kuali BUILD

The State of Forms in Higher Education

2021 Report

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Table of Contents

Introduction

> “Forms are ubiquitous across higher education campuses”

Today, digital transformation is a must do now for Higher Education institutions. The world is quickly going digital, and it shows no signs of slowing down or ever turning back. The challenges of both recruiting and retaining students are proving increasingly difficult. According to research by EDUCAUSE, a nonprofit association devoted to the advancement of IT in higher education, over 83% of institutions have already begun implementing or exploring digital transformation strategies.

This shift to adopt new technology practices is by no means a surprise. In 2020, COVID brought expedited digital transformation as universities sought ways to rapidly adapt to remote teaching and work. The resulting economic pressures from the pandemic continue to highlight the need for optimal agility, being able to adapt to unforeseen circumstances overnight. IT’s leadership and roadmap proved a critical necessity throughout 2020 and institutions that have adopted standards for technological excellence across campus are poised to transform rapidly, empowering their respective institutions to focus less on repeating unnecessary work and more on achieving their missions.

Despite all of this evidential progress, a looming challenge still exists for thousands of institutions. Forms are pervasive across higher education campuses, many of which remain highly manual in Microsoft Word or PDF-based versions. When dynamic forms need to be edited or created, departmental users may first request support from IT, though with IT’s overloaded backlog, particularly since 2020, they may resort instead to tools they know and are available to them, thereby perpetuating the use of legacy, manual technology. The use of manual technology costs institutions hundreds of thousands in unmanageable shadow technology, lost labor due to manual processing, and increased risk due to more easily breached data.

Gartner's 2021 Higher Education Emerging Technology Trends highlighted low-code enterprise application platforms as a key driver for institutional sustainability in order to begin to address this challenge for institutions. In addition to technological solutions, IT leadership must understand the pervasiveness of the challenge, including root causes, in order to best create a sustainable solution.

The purpose of this report is to support Higher Education IT leadership with a comprehensive analysis of the true state of forms in institutions today. This report will highlight both challenges reported by different form participants across campus and recommendations for how to seek lasting process, policy, and technological solutions.

Survey results were composed of 120 individuals from a cross-functional segment of Higher Education administrators; educators were excluded for the purpose of focusing the results on Higher Education administration. All respondents identified as management-level or higher, with 41% self-identifying as Director level or above. 58% of respondents were employed through a 4-year university with 17% supporting community colleges; institutions ranged in size though the majority of respondents supported an institution with 10K - 20K full-time students.

We hope this research will help guide your teams to address campus-wide process challenges as part of your comprehensive digital transformation strategy in years to come.

State of Forms

Survey respondents self-identified into four key groups based on their frequency of activity for the respective group. It was possible respondents identified with multiple groups depending on their activity with the respective function.

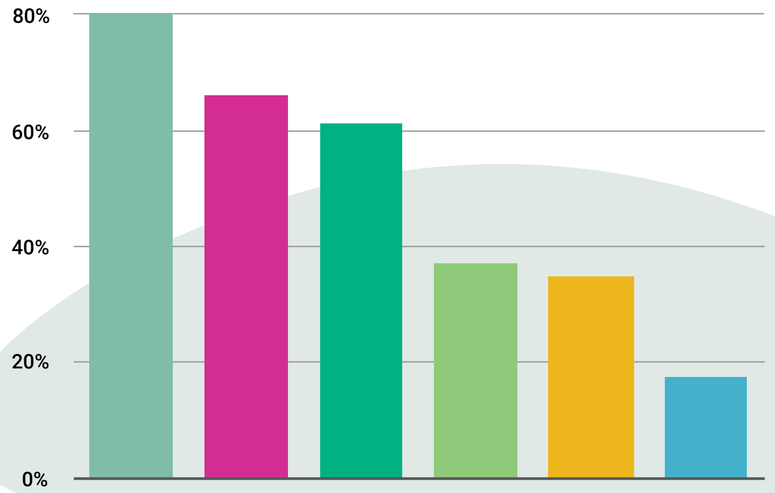
Form Creators | **Form Editors** | **Form Submitters** | **Form Approvers**

WHAT TOOLS ARE USED?

