



# MEETING GRANTOR CHALLENGES DURING CATASTROPHIC TIMES



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The Federal Government spends more than \$600 billion annually on grants. In the best of times, executing the full grant lifecycle is a challenging endeavor. Each of the phases (i.e., Pre-Award, Award, Post-Award, Closeout, etc.) has many sub-steps that the general public doesn't even know about. For example, before awarding most discretionary grants, the entity has to find and assemble reputable grant package readers to review proposals submitted by potential grant award recipients. Depending on the specific grant program, the number of proposals could number in the thousands. Part of this process requires scoring and ranking of proposals, ultimately leading to a shortlist of potential grant award recipients. It may sound simple, but the entire process calls for a robust set of tools, processes, and oversight that will ensure a fair and auditable competition. Many entities still prefer an in-person review of proposals that require a significant effort in logistics. Considering that this example is merely one step in the overall grantmaking process, it is clear to see how complex it can be. Successfully and competently managing this lifecycle amid a local, national, or global disaster becomes exponentially challenging, especially when travel is restricted, and the majority of the workforce is forced to work remotely.

At the root of every modern business process is an information system. At its very root, information systems are comprised of Hardware Technology, Software Technology, People, Processes, and Data. Each of these elements of a system has its own challenges when disaster strikes. Consider the following questions:

## CHALLENGES

Hardware
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>Can the existing hardware handle 90% or more of your staff working remotely?</i></li><li>• <i>Can the existing hardware provide the speed that is necessary?</i></li><li>• <i>Is the existing hardware secure against hacking and other cybercriminal attacks?</i></li><li>• <i>Do your workers have the necessary equipment to work remotely?</i></li><li>• <i>Can you accurately and timely measure productivity?</i></li><li>• <i>Do you have an adequate technical feedback loop in place for internal and external stakeholder communication?</i></li></ul>
Software

- *Does your current software provide the workflow necessary to ensure there are no bottlenecks in the process?*
- *Does your software have a robust authorization scheme, ensuring only authorized users can get to functions available to their roles?*
- *Does your software provide robust authentication schemes like two-factor authentication?*
- *Is your software secure against hackers and other cybercriminal attacks?*
- *Is your software current on its mandatory patches?*
- *Does your software currently minimize manual processes such that work can be done 100% virtual?*

### **People**

- *Do you have the optimal amount of staffing to handle the virtual workload?*
- *Are your staff sufficiently trained to do work virtually and unsupervised?*
- *Do you have an adequate feedback loop in place for internal and external stakeholders?*

### **Processes**

- *Are your grant lifecycle business processes thoroughly documented?*
- *Are your grant management processes optimized (i.e., lean and non-cumbersome)?*
- *Have those documented processes been **socialized** throughout the organization?*
- *Have you assessed the risk of the various steps in the end-to-end process?*
- *Have you developed mitigations for the assessed risks?*
- *Do you have a knowledge Management system to help staff with questions?*
- *Have you reviewed the impact on your policies and procedures due to legislative directives as a result of the disaster?*
- *Do you have enough controls in place for effective monitoring of recipients to minimize waste, fraud, and abuse?*

### **Data**

- *Have you adequately standardized your grant data?*
- *Is your data secure against hackers and other cybercriminal attacks?*
- *Do you have the necessary analytics in place to crunch data for decision making and produce effective reports for the agency?*
- *Do you have standard reports in place that provide early warning of data issues?*
- *Do you have adequate technology in place to quickly process information and accounting?*

Yes, it would have been great if all of these questions had been asked and resolved prior to a global disaster. But, it's never too late to resolve some of these issues, and more importantly, plan for the next inevitable disaster. The

following is a shortlist of the actions that can be taken to mitigate or at least limit the impact that scenarios like this bring.

