



# Online Applications and Reporting

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**PRINCIPLE 1**

Take a fresh look at information requirements

**PRINCIPLE 2**

Right-size grant expectations

**PRINCIPLE 3**

**Relieve the burden on grantees**

**PRINCIPLE 4**

Make communications clear and straightforward

A collaborative initiative of the



In partnership with

Association of Fundraising Professionals  
Association of Small Foundations  
Council on Foundations  
Forum of Regional Associations of Grantmakers  
Foundation Center  
Grantmakers for Effective Organizations  
National Council of Nonprofits

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**Project Streamline** is an effort of funders and nonprofits to improve grant application, monitoring and reporting practices. It is a collaborative initiative of the Grants Managers Network, in partnership with the Association of Fundraising Professionals, the Association of Small Foundations, the Council on Foundations, the Forum of Regional Associations of Grantmakers, the Foundation Center, Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, and the National Council of Nonprofits. For more information, go to [www.projectstreamline.org](http://www.projectstreamline.org).

**The Grants Managers Network (GMN)** improves grant-making by advancing the knowledge, skills and abilities of grants management professionals and leading grant-makers to adopt and incorporate effective practices that benefit the philanthropic community. GMN has more than 1,400 members from 1,000+ grantmaking organizations who represent the breadth of the philanthropic community including small family foundations, prominent national foundations, grantmaking public charities, and socially responsible corporations. For more information, go to [www.gmnetwork.org](http://www.gmnetwork.org).

# Project Streamline At A Glance

What can funders do to improve their grant application and reporting processes, reduce the burden on nonprofits, and free up more time for mission-critical activities? How can grantseekers support these efforts?

Project Streamline has worked with leaders in grantmaking and nonprofit organizations to identify challenges, propose solutions and develop resources to help you streamline.

## Streamlining Challenges

***Drowning in Paperwork, Distracted from Purpose,*** a Project Streamline study, found ten flaws in the current system of grant application and reporting:

1. Enormous Variability
2. Requirements Aren't "Right-Sized"
3. Insufficient Net Grants
4. Outsourced Burdens
5. Trust Undermined
6. Reports on a Shelf
7. Fundraising Gymnastics
8. Due-Diligence Redundancy
9. Double-Edged Swords
10. Time Drain for Grantmakers, Too

## Streamlining Solutions

Our research suggests four core principles that grantmakers can adopt into practice to make things easier on nonprofits.

**Principle 1: Take a fresh look at information requirements.** Begin with a rigorous assessment of what kind of information you really need to make a responsible grant.

**Principle 2: Right-size grant expectations.** Ensure that the effort that grantseekers expend to get a grant is proportionate to the size of the grant, is appropriate to the type of grant, and takes into consideration any existing relationship with the grantee.

**Principle 3: Relieve the burden on grantees.** There are many ways that funders can reduce the burden that grant-seeking places on grantees. By minimizing the amount of time, effort, and money that nonprofits spend getting and administering grants, funders increase the amount of time, effort, and money devoted to mission-based activities.

**Principle 4: Make communications clear and straightforward.** Good communication is critical to a streamlined process and essential for fostering a mutually respectful relationship between grantmakers and grantseekers.

## Streamlining Resources

We provide resources to help you streamline.

### Guide to Streamlining Series

Guides on:

- Due Diligence
- Right-Sizing
- Grant Budgets and Financial Reports
- Online Applications and Reporting
- Communications

### Making Streamlining Stick

Explores four steps to develop your organization's strategy:

1. Take stock
2. Make the case
3. Plan changes
4. Implement and Refine

### Online Self Assessment

Tool to assess your current practice

### Workshops

Interactive sessions for grantmakers

### Website

Resources, events, ideas

### Newsletter

Stories, voices, research

# Guide Snapshot

## Streamlining Online Applications and Reporting

A groundswell of funders are putting their application and reporting processes online for the first time or moving to a second generation of online systems, both custom-built and off-the-shelf. This is a wonderful thing, but it needs to be done right. This guide offers a set of recommended practices and principles to improve and streamline the process of online grantmaking.

