



2009

eGrants - Automating and Creating a Grants Management System

State of Illinois

Category: Data, Information and Knowledge Management

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Executive Summary

In the State of Illinois, the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity's (DCEO) mission is to bring, keep and/or create jobs in Illinois. The primary way this is done is by the issuance of economic development grants to individuals and businesses. DCEO funds over 80 types of programs that issue over 2000 grants each year.

Since the primary function of the Agency is to manage the grant award and accountability process from application to closeout, it is essential that our technical infrastructure support the management of the total grant lifecycle. Before May of 2008, DCEO's legacy systems were not up to this task.

The initial primary business needs for a grants management system were:

- Baseline Information -- capture all applications coming into the programs, not just the ones that were funded in order to make better decisions about funding distribution in the future
- Transparency -- any staff person must be able to "see" where in the lifecycle the application or grant was and its status where ever the staff person may be -- in the office or traveling; any grantee should be able to view the status of their application/grant
- Document Management -- audit findings concerning grant-related documentation were an ongoing issue

To this end, DCEO built a grants management system -- eGrants -- which addressed these business needs by building upon a software product our users were already familiar with, Microsoft SharePoint, utilizing document libraries, content types and workflows.

Within eGrants, there was a "quick capture" function built that allowed program staff to enter minimum application information but capture enough information that a baseline of all applications could be begin to be built for the programs.

Automated workflows were the key to making the grant lifecycle transparent. Before implementation of eGrants, the funding determination workflow was a paper process that literally was walked or mailed from desk to desk to be approved. By customizing Microsoft Windows Workflows, DCEO was able to use e-mail notifications and electronically document tasks to get needed approvals and log them in the system.

By using scanning technology and content types, document management for grants became electronic. Everything from the application, evaluation reviews, grant agreement (contract), reports, and supporting documents are now stored within an application library for the grant. Now all documentation for a grant is easily shared.

Description of the Business Problem and Solution

The Agency previously had a legacy grant management system called Customer Information System (CIS), which was built on COBOL and connected to DCEO's COBOL fiscal systems. This system allowed for grants to be processed, obligated, and monies distributed. However, it had the following shortfalls:

- duplication in the collection of information
- difficulty in retrieving information entered into the system
- an inability to know where in the cycle an application was currently located

Because of the system's shortfalls, DCEO staff entered only the minimum amount of data required to get the grants funded. This created several problems. First, if senior staff were asked about a specific application, there was no easy way to get information out of CIS, or to know if that information had been received if the application was not funded. There was no transparency into the system and no way to track the documents received. Because of these problems, much time would be spent conducting an Agency-wide search to look for the application. Secondly, there was no way for the Agency to show that the amount of monies requested for in applications exceeded the amount appropriated for the program, so there was very little data to support the need for more money in a given program.

The DCEO CIO and the eGrants project manager decided to use a Microsoft SharePoint backbone to build the new grant management system and to utilize as much of the Microsoft Office 2007 and SharePoint functionality as possible to minimize coding behind the scenes. The decision was based on the advantages of utilizing the SharePoint framework for addressing document management task tracking and security needs.

eGrants had to maintain connectivity to the Agency's COBOL fiscal systems to allow for monetary distribution of the grants, but in addition, the following were the three main focuses of eGrants:

- Baseline Information -- capture all applications coming into the programs, not just the ones that were funded in order to make better decisions about funding distribution in the future
- Transparency -- any staff person must be able to "see" where in the lifecycle the application or grant was and its status where ever the staff person may be -- in the office or traveling, any grantee should be able to view the status of their application/grant
- Document Management -- audit findings concerning grant-related documentation pertaining to grants were an ongoing issue

Baseline Information: To allow program staff to enter all applications into eGrants while keeping data entry to a minimum for the applications that wouldn't be funded, a quick capture function called "Request for Application" was built.

The "Request for Application" function was a coded Smart Part that, after the submit button was clicked, a review workflow using Windows Workflow logic would begin. If the Request is approved, an eGrants SharePoint application site and library are set up. This site is where all of the core grant information is entered to be pushed to the fiscal systems. It is also where the document library is created so all documentation related to the application/grant can be uploaded or scanned using content types.

Not only does the Request allow baseline application data collection (e.g. how many applications came in versus how many we were able to fund), it also allows for transparency. By doing a quick search on business name, grant or application number, T.I.N. or City, any staff person can find the application/grant and what the status of the grant is – where it is in the various workflows.

Transparency: Automated workflows within eGrants were the key to making the grant lifecycle transparent. Before eGrants, the funding determination workflow was a paper process that literally was walked or mailed from desk to desk to be approved. After it left the program manager's desk, it was very difficult to find where the application was – whose desk was it on and how long it had been there. By customizing Windows Workflows and using content types to trigger the workflows, DCEO was able to use e-mail notifications and tasks to get the needed approvals and log them in the system.

The program staff set up the players in the workflow for each program yearly. This includes defining the program manager, division manager, bureau manager, legal and accounting staff. The funding decision workflow then uses these definitions to know where to send the application next once it has been approved at each level. The people in the workflow are notified that they need to take action on the funding approval through an e-mail sent to them. This e-mail has a link to the application library where all of the documentation is stored so they can look at any of the documentation before approving or denying the task.

This action is logged in the Application Library where the documents are stored based on content type. A staff member can click on the status of the document (e.g. approved, in progress) and they then can see each completed step in the workflow and how long it took each person to act on the task.

The eGrants SharePoint application is available to Agency staff from anywhere. The staff members must log into the domain with their DCEO credentials and are able to view eGrants the same as they can when they are sitting at their desk in the office. This allows staff quick access to grant data. Before the implementation of eGrants, they would have had to call or e-mail the office to get the necessary grant data.