## MITIGATING APPROACHES

- Hire firms that understand and have referenceable experience with the Federal Government Grant process. These companies can quickly support you in getting your arms around your people, process, and oftentimes technical challenges. It is not advised to simply hire competent IT professionals. It would take much too long for them to get up to speed on the grants business processes. It would be best if you had firms that have Federal Grant-making as their core focus area. In fact, most firms that specialize in grantmaking also have technical expertise or solid relationships and partnerships with trustworthy IT firms.
- Look for ways to optimize the grant process immediately. While many steps in the process are legislatively mandated, most agencies have added steps that are unique to their organization. Many of these nonmandatory steps provide value in normal times but fail to be useful during moments of disaster. Again, firms that have expertise in the grant process can help you optimize your process and draft new documentation clearly articulating the deviation from the norm.
- Most firms working in the grants space can provide staff augmentation to get through the rough period. Again, vendors with relevant experience will allow you to avoid a steep learning curve. This approach will allow you to solve staff shortage issues quickly.
- There are many best-of-breed hardware and software solutions available in the cloud that entities can quickly acquire. If you are faced with inadequate hosting equipment, space/volume challenges, or ways to work remotely, there are numerous and reputable tools available in the marketplace that can quickly get you up to speed. The key here is that these tools should be a good fit for your enterprise culture and infrastructure, and should align with your grants line of business.
- Begin analyzing your data now. Are balances correct? Does there appear to be missing data? Are there any anomalies as it relates to who is creating or modifying your data? Is your data being adequately backed up? This is just a very small example of the questions you should be asking and reporting on.

As we all know, most disasters can't be anticipated. And, the onslaught of a disaster is no time for panic, but in fact, a time to employ critical thinking and seek the necessary support to mitigate further harm. The information provided above is simply a snapshot of the challenges an organization might face during a catastrophe and possible steps one can use to mitigate or limit the damage. The top recommendation is to seek assistance from professionals in this line of business to support you in decision making, process management, and staff utilization. At some point, the disaster will subside. The steps you take now will make you that much stronger when the next disaster occurs.

## RELEVANCE TO COVID-19

The current COVID-19 is a wake-up call for many entities, especially in the grants space. The administration has created a vast stimulus fund (Over \$2 Trillion) under Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act). A large portion (over \$940 Billion) of this fund is designated for grants and loans. The grant-making agencies have great challenges in awarding these grants without widespread waste, abuse, and fraud for the following reasons:

- Many entities are not equipped with means of working remotely and getting things done. Since the pandemic has forced the government to work remotely for a large part, there is a lack of infrastructure and instructions for the workforce to continue providing services remotely.
- The agencies may not have proper oversight in place to disburse such a large amount of funds at short notice. There is a major possibility of increased waste, fraud, and abuse if sufficient controls are not in place.
- Some grants management systems do not allow recipients to drawdown in the large amount. This puts an overhead to break down the amount into smaller chunks before drawing down.
- Many agencies are relaxing their internal controls in terms of performance and financial reporting on existing grants during these times as per the [OMB Memorandum M-20-17](#) (Administrative Relief for Recipients and Applicants of Federal Financial Assistance Directly Impacted by the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) due to Loss of Operations). However, their systems may not be able to keep track of these relaxations to ensure that things do not fall through cracks when the situation stabilizes.

- Many agencies are developing new programs to respond to the pandemic; however, their workforce may not be able to collaborate effectively to put the application packages out quickly on Grants.gov.
- Peer Review process is still manual at many agencies where printed applications are given to a group of peer reviewers who are co-located in a large room. Due to travel restrictions and social distancing guidelines, these agencies are finding it hard to conduct a meaningful peer review of applications remotely.
- The grant applicants are now trying to figure out how to perform their obligations to comply with the grant program goals while facing the travel restrictions and maintaining social distancing.

During these unprecedented times, companies like Zenius Corporation with a core focus in enhancing federal grant-making are ready to help. We have a proven robust methodology to quickly assess the health of an agency's grants ecosystem called Grants Management Maturity Index™ (GMMI). This tool can quickly assess your current challenges and provide you a roadmap that is aligned to your investment priorities and strengthens your end-to-end grant operations, which is especially critical during catastrophic times like now.

To further discuss how Zenius can assist you during the current COVID-19 pandemic in meeting your grant operations challenges, please contact Zenius Corporation's CEO, Prasanna Amitabh, at [pamitabh@zeniuscorp.com](mailto:pamitabh@zeniuscorp.com).

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## **ABOUT ZENIUS CORPORATION**

*Zenius Corporation (Zenius) is an SBA certified HUBZone company, Minority-Owned Small Disadvantaged Business (SDB) firm comprised of highly experienced and exceptionally knowledgeable industry experts. As trusted advisors to our clients, we offer expertise in solving complex and multi-dimensional operational and technical challenges. Headquartered in Leesburg, VA, Zenius Corporation's management and technology consulting services include IT Infrastructure and Modernization Support, Cloud Transition Support, Business Intelligence and Analytics, Cybersecurity Support, and Program Management. We have extensive expertise in developing and providing Grants Management systems and solutions, IT Assessment and Optimization systems and services, and Financial Management systems and consulting. For more information, go to <https://www.zeniuscorp.com>.*