

Open the Front Door

A Guide to Easing Access to DOE's Funding Opportunities

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CleanEcon Authors

Farah Benahmed | Adria Wilson

Waypoint Strategy Group Authors

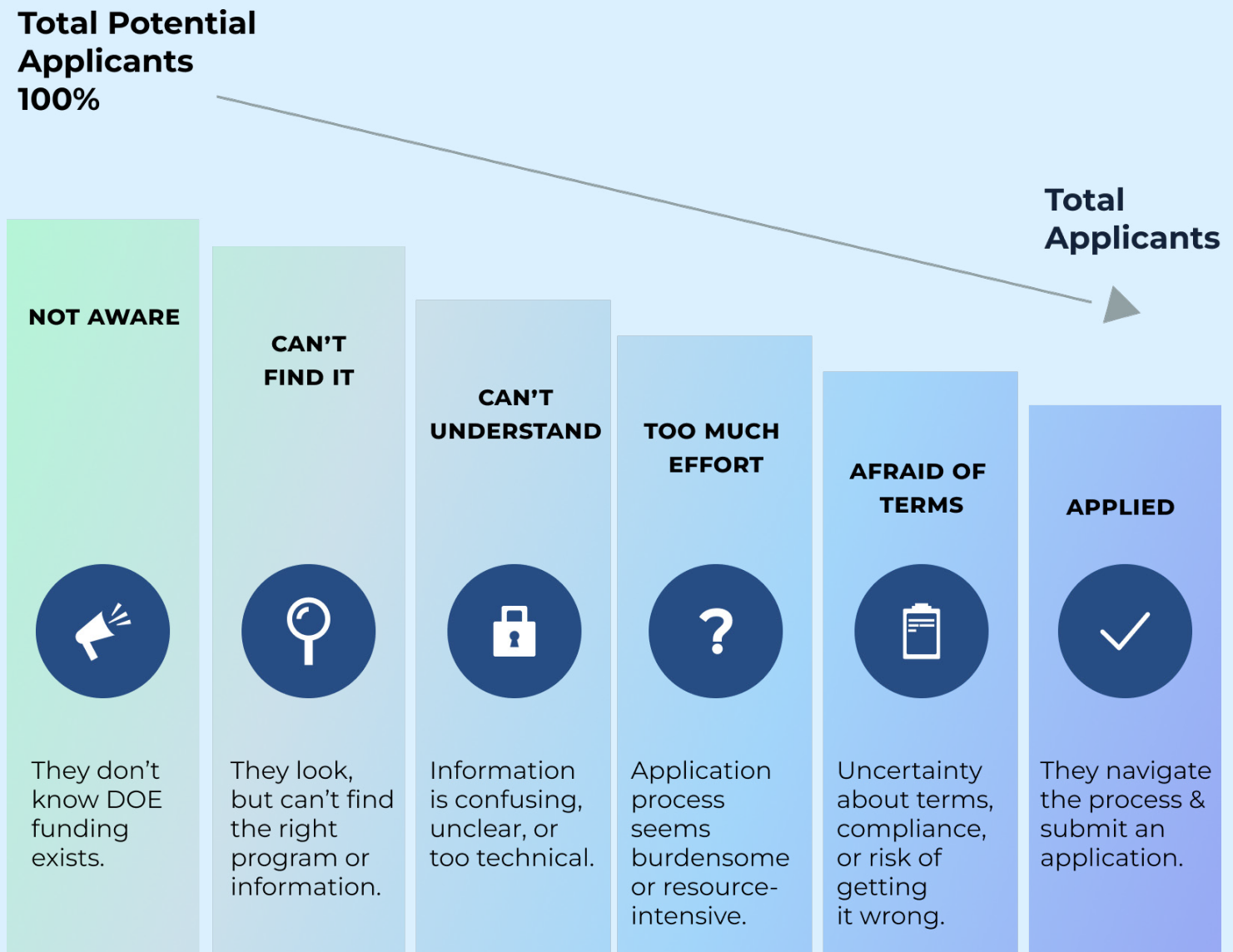
Andrew Dawson | Jennifer Garson | Victor Kane | Garrett Nilsen

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Executive Summary

The Department of Energy (DOE) is America's primary engine for funding the full range of energy research, development, demonstration, and deployment (RDD&D), work critical to the national interest that no private actor could undertake alone. From strengthening energy security and grid resilience to accelerating the next generation of energy technologies, DOE's impact on the broader energy innovation ecosystem and market depends on the quality and diversity of the companies it engages.



