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# Operationalizing Pre-Award Workflows Across the Proposal Lifecycle



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# Session Overview

## What We Will Cover

- Why workflows break down before submission
- Mapping the pre-award proposal lifecycle
- Key decision points and common fracture points
- Centralized, decentralized, and hybrid models
- Practical intake and handoff strategies
- Adapting practices to your institution

## POLL

Where do most proposal challenges occur at your institution?

A. At submission

B. During proposal development

C. At intake / initiation

D. Throughout the process

# Learning Objectives

By the end of this session, you will be able to:

1

## Identify Key Decision Points & Handoffs

Identify key decision points and handoffs across the pre-award proposal lifecycle and recognize where workflow breaks down.

2

## Compare Workflow Models & Adapt Practices

Compare centralized, decentralized, and hybrid workflow models and determine which operational practices can be adapted to improve efficiency and proposal success at your institution.

# The 4:59 PM Myth

Pre-award work does not fail at submission — it breaks down weeks earlier.

## The Problem

- Unwritten processes rely on individual knowledge
- Makes work stressful and person-dependent
- Staff departure disrupts the whole team

## The Pattern

- Firefighting replaces planning
- Every proposal starts from scratch
- Same mistakes repeat cycle after cycle

## The Goal

- Move from reactive to predictable
- Build a repeatable, documented lifecycle
- Reduce stress for staff AND PIs

# The Proposal Lifecycle

From PI spark to agency inbox — what happens in between?



**Key Insight:** Early issues compound - a problem at intake does not stay at intake. It creates a snowball effect throughout the proposal process.

Discussion: Which stage causes the most delays in your organization?

# Where Workflows Break Down

*“Raise your hand if you have experienced at least one of these in the past month.”*

## The Silent Handoff

Assuming someone else is handling the subaward docs and finding out at 4 PM they were not.

## The Versioning Trap

Final\_Budget\_v4\_REVISIED\_FINAL.xlsx — no one knows which file is the true final version.

## The Information Gap

Starting a budget without knowing the correct F&A (indirect cost) or fringe rate.

## The Black Hole

A proposal sitting in a leadership inbox with no notification, no follow-up, and no progress.

# Key Decision Points: Stop / Go

Deciding things on Day 2 is 10× better than deciding them on Day 20.



Does the PI have the authority to lead this project?



Is there a cost-share requirement we cannot meet?



Are there foreign components requiring additional scrutiny?



Is the sponsor deadline realistic given our internal timeline?



Do we have all required institutional approvals?

# Understanding Institutional Models

## Centralized

One office for everyone

### Strengths

- High consistency
- Deep expert knowledge
- Standardized processes

### Challenges

- Can feel disconnected from the PI
- Single point of failure
- Bottlenecks at peak times

## Decentralized

Each unit its own team

### Strengths

- Personalized service
- Deep disciplinary knowledge
- Fast local response

### Challenges

- Processes vary widely between units
- Hard to enforce standards
- Knowledge silos

## Hybrid

Local support + Central oversight

### Strengths

- Best of both worlds
- Local expertise + Institutional oversight
- Adaptable to unit size

### Challenges

- Requires clear communication
- Coordination complexity
- Role clarity is critical

# Which Model Are You?

Which model best describes your institution?

Centralized

Decentralized

Hybrid

## Reflection Questions

1

What is one thing that works well in your current model?

2

Where is the biggest challenge or friction point?

3

What practice from another model might work for you?

*Scenario Activity — share with your neighbor, then we will discuss as a group.*

Think-Pair-Share: How does proposal intake currently happen at your institution?

# Operationalizing: The Intake Form

Do not start work until you have the basics. The intake form is your first line of defense.

## The Strategy

- Standardize your request process with a single intake form
- Google Form, Smartsheet, or PDF — pick one and stick to it
- No intake form = no work started (make this a policy)
- Include automated timestamps for tracking purposes

## Essential Data Points

### Sponsor Deadline

The agency due date

### Sponsor & Program Name

Link to the funding opportunity

### Estimated Budget Total

Rough number to start scope

### PI & Department

Who owns this proposal

### Subawards or Consultants?

Any external collaborators involved

Think-Pair-Share: How does proposal intake currently happen at your institution?

# The Internal Deadline Strategy

## Administrative Deadline vs. Sponsor Deadline

*Your internal "all files due" date is 1-2 business days before the agency deadline.*

### Portal Glitches

Grants.gov and Research.gov crash on deadline day. A buffer saves submissions.

### Internet Outages

Internet goes out, VPNs fail, and ERAs require updates at the worst possible time.

### Error Correction

A 48-hour buffer allows time to submit a changed/corrected application due to a rejected file or missed attachment.

*Script: "We need your final files by Wednesday so we can guarantee a Friday submission."*

# Managing Handoffs & Bottlenecks

*Poll: How clear are roles and handoffs in your current workflow?  
Very clear / Somewhat clear / Not clear / Constant confusion*

## The Handoff Checklist

- Shared document showing who does what (PI = Science, Research Administrator = Budget, OSP = Submission)
- Status visible to everyone — no 50 email threads
- Clear "pass the baton" moment with written confirmation
- Named owner for each deliverable and deadline

## Common Bottlenecks & Fixes

### Budget Development

Cross-train staff; build templates for common sponsors

### Compliance Review

Run checklists in parallel, not sequentially

### Final Approvals

Pre-alert leadership; automate routing in system

### Staffing / Workload

Balance submissions; track proposal load per team member

# Adapting Practices to Your Institution

You do not need expensive software to operationalize. You need a documented process everyone agrees to follow.

## 1. Pick ONE Fracture Point

Choose the single most painful breakdown (e.g., intake process, versioning, or approval routing). Do not try to change everything at once.

## 2. Document the Current State

Write down exactly how it works today (messy, imperfect, real). You cannot change what you have not named.

## 3. Agree on a New Standard

Get your team to consensus. A simple shared document or form is enough to start. Standardize this month.

## 4. Scale Gradually

Talk to counterparts in other departments. What works for them might work for you. Peer learning beats reinventing the wheel.

# Key Takeaways



Proposal workflows break down before submission — address issues early



Map your lifecycle and identify your top fracture points



Formalize intake: one form, one process, no exceptions



Use internal deadlines to buffer against technical glitches



Define clear handoff ownership so nothing falls through the cracks



No one model fits all — adopt proven practices from peers

*Final Reflection: What is ONE change you can take back and implement immediately?*

# Questions & Discussion

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*Thank you for attending this session.*