



A Guide to Evaluating Grants Management Systems



Table of Contents

This guide outlines seven key phases for conducting a thoughtful and effective Grants Management System (GMS) evaluation – from defining goals and aligning stakeholders, to selecting the right solution and preparing for a smooth implementation. Our goal is to help you approach this decision with confidence and a long-term perspective.

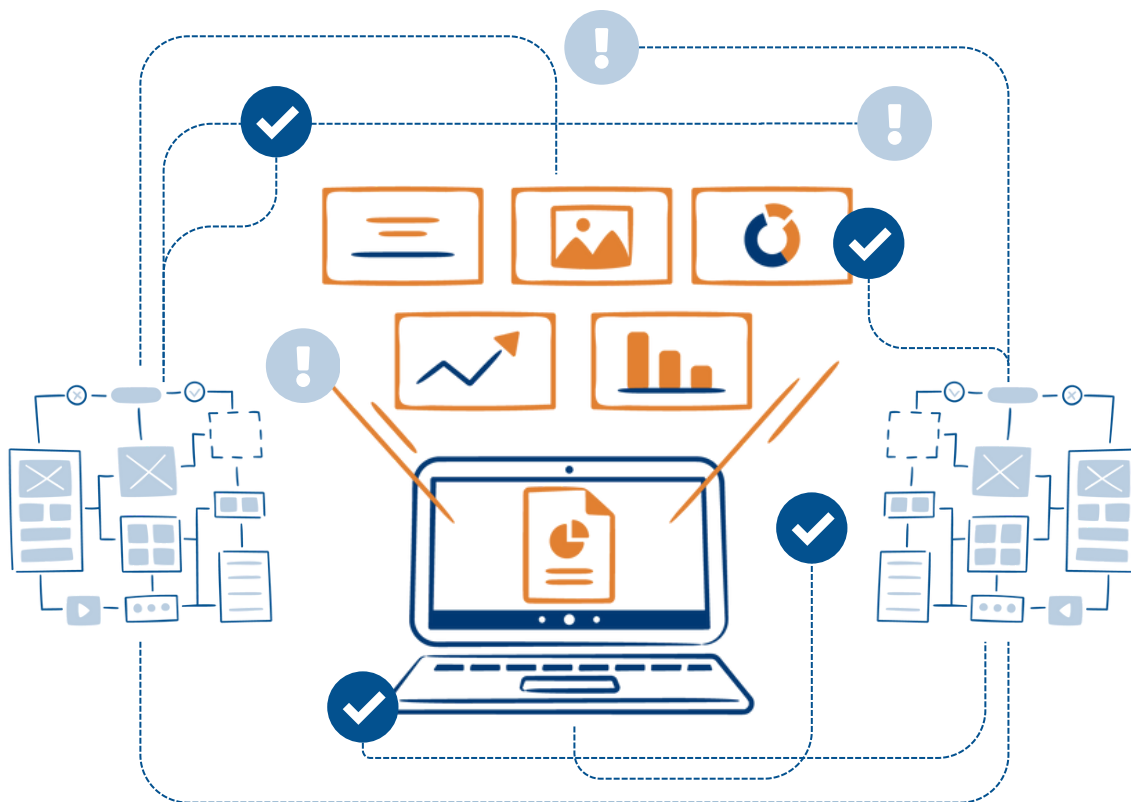
Your GMS shouldn't simply support your operations, it should propel and amplify your mission.

Introduction	03
Is it time for your organization to evaluate a new GMS?	04
Part 1: Define your needs and set goals	05
Part 2: Align stakeholders	06
Part 3: Do your research	07
Part 4: Integrations and existing systems	08
Part 5: Analyze cost and pricing	10
Part 6: Vendor stability and support	11
Part 7: Final decision and procurement	12

Introduction

Foundations rely on a variety of technology to carry out their mission - but none is more central than its Grants Management System (GMS). Much like an operating system powers your laptop, a GMS is the operating system of your organization, facilitating every aspect of the grantmaking cycle – from strategy and planning, to awarding grants, to reporting and impact tracking.

Yet many foundations struggle with systems that no longer serve their evolving needs – systems that are too rigid, lack transparency, or don't support shifts toward grantmaking models that are more relational and trust-based. Many organizations find themselves implementing workarounds, misusing system fields and stitching together disconnected and disparate tools, which creates confusion and compromises data quality and integrity.

