

■ MEETING THE DEADLINE: The Time-Sensitive Proposal

Proposal writers must give top priority to meeting the procuring organization's deadline, while also producing a high-quality, persuasive proposal likely to receive favorable evaluations. Late proposals are hardly ever accepted, and if your organization is relying on funding from granting institutions, a missed deadline could have devastating consequences. The following time-management strategies can help toward meeting these goals.

1. *Hold an initial planning session.* The project manager should hold a planning meeting with the project coordinator, the compiler, the budget specialist, and the key subject-matter specialists to introduce the project team members, set priorities, determine and delegate tasks, set milestone deadlines for

each task, and decide the most effective way to create and exchange drafts: e-mail, wikis (collaborative-project Web sites), faxing, and the like. If you are working alone, create a reasonable schedule with intermediate deadlines.

2. *Assign coordinators.* During the planning meeting, the project manager should choose a writing coordinator to organize the creation and production of text and graphics, and a compiler (often an administrative assistant) to integrate all sections and elements of the final proposal and to make sure that those sections and elements adhere to the potential customer's requirements in the request for proposal. If you are working alone, return often to the list of your potential customer's requirements to ensure that you continue to adhere to those requirements. Have a colleague review your work when possible.
3. *Set priorities.* The sections or features likely to weigh most heavily during the prospective customer's evaluation of the proposal should receive the most attention from the writers and the most space in the final product. Make this determination at the beginning of the project. These sections tend to be longer than sections of lesser importance. For example, for a ten-page proposal that includes four sections, the two most important sections might be four pages each, while the two least important sections might be one page each.
4. *Delegate tasks.* To expedite research and writing, assign more than one person to work on each section, and allow them to work out a way to collaborate efficiently to meet the deadline for submitting their section. This strategy works best when the contributors have diverse schedules and areas of specialization. Often, two or three subject experts coauthor parts of a single section, and the writing coordinator edits the resulting draft for clarity and coherence. If you are working alone, have drafts of each section reviewed by colleagues with pertinent expertise.
5. *Work out a schedule.* During the initial planning session, determine how much time each task is likely to require. Start work immediately on tasks likely to take longer to complete, but also begin to collect other important pieces, such as résumés, biographies, and project descriptions. Decide which tasks can be done simultaneously and which tasks must precede others. When establishing a schedule, work backward from the proposal deadline. If the RFP specifies that the proposal be submitted to a Web site or an e-mail address by a certain date, work backward from that date. If the RFP requests a paper copy, leave at least a day for the proposal to reach its destination by express delivery, half a day before that for collecting company signatures and making multiple copies of the proposal, and half a day before that for last-minute edits and proofreading.
6. *Use repurposed material.* When possible, import into the proposal standard content from previous proposals, such as résumés, descriptions of past projects, and company goals and accomplishments.
7. *Track progress and deadlines.* Use e-mail or the notification option of your proposal-management software to periodically send out reminders about

deadlines—to yourself and others—or prompt someone to deliver material that you need right away. Hold interim meetings if doing so will speed up your work. If interim task deadlines are missed and you need information, materials, or finished products immediately, ask everyone on the project team to abandon other projects to devote full-time and extra hours to the proposal effort so that you can meet the final deadline.

8. *Hold a lessons-learned meeting, if necessary.* Even when these strategies are used, problems can arise that jeopardize the quality of your proposal or your ability to meet the final deadline. After sending the proposal, or once you have received an answer to your proposal from the granting or purchasing organization, hold a debriefing session in which you identify those problems and plan strategies for avoiding them when planning and writing future proposals. If you completed the proposal alone, make a list of the strategies that were unsuccessful and brainstorm new methods for handling upcoming proposals.