# Unsubmitted Grant Applications

## Flashpoints, benchmarks and solutions

At first glance, grantmakers may view the issue of unsubmitted grants applications as minor. Virtually every grants program will attract its share of applications left unsubmitted – some barely started, some abandoned halfway through.

But unsubmitted applications may indicate deeper issues with your grants program – ones which result from flaws in your application forms and processes, and which may be preventing your program from fulfilling its potential in the community.

This edition of *Grants Management Intelligence* looks at the issue of unsubmitted grants applications from a few perspectives.

We use our knowledge to delve into some of the reasons why grantseekers start applications but don't submit them, and we suggest best-practice steps grantmakers can take to address the problem.

We draw on years of SmartyGrants data to develop benchmark statistics on levels of unsubmitted applications across various grantmaking sectors. And we gain some first-hand insights – from both SmartyGrants staff and grantmakers – into why applications are left unsubmitted and what they've done to address the issue.

# Five reasons why you're missing out on applications

## Five best practice tips for great grants assessment panels

**1** **Application forms:** Your application form is often the first, best place to look when trying to find out why you are experiencing unsubmitted applications. Form length, language, clarity and question order can all play a part. (See page 2)

**2** **Timelines/closing dates:** Sometimes grantseekers simply run out of time to complete the form. And while grantmakers can't do that job for their grantseekers, they can take steps to help them meet their deadline. (See page 2)

**3** **Eligibility requirements:** How many of us have started filling out a form or document only to read the eligibility guidelines and find that we are wasting our time? Grantseekers do the same thing, though there are simple actions funders can take to minimise this problem. (See page 2)

**4** **Communication/support:** Poor communication can lead to groups starting applications for programs they are ineligible for, or missing deadlines for programs they are interested in. Others give up as a result of confusing advice or a lack of support when using technology or online grants management systems. (See page 2)

**5** **Relevance to community:** Unsubmitted applications, and/or a fall in applications, can indicate your grants program is not as relevant or useful in the community as it once was. (See page 3)

## And one more thing …

**Accessibility:** Best-practice grantmaking demands funders ensure their important information, programs, application forms and guidelines are accessible to applicants.

Funders should also ensure that grantseekers without ready or reliable access to the internet and online grants management systems have alternatives, or can access support.

Online grants systems have many benefits, but you don't want to lock out a portion of your prospective applicants (see page 3).

# Unsubmitted applications – flashpoints
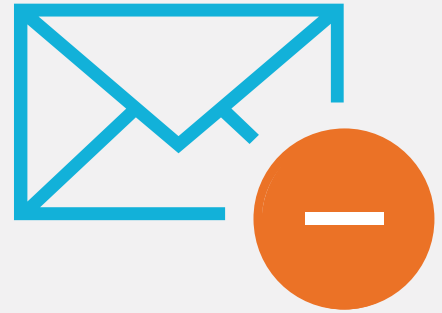
Here are some questions to ask when examining your unsubmitted application levels.

## 1. Application forms

- How long is your application form, and is it commensurate with the size of the grants you are allocating?
- Have you revised, edited and proof-read your forms? Do the questions run in a sensible order, flowing from one section to the next?
- Are technical terms and jargon kept to an absolute minimum (or, if used, explained clearly in appropriate places on the form or in an easily accessible glossary?)
- Is the form easily understood and accessible for people whose first language isn't English? Is there a way to access copies of your forms in languages other than English? And what about those with vision or other impairments?
- Can people easily access a sample copy of your form to read before they apply?

## 2. Timelines and closing dates

- How clear and easy to find (on your website, on forms, elsewhere) is your grant program's closing date?
- Do you contact those who have started applications but not submitted them a week or two before the closing date?
- Does your closing time suit your target audience? Scheduling closing times on weekends or after hours isn't best practice, but have you thought about whether your closing times clash with public/religious/school holidays?
- Do you have a timeline on your website – either a graphic or a list of milestones, such as opening date, closing date, assessment period and funding announcements?
- Are staff members clear on the closing date and time for applications, as well as other key dates?

## 3. Eligibility requirements

- Where do you explicitly state the eligibility requirements for your program/s?
- Do you state eligibility requirements up front, before grantseekers invest time in applying?
- Are your eligibility requirements reasonable, or do they eliminate groups that should be able or encouraged to apply?
- Have your eligibility requirements changed? If so, have these changes been communicated effectively?

