Research Administration Form Use Survey

MAKE FORMS

PURPOSE

Research Administrators spend a lot of time filling out, developing and collecting forms. Forms in research administration run the gamut from big, bad and ugly to beautiful and highly functional. They can seem like a burden, but in fact they are an important communication tool and part of a research administrator's work.

The purpose of the Research Administration Form Use Survey was to survey the research community to identify common themes, attitudes, and methods regarding the use of forms as well as industry standards for types of forms and methods of completion and collection. Based on the responses, insights that result in real improvements to forms can be provided.

SURVEY

In February 2019, a survey was distributed to national research administration listservs. The response was outstanding, supporting the idea that forms are an important topic and in need of a deep dive. A total of 110 completed surveys and 31 partially completed surveys were received from 59 institutions of all types, small and large, private and public, hospitals, universities, and private companies with a range of needs, system modernization, capabilities, and resources. Respondents also had a variety of roles in research administration, with the majority being departmental and central research administration staff.

ABOUT THE RESPONDENTS

90% **Involved in the creation and/or development of a new form**

Predominant Roles

44% **Central Office Administrators**

28% **Authorized Organizational Representatives**

26% **Department Administrators**

Types of Organizations Represented

73% **Universities**

19% **Medical Centers/Hospitals**

8% **Other (Non-profits, PUIs, etc.)**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Jessica Rowell, Proposal Development Manager, and Alexa Van Dalsem, Senior Manager Proposal Development, in the Office of Contracts and Grants at the University of Colorado Boulder developed, conducted, and synthesized the results of the survey. Together with Nicole Jenkins, Assistant Director for Communications and Training, this poster was authored.

References

Jarrett, C. (2000). Designing usable forms: the three-layer model of the form. Retrieved from http://www.formsthatwork.com/files/Articles/DesigningUsableForms.pdf

Maier, A. (2014). Paper, Cut: The Bleeding Edge of Government Forms. Civic Quarterly. Retrieved from https://civicquarterly.com/article/paper-cut-the-bleeding-edge-of-government-forms/

Survey and survey results available at www.colorado.edu/ocg/form-survey

Clear

Like a lightbulb brings clarity to darkness, good forms communicate the following clearly:

- Information that is needed
- Rationale
- Directions
- How to submit

RATIONALE FOR FORMS

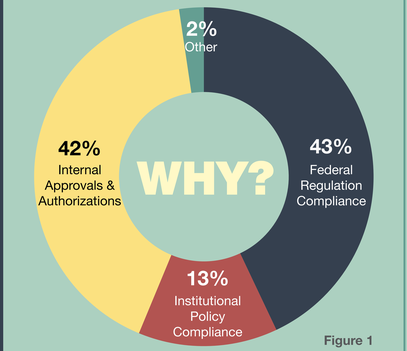


Figure 1

Assuring Federal and institutional compliance (56%) and approvals (42%) are overwhelmingly the primary rationale for requiring forms (Figure 1). However, 30% of the time the rationale is provided partially or not at all within the form (Figure 2).

EVIDENCE OF CLARITY

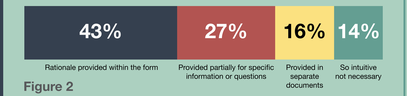


Figure 2

Surveyors note that no faculty participated in the survey. While the survey responses indicate a clear understanding of the information that is needed on forms, this may not be shared by all form completers.

Recommendation: Embed instructions on forms; instruction should be simple and use plain language. Complicated or inaccessible instructions are unlikely to be used. (Maier, 2014). Users should not be guessing either what to provide on a form or how to provide it.

Linked

Users are a critical link in the success of forms, and their involvement should be leveraged at every stage of:

- Design
- Review
- Testing
- Roll-out
- Continuous Improvement

FORM DEVELOPMENT

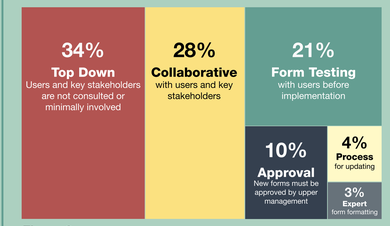


Figure 3

Survey results indicate there are a variety of users (Figure 4), but over a third of the time form development is top down (Figure 3).

Recommendation: Improve forms by linking with users. Forms are a relationship and communication tool between the users (Jarret, 2000). For every form, there are at least two users: (1) the form completer; and (2) the final form receiver.

