



Kerrin: Hello, and welcome to the Untapped Philanthropy podcast. I'm your host and Fluxx co-founder, Kerrin Mitchell. I've spent my career exploring technology's role and amplifying impact within our social sector and, more specifically, helping funders to learn to leverage technology and data to connect and better serve our collective causes, constituents, and communities.

In this podcast series, my team and I will profile social sector leaders, public figures, philanthropists, and industry futurists to explore this fascinating intersection of funding, technology, and policy. We're here to analyze the most critical and formative topics and trends that shape philanthropy both today and tomorrow. We hope this series leaves you inspired to think and act through a more collective and visionary lens.

This week, I'm thrilled to welcome Kari Aasnestad. She is the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits Associate Director. She's also the co-director of grantadvisor.org, and the organizer of this incredibly important campaign Fix the Form. Kari, hi!

Kari: Hi, Kerrin.

Kerrin: You and I go way back at this point, but you may be a new voice to some listeners. So, I thought I'd let you kind of have the floor to introduce yourself and your journey.

Kari: Yeah, thanks so much for having me on this podcast so I can talk about my professional baby, Fix the Form. It's very near and dear to my heart. And so, I'm grateful for the chance to chat about it. So yeah, as you said, my full-time day job is Associate Director at the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits. So, we're a nonprofit state association and we provide tools, resources, information, research, and advocacy, to support nonprofits in achieving their charitable missions.

And one of the key resources that MCN has become a home for is Grant Advisor. So, grant advisor, for those of you who haven't heard of that yet, is a free anonymous review site of grantmaking foundations. Grant Advisor was launched in partnership with two other nonprofits based in California about five years ago. And over the course of five years, the website has generated 3000 Anonymous reviews about 850 foundations based in the United States. So, I'm co-director of Grant Advisor. And it was really from those 3000 reviews that the idea of Fix the Form was born.

Kerrin: So, the Fix of Form movement is calling upon foundations to make changes to their entire grantmaking process to make it easier and more accessible. Do you mind giving us a little bit of the elevator pitch as to what that really entails?

Kari: Absolutely. So, the spirit of Fix the Form was really an international movement driven by those who have grantseeking experience and really use that experience to identify top opportunities to simplify and streamline grant applications and reports. So as much as I want to claim that this idea was mine to launch an international movement, it was not mine at all. It really came the genesis for it was we read through nearly 3000 reviews that had been written on Grant Advisor and started to see themes emerge. The top opportunity that grantseekers were identifying an opportunity for improvement in the field and these weren't broad-sweeping, high-level, we need to fix racism, right? That's absolutely something we should fix. But the call from the field was really applied and direct and kind of scrappy and practical.



So thus, was born Fix the Form. I got together with another brilliant fundraiser and grantmaker who's based in London, her name is Laura Solomon. And she and I took 16 of the top pain points that had been identified through grant advisor reviews. We pulled together literally a Google form and then sent a survey out to the field in December of 2020.

Kerrin: When you say the field, what does that entail? I mean, how big was that push of information and request for feedback?

Kari: So, we distributed it among grant advisor channels. So, Grant Advisor has about 10,000 subscribers across all our newsletter and all social platforms, Laura and I also just put it out to our networks. We were active on Twitter, LinkedIn, all the places that we could think of. So, it was very on the ground. Not developed by a professional marketing team or anything. And we were shocked to see that it got traction. Within four weeks, the survey had gathered 500 responses from people who are based in nine different countries.

Kerrin: It's incredible. It's calling people in to give feedback on things and calling out improvements that would help you all use resources correctly and use the core superpowers of the nonprofits in the right way without administrative burden. So, it's asking for a seemingly small adjustment, but, you know, clearly establishing an opportunity for people to be able to look at things that may need to be addressed to create less of a drain on nonprofits that often have limited staff, time, and budgets. So, we've seen this kind of groundswell of movement from the feedback you receive and your interest in it. What are some of those most interesting and surprising results you found today?

Kari: Yeah, the first surprising result that we saw that came through that survey was that 20-30% of nonprofits time was being invested in filling out these forms. So not even just writing a grant application. Of course, developing original content should take time and thought, and energy. But it was 20-30% of grant writers full time just spent just navigating online forums. And we thought that's an incredible inefficiency for the field.

Think of all the mission advancing hours that could be reclaimed if only we could eliminate word and character limits, or at least find ways of right-sizing output fields so that grant writers wouldn't be forced to copy and paste impact instead of the outcome. And so that was so surprising. If only that user experience could be elevated to a point that was brought into consideration when making kind of platform changes.

