

New Trends in Grant Applications



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Nonprofit executives rarely have enough time, but that's especially true now as the pandemic continues to upend operations and routines.

So when the William & Flora Hewlett Foundation offered David Biemesderfer the chance to use an existing report to request a new grant — one compiled for a

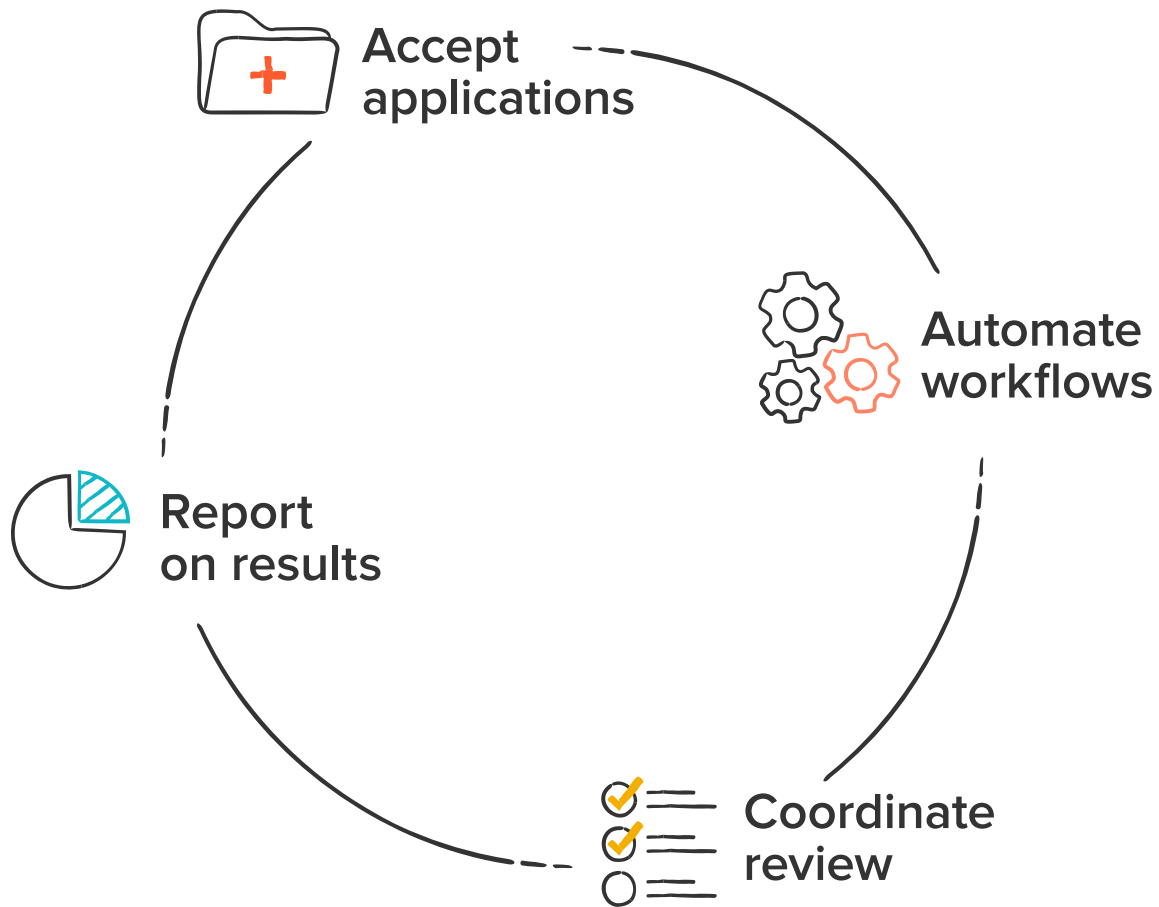
different grant maker — the leader of United Philanthropy Forum was relieved. Instead of submitting a new application and writing a fresh narrative, Biemesderfer could simply repurpose the other document.

“That saved a lot of valuable staff time,” he explained. “When you’re an organization with limited staff and a lot of work to do that means so much.”

Hewlett’s focus is on building

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and sharing knowledge, and UPF typically sticks to sharing updates on work related to those areas. Yet the repurposed application included details about UPF's public-policy efforts — such as advocating for a universal charitable deduction and an accurate census count — something Biemesderfer and his team don't usually emphasize in applications and reports to Hewlett.

Foundations across the country are responding to this unprecedented time by finding ways to streamline the grants process to make it as quick and easy as possible.

“They appreciated reading about that aspect of our work. Had we done a customized application for them we wouldn't have emphasized it as much,” he explained. Reusing applications “is not only saving time for the applicant,” he said, “but it can have that benefit to the funder of learning more about the organization.”

Encouraging nonprofits to reuse proposals, applications, and other materials tailored for another organization is just one way that grant makers are seeking to streamline grant seeking and reporting in recent months.

Foundations across the country are responding to this unprecedented time by finding ways to streamline the grants process to make it as quick and easy as possible. Some are taking applications over the phone, forming coalitions that accept a common application, and, in rare cases, eliminating applications entirely.

According to an April survey of grant makers by PEAK Grantmaking, a membership organization for grant

managers, 67 percent of the 169 respondents reported less stringent application requirements and more flexible conditions for nonprofits to receive rapid-response grants. Forty-seven percent of respondents anticipate these adjustments will continue after the pandemic.

