



Practical Advice for Future DN Coordinators

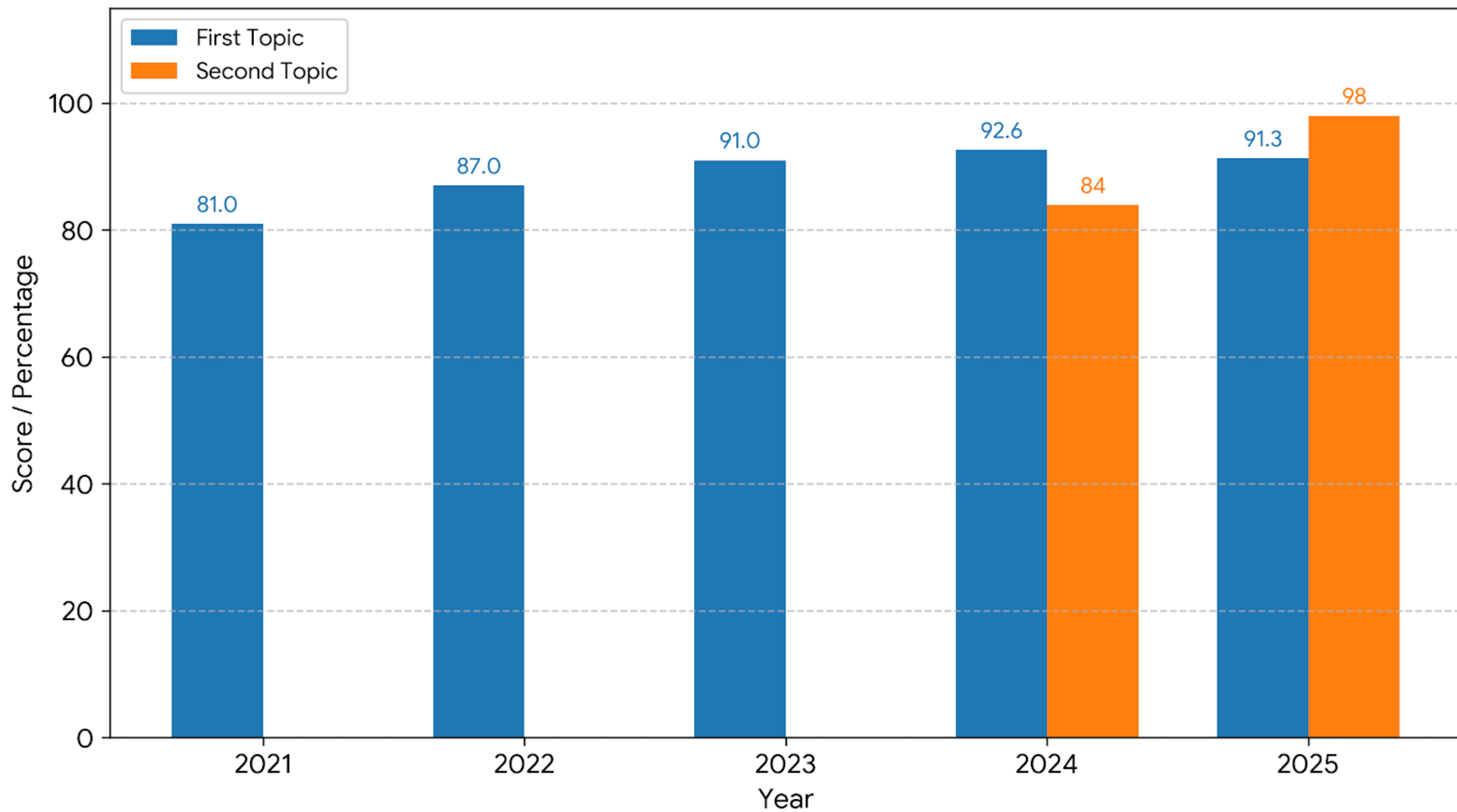
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