American Diversified Energy
CONSULTING SERVICES

40 Mistakes That Will Kill a Proposal

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This article was published in the Thought Leadership section of Biofuels Digest on November 15, 2018

It is not enough to just have a game-changing idea, concept, or innovation. Nor is it enough to just add a top-notch team, detailed workplan, and sufficient inhouse and outside expertise to move through each of the nine TRL levels.

You need to be able to secure the funding needed to proceed.

This is where many entrepreneurs and companies struggle.

It is widely recognized that ample time, allowances for things to go wrong, rigorous care and attention to detail, and expert knowledge are required to perfect a game-changing innovation. It is not widely recognized, however, that the same is true of preparing a winning application.

If you have the necessary expertise to do this yourself, great. If not, get outside help, if only to review what you have done to be sure nothing is overlooked.

One or two seemingly small details can make the critical difference between an application that succeeds and one that does not.

Here is a list of 40 common mistakes that will cause an otherwise good proposal or application to be rejected.

The list includes the common mistakes that Lee Enterprises Consulting (LEC) and American Diversified Energy (ADE) have encountered in preparing applications and proposals, along with excerpts from "SBIR/STTR Phase 1 Proposal Preparation" by Jim Greenwood of Greenwood Consulting Group (GJG), Sanibel Island, Florida, who provides training, presents workshops, and is an expert in preparing winning Small Business Innovation and Research and Small Business Technology Transfer (SBIR/STTR) applications.

Greenwood's list includes not only the common mistakes he has experienced in guiding applicants through the SBIR/STTR process, but those regularly encountered and reported to him by the reviewers of applications in the agencies that fund SBIR/STTR applications.

Here's the first mistake that LEC, ADE and GCG regularly encounter:

1. Starting too late

It is critical to ensure that adequate time is available to prepare an application. The more time available, the better the result.

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It is recommended that applicants allow at least 60 days to prepare an application, bid submission, or response to a RFP … and more, if possible.

Even a one-week delay in startup will impact the application or proposal. Quality – and attention to detail – will suffer further with each week of delay. This is because some of the critical steps necessary to prepare the best work product possible will have to be sacrificed to meet delivery requirements while everything else must be squeezed down into less time.

Each day that is lost means less attention can be given to detail; fewer reviews can be carried out; fewer opportunities are available to catch errors, improve clarity, amplify strengths and mitigate weaknesses; and less scrutiny can be given to perfecting the way in which information is presented to ensure maximum impact.

This, in turn, reduces an application's ability to attain the highest score possible, make a good impression, and win a reward.

Here are the next four common mistakes:

2. **Lack of awareness of:**

- The complexities involved
- The requirements that have to be met
- The amount and quality of documentation required

3. **Lack of proper planning**

You need to ensure other work can be put aside or postponed so priority attention can be given to the application, bid submission, or response to a RFP

4. **Starting off with inaccurate or outdated materials**

A previous application based on another project or information about an earlier pilot can provide a good starting place for an application or proposal. Before using them – and especially before passing them on to any outside consultants who will be helping with the application effort – be sure you are clear, and can clearly tell consultants, what portions of these materials relate to and contribute to the understanding of the current project, and which portions do not.

It is far too easy to pick up unrelated, inaccurate, and outdated information from a background document and use it in an application – intended sometimes only as a place marker – then, due to time constraints, not go back to update or correct it.

5. **Not having the information required to complete the application or proposal**

Most companies do not have all of the required information for an application or proposal readily at hand, in a completed form, and fully up to date. Time, therefore, must be allowed to collect, update, fill in gaps, and hone this information

for clarity and maximum impact. Going forward with incomplete – or worse, confusing or incomprehensible – materials can doom an application or proposal.

Here are five more common mistakes:

6. **Not making a commitment during the application / proposal development period to have "all hands on deck" with as- and when-needed access after office hours, during weekends, and during vacations, if necessary, to company executives, technical and financial staff, and vendors and suppliers to resolve problems and questions that come up**

7. **Not knowing if there is a market before writing your proposal**

- What is the payoff for the agency if it funds your proposal?
- Do you have a clear plan for commercializing / launching your concept, innovation, approach?
- What is the market for your concept, innovation, approach?
  - Relevant market size
  - Target customers
  - Customer needs
  - Direct competitors
  - Indirect competitors
  - Competitive advantages
  - What is your implementation strategy?
- From *a market opportunity* perspective why should this project be undertaken? – from a National Science Foundation (NSF) STTR solicitation
- *"A recent National Academy of Sciences study of the DOE [U.S. Department of Energy] SBIR program found that 1/3rd of DOE Phase II SBIR/STTR awardees stop working on their technology after their Phase II award because they discover the market for their technology is too small. We don't want companies making this discovery after they complete their Phase II grant, but before they submit their Phase I proposal."* – DOE SBIR program manager
- *"Commercialization is 50% of the grade when we consider [funding a] project*" – NSF Program Director 4/14/2017

8. **Not addressing key questions that need to be answered**

- What is the significance of your concept / approach?
  - Who cares?
  - Why is this important?
  - Why MUST this problem be solved?
  - For contract agencies like DOD: Do you grasp our problem?
- What is the innovation?
  - What's unique / different / novel about your approach?
  - What are the technical risks / unknowns? You are expected to know this. Be sure to provide a complete list.