The second kind of surprising finding was how seemingly simple and applied the fixes were. So, when we got the results back, the top three that rose to the top were able to see the full application ahead of time and the time spent applying was not aligned with the dollars that were awarded. So that's the efficient process. And then the third was the forms that you're able to save and return to.

The thing that was surprising about this was that those were the top three. But from the moment the first person filled out our survey to the 500th, those were the top three, there was a strong consensus among nonprofit organizations who were filling out the survey that these are the opportunities in the field for Fixing the Form. And they were also rated the most painful. So, our survey asked folks not only to identify what are your top pain points but then on a Likert scale? How painful are they to you? And so, those three also received the highest kind of pain ratings.



Kerrin: And from that information, obviously, some changes were called into action that were spread not just to the funders but to the grant manager or grant management software. And in that, I guess, what are some of the changes you've seen that have tactically or strategically come from that information and are now being brought to people's awareness? And where do you want it to go? And where would you want to see that continue?

Kari: So, the survey was closed in early 2021. And we sat with it for a couple of months, and then thought through what we can do with this information. It was at that moment that we got connected with the Technology Association of Grantmakers.

And TAG said we should do a campaign to mobilize change in response to this feedback that we're getting. So, this was born, a time-limited campaign called 100 forms in 100 days. The goal was to get 100 foundations to make changes to address that number one pain point, which is being able to see the full grant application ahead of time.

So, we did heavy recruiting over the summer of 2021. And we were thrilled that within our 100 days, we had successfully recruited not only 130 foundations who kind of took the pledge and made the change, but we also got to work with five grants management systems. So Fluxx was one of them, thank you Fluxx. And then for others that made permanent changes to their tech platforms to allow for foundations to use their platform in a way that made the full application available to grant seekers ahead of time. So that the 130 number is great, we absolutely need to be able to see that kind of ownership from foundations. But that secondary level of going to the actual tech platforms was amazing too.

Kerrin: That's incredible. And what does this for them as grantees? Are they seeing these changes? Are those all set and moving forward? I mean, what has that sort of response been, if you will, from the efforts that your team put forward?

Kari: Laura and I had that question. And so, we set out a second survey to the field back in December of 2021 and asked what changes you have seen if any? And where should we go next? And I'll say that the results have been mixed.

So, about half of the respondents to that survey [250 people from five different countries] said they have seen funders make changes to grant applications over the last two years. And specifically, making the full forum available in advance was the most cited change. There was some celebration among half of the folks saying, "Yes, we have seen these changes come to fruition." This saves us potentially, collectively, hours, millions of hours a year if you think about the number of applications that one nonprofit organization may be submitting each year, and then multiply that by the entire nonprofit sector in the United States.

That there was fear also of whether this would be a lasting change? After the disruption moment of the pandemic are people going to return to normal? So, there's some lingering uncertainty or celebration of the changes that have been made, there's a lingering uncertainty around how lasting those changes are going to be. And then looking forward, there's a clear call to say that there's more work to be done.

About a third of respondents say, you know, we haven't seen any movement from a handful of foundations. And that's really frustrating. And they're not listening. So how can we get how we can really work together to make changes that we know will have a positive impact and net impact on the whole field?



Kerrin: Yeah, it's amazing to see this groundswell of interest leading to changes for this administrative work. But what's interesting is partnerships, you know, play the biggest role for you to be able to get this out there. And that includes TAG funders, nonprofits, and obviously grants management systems and technologists. So, I guess my question is, in light of the second round of responses that you're currently aggregating, you know, what is the question that would kind of come forward to say, how can we further drive these results? Is it to, you know, keep kind of banging the drum to the funders? And making sure we get it more broadly out there? I mean, what would you like to see done so that we can help keep that momentum? Because it is so critical for the industry?

Kari: Well, I think Grants Management Systems play a crucial piece of this whole puzzle for change, right? So, you think about how often foundation clients will really look to GMS providers to guide what successful implementation of their platforms? Alright, you're looking to you to say, what are the best practices? What are the templates? How can we maximize the use of the product we're purchasing or subscribing to as your customer?

And I was first struck by this when I was getting into the Fix the Form survey results to see how we push for change. Basically, you can learn a lot about an organization about the roles that they employ. And I was surprised to see how many customer success staff members were on these teams dedicated to working with clients around product implementation.

And so, there's this opportunity to continue to push back on the idea of who is the primary user of these platforms? I think often, we may have only thought for thought primarily of the Foundation as a primary user because they're the customer, they're the one paying. But it's this unique world where it's a platform to collect grant applications and reports but there's this other side of a nonprofit experience as well.

