

## CASE STUDY

### CREATIVE & CULTURAL SKILLS GRANTS MANAGEMENT

# TOPLEVEL CREATES END-TO-END GRANT MANAGEMENT SYSTEM FOR CREATIVE EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMME



**TOPLEVEL HAS DELIVERED AN END-TO-END GRANT MANAGEMENT SYSTEM FOR THE CREATIVE EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMME ON BEHALF OF CREATIVE & CULTURAL SKILLS, ENABLING THE SECTOR SKILLS COUNCIL TO BECOME A GRANT-GIVING ORGANISATION.**

Toplevel designed an application process in concert with Creative & Cultural Skills to process and monitor grant applications to generate youth employment in the arts. Rapidly configurable, the system manages all aspects of the grant award process, from application to assessment, award and monitoring. Since go-live, Creative & Cultural Skills has committed funding to the creation of over 400 jobs.

Creative & Cultural Skills, the Sector Skills Council for creative and cultural industries in the UK, was selected to act as the National Grant Provider by Arts Council England, leading to the generation of the Creative Employment Programme web portal.

A National Lottery fund of up to £15 million is available to help young unemployed people find paid work in the arts and includes all employers, both commercial and subsidised, across a range of creative industries, from music, dance and theatre to literature, galleries, museums and libraries to circus and carnival arts.

### THE CHALLENGE

The Creative Employment Programme is an open-application funding programme that provides part wage grants from between £1.5k to £200K to employers who create new apprenticeship and paid internship job opportunities for young unemployed people aged 16 to 24 across England. Employers are required to make an application for funding during five weekly rounds.

The Creative & Cultural Skills management team had a strong track record of delivering large scale, complex and national work-based learning and skills development programmes but Creative & Cultural Skills itself had never operated as a grant giving organisation.

The team sought a tailorable grant management solution that could be speedily deployed and would appeal to prospective employers, with application cycles of just five weeks.

Using Toplevel's grant management solution, Creative & Cultural Skills was able to co-design the application process and integrate the system with the Creative Employment online service in a phased approach over just three months. The project began with a design phase and was then deployed in three stages: application portal going first, the assessment portal a month later, followed by the grant management portal, all of which were on deadline. Hosted externally, the three separate portals are interlinked and able to share information, with the application portal accessible from the Creative Employment website.

**creative  
& cultural  
skills**



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We wanted an online Grant Management System that we could co-design, that would keep everything in one place, and was hosted externally. While we could have adapted our CRM system, that would have caused numerous integration issues and there would have been a greater risk of the system going down. We needed a robust solution capable of meeting the tight turnaround times and assessing, allocating, monitoring and reporting data. The pressure was on to design and deploy a grant management solution in a very short timeframe that could deliver exactly what we needed.”

SARA WHYBREW, DIRECTOR, CREATIVE EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMME

## WHY TOPLEVEL

Creative & Cultural Skills selected Toplevel based upon the provider's track record in providing grant management solutions for the Heritage Lottery Fund, The National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA) and Arts Council England. For Creative & Cultural Skills, it was vital that they act as a partner in the design of the system, selecting the wording and the application form design, determining guidance notes for applicants, deciding when intervention was needed and a formal step-by-step outline of how the application should proceed.

“The team members that would be using the system day-to-day needed to be actively involved to encourage staff buy-in, so we sought to include them in the design process. Their input meant they could see how the system would be used, helping to ensure roll-out was as quick and smooth as possible.”

Toplevel offers a menu of feature sets when designing grant management solutions and Creative & Cultural Skills opted to include several of these. Expert Review, enabling assessors to comment on and score criteria below the questions, is displayed within a secure window and enables assessors to comment directly in the application itself at the relevant point. Creative & Cultural Skills also selected the Staff Workbench feature which allows the team to track and monitor case status, search historical data, automate progress chasing and manage workflow and reporting, among other functions.

“The Grant Management System allows us to keep a record of all correspondence with a client, a record of conversations that we have, any issues with releasing payments, it allows us to add and amend payments and conditions if we need to and the system itself will allow us to raise reports on the status of different grants; it will allow us to see when grants are active and what stage they are at in terms of payments.

