Breakfast for Learning

Using MicroEdge IGAM to Streamline Grants Applications

Challenge:
To make the transition to an online grants application process

The Solution:
MicroEdge IGAM integrated with GIFTS Online to help Breakfast for Learning save time, streamline its processes, and better serve applicants and grantees.

The Result:
Breakfast for Learning now serves more schools—and schoolchildren.

BREAKFAST FOR LEARNING

User:
Breakfast for Learning
www.breakfastforlearning.ca

Solution:
MicroEdge IGAM

Industry:
Nonprofit child nutrition foundation

Employees:
24 in 15 offices across Canada

Our brains work best when our bodies are well nourished, and that's especially true for children. That's the simple—and crucial—principle behind Breakfast for Learning, a Canadian nonprofit that funds school nutrition programs across the country. As the nation's leading advocate for quality nutrition in schools, the organization makes grants that allow school-based meal programs to buy food and equipment; creates and distributes materials for nutrition education; and advocates for quality nutrition for schoolchildren.

Breakfast for Learning was founded in 1992, and now funds more than 2,300 nutrition programs serving more than 267,000 Canadian children. Its mission: "To ensure every child in Canada attends school well-nourished and ready to learn." To achieve that goal, the organization maintains offices in each of Canada's 10 provinces and three territories and a main office in Toronto.

The Challenge: Dispersed Applications, Incomplete Data

To manage such a large and wide-ranging grantmaking process, Breakfast for Learning has long used MicroEdge GIFTS. Until 2009, the organization accepted only paper applications, with each provincial office maintaining its own application. For each application cycle, data was entered into spreadsheets by provincial coordinators—then national office staff would manually re-enter the spreadsheet information into the GIFTS database. The work was time-consuming and error-prone.

Shelley Baker is Breakfast for Learning's database services coordinator and the conduit through which all grant applications flow. She explains, "At the main office, we entered just the general program information, enough to help us determine how much money to grant—things like how many kids a program serves, how many meals. But for the more complex questions, only the provincial coordinators would have that information." Each coordinator had a clear picture of grantees in his or her region, but the program as a whole was hamstrung by incomplete information and province-specific application forms—a problem compounded by staff turnover.

The Solution: Standardizing with MicroEdge IGAM—Online Applications and Reporting Solution

In 2009, Breakfast for Learning added MicroEdge IGAM to its GIFTS system. The organization was very happy with GIFTS, says Baker, and IGAM seemed like an obvious next step: "We just said yes, that's a great idea. We wanted to generate less paper, streamline the process, and get information into the system as quickly and easily as we could."

Integration with GIFTS was one of the biggest selling points for Breakfast for Learning. "If you're currently using GIFTS," says Baker, "it's really easy to add to your processes." IGAM helped the organization standardize its application and ensure that data is complete. The benefits extend far beyond the application cycle to reviewing and reporting.

A Smooth Transition, With Surprise Benefits

Although very satisfied with IGAM, the Breakfast for Learning staff was cautious when moving to an online-only application process; they worried that the schools they serve might be wary of change. To start, the organization accepted both paper and online applications, with the online option available in only a handful of provinces. In 2010, the online option was extended to all applicants—and in 2011, Breakfast for Learning went to an online-only application.

The transition was surprisingly easy, says Baker, and "switching to online-only didn't in any way decrease the number of applications we received." In fact, the organization saw a one-year overall increase of 17%, from 1,800 applications in 2010 (47% online) to more than 2,100 (all online) in 2011. If anything, schools were more likely to apply for a grant with the online-only application—and because the nonprofit is able to fund all qualifying applicants, that means more nutritious meals for schoolchildren across Canada.

Going online also provided the impetus to consolidate applications into one nationwide form for all applicants, and to impose a single national deadline. That in itself was an ambitious project—though Baker notes that the time saved by using

IGAM "allowed us to spend time thinking about how to unify the application process," moving the project along more quickly.

The Result: Better Communication, Better Information

In its third year of using IGAM, Breakfast for Learning has come to a happy conclusion: when it comes to online applications, what's good for the organization is good for its grantees. Baker says that it helps her support her team of provincial coordinators, since all team members have access to the same pool of complete applications. Grantmaking and serving grantees is also less dependent on any one individual. Where before much information on specific grantees was held in the files—or the brains—of regional employees, she says, "Now, even if there's staff turnover, we can still give the schools the same level of support, because we have all the information here."

Schools served by the nonprofit are equally pleased. Returning applicants can access their application history, making it easier for grantees to save time and learn from the past, regardless of paperwork or school staffing changes. Recalls Baker, "We'd get questions from schools, asking 'what did I do last year?' IGAM saves everything that's been submitted, so they have access to the information they need." Applicants and grantees alike have expressed satisfaction with how the online application saves their schools money and time once spent on copying, mailing, and storing multiple copies of each year's application.

Breakfast for Learning has recently gone one step further to integrate online Requirements forms, through which grantees can report on their progress. These progress reports were once requested and retained by each provincial office, says Baker. Now, with the online requirement form, "the national office has a full picture of every question we ask." The result? Increased ability to identify and reward effective programs.

As for Shelley Baker, she doesn't like to think about her job without the benefits of an online application module. "If IGAM ever went away?" She pauses. "We'd be in big trouble. I don't think I could come to work if I didn't have IGAM."

We wanted to generate less paper, streamline the process, and get the information into the system as quickly and easily as we could. And it integrated with the product we already had, which was beneficial.

— Shelley Baker
  Database Services Coordinator
  Breakfast for Learning

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