

Leveraging Technology to Streamline Grants Management

Government grants are an invaluable resource for many communities, non-profit organizations and even individuals. However, the act of finding and applying for a grant can be a tedious, time consuming process. However, by improving their technology, agencies can both streamline their efficiency and improve the quality of customer interaction throughout the grant application process.

Federal and state government officials and industry leaders spoke at a [recent FedInsider event](#) to discuss how they're using digital technologies to better manage awarding grants for large public works projects and other activities across the country. The following are some of the most important aspects of their discussion.

Simpler Tools Can Help Smaller Agencies

When it comes to awarding large government grants, the process is often associated with the federal government. While it's true that the federal government is heavily involved in awarding grants, state governments are also large providers of grant funding. This is especially true today given the passage of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, which earmarked billions of dollars for projects like roads improvements and broadband installation initiatives.

But just because an agency is responsible for awarding millions of dollars does not

mean that they have a large budget to spend on a system for managing that money. The paradox is that it often requires some level of technology investment in order to efficiently award funding designed to improve communities. But many smaller agencies don't have the budget to purchase the systems and technology they need.

That is why it's important for industry to try and meet those agencies where they are with their internal budgets. There are many improvements that can be made without breaking the bank.

"For smaller grant-awarding agencies with limited budgets such as those at the state or local level, there are some simpler tools that cost less and take less time to implement," said David Santiago, Public Sector Strategy Team for Adobe Document Cloud and a Former Deputy Assistant Administrator for Grants Systems and Policy Integration at FEMA.

As a former Grants System administrator for FEMA now working with Adobe, Santiago has seen multiple sides of the grants awarding process. He stressed the need for industry to provide efficient and useful systems and platforms to help smaller agencies that may not have the budget for a dedicated, standalone grants management platform. But these days, the technology is so good that a dedicated platform may not be needed in most cases. Even smaller tools can make a big impact, he said.

Featuring:

■ **Shivani Bose-Varela**
Program Director for Grants Portal, California State Library



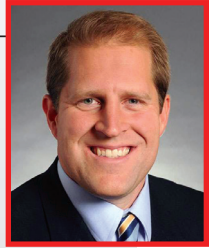
■ **Andrea Sampanis**
Solutions & Service Lead, Grants Quality Service Management Office, HHS



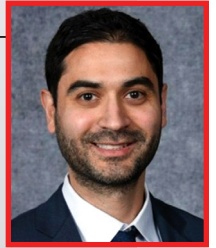
■ **Brette Fishman**
Director of Grant Policy, Office of Recovery Programs, U.S. Dept of Treasury



■ **Matt Schmit**
Director, Illinois Office of Broadband / Chair, Illinois Broadband Advisory Council, Illinois Dept of Commerce & Economic Opportunity



■ **David Santiago**
Public Sector Strategy, Adobe Document Cloud & Former Dep. Assistant Administrator for Grants Systems & Policy Integration, FEMA



Centralization of Grant Management Systems

As grants management programs have grown, so have the number of systems that serve them. Officials speaking at the event said that it can sometimes take two or three systems just do the simplest of tasks. And when there are combinations of newer enterprise systems working in tandem with legacy platforms, it can cause bottlenecks to form in the grants process.

"As for key challenges that exist to implement new IT, from a high level I think the challenges can be broken down into the three buckets of the triple constraint: scope, time and cost," said Brette Fishman the Director of the Office of Grant Policy, Office of Recovery Programs at the U.S. Department of Treasury.

Fishman explained how she watched a presentation where an agency was still using a system programmed in Cobol (common business-oriented language), which was invented in 1959. Integrating a system like that with modern IT is nearly impossible, yet most agencies don't have the budget to scrap existing systems for all new platforms.

Andrea Sampanis, the Solutions and Services Lead for the Grants Quality Service Management Office at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services agreed that the technology challenges, especially for smaller agencies, can seem formidable.

"I have an example of a small agency," Sampanis said. "They used to create or give away about \$100 million in grants, but now they have to manage \$1 billion in grants because of the CARES act passing. But they do not have the funds to build a new system. They just did it with Excel in the past, and now they are managing \$1 billion. So we need to give them a system and get them access to something to help out."

Automation Is Integral For Grant Management Agencies

Many grant management agencies deal with a massive influx of data and often lack efficient methods to deal with it. While there is

no silver bullet to automate everything, even automating small parts of the whole system can rapidly improve efficiency. This could be as simple as creating electronic grants or a portal to lessen paperwork and make data easier to search, modify and filter.

"Grant administration groups may not have the bandwidth to deal with all of the grants they are responsible for these days," said Matt Schmit, the Director of the Illinois Office of Broadband and Chair of the Illinois Broadband Advisory Council for the Illinois Dept of Commerce and Economic Opportunity. But, he said automation can help.

For example, in Illinois, the broadband office is mostly responsible for awarding grants to provide broadband state-wide. They were able to make their program more efficient by automatically incorporating mapping data, ensuring that broadband grants were reaching the most people in the state.

"We are able to take map files that have been shared with us over email or a web portal and have them populate a data set or a mapping tool automatically," Schmit said. And that simple level of automation ended up saving a lot of time while also providing for a better customer experience.

Allow For Flexible Grant Submission Methods

In a perfect world, everyone would have access to the same technology. This would allow uniform submissions of grant applications that would be easy to automate. However, in the real world, that will never happen, so agencies need to ensure that grants are

equitably awarded regardless of the submission method used. That might mean being able to provide equal weight to both online application submissions and those that arrive on paper via traditional mail.

"One of the major advantages that we have in California is allowing for different ways of submitting information," said Shivani Bose-Varela the Program Director for the Grants Portal at the California State Library. Having multiple submission methods and the infrastructure to support them helps to ensure digital equity, where all submissions can be judged solely based on their merits, not an applicant's access to technology. And that is critical when awarding grants, Bose-Varela said.

Santiago agreed, and added that the tools to support multiple submission methods do not need not be overly expensive. "There are tools such as digital document workflow solutions and document extraction APIs that can pull content right out of PDFs and paper-based documents, streamlining the processing of paper applications," he said.

In that case, it's a win-win for grant distributing agencies. Their processes are streamlined while ensuring full equity for grant applicants. And as a bonus, customers also have a much better overall experience. And none of those improvements will break even a smaller agency's budget.



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