## 4. Communication and support

- Do you have a communications plan tailored to your grants program?
- Do you state clearly and widely your organisation's contact details – phone and email in particular?

- Do you have knowledgeable staff who are dedicated to offering expert support, advice and guidance in response to inquiries?
- Do you clearly communicate timelines, closing dates, eligibility requirements and other vital information?
- Do you stage information sessions for your grants programs? If so, do key grants staff attend? And what information is conveyed at these sessions?
- If you accept online applications, do you offer adequate technological support?

## 5. Relevance and responsiveness to community

- How regularly do you review your grants program (1) – its focus, target audiences, and the size of the grants you offer?
- How regularly do you review your grants program (2) – eligibility requirements, accessibility, provision of key information, communication, etc?
- Have you sought feedback from the community? Do you do so regularly?
- Do you engage with grantseekers who are responsible for unsubmitted applications to find out why they didn't submit?
- Do you engage with groups in your target audience – groups that applied for your grants program as well as others that did not – about your program?

## 6. Accessibility

How accessible are your forms and other resources?

- Application form?
- Information on eligibility requirements?
- Supporting documentation?
- General program information – aims, target audiences, previous funding recipients?
- Knowledgeable staff members and support staff?
- Technology you ask grantseekers to use?
- Information in languages other than English?
- Forms and other documents in formats suitable for those without up-to-the-second technology, with impairments or with access issues?
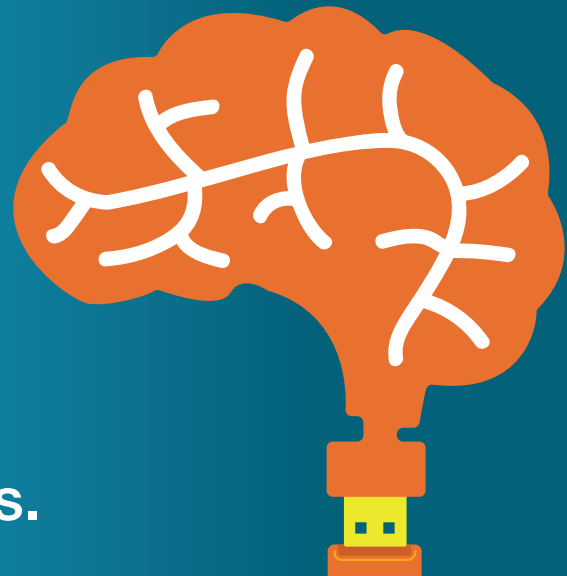
# Unsubmitted applications – benchmarks

We've scoured the stats to come up with some great data on the levels of unsubmitted applications grantmakers typically receive.

Where does your organisation sit in comparison to these benchmarks?

## Key Stats

Across **all grants programs**, 28% of grant applications are started but left unsubmitted.

Across **corporate** grants programs, **36%** of grant applications were started but left unsubmitted

Across **Federal Government** grants programs, **33%** of grant applications were started but left unsubmitted

Across **community foundation** grants programs, only **14%** of grant applications were started but left unsubmitted.

**Local Government** grant programs –metro, rural or regional – ranked around average for unsubmitted application levels

## Findings

Analysis of more than six years of SmartyGrants data covering in excess of 345,500 grants applications has found that 28% of applications – almost 97,700 – were unsubmitted.

A note here: when we refer to an application as unsubmitted, we are referring to one which a grantseeker has begun but, for whatever reason, has abandoned or not completed.

SmartyGrants keeps track of all applications to all grants programs – both submitted and unsubmitted – allowing us to analyse the data.

