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MOST COMMON PITFALLS WITHIN CREATION OF PROJECT PROPOSALS FOR EU FUNDING

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Abstract

In this funding cycle, method of work of EU financing sources, along with same success rate, remained very similar to previous ones. So far gathered evaluators` experience, demonstrates the presence of same pitfalls in this financial round, as in previous ones. This paper addresses most common and obvious pitfalls associated with the process of project proposal creation, usual reasons for their occurrence and with some recommendations to overcome them.

Keywords: EU funding, project proposal, project proposal pitfalls, consortium, task distribution, activities

1. Introduction [1-5]

During previous EU funding era (period 2007-2014), there were over 400 funds, from which financial (direct and indirect) support could have been drawn. Re-composition of these sources, while introducing new round of EU financing, did not change the situation much, in terms of number of funding sources. Other aspect of funds utilization remained the same: call for proposals, i.e. the necessity to create and submit project proposal, in one or two stage process. Average success rate was 8-11%, with new funding cycle demonstrating, till date, more or less, the same percentage. Although, the orders of evaluating parameters have been somewhat changed, and are:

- Quality and efficiency of the implementation
- Impact
- Excellence

The same success rate, along with evaluators` experience, demonstrates the presence of same pitfalls in this financial round, as in previous ones.

2. Most common pitfalls [1-5]

<u>1. Wrong composition of the consortium</u>.

Within published call for proposal certain criteria for consortium are established, but, usually, defining only the minimum number of participants (usual number is three, except in some limited number of cases), and that is, very often, interpreted as sufficient number, leading towards too small consortium. This especially happens when scope of work, available resources, and desired outcome(s) are being put aside, or are not being properly seen through. Usual reasoning behind this approach is either "*We can do this alone, we do not need anyone outside our little company*", or "*We want to keep all the money*". Response to that attitude is that if one can do something alone - it is not the case for EU funding schemes, and that EU is promoting cooperation and distribution of work load, results, knowledge and financial resources.

Opposite situation happens when too big consortiums are created, due to the wish that consortium composition appears more serious (reasoning is that larger number of consortium members will carry more weight with evaluators), or there is pre-requirement for one or more consortium participants. Usually that pre-requisite is participation of one or more SME(s) - so required number of SME(s) is adjoined to the consortium. Or, when EU funding is perceived as good source of money, so "*let's introduce good friend's company into the consortium, so they can get some money*". This, again, happens when the distribution of the workload, associated with necessary resources for goal achievement, is neglected. This approach leads to one mistake immediately noticed by the evaluators: role of some partner.

Desire to work with known partners is understandable, as is the connections existing among similar companies within one region (for example neighboring countries). But, creation of consortium of that provenance is not a good way to go, since the pre-requisite that impact and knowledge distribution for EU funded projects must be at least on EU, if not world level, is being dropped out.

<u>2. Lack of understanding of the documents</u>

Whichever the founding source is, always there are available documents, supporting that funding scheme, intended for the use of proposers. Main document, in which problem of interest is defined, along with expected solution/goal to be achieved, all of it accompanied with timetable with expected dates of interest is called work plan. Noticeable is that proposers, very often, read only call for proposals (Call fiche), in which summary of the work-plan is presented, along with mentioned timetable. This approach leads directly to not understanding what the identified problem is, and what level/kind of solution has to be provided in exchange for public funding. Also, this leads to confusion on number of consortium participants, and expected level of public funds contribution, thus maximally diminishing chances for successful project proposal submission.

Even if work plan has been studied, it might not be enough: for example, it could be written that ''…solution for processing of large quantities of real time data is required…''. Appropriate document, defining what that large quantity is, has to be found. These kinds of documents are public and available; it is only a matter of time needed to find exact explanation.

3. Lack of understanding of prescribed goal/interest

In majority of the cases problem is pre-defined in work plan and supporting documents, along with the goal realized project must achieve, constituting top-down approach. On the other hand, proposers have pre-defined idea, of their own, usually developed in line of own engagement, and again, usually without consulting of relevant EU documents, but with a strong wish for that idea development to be financed by public funds. In that case, tendency, on the proposers' side is to try to find any call for proposals remotely resembling to their interest and try to "squeeze in the idea". Some extreme cases, when proposers did submit their proposals, even if the call was, clearly, intended for NCP network, to which they do not belong. This attitude leads to complete "miss of the target", set by EC. Other, more radical approach is "*This call should be about this, I/we will write the project and explain to the Commission how this is important/genial/revolutionary....*".

