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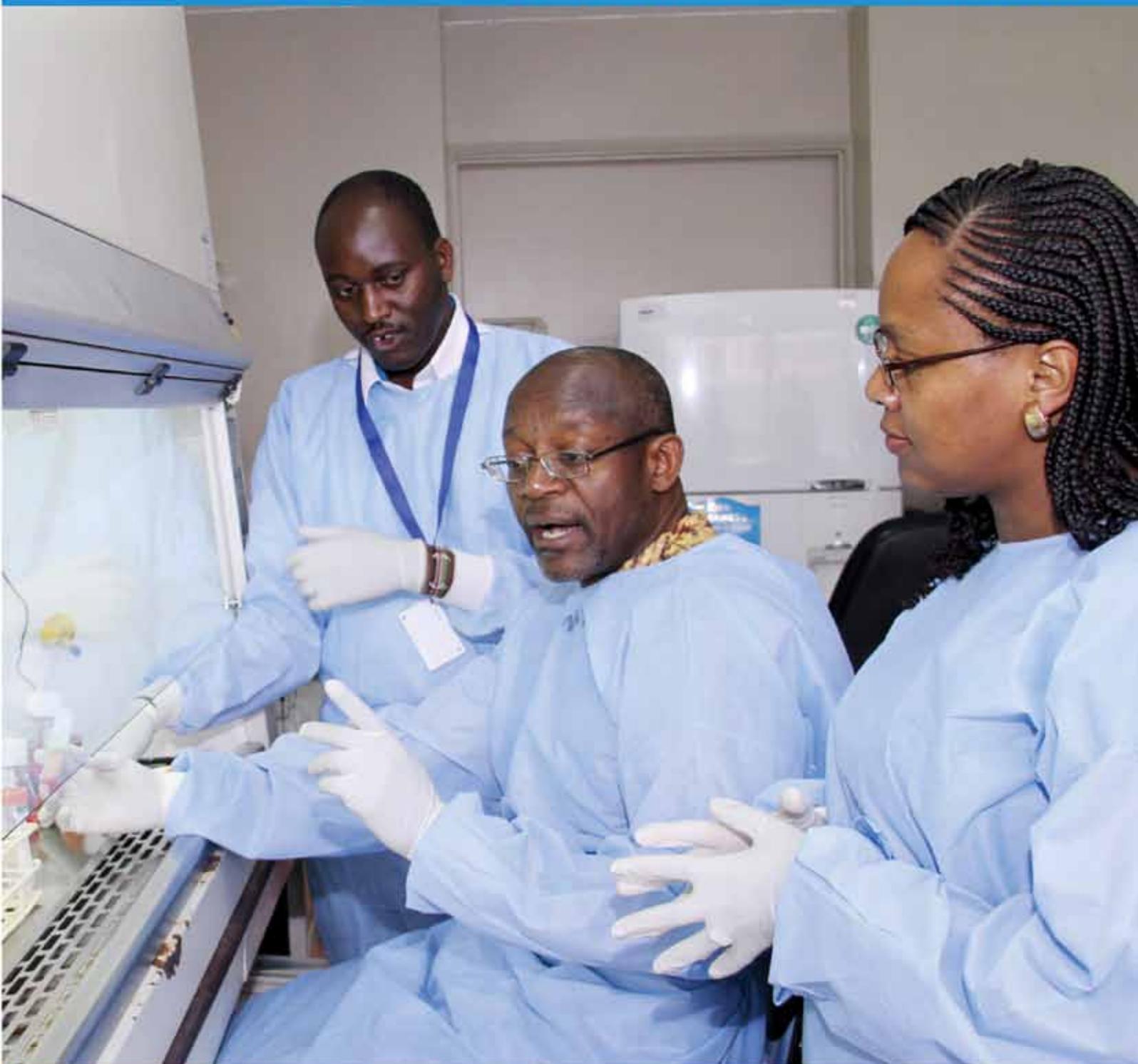
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Collaboration in Research



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Managing research grants

Tips from a Grants Manager

Susan Muchina asked Ms. Annah Njui to share some insights into the important issue of grants management based on her experience as the Grants, Partnerships and Projects Manager at the International Centre of Insect Physiology and Ecology (ICIPE). Ms. Njui was one of the participants at the Grants Management Training organised by the Consortium for National Health Research (CNHR) for its member institutions in July this year. ▶▶

Grant Management



The office works with principal investigators, coordinators, managers, and the Finance Office to ensure the successful implementation of projects.

Question: Why do research institutions require a Grants Management Office?

Answer: The Grants Management Office provides overall leadership, management, and oversight of the ongoing research and development projects in an organisation. The office works with principal investigators, coordinators, managers, and the Finance Office to ensure the successful implementation of projects. The aim is to build a relationship of trust with funding agencies and also make the grants management process within institutions orderly and procedural.

Question: What should researchers expect from the Grants Management Office in their institution?

Answer: The expectations are enormous. Once a grant proposal has been funded, it is essential to study the terms and conditions of award and seek clarification of issues that may be unclear. This should be done as promptly as possible.

