

Designing a Grants Filing System That Works

By Henry Flood

Papers, papers everywhere! Whether you're a veteran grants manager or a novice, this much is certain: keeping track of all the files and records is a never-ending challenge. Even in this increasingly electronic age, grants offices continue to collect and generate reams of printed material. And anyone with experience in a so-called paperless office knows that it's almost as easy to drown in a sea of computer files as it is to drown in a sea of paperwork.

How do you cope? No single method for organizing grants paperwork and computer files is perfect. The key is to devise a system that makes sense for you. It's no less important, however, to take an approach that will make sense to anyone who might succeed you. At most institutions, grants management is a job where people come and go, which is why no grants system should be purely idiosyncratic. If you work in grants, you are inevitably responsible for someone else's records, activities, and finances. That means you are acting as the custodian of a system, not as its proprietor. So make sure you follow a plan that can be readily understood by anyone who may inherit it once you have moved on.

Where to start? Borrowing a phrase from the late philosopher Isaiah Berlin, you need to think in practical "concepts and categories." The best way to address conceptual issues in grants management is to ask these questions:

- What kind of organization are you in?
- Whom will the system serve?
- What do you want the system to do?
- What grant functions must the system cover?
- What is the level of detail and tracking that must be maintained by the system?

Whatever your work setting might be—government, nonprofit, school—the records and tracking system you set up must segregate the various functions that make up the grants process. To minimize confusion, I recommend a color-coded filing scheme. It's the approach illustrated here, but other schemes can work just as well, so long as segregation of grant functions is maintained and the various files are organized for easy recognition, retrieval and use.

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Likely categories for a typical grants information system include:

- Grant Research and Prospecting
- Grant Applications
- Post-Award Management
- Organizational Background and Reference
- Internal Grant Administration and Finance
- Grant Reference and Resources.

A simple, efficient approach would be to have each functional area represented by a different colored file folder, file pocket or file envelope. (File pockets are box-style, expandable folders for holding bulky documents. File envelopes are used for original and/or sensitive documents that need to be protected or secured.)

Newer model file folders, file pockets and envelopes are designed to accommodate the insertion of floppy disks and CD-ROMS. Of course, computer files can be stored on your hard drive or backed up to a disk, tape or CD-ROM. Still, it's a good idea to also store copies of these electronic files with their associated paper files.

I. Grant Research and Prospecting (Yellow)

The function of grant research files is to maintain information on funding opportunities from various funding sources, including:

- Federal government agencies
- State government agencies
- Local government agencies
- Foundations
- Corporations
- Individuals

You will need to subdivide these categories to track and find the information expeditiously. In the case of the federal and state governments, the file sequence would be major agency (e.g., Education, HHS, Justice), then sub-agency (e.g., Higher Education, NIH, Office of Justice Programs), and then by specific program (e.g., FIPSE, Health Professions, Violence Against Women).

Local government information would be something like Miami-Dade County or City of Miami, followed alphabetically by the program name. For example,

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Miami-Dade has a Cultural Affairs Grant Program that awards several different grants each year. In this case, the file sequence would be Miami-Dade County followed by Cultural Affairs Programs, and then followed by folders for each of the individual grant programs.

Foundation funding sources would mostly be filed only by the major heading of Foundations, followed by file folders containing information about each foundation in alphabetical order. Larger foundations that have several grant programs or initiatives could also be sub-divided so that individual programs are accounted for.

Corporate giving would be treated similarly to foundations. The major heading would be Corporations, followed by company names in alphabetical order. Consider segmenting these sources into local, regional and national groups.

II. Grant Application Management (Green)

Once the decision has been made to write a proposal, you should create files to contain the application instructions and application drafts. Working copies can go in a file folder or file pocket, but a clean copy of the final application, as it was transmitted to the grantmaker, should go in a secure file envelope. It is important to protect the formal file copy.

Model or sample proposals related to an application effort should be placed in folders of a different shade (e.g., light green) and placed behind the darker green folders. This will distinguish sample or model proposals from proposals that you are submitting for funding consideration.

III. Post-Award Management (Blue)

After a grant has been awarded, you'll need a six-part partition file folder for post-award management. Into this special file would go (1) the award letter and grant agreement; (2) a copy of the approved grant application; (3) the official budget as approved by the grantmaker; (4) finance and performance reports; (5) audit information; (6) correspondence and close-out documents.

In cases where a grant is awarded for more than one program year, it may be beneficial to have a new six-part partition file for each year—since your budget will probably be revised each year. You will still need a running summary of—and administrative amendments to—your grant award. Plan to

have enough of these partition file folders in stock to accommodate both current awards and anticipated new awards.

IV. Organizational Background and Reference (Orange)

Every grants office must maintain up-to-date files of institutional background data in support of its efforts. A precise file scheme for this data will depend on the size of your organization, its scope of authority and functional purpose. For example, here at the Medical Center Campus of Miami-Dade Community College, institutional background data is maintained under the following rubrics, sorted alphabetically:

- MDCC College-wide
- MDCC Medical Campus
- MDCC Other Campuses (for collaborative efforts)
- Local and Regional Profile Data
- National Data
- Other Files (as appropriate)

In the course of writing and submitting proposals for funding consideration, certain information will be used frequently. This information should be kept in a ready reference file so you don't have to waste time gathering the data from several files. Such information might include:

- Your 501(c)(3) tax exemption letter
- A summary profile of your organization
- Local, neighborhood or area-wide statistical data
- Master list of awarded grants for last five years
- A copy of your most recent indirect cost rate and agreement
- A copy of your most recent audit and organization-wide budget

V. Internal Grant Administration and Finance (Gray)

Files that pertain to your internal grant administration and finance would contain organization-wide grant policies; grant processing policies; the chart of accounts and any other instructions on financial management policies pertaining to grants.

This also might be a good place to include a copy of key federal and state policies that apply to grant funding, such as OMB cost and management circulars, audit policies, and copies of any state grant policy requirements.

VI. Grant Reference and Resources (White)

Grant reference and resource files are those containing information about books, publications, subscription items or other information associated with grants.

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