How to write a successful Horizon 2020 proposal in 5 easy steps

Earlier this month, the **European Commission** published the details of the next chapter of the Horizon 2020 funding scheme – the 2016-17 Work Programme. Following an in-depth interview with Dr Jane Watkins, an expert Horizon 2020 National Contact Point, *International Innovation* presents a five-step guide to help you put together an amazing proposal and increase your odds of earning a portion of the €16 billion available budget

Step 1:

ASK YOURSELF IF HORIZON 2020 IS THE RIGHT FIT FOR YOU

Before diving into the near-Herculean task of applying for Horizon 2020 funding, it is important that you build an understanding of what the funding framework is all about. "Horizon 2020 is about internationalisation, collaboration, long-term benefits, creating networks that can potentially speed up the results and improving the overall scientific output of Europe," says Dr Jane Watkins, a dedicated Horizon 2020 National Contact Point. "It is very different to applying to something from national funding bodies because Horizon 2020 is not just about the research, and it is not about doing it for the money. Proposals that do it for the money tend to fail."

Buried within Watkins' response is something that she notes as being dear to all successful applications: they focus on a united Europe. One of the main purposes of the EU is to bring the region together both economically and politically and to ensure its various Member States are pulling in the same direction. This is reflected in the fact that at a minimum, Horizon 2020 applications must have three partners from three different Member States. "My biggest tip is to address what is required of Horizon 2020 in terms of looking at that bigger European picture," Watkins states. "If you can't do this, then this isn't the funding scheme for you."

She also suggests holding a mirror up to your research and asking yourself a cold, hard question: is the work that you are doing truly innovative? "The Commission doesn't want to fund incremental change. They want to fund something that is groundbreaking and something that is beyond the state-of-the-art," she shares. "Some proposals just aren't innovative enough."

HELPFUL HINTS
Read the rules for participation. This will tell you if you are even eligible for funding.

Start on your application as early as possible. A good application takes approximately three person-months to put together.

Go to brokerage events. These types of events will teach you the ins and outs of the funding framework. This will also help you expand your network and create ties with other people looking for collaborators.

Visit the Portal. This is a resource (http://bit.ly/H2020ParticipantPortal) hosted by the European Commission and it provides all the information you need to apply for funding; however, there is a lot on that Portal, and it takes time to digest all of the information on it.

Step 2:

GET INTIMATE WITH YOUR CALL

Once you've established that Horizon 2020 is a good fit, it is important that you don't fall victim to one of the biggest traps for applicants: failing to address the scope of the call. "I pre-screen a lot of proposals, and I am surprised at the number of these that do not address the question the European Commission is asking," Watkins says.

Therefore, one of the most useful things you can do when you start working on your application is to print off the call and highlight the important keywords. At the same time, check if the call has its own eligibility criteria and examine the impact the Commission requires it to achieve. "The Commission will publish the expected impact on what they are wanting to achieve via the particular topic," Watkins shares. "Applicants need to address every single impact within that call topic."

Finally, once you have a good understanding of what the call is asking for, write a one-page outline to provide a high-level overview of your project. It should open with an overall objective statement and the page should simplistically explain the issue you want to address and how you plan to do it. Print this sheet off and keep it on hand as you go through the entire application process.

HELPFUL HINTS
Make your objective extremely clear. Since you will be referring to this throughout the application process and will likely be sharing it with your consortium, this objective needs to be as strong and clear as possible.

Remember your customer is the European Commission. Know what motivates the Commission and keep this in mind when creating your one-page outline.

Step 3:

CREATE THE BEST CONSORTIUM YOU CAN POSSIBLY IMAGINE

Now that you know what you want to achieve and that it tallies with a specific Horizon 2020 call, you should focus on putting together a world-class consortium composed of a diverse group of partners. This group should be a blend of individual academics and scientists as well as SMEs, universities, research organisations and industry partners. "If you can put together a consortium that best reflects the people in your field, you will have a higher chance for success," Watkins notes.

Not only should your consortium be wide ranging, it also needs to be strategic. When you invite people or organisations to join, you should know exactly why you want them on board, and you should play to their strengths.

This is also the point where it is important to pin down a project coordinator; this will be the person who is responsible for the project and oversees its progress. "This person should have experience in coordinating large-scale projects, and they need to show their experience in the application," Watkins advises. "Managing a consortium takes a lot of planning and you have to be a very good coordinator to maintain control of its activities."

"A lot of proposals I see that fail are ones where the excellence and the implementation is good, and they have the right consortium, but they fail on the impact because they haven't studied the market enough and they don't talk about how they will address things at a European level"

HELPFUL HINTS
Get more industrial involvement into your proposal. In comparison to the Seventh Framework Programme (FP7), Horizon 2020 is more interested in funding projects that have an eye on commercialisation, and industrial members play a large part in this process.

Step 4:

PUT TOGETHER YOUR APPLICATION FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF THE EVALUATOR

Once you have a consortium and you are all sharing the same vision – which should be the vision you outlined on a single page at the beginning of the application process – you are finally ready to start writing the proposal. Before you dive into your first draft, Watkins suggests printing off the self-evaluation form that the European Commission hosts on the Portal (http://bit.ly/H2020ParticipantPortal) and keeping it on hand.