Form creators confirmed the percentage of forms created via a variety of mediums ranging from paper to fully digital; a large share of forms in institutions still are created as Microsoft Word or PDF-based documents, with paper now playing a less significant role. Low-cost or free digital forms tools, like Google Docs, play a large role in form creation as well.:

When creating new forms, respondents relied on the following tools:

- 80% Microsoft Word
- 66% PDF-based documents
- 61% Google Docs (or low-cost electronic forms tool)
- 37% in enterprise automation tool (such as Salesforce or Service Now)
- 35% in eSign tool (such as DocuSign or Adobe Sign)
- 17% of new forms are created as paper-based fForms



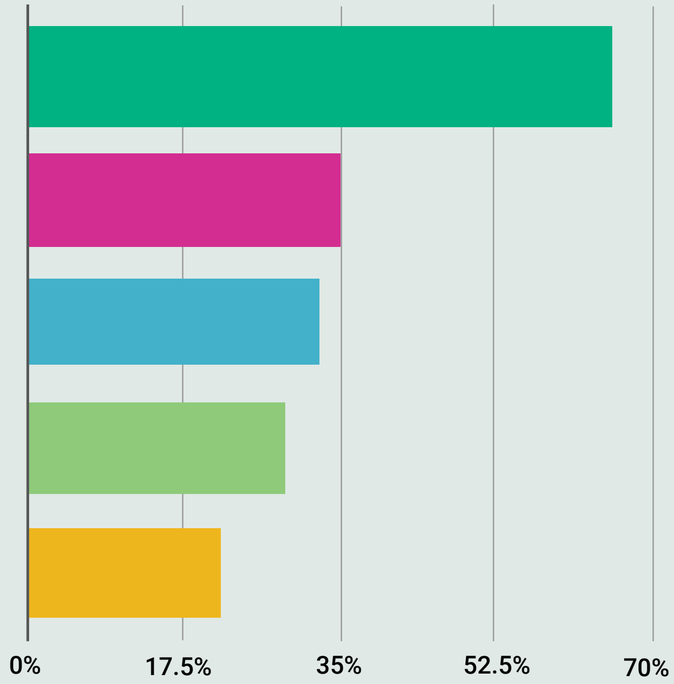
WHO HELPS TO CREATE AND EDIT FORMS?

In 65% of cases, initial form creators relied on support from IT to develop and deploy new forms, reinforcing that IT's bandwidth can at times be a limitation to new process development. Surprisingly, form approvers and form submitters were only consulted less than 1 in 4 times when new forms are launched.

When creating new forms, respondents relied on input from the following constituent groups:

- IT: 65%
- Upper management: 35%
- No one (just the form initiator): 33%
- Form submitters: 29%
- Form approvers: 22%

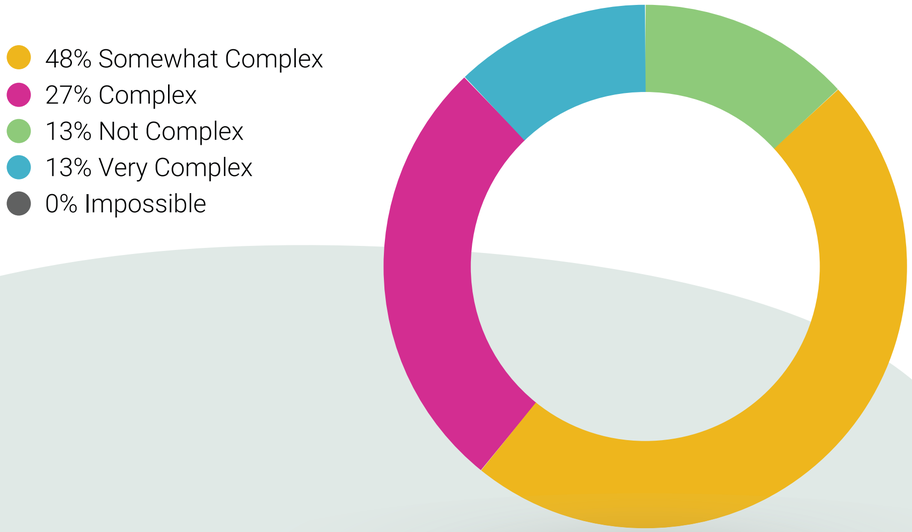
Interestingly, campus-wide involvement drops dramatically when only updating an existing process. The form initiator typically takes on the majority of form edits, involving IT only 35% of the time. Additional process stakeholders like submitters and approvers are only involved 5% and 15% of the time, respectively.



WHAT TYPES OF PROCESSES ARE CREATED?