- What risks / unknowns will the proposed project address?
- Why does this justify the money you are requesting?

- Who is the team?
  - Are they qualified?
  - Do they LOOK qualified?
  - A PhD is not required … but do you have one in place or available to add to your team, just in case?
  - Has your team had previous success in commercializing other innovations, concepts, or approaches?
- What is your approach / research plan?
  - This is where newbies most often make or break their credibility
    - Don't over propose
    - One of the most common Phase I problems (and criticisms from Phase I reviewers) is an *"overly ambitious workplan"*
    - What can you afford to propose based upon the amount of money you are requesting?
  - Of the relevant questions and unknowns, which is the key one (or the key ones) that the proposed project will address?
  - Why should this be addressed first?
  - How and when will the others be addressed?
- How will you know if you are successful?
  - What set of metrics will you use to assess the success of your research and workplan?
- And finally:
  - If you were the reviewer, would you give these people $100-$225K (or whatever amount is being requested) based on what they wrote in their proposal?

9. Not recognizing the importance of nitpicks as well as substance and merits

There are two reasons these are important.

The first step undertaken when an application is submitted is an "administrative review." Before being read, all applications and proposals are prescreened to ensure they meet the application, solicitation, or RFP requirements.

Those that don't never get read. They are eliminated and flagged for rejection.

This is where a significant percentage of applications fail (in 2011, 19 percent of the 2,300 Part I SBIR applications received by DOE – 437 applications – were pre-screened out and never read).

The prescreening most often is done by a junior staff member or clerical person armed with a ruler and checklist of requirements drawn from the application requirements published in the Federal Register, solicitation, or RFP.

If an application requires responses to 21 requests for information, you need to be

sure your responses are not buried somewhere in a dense block of text that take time and effort to find. They need to be organized under easy-to-find headlines or call-outs – which appear in the table of contents, if one is required or included – using the EXACT wording from the solicitation.

That way, the prescreening reviewer can go through his or her checklist and quickly find and mark that you have addressed all 21 requirements.

Next, come the nitpicks.

Most competitive applications have strict formatting requirements – page limits for each section, one-inch margins all around, a specified font (Times Roman, Arial), a specified or minimum font size (11 point, 12 point), minimum spacing before and after lines (almost always 0 point), and line spacing requirements (single space, 1.5 line spacing, or double line spacing).

The formatting requirements have two purposes:

- **The first is to ensure every applicant has the same opportunity** to present a compelling case for funding or winning a RFP within the confines of the page limits imposed.

  Applicants who try to squeeze more information into the page limits – by using .9 margins all around, thinking no one will notice; allow graphs, tables, and illustrations to extend beyond the margins; do not reset the default in their word processing software to 0 point spacing before and after lines (as opposed to being reduced to 10 point or 8 point for a 12 point font, which is common among many writers and companies); or squeeze down the line spacing from single to "exactly" 12, 12.5, 13 point, or anything less than single space – are, quite bluntly, viewed as cheaters who are trying to gain an advantage over other applicants.

  Doing so – even on a single page to make everything fit on that page – will send your application directly to the rejection pile.

- **The second purpose is less obvious, but even more important.** The decision to give you a significant sum of money (or undertake responsibility to carry out an important project – flawlessly – through your response to an RFP from an agency or company) is based entirely upon your submission.

  If you cannot follow the directions set forth in a solicitation – or do not rigorously check your work to ensure it meets these requirements and fix errors – how can you be expected to properly carry out research, complex operations, design and run processes, or build equipment and devices that require precision and close tolerances?

Paying close attention to nitpicks can be a hard lesson to learn. One dramatic example of this was provided several years ago by a RFP issued by a Florida county for a multi-million dollar contract that was required by law to go out for competitive bidding due to its dollar amount. The RFP was initiated after a

preferred vendor had sold the county on purchasing and installing an innovative, easy-to-access online process that had been developed by the vendor to help applicants navigate through and comply with the county's regulatory requirements for agricultural operations.

The RFP was based entirely on the vendor's proposal. This was intended to meet the letter of the law, but favor the vendor in the selection process, since it was assumed that the vendor would be the only company capable of delivering the required web-based portal and software.