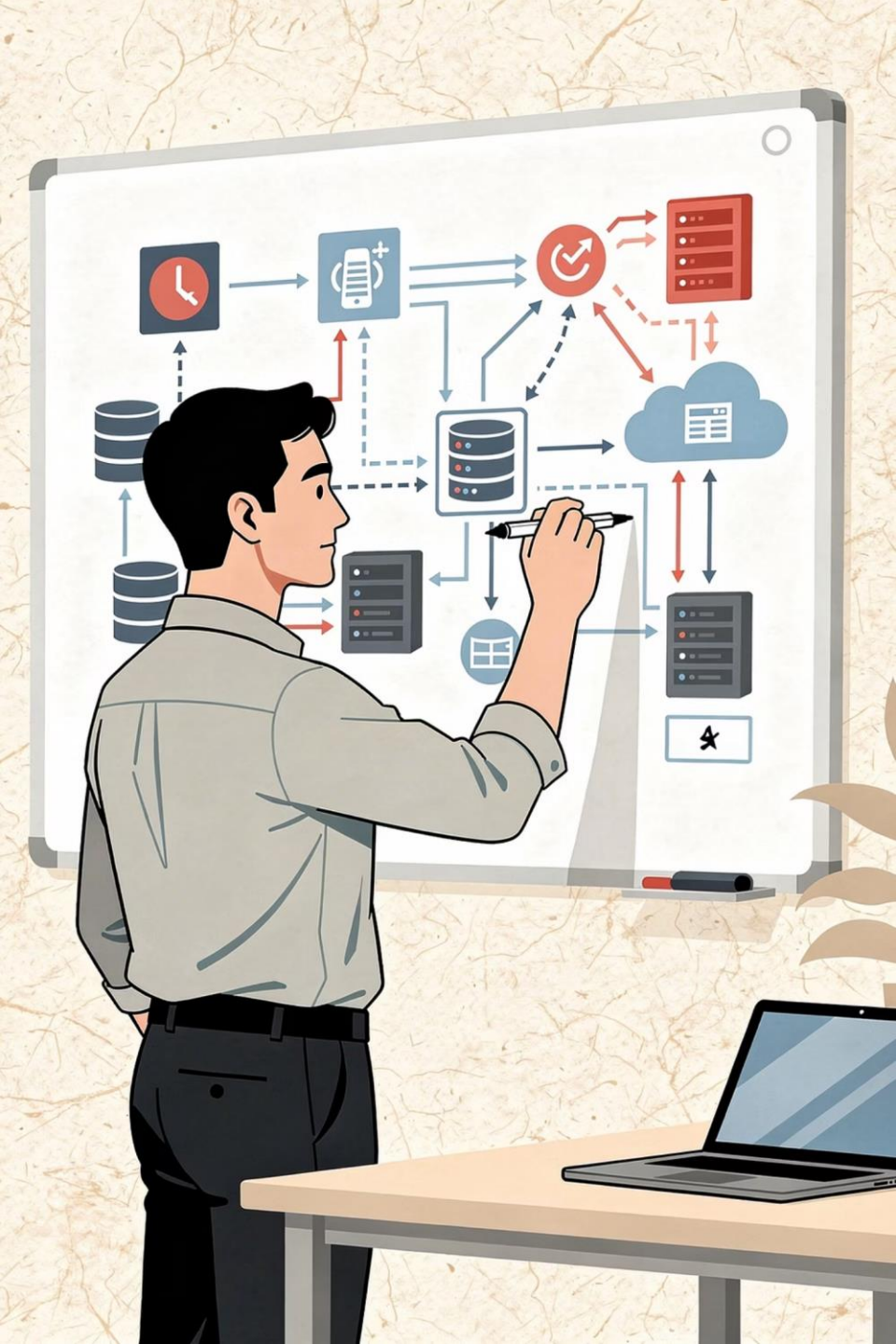
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Yearly Topic Scores Comparison



