

CASE STUDY

The Search for the Right Reviewers Results in Increased Productivity – The Research Council of Norway

Photo credit: Sverre Chr. Jarild



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

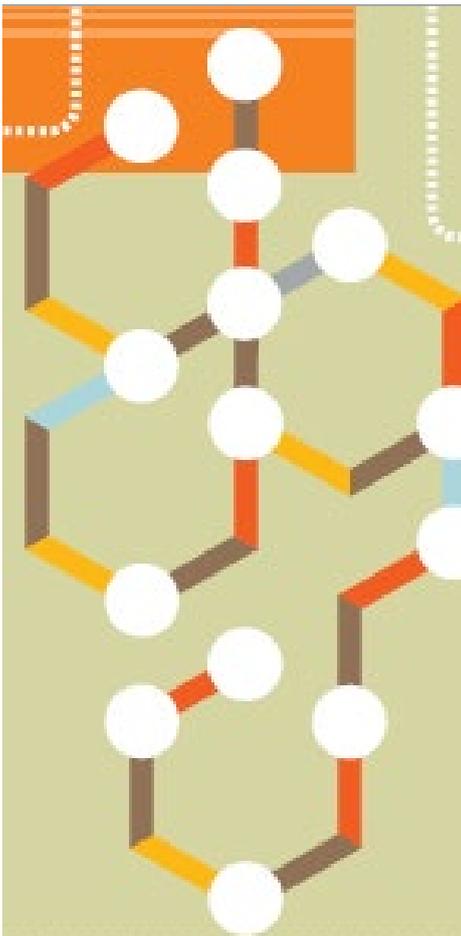
The Research Council of Norway (RCN) is a multifaceted organization that disburses funding for research projects initiated by or affiliated with Norwegian researchers, institutions and companies. As part of its ongoing efforts to improve the funding application review process, RCN recently implemented Elsevier's Expert Lookup to improve the search for experts to sit on the referee panels. Very quickly, early users saw a boost in workflow efficiency, translating into tremendous time savings. Furthermore, the solution also gave access to a global pool of experts, which made it much easier for review panel managers to find qualified referees for the wide variety of projects.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Research Council of Norway (RCN) serves as the chief advisory body for the Norwegian government authorities on research policy issues, and works to promote international cooperation and increase participation in the EU framework program on research and innovation. The RCN creates meeting places and provides a platform for dialogue between researchers, users of research and research funders.

The RCN is responsible for distributing an approximate NOK 9 billion (1 billion USD) annually to research projects prioritized in six thematic areas; namely:

- Seas and oceans
- Climate environment and clean energy
- Better public services, including healthcare
- Enabling technologies, such as biotechnology and nanotechnology
- Innovative and adaptable industry
- World-leading academic groups



BACKGROUND

Set up over 20 years ago to merge the different Norwegian research councils, the RCN is today the central research agency serving multiple advisory roles in the country, with a key function in reviewing and approving research applications for Ministry funding.

In the process of determining whether a project meets respective selection criteria and funding standards, the Council requires every application to undergo a peer review process. During the review process, each proposal is assessed by a panel consisting of five to eight unbiased experts. In all, this system requires RCN to qualify more than 1800 unbiased experts annually for the full spectrum of applications received.

The Council's demand for unbiased reviewers without competing interests far outweighs the resources available in Norway's small research community. Hence, it regularly searches for experts outside of the country.

To qualify an expert however, requires the RCN advisors to do a layered assessment. Essential checks on subject matter expertise, credentials and experience aside, there are also considerations for possible conflict of interest to the research like prior co-authorship, and contradictions to RCN's compliance policies. With close to 6000 funding applications received in 2016, and 2000 accepted grants, RCN needed to optimize the search for qualified reviewers.

CHALLENGE

Until recently, the search is heavily reliant on each advisor's personal network. This not only limits the knowledge catchment, but can also cause an overlap in qualifying the same expert for different projects.

This is compounded by the time-consuming process of sourcing for additional reviewers, which begins with an open Google search for potential candidates, followed by a search for each candidate's *h*-index.

For Dyveke Hetland, who is senior adviser at RCN's Department for Medicine,

Natural Sciences and Technology, it is not uncommon to have her entire day devoted to filtering the publication lists, just to find an *h*-index to gauge a reviewer's level of seniority.

Another challenge for advisors is understanding the country in which a potential referee is based – Because the RCN runs face-to-face review panels, it is preferred to have referees who are located not too far away.

"Finding qualified reviewers can consume weeks of my time," she said.

SOLUTION



"I just want to say how happy I am with Expert Lookup – it makes my life so much easier. I save weeks of time every year using Expert Lookup."

- MS. DYVEKE HETLAND, Senior Adviser, Department for Medicine, Natural Sciences and Technology, RCN

To raise the efficiency of its review and approval process, RCN turned to Elsevier's Expert Lookup, a powerful tool designed for the needs of funding organizations.

Using Elsevier's patented Fingerprint Engine and data from Scopus, the tool uses the grant proposal abstract to generate a list of concepts relevant to the proposal, or "fingerprints". These fingerprints quickly identify key concepts based on a discipline-specific thesaurus, and show researchers active in each specific research field. Related information, like the experts' *h*-indices – based on publication data and potential conflicts of interest based on co-authorships and previous institutional affiliation – is also generated.

Expert Lookup also enables customization of search parameters to help land a better match. Feature functions allow users to adjust conflict publication year cut-off or *h*-index minimums so Expert Lookup can suggest candidates from an expanded network search, while fingerprints can be refined to search more granularly.

Search results generated by Expert Lookup provide a more detailed perspective of the experts' work. The process simplifies what used to be a tedious task into a convenient workflow, saving grant administrators weeks of time annually, and yielding high-quality results with a selection of suitable candidates without competing interests.

CONCLUSION



With Expert Lookup, RCN is better equipped to qualify myriad research applications for funding.

The use of the solution has helped the Council to:

- Look beyond its traditional base of grant reviewers, and expand its network of experts globally
- Achieve workflow efficiency which results in significant time savings
- Improve quality of search, filtered according to expertise level, institutional affiliation and country

The word-of-mouth generated by early users of Expert Lookup has generated interest across the organization. Moving forward, RCN will progressively extend the benefits of the tool to other council advisers – starting with a planned series of introduction courses.

“Expert Lookup has not only saved me and my closest colleagues weeks of time every year, but it has also given us a much broader group of potential subject matter experts from which to select reviewers. We have to have this – it is impossible not to have this now that I know it exists.”

- MS. DYVEKE HETLAND, Senior Adviser, Department for Medicine, Natural Sciences and Technology, RCN



Expert Lookup helps to identify scientific experts in minutes. Ms. Dyeke Hetland used it to improve her search for qualified subject matter experts, who review potential candidates for RCN's grants.

“The search for relevant experts to assess the thousands of applications for research funding we receive every year used to be a time-consuming process. The solution has opened up new time resources, and empowered us with the necessary information to find relevant experts around the world.”

- MS. DYVEKE HETLAND, Senior Adviser, Department for Medicine, Natural Sciences and Technology, RCN



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