In roughly 50% of the cases, forms created are ‘somewhat complex,’ involving multiple steps of approvals and possibly adaptable routing requirements based upon information submitted in the forms:

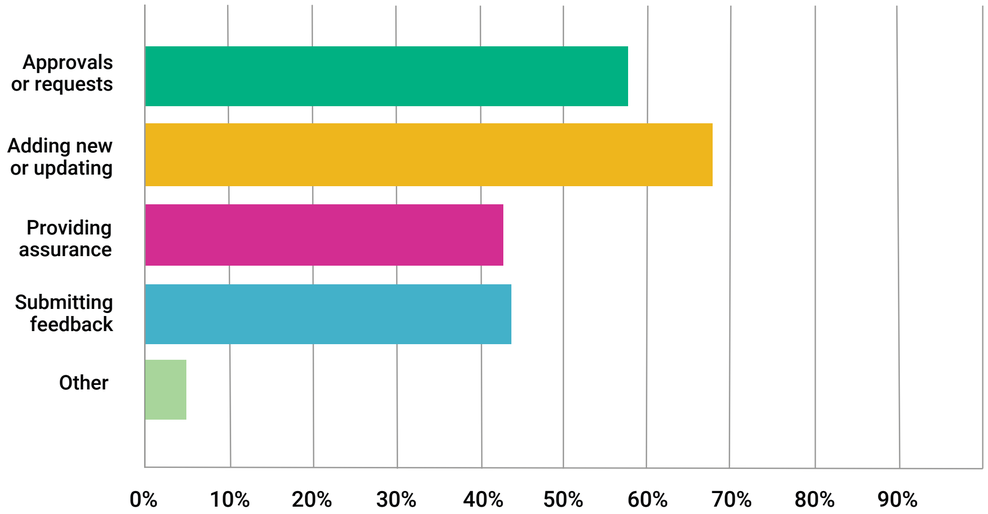
How complex are the types of processes you typically build:



Options	Counts
Not complex: the process is always the same and is often 1-2 approvals in our department / team	13% **8**
Somewhat complex: the process is always requires several approvals and can sometimes change	48% **30**
Complex: the process requires several steps of approvals across campus and can change consistently	27% **17**
Very complex: The process can be routed to numerous departments across campus, require a significant amount of approval or feedback, and can change dramatically based upon what has been submitted	13% **8**
Impossible: The process is almost never the same, requires a significant amount of approvals, and is so inconsistent that I’ve never been able to make it wotk correctly	0% **0**

The most common purpose for forms is to add new or update existing information, such as an enrollment or new employment form. Approval requests, such as a change of major request, was the next most common form purpose.

What are the most common general purposes of your form-based processes?



Options	Counts
Approvals or requests (such as a change of major or travel request)	57% **37**
Adding new or updating existing information (such as a new employment form)	66% **43**
Providing assurance (such as certifying employment)	42% **27**
Submitting feedback (such as employee evaluation form)	43% **28**
Other	5% **3**

When asked for specific types of forms respondents commonly submitted, responses included forms such as:

- Paid time off Requests
- Expense reports
- Change of major requests
- Software access requests
- Facility requests
- Purchase requests
- Financial Aid requests

How often are forms being submitted and approved?

On average, respondents submitted between 1 to 10 requests per month. The majority reported that roughly 40% of submissions are currently submitted as Word documents, with remaining submissions being equality split between PDFs and digital forms.

Each submission took on average between 5 minutes to 3 hours, with 25% of respondents reporting submissions took on average 1 hour to 3 hours to complete. Respondents reported submissions took roughly 30 minutes to 3 days to be fully processed and the submission to be considered 'done.'

50% | **of form approvers reported approving between 3 to 10 submissions per month**

40% | **of submissions currently being processed as Word documents**

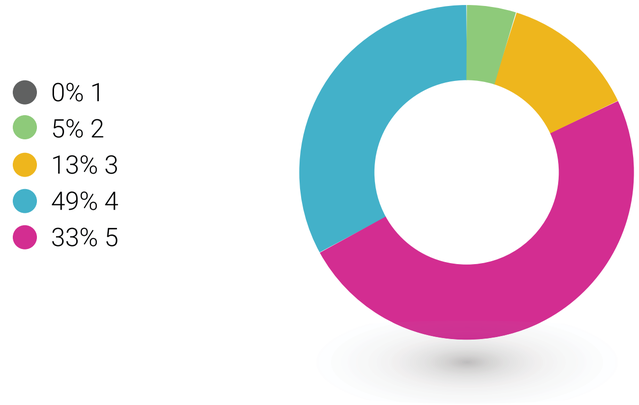
The majority of approvers processed approvals between 5 to 30 minutes

The second highest group reporting the process taking 1 to 3 hours.