In principle, "I/we will explain..." attitude is sound one, but only during the programming stage of the next funding cycle, around year and a half before current one ends. In all other stages, it is a pure waste of time. Both situations derive from proposers being in love with own idea, perceiving it as something of outmost importance, displaying a bit of autistic approach to way how public funding works.

4. Lack of understanding of Guideline for applicants

Every Call for proposal is accompanied with set of documents necessary for submitting of proposal and supporting its creation. One of these documents, usually, is Guideline for applicants, which contains necessary explanations (including what form of justification should be provided beneath which headline in the project proposal template, as well as other useful information) and examples, and, thus, very often, comprises of more pages than main text-body of the proposal should include. Additionally, that document contains a very important segment: - evaluation grid/table. In that table, overview of evaluation criteria are listed, along with the questions concerning that particular criterion. Those are the questions that will guide evaluator in his/hers work, meaning that there is a clear presentation (yielding a supportive role for the proposers) of the successful project proposal creation "trick": answer the evaluator's questions. Good project proposal will posses explanations provided, which are in line with Guideline, but having in mind mentioned table, i.e. mentioned questions. Never the less it is noticeable that very often this document is neglected, almost ignored, again, usually, due to the "*...I shell explain to them...*", and/or "*...I know what to put down on the paper...*" thinking matrix. In all fairness, it should be noted that there are "tips and tricks", acquired through experience, not presented within supporting documents, which proposers with lack of experience do not notice, but, utilization of that kind of knowledge differentiates outstanding or excellent project proposals from good ones, not from ones of poor quality.

5. Unverifiable sources of information

A very common pitfall, associated with lack of experience in project proposal creation. It is additionally enhanced if main "writers" background lies out of scientific community - which is accustomed to reference and sources of information quoting within papers. Other reasons for lack of sources of information within core text are *"...it takes too much space to quote references, a space needed to explain how much this idea is a great one....*" or "*…believe me on my word...*". Situation does not change when too local, too obscure or not well known and acknowledged source is stated. In all of the cases, what neglected is that credible sources quoting enhances the credibility of the proposal (especially, since evaluators are from the area dealt with in the proposal, and there is a very good chance they know those sources and information contained within them). In addition, what majority of the proposers do not realize is that evaluators are more in the position of investigators, searching what is wrong with the proposal, making sure that the-best-value-for-money principle is secured.

6. Unclear starting- and end-point, prescribed impact not reached

Every project financed by public/EU funds must have a beyond-state-of-the-art result. It is expected that proposal is created by a proposer/consortium dealing in the area and being at the-state-of-the-art or having a clear knowledge where that state-of-the-art level is, thus being capable of clearly depicting it. This level should be pictured as a pillar, whose height is defined (again, clearly) by that level. Justification on that pillar's height, i.e. what is keeping it from being at a higher level (a.k.a. constraints) should be provided. Next step is to depict which of these constraints will be addressed and how, providing a clear picture where the result of funded project will lead – to which level. This result should, also, be pictured as a pillar, whose height is defined by a level of knowledge, or technology, or else, attained at the end of the project, i.e. after achieving the project goal, providing clearly defined new state-of-the-art level. if the ''height'' of both pillars is clearly defined, the difference between before the project state-of-the-art, and after it, defines the ''beyond'' component, which is measurable (a very important aspect of the proposal: for progress to be clearly measurable). Last step would consist of analysis whether that ''beyond'' component corresponds with one required by relevant EU documents, i.e. is prescribed impact reached or not.

Very often proposers do skip this line of steps, and the tendency of being encapsulated within the similar way of engagement of similar legal, i.e. within the surrounding, is visible. This implies knowledge on the-state-of-the-art, but it may be on local, rather than on EU or world level.

7. Work load not distributed properly

As stated in 1), in cases when composition of the consortium is not well thought through, problem(s) with role of some partner emerges. If some person (legal or natural), does not have well justified role, in the core text; if necessary expertise does not suit the call; if tasks multiply and/or overlap across the partners - that, immediately stands out, demonstrating that EU does not get best value-for-money, since there is "dead weight", in form of unnecessary project partner(s) presence, whose lack of work, and/or expertise is to be paid for. Since composition of the consortium is one of the main checkpoints for the evaluators, this is not going to happen.

Regardless of consortium size and composition, more problems with partner roles can immerge and are associated with core competences, capabilities, experience, past track record and available resources. Core competence problem is displayed when some legal entity is interested, at all cost, to participate in EU financed project, with area of engagement "*not exactly right, but, at some point of view - close enough*", and with project coordinator inexperienced to recognize this, or interested in extending the work to particular company. That is why most successful consortium leaders work with trusted and checked collaborates, and carefully check any new partner profile and references.

