SCIOTHECA

GET CONNECTED USING COST ACTIONS

SHORT GUIDE FOR PREPARATION OF COMPETITIVE COST ACTION PROPOSAL

„ If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants." - *Isaac Newton*

The aim of this guide is NOT to provide basic information on the program (this can be found here: www.cost.eu), but to share valuable personal experiences collected during preparation of three COST Action proposals in the role of coordinator, two of them being successfully funded.

The official website of the COST Association provides you with plenty of information, however, for a beginner; the number of various documents and guidelines is overwhelming. My intention is to sort out the necessary ones for the proposal preparation and to show, what is important during the proposal drafting.

PRIOR TO WRITING YOUR PROPOSAL

The very first question of yours should be, whether you fulfill COST eligibility conditions. This and many other practical information can be found in the document called **COST Open Call SESA Guidelines**.

Is my idea fitting the program?

- There are two possibilities: Either you are active in a new field of research and technology or you want to combine several already established technologies to exploit the potential of the relevant technologies. Both ways are supported, the combination of technologies must of course bear a provable potential to deliver new results. What will NOT be funded: networking of experts of already well-established fields of research or technologies or research fields with no potential of new breakthroughs. It is up to you to defend your research idea; if your arguments are good, the evaluators will rather agree with you and support your idea.
  You can also consult your project idea with your respective country representative, who should be able to give you an advice; this consultation is for free.

What is the probability I will get successful?

- Well, on the first glance it is not very high. The success rate of COST Actions in 2019 was 10 %, however, the intention of European Commission is to raise the success rate to 15 %, meaning more funds should be available in the future. 10 % seems not to be too high, but there is still a fair chance to get funded if you prepare your proposal well.

Coordination vs. participation?

- The coordinator has the saying. Sometimes it works well, sometimes not. I personally prefer the coordinator's role as it enables me to shape the proposal according to my good practice, and to use the methods I know they work. Should it happen you are in the role of a participant ("secondary proposer"), you will be probably asked to review the proposal or to write a chapter, but the final text will be always made by the coordinator and it is only up to him/her, whether s/he will consider your comments or not. Some coordinators do this, some not. My advice in this matter is: if you want to have an excellent proposal, **don't be afraid to take the role of the coordinator**.

How long does the proposal preparation take?

- Most researchers would tell me they need not more than 2 weeks. Honestly, it is a nonsense. They certainly would not need more than two weeks for their part, maybe for the whole scientific part including the contribution of the secondary proposers, if necessary. Only when the scientific part is ready, the others can be drafted, and the other parts usually take unexpectedly much time. Besides the Technical annex, plenty of information must be filled in in the eCOST online tool; all secondary proposers must fill in their part, very often forgotten part Mission must be filled in, too. You might find out during the drafting of the proposal that your network misses some experts, so you will have to find some. Just putting together the whole network might take a few weeks.
  Altogether, from the very first idea to submit a COST Action proposal, you should have at least three months' time left to the next cut-off date. Most people take 4 – 5 months to prepare a COST Action.

WHAT COMES NEXTS

How should I prepare the budget?

- Luckily, there is no budget in COST Actions. The budget is calculated by the funding body according to the size of the Action, the proposed activities and the available funds. You may get around € 110.000/year. The budget will be reviewed every year after the grant period is closed and adjusted according to the spending in the old grant period and the proposed activities for the new grant period.

Which activities get funded?

- This question is actually essential as many applicants do not properly understand, what can be funded by COST and are quite disappointed, when they find out the truth. The only supported activities are
  - NETWORKING: meetings and conferences (currently virtual meetings). Travel and subsistence costs are paid, expenses connected with organization of the event (catering, rental fees etc.)

- Summer schools: the only activity, where applicants get consumables financed. Otherwise travel and subsistence costs are covered as eligible costs.
- Short- and long staff exchanges: travel and subsistence costs are paid, NOT consumables connected to the visiting scientist

NOT supported activities are research itself. One must understand COST Actions are a tool bringing experts together to find out new ways of research, to put their research results together to develop something new, but not to carry out research. However, it is expected, that as a follow-up of a successful COST Action, e.g. Horizon 2020 collaborative project with the participation of the Action proposers will be submitted.

Where can I get more information?

COST Actions have usually two cut-off dates a year, autumn and winter/spring. The first challenge is to find the actual proposal template. When you open the COST website (www.cost.eu), you might notice the section "Open Call", then you go to "Documents & guidelines" and here the hell starts. The last time I counted no less than 32 documents on this site. Do not panic! The essential documents you need for a proposal drafting are:

- **Technical annex**: this is the proposal template. There is a new version issued for each call, never use older versions! **COST Open Call SESA Guidelines**: this document gives you the real guidelines, how to fill out the technical annex, explains the individual sections of the Technical annex, shows, what is expected to be described in the Technical annex. This document is extremely helpful, and I have experienced several times that people were not aware of it. Please, do nott mix it up with the document "Action proposal submission, evaluation, selection and approval (SESA)".

Practical tips for the Technical annex

Try to avoid the most common mistakes.

1. The proposers have difficulties to fit into the **limit of 15 pages**. Please, be aware, that a certain space must be left for the often-underestimated chapters such as "Added value of networking", "Impact", "Implementation". A Gantt chart is a must and takes usually half a page! Please note, that science is an important part of the proposal, but not the only important part. An optimal ratio between the scientific and management part is 5 pages of the topic

description: 10 pages of the rest (starting from the chapter "Added Value of networking"). A lot of scientific stuff might be added in the "Description of the work plan", though.

2. **Keeping the idea throughout the proposal**: this happens quite often. The proposal starts with a clear idea which starts to undergo small changes at some point of the proposal and then repeatedly. At the end, the main proposer (the coordinator) finds out the idea gets very different now. Moreover, the proposer may realize that the "new" idea is actually better that the old one. The consequence is that s/he starts to draft the proposal again from scratch. After several attempts s/he gets confused, the idea gets lost, the frustrations come. This is usually a result of putting together texts written by several persons. Therefore, the next advice sounds:

3. **Write your proposal yourself!** Although it seems to be much more work – and probably is – it pays off. Of course, you can ask a secondary proposer to draft a certain section where s/he is a better expert than you are. However, your role as a coordinator is to critically review this part and re-write it so, that it matches the original idea and clearly shows the necessity of this part for the Action.

AFTER PROPOSAL SUBMISSION

How long does the evaluation take?

Usually up to five months. The coordinator will get informed on the outcome of the evaluation. The next step is invitation of the coordinator (Action Chair) to a workshop in Brussels where s/he will get introduction to the whole COST system. However, at this point we are already toughing the project implementation, which is another story.