How satisfied are current form participants?

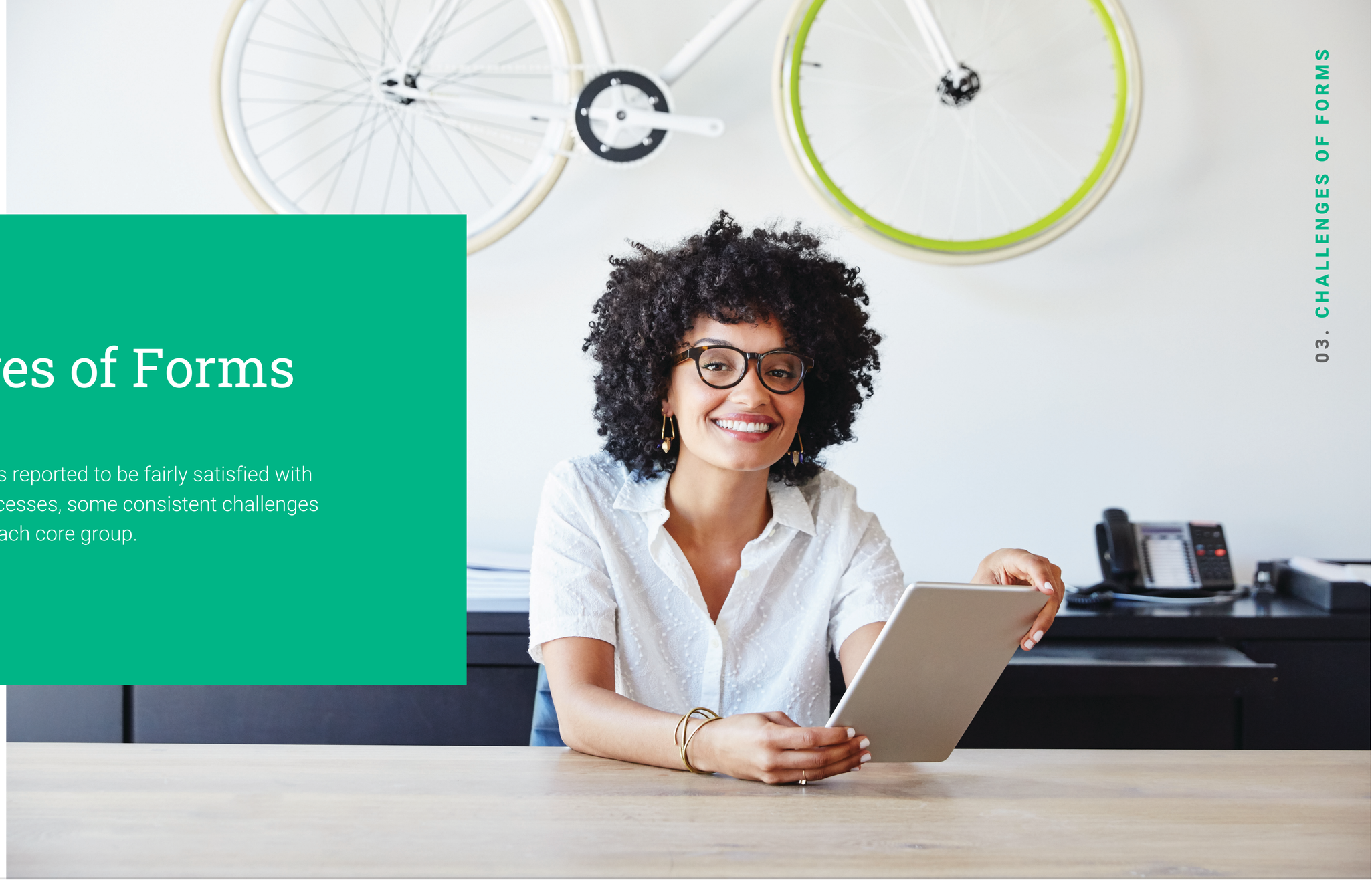
Respondents were asked their level of satisfaction multiple times during the survey process, capturing varying levels of satisfaction with each tactical group. On a scale of 1 to 5, respondents overwhelmingly shared satisfaction levels of both Satisfied (4) and Highly Satisfied (5).