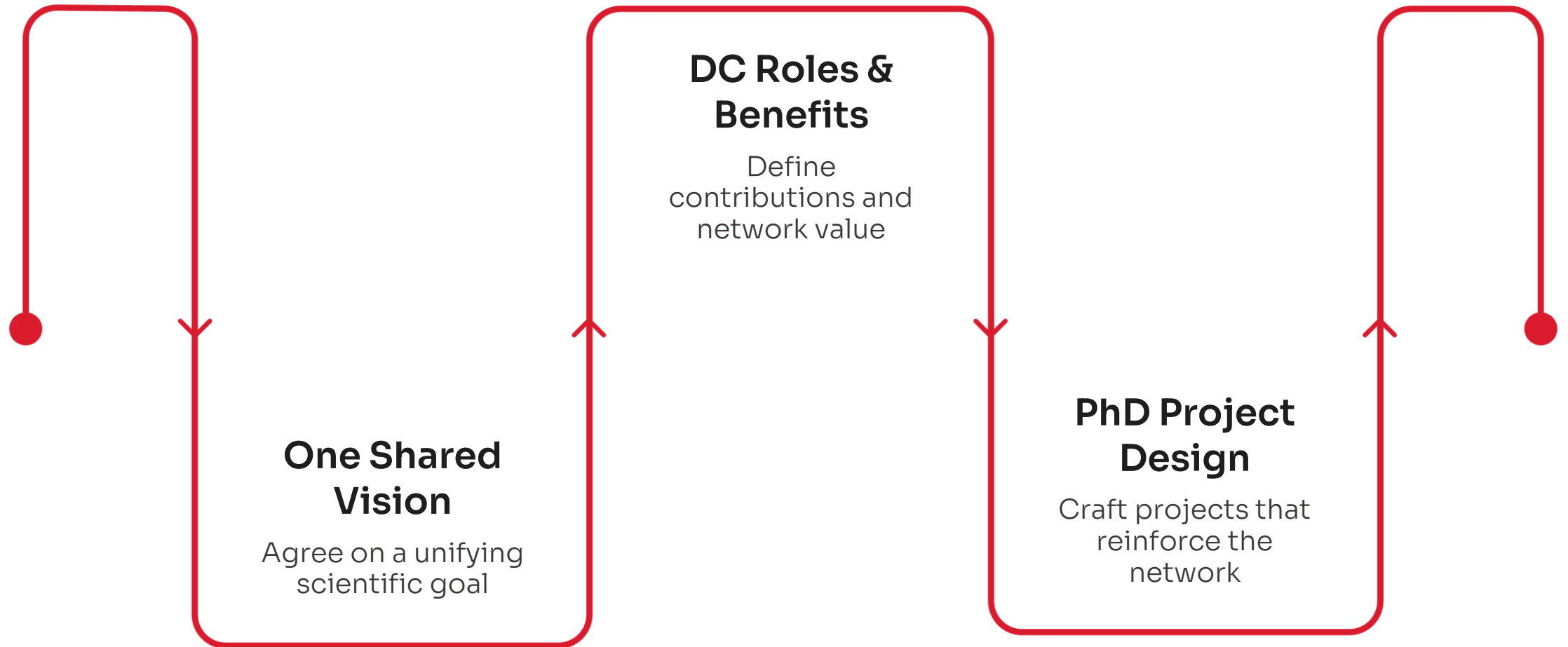


Lesson 1

Design the Network Before Designing the Projects

Don't start with 15 PhD topics. Start with **one unified scientific vision**, then ask how each Doctoral Candidate (DC) contributes to — and benefits from — the others. Evaluators fund a network, not 15 independent PhDs. The interconnection between DCs is what separates a genuine network from a bundled grant application.

From Isolated Projects to a Shared Vision



This sequence forces you to articulate the added value of the network at every stage. If a DC's project could be completed alone at a single institution without loss, it doesn't belong in a DN. The network logic must be visible, not assumed.

Lesson 2

Make Every DC Truly Mobile

Mobility is not a checkbox. Don't simply state where a secondment will take place — **explain why**. Evaluators expect a clear scientific justification for every mobility: what unique expertise or infrastructure exists at that institution, and why this training cannot be obtained anywhere else. Unmotivated secondments are a red flag that weakens the entire work package.



The Three Questions Every Secondment Must Answer

Why that institution?

Identify the specific expertise, infrastructure, or industrial platform that makes this partner uniquely qualified to host this particular DC at this stage of their project.

What will the DC learn?

Specify the techniques, methods, software, or professional skills that will be acquired — and explain how they feed back into the main research objectives.

Why can't this happen at home?

Make the case that the training is genuinely unavailable at the recruiting institution. If you cannot make this argument convincingly, reconsider the secondment.

Lesson 3

Build Strong Beneficiary–Associated Partner Relationships

Associated Partners are **far more than letter providers**. Treated well, they become future beneficiaries, future proposal partners, and long-term scientific collaborators. The relationship you build during proposal writing often outlasts the project itself.

Invite promising partners early — even if they cannot formally be beneficiaries this time. Giving them a meaningful role as Associated Partners keeps them engaged and builds the trust needed for future consortia.

What Associated Partners Can Become



Full beneficiaries in the next call



Partners in Staff Exchange or COST Action proposals



Co-authors on joint publications



End-users who strengthen exploitation plans

Lesson 4

Include Non-Academic Beneficiaries Whenever Possible

Even in a "standard" DN, industrial or non-academic beneficiaries **materially strengthen your proposal**. They add intersectoral training, enhance innovation potential, and make your exploitation plan credible. But before listing a company as a beneficiary, verify three things.