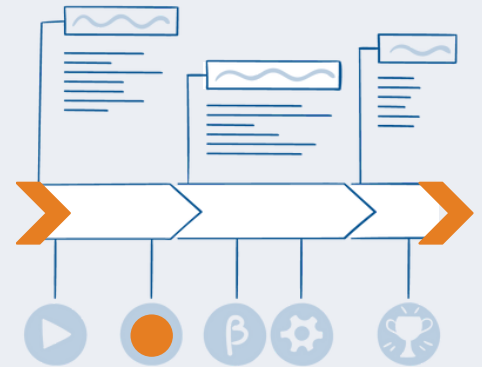


Is it time for your organization to evaluate a new GMS?

The answer depends on a lot of factors, but here are a few scenarios:

- Grants are being managed through ad hoc tools like spreadsheets, sticky notes, and inboxes – hampering collaboration and introducing room for error.
- Your current GMS is introducing operational bottlenecks, you’ve started to outgrow it, or it’s getting in the way of your mission.
- Your organization is scaling up its grantmaking, bringing on new staff, or managing other types of organizational change.
- Grantees are encountering burden in the application or reporting process due to limitations in your system’s design or accessibility.
- Strategic priorities are shifting toward new grantmaking models, such as flexible funding and trust-based philanthropy.
- Core processes are unnecessarily complex or inefficient and you get the sense that things should be easier, more intuitive, and take less time.
- You’re ready to use data more intentionally to inform strategy and tell a stronger story of your impact.

Whether you’re experiencing persistent operational inefficiencies, grantee frustration, insufficient reporting capabilities, or simply trying to future proof your operations, initiating a GMS evaluation is a strategic necessity.



Timing Matters

Be proactive. Starting the evaluation process early gives your team the time and space to engage in a thoughtful, comprehensive, and forward looking evaluation. Some things to consider:

- The typical GMS evaluation takes **2-3 months** to complete.
- The typical implementation (depending on complexity) takes about **2-6 months**
- If you are moving off of a current system, you will want to line up the end of implementation with the end of your current GMS contract or the end of a grant cycle.
- Starting too early is always better than starting too late!

Part 1:

Define Your Needs and Set Goals

Before evaluating a GMS, it helps to ask two fundamental questions:

- What challenges are you trying to solve?
- What does success look like?

Use this moment to get clear on:

- Your organization's long-term operational goals, ambitions, and mission.
- The goals of teams and individuals within your organization
- Your grantees' needs.

Start by assessing the current state, core challenges, and the limitations of your existing technology. Here are some questions to consider:

- What current workflows are unnecessarily manual, inconsistent, or siloed across teams?
- Is it difficult to generate timely, accurate, and meaningful reports? Do staff across the organization (programs, finance, leadership, board) have access to the information that they need?
- Do grantees struggle with you existing systems and processes?
- Is your current technology scalable and will it serve your organization's needs over the long term?

Then ask questions that orient toward the best possible future state:

- What workflows or common processes do you hope to streamline or automate?
- How would you improve reporting, data transparency, and data visualization?
- How could you deepen your relationships with grantees and streamline the grantee experience?
- What would increased coordination or collaboration look like across teams?
- Is your organization shifting toward different models of grantmaking, such as trust-based philanthropy, relational grantmaking, or flexible funding?



Working with a Consultant

Consultants can provide valuable guidance, especially if you are navigating this process for the first time, your organization uses complex processes and workflows, or if you are trying to align the goals and needs of multiple departments.

Here are some things to consider:

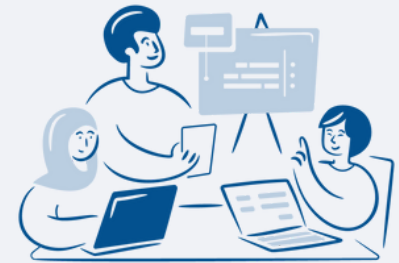
- Look for a consultant who has experience with organizations of a similar size and complexity to yours.
- Work with a consultant that is technology agnostic and is familiar with a wide variety of GMS.
- Use their expertise to guide and inform, but the final decisions should remain yours.
- Identify opportunities for post-selection engagement such as support during implementation and training.

Part 2:

Align stakeholders

Selecting a new GMS can impact the entire organization. Bringing in the right perspectives early — from staff across grants, programs, operations, finance, and leadership, as well as your grantee partners — helps ensure the technology reflects everyone’s needs and builds buy-in.