Yet, for many companies, engaging DOE is harder than it should be. Funding opportunities are scattered across offices and websites with no single access point, no forward-looking schedule, and no outreach beyond DOE's existing network. The opportunities companies do find are written in opaque language that new entrants struggle to understand. Many programs skip any preliminary check on ideas like a concept paper stage, and require lengthy full applications upfront, forcing every applicant to spend significant resources before learning whether it has any chance of selection.

Other offices scope solicitations so narrowly that they exclude innovators whose approaches could meet the same objectives by a different path than the sponsoring office identified. Startups and companies that do make it through the application process face terms and conditions not shared until after selection, unpredictable review timelines, and legitimate but poorly explained agency concerns about intellectual property (IP), Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) exposure, and cost share requirements. As a result, the pool of companies willing and able to engage with DOE shrinks, as does DOE's ability to fulfill its mission.

Three barriers reduce the pool of companies able to engage effectively with DOE's mission.



- 1. Awareness and Accessibility.** Many companies that could contribute to national priorities never find a relevant funding opportunity, either because schedules aren't published far enough in advance, or because they never learn the funding exists at all (Section 6).
- 2. Information, Understanding, and Trust.** Some companies find federal funding opportunities but lack the information needed to make an informed decision about whether to apply (Section 7).
- 3. Application Burden and Narrow Topics.** Others decide to apply but face disproportionate effort, unclear processes, and solicitation topics scoped too narrowly to accommodate their approach (Section 8).

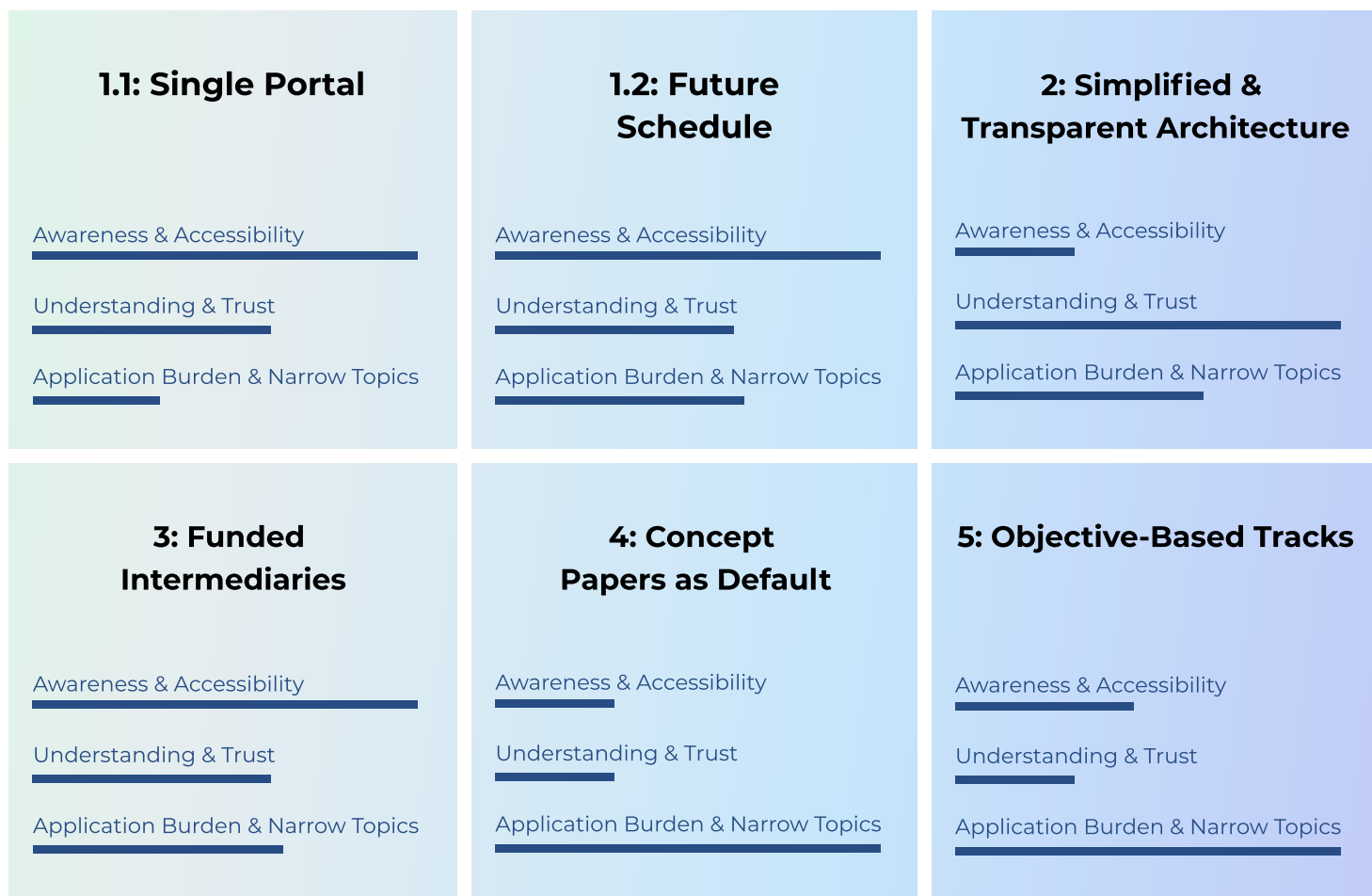
These barriers are especially difficult to solve because their impacts are invisible in DOE's own tracking and evaluation. Companies that never apply, stall out navigating federal processes, or self-select out before submitting never appear in program data.