### The Bottom Line for Funders

Online systems are an undeniable improvement on manually processing grant applications and reports. But not all systems are created equal. Some are designed in a clear, intuitive way. Others lead grantseekers to feel like a mouse in a maze. While many funders have gone online, few have looked deeply at the systems' usability, clarity, and comprehensiveness from the nonprofit's perspective. In short, most haven't fully considered the end user.

We offer a host of specific recommendations for grantmakers as well as vendors, but here's what you really need to know. Online grantmaking systems should be:

- **Usable:** They should be designed and set up to be simple and intuitive for the end user—the grantseeker. They should also be easy for your staff to use and customize to your purposes.
- **Clear:** Online systems will be most effective if they clearly define and communicate expectations to grantseekers.
- **Comprehensive:** Systems should allow online submission for each stage of the application and reporting process, from letter of inquiry to final report.

Beyond the technology, we suggest a number of best practices that funders can implement to make the grantseeking and grantmaking process more efficient for everyone.

### Tips for Nonprofits

Nonprofit organizations applying for or reporting on grants can do their part to help online systems work well. They can also influence the way that grantmakers set up and use these systems. Here's how they can do so:

- Read guidelines and Frequently Asked Questions provided by the funder and ask questions when instructions aren't clear.
- Take care when writing, using spell check and clear, concise language.
- Back up critical information, writing and saving long responses in word processing software so if there are system or connection problems, your work will be saved.
- Voice your concerns, responding honestly to grantmaker requests for feedback on their processes and even volunteering ideas and suggestions for making the application and reporting process easier.

### Principles in Action

The *Guide to Streamlining Online Applications and Reporting* responds to Project Streamline's Principle 3: Relieve the burden on grantees. Although online systems should make applying and reporting processes easier for everyone, they are often poorly designed and implemented, wasting time and frustrating grantseekers. The recommendations of this guide identify the essential and gold-standard features and practices of online systems to help your grantmaking organization select and implement—or retrofit, if needed—a system that is user-friendly and designed to help grantseekers succeed.

## Consider the Customer

If grants are the lifeblood of nonprofit organizations, then applying for one these days can seem like getting a transfusion from a first-year medical student. Wasn't this less painful in the past? A nonprofit filled out a paper form, the funder made a note of it in a ledger book or index card and hand-wrote a check, and—presto—philanthropy! As seductive as it may be to try to turn back the clock, the world of grantmaking and grantseeking has become vastly more complex. The number of nonprofits and funders has grown dramatically in the last few decades, the need for accountability has intensified, and the mantra of “do more with less” is now a constant companion.

In an effort to streamline their own operations, many funders began asking grantseekers to use the Internet to submit applications and reports almost as soon as e-mail became a commodity in the early 1990s. These tentative steps led to Web-based application forms that allowed funders to receive applications electronically and, ideally, import that data automatically into grants management databases, eliminating the need for data input by funder staff.

These systems are an undeniable improvement on manually processing all of that information. But unlike businesses spurred by feedback and competition to make products work well for customers, funders often make decisions in a vacuum. The result is a panoply of online systems among funders, some designed in a clear, intuitive way, others leading a grantseeker to feel like a mouse in a maze. Funders have tried to do more with less and make their own systems efficient. Vendors have tried to please their funder clients. But few have looked deeply at the usability, clarity, and comprehensiveness of their online systems from the nonprofit's perspective. In short, most haven't fully considered the end user.

### KEY INGREDIENTS IN ONLINE SYSTEMS

This guide offers a set of recommended practices and principles to improve the process of online grantmaking. We recognize that both grantmakers and grantseekers vary greatly in their sophistication with technology and access to adequate funding and staffing, and we don't intend to be prescriptive or promote a “one-size-fits-all” approach. Rather, we present a menu of choices from which organizations can select according to their own circumstances and strategies.

Online grantmaking systems should be:

- **Usable:** They should be designed and set up to be simple and intuitive for the end user—the grantseeker. They should also be easy for your staff to use and customize to your purposes.
- **Clear:** Online systems will be most effective if they clearly define and communicate expectations to grantseekers.
- **Comprehensive:** Systems should allow online submission for each stage of the application and reporting process, from letter of inquiry to final report.

**WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “GOING ONLINE”?**

We realize that “going online” may mean different things to different funders. Some grantmakers may begin by posting requirements in a downloadable format on their website and accepting applications and reports via email rather than requiring hard copies. This is a positive step! But our recommendations focus on Web-based systems that integrate with a grants management database. Whether the grants management system itself is hosted and Web-based, or a more traditional installed client-server product, our focus is on online forms that allow grantees to submit applications over the Web.<sup>1</sup>

**THREE TYPES OF RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. First, we look at the features that are helpful in the process—the functionality that online application vendors should provide and that grantmakers should seek.
2. Because improving the online application experience is a responsibility shared by software vendors and grantmaking institutions, we provide a list of non-technical best practices for grantmakers as well.
3. We also look at what the grantseeker can and should do to streamline the online application process.

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**Improving the online application experience is a responsibility shared by software vendors and grantmaking institutions**  
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We divide the first two sets of these recommendations into two categories:

**Essentials**—features and practices that are basic to the task of enabling nonprofits to apply to a funder online. We believe that every online system should include these essentials.

**Gold Standard**—features and practices that go beyond those basics to provide an enriched online experience and provide nonprofits with more control of their information.

1. For an excellent set of reports on grants management database systems by Solpath and Idealware, see <http://solpath.org/results.html>.

## Building a Better System

Online systems come in all shapes and sizes. Some are rudimentary, doing the basic tasks of gathering essential organizational and grant-request information; others are complete Web-based solutions with attractive graphics, drop-down lists, and automatic reminders for required information.

This list of features is intended primarily as a checklist for grantmakers looking to implement or improve systems to streamline both their own processes and the grantseeker's experience. We believe that educated grantmakers will encourage vendors to build systems with these features in mind.

The online features listed can help produce a streamlined and effective online grant application process. They provide a good platform. But they are not sufficient to create a great process without corresponding changes to grantmaking practice. We take that up in the next section.

### Essential Features

Grantseekers should be able to count on a minimum level of functionality in each online application. What features should all online application systems provide?

#### GETTING STARTED

**1. Simple account creation with lost password functionality:** Systems that require users to log in should follow standard Web best practices and include a way to deal with lost passwords, both at the user level (have password e-mailed to the user) and at the grantmaker level (in case the employee that started the application is no longer available to complete the application).

**2. Ability to preview and print a full application before starting and at any point before submission:** It is important to provide a way for applicants to preview and print the full application form before starting so they can gather the information they need and begin working on responses offline. In addition, applicants should be able to print out their application at any point in the process and after they complete the application.

**3. Storage and retrieval of past data:** Address, contact and organizational history information should be retained so that returning applicants do not have to enter this data with each new application.

**4. Duplicate controls:** Online systems should include good controls to ensure that returning applicants are not treated as new to the database. The system should check for organization name as well as the Employer Identification Number (EIN) and name and telephone number for contact people.



**DISCUSSION QUESTION** If your organization uses online application and/or reporting systems, what about them is frustrating to applicants and grantees, and how do you know?

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## OVERALL EASE OF USE

**5. Ability for an applicant to save work and return to it later:** Applicants can't always complete their application in one session. Essential information may not be at their fingertips. And some applications are completed by more than one person—e.g., a program staffer and a financial staffer—both of whom need access to the online application forms.

**6. Clear and widespread opportunities to save work:** Computers crash and Internet connections get dropped. Getting 95% through an application and having all the work lost because of a computer crash can make for a very unhappy grantseeker. Online application systems should provide automatic saves or regular opportunities to save work manually during the application process so that inputted text is saved even if the system goes down.

**7. Ability to copy and paste text from word-processed documents into Web forms:** Grantseekers often cut and paste some answers from similar proposals or from stock language developed to describe their organization or project. Retyping those answers into a grantmaker's form wastes time.

**8. Required fields:** Because one advantage of using online application systems is to make sure grantseekers provide all the necessary information, online application systems should have the ability to require that certain fields be filled out. These fields should be clearly delineated for the user.

**9. Error notices:** If a required field is not filled out, or if incorrect information is entered (such as text in a numeric field), the online system should provide clear and simple feedback to the applicant about what the error is and how to fix it.

