

Future Trends in Federal Grants Management

HOW TECHNOLOGY CAN SUPPORT A NEW REALITY FOR GRANTS PROGRAMS

By Jason Adolf and Brian Chidester

With added demands for efficiency and transparency, manual grant management processes are not suitable for meeting the demands of today's evolving government. Managing grant data in spreadsheets and homegrown systems results in poor program outcomes and insufficient reporting. These tools also tend to lack the ability to integrate into an agency's financial management landscape and are poor project management tools.

The federal government has been working toward finding ways to modernize its IT infrastructure for decades. The challenge has been that 75 to 80 percent of the federal IT budget is spent on operations and maintenance, leaving little for innovation and modernization. Simultaneously, the government has established new compliance and transparency standards for organizations to follow. These place added pressure on organizations to automate data collection, management and reporting for compliance reasons. Despite the added scrutiny, due in large part to the lack of innovation, these antiquated IT systems severely restrict the government's ability to keep up with policy demands and often provide a poor experience to the very constituents they are trying to serve.

Now, more than ever, the time has come for a joint partnership between the federal government and the private sector to begin this journey of digital transformation, together. Innovative and modern technologies such as cloud, low-code and agile software development will enable government agencies to respond even faster to the needs of their internal and external stakeholders.

This paper identifies three key catalysts that are changing the Federal Grants Management landscape and explores how technology can help support this rapidly-evolving environment.

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POLICIES DEMAND TRANSPARENCY AND SCRUTINY

In the coming years, grant funding agencies will continue to see increased regulations with stricter parameters, mandates and requirements. This means that organizations must work smarter – from the grant proposal and administration process, to proposal preparation and pre-award administration, to the grants accounting processes and post-award reporting.

One such piece of legislation that has narrowed the parameters is the Digital Accountability and Transparency (DATA) Act of 2014, which has resulted in all of the U.S. federal government's spending information now being in one single, unified data set. Before the release of this site, different types of federal spending information were all tracked in different ways and reported to different places, including grants, which were submitted to the Awards Data System. Now, the public can track the economic impact of Congress' spending decisions, and constituents can match laws Congress passes to the grants and contracts that are awarded under those laws.

The federal government is already seeing the initial benefits of the transparent federal grant spending data being provided under the DATA Act. Recently, University of California officials have been questioned about their federal grant programs that were spending 55 percent of research grants on overhead expenses such as buildings, instead of on the scientific research they were intended to fuel.

At a recent keynote at the 2017 Data Act Summit in Washington, DC, Rep. Gerry Connolly (D-Va.) spoke to the value of the legislation. "This can fuel a renewal of faith in government. Transparency is key to public trust."

INNOVATION THROUGH METHODOLOGY

While the goal of the Data Act is to gain financial transparency, along the way it has created the first government-wide data framework and the first government-wide project to use the agile methodology.

The DATA Act team delivered on time and under budget because they instituted an agile approach to the development process which is a methodology the private sector has used for decades. It is successful because while a team builds an application, they consistently go back to the end-users for feedback, which results in a co-creation between the developers and the users.

In order to build off the success of the Data Act initiative and accelerate mission success, government agencies must digitally transform their process infrastructure. Organizations can duplicate this agile methodology to meet their unique Grants Management challenges by leveraging low-code, cloud-based platforms. With this technology, agencies can quickly develop an application for a specific need or capability, while also extending their return on investment by deploying additional applications to support their internal demands. This type of innovation and speed to mobilization is the key to revolutionizing how Federal grant processes are managed.

MAXIMIZING RETURN ON INVESTMENT

In the “do more with less” reality that the government is currently facing, agencies should always be looking for ways to align grants to their mission, particularly on priority mission purposes where the agency has a unique goal. Program managers should also look across government for any grant programs that could be cause for coordination and collaboration — and perhaps technology consolidation.

Grant makers can no longer measure themselves by how quickly they get grant funding out the door or by a perfect record of grantee financial compliance.

With the reporting and transparency yielded by the Data Act, the end result may be a truly more efficient government. But both grant recipients and grant makers will need to own this responsibility to achieve results. One way to do that is to rely on technology to both improve their efficiency and provide evidence of those performance results. Grant makers can no longer measure themselves by how quickly they get grant funding out the door or by a perfect record of grantee financial compliance. Federal grant facilitators now have to be more serious about achieving mission goals and producing research results. Capturing performance data across all federal grantees — and sharing it openly on the web — could be a key step toward the accountability that the government is seeking.

Fortunately, private-sector innovation can now help in facilitating the type of transformational change agencies need to meet these evolving requirements. Today, agencies can leverage technologies to quickly develop an application for a specific need or capability, while also extending their return on investment by deploying additional applications to support their internal demands. This is particularly valuable in situations necessitating rapid-response where organizations must quickly deliver grant funding in times of natural disasters, terrorism, and other unimaginable conditions. This type of innovation and speed to mobilization is the key to revolutionizing how Federal grant processes are managed.

ACCELERATE YOUR GRANTS MANAGEMENT TRANSFORMATION

IT modernization initiatives remain central to the delivery of every agency’s mission. With the additional demand to improve efficiency while budgets are being slashed, agencies can still transform to create agile services, while accelerating delivery to their stakeholders. However, an additional layer of complexity forces organizations to digitally transform their infrastructure while also driving towards their cloud and mobile first mandates.

This demand for agency efficiency and compliance requires a highly agile, flexible, secure and on-demand platform to respond to their specific needs.

The Appian Grants Management Accelerator provides end-to-end management functionality from application intake, to award, and through to close-out. With powerful, dynamic dashboards, grantees and agencies can effectively address all aspects of the grant lifecycle, including, but not limited to, programs, applications, awards, Financial Reporting (FFR), and Progress Reporting (PPR).

Agencies can also gain the ability to make the necessary platform modifications for continuous process improvement, while also collecting metrics about process performance, collaboratively assessing the outcomes and making decisions about possible process improvements using dashboards that allow decision-makers to drill-down into the state of your grants management processes overall.

In today's highly-demanding government environment, the stress of bringing an application into an agency environment and assuring continuing quality needs to be lessened. Appian can do this for your organization.

REPORT AUTHORS



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