Managing Demand or (Over) Demanding Management? Ten Tips for Internal Grant Application Sifts and Competitions

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Introduction

Research organisations can use sift processes, based on peer review, to identify nascent research grant applications for development, for quality assurance, or to respond to the demand management expectations of funders. The most successful processes are those that are academically rigorous, and which support and engage participants whilst also fulfilling institutional objectives.

The tips presented here are drawn from broad experience at the University of Reading of delivering a variety of processes to support applicants to funding schemes offered by UKRI, learned societies and charities. These general principles will support the planning and delivery of effective processes that make efficient use of resources and which are sustainable in the long term.

The Ten Tips

Tip 1: Articulate the Process Aim

Is the intended outcome to select a given number of proposals for further development? Or is the emphasis more on quality assurance and development? Make sure you communicate this clearly.
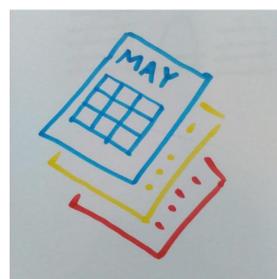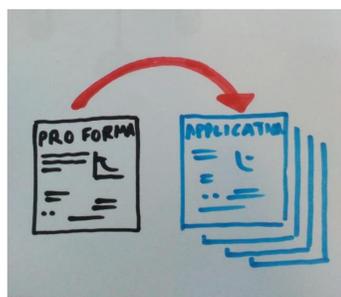

Tip 2: Set Clear Timescales

Try to ensure a quick turnaround, but be realistic in terms of what can be achieved. Do you need to start before a call is actually published?

Tip 3: Minimise Extra Effort

Consider the lowest threshold of information required from applicants that will enable a rigorous review of their proposal idea.
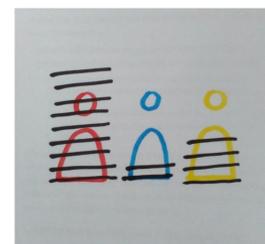

Tip 4: Be Transparent

Would anonymity enable greater freedom of discussion amongst a panel? Or could it be waived if that would better support applicants? Could panel observers be invited?

Tip 5: Share the Workload

If the process involves expert reviewers, try not to over-rely on one person. Sometimes that might mean asking external colleagues for help.
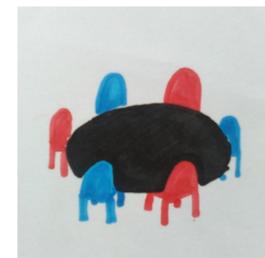

Tip 6: Maximise Accessibility

Be sensitive to the differing needs of applicants and ensure your process is as inclusive as possible. Be wary of barriers to entry and biases.

Tip 7: Engage with Applicants

Would an applicant derive greater benefit from a discussion with the panel? Would a Q&A session save time for everyone involved?
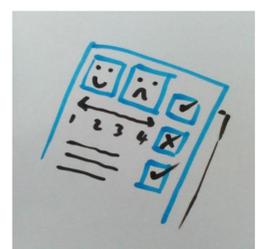

Tip 8: Provide Constructive Feedback

Whatever the outcome, be supportive to your colleagues. What advice or encouragement could help them improve? Could a mentor help?

Tip 9: Secure Buy-In

Celebrate successes, be honest about challenges and consult on potential solutions.

Tip 10: Evaluate and Evolve

Monitor progress, invite feedback and be willing to change. Is the process still fit for purpose?

Conclusion

There are many factors that can contribute to the success of an internal grant application sift process. Consideration of these ten principles, from the perspective of different stakeholders involved, can have a significant influence on the effectiveness and efficiency of such a process, as well as its perception amongst an academic community.