So more than a quarter of all applications begun through SmartyGrants were not submitted to the relevant grantmaker.
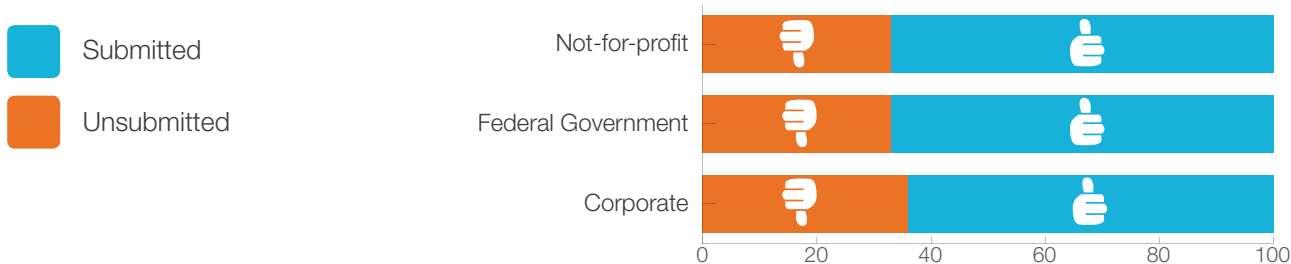
### Submitted vs unsubmitted grant applications

- 72% Submitted
- 28% Unsubmitted
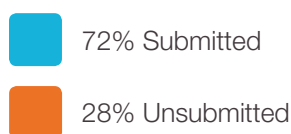
## Sectors with higher-than-average percentages of unsubmitted applications

Alongside corporate (36% unsubmitted) and Federal Government (33%) grantmakers, not-for-profit grantmakers also recorded a higher-than-average percentage of unsubmitted applications. Thirty-three percent of submissions to not-for-profit grantmakers were left unsubmitted.

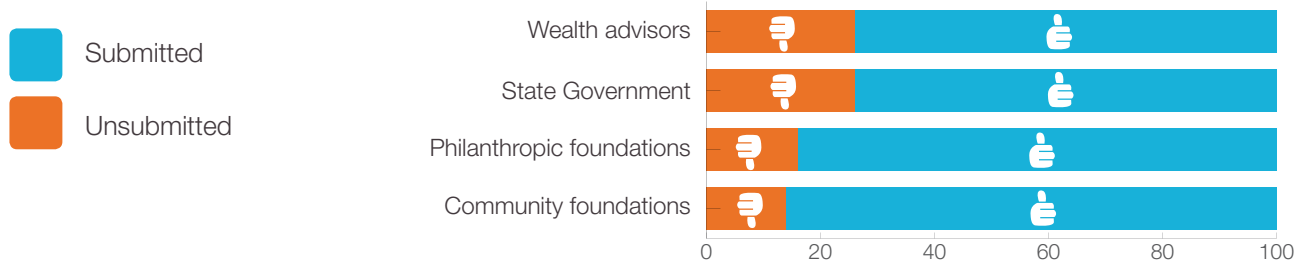### Submitted vs unsubmitted grant applications



## Sectors with lower-than-average percentages of unsubmitted applications

Foundation-based grantmakers featured prominently among the sectors with lower-than-average levels of unsubmitted applications:

- Community foundations had the lowest percentage of unsubmitted applications. Only 14% of applications were left unsubmitted.
- Philanthropic foundations weren't too far behind – just 16% of applications to grantmakers in this sector were unsubmitted.
- State Government grantmakers, as well as those in the wealth advisor sector, saw an unsubmitted application rate of 26% – slightly better than average.

### Submitted vs unsubmitted grant applications



## Local Government

Overall, Local Government grantmakers were just on or above the average:

- Local Government grantmakers from Australian metro areas saw 26% of grants applications unsubmitted.
- Local Government grantmakers from Australian rural areas had a 28% unsubmitted application rate – right on the overall average.

Both sets of figures were slightly better than that recorded by New Zealand –based councils which use SmartyGrants. Those councils had a 30% rate of unsubmitted applications.

### Submitted vs unsubmitted grant applications
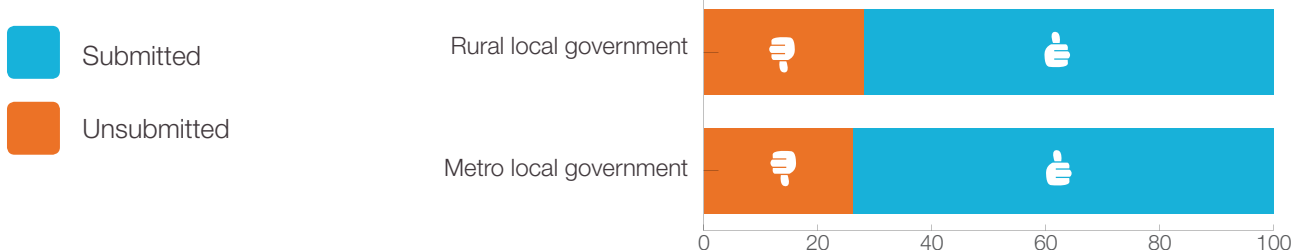
# Tales from the coalface: improving application submission rates

With Jon King
Grants Administrator
Community Broadcasting Foundation

The new age of online grant application systems has led to an increase in the amount of information we have about our applicants. We can now see how many applications have been started, who they were started by and when they were started.