Document Management: It was decided that since Share Point technology would be used for eGrants, it made sense to make use of content types and application libraries where all documentation related to the application/grant would be stored. Some examples of grant documents are the application, evaluation reviews, grant agreements (contract between organization and Agency), reports specific to the grant (monthly, quarterly, etc), and any type of supporting information.

Documentation can be put into the application library in three ways: system generated documents, uploading of documents and scanning documents. When the Agency staff member either uploads or scans the document to the library, they must choose a content type. Some content types start workflows, while others do not.

If the document is to be scanned in, once the content type is selected and a title to the document is given a coversheet is created and printed. This coversheet has a barcode on it which tells the document which application library to go to. Program staff log into the scanner, place the coversheet on top of the document, and scan.

Now that all of the supporting documentation is located via eGrants, there is no need to e-mail documents from person to person, or photocopy the documents to share. Staff simply go to the application library and view the documents there and print if needed.

The eGrants Share Point sites are backed-up daily. Once the grant is closed out, the site will be archived off for the document retention period pertaining to the type of program.

Length of Time in Operation: eGrants went live in May, 2008. DCEO ended up streamlining some of our workflows, and creating change requests for additional workflows. The program staff find the system far easier to use and have easier access to grant data as compared to the legacy system of CIS.

Significance to the Improvement of the Operation of Government

By creating eGrants there have been several operational improvements at DCEO, most if not all of them contribute greatly to time efficiency including the following:

- Response to customer inquiry is more timely
- Ease of access to data
- Central electronic storage of grant documentation
- Standardized processes for grant processing

Response Time and Data Access: DCEO has many levels of customers – system power users, senior staff, Governor’s Office and Legislators, and the applicants. Regardless of who is asking for data about a specific application, grants given to a specific organization, or grants in a geographic area, the response time to these types of inquiries has been greatly enhanced by the data being captured in eGrants, the search function in eGrants, and the reports available through eGrants. When DCEO relied on the legacy CIS, customer inquiries were received via phone calls or e-mail

requests. The time between query and response ranged from several hours to several days.

What used to take an e-mail to all of the Agency bureaus, time waiting on the responses from the bureaus and time taken to compile all of the responses now can be done quickly from the Account Lookup search functionality in eGrants. When staff are answering eGrants queries, they are now able to answer questions more quickly because all of the information for which they are responsible is located in one place. Each Grant Manager has a 'MyWorkplace' site where the material related to his/her areas of responsibility is located. Through use of the MyWorkplace site and advanced search and reporting tools, DCEO estimates that response times have been reduced by at least 40%.

When customers are able to query the system on their own, this response time will be further reduced to a matter of minutes. DCEO estimates that, at this point in time, response rates will have been reduced by at least 85%.

Central Electronic Storage: With the electronic storage of grant-related documents in the eGrants application libraries, staff can get to the documents from anywhere and sharing of documents has never been easier. There is no need to e-mail or photocopy documents. The time spent looking for hard copy documentation is cut drastically.

Standardized Processes: While this was not one of DCEO's predefined goals when starting the eGrants project, it has been an added benefit. Now that workflows are basically the same for all programs and support staff (legal and accounting) cross-training time is virtually gone. If a legal staff person has to cover for another who deals with a different program, they know that they will be notified at the same step in the process regardless of the program. This standardization also allows for easier transitions if staff personnel move from one program area to another. While the program specifics and rules are different, the process for funding determination and the Welcome Package are virtually the same.

Benefit of the Project

The eGrants project provides several major benefits to DCEO. Financial benefits include improved resource allocation and improved staff productivity. Nonfinancial benefits include improved staff communication and improved customer relations.

Financial Benefits: The major financial benefit of eGrants is its contribution to staff productivity. As noted in the discussion of Document Management, staff are now able to efficiently find support documentation and can easily track the progress of an application through each of the major steps in the review and approval process. These capabilities make it possible for each individual program manager to be responsible for a larger number of grants. Staff are also able to communicate more effectively, through use of a collaborative environment that does not require face-to-face meetings. Another significant contribution to staff productivity is the 'MyWorkspace' feature, which allows staff to focus on the information that is personally relevant to his/her activities. Lastly, eGrants is a tremendous asset to the many 'mobile workers' who interact with

customers and partners in the field. Because eGrants is an Internet-based system accessible from anywhere, they are able to work effectively at virtually any location.

Another significant benefit is that -- because eGrants collects Baseline Information comparing applications with actual grant awards -- the Agency now has a much better picture of what types of services are in most demand for the purposes of economic development. This information, which allows us to see patterns of need and utilization, allows the Agency's program management to more effectively gauge the relative levels at which competing programs and competing constituencies need to be funded. This information is especially important in assessing apparent disparities in the geographic allocation of funds.

One other significant benefit is the contribution eGrants makes to DCEO's 'green' initiative, by significantly reducing the amount of paper records that must be maintained. Prior to the implementation of eGrants, DCEO utilized approximately 7,000,000 sheets of paper each year. Utilizing eGrants, it is estimated that the Agency will be able to reduce this figure by up to 12%.

Non-Financial Benefits: In addition to improved staff communications, the major nonfinancial benefit is improved customer relations. As noted in the discussion of 'Transparency', eGrants provides the capability for customers to not only better understand the opportunities offered by the Agency for economic development assistance, but also to know the status of any individual grant application they have submitted. In this manner, eGrants will allow the Agency to maintain an ongoing 'two-way' conversation with its customers.