On a scale of 1-5, how satisfied are you with the current form creation tools available for your use:



Challenges of Forms

While overall respondents reported to be fairly satisfied with current forms-based processes, some consistent challenges were submitted across each core group.



HOW ACCESSIBLE ARE CURRENT FORMS TOOLS ACROSS CAMPUS?

Survey organizers were surprised to see the number of Microsoft Word forms in use on campus today, especially with the majority of campuses having between three to five form-based automation systems on campus today.

40%
Use the tool they do due to it being the only one available

22%
Use the tool mandated by university policy

50%
Think there are too many tools and they don't know whivh one to use

42%
Think that tools they use are too simple and don't actually support their needs

The majority of respondents reported the most important change that would improve their form building satisfaction would be improving overall access to tools so they can use one that is easier and more efficient.

Based upon somewhat conflicting responses, respondents seem to note that while there are many tools available to use, they may not be effectively trained on which tool meets the needs for which scenario. This confusion leads respondents to perhaps rely on tools that are very familiar to them, such as Word or Adobe PDFs. While these tools allow respondents to quickly create forms, they often may lack necessary features for optimal efficiency and innovation.

WHAT IMPACT DOES USING WORD AND ADOBE PDF FORMS MAKE?

With such a high use of Word and PDF-based forms, it's not surprising that Form approvers and submitters highlighted functionality-related challenges.

Form submitters reported their top three frustrations with form submissions as:

45%

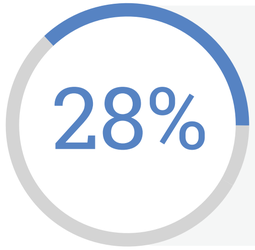
Required information is duplicated on other forms

45%

Printing forms

32%

Wet signatures are required (when they may not be necessary)



28%

of form submitters confirmed the largest improvement creators can make to their form submission satisfaction would be to improve the medium (tool / format) of form submission.

Form approvers reported their top three frustrations with form approvals as:

37%

Approving too many forms

30%

Not being able to easily find previously submitted approvals

28%

Forms getting lost in email inboxes

Form approvers reported they search for previously submitted approvals on average several times per week, with their search process taking on average between 5 minutes to 1 hour.

If you assume a standard approver searches for a form even two times per week and that search takes 30-minutes, they'll spend 4-5 hours per month and more than 200 hours per year simply searching for approvals.

The lack of advanced functionality available in Microsoft Word and Adobe-based forms clearly make an impact on form submission and approval satisfaction, causing dramatic losses in productivity whether through printing, signing, and scanning forms, duplicating information, or losing mission critical information in email inboxes

HOW DO INSTITUTION POLICIES MAKE FORM PROCESSES MORE DIFFICULT?

30% of form creators and form approvers both agreed that university policies requiring unnecessary approvals or signatures created less than ideal form-based processes

32% Over 32% of form submitters confirmed the requirement of wet signatures in unnecessary circumstances contributed to form submission dissatisfaction

18% of form approvers agreed this was a major pain point, suggesting either that form submitters find less value in signing initial form submissions or are required to do so at a greater frequency.

HOW MANY PEOPLE SHOULD BE INVOLVED IN THE FORM CREATION PROCESS?

Form creators asserted that multiple individuals are often involved in the creation process, with high involvement from IT, managers, form submitters and approvers. When editing an existing form, involvement of other parties drops dramatically, with management, approvers and submitters only involved between 5% to 15% of cases.

35% respondents reported it takes on average between 2 weeks and 1 month to launch a new process, with 21% reporting it takes on average between 1 month to 2 months to launch new processes. When asked why the process takes the respective time to launch, the largest response, or 33% of respondents, reported the amount of people involved in the process caused the largest delays to launch.

When form approvers were asked what the most impactful improvement would be, 33% responded by making sure their approvals were only requested when absolutely necessary. This aligns with the largest aligned frustration across form approvers, with 37% reporting they felt frustrated with how many forms they have to approve.

Form process buy-in is critical for launch success, but managing the level of involvement is also important. Form creators should seek input across stakeholder groups, particularly form approvers, and encourage them to not only provide input on the medium and information requested, but also on if their involvement is needed in the process.

Are experiences of form creators / editors and form submitters / approvers aligned?

Form creators were asked their level of confidence in the form developed, on the following aspects:

- **The form instructions will be followed.**
- **Forms will be filled out with accuracy.**
- **Approvals will be adequately reviewed before signing.**
- **Forms will fill the intended purpose.**

Overwhelmingly, form creators responded with levels 4 of 5 confidence on each respective category.