As part of the county's RFP screening process, the RFP included a requirement that the technical and financial sections of the RFP responses were to be separated by an azure sheet of paper. The purpose of this requirement was to ensure respondents were able to pay close attention to detail, which would be required for successful execution of the contract. After all, the county was going to entrust the explanation and compliance of its regulations through a new interface and portal to a software developer whose execution had to be unassailable.

The pale blue paper that the vendor had on hand was close enough to azure in the vendor's mind and was used in its RFP response. As a result, its submission was screened out and another vendor was awarded the contract.

Hard to believe, isn't it?

But I learned my lesson well. I'm the vendor to whom this happened.

Nitpicks may seem like an unimportant bother. They're not. They're tests. You need to be sure you can pass them.

10. Not proofreading for typos …

Use Spellchecker but don't trust it

<u>Spellchecker caught none of these:</u>

- Meant to write *"turnkey system"*
  - Actually wrote *"turkey system"*
- Meant to write *"Due to the threat of nuclear war"*
  - Actually wrote *"Due to the treat of nuclear war"*
- Wrote *"…useful in rug screening and testing…"*
- Wrote "*Ass president/CEO of our firm, he designed…"*
- *"…capable of withstanding…a 3 foot drop test onto a herd surface."*
- *"We have two millstones in our Phase I project…"*
- *"The PI has access to the field tasting range at Tyndall AFB…"*
- *"…urgent massage from …"*
- *"We propose to tie a wench to a post and apply pressure…"*

Here are the next five common mistakes:

11. Not understanding – and not writing your application or proposal to address – the three steps of review

Once you pass the prescreening step in #9 above, your proposal will go through two more stages of review:

- **Technical / Substance Review**
  This is where proposals are assessed for:
  - Technical merit, realistic workplan, relevancy of tasks to objectives, sensible cost proposal, controls and measures for feasibility and risks, and R&D quality, including:
    - Scientific and technical quality of work to be carried out
    - Anticipated benefits
    - Qualifications of company and research / project staff
    - Consistency with agency's needs
  - Commercialization potential

  Not only does a proposal need to address each application / RFP requirement, it needs to so in a way that is:

  - **Easily understandable**. Dense blocks of text, turgid language, technical jargon, and sentences filled with undefined acronyms reduce the clarity – and a reviewer's willingness to read – a proposal. Don't assume a reviewer is going to understand highly technical descriptions; their PhD may be in a related but different field.

    Different sections of an application or proposal often will be reviewed by different reviewers. Each section also may be read by more than one reviewer to gain the benefit of different points of view and areas expertise.

    Narratives need to be written so that anyone can understand them (just as is done in general circulation newspapers and magazines). A PhD reviewer is not going to be offended if you define each acronym the first time it is used or provide a laymen's description of a calculation of formula.

    Doing so will demonstrate that you can communicate complex concepts in a simple, easy to understand way, a plus in attracting further support for your concept through future grants, and from investors and banks, which will enhance its commercialization potential in the eyes of reviewers.

  - **Easy to follow.** Reviewers have to be able to find the sections of the proposal where each requirement is addressed (including references to other sections where additional information related to the requirement can be found).

  - **Inviting to read**. The easier a proposal is to read, the easier it is to follow the steps being laid out, and the more each page is broken up with

headings, bold face lead-ins, short paragraphs (5-10 lines each), bullet lists, text boxes with call outs, tables, charts, figures, and illustrations, the more inviting it will be to reviewers.

Not only does this impart a good impression, it helps to ensure that when a reviewer has a stack of proposals to review, he or she will pick up yours first, putting it ahead of the hard-to-read ones, which most often will be dealt with last.

- **Engaging and compelling**. Be sure the proposal is written with the reviewers in mind. The fate of your proposal is in the reviewers' hands. Picture who they might be. Think about how you can grab – and hold – their attention. Think about how you can lead them in a logical sequence through your idea, concept, or innovation. Focus descriptions on how it excels at meeting each application or solicitation requirement.

- **Scoring / Selection of Winners**

  Each part of a proposal will be given a numerical score, based on the merit review or scoring criteria laid out in the solicitation.

  The scores assigned by each reviewer will be correlated and weighted (with the final score for technical quality making up 30 percent of a proposal's total score, for example). Each proposal will then be ranked in order from the highest scoring to the lowest scoring.

  The funding requested by each of the top-ranking proposals will be subtracted from the funding available. When the available funding runs out, the selection process will end. The remaining applicants will receive "we are sorry to inform you … " letters.

  You need to be sure you have done everything possible to rank high enough to get an award.

