

Submittable 

Report: COVID's Effect and Influence on Grant Management

Grantmakers share their challenges, changes, and lessons learned



CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Introduction | 3 |
| How grant organizations were impacted by COVID | 4 |
| The biggest challenges grantmakers faced | 5 |
| How grant organizations pivoted in response to the crisis | 6 |
| COVID as an accelerant of change in the grant space | 8 |
| Permanent changes to the granting landscape? | 11 |
| What we've learned: Grantmaking best practices moving forward | 12 |
| Conclusion | 12 |

In early 2020, almost every aspect of our lives changed due to the emergence of a novel coronavirus, COVID-19. Everything shifted, from how we got our groceries to how we greeted our friends—and on a greater scale, we were met with daunting challenges to our livelihoods, our mental health, and our wellbeing as we struggled to keep ourselves and our families safe and healthy.

Just as our personal and professional lives were thrown into uncertainty, bigger emergencies were surfacing in most every industry and field, and the world of grantmaking and foundations was no different. Regardless of size or establishment, philanthropic and nonprofit organizations around the world faced unheard of challenges at the same time that they were asked to do more than they ever had. Unprecedented circumstances required unprecedented change and innovation, and these organizations survived by quick pivots, fast thinking, and a reliance on their mission to do good.

Now that vaccines are being distributed and an end to the public health crisis is hopefully in sight, we have the opportunity to reflect upon the events of 2020 and our response to them—and ultimately, an opportunity to learn from both our innovations and our missteps.

Submittable surveyed our customers who identified as belonging to the grantmaking space to collect information, statistics, stumbling blocks and best practices from organizations of all shapes and sizes. Over 100 responded with thought, grit, and newly-won wisdom.

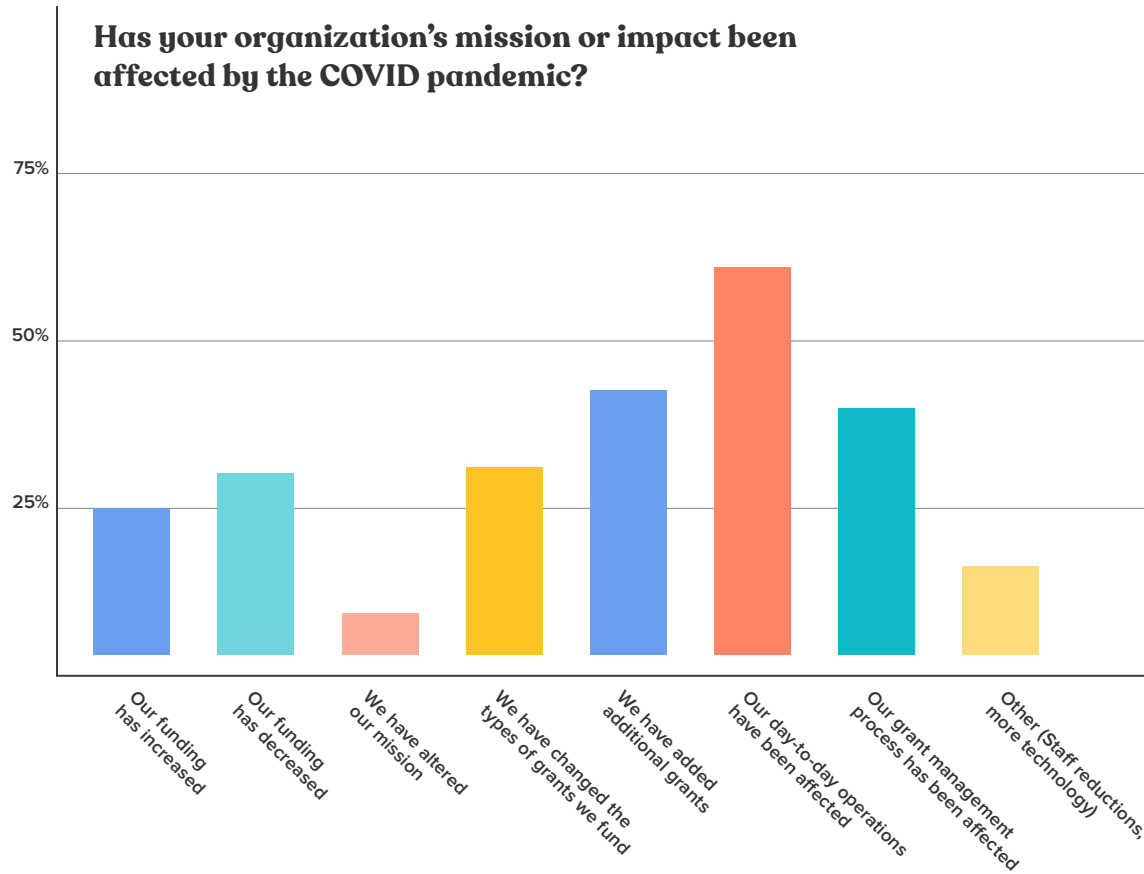
Here's what they had to say.