When form approvers were asked their largest frustrations with form processes, over 25% responded that the information submitted is often not complete or accurate.

The varied perspectives of form approvers and form creators showcases the importance of involving form approvers not only in the initial creation process, but in subsequent form modification processes as well. With a better feedback loop from builders to users, forms can be optimized to improve both accuracy and format.

Recommendations for Form Creators

The State of Forms 2021 Survey illustrated forms continue to be pervasive across institution campuses. While the age of paper forms are largely behind us, the digital replacements of microsoft word and Adobe PDF forms still present significant challenges to optimal efficiency and achieving true digital transformation.

While digital forms are increasingly being used for new form creations, the perception of form submitters and approvers still remains that the majority of the forms they interact with are in legacy digital formats.

Overall, satisfaction levels of each survey cohort largely surprised survey creators as despite the evident frustrations echoed throughout responses, overall satisfaction levels maintained fairly high levels. One possible explanation for the anomaly could be that while form processes may not be perfect across campus, they are 'good enough' to keep things moving.

The time investment to continually optimize processes and learn new tools may outweigh the perceived benefits of those respective changes. Thus, as in many digital transformation efforts, the largest impediment to progress is first, the campus-wide recognition and knowledge that a better way is indeed possible and second, making small but incremental changes in a method that feels achievable for all.

The following recommendations are written mainly to address the opportunities of form creators, editors and those involved in digital transformation efforts across campus. Consider some of the following recommendations for 'small wins' to help move your campus towards transformation:

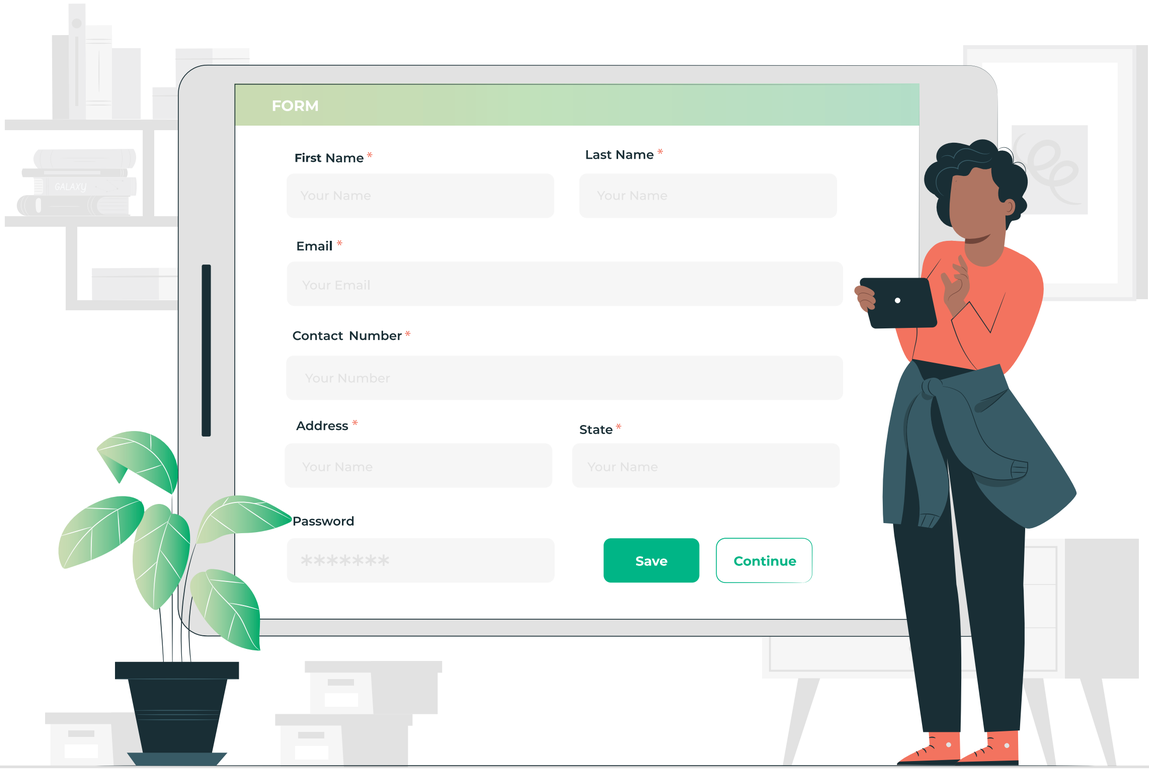
1 EVALUATE POLICIES AND PROCESSES TO IMPROVE OPTIMIZATION:

Survey respondents consistently cited the lack of optimized processes is a challenge in their forms experience. Whether respondents were involved when unnecessary, the process took longer than it should have, or wet signatures were required when seemingly not critical, evaluating form processes and the greater institution policies that drive those is a great initial step. An inefficient form process will remain ineffective, no matter how robust the form tool of choice is.

