

Writing Bids For Funding

support@rsp.ac.uk

Overview

In these times of increasing pressures on public funding, competition is growing and in order to secure the resources we need to develop and enhance our existing services or start up something new we are required to seek and bid for external grants. This briefing paper provides some practical advice and links to further information aimed at helping you write successful bids.

Before you start - ask yourself “is it worth it?”

As a rule of thumb, we can estimate that 3 out of every 4 bids will fail. If the chances of having a proposal funded are 1 in 4, the first thing that any potential bid writer should ask is “is it worth it?” The amount of time it takes to put together a good proposal is significant, and in my experience of responding to JISC calls for funding I estimate that writing, editing, costing a bid can take 100 hours of staff time.

So how do you decide whether to bid? Lewis in his book “Bids, Tenders & Proposals” 1 gives an idea of the kind of criteria to consider when weighing up the potential opportunity against the costs of putting together a bid. Some of you will need to consider are: skills and experience you can offer, your competitive situation, and relationship with your strategy.

If a decision is made to go ahead and put together a proposal, the next most important thing to remember is this. The bid writing process needs managing.

If yes, plan and manage the process

It may seem obvious but it’s often overlooked that the bid writing process needs managing. If you are responsible for putting together a bid you’ll have a deadline for submission, limited time (most likely because this will be on top of your “day job”), and

you’ll need backing and approval for the proposal from senior representatives at your organisation. You’ll also need budget information, probably technical information, a range of skills embodied in different people in your department (and outside), and you may need partners from other institutions. Gathering information from others, gaining support, getting feedback on drafts of the bid will all need careful planning and managing. Putting together a bid can be like managing a mini project in itself. Advice from a colleague just starting out with bid writing:

“Allow the maximum amount of time possible to write the bid and start early. It will take longer than anticipated because you don’t foresee all the issues”.

How to make a compelling case

The JISC Guide to Bidding for Grant Funding 2 presents a challenging list of criteria for successful bids and useful guidance on how to meet those criteria. This document offers a whole range of advice for successful bidding. Its pointers include:

- Clarify project outputs and demonstrate wider benefits to the education and research community
- Describe how it meets the criteria set out in the call
- Demonstrate that an initial assessment of project risks has been undertaken
- Provide a sound initial project plan and demonstrate robust project management arrangements
- Demonstrate how it is aligned with the objectives of your college or institution
- Document proposed dissemination, embedding and evaluation mechanisms
- Comment on sustainability issues when project funding ceases

So how do you go about responding to all of this? Bit by bit you will need to put together the jigsaw of a

compelling case, the pieces of which will most likely include:

- well-articulated and evidenced user need and demand,
- clear aims, objectives, outputs,
- a first draft overview project plan,
- risk analysis,
- stakeholder analysis,
- dissemination and communication plan,
- description of benefit to be delivered (this is not just a list of project outputs),
- consideration of value for money so that your budget is appropriate to the outcomes,
- outputs and benefits,
- articulation of impact and evaluation process so that you know whether your project has been successful,
- consideration of sustainability issues – what will happen when the funding grant runs out,
- and the budget presented according to the requirements of the funder.

There could be more or less pieces depending on the funder so do take time to read through call for funding carefully and take the advice of “Writing Better Fundraising Applications” (and Lewis) to use checklists all the way through the bid writing process starting with noting all the key information from the initial call for funding. You may want to refer to other RSP papers e.g. Key stakeholders and benefits, planning checklists (particularly before you start)]

What can go wrong?

As mentioned in section one, only one bid in four is likely to be successful. So why do some bids fail? In my experience, some of the things identified by bid reviewers in their feedback on bids that fail to get funding are:

- Lack of evidence of user demand
- Unclear aims and objectives
- Unclear deliverables
- Fit with between the scope of the call and the bid proposal
- What’s new in relation to what is already available

It isn’t possible to consider all of these points in detail. In short, I would recommend an email or telephone call to the contact at the funding agency to sound them out about whether your idea for a bid is in scope for the call for funding. I would also recommend that you ask someone else outside your immediate team/colleagues to review a draft of your bid and give you feedback on the clarity of what you are proposing to do and deliver. They will spot whether your case is clearly articulated to the person who does not know you, your work and your context. It is worth focusing on demand and evidence for it – this not always easy especially if working “ahead of the adoption curve”. Do draw on user feedback, surveys, market research (interviews, focus groups etc.), strategies, widely applicable reports into behaviour and trends. In fact, anything that paints a credible picture of why your project is needed, solves a problem, or improves stakeholders’ situations.

So why do it?

Bid writing is hard work, resource intensive, time consuming and often doomed to failure. So why do it? Regardless of whether your proposal is successful or not, bid writing can be a rewarding, and even enjoyable process. I asked a handful of colleagues “what aspects of bid writing do you enjoy the most or find the most rewarding?” and this is what they said:

“The prospect of being able to do something different and exciting motivates me. Finishing it is good - clicking on Send is a great feeling! Making the case- especially when you hit on something you think is a real clincher.”

“I most enjoy working as a team to produce a high quality bid. Quite often the bids are completed under pressure to a definite deadline. This means that the team have to focus on the work together and it can be extremely rewarding when the bid is completed on time to a high standard.”

“Researching the user need and finding evidence for the project from secondary or primary research is satisfying.”

“Finding the perfect partner for a project who is keen, enthusiastic and professional about putting the bid in.”

References & Further information

1. Lewis, H. (2009). Bids, Tenders & Proposals. 3rd Ed., Kogan Page, 2009. Chapter 6 pp 60-71
2. http://www.jisc.ac.uk/fundingopportunities/funding_calls/2010/09/grant1110.aspx
3. Eastwood, M., Norton, M. (2010). Writing Better Fundraising Applications. A practical guide. 4th ed., Directory of Social Change, 2010