The grants management office should also maintain a project file to be used in documenting all major actions from grant award to closeout. The office should have in place, for every funded project, a file containing the following:

- Copy of the executed grant agreement including the approved budget
- Copy of the grant budget reflecting how it will be processed through the accounting system and eventual preparation of financial statements
- Key correspondence with funding agency
- Financial Statements filed with the funding agency
- Narrative progress reports filed with the funding agency
- Audit and project closeout documentation

Question: Your role as Grants, Partnerships and Projects Manager revolves around managing grants on behalf of the researchers. Describe briefly, what this role entails.

Answer: My major role is grants monitoring and reporting which involves working with teams from management, scientists, and Finance. The purpose of grant monitoring is to review and ensure progress against the grant's goals and address any problems or issues before the end of the grant period in consultation with the funder. I am involved in the whole spectrum of activities relating to the grant such as partnership and project management, implementation and compliance, reporting and monitoring, and closeout.

Question: In your opinion, what is the role of Finance Department in the grant management process especially elaborating on the relationship with the PI and the grants management office?

Answer: Essentially, the main role of Finance is to provide a reporting system that fairly and accurately documents the spending of grant funds. The Finance Office should work jointly with the PI and the Grants Office to ensure that all financial transactions are clearly documented and recorded in a manner that facilitates comprehensive financial reporting, easy referencing, and maintenance of a clear audit trail. This integrated approach provides real-time access to financial information to assist project managers in controlling their activities. Budget controls should be based on project management accounts to ensure the expenditure is within the funder-approved budget. Finance Office should also design and implement policies that minimise the risk of loss, ensure protection of assets, encourage cost-effective employment of resources, and safeguard against irregularities. ▶▶

Question: Why is it that some researchers, and even institutions, attract and retain funders while others seem to be struggling to receive even a minimal amount of funding?

Answer: The secret to “attracting and retaining” funders lies in establishing a sound relationship and compliance system. Funding agencies support individuals and not institutions! Every grant award letter and the accompanying grant agreement will contain information about applicable compliance requirements. The award letter is a binding document. To demonstrate compliance, the Grants office should make a checklist of the grant requirements, which cover issues like personnel and procurement policies as well as reporting obligations, and ensure that these are strictly adhered to. If for any reason a deviation is imminent, then the grants office should immediately inform the funding agency and provide the justification and proposed action to remedy the situation. Such a proactive approach eventually builds trust and effective and efficient grant management mechanisms. It also helps to develop and maintain a professional working relationship with funders and other partners who become motivated to collaborate with researchers.

Question: It is often said that “A grant is not a gift!” What would you say is the reward for the researcher whose proposal has attracted a good amount of funding?

Answer: Obtaining a grant for your research is a phenomenal achievement! Funders give support because they believe the work will make a difference in a cause they care about. Their funding is an investment in the work they expect to be accomplished by the research. If this is well-communicated and articulated in the proposal, then you are good to go and achieving results as defined in the proposal is the best way to show appreciation to your funders.

For the researcher, receiving a research grant signifies career progression and peer recognition. Ultimately, the reward is the satisfaction achieved and results obtained while implementing the project. To maintain and even enhance this milestone, the researcher should create performance measures pertaining to project management and activity completion.

Question: How should a researcher handle a situation where not all funds have been expended by the end of a project?

Answer: Having unused funds at the end of a project is something that needs to be considered carefully because the actions you take with one funder may just set the

standard upon which others will view you/your institution in future. One way of preventing such a problem from occurring is to regularly review and reconcile your project expenditure against your activities and project timelines. If things are not progressing according to plan, request the funder for an appropriate grant amendment.

In all grant agreements, there is usually a clause that spells out how modifications should be handled. An appropriate modification should be sought, through the institution’s grants office, to extend the period of performance (usually referred to as no-cost extension (NCE) and a request to utilise the unexpended funds. The request should be made in the form of an official letter signed by the authorised institutional representative (usually the one who signed the Grant Agreement) as the request is binding to the institution. The request should contain a brief explanation of achievements made so far; reasons for project delays; a mention of the pending activities; and a confirmation that the resources are adequate to support the extension. It is also important to append a work plan and associated proposed budget revisions for the NCE. Under no circumstances should grant funds be spent beyond the grant end date without an approval.

Question: Based on your experience as a grants manager, what advice would you give to institutions seeking to improve grants management as a core research support function?

Answer: Improving grants management as a core research support function will certainly revolutionise an institution’s grants management and resource mobilisation activities. I have been in this game for over 16 years and managing research grants certainly requires a significant amount of proficiency. Pertinent to this is building the right skills set for staff in the grants office, who should also have knowledge of the current trends in grant management. Training is therefore a key requirement.

My academic qualifications as a project development specialist has equipped me with appropriate skills to oversee the Grants Management Office at ICIPE. I have also received invaluable training through the Training Health Researchers Into Vocational Excellence in East Africa (THRiVE). I would say the extraordinary impact of the THRiVE training and backing from my supervisors and other focal persons has enabled me to become part of a professional forum of health research administrators in Africa. We hold discussions in this forum, conduct training, and undertake analysis and benchmarking of best practices. I would recommend similar forums to institutions seeking to foster a sustainable grants and research projects environment.