

Reports and Other Documents

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Lots of reports, proposals and other documents cross my desk, sometimes in paper form but now more often by email or as web links. If you regularly read this column, you will have heard about a number of them over the years, on subjects ranging from hand sanitizing, through resources available for seniors, to statistical studies of the English-speaking population of our region, and many others in between.

I read these documents when they are sent to me and am often struck by how much time and energy goes into producing them, not to mention the amount of money spent to pay the researchers, report writers, graphic designers, printers and distributors. And, most of the time, that money comes from grants provided by different levels of government, designed to strengthen communities, analyse service needs or report on progress in providing them.

They often arrive on thick, glossy paper, complemented by beautifully produced photographs illustrating the target groups and their activities. But, with time, more and more are also being distributed on-line, which reduces dramatically the cost of creating and delivering these documents.

Electronic distribution, as web links or attached to emails, is increasing the number and volume of the reports. Volunteers, like myself, who have to stay properly informed, are faced with dedicating exponentially rising amounts of time to reading these sometimes-gigantic reports only to determine whether they should have been sent on in the first place. In the meantime, paid project organizers feel that they are doing more work than ever because they can press 'forward document' to a whole network of volunteers and other people in the field.

It is rare to receive a report that has a clear summary of the contents, reduced to a few pages at the beginning, noting the most salient points addressed in more detail within its body. More and more frequently I receive whole bundles of these documents at the same time. I have to read, understand, write an executive summary to protect those I have to forward it to from burnout, and 'forward document'.

In the meantime, community networks seek grants to acquire or undertake studies and pay salaries for community organizers and researchers, returning regularly to the granting agencies with this burden of documents to show how much they have accomplished and how much more money they need to do more studies and prepare more documents. Then they dump it on the volunteers, who really have little choice but to go through these hundreds of electronic pages or glossy brochures to make sure to stay up-to-date.

Staffers don't appear to be trained to prepare proper executive summaries and they seem to feel that they are showing appreciation of the volunteers by sending everything on, with no incentive to do their best to help save our time. Volunteer committees have been asked to fill out, and get others to fill out, questionnaires so that more reports can be made. There appears to be no central control over whether one community group is zealously repeating the efforts of others.

This leads volunteers to become worn out and to stop volunteering. The funded agencies then claim that they are not receiving enough government money to accomplish the complex organizational tasks that they are asking of the volunteers.

This cycle must be broken and simple courtesies must be exercised, like confirming the pertinence of the documents and including executive summaries of the ones they choose to send on. It would also be nice to see granting bodies provide more oversight to avoid duplication.

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