

CASE STUDY: Unsolicited Submissions

CHALLENGE

Email-Based Submissions Flooding an Outdated System

Unsolicited applications and proposals represent an opportunity for individuals and organizations to offer USAID their innovative solutions to global challenges. However, the system for accepting, routing, and assessing unsolicited submissions was broken. In 2023, USAID received more than 4,000 unsolicited submissions to an email inbox managed by USAID's Legislative and Public Affairs Bureau, in addition to hundreds of paper submissions that were hand-delivered to Missions worldwide. Processing these caused significant inefficiencies, including delays in routing, inaccurate tracking, inconsistent evaluations, and limited transparency for applicants. These challenges strained resources and discouraged innovators from contributing valuable ideas.

With no standard structure for submissions, applications and proposals came in varying formats, often with critical information missing or with excessive information included. Circulating, evaluating, and responding to these submissions created a major burden on Agency staff. With just a basic spreadsheet for tracking, submissions were easily lost. For potential partners, there was no way to know where their application or proposal was in USAID's review process. Some submitters never received follow-up, leaving potential partners feeling that their submissions had disappeared into a black hole.

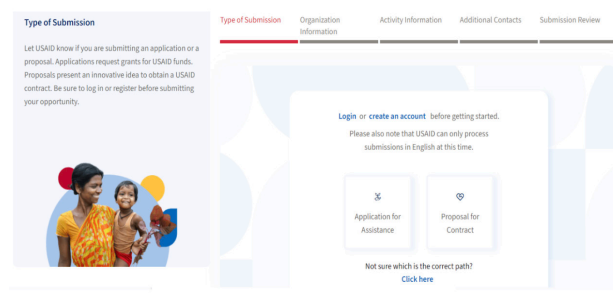
RESPONSE

A Streamlined, Web-Based Portal for Submissions

The Industry Liaison team in USAID's Management Bureau's Office of Acquisition and Assistance (M/OAA) believed that this process could be improved through a web-based portal integrated into WorkwithUSAID.gov. However, to change this process, the team needed to gather evidence that would build buy-in for a new system. The Industry Liaison shared a concept note with more than 2,000 USAID staff, outlining current challenges and proposing a four-step automated solution with standardized evaluations.

Over 100 contributors shared feedback that revealed striking issues, such as the existence of 120 separate tracking systems across USAID Missions, Bureaus, and Operating Units; a lack of consistent formats for submissions; and no centralized tracking of the proposals that received funding. The team also conducted interviews with staff and partners to understand pain points in the process.

Working closely with a team of web developers who were already supporting WorkwithUSAID.gov, the Industry Liaison team designed a new system that would allow potential partners to learn about USAID funding, input the required information, and track their submission status. Instead of receiving submissions via email, all



“The fact that USAID has provided an opportunity for unsolicited proposals [...] allows for innovation and provides new organizations with an opportunity to get funding.”

~Work with USAID LinkedIn Group Member

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applications and proposals would be streamlined to a portal dashboard. This would allow for both partners and staff to view and track submissions at each stage of evaluation, increasing transparency and enabling partners to receive feedback as their submission was reviewed. The new system collected specific required information, supporting alignment with the Agency's policies and gathering information necessary for evaluation at the concept note stage.

Alongside the portal, the Industry Liaison team also developed a Funding Essentials page to inform potential partners about USAID priorities, including Country Development Cooperation Strategies (CDCS), and help them understand the difference between acquisition and assistance before they even reached the portal. The Funding Essentials page encouraged potential partners to review all of the other funding opportunities available to them before submitting an unsolicited submission. This would ensure that they had exhausted all other relevant funding options and that they understood how their submission aligned with USAID's objectives.

EVOLUTION

Piloting and Refining the New System

In February 2024, the web development team created a working prototype of the portal, which featured a submission tracker for applicants, automated email notifications, a centralized database for staff, and standardized operating procedures to ensure consistency across units. When tested with a focus group of USAID staff and external organizations, feedback was overwhelmingly positive, confirming the portal's effectiveness. Based on user testing, the team adjusted minor aspects of the wording and flow within the portal.

IMPACT

Heightened Responsiveness, Reduced Burdens, and Improved Customer Experience

The Industry Liaison team launched the Unsolicited Submissions portal in April 2024, just four months after the initial idea and at no additional cost to the Agency. The new process has helped staff by modernizing and simplifying the review process, reducing burdens, and increasing efficiency, representing a 70 percent reduction in staff workload. Internally, the automated process filters out the unqualified submissions that overwhelmed the previous system and created burdens on staff. The internal review process also allows for a standardized comprehensive Agency-wide review process, and staff can easily sort pending, rejected, and approved submissions at each review stage.

The new system ensures initial screening within 24 hours, compared with the previous 60-day response standard. Notably, the first funded submission was approved in just 22 days—38 days faster than before. Six months post-launch, 88 percent of surveyed staff reported reduced workloads, and 90 percent found the process more efficient. Automating the unsolicited submissions process has transformed USAID's operations. It has improved efficiency, reduced staff burdens, and enhanced the Agency's ability to engage with innovators, enabling more impactful development outcomes.

Unsolicited Submissions Accomplishments

- 891 submissions received from April 2024 through January 2025
- 88 percent of surveyed staff reported reduced workloads
- 90 percent of surveyed staff found the new Unsolicited Submissions process more efficient