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Responsible Research and Innovation & Digital Inclusiveness during Covid-19 Crisis in the Human Brain Project (HBP)

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ABSTRACT

Covid-19 changes the lives for all of us: Institutions and other places are closed; it is not possible to see friends and family personally and keeping distance is the topmost commandment. Therefore, most of us are working from home and digitalisation is on the way up in many aspects of life. The HBP has a long-lasting experience of interdisciplinary collaboration by virtually bridging distances because its involved partners are not only complex but also spatially remote. In these challenging times of the pandemic, the HBP's Diversity and Equal Opportunities Committee together with the Ethics Rapporteur Programme has started "I-include", an Initiative for Inclusive Digital Engagement to make sure that no one is left behind virtually and that diversity matters in digital collaborations. It offers recommendations based on practical experiences of HBP members. Considering this new framework during the current situation is a way to ensure that our digitally distributed work becomes a valuable and successful experience corresponding to the standards of Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI). RRI is a dynamic, iterative process in which all stakeholders in research and innovation become mutually responsive and share responsibility for both the process and its outcomes. Even and particularly in difficult times.

I-include - Initiative for Inclusive Digital Engagement

The HBP, and each individual contributing to it has experience of interdisciplinary collaboration by virtually bridging distances. Departing from the framework of Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI), the HBP has dedicated itself to foster equal opportunities, and with a learning attitude, serve as a best practice example for projects characterised by complexity and spatial remoteness of involved partners. Embracing diversity, inclusiveness is especially relevant to make the nature of our distributed work a valuable, successful experience, in general and especially in this Covid-19 crisis with most of us working from home. The following recommendations are based on practical experience of HBP members.

1. Social and Family Life

Social and family life means to take care of each other, in a balanced way, with the means, hearts and minds we can offer. For example, family and other social significant obligations vary depending on the changed living conditions. In times of crises, women are often hit harder because existing gender inequalities are exacerbated.

The HBP recommends thus to

- Keep in touch with your employees or team members, show interest and understanding for their private life domains. As long as team members work from their home offices: Don't expect the same results, give more time, ensure additional feedback.
- Share experiences and ideas, information that might be helpful like games or learning platforms for children, how to support family members or friends in need for help.

2. Stress and Anxiety

People react differently to a crisis, being confronted with bad news and statistics, being forced into different working modes and new forms of obligations, being cut off from well-established routines, colleagues and friends is stressful. How this stress can be processed depends not only on the personality, but also on the specific circumstances of life, which bring stability, or other factors of uncertainty, for example, the financial situation, personal health or remoteness of friends and family members.

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The HBP recommends thus to

- Ask team members, how they are doing and what might help them. Make sure it is safe to speak up, for example, by revealing your concerns. Listen carefully and send messages of understanding. If adequate, offer virtual coaching.
- Focus on "what needs to be done, and how to do it": a working relationship must focus on work, and set a good framework enabling everyone to contribute to the best of their means.

3. Career Stage, Roles and Responsibilities

The impact a pandemic like Covid-19 can have on the professional situation depends, among others, on the educational background or scientific discipline and career stage of a person. While some can make progress by working from home, others might depend on lab work, contributions to conferences or a research stay abroad. Especially for early career stage scientists contracts might not be save or at severe risk due to travel restrictions, no or restricted access to labs and further resources crucially needed to progress.

The HBP recommends thus to

- Set up individual meetings dedicated to career planning and to share in an open dialogue experiences and thoughts, to learn how others have managed this situation and support each other. Use your networks to offer mentoring and sponsoring, or become an active mentor yourself.
- Clarify with your university or organisations the different options of contracting under the given circumstances; provide as much security as possible. Ensure that letters of recommendation address special achievements under difficult conditions.

4. Team Spirit and Virtual Collaboration

Successful collaboration and team spirit often derive from joint activities in close proximity, the opportunity to get to know and understand each other both professionally and privately. Virtual environments lack the opportunity to dedicate the same amount of time and involve all senses, which is even more critical when cultural and professional differences come into play. Different cultures and personalities also lead to different ways of written conversation. Misunderstanding arises easily from written communication, especially when people are stressed and work on laptops and might overlook important information addressed in an email. Virtual meetings are better than emails and also better for the environment than meetings that involve at least several flights to get together. Still, they are more exhausting because movement in between meetings is missing, voices sound different, and it is unclear who looks at what on the monitor.

The HBP recommends thus to

- Make sure there is enough time to get to know different work style preferences, explore and value talents and experiences, understand what everyone needs to get into top form in the virtual world. Build safety and offer a variety of different collaborative channels and ways to contribute. Check with everyone on a regular basis and get in touch with those members you might not have heard of for a while.
- Be aware that emails might not arrive, end up in spam filters, the content might be overlooked or hard to interpret. Do not hesitate to ask twice if the message came, pick up your phone or favorite VC channel to clarify the details.
- Make participants aware of the challenges of virtual meetings as well as the technical options of organising the meeting. Send documents beforehand, give enough time and opportunity to respond via different channels. Also, make use of chat rooms to raise questions and answer them in the correct order.
- Keep meetings short and mindful and keep up in follow up meetings. Respect privacy and do not make it obligatory to have cameras turned on. Make everyone aware of the opportunity to show their names only, a preselected picture or a virtual background instead of their private environment.

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