



Feel Like Grant Applications Are Wasting Your Time? You're Right, According to a Recent Analysis

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The results are in, and it's official—grant applications require nonprofit staff to waste a lot of time answering the same questions over and over again. Through their joint #100FormsIn100Days campaign, GrantAdvisor and Technology Association of Grantmakers (TAG) have discovered that application forms share 39% of their questions.

As TAG, which conducted and paid for the analysis, put it in an August press release, this means that any random grant application is 39% similar to any other grant form. The result? Grantseekers have to fill out many application forms in different formats and on different platforms, but end up providing a lot of duplicate information—that's time that smaller nonprofits in particular could otherwise use to attend to their missions.

“We've created a system that enables big nonprofits [that can afford to hire dedicated grantwriters] to handle this, and the small nonprofits to get crushed by it,” said Chantal Forster, TAG's executive director.

The question was simple; getting the answer wasn't

As [we reported in May](#), the #100FormsIn100Days campaign was the first step in an overall movement to #FixTheForm. Fixing issues with grant applications is the goal, starting with the inability to download and examine entire forms before filling them out online—the No. 1 pain point discovered during a survey of nonprofits by the Sutton Trust head of donor relations Laura Solomons and Kari Aanestad, GrantAdvisor's co-director.

Anyone who has had to fill out an online grant application knows the frustrating, time-wasting process of being unable to see and prepare for all of the questions ahead of time. The situation is particularly maddening when an online grant application system won't let



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you move on to the next question until you've answered a question you didn't anticipate in advance.

To address this first issue, Solomons and Aanestad partnered with TAG and PEAK Grantmaking, setting an initial goal of persuading 100 funders to make their grant applications downloadable in just 100 days. Forster told IP that getting those forms turned out to be more difficult than they'd thought it would be, but the end results are still impressive: More than 100 grantmakers made their forms fully available. Five grants management providers joined in, enabling their 3,000+ funder clients to easily add their own application forms to the list of accessible resources. If all of those clients choose to participate, more than 1 million nonprofits could potentially save 1 million or more combined hours annually, courtesy of this new ability to download and review entire application forms and gather the relevant information before completing them.

Next, TAG turned to the most pressing question the #100Forms campaign was created to solve: Just how similar are grant applications, really?

Getting to the answer involved a \$60,000 process that included hiring a data scientist to conduct the analysis, and a good deal of TAG staff's time. Tasks included extracting the average of 25 questions per application from the 133 applications that were submitted; not an easy thing to do, considering that some applications were Word documents, others PDF files, and still others in text formats. From there, TAG's contracted data scientist used machine-learning techniques to evaluate the text in the resulting 3,000+ separate questions to determine their similarity.

The above is an extremely over-simplified explanation of an extremely complicated process. The bottom line, on the other hand, is simple: With no ill intent whatsoever, foundations are wasting an extraordinary amount of grantseekers' time.

It might seem as though similarities across applications would be a time-saver, but grantseekers can't just create a single text document with the answers to all of these similar questions and cut and paste into the different application forms, because

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foundations use different application systems, which in turn use different formats. “So every time [grantseekers] apply, they still have to answer that 39% in a new way, in a new field and in a new form, every single time,” Forster said.

Next steps, and what’s left to learn

Forster told IP that TAG has reached the limit of what it can do with the data on its own; the initial \$60,000 in contractor and staff time that unearthed the data’s preliminary results came entirely from TAG’s pocket. But, Forster said, even those preliminary results suggest a few potential solutions.

One step, she said, would be for grantmakers to collaborate on not just increasing the similarity of their applications’ questions, but to ask those questions in exactly the same way. Next, she suggested that the industry explore the possibility of *increasing* the percentage of identical questions in grant applications.

“We are 39% similar without even trying as a sector,” Forster said. “What would it look like if we did try” to duplicate as many as 50 to 60% of the questions?

Then, she said, the industry could conceivably create a secure, central depository for that standard information—the racial makeup of nonprofits’ boards, for example, or their tax ID numbers—which would then auto-populate into grantmakers’ online application forms so nonprofits aren’t forced to duplicate their efforts.

Think about shopping online, using forms that populate your email address or other information in the relevant fields while you’re checking out. The system Forster proposes would have a similar function, but the data would be housed by a trusted third party or collective and would only be accessible with the explicit consent of grantseekers filling out an application.



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Forster estimated the creation of such a system would cost from \$1 million to \$2 million—which may sound pricey, but is not even a fraction of a drop in the bucket for the philanthrosphere as a whole.

Another option would be for funders to collectively create a single, shared application (at least for their similar questions), though Forster said that this would be a much harder sell.

The data from those 100+ grant applications could also reveal additional information for researchers with the time and money to find it. For example, the #100FormsIn100Days campaign asked for basic demographic data, which leads to the question of whether or not funders in some countries are doing a better job of creating less of a burden for grantseekers.

Forster said she has received a lot of interest in tackling these issues, and in further research, since TAG's August webinar unveiling the initial results. But, she said, her organization has already done what it can with the resources it has available.

Good news on the funding front is on the horizon, however. TAG is in discussion with two national foundations to fund the next phase of the work. Further progress, though, is contingent on funders coming forward with the means to make it happen.

One such arena for progress may involve eliminating some of grantmakers' unique questions altogether. While she isn't yet able to cite specifics out of concern for violating the confidentiality of participating foundations, Forster said that the sector as a whole would be "somewhat shocked, somewhat sad, and perhaps even slightly embarrassed to look at some of the questions that we are asking our grantees."

"I think... there will be some soul searching when we look at the questions that are not similar," she said.