How grant organizations were impacted by COVID

We began by asking organizations how they were affected by COVID-19, from changes in their daily operations to enormous shifts in mission. It seems as if no two organizations took hits in the same way—with some scrambling for funds and staffing while others found themselves suddenly responsible for distributing millions of dollars in federal or state grants. Either way, the vast majority of respondents (68%) agreed that their day-to-day operations were altered in some way by the pandemic.

Four in ten organizations said that they changed their grant management process because of the pandemic (see next section), and 45% said that they had added additional grants related to COVID. A majority, 65%, added what they qualified as at least one emergency grant related to COVID in 2020.

More than half of the organizations surveyed (56%) reported that their funding and budget changed in 2020 due to coronavirus, but the changes were starkly different: one-fourth reported that their funding had significantly increased, while 31% reported that their funding had significantly decreased.



Very few organizations (7%) said that they altered their mission or mission statement because of COVID-19. On the contrary, many reported that their mission was made more urgent, or that they found clarity through their mission, because of the crisis.

To take things even further, those with strong and focused missions had an easier time pivoting and responding.

“The work we had done as a foundation to clarify and center our work in core values served us well

in this moment, and made our ability to respond quickly and deeply quite simple,” said Ben Cameron of the Jerome Foundation, about his organization’s own experience.