Department	Perspective
 Grants:	Understand day-to-day workflows and processes
 Programs:	Have perspectives around grantee relationships, visibility into grant portfolios, and a deep understanding of the issues that their foundation supports.
 IT/Operations:	May have requirements around integrations and security
 Finance:	May have preferences related to payment workflows and financial reconciliation
 Leadership:	May need a solution that aligns with the foundation's larger strategic goals
 Grantees:	Are invested in streamlining application and award processes



During a GMS evaluation, the perspectives of grantee partners are often left out. Get a sense of what your grantees want out of their experience. This process can be informal, consisting of candid discussions with a handful of grantee partners.

Involving stakeholders throughout the process — from gathering requirements to choosing a GMS — builds buy-in and ensures the GMS meets everyone’s needs. Gone are the days of a GMS serving only the administrative needs of the Grants Manager. That said, it is perfectly acceptable for the primary user of the tool to have some non-negotiables!

Part 3:

Do your research:

Once you've established internal alignment, it's time to explore the GMS landscape.

Tap into trusted resources, including:

- [Technology Association of Grantmakers](#)
- [PEAK Grantmaking](#)
- [Techimpact.org](#)
 - [*A Consumers Guide to Grants Management Systems*](#)
- [Council on Foundations](#)
- [Exponent Philanthropy](#)

And just as importantly: Talk to your peers.

Reach out to peers at other foundations to learn about their experiences with GMS—what's worked well for them, what challenges they've faced, and what they wish they had known before starting their evaluation.

Qualitative insights from your peers can validate or challenge what you are hearing from GMS vendors. You can also ask potential GMS providers for testimonials from current customers, see if they have a strong community, or even ask your grantees what systems they have had good experiences with.



Part 4:

Integrations and existing systems

A GMS is the technical backbone of a grantmaking organization. It is therefore vital that it integrates seamlessly with the rest of your tools. Here are some integrations that many grantmakers find vital:



Data Visualization: Transforming data into actionable insights is crucial for strategic decision-making. Integration with data visualization tools like Power BI and Tableau give organizations a clear and comprehensive view of grantmaking activities, allowing them to analyze trends, measure impact and make informed decisions.



Relationship Management: Maintaining strong relationships with grantees and partners is essential for effective grantmaking. Integrating an advanced Customer Relationship Management (CRM) tool like Salesforce or HubSpot ensures that all relationship data for grantees and funding partners is centralized and accessible. Note that some GMS have built-in CRM tools as well.



External Data Sources: Access to accurate and comprehensive data is essential for informed decision making. Tools like LexisNexis facilitate due diligence and help streamline compliance processes.



Document Management & Storage: Integrating tools like Microsoft 365, Google Drive, Box, or OneDrive into a GMS ensures that all documents are easily accessible and shareable across the organization.



Integrations vs. Open APIs

Many GMS platforms offer “out of the box” integrations that can be deployed with a minimal technical lift. For more complex needs, an open API allows developers to build custom connections between software platforms. While integrations allow organizations to quickly connect disparate technologies, an open API opens a world of possibility for other types of integrations.



Billing & Finance: Integrating with finance tools like Bill and Sage Intacct provide finance teams with real-time visibility into the status of grantee payments allowing them to verify charitable status, and quickly perform other time-intensive batch processes.



Communication: Integrations with email tools like Gmail and Outlook ensures that all grantmaking communications are centralized and accessible. This makes it possible to track the history of a grantee relationship and ensures continuity when there are organizational changes.



Security & Authentication: Integrations with Okta, OneLogin, and Microsoft Active Directory ensure that user access is managed securely, protecting sensitive information and simplifying the login process.



Digital Signature: Integrations with digital signature tools, such as DocuSign and Adobe Sign, streamline the grantmaking process by allowing documents to be signed and managed in a single spot.



Key integrations questions to ask

- Does the GMS provide out of the box integrations into your existing (or potential future) technology ecosystem?
- Does the GMS offer open APIs and custom integrations?
- Will the GMS vendor provide data migration out of your former system?



Part 5:

Analyze cost and pricing

Pricing is one of the most visible and quantifiable factors in technology evaluation – but it is also one of the most misunderstood.

To get the full picture of pricing:

- Understand the license model – per user, by usage tier, or flat rate
- Identify one-time implementation, data migration, onboarding, and training fees
- Evaluate ongoing support and maintenance fees. Some grantmakers find that they need to hire consultants or additional staff to implement and/or manage their GMS post implementation.
- Understand renewal terms and access to upgrades

And ask yourself:

- Is the pricing transparent? Do you understand what you are paying for?
- Is the pricing scalable? What happens when you bring on additional users, expand the amount and type of work that you are doing in the system, or integrate with other technology?

