Setting an
Electronic
Standard

By Martin B. Schneiderman

Now that grantmakers' use of computer-based grants management systems has become widespread, the Foundation Center is planning to tap the potential for faster, electronic dissemination of grant information. In the end, grantseekers who rely on the center's print-based and electronic grant listings would receive more timely and accurate information, and grant-makers would have an easier time of being publicly accountable about what they do.

In early 1995 the Foundation Center initiated a project to move the grant reporting process from here to there. The "here," or how grant information is collected today, generally means that participating foundations mail grants lists to the center, or lists are compiled from publicly available tax returns. In both cases, these grant lists must be rekeyed into the center's information database.

The Foundation Center recognized that each of the following key requirements would have to be met before foundations would begin reporting electronically. The new approach would have to:

- work with the widest possible range of computer hardware and software;

- make it easy for a grant administrator to select an option from a menu to automatically produce the grant report in an electronic format on a diskette with an accompanying hard copy summary report;

- work with all existing grants management systems without requiring the addition of any new data fields or the use of alternative codes or classification schemes;

- adhere to industry standards for data export so that software developers can easily build this capability into all existing and future commercial and custom grants management systems;

- gain broad-based support from vendors of commercial software.

The Foundation Center believes that grant reporting should be as simple as pushing a button. That's why it's working toward establishing some universal data protocols and a more efficient reporting process. The effort involves a lot of technology talk—but it is really about achieving greater accountability in philanthropy.

Moving Forward

Vice President of Publications Rick Schoff hired my company, Information Age Associates, to help coordinate this initiative. Our first step was to describe its goals to dozens of foundation information systems managers, grant administrators, and software vendors and seek their input. We consistently heard that the center's proposed approach was sensible and, from their end, would be technically feasible.

Availability of Software That Supports the Foundation Center's Electronic Standard

Vendor	Product	Status
Henry Bromelkamp + Co.	HOBIE/PC	Available immediately upon request
MicroEdge, Inc.	PC-GIFTS	Available immediately upon request; scheduled for release in the April 1996 update
	GIFTS for the Mac	Available immediately upon request; scheduled for release in the January 1996 update
	GIFTS for Windows	Available immediately upon request; scheduled for release in the December 1995 update
NPO Solutions	Foundation Information Systems (FIMS)	A built-in capability since September 1995
Philanthropic Systems	FMS (Windows and Mac)	A built-in capability since August 1995
Riverside Software	Grants Manager Riverside Grants for Windows Riverside Grants for DOS	All scheduled for release in January 1996
TRAC	TRACSTAR/Pro	Scheduled for release in January 1996

An advisory group was then convened to review the center's overall plan and draft versions of an electronic standard. This group included grant administrators from a variety of foundation types—independent, family, community, corporate, and operating—as well as staff from two regional associations of grantmakers. (The center ultimately considered all the input on the plan received from over 275 funding organizations.)

After the electronic standard was drafted, we sent it out to 1,200 foundations for their review. At the same time, we surveyed these funders about what kind of equipment they had or expected to have to enable them to use electronic grant reporting. We also asked specifically: Do you think you will use this system when it is available?

Survey responses were received from 257 foundations (63% independent, 19% corporate, 14% community, 3% family, and 1% operating foundations). Following are highlights of what they said:

- 60 percent of the survey respondents (155 foundations) agreed to report grant information in an electronic format.

- The 155 grantmaking organizations that agreed to report electronically awarded approximately 16,000 grants totaling $1.53 billion (14% of annual foundation grant dollars) in the survey year.

- 87 percent of the survey respondents report that they are now using computer-based grants management systems—51 percent use commercial systems and 36 percent use custom software packages.

- Respondents reported using a total of 2,197 (92%) IBM compatible, 162 (7%) Macintosh, and 22 (1%) mini/mainframe computers.

- 74 percent of IBM compatible users run Microsoft Windows applications and 43 percent run DOS character-based applications (total combined percentages exceed 100 percent because some respondents report using both Windows and DOS applications).

- 32 percent of the survey respondents have a computer with CD-ROM capability.

- 75 percent of the survey respondents have a computer with a modem.

- 60 percent of the modems in use are fast enough (at least 14.4 bits per second) to access the World Wide Web.

- Foundations report that they are using and planning to use the Internet as their primary means of accessing information on-line.

Phase Two

The electronic reporting standard has received the full support of every major vendor of commercial grants management soft ware. Each of the companies listed in the box, "Availability of Software," on page 26 has already enhanced its products so that grantmakers can easily create a diskette that will load grant data and print reports according to Foundation Center specs. (Electronic data transmission by modem will come in a subsequent phase).

The center's diskette reporting process, as developed with guidance from potential users, is being tested right now by a small group of foundations. When center staff receive a data diskette they check it for viruses, compare the data file and the accompanying printed report, import the grant data into their large-scale systems for editing, and then transfer the data into a master grants database. For accuracy and consistency the center will continue to have its own staff assign or verify indexing classifications.

It may take years for all of the foundations reporting to the center to convert to this new system, but it's clear that its use will minimize time and labor—and maximize information sharing. The Foundation Center hopes this new system won't take long at all to attract new foundations to grant reporting. •

> To find out more about the electronic reporting standard and how you can participate, contact: Rick Schoff, Foundation Center, 79 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY, 212/807-3621; e-mail fks@fdncenter.org.

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