I'll cover a few strategies to help you as a funder to improve your submission rate, and hopefully the quality of the applications you receive at the same time.

## Be clear

Be clear about what the grant program will and will not support, and make sure applicants read this thoroughly.

Before we moved to SmartyGrants, our application forms and grant guidelines were two separate documents. Our website analytics showed very few applicants bothered to download the guidelines. So while we provided the information, our applicants weren't reading it.

The first thing we did in moving to SmartyGrants was put the grant guidelines as page one of the online form. That way applicants would have to at least glace at the guidelines, and hopefully refer back while completing the application form.

## Respond to enquiries

As much as we try to ensure our guidelines are as clear as possible there's always a little jargon and ambiguity your applicants will pick up on. We need to be clear at a human-to-human level for the special cases where guidelines aren't clear enough.

At the Community Broadcasting Foundation we provide the name, email address and direct phone number of the staff member responsible for each grant program, and encourage applicants to seek advice and even feedback on a draft application two weeks before submissions close.

We find that applicants who seek our advice and feedback submit higher quality applications and are more likely to be allocated a grant.

## Provide technical support

Some applicants just aren't familiar with computers, word processing software and online forms (yet).

Applicants may think they have completed everything in the application and submitted the form. They are waiting for you to confirm that you have received the application. But one small missed field or step might mean the applicant's hard work is not assessed.

Grantmakers should think about who their applicants are and what help they may need to fill out forms.

Our forms provide instructions on how to navigate the form and how to submit the form when complete. We also provide instructions on how to complete particular sections, such as budgets, and how to submit attachments.

## Issue reminders

SmartyGrants is able to provide us with an email addresses for users who have begun grant applications but not submitted them, so we can contact them directly.

We usually do this two to three weeks before a submission deadline, allowing time for them to gather information and complete the form. We offer our assistance with any questions they may have about the process.

## Summary of suggestions

- Include clear grant guidelines as page one of your application form.
- Offer advice and feedback to applicants before the submission deadline.
- Provide clear instructions on how to navigate and submit your application form.
- Provide clear instructions on how to complete tricky sections within your application forms.
- Send a reminder to applicants who have not yet submitted their application a few weeks from the submission deadline.

Examples of how these suggestions have been incorporated within the Community Broadcasting Foundation's grant processes can be found in our Emergency Grant application form.

# Unsubmitted applications – solutions

Drawn from the wisdom of our AIGM and SmartyGrants "gurus", here are some simple, practical tips to help grantmakers reduce the level of unsubmitted applications.

### 1. Reminders, reminders, reminders (1)

A week or a fortnight before your grants program closes, send out reminder emails to those who have started applications but not submitted them.

Of course, this is easier if you're using an online grants management system (like SmartyGrants).

If you're not, see point #2 below.

### 2. Reminders, reminders, reminders (2)

Place reminders of upcoming deadlines front and centre on your website.

The timeline Google used for its Impact Challenge Grants Program (https://impactchallenge.withgoogle.com/australia2014) is a great way example of an effective way to get the message across.

And social media can be effective in getting the word out – put reminder posts on your Facebook page and send out a Tweet.

### 3. State your eligibility requirements up front

The eligibility requirements for your program should be stated clearly in a number of places, including:

- On or near the front of your program's application forms.
- Via a well advertised and prominent link to a separate document on your website.

Publicise these requirements at any information sessions you stage, and make sure your staff understand them thoroughly.

Include a statement of the program's intended target applicants too.

### 4. A useful list

Consider setting out a checklist of documents, information and other "things" grantseekers will need to complete your application – proof of DGR status, financial records, references, contact details, etc.