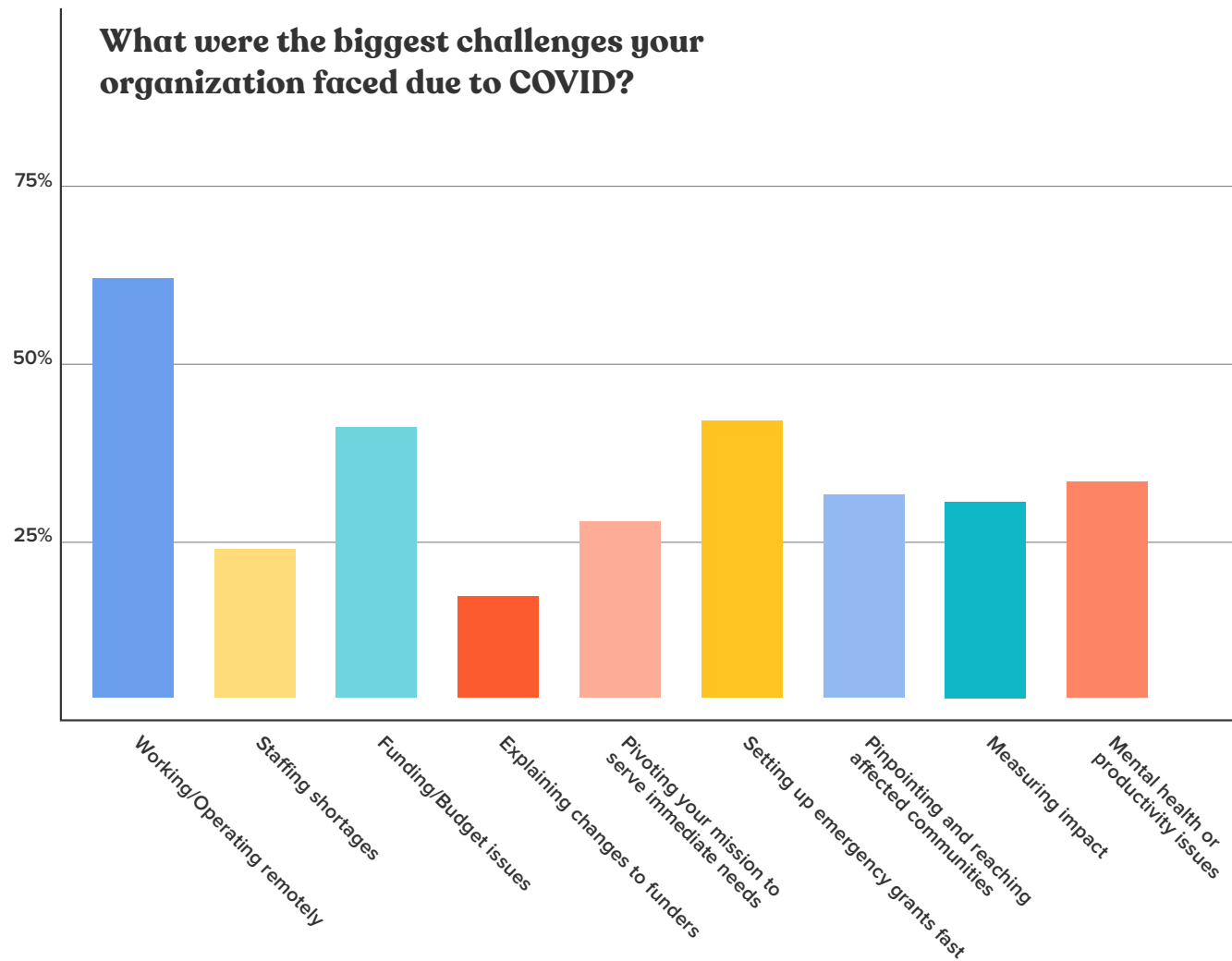
The biggest challenges grantmakers faced

Most organizations reported multiple challenges as everything from companies to countries shut down to stop the spread of the virus.

The most common challenge reported (65%) was shifting to remote work. Specifically, organizations reported that measuring impact while not in the office was difficult (29%) as well as pinpointing and reaching affected communities (30%) from afar.

The next two most common challenges were funding issues (41%) and setting up emergency grants fast (40%). A little over two out of ten organizations struggled with staffing issues related to budget cuts, sick employees, and family leaves.

On top of these high-level problems, 32% of organizations reported that mental health issues and productivity issues related to pandemic stress, childcare, and selfcare affected their operations for the year.



