



\$100 BILLION PROBLEM: GOVERNMENT DUPLICATE SPENDING

Introduction

In the early morning hours of August 6th, 2012, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) successfully landed the Mars Science Laboratory (MSL) on the surface of Mars. The laboratory, nicknamed “Curiosity” was launched in November 2011, and it was the culmination of over eight years of work by the agency.

The total price tag for Curiosity was \$2.5 billion and was the product of an organization making severe cutbacks, including ending its shuttle program in 2011.¹ But despite the success of the project, many have questioned the expense at a time of severe government-wide cutbacks and belt tightening.

But as much money as \$2.5 billion is, that amount pales in comparison to the amount of money lost every year due to duplicate spending by government branches.

A recent Government Accountability Office (GAO) report estimates that between \$100 billion and \$200 billion is lost every year to such wasteful spending², enough to put at least 40 Curiosity rovers on Mars every year or one every nine days. In fact, even the lowest estimate would be enough to fund NASA, in its entirety, five times over.

How Could Grant Funding Be Duplicated?

Although granting agencies require disclosure, grant applicants may not always disclose an accurate list of agencies where a proposal has been submitted. Not all federal, state and private organizations are able to cross-check submitted grant proposals.

But while it’s unlikely that this money would be spent sending an army of rovers to Mars or just on overhauling the space program, it shows how much good can be done with that amount of money and, more importantly, the scope of the opportunities missed by wasting this amount of funding on duplicate spending.

However, the issue of duplicate spending is not one that can be addressed by just one or two agencies. The problem, as the GAO report shows, is government-wide and it requires a broader solution to have the maximum impact.

Scope and Impact

With shrinking government budgets and an increase in demand for grant money and other Federal funding, duplicate spending has become an increasing concern for agencies in all areas of government.

The billions of dollars uncovered by the GAO report that is wasted by the US government on duplicate spending each year is an amount that could be easily avoided through better coordination and communication.

Much of this money is lost through copied and plagiarized proposals. In one well-documented case in 2010, a faculty member at the University of Central Florida (UCF) submitted a plagiarized grant to the Air Force, US National Science Foundation (NSF) and the Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) and was awarded grant money by each.³

In a similar case, reported in Nature Publishing Group by Craig Grimes, a now-former professor at Pennsylvania State University, submitted a plagiarized grant to the Department of Energy (DOE) and the NSF, both of which awarded him grants that he accepted. The matter was only brought to a conclusion after authorities brought grant fraud charges against the professor, to which Grimes pleaded guilty.⁴

However, for every case like Grimes where the misuse of funds, accidental or intentional, is discovered, there are many more cases where it is not.

This type of applicative and wasteful spending is easily preventable as the technology exists to detect and stop many of these problems before they result in wasted money. Furthermore, fixing such issues is imperative as economic and political pressures constantly force government agencies to do more with less resources, making the elimination of waste a top priority.

Cause

Much of this wasteful spending comes from duplicate payments, grants and expenditures made by various government departments that are often unaware that their efforts are being replicated elsewhere.

Use Case | NSF

The National Science Foundation (NSF) began using iThenticate in 2007 to check grant proposals for plagiarism. In a recent announcement, NSF stated that it will explore increasing its usage of iThenticate, specifying that: "iThenticate offers access to an extensive database of sources, requires minimal training, performs quickly and efficiently, and maintains the confidentiality of uploaded documents. No other product on the market, including those introduced since our initial contract, provides the breadth of content or ease of use as iThenticate."⁵

However, the problem can also exist within the same program. As the GAO report highlights, sometimes a single agency will not coordinate grant applications across the various programs it oversees. The depth of vision, when it comes to duplicate spending, is often very shallow.

Unfortunately, the problem is only going to get worse if major changes are not made.

The reason is that government budgets are continuing to shrink and that is applying a downward pressure on schools and private companies alike to seek out government funding through grants and proposals.

But with this increased pressure comes increased competition and an increased likelihood that government agencies will receive plagiarized or duplicate proposals, opening up the door for billions more dollars to be wasted on undeserving projects or projects that have already been fully funded.

Without greater cooperation and communication within individual and between different government agencies, it's likely that the problem of duplicate spending is going to grow and that more and more of the government's limited resources will be spent on projects that should never have received funding.

Solution

The only solution for addressing duplicate spending, especially when it comes to research grants, proposals and reports, is by agencies cooperating and communicating with one another. If an agency is not aware that something they have received is a duplicate work, they have no way to prevent it from receiving funds that it does not deserve.

Unfortunately, given the volume of works that even a small agency has to deal with, it is impractical, if not impossible, to check all of the works by hand. This problem grows exponentially when you attempt to perform such checks across departments and agencies.

Agency-wide Adoption

Fortunately, iThenticate can greatly expedite the process of performing such checks and also add a layer of protection against plagiarism and other forms of duplication.

iThenticate, like most technology, is most effective when it is widely and consistently used, both within a single agency and across multiple agencies. This is because iThenticate not only checks works against its large database of content, but also against other proposals, grants and reports submitted to restricted repositories, meaning that it can detect duplication across government agencies potentially reducing the money spent on redundant funding.

Though not all duplication is unethical or illegal, detecting duplication is the first step to determining what is and is not acceptable and weeding out grants and proposals that may not deserve funding.

Adoption Across the U.S. Government

Many government agencies and institutions are already using iThenticate. In the US, this includes the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the United States Department of Justice, the United States Department of Energy, the Office of Research Integrity (ORI) and the National Science Foundation (NSF). Internationally iThenticate is being used by both the European Commission and the European Parliament as well as government agencies in other nations around the world, including the Swiss National Science Foundation and Qatar National Research Fund.

For more information on government agencies using iThenticate, visit: www.ithenticate.com/resources/government

This level of adoption gives iThenticate the potential to serve as a central grants repository that all government agencies can access. Such a centralized system would make it simple and cost-effective for US government agencies to check incoming proposals and reports for originality and help spot potential ethical or legal issues before they become a more serious problem.

Most importantly though, by making it easy to automatically and accurately check such works for duplication, iThenticate has the ability to identify possible cases of redundant funding and help ensure that the resources of the government are directed to where they are most deserved and most needed.

In short, duplication checking through iThenticate is a potentially powerful tool for preventing government waste and it can be implemented almost immediately.

References

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