

# Telluride Film Festival

This iconic organization turned to Supporting Strategies to bring their bookkeeping operation into a new era

When Telluride Film Festival's long-standing bookkeeper retired in 2016, the organization seized the opportunity to modernize back-office operations for optimum efficiency.

## Client Profile

Each summer, filmmakers, industry professionals, critics and cinema lovers congregate in the picturesque mountain town of Telluride, Colorado, for the Telluride Film Festival (TFF). This four-day event celebrates the art of film and previews many of the fall season's most anticipated releases. The nonprofit organization that runs the festival is headquartered in Berkeley, California.

## Ready to Go in a Different Direction

Running an annual festival in a quaint mountain town requires an impressive amount of planning and execution, plus major upfront expenses and administrative tasks. While the majority of TFF's full-time staff work in the Berkeley office, several work remotely. The team quickly balloons to roughly 300 seasonal employees during festival season.

Faced with the need to find a new bookkeeping solution, TFF explored going in a different direction. Simply hiring another full-time bookkeeper would mean ongoing challenges with a highly fluctuating bookkeeping workload and figuring out how to get by when the individual took time off. Plus, the change presented the opportunity to rethink traditional paper-based and cumbersome back-office processes that had led to challenging bottlenecks during peak festival season in previous years. For these and many other reasons, Supporting Strategies' team-based approach seemed like the perfect fit.

"We now have a vendor who can support us year-round," says Kirsten Laursen, TFF's Chief of Staff and Administration. "We don't need to worry about our Financial Operations Associate going on vacation because she can lean on her colleagues to cover for her. We don't experience a lag in services like we would if we were just relying on one person. It's nice having checks and balances in place as well."

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## Moving on from a Desktop Solution

Job #1 for Supporting Strategies was transitioning TFF away from desktop technology for its bookkeeping. With staff working remotely and the bookkeeper working in Berkeley on traditional paper-based processes and offline systems, reviewing the books and collaborating with the bookkeeper in real time had become increasingly complex and time-consuming.

By putting in place a set of integrated online tools, Supporting Strategies has made it simple for the management team to access the books and understand the financials, no matter where they are.

Next, TFF and Supporting Strategies began targeting other paper-based processes to update. Accounts payable was a high priority. The organization had traditionally received paper bills in the mail. They paid the bills with

checks that required the signature of the Executive Director, who travels often on business. It was an inefficient process that became nightmarish during festival season, when the number of bills from vendors increases exponentially and timely vendor payments are critical to the success of festival operations.

TFF implemented a digital purchase order system to efficiently control approved spending, while Supporting Strategies transitioned TFF to a cloud-based solution for paying bills electronically — a welcome change for all, especially during the hectic festival season.

## Payroll and Time Tracking Came Next

Supporting Strategies also upgraded TFF's paper-based payroll and time-tracking systems — two other acute pain points each summer. Previously, seasonal staff had to physically line up to complete paper forms for payroll processing upon reporting to the festival grounds on their first day. Each week, someone on the TFF team had to collect and manually process paper timecards.

Thanks to Supporting Strategies, seasonal employees now receive an onboarding package via email that they fill out before reporting for work the first day. They're also set up to be paid through direct deposit, eliminating the need for TFF staff to print and hand out physical checks each week.

Time tracking, Laursen notes, has also become much more efficient. “Rather than completing a paper timesheet and faxing it, everyone just logs their hours through a mobile app or computer,” she says. “This has freed up our management team to focus on other things because we no longer spend so much time and effort gathering timesheets from everyone.”

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## Passing Audits with Flying Colors

Like any nonprofit organization, TFF is subject to annual audits. In the past, TFF spent a great deal of time working with the bookkeeper on audit preparation. Even still, reporting errors frequently created challenges in preparing the audit.

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The paper-based bookkeeping system also complicated matters, as assembling the supporting materials was so labor-intensive that the auditor needed to spend a week on-site to review all documentation.

“Plus, in the previous arrangement, the auditor ended up handling certain bookkeeping tasks and TFF would engage a consultant on an as-needed basis to support the bookkeeper,” Laursen recalls. “With Supporting Strategies handling the bookkeeping, TFF has been able to delegate bookkeeping duties back into the bookkeeping realm.”

Supporting Strategies has a team-based workflow model that helps ensure accuracy. In addition, Supporting Strategies’ digital filing system has made it easier for Laursen and her colleagues to gather all necessary audit materials, which the auditor can review online. The auditor now spends just two days meeting on-site with TFF staff, and the entire process is much smoother.

TFF can’t imagine handling their bookkeeping any other way.

“Our team at Supporting Strategies really cares about continuous improvement, doing a good job and making sure our organization succeeds,” Laursen says. “I really hope it’s a relationship that we’ll have for years and years to come.”

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