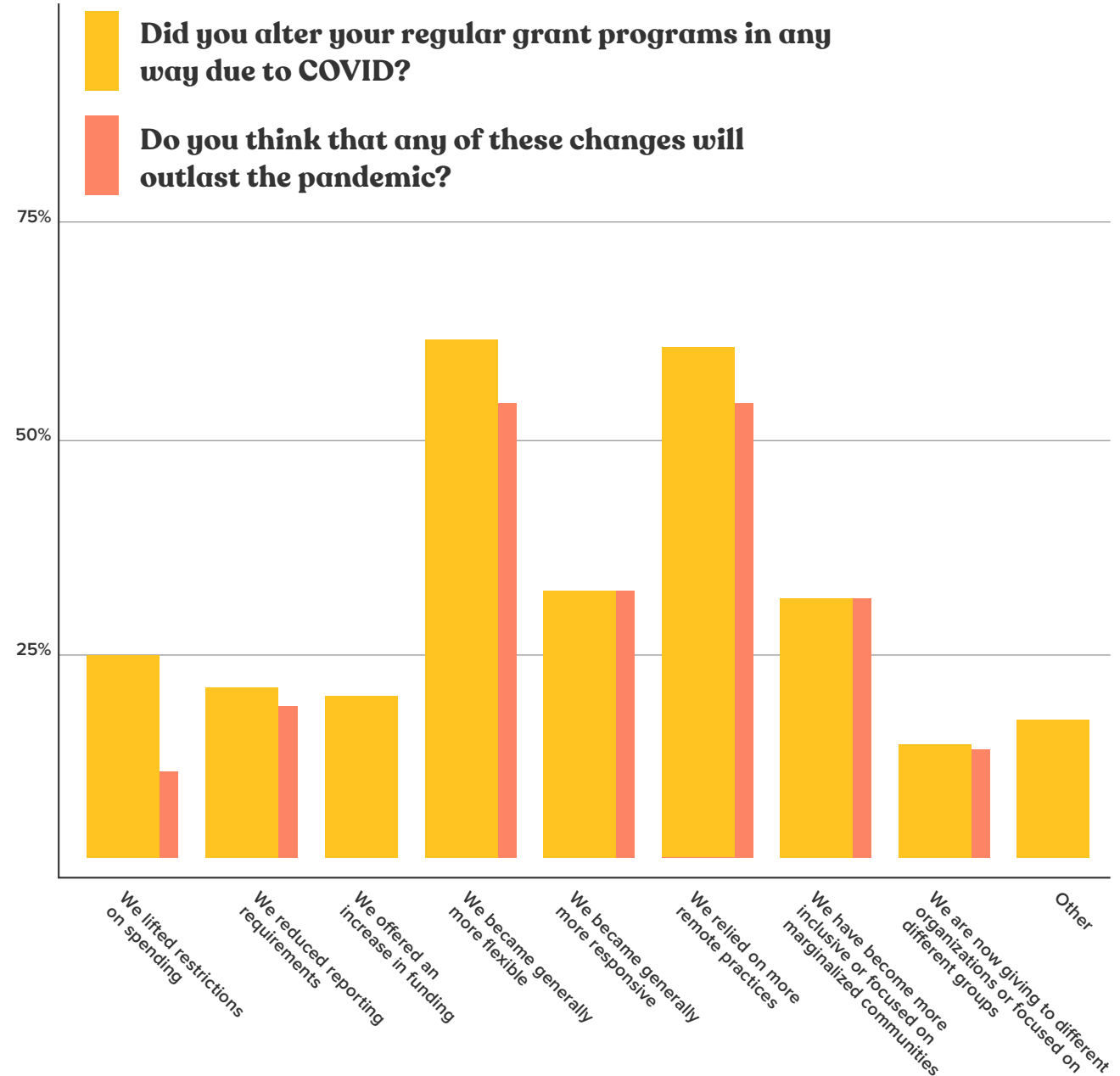
How grant organizations pivoted in response to the crisis

So, what happened next? When faced with such stark challenges, on both personal and professional levels, how did organizations respond?

With innovation, thoughtfulness, and quick pivoting.

Specifically, in relation to the grant management process, 63% of organizations reported that they quickly shifted into remote solutions for grantmaking, including grant management software and payment software that allow organizations and grantees to skip paper checks and the bank.

Organizations also generally pivoted to being more flexible (64%), in all aspects of their grant management strategies. This flexibility involved where and how they worked, what their applications looked like, and how they interacted with grantees.





Allowing flexibility with project modifications and contract amendments serves all parties to the grant, and the public interest too.

Jodi Neilsen,
Cultural Coalition of Washington County (CCWC)

One-third of the respondents also became more responsive to grantees and stakeholders, even under remote conditions.

A large minority (21% and 25% respectively) lifted requirements on spending and reporting for grantees.



In the time of a crisis or emergency ask the targeted community or individuals what they need and want. What you have been offering and supplying in the past may need to shift and change in response. Examine what you do and why you do it. In a crisis saying that is the way we have always done it may not be good enough. Be open, flexible and adapt as needed.

Mary Jane Edwards,
Jentel Foundation

One in three also said that they shifted their focus to more marginalized groups, both because of the pandemic and because of the nationwide protests following several incidents of police violence against people of color.

Some of these changes seem like they will leave with the pandemic, while others have more potential to stick around. For example, over half (56%) of those who completed the

survey shared that they would continue to engage in more remote practices, including remote grant application review. Why? Many organizations said that they discovered benefits as they moved their process over.

For example, the City of Seattle Office of Arts & Culture discovered that with remote work comes more accessibility and equity.

