

Incentives Lost: How Misconceptions about the R&D Tax Credit are Costing Businesses Thousands

Each year, businesses receive hundreds of thousands of dollars in tax credits as a reward for performing one of their integral functions: research and development. Created in 1981, the Research and Development Tax Credit was designed to foster technological innovation within the U.S. and incentivize the hiring of employees to engage in R&D activities. Today, the credit is a boon for businesses, representing an estimated \$5.6 billion in 2009. (Source: <http://www.journalofaccountancy.com/issues/2010/mar/20092122>). While the credit is one of the most lucrative incentives in the tax code, it is also one of the most underutilized, with many businesses erroneously assuming that their activities do not constitute qualified research.

Businesses that reap the rewards of the credit range from very small to very large and represent a wide array of specializations, including engineering, architecture, technology, and manufacturing. The taxpayer is not required to develop a new product or make a groundbreaking discovery. Qualified research may encompass activities such as developing prototypes or models, environmental testing, building or improving manufacturing facilities, and streamlining internal processes.

(Source: <http://www.journalofaccountancy.com/issues/2010/mar/20092122>).

A four-part test guides businesses in determining whether their activities may qualify for the credit:

1. The purpose of the activity must be to create new or improve existing functionality of a business component. Architecture firms may find that designs developed for clients satisfy this requirement, as long as they are not purely aesthetic. (Source: AIArchitect This Week – Architecture Firms Can Get R&D Tax Credits). For tech companies, this may include developing or improving software, as long as the software will not be used exclusively within the taxpayer's company. (Source: <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/deborah-sweeney/how-tech-startups-can-qualify-for-r-d-tax-credits>). For manufacturing companies, this may include improving a manufacturing process or facility. Other permissible purposes include pursuit of state, federal, or industry certification (Source: "The Research and Development Tax Credit," http://www.ipc.org/3.0_Industry/3.3_Gov_Relations/2008/tax_credit_whitepaper08.pdf), and researching and filing for a patent (Source: <http://www.businessweek.com/small-business/the-rampd-tax-credit-explained-for-small-business-08162011.html>).



Wondering if your research activities qualify for lucrative state and federal tax incentives?

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2. The taxpayer must intend to eliminate uncertainty about the project. At the outset of any project, a business likely has questions about how the goal will be achieved and sometimes whether it is worth pursuing at all. If the business proceeds to conduct testing and experimentation in order to answer these questions, it is intending to eliminate uncertainty. For example, an architect taking steps to determine what the optimal final design of a project will be intends to eliminate uncertainty.

(Source: AIArchitect This Week – Architecture Firms Can Get R&D Tax Credits).

3. The taxpayer must engage in some sort of systematic process of experimentation designed to evaluate one or more alternatives. Examples include testing, modeling, computational analysis, or even an informal trial and error process.

4. The process of experimentation must be technological in nature and must fundamentally rely upon principles of the physical or biological sciences, engineering or computer science.

Qualified research has been deemed to specifically exclude certain activities, such as:

- Research conducted after the beginning of commercial production. This includes preproduction planning for a finished business component, trial production runs, and accumulating data related to production processes.
- Adapting an existing business component to a customer's specific needs
- Reproducing an existing business component
- Efficiency or consumer surveys, market research, testing, or development, routine data collections, or ordinary testing for quality control
- Any research conducted outside the U.S.

- Any research in the social sciences, including economics, behavioral sciences, or humanities
- Research funded by another person or entity, such as through a grant

(Source: [http://www.irs.gov/Businesses/Audit-Techniques-Guide:-Credit-for-Increasing-Research-Activities-\(i.e.-Research-Tax-Credit\)-IRC-%C2%A7-41*---Qualified-Research-Activities](http://www.irs.gov/Businesses/Audit-Techniques-Guide:-Credit-for-Increasing-Research-Activities-(i.e.-Research-Tax-Credit)-IRC-%C2%A7-41*---Qualified-Research-Activities))

Once a business determines that it has performed qualified research, it must determine how much it expended on the research. The R&D Tax Credit is calculated based on the amount of qualified research expenses, or QREs, as defined by § 174 of the Internal Revenue Code. QREs include the wages paid to employees and amounts paid for supplies used in the conduct of qualified activities. If at least 80 percent of an employee's activities constitute qualified R&D, 100 percent of their wages can qualify for the credit. Section 174 also encompasses certain time-sharing costs for the use of computers in the conduct of qualified research, as well as 65 percent of amounts paid to others within the U.S. for contract research. (Sources:

<http://www.businessweek.com/small-business/the-rampd-tax-credit-explained-for-small-business-08162011.html>;
<http://www.journalofaccountancy.com/issues/2010/mar/20092122>).

Despite these guidelines, businesses seeking to claim the R&D Tax Credit will likely face some complexity and confusion. As a result, claims must be carefully examined on a case-by-case basis to determine whether the taxpayer qualifies. Thorough documentation of R&D activities is essential to support a claim. For example, businesses should keep plans, diagrams, and timesheets of any employees working on the activity. (Source: <http://www.businessweek.com/small-business/the-rampd-tax-credit-explained-for-small-business-08162011.html>).

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If a business does qualify for the credit, the amount of the credit may be calculated using one of two methods:

- Under the traditional method, also known as the regular research credit or RRC, the credit is determined based on increases in research activities and expenditures. The credit equals twenty percent of QREs in a given tax year over an established base amount. Therefore, this method may be best for taxpayers with low base amounts.
- Under the Alternative Simplified Credit method (ASC), the credit equals fourteen percent of QREs over 50 percent of the average annual QREs in the three immediately preceding tax years. If the taxpayer did not incur any QREs in the three preceding years, the ASC method allows for a credit of six percent of that tax year's QREs. The ASC method is often recommended for companies that have a high base amount or incomplete records from the base amount period, or those that have been complicated by mergers and acquisitions

(Source:

<http://www.journalofaccountancy.com/issues/2010/mar/20092122>).

The law also provides for a 20-year carry forward provision, which is particularly helpful for start-ups that may not have had a tax liability due to lack of income in the years when they were performing most of their R&D. The carry forward provision allows them to claim the credit in future years when they do have taxable income. (Source: <http://www.businessweek.com/small-business/the-rampd-tax-credit-explained-for-small-business-08162011.html>).

In addition to seeking qualification for the federal R&D Tax Credit, businesses should examine whether their states offer an incentive for R&D activities. Minnesota became the first state to offer a R&D credit in 1982. In subsequent years, an additional 42 states have adopted some form of R&D tax incentive. Most state incentives are modeled on the federal credit and use the federal definition of qualified research expense, but states typically allow only QREs incurred within the state to be used in calculating the credit. Percentages used to calculate the credit vary drastically, ranging from 1.25 percent in North Carolina to 40 percent in Louisiana, with the most common rate being around ten percent. With such variation, businesses may find that their state credits are more generous than their federal credits. (Source: "Overview of Research and Development Tax Incentives,"

http://www.lbb.state.tx.us/Other_Pubs/Overview%20of%20Research%20and%20Development%20Tax%20Incentives.pdf).

Wondering if your research activities qualify for lucrative state and federal tax incentives? Capital Review Group (CRG) provides the expertise to help businesses determine eligibility and capture the benefits of the R&D Tax Credit. For additional information, contact CRG.

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