

Innovations in Grants Management

Government and private organizations alike struggle with effectively processing large quantities of information and financial transactions among dispersed user communities. Many are still trying to translate old paper-based processes to computer and Internet technologies.

One area where the U.S. Government struggles is the management of tens of thousands of annual grants (totaling more than \$300 billion a year) to state and local communities. The U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs (OJP) has one of the most complex challenges as it administers more than \$6 billion in funds and processes more than 10,000 grant applications annually in support of state and local law enforcement initiatives. The bar has been raised further as a new law requires federal agencies to streamline the grants process to increase qualified applications, reduce the burden on applicants, shorten the time to award, decrease administrative costs, and enhance mission fulfillment.

The Department of Justice realized that it needed a comprehensive, Web-based information system to provide grantees with quick and reliable access to program and funding information and to provide staff with the tools to more efficiently process grant applications. OJP envisioned that this system would be accessible to its entire grantee community, provide timely and accurate information, and support the diverse and evolving requirements of OJP and all of its grant programs. In addition, it would need to be secure; scalable to accommodate increases in use, data volume, and functionality over time; and able to interact with the legacy grants management and financial systems.



ICF Consulting partnered with OJP to develop the Grants Management System, leading significant efforts in application architecture, requirements analysis, database design, systems design and development, objective systems analysis and studies (including vendor information, legacy systems, and grant document image management).

Numerous issues need to be addressed when developing a grants management system. It is important to define, implement, and adhere to standards including program, data, business process, and technology standards. Also, while you might wonder whether grants processes drive the information technology (IT) development or if standardizing an IT system would drive the grants business process—you need to be prepared for both.

There are also critical technical issues related to the system's architecture, functionality, scalability, and interoperability that should be addressed. Using an enterprise architecture helps to integrate the mission, objectives, and business processes to drive IT decision-making. ICF Consulting discourages investments outside the architecture, which might complicate interoperability and performance. A limited, rigid grants system also will fail or be costly to maintain. The system's technology must be scalable and its functionality extensible to accommodate the peak of grant season and future changes in grant programs. Furthermore, for the system to be most effective, the various enterprise systems (e.g., grants, finance, enterprise portal, customer relationship management, help desk, Web site, etc.) must interact.

The Grants Management System (in production since 1999 and fully re-architected during the past 18 months) now offers instant, nationwide access to OJP's constituents for submitting and reviewing applications, awards, and payment information, reducing paperwork requirements, and providing electronic access to funds. All of this effort reduces total cycle time for processing grants and increases customer satisfaction in the grant-making process.

Perspectives

As a testimony to the system's robustness, when the newly formed Department of Homeland Security distributed the "first responder grants," they chose OJP's Grants Management System to dispense funds quickly and effectively. OJP's system was recently recognized as a 2003 eGov Explorer Award winner for best practices in the U.S. government.

For more information about ICF Consulting's information technology capabilities, please visit www.icfconsulting.com/it