“The shift to remote application review and selection processes has highlighted the ways that technology can support more inclusive processes—using a video conferencing platform with built-in captioning, for example. I hope those benefits are maintained, even as we shift back toward working in-person.”

Another 56% said that flexibility was here to stay, since it worked better for their grantees, their resources, and their final impact.



I think that COVID has made clear the actual flexibility of many organizations, in terms of grant management. Oftentimes, the ability for an organization to restructure a grants program has more to do with the personal motivations of the staff, or what the staff believes to be possible, rather than other organizational limitations. COVID has put organizations in a tough spot, but hopefully it has inspired grant managers to realize that a lot more things are possible than they might have realized.

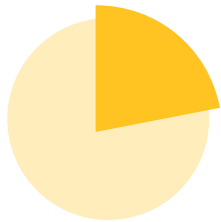
Luke Palermo,
Japan ICU Foundation

Being more responsive and more inclusive will also be lasting trends for 32% of organizations.



Listen to the community or communities you serve. Be nimble, be flexible, be responsive.

Carolyn Taylor,
StreetARToronto



About 1 in 4 organizations lifted requirements on spending and reporting for grantees

COVID as an accelerant of change in the grant space

Many of the changes that took place in the foundation and grant sphere during 2020 were out of pure necessity and survival: organizations often made on-the-spot decisions to keep their employees safe, bring needed aid to their communities, or just keep their operations afloat.

But a large hidden good among the pivots and re-imaginings that happened due to the pandemic was that a majority of the organizations surveyed made changes that they had been planning to make before COVID-19 struck—and were able to accomplish those changes quickly—with the added pressure of the circumstances.

In fact, 51% of survey respondents said that the novel coronavirus accelerated at least one change that they were already planning to execute on in the future.

Some organizations shared that not only did they make these changes faster than they would have, but that the changes would have not have happened at all without the pandemic.

Greater use of technology

The most common type of change that organizations accelerated, by far, was their use of technology. While many grantmakers already use software for electronic intake of applications and other information, the pandemic was good reason for many to move their processes to 100% paperless, remote, and online. Those without a paperless application system took the plunge, while those who already offered online applications moved over to review and selection software. Many sought comprehensive online grant management solutions to replace their mix of technology and old-fashioned paperwork.

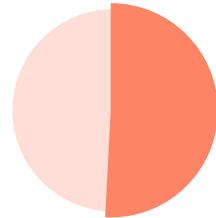
Multiple organizations mentioned using technology to help them fund grants in addition to helping them award grants. The Foundation for Contemporary Arts wrote, “We had discussed transitioning from checks and physical award letters to using platforms like DocuSign and making electronic payments, but the transition was accelerated when we were thrust into remote working conditions.”

Shifting relationships with grantees

Multiple organizations shared that they took the pandemic as an opportunity to officially change their relationship with grantees.

Openlands, a conservation organization shared, “The grant program team had discussed simplifying the reporting process for some time. As we have a grant writer on the team, she provided feedback on duplicative and complicated questioning that grantees have struggled with in the past.”

The Jerome Foundation put it more simply. They said that they took the opportunity to generally operate from a place of “radical trust” with grantees—a move they’d been meaning to implement.



1/2 of grantmakers said COVID-19 accelerated changes they were already planning to execute

General policy and program improvements

While some organizations were overwhelmed with new tasks, others found themselves with more time and/or resources than usual and took advantage of the eerie pause in life to overhaul or revamp major parts of their operations.

The International Center for Journalists said, “We were able to focus more on how to improve our internal policies and procedures,” while the Japan ICU Foundation shared, “We took our time to commit to an evaluation process of

our grants and scholarships programs in conjunction with our stakeholders. We are now planning to announce our revamped program in March and officially launch it in April.”

Some were so busy that it necessitated changes in procedure and policy that had been on the docket but backlogged.

The Dramatists Guild Foundation wrote: “We had been planning to clarify, streamline, and staff up, but I had been putting it off because the application load didn’t necessitate it. We were perfectly fine operating a B+ program. When volume or applications exponentially increased, we had no option but to better oil the machine and make sure our program was A+. With so many applications, we have to be top of our game 100% of the time now.”

