



## Conrad N. Hilton Foundation Improves Efficiency in Grantmaking & Consistency in Grantee Experience

**“With GivingData, our grants management team has demonstrated the remarkable insights we can unlock, while empowering the foundation to enhance and optimize its processes. It's a testament to the boundless potential of leveraging technology for impactful philanthropy.”**



**Richelle Pittella**  
Manager, Grants Training  
and Process

The Conrad N. Hilton Foundation issues hundreds of grants across a wide range of program areas every year, and suspected that their grantmaking processes were not as streamlined as they'd hoped. The grants management team was deployed to investigate just where bottlenecks and delays might be occurring, and used GivingData Workflows to measure the completion of tasks in their process, in order to improve turnaround times and ensure an integrity of experience between their team and the nonprofits they partner with. The methodology their grants management team created and implemented will be used by the entire foundation for years to come, highlighting that the value of a grants management software extends across the entire foundation staff.

### Discovering a need for greater grantmaking efficiency to serve the values of the Hilton Foundation

In 2021, the Hilton Foundation experienced a tremendous increase in grantmaking. Thanks to a generous bequest from the Foundation's biggest donor, the Foundation doubled in asset size in 2019. Growth can bring along new challenges, or at least shine a spotlight on existing ones, as their growth in grant requests required them to be even more efficient in their processes. The first step to becoming more efficient was to understand existing task completion timing, and then determine where delays in those process steps could be eliminated or shortened.

## Key Results

### Problem:

A massive increase in grantmaking required a deep analysis to address delays in grantmaking processes and ensure greater efficiency.

### Solution:

Create a methodology to read grants management data through GivingData workflows and discover bottlenecks or inconsistencies in processes that should be addressed.

### Results:

- Developed actionable steps to create greater consistency in grant turnaround times
- Improved experience for grantees
- Created a grantmaking process that better serves the Foundation's values
- Mandated the use of online concept notes only, after showing that when inviting concept notes through GivingData, the initial review & approval process went **a full week quicker**

Allison Gister, the Director of Grants and Knowledge Management at the Hilton Foundation, knew there were more ways they could and should be leveraging their grants management system to address these issues. "We know we have this functionality, we know we have this problem, how can we bring the two together?" she asked.

Allison took a step back and really thought about the foundation's values: stewardship, integrity, and transparency.

In regards to **stewardship**, she thought "We already use GivingData, so how can we take the tools that are already there and get more out of it?" When considering **integrity**, it was critical that everyone involved in the grantmaking process was going through the same steps and that there was an "integrity of experience," as Allison put it. Lastly, **transparency** involved being able to answer questions about the status of grants, who is working on what, and ensuring that everyone on the staff knew the process or at least could understand it by referencing reports in the GivingData system.

Allison and her team saw an opportunity to use workflows in GivingData to drive change within the organization, show the value of the grants management team, and promote these values in their organization. She considered the following question: "What can we learn from our implementation of the workflows and what they tell us about our process, that only we [the grants management team] would be able to share?"

At the end of 2021, they conducted this analysis by looking at grant application completion times over the span of eight months of data.

## Creating a new methodology to read grants data

Richelle Pittella, the Grants Training and Process Manager, was integral in developing the methodology for this analysis. To start, she had to determine what data was needed. She also needed to create hypotheses to understand what the preconceived notions of the processes were – for example, "it takes significantly longer for a larger grant to be made than a smaller grant."

From this, Richelle was able to determine they needed data that included the approved amount for the grant, the date that the first task in each workflow was started, and the date the last task was completed. All of this information was available to them in GivingData, so it was just a matter of creating a methodology to analyze and then take data-driven action to improve their grantmaking processes.

The methodology in gathering this actionable data involved eight guidelines that ensured fair and accurate reporting. Some examples included excluding weekends and holidays when measuring the time it took to complete a grant, as well as taking into account that the day a grant was inputted into our Scenario Planning tool may not be the day the grant itself was started.

Not only did we develop this methodology,” said Richelle, “we shared it front-and-center in our analysis.”