This form shows what the evaluators are looking for in the three criteria they will use to mark your proposal: excellence, impact and implementation. According to Watkins, many proposals fall down on showing impact, so it is vital to make the intended impact of your project pop. A great way to do this is by focusing on how you are bringing industry into the fold. "Industry participation is of major importance to Horizon 2020; in fact, 44 per cent of partners in the first Horizon 2020 Work Programme were from industry," she states. "A big difference between FP7 and Horizon 2020 is that a successful proposal cannot just focus on a project or a product, it must also demonstrate its ability to go to market and the team's capability to commercialise it."

Another important point to think about when you actually start writing the application is how the evaluator will read it. The first thing they read is usually the abstract. Therefore, it is essential to make the abstract as attractive as possible. One of the next things they will do is examine the budget, as it provides a quick overview of each partner's role. When putting together the budget, be realistic, because unlike FP7, there is no contract negotiation. Evaluators will solely mark the section as seen. "If the budget is wrong, the proposal may well be marked down," Watkins warns. "So don't put in things you don't necessarily need."

HELPFUL HINTS
Evaluators are human. Often they will read proposals for hours at a time. Do your best to make your proposal memorable.

Build a relationship with your National Contact Point. NCPs can provide you with free and impartial advice on Horizon 2020's rules, and they can review your proposal and provide you with their thoughts on if it tallies up appropriately with the call topic.

The Commission selects external evaluators via a database. A great way of learning to write a good proposal is to register as an evaluator. Anyone can do this if they have the appropriate academic or industrial qualifications and background.

Step 5:

SUBMIT YOUR PROPOSAL
EARLY AND OFTEN

Upon completing a solid draft of your proposal, one of the first things you should do is submit it on the Portal. Watkins can name several occasions where researchers have missed the deadlines for their calls because they left the submission to the last minute. "It can take a while for the server to submit the proposal, causing you to miss the deadline," she states. "You can submit as many times as you would like up to the actual deadline, so take advantage of this feature."
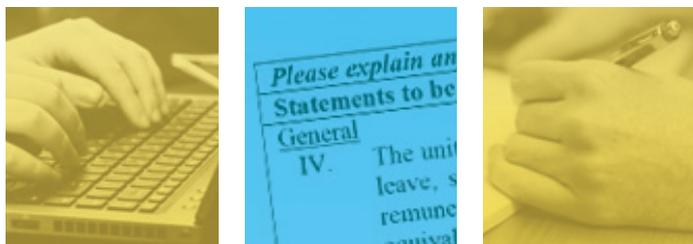
THIS IS HORIZON 2020

With the formal publication of the 2016-17 Work Programme, it is time for European-based researchers, scientists and industry members to pull out all the stops and get their head in the Horizon 2020 funding game

The new programme offers funding opportunities through a range of calls for proposals, public procurements and other actions like the Horizon Prizes. Combined, these will cover nearly 600 topics that will substantially contribute to several of the European Commission's policy priorities via the Jobs, Growth and Investment Package, the Digital Single Market and the Energy Union and Climate Change Policy, to name a few. "The whole point with Horizon 2020 is to help the economic activity of Europe by boosting the economy and helping businesses, universities and research come to market much faster," states Watkins.

Following on from the 2014-15 Work Programme, this one will also be biannual in order to give the applicants more time to plan their projects and to put together the best application possible for the range of cross-cutting initiatives the programme will support. These include: the modernisation of Europe's manufacturing industry (€1 billion); technologies and standards for automatic driving (over €100 million); the Internet of Things (€139 million) to address digitalisation of EU industries; Industry 2020 in the Circular Economy (€670 million) to develop strong and sustainable economies; and smart and sustainable cities (€232 million) to better integrate environmental, transport, energy and digital networks in EU's urban environments.

HOW WILL THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION EVALUATE MY APPLICATION?

There are two types of evaluations: single-stage and two-stage. What type of evaluation you will have to put together depends on what is stated in the call.

This process requires you to submit a full application by the application's deadline. There are four steps:

1. Three individuals will evaluate your proposal remotely and mark it based on excellence, impact and implementation, with each being marked out of 5 (if you have an innovation action, it is usually weighted 1.5 times more)
2. It goes to a consensus group
3. The proposal is sent to a panel review
4. It receives a ranking, and those projects above a certain threshold are chosen

The two-stage process is very similar to the single-stage process, except that:

1. You must submit a short proposal, which evaluators will solely mark on excellence and impact. If you are above a certain threshold (usually 8/10), then you are invited to stage two.
2. You must submit a full proposal. At this point, you will have a clean slate from stage one, but the process that is followed is the same

RESOURCE CORNER

H2020 ONLINE MANUAL:
http://bit.ly/H2020OnlineManual

SELF-EVALUATION FORM:
http://bit.ly/H2020SelfEvaluationForm

RULES FOR PARTICIPATION:
http://bit.ly/H2020RulesForParticipation

THE PORTAL:
http://bit.ly/H2020ParticipantPortal