**10. Word or character counter:** Online systems often allow grantmakers to put word and/or character limits on fields. (These can be frustrating to grantseekers filling out the application—see #9 under Critical Grantmaker Practices later in this guide). If limits are used, the fields should include a counter so that applicants are aware of how much space remains as they fill out the application.

**11. File attachments:** Online systems that allow applicants to include file uploads should make this process as simple as possible, following common Web practices. Clear instructions should be included regarding how to attach a file, what types of files are acceptable, and what file size limitations there are, if any. Virus scanning on all attachments should be done before any files are brought into the database.

**12. Acknowledgement of receipt of submission:** All online systems should generate an e-mail to applicants letting them know that their application was received. These emails should be customizable to allow the grantmaker to include information the applicant will need to follow up on the grant request, such as a request number, staff member to contact for more information, and next steps in the review process.

## GOOD FORM DESIGN

**13. Good design:** Good design and layout can make or break the usability of an online application system. This requires grant application design tools that allow the creator of a form to group fields into categories, include hyperlinks, and incorporate at least basic HTML design elements like underlining, centering or bolding text.

**14. Online forms editing:** Online forms should be easy for funder staff to edit, to improve instructions or incorporate suggestions, and make the online process easier and more user-friendly.

**15. Drop-down lists, check boxes and radio buttons:** Online forms should have the ability to include drop-down lists, check boxes and radio buttons in order to preserve data integrity in the database and keep it simple for the applicant.

## MULTIPLE STAGES

**16. Support for eligibility quizzes:** Grantmakers should provide clear and easily accessible guidelines on what they do or don't fund. An eligibility quiz that takes the applicant through a simple set of questions can be an excellent tool to reinforce these guidelines. It can also save the applicant the time of applying for a project that has no chance of being funded and the grantmaker the time of reviewing an ineligible request. Ideally, quiz functionality should include the ability to automatically check the Office of Foreign Asset Control (OFAC) list and verify 501(c)(3) status (via the IRS or Guidestar), as appropriate to the grantmaker's needs, as well as provide applicants the specific reason for ineligibility.

**17. Online reporting:** Systems should allow applicants to submit interim and final reports online. This would include providing grantees with their responses to the original proposal questions and allowing them to report on the outcomes and submit attachments. Upon submission, the data should feed back into the funder's grants management database so that the funder has a complete record of the grant from proposal through final report.

## Gold Standard Features

In addition to these essential features, there are a number of gold standard features that can provide substantial benefit to grantseekers.

## GETTING STARTED

**1. Access to previously submitted applications:** Applicants should be able to see a history of previously submitted applications, print them out, and use them as a template for new submissions.

## GOOD FORM DESIGN

**2. Branch logic:** In eligibility quizzes, letters of inquiry, and full proposals, it is very useful to be able to include branch logic—e.g., if applying for this type of grant, then one set of criteria applies; if applying for another type of grant, a different set of criteria applies. This allows applicants to easily answer only the questions that are appropriate to them.

**3. Advanced design capabilities:** Gold-standard systems use full Web design tools to allow for true flexibility in the creation of forms and multimedia "Web 2.0" features.

## MULTIPLE STAGES

**4. Multiple-stage applications:** Systems should allow grantmakers to define multiple online application stages, including an eligibility quiz, a Letter of Intent (LOI), and a full proposal. Grantseekers should be able to easily convert an LOI-stage application into a full proposal online form without having to re-enter their information.

## DATA SHARING AND COLLABORATION

**5. Application editing and collaboration:** It's useful for grantseekers and grantmakers to be able to work collaboratively on a pending application until it is completed. For example, an applicant can be working on a proposal that the funder can access, make suggestions for edits, and work with the grantseeker to refine before final submission.

**6. Extranet capabilities.** Beyond the application process, it's very useful for applicants to be able to check on the status of a request online, see when reports will be due and when payments are scheduled, and change their contact/address information (with approval control from the funder organization).

