

Forbes

The Future Of Work Now: Nonprofit Fundraising With Gravyty



Tom Davenport Contributor
CIO Network



GRAVITY FEATURED IN FORBES

Key Takeaways

“Taylor Buxbaum has measured some of the benefits from using Gravyty in his job. They include:

Portfolio size: Taylor Buxbaum is Director of Development for a couple of Gravyty allows him to actively manage a primary portfolio that is 66% larger than before, plus an auxiliary portfolio of 150 prospects and a travel pool of an additional 840 prospects.

High impact actions (phone calls and meetings): 37% increase in high impact actions just in the first six months of use; 160% increase in high impact actions per month so far this fiscal year.

Proposals (major gifts asks of \$25K or more): In one fiscal year of Gravyty usage, 175% increase in funded proposals; 540% increase in dollars raised; 132% increase in average gift amount

Return on investment: He has received two gifts, totaling \$50,000, from brand new prospects in this current fiscal year with whom he would not have had any contact if it were not for Gravyty. These gifts have already paid for the software usage for the entire fundraising team.

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Arkansas State University football helmet (Photo by John Bunch/Icon Sportswire via Getty Images.) CON SPORTSWIRE VIA GETTY IMAGES

Taylor Buxbaum is Director of Development for a couple of colleges—Liberal Arts & Communication, and Sciences & Mathematics, at Arkansas State University. A-State, as it's known, is located in Jonesboro, AR—known for growing rice and soybeans, and for [Johnny Cash's boyhood home](#)—and enrolls over 14,000 students. Buxbaum has been in the job for a couple of years, and previously worked in development at Arizona State. His wife got a job teaching music at A-State, and Taylor was able to find a job there too.

The job of a university fundraising or development role is pretty consistent across institutions, at least those in the U.S. The goal is to build a relationship with potential donors—primarily, but not exclusively, alumni—keep in touch with them over time, and eventually persuade them to make a big donation. Buxbaum typically traveled to see potential donors before the pandemic, but during it he's mostly communicated by email and phone. After a period of relationship-building and discussions about gift opportunities, it is hoped, potential donors will become actual ones, perhaps making a "major gift" to the university. Buxbaum has an assigned portfolio of about 150 potential major gift donors, and an "auxiliary portfolio" of prospects who are somewhat less likely to make major gifts, but might do so.



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Tom Davenport is the President's Distinguished Professor of Information Technology and Management at Babson College, co-founder of the International Institute for Analytics, Fellow at the MIT Initiative on the Digital Economy, and Senior Advisor to Deloitte Analytics. He teaches analytics/big data in executive programs at Babson, Harvard Business School and School of Public Health, and MIT Sloan School.

Davenport pioneered the concept of competing on analytics with his best-selling 2006 Harvard Business Review article and 2007 book. His most recent book is *The AI Advantage: How to Put the Artificial Intelligence Revolution to Work*. He wrote or edited nineteen other books and over 200 articles for Harvard Business Review, Sloan Management Review, The Financial Times, and many other publications. He is a regular contributor to the Wall Street Journal and Forbes. He has been named one of the top 25 consultants by Consulting News, one of the 100 most influential people in the IT industry by Ziff-Davis, and one of the world's top fifty business school professors by Fortune magazine.



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Developer Meets Gravyty

Gravyty, a Boston-area startup, uses AI to facilitate the fundraising process for nonprofits (disclosure: a former Babson student of mine, Rich Palmer, is the co-founder of Gravyty, though I have no financial interest in the company). Buxbaum had not used Gravyty in his first development job, but at A-State a previous Vice Chancellor of Advancement met a Gravyty person at a conference, and the company came to the University and did a demo for the Development Office.

Buxbaum found the software immediately appealing. He raised his hand saying he wanted to test and use it in his job. He loves data and “the nitty gritty of it.” He started the beta test of Gravyty in March of 2019, and has been using it every workday since then. The software enabled him, he said, to double his number of visits to potential donors in the first month.