  Of the 2,300 proposals submitted to DOE in response to its 2011 Phase 1 SBIR solicitation, 72 PERCENT WERE ELIMINATED FROM CONSIDERATION DUE TO FLAWS IN THE PROPOSALS, with 437 rejected in prescreening and 1,222 rejected due to one or more of mistakes listed under 16-40 below.

  Out of the group of 641 proposals that were ranked as "fundable," only 229 awards could be made. The other 412 lower-scoring, good-but-not-good-enough proposals were sent back to the drawing board without awards.

  After substance, presentation is paramount. Proposals must be written so that each sentence contributes to meeting – or exceeding – requirements, making a strong positive impression on reviewers, and gaining the highest score possible.

12. Not getting an outside review

Guaranteed: you missed something important in the instructions.

- Get someone to review who wasn't involved in drafting the proposal
  - Within the company
  - A professional grant writing company
  - A professional copy editor or proofreader
  - Spouse or teenage daughter
  - Anyone who can read and pay attention to detail
- Get someone to read everything you have written with a critical, independent eye to give you honest, candid feedback so you can make revisions before the real reviewers try to pick your proposal apart.

13. Not making it clear what data are from the company and what are from other sources

Don't leave room for – or invite – questions or misunderstandings. Be sure to explain where all data originates and, if not from your research or other work, where it comes from, why it is relevant to your proposal, and how it advances the work you intend to undertake

14. Not citing sources for data, not ensuring that data being used and cited is accurate and up to date, and not explaining and putting the data you are citing into context

If something is stated in an application or proposal that does not conform with a reviewer's understanding of your subject area or raises a question in the reviewer's mind, he or she is going to check with a trusted source for verification.

If the information the reviewer finds differs from the claims you have made or the data you have cited, your credibility will suffer – perhaps even fatally if the error or misstatement is egregious enough or strikes and the heart of your proposal.

One misstatement or mistake can destroy your credibility and bring everything else you say into question.

15. Not applying for grants and funding opportunities in the proper sequence or at the proper time

For example, one of the sources of funding for a project that has reached TRL-4 would be a Part II SBIR/STTR grant. Problem is, one cannot apply for a Part II grant without first having applied for, received, and successfully completed a Part I SBIR/STTR grant, which is geared toward TRLs 2 and 3. Hence, a project developer who has reached TRL-4 without going through the Part 1 SBIR/STTR process has a dilemma:

- Apply for a Part I SBIR/STTR grant and go through that process to be able to apply for a Part II grant, thus spending time and money that may not need to be spent, which could delay the development of the project, or

- Forego the multiple funding opportunities of up to $1.5 million per project available through Part II SBIR/STTR grants and seek funding elsewhere among the limited grant programs available for TRL-4 projects.

Here are 25 common reasons cited by reviewers for an application's failure to gain their enthusiasm:

16. **Not relevant to agency's mission**
17. **Not significant to agency's research**
18. **Unconvincing case for commercialization / societal impact**
19. **Lack of clarity, consistency**
20. **Vague workplan**
21. **Lack of technical detail**
22. **No statement of the feasibility, risk, or solution measures**
23. **Lack of detail in the feasibility test / research plan**
24. **No recognition of pitfalls**
25. **Problem is more complex than proposer seems to realize**
26. **Overly ambitious workplan**
27. **Lack of credible, defensible, sensible cost proposal**
28. **Relevancy of tasks to objectives not clear**
29. **Methods unsuited to the objectives**
30. **Direction or sense of priority not well defined**
31. **Lack of focus in the hypotheses, aims, and / or research plan**
32. **Proposed model system inappropriate for proposed questions**
33. **Relevant controls not included**
34. **Insufficient consideration of statistical needs**

35. **Driven by technology rather than a problem or pressing need**

36. **Too much background**

Stick to provable and demonstratable statements and citations from credible sources. Don't include information that is unrelated to the application requirements – no matter how near and dear it is to your heart – especially if its inclusion comes at the expense of descriptions of the substantive steps you are going to carry out to complete your workplan and analyze its results.

37. **Lack of evidence – or convincing evidence – of innovation or uniqueness**

38. **Lack of credible principle investigator (PI) or team**

39. **Investigator(s) inexperienced**

40. **Lack of alternatives if primary approach does not work out**

Ensuring that each of these mistakes is addressed is why many applicants turn to professional grant writers and firms with grant writing – and government application – expertise. Every investment made in improving the quality, impact, and scoring ability of a proposal will pay dividends by saving you from disappointment after months of work and hopes of an award, and reduced options for moving forward with an idea, concept, or innovation.

Even if you don't hire a professional writer or firm to prepare the application, give serious consideration to hiring one prior to submission to review, provide feedback, and give advice on how to improve your proposal.