Notes of a BTOP Reviewer,
Or How I Learned to Love Broadband

NTIA put out a call for volunteers to review applications for broadband stimulus grants. Broadband Properties' undercover reporter answered the call.

By "Alexander Graham Bell"

The notice said, "Serve your country! Be a BTOP reviewer!" In these troubled times, how could I resist the call to patriotism, service and telecommunications? It was easier than enlisting in the military and promised to be much more fun than paying taxes.

Let me begin by introducing myself, but only in the broadest possible way, as I am committed to keeping my identity a secret. I have a full-time job with a non-telecommunications organization. I have been, for a very long time, a member of a profession that is often the butt of jokes but is also the basis for many TV shows. I've been involved with telecommunications for long enough to remember when there was only one giant company in the industry and words such as "natural monopoly" and "economies of scale" were tossed around the way "BTOP" and "BIP" are tossed around today. I also remember when cell phones were the size of shoe boxes.

I first heard about BTOP – the Broadband Technology Opportunities Program, funded by broadband stimulus money from the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) – from a longtime friend who works at the Federal Communications Commission. I was given a name and a phone number, I made a call, I presented my credentials and the next thing I knew, I was sitting in front of my computer at a webinar, training to be a BTOP reviewer. (Volunteering to be a BTOP reviewer was neither as clandestine nor as shady as it might sound, but I don't want to "out" the people I worked with at NTIA any more than I want to "out" myself.)

SIX COMPUTING CENTERS TO GO, WITH CREAM AND SUGAR

In early October, I received six BTOP applications relating to public computer centers. The applications came from all parts of the country; interestingly, none came from the part of the country where I grew up, and I found myself reviewing applications that proposed projects a continent away from my hometown.

However, three of the applications were from organizations similar to my employer (whose name is clearly stated on my résumé), showing that NTIA was serious about using the specific expertise of each reviewer. (Let's put it this way: Suppose I were a barista at Starbucks; of the six applications I received, three would have come from coffee shops.)

Although one of the applicants is much larger than my employer and two are smaller, I certainly understand the values and goals and culture of the three applicants and had a firsthand understanding of the purposes that would be served by broadband adoption. Of

course, there's a nice ethical question: Did applicants from "coffee shops" have an advantage because I work at "Starbucks"? What about the applications from the "car repair place" and the "doughnut shop"? Don't these applicants deserve to have one of their own read their applications? I have no answer for this question, but, in my defense, I gave one of my highest scores to an applicant that is nothing like my employer.

GRADING THE APPLICATIONS

All BTOP applications were to be scored on a scale of zero to 100. Before I even started scoring, I read the applications from front to back simply to try to understand what each applicant was applying for. At the risk of sounding a little schoolmarmish, I will say that one application was so poorly written, I refused to give it a second reading. If I can't understand what an applicant is asking for – and I couldn't – I can't give the application a good grade. So let this be a lesson to future applicants: If you can't write,

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About the Author

Alexander Graham Bell received the first patent for the telephone on March 7, 1876. The author of this article wishes to remain anonymous.

find someone who can and pay him or her to write the application for you.

Each application was assessed in terms of four categories: project purpose, project benefits, project viability and project budget and sustainability. I had read the Notice of Funding Availability to get an understanding of what the broadband stimulus program was all about, and I went through the first set of evaluations – on project purpose – trying to balance what I thought the government was looking for with what each applicant was proposing.

The applications did a reasonably good job of describing the project benefits, but by definition, all the applicants were guessing at their ability to actually deliver the described benefits. My applicants were careful to note the educational benefits that broadband would deliver as well as the jobs that would be created.

In the project viability section of the application, applicants demonstrated, among other things, their connection to established community groups and their capacity to enter into meaningful partnerships with these groups as well as the broad support the application enjoyed. At this point, I felt a little bit like a college admissions officer wondering how *everyone* who applied could have been president of the student council but knowing that I had to take the applicants' word for it. So if applicant John Smith asserted, for example, that his application had the backing of his state's congressional delegation, I had to take John's word for it – and score accordingly.

The fourth area – project budget and sustainability – was the most problematic because my own expertise falls very much outside the realm of budgeting and finance. Each BTOP reviewer was supposed to be part of a panel of three reviewers, all anonymous to one another, who read the same applications and were supposed to put their heads together to discuss the individual scores and then revise the scores, if necessary, before submitting a composite to NTIA. I had figured that the expertise of the other members of my panel would compensate for my considerable deficits in the budget area.

Reviewers give low scores to grant applications they can't understand. Lesson: Write clearly or hire someone who can.

Problem: There was no panel discussion. Though the good folks at NTIA sent out a list of possible times for the panel to meet by phone to discuss our scoring, none of the times worked for me, so I never met with the others. Realizing that I was on my own, I gathered my courage, resurrected my notes from the first-year course in finance at Harvard Business School and threw myself at the project budgets. It wasn't a pretty sight, but I got through it and submitted my scores to my NTIA handler, who received them with profuse thanks.

In sum, I enjoyed my time as a BTOP reviewer. I liked reading the applications (the five intelligible ones, that is) and learned a great deal. I admired the pluck and fortitude of the applicants and actually found myself rooting for a couple of the applicants. (Alas, none of the applicants I screened were on the first list of grantees announced in mid-December.) Occasionally, the need for confidentiality and anonymity were oppressive, and I began to feel as if I'd entered NTIA's version of the witness protection program. But as confidentiality has a central place in my profession, I was familiar with the obligations that came with being a reviewer.

Bottom line: I liked being a BTOP reviewer so much that I signed up to be a reviewer for the second round of proposals. **BBP**