Despite these barriers, effective models for opening the front door to federal support already exist within DOE. Individual offices have developed practices worth scaling, such as the former Solar Energy Technologies Office's real-time funding pages, the Office of Clean Energy Demonstrations application transparency, and the Advanced Research Projects Agency for Energy's (ARPA-E) open solicitations. The goal is to expand and improve systems DOE has in place to make federal support more accessible to the American innovators best positioned to advance U.S. energy and technology leadership (Section 3.3).

Five Reforms to Open the Front Door

We propose five reforms to improve front door access, all within DOE's existing administrative authority (Section 3.3), including some that could be operational within months. Each recommendation is detailed in the Blueprint's Operational Design (Section 9).

01	Digital Front Door: A Single Resource for Current and Future Funding.	1.1: Single Portal. A single searchable location for all DOE competitive funding across all mechanism types. 1.2: Future Solicitation Schedule. A forward-looking schedule of planned solicitations six to twelve months out, transforming DOE from a system innovators must react to into one they can prepare for.
02	Simplified, Standardized, and Transparent Application Architecture.	Application requirements right-sized to decision-essential information, with terms and conditions published alongside every solicitation and clear visibility into process and timeline from the outset.
03	Funded Intermediaries for Outreach and Applicant Support.	Systematic funding for organizations such as incubators, accelerators, or other entrepreneurial support groups that serve as a human front door, reaching innovators not actively searching for DOE funding and helping first-time applicants navigate the process. These intermediaries can also help companies navigate the complexity of managing federal awards, if successful.
04	Staged Application Process with Concept Papers as Default.	Lightweight first-stage submissions that protect applicant time, manage review volume, and give DOE an early signal on the expertise needed to evaluate full applications.
05	Objective-Based Solicitation Tracks.	Solicitations that define measurable outcomes without prescribing technology pathways, surfacing innovations DOE would not have thought to solicit directly.



The recommendations reinforce one another, and the full set is substantially more powerful than any single fix. A wider front door to federal awards does not mean a heavier workload for DOE; each solution is designed to benefit the department as much as the applicant (Section 5).

The constraints DOE operates under are significant. We distinguish between what is legally required, what is good practice, and what is institutional inertia hardened into false necessity (Section 3.2). The recommendations are calibrated to what DOE can do now, within existing authority.

The costs of a narrow front door are borne by everyone: by DOE through weaker applicant pools, by companies in forgone partnerships with the federal research enterprise, by the public, which misses market-ready technologies, and by the United States, which sees slower commercialization of the technologies that will define the next era of energy competition.

Meanwhile, that competition is intensifying. Global clean energy investment reached \$2.3 trillion in 2025, and for the first time, the European Union outspent the United States in energy transition investment. The speed with which the U.S. moves technologies from laboratory to market will determine whether America leads or follows in the decades ahead. Opening the front door to public investment is a prerequisite for DOE to fulfill its mission, and for the United States to compete.