



Fix the Form! A Campaign to Curb the Byzantine Process of Applying for a Grant

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Last fall, two self-proclaimed “scrappy fundraisers” asked nonprofit grantseekers to describe the top pain points they experience while navigating the often byzantine process of applying for funding.

About six months later—with responses in hand from 500 nonprofits across nine countries—GrantAdvisor Co-Director Kari Aanestad and Laura Solomons, head of donor relations for the Sutton Trust, are taking on the No. 1 pain point they heard from fundraisers. Partnering with the Technology Association of Grantmakers (TAG) and PEAK Grantmaking, the campaign seeks to end the maddeningly common practice of making it impossible to view entire grant applications in advance of applying.

It’s a seemingly small adjustment, but would ease what is clearly a serious hassle for applicants. It’s also part of a larger, long-running push in the sector to make grant funding more accessible to all by making the application process less of a drain on nonprofits, which often have limited staff time and budgets.

The [100 Forms in 100 Days](#) campaign launched in April, asking participating funders to make their entire grant applications accessible on their websites and on GrantAdvisor.org. The campaign’s organizers hope that at least 100 funders will share their applications by the time the effort concludes in July. The project is the first step in the overall #FixTheForm movement, which arose after the organizers compiled responses to their initial survey, along with feedback from 2,500 reviews of funders on GrantAdvisor.org.

Aanestad told Inside Philanthropy that 32 foundations have answered the call so far. The “[ReFormer Community](#)” includes some heavy hitters. The Ford Foundation has signed on, as have the Kresge and Charles Stewart Mott foundations. Microsoft has joined as a corporate member, with a spectrum of family, community and other funders rounding out the group.

The goal of the initial 100 Forms in 100 Days effort, and the #FixtheForm movement as a whole, is to cut down on the amount of time grantseekers spend wrestling with online grant applications. An estimated 21% of the time it takes to apply for a grant is spent in front of a computer screen dealing with issues like surprise “pop-up” questions, transferring content from word processing programs to boxes in online forms, and uploading attachments in one format (like a PDF or a Word doc) just to learn that the



Inside Philanthropy

system will only accept a different format. And don't forget the surprise word limits that force grant officers to further revise work they've already done.

The result is a system that rewards nonprofits that can afford to hire a full-time grant writer at the expense of smaller organizations, according [to GrantAdvisor's report](#). At a time when foundations are increasingly using the language of equity and inclusivity, having an application process that works as a de facto gatekeeper isn't a great look.

In an example of practicing what you preach, the organizers behind 100 Forms in 100 Days have made it easy for foundations to participate. Funders need only to fill out a [simple, five-question online form](#) and then upload their grant application, complete with all requirements (for example, word limits and necessary document formatting), as either a Word or Google doc. If that's too difficult, the organizers will also happily accept applications shared via Box or Dropbox links.

Aanestad told Inside Philanthropy that "there's definitely a groundswell of momentum" building in the initial campaign, which has about nine weeks to go. She added that publishing grant applications is just the #FixTheForm movement's first step.

"When the campaign concludes in July, we'll be working with a few partners to analyze the applications and better understand the degree to which the broader field might already have a common grant application," Aanestad said. "Laura Solomons and I are also working together to build out the next steps in the broader ReFormer movement—a community of practice that's dedicated to actually making the changes that address pain points for nonprofits."

Potentially, the next pain points on the list include the disproportionate amount of time nonprofits are required to invest in applying for relatively small amounts of money, online forms that require applicants to complete the entire application in one sitting (in other words, that can't be saved and returned to), repeating or asking similar questions while expecting different answers, and online applications with word or character limits.

Ultimately, the campaign's organizers hope to determine whether there are enough similarities between various foundations' applications to standardize at least some parts of the application form across funders.

"Imagine this: What if grant applications share 60% of their questions across funders? What a catalyst this would be for development of a 'baseline application' across funders and across software vendors," said the Technology Association of Grantmakers' executive director, Chantal Forster, in an email to Inside Philanthropy.



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Today's labyrinthine approach to grant applications, Forster said, resulted from the different "personalized set[s] of impact measurements, language and processes supported by their [different theories] of change." In response to the pandemic, though, Forster said an increasing number of foundations are starting to focus on the "grantee experience," not just their own metrics.

She cited Wellcome Trust and the Arcus Foundation as two funders that are already "shifting to ground everything they do in understanding and measuring the grantee or nonprofit experience," in order to improve their own processes.

"I am optimistic that we've reached a watershed moment," she told Inside Philanthropy.

In keeping with the overall theme of our times, Aanestad said that the #FixTheForm movement is being driven by the people that are closest to the work—"not CEOs or 'thought leadership'" in the field.

"This is really a bottom-up movement in a lot of ways," she said.