💰 Financial Capacity

Can the SME sustain four years of participation, cover pre-financing, and handle audit requirements?

🏢 Administrative Capability

Does the company have staff able to manage reporting, timesheets, and Grant Agreement obligations?

📋 Real Commitment

Is leadership genuinely committed — not just a supportive email from a contact who may leave next year?



Lesson 5

Be Explicit About Infrastructure

Vague descriptions of training destroy evaluator confidence. Never write *"The student will receive training at Partner X."* Instead, make the implementation almost visible from the proposal text itself.

Specify the **laboratory, equipment, pilot plant, characterization facilities, software, and industrial platforms** involved — and name the person who supervises each activity. Evaluators should be able to picture a DC arriving on day one and knowing exactly where to go and what to do.

Replace vague with specific

~~The student will receive training at Partner X.~~

✓ DC3 will spend months 13–16 at Partner X, using the NMR facility (600 MHz, available 40 h/month) and the pilot-scale bioreactor (200 L), under the daily supervision of Dr. Y, to complete Deliverable D3.2.

Lesson 6

Supervisor Agreements Matter More Than You Think

Many implementation problems originate **before submission**, not after funding. Before you submit, every supervisor must have discussed and agreed on the key parameters of their DC's employment and research. Surprises during Grant Agreement preparation are costly — and sometimes fatal to the project launch.



DC Location

Which institution is the primary employer? Is the supervisor willing to host the DC full-time?



IP & Data Ownership

Who owns results produced during secondments? This is especially critical when industrial partners are involved.



Supervision Effort

How many hours per week will each supervisor realistically commit? Is this reflected in the proposal?



Publications

Are open access requirements understood by all supervisors, including those from industry?



Lesson 7

Think Beyond the Proposal

When selecting partners, ask yourself: **"Would I want to work with this person for the next 10 years?"** DNs routinely seed collaborations that continue long after the project ends — through Staff Exchanges, Horizon Europe bids, COST Actions, ERC collaborations, and joint publications. You are not just building a consortium for a grant; you are building a scientific community.

- ❑ Choose people, not only expertise. Scientific fit matters — but trust, communication style, and shared values matter just as much over a four-year project.

Lesson 8

Don't Underestimate Recruitment

The First Real Challenge

Excellent science is useless if you cannot recruit excellent DCs. Recruitment is consistently the first major challenge coordinators face after funding is confirmed → and it is rarely planned for during proposal writing.

Think Early About These Factors

- **City attractiveness** — quality of life, housing, international community
- **Salary competitiveness** — living allowance vs. local cost of living
- **Visa and work permit timelines** — especially for non-EU candidates
- **Laboratory readiness** — will the space and equipment be ready on day one?
- **Onboarding process** — who guides the DC through administrative setup?

Lesson 9

Keep the Science Ambitious but the Management Simple

Complex science is not only acceptable — it is expected. Complex management is not. If an evaluator needs to read a work package description twice to understand who does what and when, you have a problem. Clarity in implementation signals that you have thought rigorously about execution, not just ambition.

If reviewers need to read something twice to understand implementation, simplify it. The implementation chapter is not the place to demonstrate scientific depth — that belongs in the research objectives.



Six Key Lessons at a Glance

01

Network logic first

One scientific vision drives all DC projects — interconnection is the evaluator's primary criterion.

03

Choose beneficiaries carefully; choose associated partners generously

Verify SME capacity. Invite promising partners early even if they can't be beneficiaries yet.

05

Plan recruitment before funding arrives

Salary, visa timelines, city attractiveness, and lab readiness all affect your ability to hire.

02

Justify every mobility

Each secondment needs a scientific reason, not just a destination.

04

Be explicit about infrastructure, supervision, and training

Name the lab, the equipment, and the supervisor. Make implementation visible from the text.

06

Think about implementation while writing — not after funding

Supervisor agreements, IP, and DC location must be settled before submission, not during GA preparation.

The One Thing to Remember

A DN is an ecosystem, not a bundle.

Every doctoral candidate should be able to point to something they learned — a method, a perspective, a collaboration — that would have been **impossible without the network**. If they can't, the proposal has described 15 independent PhDs with a shared budget line.

These lessons come from real coordinator experience. They are the kinds of practical insights people rarely hear until they have coordinated a DN themselves — and by then, the first proposal has already been submitted.

- ❑ Good luck with your proposal. The network you design on paper is the network your DCs will live in for four years — make it worth their time.