**7. Software should allow data to be written to and from third party systems.** Grantmakers could benefit greatly by taking the best parts of one system and marrying them with another system or creating their own programs to extend the capabilities of a grants management database. In order to do this, vendors need to offer an application programming interface, or API, at low cost. The API would enable software developers to create programs that would "talk" to the database. This would allow grantmakers to create just the look and feel they want, access data in a way that best suits their needs, and provide a better interface for grantseekers. And, perhaps counter-intuitively, it could also benefit vendors by allowing them to concentrate their development efforts on those things they do best and allowing their customers to get what they really want.



**DISCUSSION QUESTION** If your organization doesn't use a simple eligibility quiz that can guide prospective applicants to apply or not, what would be the downsides of adding such a tool?

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# Beyond the Tools

System features can be a big help in the online application process, but ultimately the grantseeking and grantmaking process is based on communication. There are a number of best practices that grantmakers can implement, regardless of technology, to make the process more efficient for everyone.

## Essential Grantmaker Practices

Here are some basic suggestions grantmakers can use to make the application and reporting experience easier on applicants, save themselves time, and improve the quality of information they receive.

**1. Carefully design your grant applications and reports:** Follow Project Streamline’s principle, “Take a Fresh Look at Information Requirements,” carefully considering every question asked in your application or report to ensure that (a) the information is critical to your decision making and (b) you’re asking for it at the appropriate time. For example, you might only need detailed financial information from grantseekers you are seriously considering funding. Instead of asking for this detail from all applicants, make it part of your final due diligence process before funds are released.

**2. The look, categories, and flow of an application can be critical in helping grantees make sense of what’s desired:** Clear grant applications have a logical layout of questions and clear instructions for things like word limits or other important notices.

**3. Help grantseekers understand how to use the system:** Design systems that will make sense to grantseekers who may not have much experience filling out any type of application, much less a Web-based application. Provide information about what they should expect, how to create an account, and how to save and return to an application. Make sure they can easily see and print a list of all the questions and information you will require (including any character limits) so they can start writing their application offline if they choose. Be clear about what type of attachments you require and how to attach the documents. If you require information in a specific format, such as an Adobe PDF file, make sure you provide information, and even software if necessary, to help grantseekers create information in that particular format. Another way to help grantseekers understand the process could be a webinar that walks them through the online system. Such a webinar can be offered at the beginning of each funding round and recorded and posted for future reference.

**4. Provide helpful answers to Frequently Asked Questions:** Grantmakers should include a Frequently Asked Questions link to provide answers to common questions about general issues, such as what types of nonprofit organizations are eligible for funding, as well as technical issues, such as what Web browsers are supported by the system or whether cookies need to be enabled in the browser. Eligibility quizzes can be created as part of an integrated online system or as a series of simple web pages.

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**ANSWERING THE CALL**

Grantseekers to the Ontario Trillium Foundation have access to answers through a staffed call center that the foundation uses to support its new online system. The call center staff answer basic technical questions from grantseekers, track the issues they encounter, and funnel trickier questions to the appropriate person.

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**5. Provide technical support:** Online applications benefit grantmakers as much as grantseekers, but, when things go wrong, it's often the applicants who suffer. For that reason, it is essential that grantmakers provide excellent and responsive technical support to applicants and ensure that support contact information is clear and prominent.

**6. Take care with automatic 501(c)(3) checks:** Automated checks of 501(c)(3) status can be useful, but don't rely on them as the only way that grantseekers can be approved to submit an application. In many cases, a valid organization may be rejected due to improper formatting or slight variations in the way their name is written, rendering the submission ineligible when it should be moved to the application stage.

**7. Use understandable language:** Funders speak a form of jargon that is often unique to the individual organization and makes little sense to grantseekers. And because Web forms tend to require brevity, questions can often be abbreviated in ways that make little sense. Take particular care to phrase your questions in everyday language that will be accessible to any grantseeker.

**8. Use caution with word or character limits:** Take care when imposing word or character limits, and use them sparingly. Character limits are the cause of much frustration for grantseekers, requiring them to spend time pruning answers to fit within the allotted space.

**9. Test your application!** Before unleashing your questions on an unwitting group of grantseekers, test the applications yourself. Technical staff should work with program staff to craft both the questions and look and feel of application forms. They should experience filling them out before they are published for grantseekers. And they should test the applications on a small group of current grantees, asking for feedback and incorporating suggestions as needed.