FORM APPROVERS

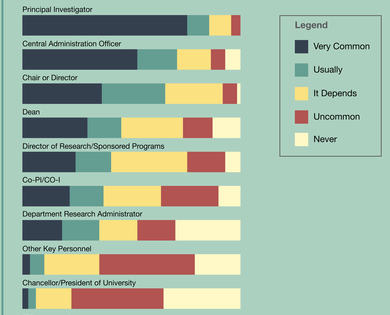


Figure 4

Efficient

Bad forms drain the energy out of users, but efficient forms take advantage of these key elements:

- Modern design
- Scannable and readable
- Process and cadence for regular updates
- Consideration to rationale, users, and accessibility

MADDENING ASPECTS

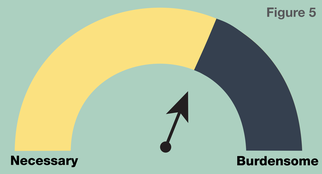
When it comes to identifying the most maddening aspects of required forms, 43% of respondents cited:

- Information required is duplicated on other forms
- Routing workflow is too time consuming
- Poor formatting

These maddening aspects may be experienced due to the technology that is used. Respondents indicated that 18% of form interaction was completed through a word processing or hard copy document, while only 15% of form interactions utilized an electronic research administration (eRA) system (Figure 6).

NECESSARY VS BURDENSOME

Figure 5



While the survey results indicate that forms have burdensome aspects, when respondents were asked to rank forms on a 0-100 scale with 0 = Necessary and 100 = Burdensome, the results indicate that the necessary aspect of forms outweighs the burden (Figure 5).

FORM CONSIDERATIONS

With approvals being the greatest purpose for required forms (Figure 8), very little consideration of the user/approver is made during form development. When respondents were asked to rank six dimensions of form development, 66% responded that user experience and consideration of who needs to sign the form were the lowest priorities.

At the same time, 29% indicated signatures of various approvers was very common (Figure 4). However, there is little trust in the approvals obtained. When respondents were asked to identify their level of trust with forms, 37% of the distrust identified was associated with approvals not being adequately reviewed and considered before signing (Figure 7).

Accessible

Forms need to be intentionally designed for functionality, visual design and to maximize technology, which includes:

- Central point of access
- Accessible by all users
- Easy routing
- Ability to collect signatures electronically

ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

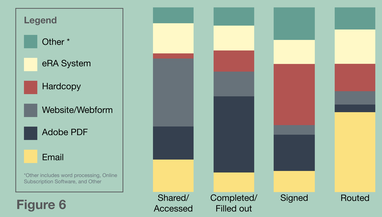


Figure 6

Respondents indicated that 41% of form interactions are completed through email and Adobe. Surveyors question if these processes are really digital or just an electronic version of a paper form. Surprisingly, 33% of respondents answered that signatures are collected on hardcopies of forms (Figure 6).

Recommendation: Ensure the technology being used is digital and not analog. This can provide data validation and proper form accessibility (Maier, 2014).

TRUST IN FORMS

Respondents were asked to identify their level of trust regarding the following aspects of forms:

- Required approvals will be adequately reviewed and considered before signing
- Forms will be completed entirely and accurately
- Form instructions and information will be followed
- Forms will work

Moderate trust had the highest number of responses for each aspect and represented 45% of responses for all aspects combined (Figure 7).

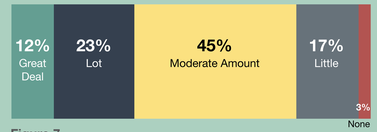


Figure 7

Necessary

Whether a new or an existing form, querying the necessity of forms and its components includes considering:

- Duplicative information in the same or multiple forms
- Timing - is this needed now?
- Consistency within and across departments

PRIMARY PURPOSE

Respondents were asked to rank the primary purpose for the majority of their organization's forms on a scale of 1 (highest priority) to 5 (lowest priority). With 127 responses, the highest priority was approvals with an average rank of 1.7. Obtaining assurances and gathering information were the second highest priority with an average rank close to 3.0. Submitting requests had an average rank of 3.4, and receipt of notification had an average rank of 3.8.

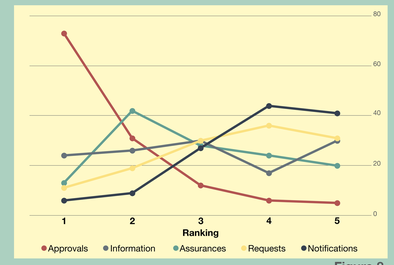


Figure 8

NUMEROUS FORMS

The survey identified 30 research administration forms and asked respondents to indicate if they were used within their organization. All forms had a positive number of respondents indicating use, and respondents identified an additional 42 forms beyond those identified in the survey.

Surveyors categorized the identified forms into the following research life cycle phases and purposes:

Phase	Qty
Proposals	17
Award - Contractual	16
Award - Financial	13
Compliance	9
Subs	11
Miscellaneous Actions	6

Purpose	Qty
Approvals	23
Assurances	20
Gathering Information	11
Requests	12
Notifications	6