Project proposals with company, few people strong, few thousand euro in capital, with past track record of few projects (project partner role) worth under hundred thousand Euros, proposed as a coordinator of consortium of over 10 partners, with proposal several millions euro worth, have been seen, demonstrating lack of proper task distribution within consortium. Also, legal entity, previously only partner on national size project (order of value under 50 thousand euro), appearing as WP (worth several hundred thousand euro) leader, have also been seen, demonstrating, again, poor task distribution within the consortium.

8. Inconsistencies and its connection to activities

Preparation of project proposal is time consuming and a bit of a "moving target", meaning it is evolving through time (to remind: around 12 months). Usually, it is not written in one pass, but there are certain time disruptions, which can lead to certain inconsistencies. For example, the number of perceived conferences to be organized, instead of 2 at the beginning of the work, comes up to 4, but at the beginning of the text 2 remains, while in some later part of the text 4 appears, leading the evaluator into confusion. This especially happens when more persons are writing the text and integration is not done, because it was not deemed necessary or there was a lack of time (late start of preparation, and, thus, deadline time pressure). It is important to execute this integration (especially in case of multiple persons writing the proposal, since different people have different writing styles, and difference between them will be noticeable). Checking the consistency of the text can be a problem to person(s) writing it, since, after all that time spent on writing, and due to the information saturation, when reading what is on paper or screen, the brain does not read what is written but what it expects to be written.

Other inconsistencies are associated with depicted activities, and occur in cases of wrong consortium composition and poor task distribution within the proposed consortium, i.e. when work to be done was not seen through properly. There is a simple cycle: problem identified by EC → project general goal and specific goals (denominating what will be achieved) → activities (demonstrating who, when, how and why something will be done) → resources (demonstrating with what something will be done), which has to be followed and justified, with clear causal string. Any deviation will be highly noticeable.

9. Late start of preparation

There are a few main pitfalls connected to the start of preparation:

- first one occurs when interested party downloads templates for project preparation and submission, and if encountering it for the first time, or not having enough experience on the project preparation process, gets spooked by the looks of it and its requirements. Usual reaction is in line with: ''*It is too complicated for me…, or,… I do not have the time (knowledge) for this…*'', and the usual result is withdrawal from the creation of the proposal
- second one occurs when interested party downloads templates for project preparation and submission and deduces that is is a very simple thing to fill in and that it can be done in ''*only few hours…*''*,* or ''*in few days*''. Consequence of that approach is that proposal will not be created, nor submitted by deadline.
- the third and most complicated one is when higher instance issues a directive to lower subordinate (something like: ''*You see what is that all about. Prepare and submit proposal and get us some money, but do it along with your normal working engagement*'', which will lead to work extreme overload to the person in question, and, still, will

yield no really tangible results (almost totally regardless of the person-in-question's experience).

It should be noted that successful preparation of the EU project proposal demands dedicated, experienced person(s), and, around 12 months of work.

Poor presentation (language, format of the text...)

Knowledge of the language, i.e. used terminology is of great importance. One should bear in mind that most of the proposers and vast majority of evaluators come from surrounding where language of the proposal is not native, or speaking language, hence knowledge on terminology makes a difference.

Many of the inexperienced proposers tend to try to ''pack'' as much text as possible, using single space and the smallest font possible, text being from one margin to the other. What is forgotten in that approach is the appearance of the text to the evaluator. It is not a good idea to inhibit evaluator form being able to follow what is written and to him/ her a headache. Better solution is to use bullets, italic, bold fonts, table overviews and pictures, in order to break the monotony of plain text.

3. Recommendations [1-5]

Most obvious recommendation is to avoid mentioned pitfalls, bearing in mind that listed ones are not the only ones, but, rather, most common and obvious one.

Of significant help is utilization of the ''fresh pair of eyes'', meaning that, at least, after completion of the work on project proposal preparation, that proposal should be given to someone, not involved in its creation, for reading, regardless of the experience. Whatever that person sees as an unclear bit, there is more than strong probability that evaluator will see the same, since, most probably, that bit presents some inconsistency. Naturally, care on accuracy and needed level of proof for statements /descriptions, should be taken.

The use of consulting services (during creation of the proposal, pre-evaluation, research, etc) is highly recommended, especially for inexperienced proposal creator(s).

4. Conclusion [1-5]

Besides recommendations on pitfall avoidance, ''fresh pair of eyes'' and experienced consultants services utilization, it can be concluded, by paraphrasing a saying, known in project advisors' circles, that one offering the solution to Brussels gets the funding.

5. References

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