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Money, Money, Money

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Money, Money, Money!

(Lead in:)

Collected from researchers who served as reviewers for large national and international funding bodies, we share hands-on advice for writing a good funding proposal.

(Body:)

Perhaps more than ever, being a successful academic entails a pronounced ability to acquire external funds to carry out research projects. Invariably, the process consists in matching one's own ideas with requirements set by various funding agencies. Some of these requirements are formal (e.g., the budget part), while others are rather informal, and indeed completely human (e.g., the project description).

Below follows hands-on advice collected from researchers who have served as reviewers for large national and international funding bodies. Although the details may always differ in important respects between funders, some things may count as robust insights, and can assist anyone in writing a good proposal.

Naturally, a good project idea is the *conditio sine qua non*. Importantly, do avoid giving the impression that your project might lead to *no result*. Of course, no one can know *exactly* how a project will develop. Yet, anyone (with a bit of a brain) can reason in advance through a project's possible outcomes. You therefore want to be able to clearly state that *any* such outcome can be reasonably interpreted as a meaningful result. Falling short of this means your funder potentially wastes money. Bad, bad idea!

This one out of the way, let's turn to some more hands-on insights:

1. Know thy audience: As far as possible, try to understand who will be on the review committee, and try to learn about the values (instrumental or other) endorsed by the funding agency, then adjust your application accordingly. Avoid sending the exact same application to two or more funding bodies. Always change it according to the specific call. Do read the funder's instructions carefully (e.g., when they write *basic research*, then *applied research* will not get funded), then use these instructions as a template for your application.

2. Have a model: It is not the worst idea to ask a colleague who has recently been successful with a specific funding body to make his or her application available to you. The more recent this application is, the better the chances that modeling your application on your colleague's (in formal respects; *not* with respect to content) is a successful strategy, insofar as the panel of reviewers, and their preferences, are similar. Moreover, reading a good application, or several of these, will help you "pick up the right tone." After all, you need to write a persuasive text, rather than a lab report.

3. Dot your i-s and cross your t-s: Do not overstate your budget (even if you have reason to expect the funder will "cut down" the budget). Never submit an application that is half-baked, or contains errors in grammar or style; this can only backfire, even if your project is novel and well founded. The same holds for a sloppy budget or an incomplete reference list, an unrealistic project schedule, evidence of egomania (such as stating "I am a promising junior researcher"), or other signs of disrespect for the funder's *modus operandi* (no matter what you think of it).

4. Be clear: Remember that your application may be evaluated not only (and perhaps not at all) by experts in your own field, but by those from neighboring or completely different fields. So avoid jargon, and make clear—in ways that your hairdresser can readily understand (yes, do ask!)—*what* it is you are doing, and *why*, and *how*, and *where*. This makes a good popular science description all the more important. In the worst case, it may be all that a reviewer looks at before deciding to read your application, or not. Good examples of what clear English is can be obtained from publications such as the *Economist* (you don't have to buy their political views) or the *New York Times* (likewise), then copy their style of writing.

5. Be interesting: An application is, after all, a document giving reasons why you (rather than someone else) should receive money. Any sign of lack of enthusiasm on your part will not get you funded, but neither will it help if you sound overly and thus unrealistically enthusiastic. The same holds for pulling too many catchy phrases (such as "nano-something"), for a generally boring style of writing, or for dropping names of important people not directly related to your project.

6. Your CV counts: Imagine a review panel having to choose between two equally good projects, because there is not enough money to fund both. Chances are that the person with the more interesting curriculum vitae will receive the funds. Here, "interesting" may refer as much to your publications and other academic achievements as it may refer to general aspects of your personality, e.g., you inclination to work as an independent researcher, without your supervisors (as evidenced, for instance, by your publication list or your extra-curricular activities). If on this occasion you should find out that you completely lack personality, you would probably do well to develop it quickly.

7. Be (not too) novel: Avoid submitting a project that reapplies work you undertook earlier (e.g., during your PhD studies). At the same time, you will need to demonstrate—usually in the part of the application called "State of the Art" (or similar)—that you have the requisite knowledge to successfully bring your project home. Of course, this means "writing out a check" which to cash-in will always remain uncertain to some extent. Learn to live with this uncertainty. It is the only rationally controllable way for genuinely new knowledge to come about.

8. Be international: Having an international group as project partners is a jolly good idea, as it will help you avoid getting stuck (in nepotistic relations) with your old supervisor or colleagues. Moreover, it demonstrates your orientation towards international research and, in order to be reported truthfully, does of course require that you have indeed made contacts with researchers

outside your home university—all of which will make you a better person, and your project more cutting-edge than it otherwise would be. So keeping doing so whenever you can!

9. Start and finish on time: Some funders place their calls once or twice a year, others have a running deadline. Find out what is the case, and try to plan six months ahead. It can be a challenge to prepare an application in little time, but there is usually no other point to it. Make sure you have ample time left for language checking, and ask a good friend (one willing to give critical remarks) to read both an early draft and the final piece. Finally, avoid submitting two minutes before the deadline—it's a stupid risk to take!

10. Never give up: While you can't always win, you can of course always loose (lest you have learnt from past failures). Indeed, there is no guarantee that your project will get funded, and you will for the most part not even receive a good explanation why it was rejected (which, in some cases, has to do with your legal rights to challenge a decision taken by a funding body). You will need to learn to ignore such details. Revise or redraft your application in the light of any useful comment you receive, and resubmit on a different occasion. Most importantly, don't take it personally—ask around, we have all had applications rejected—and don't waste feelings on this, neither in anticipation of funding success, nor in frustration if you did not succeed. Getting funded isn't just a game; but it's not the end of the world either!

To find an open call for proposals, visit www.researchprofessional.com to create your own funding search (with results delivered to your inbox), and—for EU projects or similar—contact Lund University's Research Services.

For open positions in EU projects, see especially http://ec.europa.eu/euraxess/index.cfm

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