The primary role that Gravyty plays in Buxbaum’s job is to create first draft emails for him. The system keeps track of which prospects he’s communicated with, and how recently. When he arrives at work he’ll have a couple of suggested emails to people in his major gifts portfolio, and one for his auxiliary portfolio. He says the emails suggested by Gravyty are usually a good approximation to what he would have sent on his own. He usually modifies the emails, however, particularly for his assigned major gifts portfolio members. In those he will reference a specific interest of the potential donors or a conversation he’s had with them. The Gravyty system learns from these modifications to improve its suggested language over time. When Buxbaum has information about a relationship that the database does not, he uses Gravyty’s First Draft edit feature to include that message in his outreach. For his assigned portfolio, he’s also more likely to change the priority of contact, as he knows the overarching plan for a major giving prospect.

For the auxiliary portfolio prospects, he usually makes few changes in the pre-written messages. In both portfolios, Gravyty knows if he’s sent an email and the recipient has not yet responded. The email messages it composes may suggest a call, or in normal times, a visit. If he’s planning a trip, Gravyty suggests all the people it thinks he should visit within a particular area and has a process for emailing them to propose and prepare for the visit.

Gravyty works with the data in A-State’s donor history database (Blackbaud’s Raiser’s Edge, though Gravyty integrates with other CRM systems as well). It uses a machine learning-based lead scoring model and natural language generation to compose messages, which are in each user’s individual voice and uses words they would employ. The Gravyty system provides factual backup for the lead scoring in the form of data attached to the proposed email language. It includes factors like the donor’s last gift, total lifetime giving, the last time the donor was contacted, alumni status or relatives who attended the University, and phone numbers. All the information can be viewed on one screen—as opposed to the multiple data sources and spreadsheets Buxbaum had to consult in his previous job.



TAYLOR BUXBAUM
Director of Development
Arkansas State University



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How the System Helps

Gravyty, Buxbaum says, has been the answer to his prayers in many ways. It brings all his work right into his inbox; otherwise he'd have to switch among multiple tools. He spends less time seeking out information and juggling tasks; it frees him up to do more of the human activities that only he can do. Overall, Buxbaum says, the system has made him 100% more effective; he wouldn't want to go back to a job without it. It increases his productivity, prioritizes the donor prospects he should be reaching out to, and nudges him to contact them.

When he's traveling for his job, Gravyty makes it easier to schedule the meetings, and helps him keep in touch with his assigned and auxiliary portfolio when he's on the road. The system has a mobile interface, and he can do everything he needs to do from his smartphone. Even in an airport, he can send out email messages to prospects just by modifying them on his phone screen.

Human Fundraisers Won't Vanish

Taylor Buxbaum still feels that he's in control of his job despite the capabilities of Gravyty. He still uses his own intuition about the best time to "make the ask" of a prospect. And, he points out, he's still the one "pushing the send button on the email." A lot of the job, he said, still comes down to human intuition about when and how much to ask for a donation. He can also often get additional information from a donor or prospect, such as their level of giving to other universities and nonprofits.

He doesn't worry that Gravyty or other AI-based systems will eliminate the need for his job. He summarized:

"It's up to every industry to figure out whether AI will replace human workers, but I think assisting humans works out better than replacing them. As for me, this AI helps me work more efficiently and raise more money. So of course I like it."

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Gravyty is the nonprofit industry's first and market-defining leader of fundraiser enablement tools powered by artificial intelligence (AI). By empowering frontline fundraisers to personalize outreach more efficiently than ever before, build new relationships faster, and deepen existing relationships with donors through automated stewardship Gravyty and AI transform what's possible for entire organizations through fundraising. With AI, Gravyty expands fundraising workforces without making new hires, builds donor pipeline, inspires giving, and raises new revenue for organizations on a mission to change our world.

What's more, fundraisers love Gravyty because AI and machine learning automate the most time-consuming processes that get in the way of doing the work they love – developing and cultivating relationships with donors.

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