Better assessment of community needs

For many, COVID was a wake-up call that they were not connecting with their communities enough.

Los Angeles Trial Lawyer Charities shared that in addition to shifting to more direct giving (another common change), they made another change that they’d been meaning to implement: “We sent a survey to all partner charities to see what THEY needed and shared with our supporters.”

But perhaps the Ciresi Walburn Foundation for Children puts it most succinctly: “The pandemic simply accelerated our commitment to listening and responding to community needs in our grant making.”

Expansion of programming

The organizations that received an influx of funding due to the pandemic as well as organizations who experienced an influx of time took advantage of their new resources to expand into new areas and grow their mission.

Stockton Rush Bartol Foundation shared, “We are offering training programs online—a longer term plan that we implemented quickly.” They added, “Due to the cancellation of certain programs, we have had more time to discuss restructuring those programs—a process that originally would have been hindered by actually having to conduct the programs while simultaneously discussing how to change them.”

Some organizations launched virtual programming, a step that they had wanted to take, but that was suddenly either necessary or top of mind.

As an example, Claire’s Place Foundation introduced a very timely work from home program, the Work Proudly Program.

Children’s Art Foundation–Stone Soup summed up their glass-half-full programming additions with gusto: “Our in-person (via Zoom) programs would not have happened this year—or perhaps ever!—without Covid.

A move to remote work

In addition to more remote programming and remote grantmaking processes, organizations also stated that they accelerated plans to make working from home either more normalized or part of company policy.

Compass LGBTQ Community Center shared in their survey, “We were looking at ways to address a space problem in our center, and had considered the possibility of remote work. COVID forced us to embrace that more quickly than we would have otherwise. It’s working out very well, overall.”

A focus on DEI initiatives

Finally, COVID’s disproportionate effect on diverse communities and people of color, paired with the national response to the murder of George Floyd, caused a significant number of organizations, foundations, and nonprofits, to accelerate DEI initiatives and racial justice plans.

Arts Council New Orleans wrote, “We had already been working on DEI, but this year made the urgency of these changes clear.”

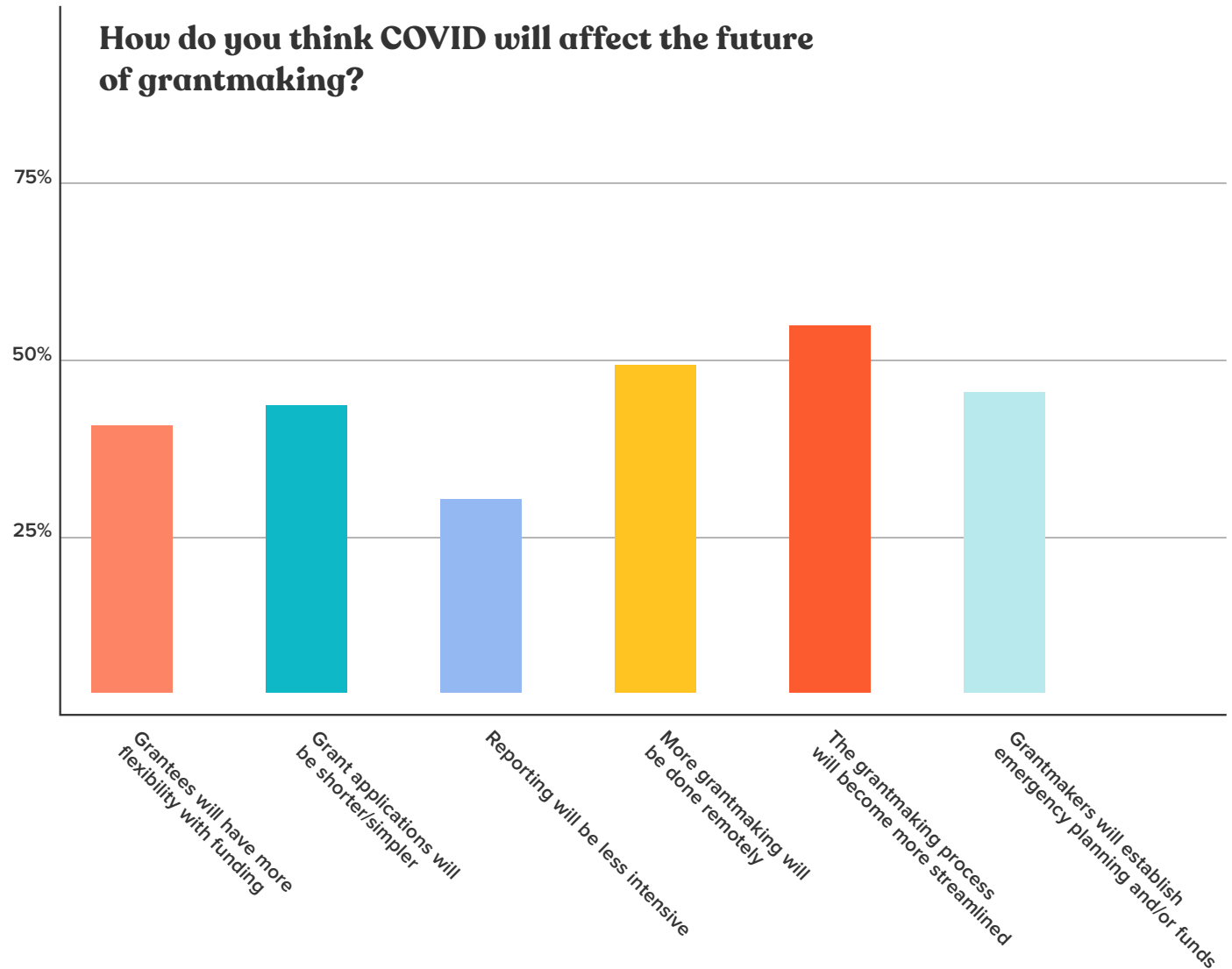
At the same time, Alliance Healthcare Foundation shared, “We started Diversity, Equity and Inclusion workshop training last fall and also in February of this year before COVID-19. With racial tensions and disparities highlighted by the pandemic, our DEI training, practice, and pull through into the application process accelerated.”