**10. Solicit feedback:** Survey your applicants about your online system from time to time. Find out what works for them and what doesn't, and be open to making changes where possible.

## Gold Standard Grantmaker Practices

Here are some suggestions for going beyond the basic requirements of a good grant application and reporting system, regardless of technology, and creating an exceptionally positive experience for the grantseeker.

**1. Explore multiple-stage applications:** Consider having a simple form for letters of inquiry and only asking for more extensive information when seriously considering making a grant to an organization.

**2. Create short-form applications for returning grantees:** Consider right-sizing your process by simplifying the application and report form for grantees applying for an additional year of support for a project that received funding in the previous year.



**DISCUSSION QUESTION** Once your organization has decided to add a new or upgraded online application system, how might you use the occasion to rethink other changes in your grantmaking processes?

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**3. Move to common applications and data repositories<sup>2</sup>:** Grantmakers should proactively seek out opportunities to use common applications and standard questions, and look to create widely-used common standards. Common applications and data repositories represent a solution that is one step beyond what individual funders can do to improve individual online systems. Questions can be standardized and submitted to multiple funders at once, and applications can be automatically populated with financial and other information from repositories with no additional effort needed from applicants after the initial submission. While there are viable models, such as the college common application, various government funding efforts, and the Pennsylvania Cultural Data Project, funders have been slow to adopt this approach, due to the complexity of the task and a lack of funder motivation to make such collective, large-scale changes.

**4. Demand better products:** You are the vendor’s paying customer. Instead of automatically settling for what is offered, let vendors know about the specific features you need. User groups, such as the Technology Affinity Group (TAG), can also help you to advocate for improvements.

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**TESTING IN THE REAL WORLD**

The Surdna Foundation piloted an online system, combining the online application and reporting functions into one online form with a small number of grant applicants. The foundation then sent out an anonymous online survey to learn about the applicants’ experiences so as to improve the process.

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2. For more information, see Project Streamline’s *Drowning in Paperwork, Distracted from Purpose*, the “Creative Approaches” section on page 25.

## What Grantseekers Can Do

Grantseekers can do their part to help online systems work well. Grantseekers can also influence the way that grantmakers set up and use these systems. Here are some suggestions for how they can do so. We encourage you (the grantmaker) to send this section along to your nonprofit grantseeking partners.

**1. Read guidelines and Frequently Asked Questions provided by the funder:** Even the clearest instructions go to waste if they are ignored. Before making a call for technical support, we encourage you to read provided information carefully and see whether the answer can be found. If you can't find it—or can't find it readily—by all means contact the grantmaker and ask.

**2. Take care when writing:** The age of Internet chat has created a shorthand that can render grant applications unclear—and sometimes out of the running. Use clear, concise language, and check spelling and grammar carefully before submitting a proposal.

**3. Back up critical information:** When writing a long proposal, craft the language using word processing software, save the document, then copy and paste it into the online application. That way, if a system does crash, you will have your hard work backed up.

**4. Voice your concerns:** We know that there are times when grantseekers must grit their teeth and grind their way through a poorly designed application or reporting system. But, as the existence of Project Streamline demonstrates, more grantmakers are taking a critical look at the grant application and reporting process, and sincerely seeking feedback. We hope you will be candid with your funder. If grantmakers send out a survey to inquire about your experience with the application process, it is because they want to learn and improve their operations, for your sake as much as for theirs. Tell them when there is a problem with their online system, or something you think could be handled in a better way. Good funders will listen and act if provided with thoughtful feedback.

## Technology Isn't Enough

The time is right for this menu of principles. The maturity of the Web has resulted in new competition for grantmaking software products, with each new product raising the bar. This is a wonderful thing. But new products with enhanced capabilities are not, when taken alone, the answer to improving the online application and reporting experience for the grantseeker or the grantmaker.

We believe that the answer lies in approaching online systems with the end users' experience in mind, communicating clearly about needs, and thinking about a comprehensive online experience. With a little intelligence and work, we can build online application systems that streamline the experience for all involved.

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Improving Grant Application and Reporting

[www.projectstreamline.org](http://www.projectstreamline.org)