When creating a new form, first map out the process on a white board or using sticky notes to identify potential bottlenecks, unnecessary information collected, and evaluate who actually needs to be involved. Here is a helpful post that walks through the step-by-step process to creating a workflow diagram.

Remember to diagram the process not only when launching a new process but also when updating an existing one. Respondents affirmed in most instances, the only person involved in updating the form process is the actual form creator and they often use whatever form, such as a word document or PDF, rather than exploring new tools.

Consider seeking feedback from at least 2 - 3 additional stakeholders in the forms process before launching a revised form version. Doing so will help prevent inaccurate data from being submitted, poorly formatted forms with repeat information, and unnecessarily involving approvers.

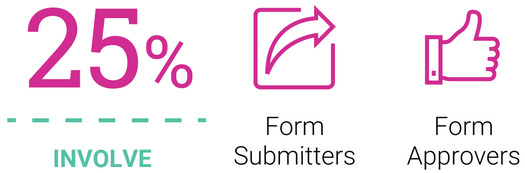


2 INVOLVE FORM SUBMITTERS & APPROVERS IN CREATION PROCESS:

Form approvers and submitters confirmed their challenges with the current form-based processes on-campus; leading complaints included required information being duplicated in multiple forms, forms being hard to understand and submit, approvers receiving incomplete or inaccurate submissions, and approvers being involved in an excessive amount of unnecessary approvals.

When asked levels of confidence in form submission experience, accuracy, and mediums, form creators responded overwhelmingly positively. Ultimately, there is a disconnect between the form creation process and ongoing form lifecycle processes. Form creators only involved form submitters and approvers less than 25% of the time, on average, when building new forms for deployment. When editing an existing form, submitters were involved only 5% of the time and approvers were involved 15% of the time.

NEW FORM



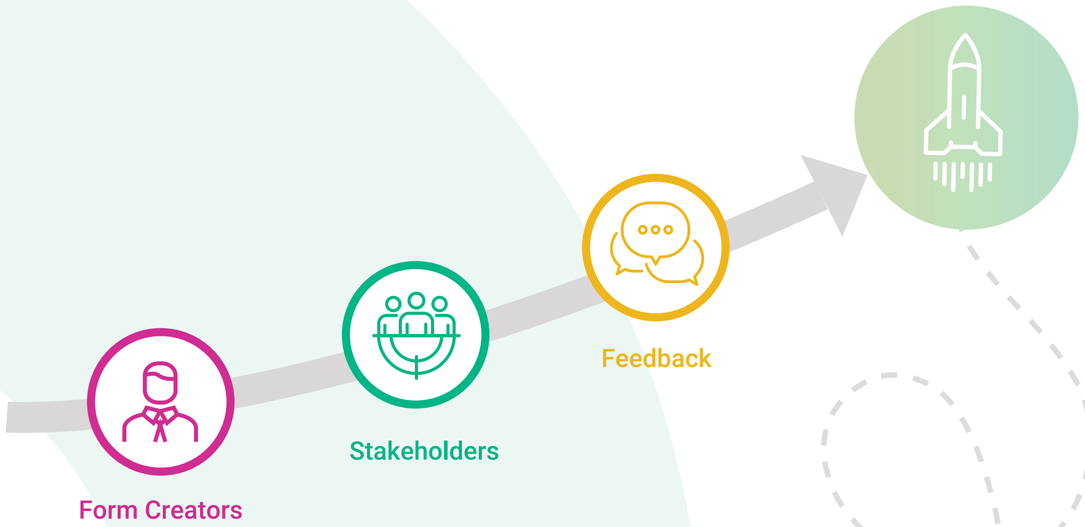
EDITING EXISTING FORM

Form creators have a significant opportunity for improvement in the inclusion of form stakeholders when developing and deploying a new form process or editing an existing process. Without an ongoing feedback loop for form processes, the disconnect between a creator's perception of process effectiveness and the reality of the stakeholder's experience will continue to be varied.