Permanent changes to the granting landscape?

Although it is both interesting and important to reflect upon how grantmaking organizations, foundations, and nonprofits took on a global pandemic over the course of about a year, it is perhaps most important to determine which actions, pivots, trends, and strategies were temporary fixes and which were improvements and innovations for the industry that should live on even after we win our battle with the virus.

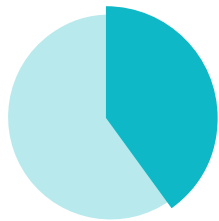
Over half of respondents (55%) believe that grantmaking will permanently become more streamlined, through the increased use of technology and better, quicker practices. For example, integrating reporting, funding, and payment into grantmaking platforms, and other moves toward more comprehensive solutions, will not go away.

How do you think COVID will affect the future of grantmaking?



Relatedly, 49% of respondents believe that the move to more remote practices will remain, including work in remote offices, electronic payments, online application processes, and remote review teams.

Many also believe that eased requirements regarding grantees and reporting will remain even as other aspects of our lives return to normal. About 40% of respondents believe that grantees will continue to be granted more flexibility, while 43% believe that grant applications will continue to be simplified. Only 29% believe that reporting will remain less intensive.



40% of respondents believe grantees will continue to be granted more flexibility post-pandemic

Almost half of the organizations we spoke with think that the pandemic has taught foundations and nonprofits to plan better for emergencies—49% think that more grantmakers will create emergency plans, policies, and funding moving forward.

What we've learned: Grantmaking best practices moving forward

At the end of our survey, we asked organizations the top emergency grantmaking or COVID-related grant management best practice that they learned or discovered during the pandemic of 2020.

In turn, we'd like to share some of the most meaningful and intriguing with you, on the following pages.

Conclusion

The last global pandemic to strike humanity was in 1918—and experts can't say when we may next be affected by a viral public health crisis of such size and scope. But any kind of disaster or emergency, whether local, regional, national, or worldwide, can affect giving and the world of philanthropy. While the particulars of the pandemic may not materialize again, the lessons that we've learned from the events of 2020 will surely help us navigate the unknown future, while the innovations we've discovered will help giving institutions increase their impact no matter the conditions.

