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Wading through Smart Grid Grants with Humor

Your mission, should you decide to accept it, is to write a compelling application that will result in winning a nice sized portion of the smart grid investment grant money. Lest you think this will be easy, let's put a few "Mission Impossible" type hurdles in front of you for this once-in-a-generation gold rush.

First, let's synchronize watches for D-Day at 8:00 p.m. Eastern Standard Time on August 6th. Now, await mission instructions, which finally come out on June 25th. Thankfully, they don't self destruct within minutes because—at 176 pages for the instructions—even a speed reader would have scorched hands. Just to add clarity to the instructions, the ever helpful funding opportunity announcement (FOA) authors included 11 separate attachments to the base document.

If you thought instructions for putting together Ikea furniture is confusing, you will really get a kick out of reading the clarifying gems in the FOA such as my personal favorite: "The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) has issued Initial Implementing Guidance for the Recovery Act. See www.M-09-10, Initial Implementing Guidance for the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. See also 2 CFR Part 176, Requirements for Implementing Sections 1512, 1605 and 1606 of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 for Financial Assistance Awards, for detailed explanations of the Buy American and Davis Bacon wage requirements."

Now, you have your instructions and 45 days to D-Day. It's time to assemble the crack team that makes it all look easy under pressure. First, we need our Jim Phelps, preferably someone with a C in their title who can approve large sums with a single stroke of their pen. Next, we need our Ethan Hunt, who ideally is a combination superman and Einstein, who can read and comprehend government grant speak at light speed and completely understands all things smart grid. Surround the two stars with a swat team

from HR, finance, operations, purchasing, project management and some grant writers, and you're good to go.

But, don't forget the commitment letters from every vendor, partner and key stakeholder. While you're at it, you'll want to get a friendly letter from your state commission indicating that they "hope you get the money, we're behind you all the way."

Just when this whole mission seems doomed, the team finds that kernel of a loophole that will save the day. Fortunately the DOE did not include in its selection criteria the need to show a return on investment (ROI) for the proposed project. Hurray! This opens up a plethora of opportunities that can meet that criterion. While the team still has to masterfully explain why their proposed project will be for the greater good of the smart grid, not having the 800 pound ROI gorilla on their back makes all the difference.

Fast forward to those last precious minutes when it all comes together. The team has figured out how to take hundreds of pages of instructions and boil the application down to the allotted 40 pages. They didn't forget the instructions on the font type, size and margin requirements. They cut and pasted charts and graphs that surely will enlighten the reviewers, and they wrote a killer one-page summary. The potential for millions of dollars in stimulus money now rests on the shoulders of the poor clerical soul who has to figure out how to upload the application and all the attachments to the DOE website. The team is standing around, jittery from gallons of coffee and a lack of sleep, stifling the urge to grab the keyboard away and do it themselves. Even our Jim Phelps has come down to the cleric's cube to pitch in on the big finale.

But now, the wait begins.

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