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NASCIO Award Nomination

Digital Government: Government to Business

Oklahoma Arts Council e-Grants

Executive Summary

The Problem

The Oklahoma Arts Council, established to provide assistance for and access to arts activities statewide with funds appropriated by the National Endowment for the Arts and the state of Oklahoma, needed a way to streamline and simplify the grants application process. Prior to the e-Grants system, grant applicants had to maneuver their way through a tedious application process: typing or hand-writing answers on a paper grants application, making multiple copies and mailing them in. If key items were left out, if budgets didn't balance, if applicants didn't meet certain requirements, it might take weeks to iron out the discrepancies.

From the perspective of the Arts Council staff, receiving and processing the applications was extremely time-consuming and paper-intensive. In addition to tying up staff sifting through the hundreds of applications, phone calls with questions were too numerous to count. Consider these illustrative statistics: 1,400 grants, totaling \$4 million are awarded annually with more than 850 organizations applying. The Oklahoma Arts Council receives in excess of 1,500 applications a year, some of which required applicants to send in a whopping 15 copies of each piece of the application – that brings the estimated total number of paper applications to 22,500. Each application packet can weigh up to nine pounds, meaning the Arts Council could receive up to 202,500 pounds of paper delivered via mail to their offices every year.

The Solution

On February 4, 2002, "e-Grants" was launched. Available 24 hours a day in a secure environment from the Arts Council's Web site, the service allows prospective recipients to apply for grants online. Interactive message boxes guide applicants through the process, creating a quick and easy experience that saves both the applicant and Arts Council staff countless time and effort. Each application is tracked meticulously and reported back to the applicant through their secure account information. Once decisions are made, the applicant is immediately and automatically notified and their project information is instantly available for review online.

This project was leading edge for an agency of their size and was the first to launch using YourOklahoma, the State's portal system (another thought leadership indicator). The Arts Council has been creative in modifying the traditional forms and processes to take advantage of the streamlined potentials realized by using an electronic format. Not only have they led the way, but they have done it creatively with their end users in mind.

Description of the Application

Called "e-Grants," the program launched on February 4, 2002. By going online and applying for a grant, future recipients are guided through the application process. Through a sequential series of online screens information is collected to file an application. As an applicant is working through the process and questions or problems arise, interactive message boxes pop up directing them to solutions and offering suggestions to rectify errors.

The program is provided through the Arts Council's Web site in a secure password protected environment and enables applicants to submit information for grant applications in their own time and at their own pace. Each step can be completed and saved allowing the applicant to assemble information or complete it in smaller steps. Once an initial application is complete, the Arts Council is notified electronically and required forms are viewable online singularly or en masse depending upon the Council's needs. As the application process moves and additional information, samples and other support materials are sent to the Council, staff members easily log and track all the pieces. When it's time for evaluation everything is together and organized for easy analysis. Once the grants are awarded the decisions are recorded into the system and made available to the applicant in a much faster timeframe.

The service is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, making it easy for applicants who have initiated a application to track the lifecycle of the grants online. From the minute they submit them to the minute the project is approved for funding each step of the process is tracked and reported back to the applicant through their secure account information. Once decisions have been made on the applications, notification is automatically sent to applicants and their project information is immediately available online for review. Throughout the process Arts Council staff members have the ability to track the application progress. This allows them to offer first hand assistance to applicants while in the midst of actually completing the application. Both the Arts Council and the applicant have the ability to work in a real-time environment with real-time technical assistance.

Significance to the Improvement of the Operation of Government

The service allows the Arts Council to reallocate staff resources, freeing them up to provide a greater level of personalized service to potential grant applicants/recipients and devote more time, in general, to outreach efforts. Because there is an interactive guide through the process, mistakes are caught even before they happen and applicants are pre-qualified before they begin their submissions. Staff can see the particular submission while the applicant is online filling it out, giving them the ability to provide real-time technical support that is specific to that application.

Thousands of grant applications in hard copy format take up an incredible amount of space, waste an enormous amount of paper and take hours to sift through and decipher. With e-Grants, the Arts Council can easily track all grants and grant applications in the database, sorting and dissecting the information in whatever way they need to get a unique view of the information. Because the process is real-time and electronic, the Arts Council is able to be much more responsive, much more quickly.

In the judging and analysis of the applications, the Arts Council has found that the consistencies gained through the online system have leveled the playing field, allowing all applicants an equal chance at the available grant money. By entering and presenting the information in a consistent format, the judges can now easily work through the projects to assess the value and compare them to other applicants. This levels out the possible subjective distribution of grant awards and places each application on equal footing for analysis based purely on the project information.

Benefits Realized for Service Recipients

Benefits to the applicants include an application process that is always available, allowing applicants to complete submissions at a time and place convenient to them. Once submitted an application is viewable online and can be followed through the grant process allowing applicants the ability to ensure all material is received at the Arts Council office and all paperwork has been filed.

This program makes it less time-consuming, less expensive (paper, postage) and easier to submit grants applications. Non-profits no longer have to bundle their applications up, fill out all the forms by hand or typewriter, print out all their supporting documentation and mail it. Wherever they live throughout the state, applicants now have access to submit their applications anytime, anywhere.

The Arts Council e-Grants Program provides access to anyone who has a computer. These days, anyone in the world can gain access through public libraries and educational institutions or Internet cafes. With this online system applicants can submit their applications quickly and easily and get their questions answered to complete their forms in record time. Of course, applicants are thrilled with receiving their grant funds quicker because of the efficiencies gained through the online system.

Measurable Operational Benefit

Immediately after the e-Grants system launched, 300 organizations began using the system. This represented a 35% adoption rate in less than one month. The

effectiveness of the program is being measured on several levels, first by the total number of organizations using the system as just described, second by the reduction of time and quantity of physical grant applications processed in a specific amount of time and finally by the reduced number of telephone support calls fielded by the Arts Council.



Today, the e-Grants system is used by 100% of all applicants and the Arts Council has witnessed a 20% increase in new applicants. The increase has been attributed to the ease of submitting the applications and the reduced time required to complete them by the applicants. The Council itself has seen significant benefits in time reduction for processing. Prior to the online system, each application, when received, had to

be entered into a database which meant retyping the entire application. Today, the application is entered only once.

With the reduction in time associated with the submission of applications the Council has also seen an increase in efficiencies. As depicted in the photo above, Karen would normally be inundated during the application period, forcing her to dedicate weeks to the process. Today, her desk is clear with four notebooks on the shelf behind her desk. That's all she needs to keep track of the applications and to prepare for the analysis, all she has to do is go online to compile the material.

Overall, the Arts Council has gained time and space by the online program and has seen an increase of applicants submitting requests for grant money. With all of this said, they have easily adapted and have been able to accommodate reductions in workforce that occurred through attrition without having to replace anyone. The Council is quicker to respond and spends less time handling paperwork and dedicates more time to making sure funds are allocated properly and to the best candidates.