It is also critically important to distinguish between pricing and cost. When evaluating cost, consider the broader investment required to adopt and maintain the technology. A lower-priced solution may lack critical functionality or require manual workarounds that consume time, introduce risk, and lead to negative outcomes. The true cost includes the investment your team will make in configuration, training, process adoption, and ongoing support.



Tip: Beware of low-cost systems that become expensive over time through hidden limitations or workarounds. Prioritize value and sustainability over initial affordability.



Part 6:

Vendor stability and support

A GMS is a long-term investment in how your foundation works and evolves. That's why it's critical to evaluate both the platform and the organization behind it.

Your GMS provider should also be a key strategic partner. They're not just offering tools – they're supporting the day-to-day needs of your organization as well as partnering in your future success.

Assess the GMS vendor's:



Customer Experience: Look for a partner that invests in onboarding, tailored training, and ongoing client education. A strong peer learning network and an active client community are signs of a GMS vendor that is committed to shared success.



Scalability & Long Term Vision: Learn about the vendor's product roadmap and ask about the frequency and quality of recent updates. A partner focused on long-term value will consistently evolve the platform and actively incorporate feedback from you – the user.



Customer Support : Responsive, multi-channel support is essential – but so is having a dedicated client success manager who understands your organization challenges, goals, and needs over time.



Client Satisfaction & Retention: High client retention and satisfaction scores are strong indicators of a vendor's reliability and trustworthiness. Ask to hear more about their client retention rate, Net Promoter Score (a measure of how likely their current customer are to recommend them), and ask for references.



Look for vendors who view your success as part of their mission.

Part 7:

Final Decision and Procurement

With your research complete and the product demos behind you, it is time to shift from exploration to decision-making. This phase is about consolidating what you've learned, aligning stakeholders, and securing buy-in.

Start by gathering structured feedback from stakeholders. Their perspectives will provide critical direction on how well each GMS meets functional needs, user experience expectations, and long-term goals.

Use a weighted evaluation matrix to assess each vendor against your most important criteria, such as usability, integrations, configurability, support, reporting capabilities. Assign scores and supplement them with qualitative insights – often, it is the narrative feedback that reveals which vendor truly aligns with your organization's values and working style.

Once you've identified your preferred GMS:

- Score or rank vendors using this weighted criteria matrix
- Consolidate feedback and present recommendations to leadership
- In addition to functionality, ask yourself: Does this vendor's culture, values, and work style align with yours, and do you want to partner with them based on your experience so far?
- Work with legal and finance for contract negotiation and signing.

This final step helps lay the groundwork or a smooth transition into implementation. The more consensus and alignment you build now, the more momentum you'll carry into the next phase of the project.

Get the most out of your product demos

Demos are a vital step in the evaluation process. Here are some tips for having great demos:

- **Be clear about your high-level challenges and goals.** Share what you're ultimately trying to achieve in the product and identify an ideal future state.
- **Focus on solutions, not features.** Try to avoid framing the demo as a checklist of features. Instead, identify real-world scenarios and ask the vendor to walk you through them.
- **Ask yourself if you would enjoy working with the vendor.** This isn't just about technology. Your GMS vendor is a long-term partner in the success of your organization.
- **Have an open mind.** The features and functionality that you use today might be a workaround. Be open to hearing about the vendor's unique approach.

Final Thoughts

Your GMS isn't just another back-office tool. It's your organization's operating system and a powerful driver of impact. Choosing the right platform is a strategic decision that requires careful evaluation, internal alignment, and a long-term vision.

We have guided hundreds of grantmaking organizations through GMS evaluations. There are lots of options available to the sector and it is our goal to make sure every organization gets the tool that is right for them.

We would love to help you start your GMS evaluation. Please reach out below and we will schedule a call.



[Are you ready to start your GMS evaluation?
Connect with us here.](#)



About Foundant, GivingData, and SmartSimple

Foundant, SmartSimple, and GivingData have joined forces—a reflection of our deep collective commitment and shared passion for centering the people we serve in all we do. As we enter this new chapter, we are excited to support foundations of all kinds--through thoughtful, collaborative, and innovative approaches that drive philanthropic impact.