The Impact of the Trump Administration on Federal Grants Management

By Danny A. Harris, PhD

It is evident from the title, that this article could have many different meanings. One could think it is talking about the impact the new Administration will have on grant programs, grant contracting, grants reporting, grants workforce or grants operations? The answer is, yes. This white paper will not only briefly opine on the speculated impact on grant programs but more specifically it will address the implications of the decrease in government grants and its impact on small, medium, and large commercial entities that serve this specific marketplace.

The Anticipated Decrease in Federal Grant Programs

Some have suggested that the new administration is vague when it comes to describing its position on many of the issues that concern the taxpaying public. Federal Grant making, in my opinion, is not one of those areas. The President and his senior staff have been very clear about their desire and intention to significantly decrease the overall size of the Federal government. Many translate this into a decrease in the federal workforce. While this is true, the larger impact is the forthcoming decrease in many of the federal grant programs that have existed for years. The Administration has also clearly expressed its intention to assess the efficacy of all grant programs. Those that are found to be steeped in fraud, waste, and abuse may be eliminated. Additionally, those programs that don't deliver the intended results may also find themselves on the chopping block.

This white paper will offer an opinion on how the drastic changes in the federal government's grant making philosophy and practices impact entities that have federal grants practices and expertise. Additionally, the white paper will offer recommendations for agencies and other entities on how to prepare themselves in this changing grants landscape.

The Implications of the Decrease

Let's begin with a word about how the decrease in grant programs will impact the internal government workforce. I have spent many years implementing and managing a major federal grant-making information system and therefore supported the Program Offices that oversee these grants. It is common knowledge that most if not all grants offices across the federal government are understaffed and overwhelmed. When the program you administer is impacted by frequent legislative changes or inquires, the problem is amplified exponentially.   A tremendous amount of credit goes to the many men and women, and the vendors that support them, that ensure that all grants are awarded and funds are distributed to those in need.   Given the recent hiring freeze mandated by the Administration, the problem is likely to worsen. What can Program Managers and Officers do to survive these conditions?

Doing More with Less

Grants processes and operations must be optimized. The dreaded "do more with less" philosophy must become a reality in order to continue to serve the American people. But how do you actually "do more with less?"

There are many answers and approaches to this challenge.   Many of the government's business processes have not

been updated in 20 or more years. Some possible solutions include:

- It is essential for managers to examine their business processes and cut out any or all fat that does not truly serve the ultimate goals of awarding and monitoring grant programs.

- Managers should look for duplication of effort. Many grant programs employ staff that can execute their specific task(s) for multiple grant programs across the agency.

- Managers should utilize staff, whose grant programs have been dissolved, in other grant-making offices at the agency or other agencies.

- Last but not the least, managers should use technology in more creative ways.

The Imminent Challenges

The 2015 Open Government Data Act has made data sharing very dynamic, in terms of grant reporting. The private sector feels that its data is one of its most valuable assets. However, the federal government has only recently started to understand the importance of collecting, producing, analyzing and utilizing the data it gathers and maintains.   One of the more important data categories is that which results from the grants awarded by the federal government. If analyzed properly, this data can help executives make better decisions and eventually eliminate or significantly improve the thousands of programs our tax dollars' fund.

Before eliminating programs that don't work, the current administration will need sophisticated Business Intelligence to help them validate their assumptions about existing grant programs. I predict that this will cause most agencies to take inventory of the tools, techniques and talents they currently have that will perform the required analytics.

Criticality of Investment in New Age Grants Management Applications

I spoke earlier about what grant professionals could do to meet current and future challenges. There are many opportunities to invest in new applications, tools, and vendors that truly understand the federal grant-making space. The vast majority of applications, tools and platforms currently in existence are legacy at best. A quick look across civilian agencies will find most either replacing their systems or at the beginning stages of procuring solutions to replace these legacy platforms.   The good news is, unlike 10 or more years ago, there is plenty of talent available in the federal grants line of business. Even better news is that much of this talent can be found in small businesses. This is not to say that large businesses do not have a role. In most cases, the size and the complexity of the project governs the acquisition strategy.   The point is, agencies now have options.

Seeking Expert Assistance from Businesses that Specialize in Grants

There are small companies that specialize in this space and can support the entire Information Systems Life Cycle, including specialized needs such as IV&V and PMO services. For example, Zenius Corporation has developed both a Grants Management Maturity Index (GMMI™) and a lean Grants Management System called GrantsForce™. The GMMI assesses the maturity level of an organization's grants management line of business and produces a roadmap for improvement.   The GrantsForce application optimizes tasks throughout the federal grants lifecycle, in a lean and open architecture.   Additionally, Zenius has been supporting services that are tailored to this specific line of

business, such as PMO, IV&V, Business Intelligence, and EcoSystem Assessment tools.   While any competent integrator can execute business improvements, agencies can realize more for their money by seeking out vendors that truly understand federal grants management processes and nuances.

Vendors seeking to provide assistance with the challenges mentioned above should consider a number of actions. They should do some or all the following:

- Remain learned on the political landscape and understand what is happening with both the Grant Programs that will be eliminated and those remaining.
- Ensure they are well positioned to perform both Agile Development and Modified Waterfall models.
- Ensure they can offer holistic solutions. In other words, just offering applications without services and cloud computing capabilities will fall short of being competitive.
- Maintain staff that are knowledgeable in grants management.
- Attempt to understand the culture of each organization requiring grants assistance.
- Be fluent in contemporary integration methods. Few systems are stand-alone these days. The ability to loosely couple grants systems with other agency system and assets will be paramount.

Conclusion

In summary, the message is clear. Agencies should not panic when they hear their workforce is being further reduced or grant programs are being eliminated. Yes, it can be devastating for those that have spent their entire careers working on a specific program, but this is not the end. There is still much work to do. There exists both simple and sophisticated solutions to all the problems that will arise. Some will require only modifications to long-standing business processes while others will require system upgrades and better utilization of staff. Again, the good news is that there is plenty of assistance to be provided by small, medium and large businesses that specialize in this line of business.

For more information on the Zenius Grants Management Offerings, please contact Zenius Corporation.

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About Zenius:

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