We can raise reports from the client management system to track the status of different grants and their payments. That's enabling us to act responsively to applications and offer advice to applicants. It will allow us to see all of the grants that have been completed and closed and all of the applicants that have been rejected for funding. So in terms of data collection it will very much support our grant monitoring process; without it we can't monitor laterally.”

Toplevel was able to provide an end-to-end solution, advising and assisting with every stage of the project, from design, to delivery and post-delivery support, enabling Creative & Cultural Skills to make adjustments to further enhance the application process.

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We wanted a solution that we could refine as we went along. Once we started using the different elements of the system it became apparent that we needed to change the wording of some questions or adapt the explanations in the employer guidance pop-ups. We wanted the process to be as user-friendly as possible, so we needed to go back in and make those alterations. It's been very easy to do that as Toplevel has responded to every change we've wanted to make and been very accommodating. Toplevel's flexibility really helped in assisting us when we've needed to make changes.”

SARA WHYBREW, DIRECTOR, CREATIVE EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMME



## BENEFITS

Creative & Cultural Skills has been processing online applications for three months, completing three rounds of funding and consistently meeting tight turnaround times which Whybrew attributes to the clarity in the design and ease of use of the Grant Management System.

"From the date of each application deadline we take five weeks to assess all applications, make our decisions and notify the applicants and start raising grant agreements. It is a tight turn around. Not many grant giving organisations work to these timescales (the National Lottery advocates a six-12 week turnaround dependent upon the value of the award). Thanks to the Toplevel system, we find a five week round is easily manageable and are well on-track to meet our commitments in awarding the funds we have available to help young unemployed people find paid work in the arts."

The success of the project – and the Grant Management System – is evident in the number of jobs created.



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In the first three rounds we've committed funding for the creation of just over 400 jobs across England, which in comparison to a similar job creation programme a few years ago is a really good start. We've still got a long way to go but having a grants process in place using terminology employers understand really works. Our partnership with Toplevel produced an ideal combination of flexible system design and sector-specific terminology which together created an application process which is easy for applicants to access, use and understand.”

SARA WHYBREW, DIRECTOR,  
CREATIVE EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMME

## SLICE AND DICE DATA

An additional benefit of using the automated Grant Management System has been the ability to collate data for auditing, allowing Whybrew to prove due diligence and compliance with regulatory legislation and justify awards. The system effectively provides an audit trail of every decision, ensuring evidence is there for posterity.

"I feel reassured by having the system and knowing that if our process is audited then we have a robust means of producing information. It's a very clear system which supports our process and provides us with an audit trail from submission right through to when a grant is closed and completed and everything in-between."

The Staff Workbench reporting functions can also be used to interrogate and segment data – so called 'slicing and dicing' – which Creative & Cultural Skills can use to answer enquiries about spend or ensure spend is proportionate.

"If the Arts Council or Department for Work and Pensions or the press asked us how much money we've committed to a particular region, for example, I'd be able to answer that by using the data that has been collected on the Toplevel system. We can do that for lots of different sorts of information and there is no need to trawl through paperwork – it's all there on screen."

The Grant Management System has an integral role to play in the justification of the existence of the Creative Employment Programme which is tasked with distributing funds over the next two years. If the programme can demonstrate its success, Creative & Cultural Skills hopes the fund will be replenished.

"Arts funding doesn't take precedence, so in the current economic climate, being able to communicate the benefits of the arts in a broader context and justify the expenditure of a job creation programme is an added benefit.

Having certain data available to us makes it much easier to make a case to the wider sector and Government. The Grant Management System helps us to do this, gathering data and producing the necessary research to ultimately justify the programme."

Whybrew clearly has long term ambitions for the Creative Employment Programme and for the Toplevel Grant Management System, with plans to integrate it into the back office systems at Creative & Cultural Skills when possible.

"Looking to the future, we'd love to integrate the Grant Management System with some of our back office processes. Currently, our finance system is housed externally but there are plans to bring this in house and when we do I will be actively looking to integrate the two. That's part of refining our working processes and it makes a lot of sense to ensure the fluidity of data across the information estate."

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