Kerrin: So, there are partnerships out there where a common goal is to consolidate this data and make things easier for the user. Fixing the Form is one of the things. It's geared to the grant application itself, but of course, exists very much in the same realm as things like organizing organization information or people, even just the work candidates are doing. Tell me about how you envision this, Fix the Form playing into those early partnerships?

Kari: And it's exciting to see some of the advances that are being made in this space. I would say the Fix the Form is distinct in that it is so applied, and so on the ground and so in the weeds, and it can support and contribute to some of the bigger picture initiatives like your name, the data comment, philanthropic Data Commons. But ultimately, we want to see a Save button at the end. So, it's like super in the weeds. I think where it kind of connects to this idea of like, the common application is that that second top cited pain point which is that the time spent to apply kind of doesn't match the amount of funding that was provided.

There is this recognition of how grant applications are currently designed. And so, the opportunity to kind of consolidate and streamline that is another promise of Fix the Form. The endeavor to create a common application ultimately gets to content: what are the questions to be asked? So, it's not just about what everybody is asking for?

And we need to ask the question, just because everyone else is doing it, is it the right thing to do? Are these the right questions that should be asked? And in that way, Fix the Form is content neutral? We don't go into the territory of asking what problem we're solving using these



words in this way. It really is more about the technical design of the forms themselves. So, this is less like a partnership. And it's more my request to the field.

Kerrin: At Fluxx we look at product management and product development from the lens of making sure that obviously, all the stakeholders are present, and the grantseekers are a part of the review process. So, as we start to innovate our roadmap, we continue to reach out to grantseekers to give feedback on what they want. So, it's kind of an exciting opportunity to push grant management software into the next realm. And I think to some degree, that will pick up to your point, the groundswell that will bring other funders along. So, I guess my question to you is for those people that are starting to see this groundswell but don't know where to start, what are the next steps for those folks that don't know where to get started.

Kari: I would say that there's at least two things that foundations who are interested in adopting some of these practice recommendations where they could get started.

Number one, all the results of the fix the forum survey are available at grantadvisor.org; we have a tab called #fixtheform. And on that page, you'll be able to see all 16 of the pain points. We also have a checklist that funders can use when evaluating their own form that blends the pain points with recommendations. So, kind of reframing from don't do this to consider proactively doing this as a change. The other thing that I would recommend is to use Grant Advisor as a tool for getting community feedback. It's completely free; we have 120,000 foundations in our database, so you're probably already in our database, and you just don't know it. And everyone has a customized survey link and profile based on your EIN. So, this has been a powerful way that we've seen many early adopters use a free and public tool to get specific information on their applications.

A lot of foundations have moved in the direction of creating customized surveys, or perhaps purchasing surveys, which is all great. I would say the unique value proposition that grant advisor provides is that we make it all public. So, it's not just a feedback mechanism for foundations. It's also actually a helpful prospect tool for other nonprofits so you can get a sense to see what it's actually like to work with that foundation. And will it be worth my time to apply?

Kerrin: In that I know we are wrapping up the podcast, I did want to run through a series of small, short questions that we call rapid fire questions and I encourage you to respond with the very first thing that comes to your mind. Okay, here we go. Name one of the most influential people of today or of history to you as a person.

Kari: Brandy Carlisle hands down, no competition. So, I've been following her and I'm in love with her and obsessed with her musical career for the past decade. And of course, her career is two decades long. So, I feel like I'm late to the game. But she's a philanthropist. She has a Looking Out Foundation she and her band established which is great. And that absolutely inspires me. But I think the other thing that I appreciate about her is how she seeks to bring out the best in other people. It's like she loves musical collaborations. She's bringing Tanya Tucker out of retirement; she helped Joni Mitchell get back on the stage after a major health event. So, her energy, her charisma, and the way that she collaborates with other people is just inspiring and contagious.

Kerrin: What are you most proud of accomplishing in your career?



Kari: So, I'm 36 I feel like I still have room to have a big accomplishment. But in what I've done so far, I will say Fix the Form feels huge. So, my goal as a leader is to kind of collect and facilitate change, and so Fix the Form feels like a meaningful demonstration of that, and I hope one initiative of others to come.

Kerrin: And lastly, do you have any fun plans this summer?

Kari: Well, I have a seven-month-old baby at home and so keeping him and his six-year-old sister alive feels very fulfilling. It keeps me focused on the small things.

Kerrin: Kari, thank you so much for joining us today and sharing more about yourself and your work. Our listeners can learn more about Fix the Form at grantadvisor.org.