



# The seven deadly sins of research inefficiency

“The business and technology systems at many research organisations have failed to keep pace with changing requirements and growing demands. This creates inefficiencies and gaps in the range and quality of services and support research organisations provide to researchers and external clients.”

**Dr Glenn Swafford, Director of Research Services, University of Oxford.**

There are significant pressures on the budgets of Research Organisations (ROs) from both executives and funders. The requirement to maintain productivity with fewer resources means that ROs need to improve efficiency if they are to maintain revenue levels. Added to this challenge is the need for greater transparency and reporting requirements.

Below are some key pointers to help you identify potential inefficiencies at your organisation and suggestions on how to streamline operations so that you can focus on world-class research.

1. **Inefficient processes** - Research projects are highly complex, often requiring input and management by many individuals who are spread across a Higher Education Institution (HEI) or RO. For many this means that there are no standardised ‘ways of working’, activities can become inefficient, peppered with elongated and duplicated processes that delay research and result in additional costs.

## Tips

- Consider a single research management and administration solution that spans all relevant departments and stakeholders in the research process. The implementation of such a system is also the perfect time to review current operations and deploy best practices to shorten processes.
- Use automated workflow technology to direct activities to the right people at the right time. This will ensure each stage of the research process is completed in a timely and efficient manner.

2. **Failure to sweat assets** - ROs often have an array of expensive and useful assets. A problem for many researchers and academics is that these assets have not been catalogued on a central system. This means that it can be difficult to identify available equipment and where it may be located. As a result, duplicate equipment items can be purchased, or rented from a third party at great expense, when it is in fact already owned and stored somewhere on site.

The benefit of capturing this information on a suitable asset system is the potential to increase utilisation through discoverability and therefore unlock the revenue opportunity of leasing equipment to other ROs.

## Tips

- Record and hold equipment information on a single database, preferably an asset management system that can be accessed by all internal stakeholders.
- Openly publish information about your asset resources, ideally using the UNIQUIP Publishing Specification <http://equipment.data.ac.uk/uniqip>, so that third parties can identify and lease your equipment.

“equipment.data is the first national equipment and facilities sharing database in the UK for higher education: <http://equipment.data.ac.uk/>. This website allows institutions to both contribute to and access facilities and equipment data from participating UK HE universities and research institutions. This will enable greater asset utilisation and addresses the need to do more with less,”

**Adrian Cox, Project Manager, Research Facilities & Equipment Sharing Project, University of Southampton.**

3. **Inefficient procurement** - In the course of its activities, an RO may purchase a wide variety of materials and services, but many are grappling with inefficient and administration-heavy purchasing habits. These include not researching best price, generating large paper trails and allowing rogue spending. High procurement costs do little to improve reputations.

#### Tips

- Collaborate with other organisations - shared services or procurement frameworks are a good place to start. The Research Management & Administration System (RMAS) procurement framework for instance, has negotiated favourable commercial terms with vendors that will reduce the cost of procuring and maintaining research management technology.
- Use integrated and best-of-class technology to manage procurement. Modern procurement solutions provide requisitioners with numerous strategic tools like access to market places to secure best price, and workflow to eliminate rogue spending and reduce paper. Integration between other relevant systems like finance and research costing and pricing applications helps improve data accuracy and reduce the time it takes to collate information for reports.

4. **Excessive administration** - Due in part to organic growth or, at HEIs, the large number of departments spread across campuses, many ROs face an uphill battle to become paperless.

Against this background the growing demand for additional reporting requirements, while designed to improve sector performance, is tying many ROs in administrative knots. This means that rather than doing more with less, many face the prospect of diverting resources from strategic activities to form filling and box ticking.

Calculating the full economic costs for research projects and the associated price to charge funders is particularly important. However, this is a complex task and trying to calculate it manually is time consuming and administration heavy.

#### Tip

- requirements. With that in mind, deploy technology that guides stakeholders through the right processes to comply - a research costing and pricing solution will ensure that all relevant data is accurate, is at the fingertips of research stakeholders and that reports can be quickly created to comply with the latest legislation.

5. **Disjointed business development** - Institutions crave the enhanced reputation that comes from world-class research and the revenue it provides to improve facilities for, in the case of HEIs, students. However, in light of the economic downturn and changing funding models, more organisations are seeking a slice of the research-funding pie. To survive in this more competitive climate many need to reprioritise when it comes to business development and customer relationships.

For many, a historic mistrust of 'commercialism' has resulted in a culture that can be at odds with the new research landscape. Relationships may not be maintained and there can be little coordination between departments (often with a customer dealing with many contacts who are unaware of each other's' involvement). This is a considerable threat given that potential customers will judge ROs against the highly organised and professional relationship management they expect from commercial businesses that they deal with on a daily basis.

6. **Antiquated recruitment and human resource systems**

Prospective students and funders often look to the quality and reputation of an institution's academics and researchers before making a decision to sign-up. As ROs look to attract and retain the best in the business, this makes first impressions at the outset of the recruitment process particularly important. Unfortunately for many, this can be an area that organisations can improve upon. The paper-based systems used by many ROs are prone to error and can cause lost applications and delays in the interview process, responding to applicants and worse.

It's not just important to have the most skilled personnel, it's essential that once on-board an RO makes the most of their employees' competencies. Often however, with hundreds of people operating under strict regulations, an administrative mountain swamps HR professionals, negatively impacting their ability to provide the strategic support that a highly skilled workforce benefits from.

#### Tips

- Centrally-managed e-Recruitment technology allows organisations to more easily access international talent 24 hours a day and manage the recruitment process more effectively. Aside from reducing costs, best practice recruitment immediately creates a positive experience for candidates, making the successful appointment of the skilled people you want more likely.
- By deploying employee self-service, administration can be removed from HR departments so that they can concentrate on more added value activities - employees can then be managed, nurtured and deployed in the appropriate role to deliver world class services.

7. **Inflexible systems that operate in isolation** - Vice chancellors, business development executives, finance directors, researchers, academics and others may record and all hold information that is of value to each other. However, as is often the case, if it is held in separate systems that value will be lost.

What's more, given that ROs are subject to a stream of evolving and new reporting requirements, holding data in different parts of the business renders an organisation less agile in the face of change.

**Tip**

- Implement a sector-specific Technology Platform to connect functions (Research Management, Pricing and Costing, Finance and CRM etc.) so that stakeholders can collaborate across relevant business processes. For instance, it is not just the sales and marketing team that are interested in the pipeline for research funding. The Finance Director can use this information to project revenue and budgets, the HR team to organise any necessary recruitment or training, and the academic faculties to plan projects.

Technology Platforms need not mean purchasing a huge unwieldy solution three-quarters of which may not be used. ROs can purchase and connect solutions which are relevant to them and their activities.

If you would like to speak to UNIT4 about how we have helped research organisations avoid the seven deadly sins of research inefficiency and how we can help you, please contact us: [info.uk@unit4.com](mailto:info.uk@unit4.com) or visit: [www.unit4software.co.uk](http://www.unit4software.co.uk).

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