Survey Responses

How grantmakers answered when we asked, “What is the top emergency grantmaking or COVID-related grant management best practice that you would like to share?”

TRUST YOUR APPLICANT. The reason we ask for a thousand pieces of documentation really boils down to not trusting the applicant. Do your due diligence, but remember why you ask for certain things, try to find workarounds and ways to accommodate, and do your best to trust your constituents. The diligence, if it must fall somewhere, should not fall to the person who is asking you for help. Ask them for one piece of info that can tell you five things about them, as opposed to asking them for five things.

Tessa Raden,
Dramatists Guild Foundation

Offering training and technical assistance. The businesses who most need money are often ‘the little guy/gal,’ microbusinesses that often do not have the knowhow in writing grants or properly articulating their needs in a competitive grant, thereby often missing out on opportunities companies with more varied resources enjoy.

Kate DeRolf,
Early Learning Connections, Geminus CCR&R

Allow for flexibility and consider funding general operations.

Laura Bettis,
Laura More Cunningham Foundation

Begin each day with acknowledging the importance of:
Patience. Kindness. Flexibility. Compassion. Understanding.
In the workplace.
In communicating with applicants.
In communicating with funders.
In communicating with board members
In communicating and supporting each other.

Mary Jane Edwards,
Jentel Foundation

I believe that organization is the most important part of management. If an organized plan is not implemented in time, unfortunately the results will be very poor.

Lake County Board of County Commissioners

There is a need to adopt the use of technology to minimize contacts with beneficiaries. There is also a need to embrace contingency planning for public health emergencies as part of comprehensive programme development.

**John Kutna,
Amref Health Africa**

A standard practice for us in every situation but even more critical in light of 2020's dual pandemics of COVID and persistent systemic racism: ask the people what the real local challenges and interventions are—don't assume you know based on your own experience or what you hear from the media.

**Corrie Adams,
The Raymond John Wean Foundation**

Listen to the needs of the people who the grants will be serving and the best ways for them to spend their funds. They know their community and urgent needs most.

International Center for Journalists

Have processes detailed and written so that anyone coming into the organization can become familiar and have references quickly.

**Kristen Davis,
CORE: Children of Restaurant Employees**

It is important to have a committed, with a whatever-it-takes, attitude to get the applications in and the money out the door to those who really need the money.

**Andrea Robinson,
City of Fort Wayne**

We learned to be agile and listen to the needs of our grantees. The biggest resources we can give our partners are not just financial support but listening ears and open minds to accept needs for flexibility.

**Susan Ahmed,
Islamic Relief USA**

Simplicity.

Arts Council New Orleans

The primary concern when making emergency grants should be making it as easy as possible for people to access funds quickly. Individuals and organizations in crisis should not have to jump through hoops to receive funding that may mean the difference between food/housing insecurity and knowing that they will have money to buy groceries or pay rent. Establishing clear and inclusive eligibility criteria, identifying the minimum amount of information you need for your process, and making it as easy as possible for applicants to provide that information is crucial.

Alexander Thompson,
Foundation for Contemporary Arts

Transparency. We were open about the situation from our end the entire time. Publicly sharing information about how much we would be able to give, how our review process worked, and what applicants could expect became a priority for us.

Jeremy Morrow,
Musicians Foundation

Making applications quick and easy for recipients to complete helps make the process faster and gets funds out to people in need faster

Sarah Bellow,
Quality Care for Children

Build relationships with the grantee community. Stop requiring cumbersome metrics. Support general operations—programs do not happen in a vacuum and failure to fund overhead will eventually kill programs.

John Bateman,
Starkville Area Arts Center

My organization both administers and receives grants. As a grant recipient, I know that unrestricted funding is the most helpful grant we can receive as it allows us to focus on the most pressing things required to further our mission. I hope more grantmakers shift to this option.

Early Learning Indiana

Submittable

submittable.com | (855) 467-8264

Submittable is a cloud-based submission management platform that makes it easy to accept, review, and select any kind of content, no matter where you are. Since 2010, Submittable has helped organizations collect more than 10 million submissions for thousands of customers all over the world.