Involving stakeholders at key points in the process may indeed extend the length of deployment, the primary cause for concern from form creators or editors as to why a process took the amount of time necessary for launch. With this said, the involvement of stakeholders at the initiation of a process can save dramatic process rework in future iterations.

To engage stakeholders in the creation process, identify each unique stakeholder group and select at least 1 - 2 members of each group to interview. Identify bottlenecks in the current process by mapping out their versions of the form process and their pain points. Following the discussions, map out a new version of the process using workflow diagramming techniques. Review the optimizing process with first individual stakeholders and ask for another round of input; adapt the process based upon their feedback. Hold a final brainstorming session with all stakeholders together and confirm their agreement to the process before building the process in a tool of choice.

Ideally, form creators should involve stakeholders in testing the process end-to-end once the process has been built into a chosen tool. Once form creators have received feedback and approval from each stakeholder group, the process can be formally launched. A review process should be established on an agreed upon frequency, such as annually, with the original stakeholder team.



3 IMPROVE ACCESS TO & TRAINING IN FORMS-BASED TOOLS ON CAMPUS:

PDF and Word documents continue to maintain a strong-hold on campus-wide form processes. As noted in an earlier section, while it seems that institutions often have a large number of tools available to users, the majority of respondents did not know which tool to use in what scenario and therefore, may have reverted back to a tool they felt comfortable using, despite knowing it lacked a robust toolset.

Digital transformation across campus must not only be driven by the top down through IT and campus leadership. Ultimately, true transformation requires users across campus to be empowered with knowledge and access to choose tools that support innovation and progress. Without ongoing training and a tool non-technical users feel comfortable using, the paradigm shift away from legacy digital forms will never be possible.

Once a suite of 'innovation tools' have been identified and selected, a combination of ongoing training, known department champions, and a transformation lead and / or team will support the ongoing use of an automation toolset.

Automation leaders should host ongoing, monthly training sessions for end users to learn which tools fill which purposes. Department 'innovation' champions should be identified during the initial launch or 'relaunch' of innovation tools and should be publicly identified as an individual who can support the development and launch of processes within their team. Within IT or the organization's PMO, an innovation mission team should be launched, with the sole purpose of supporting individuals across campus with the development of new or optimization of current processes. The team should be led by someone with technical expertise, a process optimization background (such as those trained in Lean Six Sigma), and the ability to manage varying needs and requests across multiple, diverse stakeholder groups.

The solution to building a lasting foundation for true digital transformation is not an easy one that can be solved by simply buying a new tool. By developing a comprehensive process, policy and people foundation to support an 'innovation portfolio' on campus, your institution can truly plant roots for lasting and impactful change.

IT and process leaders across campus need to first evaluate tools they have available for form creation and rate their portfolio in terms of true accessibility. How many tools are currently in-use across campus? Are the tools easy for anyone to use (and have they actually validated that assumption with real end users)? Do permissions allow for top-level control while still empowering end users to innovate and release processes?

The campus automation portfolio should not just include 'approved' solutions but also, shadow IT solutions that have popped up around campus. Interview end users across various departments to understand why they rely on respective tools (perhaps not 'approved' by IT) and what they currently don't get from existing resources.

No-Code Forms for Higher Education

Forms builders seeking more effective methods for developing and launching new processes ultimately need a tool that empowers the democratization of digital transformation across campus. Relying on IT to deploy new forms or navigating the complex tools currently available to form builders across campus is not a scalable solution; as evidenced in the data, a significant amount of form builders still default to using tools like Microsoft Word and Adobe PDFs.

On campuses today, software solutions are often too powerful, resulting in complicated, time-consuming, and often require engineers to support, adding to overall process expense. Alternatively, simple solutions across campus often have compliance issues, lack basic security measures and don't have the functionality to support the level of complexity many processes mandate.

Kuali Build, a no-code forms and workflow automation platform built exclusively for higher education, sits in the sweet spot between complex and simple campus systems, acting as the interconnected glue.

Kuali's distinct community partnership approach, built over 15 years of collaborating with higher education and focusing on user experience, has resulted in an easy-to-use yet powerful and secure automation platform adoptable by business users in every department across campus. If you're ready to digitally transform your institution, we're here to help you take the next steps. Visit Build.Kuali.co to learn more about our software and how we can help your institution achieve its mission.

Learn more about Kuali Build

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