Promote and link to this document prominently, or include it in your eligibility requirements.

A list like this helps ensure grantseekers have all vital documents and information on hand before starting the application. It also means they won't abandon the application halfway through because they don't have key information or documents.

### 5. Form preview

Make your application form available to applicants before they start work so they can get an idea of form length and contents.

This functionality is built into SmartyGrants.

### 6. Edit and proofread your forms

Check your forms thoroughly well in advance of the opening of your grants program.

And don't just do it yourself. "You are your own worst editor," as the saying goes, and you are likely to overlook mistakes or possible improvements that someone with a fresh set of eyes will pick up.

Get a writer, journalist or editor to review your application form, to ensure it reads well, is clear and flows from one section to the next.

### 7. Length of forms and form requirements

Applicants will be more willing to fill in a lengthy form if they believe its length and complexity reflect the size of the grant they are applying for.

Think critically about the length of your form in comparison to what you are offering. Don't ask applicants to answer 20 pages of questions to have a chance at a $500 grant.

And don't ask for information you don't need – it is no use having filing cabinets full of detailed information you'll never use.

### 8. Information sessions

Information sessions are great ways to get information about your grants program out there to your target audience of potential applicants.

Regularly review the contents of the sessions to ensure they contain everything they should.

Ensure the right staff members are available to answer questions and make contact with prospective grantseekers, and make sure the timing of the sessions is convenient for the audience your grants are targeting.

### 9. Get staff up to speed

Make sure any staff dealing directly with grantseekers can speak with knowledge about relevant grants programs, guidelines, eligibility requirements, closing dates, etc.

Staff may need to be trained to ensure they can fulfill this role properly.

Your staff are at the frontline of your work with grants applicants. Ensure they can answer questions – either on the phone or at briefing sessions – authoritatively.

### 10.  Allow enough time for people to complete their application

Get to know your applicants and familiarise yourself with how much time they need:

* Work out how long the average submission will take to prepare.
* Work out how many days that will take for those putting in an hour per night.
* Double that to allow for coordination and committee work.
* Add another fortnight to enable sign-off from the board.

There's your minimum time for applications to be open.

## 11. Closing times

Last year *GMI* investigated best practice for grantmakers when closing a grants round. A key finding was that the majority of grants rounds closed on a Friday – often at 5pm or midnight.

These closing days and times might be great for funders, but they often leave grantseekers disenfranchised, without support (especially if the closing time is after office hours) and likely to leave applications unsubmitted and incomplete.

Our advice? Close your grants rounds at 3pm on a Monday. And if you have to close a round at 5pm, have your staff on hand then to take calls.

## 12. Constant refinement through feedback and revision

Review your program to ensure it is relevant and responsive to community needs:

- Road-test your forms. Get actual grantseekers to fill them in and give you frank feedback on what works and what doesn't.
- Email those who left their applications unsubmitted – get honest feedback, put remedial strategies in place.

Every time you ask for submissions is an opportunity to review your forms and your formalities. After each round:

- Ask the help desk or grants support staff: what bits of the form did people most commonly need explained? Fix those bits.
- Ask yourself: what are the most common reasons why submissions are ruled ineligible? Make those bits clearer.

Go through every question and work out what you use that information for. If there's no good purpose, cut the question.
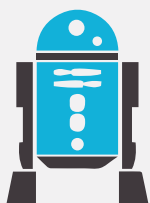
## 13. Technology

Online grant application processes are now the norm rather than the exception.

To ensure grantseekers stand the best chance of completing and submitting their applications, ensure your technology:

- works
- is accessible
- is easy to understand
- is backed by solid support systems.

And consider accepting written applications too, so that grantseekers without reliable access to technology don't miss out.

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**Our Data:**

The data upon which the findings in this edition of *GMI* are based is drawn from SmartyGrants, the best practice online grants management system developed by the Australian Institute of Grants Management.

SmartyGrants is Australia and New Zealand's most widely used online grants management system, with 350 grantmaking organisations using it to administer 2400 grants programs featuring more than 345,500 grants applications.

Our analysis looked at data from 2009 right through to August 2015 – in all, several hundred thousand records of applications both submitted and unsubmitted (started but not completed).

Information was de-identified to ensure system user anonymity and privacy was maintained.

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