[See all eight components of their methodology.](#)

## Promoting transparency and trust

The decision to document this methodology when presenting the data goes back to Allison’s emphasis on the importance of transparency at the Foundation. Transparency is important not only in their interactions with their nonprofit partners, but with staff and foundation leaders as well. Further, having the methodology built into their GivingData workflows ensured that the same process could be replicated in the future by anyone in the organization.

Part of the methodology was to make staff and teams not identifiable in the study. This ensured that it didn’t just look like the grants management team was searching for “troublemakers” or trying to pinpoint who in the organization was causing the bottleneck. GivingData made the data and analysis workable and visual in a way that allowed the grants management team to do their work, build trust and streamline the process all at the same time.

## Turning results into actions

The first thing they learned was the answer to their original question: *how long, on average, does a grant take to be made?* That answer turned out to be 83 work days. They also discovered some surprising facts about the process. While their smaller grants certainly took less time than the larger grants, their large Delegated Authority Grants and Board Grants took close to the same amount of time to complete.

Right off the bat, they determined one aspect that was extending the application process time for these smaller grants. Staff needed to generate two documents as part of the review, so they skimmed that down to one.

They also noticed that the time allotted to complete forms was inconsistent and didn’t follow the “integrity of experience” that Allison mentioned earlier. There was no real consistency in how much time grantees were given to complete the forms, even though they were being asked the same questions. As the foundation approached the day of a Board meeting, the time allowed for grantees to complete their applications condensed in order to present the requests for approval at the meeting.

This wasn’t fair to grantees who were getting shorter turnaround times as a result. Since there was no process in place to standardize these turnaround times, a handful of grantees were experiencing unseen stress.

[View a full list of the key findings.](#)

***“[By using GivingData], we started to have really interesting, engaging conversations with our general counsel about what is the value-add of the grants management team.”***

***“Anybody at the organization with the same GivingData permissions could perform the calculations and come up with the same results.”***

**Watch the Hilton  
Foundation and  
GivingData's webinar  
"Leveraging Your Grants  
Management System to  
Drive Data-Informed  
Change"**

Richelle stated, "In presenting this analysis, we asked: for grantees to continue to feel that they are respected partners in this process, how do we ensure that they are consistently provided sufficient time to thoughtfully address the prompts in the application and concept note?"

They also found inconsistencies in the review process. This included the fact that review times did not always correlate to the grant amount or workload as expected, and that review times during the summer months and end of the year may perpetuate the Q4 rush.

By crafting hypotheses, building a methodology, and utilizing powerful technology to report on their process and visualize trends in their data, Allison and Richelle have been able to locate these bottlenecks and lapses in their process, so that they can continue to improve the experience for their grantees and staff. Not only that, they have shown what the grants management team can accomplish and how the entire organization can use GivingData to manage and improve its processes.

They advise that anyone else looking to conduct a similar analysis within their organization should:

- Ensure that they work closely with their colleagues and leadership to agree on the methodology and hypothesis,
- Think about how to continue and grow the work over time, and
- Make sure the work stands on its own, and be patient and tireless.

"When things move at the speed of philanthropy," said Richelle, "it can be easy to get discouraged, but in many cases as part of this analysis we're advocating on behalf of the grantees, so we're going to keep at it and keep doing this for many years to come."

Learn more about the [Conrad N. Hilton Foundation](#).

## About GivingData

Grantmakers choose GivingData to streamline their work and activate meaningful change within their grantmaking processes. Purpose-built for private, family, and independent foundations both large and small, the GivingData grants management software features tools to support the full grant lifecycle – from our easy-to-use Grantee Portal to a dynamic Grantee Relationship Management (GRM) database and multi-year planning tools like portfolio management and scenario planning. GivingData is easy to implement, adopt, and customize to your evolving grantmaking needs.

## Schedule a Personalized Demo

GivingData offers a purpose-built, user-friendly solution for foundations of all sizes, and a seamless migration process from other grants management platforms.

To see how it can work for your foundation, schedule a demo with our team: [givingdata.com/contact](https://givingdata.com/contact)