Grant makers also are making funds easier to use, eliminating many of the restrictions on how money must be spent, and giving grants to cover general operating expenses instead of specific projects.

Some are even offering across-the-board extensions. The PEAK Grantmaking survey found that 63 percent of grant makers have offered additional grants to grantees. In March, the Robert Sterling Clark Foundation, for example, added one year of additional funding (at current annual levels) to each of its grants, with no application or review required.

Plus, foundations are offering delayed reporting, or reporting via phone or Zoom conversations (some even offered grantees free subscriptions to the video-conferencing service).

“The needs are so great; people are hurting so much,” Biemesderfer said. “Philanthropy can't do everything, but now is the time for us to really use our resources as effectively as possible.”

Simplify, Recycle, Reuse

Philip Li, head of the Robert Sterling Clark Foundation, has a suggestion for foundations looking to streamline application processes: Try filling out your foundation's application. “See what it feels like,” he said, “and be honest about which questions are superfluous or minimally useful.”

Li and the Robert Sterling Clark Foundation have for years ascribed to a “trust-based” philanthropy philosophy that encourages grant makers to loosen restrictions on grants, believing that grantees understand their communities deeply and know how best to use their resources. This movement shifts the

onus of the grant process onto grant makers. Li's foundation, for example, will accept applications, proposals, financial statements, reports, and other materials nonprofits originally submitted to other organizations — and has done so for years.

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“About 90 percent of the information, if not more, that foundations ask for is pretty much the same,” he said. Of his organization's willingness to accept materials prepared for another grant maker, Li said: “It honors the time of the organization and gives us the information we need to get a good handle on what's happening there and whether they might be a good match with what we do.”

The approach, he adds, levels the playing field for nonprofits that do not have the resources to hire grant writers or may be stretched thin and are unable to create new materials for each application.

Conversations Often Yield More Information — With Far Less Work

Some grant makers are eliminating written applications altogether. In such instances, they use video conferencing or phone calls instead, and a grant officer writes up the conversation and sends the transcript to the nonprofit to ensure accuracy.

“More than ever [foundations] have been picking up the phone and talking directly to grantees and asking what they need and getting the check out the door” with haste, said Melissa Sines, programs and knowledge director at PEAK Grantmaking. There is a real effort to remove much of the burden away from nonprofits, she said.

Nowadays, when Li's organization conducts reviews over the phone, grantees receive questions ahead of time, so they can prepare. He said these conversations allow information to flow back-and-forth more easily, foster stronger relationships, and allow grant makers to probe any items of interest.

Biemesderfer recently updated a grant maker over the phone. The process, he said, was much easier and quicker than submitting a written review. “It communicated to us the funder had trust in us, respected our time, and was willing to try something different,” he said. Plus, he noted, the conversation was even more information-rich than a typical report.

In a written report, nonprofits strategize about how to answer questions, hoping to highlight aspects of their work they think will be most compelling. They gather data, shape the story, create financial reports, and carefully edit their submission.

“That's a lot of time,” Biemesderfer said. “Compare that to a one-hour phone call. ... We have in our head everything we're doing; we're doing it day in and day out.”

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When Grant Makers Collaborate, Nonprofits Benefit

Shortly after COVID-19 struck, Elizabeth Day sent an email to a handful of local grant makers. The president of the Community Foundation of Frederick County, in Maryland, knew that forming a partnership would allow local grant makers — including

family foundations and the local United Way — to reach the greatest number of charities as quickly as possible.

So, she suggested a coalition based on past collaborations in which the groups jointly selected the same grant application software to make it easier to work together.

Their existing connections made it easy to create a universal application for COVID-19-related grants in Frederick. “We put it together in a week; we were able to do it so quickly because we had already had this relationship,” Day said. “We are stronger together in a crisis.”

Grant committees reviewed applications, and individual grant makers decided which projects to fund and would alert the group to ensure nothing was overfunded.

The top priority for the coalition, Day said, was making things easier for applicants. In many cases, because of staff and time limitations, nonprofits wouldn’t have submitted individual applications to all five of the participating organizations. For Day, a big reason the coalition’s universal application worked was the partnership that existed before the pandemic hit.

“Our nonprofits were in crisis,” Day recalled. “The funders were on the same page: ‘Why should we make overstretched nonprofits be stretched even further to get funding?’”

Will This New-Found Flexibility Last?

Biemesderfer’s philosophy in times of uncertainty is to give new things a try, even if they’re outside accepted norms. That’s how organizations get better, he said.

“I love the term ‘pilot.’ Try piloting something,” he said. “If it doesn’t work, you can go back to what you were doing. But just try it.”

COVID-19 has inspired foundations to be more nimble and responsive than ever before.

Experts agree that there was some movement to simplify processes during the financial crisis in 2008, but nothing as extensive as the changes in the last six months. COVID-19 has inspired foundations to be more nimble and responsive than ever before.

“It’s been unbelievable how quickly things we’ve been advocating for years have been put in place basically overnight,” Sines said. Yet how many of these changes will remain once pandemic-related burdens ease, she added, is “the billion dollar question.”

*“New Trends in Grant Applications” was produced by Chronicle Intelligence.
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