EPAM to continue the partnership.

So, has it all been bad? Luckily not.

“We lost a lot of time, but we also learned a lot of things.”

Andrew Collodel, ALERT Project Manager, HelpAge International

“It a shame but at least we learned a lot.”

Matt Farrar, Vice President for Design, EPAM

Both sides have learned from this experience; learnings which the ALERT team has already been able to apply. After renegotiating the partnership approach with the donor, a new software design company was selected to develop the prototype for the ALERT system on a standard service contract that did not contain a pro bono aspect. The prototype was completed by the end of June 2016 and has been demonstrated to over 25 agencies including UN agencies and a number of donors. The ALERT minimum viable product has advertised on a standard open tender with software design agencies, including EPAM invited to submit a proposal. The build of the MVP is expected to start by mid January 2017 and be field tested in mid 2017.

Discrete modules of the system ‘wish list’ that are currently not funded will be added to a list, and associated scope of work will be developed and shared with software companies to support the ALERT project, using their bench time on a pro bono basis. These modules are smaller, more flexible and not so tightly time constrained which provides software companies with the opportunity of...
effectively using their bench time for pro bono work. This approach will hopefully prove to be a more reasonable and realistic ask.

The partnership with EPAM has been terminated on an amicable basis, with the door still open for future collaborations. This can be largely contributed to the work by the project team on building strong relationships and communicating openly, even when the going got tough. No hard feelings remain from either side.

“No bridges have been burned.”

Matt Farrar, Vice President for Design, EPAM

EPAM have fully written off their work on the prototype and have transferred all intellectual property developed as part of the prototype. Furthermore, EPAM’s Vice President for Design is planning to continue working with ALERT on a voluntary basis in the capacity of a business strategist, helping ALERT to bring on board more partners that can help to realise the ambitious ALERT vision.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

The partnership journey of the ALERT project to date has been full of lessons learned. In this final section we want to highlight these key lessons about NGO and corporate sector partnerships and combine them with some practical advice on how to implement them.

Do not ask for too much.

Resources such as staff time or money are limited even for large corporate companies, and the support offered needs to be able to be absorbed without any threat of damage to profits. Martin Harris of Tumika who is supporting the ALERT team as an adviser, explained this from his longstanding experience in the sector.

“There has to be commercial value to the company. Otherwise one of two things will happen; they lose a big paying customer and cannot afford to do pro bono work, or they gain a big paying customer and no longer have time to do pro bono work. Either way, if you are not paying you will suffer.”

Martin Harris, Consultant, Tumika

A full 50:50 partnership for the development of the entire ALERT system as asserted by the donor was in hindsight never a realistic proposition. The current approach by the project to develop the prototype and Minimum Viable Product outside of a pro bono partnership model already has proven to be a better and more successful approach.

The type of company approached as part of a partnership obviously also makes a difference – while large companies in general are more likely to be able to absorb pro bono support, a pain point will be eventually reached, as was confirmed by all partners interviewed for this case study.

” THERE HAS TO BE COMMERCIAL VALUE ... IF YOU ARE NOT PAYING YOU WILL SUFFER"

Martin Harris, Tumika
“Cost would factor into our thinking eventually. If we end up spending heaps and heaps of time with wider parameters this would have been a challenge.”

Adrian Sim, Partner, Bristows LLP

However if pitched at the right level, even partnerships with small companies can be successful, as demonstrated with Blast. Hopefully this will prove to be true for the plan to realise the ALERT system wish list by dividing individual components into small scale pro bono projects.

**Be flexible.**

If you are receiving resources at a pro bono basis, you need to be willing and able to compromise on timelines or deliverables.

For example, while there was a contract in place between ALERT and Blast outlining the timeline and deliverables, both sides were willing to be flexible when it came to some aspects of delivery maintaining a good working relationship.

In the case of EPAM, had the timeline been more flexible, then the ALERT prototype and system could have likely been realised on a continued 50:50 partnership at a later point once the business was not under financial pressure anymore. The tight deadlines due to donor requirements however meant that this was not possible, bringing the partnership to an end.

“Once the company is under pressure, the business will do anything to make up the numbers and we just cannot justify spending resources on pro bono work then. At least not with the same aggressive timeline.”

Matt Farrar, Vice President for Design, EPAM

**A successful partnership needs clear parameters.**

A successful partnership requires a legal framework, contract or agreement that clearly outlines the parameters of the partnership, support provided and timelines. This is crucial for both sides to ensure goalposts do not shift halfway through the partnership.

In the case of partnerships facilitated through A4ID, both parties signed a contract outlining what is covered, which meant no misunderstanding or disappointment later on in the process.

A lack of legal framework has certainly been an issue for the ALERT - EPAM partnership; work commenced with only verbal agreements in place which led to challenges later related to liabilities, timelines and budgets.

**Always communicate.**

As with any relationship ongoing clear and open communication is key.

When Blast provided initial logo designs, the ALERT team was very clear in their communication that they were not suitable and why, which meant Blast was willing to provide further options quickly and without any extra cost.

With EPAM, there were periods of time where communication was stifled, restricted and unclear while issues around the legal framework and pro bono support had to be clarified internally. At the same time, EPAM felt communication was not always most efficient when requests were added by the ALERT team after scope of work had been agreed. However, both sides persisted in their communication and towards the end of the partnership had a frank and open discussions regarding
the project and partnership. Even though the partnership has not been successful for now, no bridges were burned.

“If you stay away from difficult discussions things tend to take on a life of their own.”

Adrian Sim, Partner, Bristows LLP

A good partnership requires good relationships.

Behind the ALERT project stand a team of dedicated individuals that live and breathe the ALERT vision.

ALERT is an exciting project, one that has the potential to transform organisational preparedness of humanitarian agencies and the ALERT team have taken the time and effort to build strong relationships by always communicating this vision to potential partners. When looking for a partner in the software design sector the project team took the time to travel to prospective partners, even though this required a lot of time and there was no guarantee of success. In the case of Blast, this was the deciding factor for the partnership and pro bono support received.

The “contagious determination and enthusiasm” of the team - as described by parties interviewed for the case study - and ongoing effort to convey the project vision to all parties involved have been an important factor contributing to the success of their partnerships.

“One of the great things about the ALERT system is the team’s passion for the project. Projects tend to succeed where there is passion. The team understands what needs to get one and they have vision. You can’t buy that.”

Martin Harris, Consultant, Tumika

This approach has created a strong buy in from partners and has resulted in a number of exceptional partnerships which have contributed invaluable resources such as expertise, staff time and money towards the ALERT project. In some cases this approach also led to some unexpected outcomes; for example, the project manager from EPAM is planning to continue supporting ALERT on a voluntary basis and in his own personal time.

What this case study has demonstrated is that if the ‘ask’ is right, there is flexibility, clear parameters, strong communication and time and effort is invested in building strong relationships, partnership models between the NGO and private sector can be successful and beneficial for both sides. We will continue to follow the ALERT project on their partnership journey to see whether lessons learned to date can indeed lead to a better approach to partnerships.

For more information about the ALERT system please visit http://www.alertpreparedness.org/

For more information about the Disasters and Emergencies Preparedness Programme please visit http://www.startnetwork.org/start-engage
The Disasters and Emergencies Preparedness Programme works to develop effective humanitarian response where it is needed most. This groundbreaking programme, one of the largest investments of its kind, is funded by UK Aid and managed collaboratively by the CDAC and Start Networks, leveraging the expertise of more than 50 member organisations.