

Response to Solicitation Number: SAQMMA-17-RFI-SGP

June 6, 2017

From: Owen Ambur, Chair, AIIM StratML Committee

Regarding: Innovating Diplomacy Through Partnerships and Collaboration

Thank you for the opportunity to provide information on how the Secretary's Office of Global Partnerships (S/GP) might innovate diplomacy through partnerships and collaboration.

Your goal is commendable:

To modernize the way the Department engages in diplomacy by institutionalizing private sector collaboration across bureaus and missions within the Department.

It is good that sequestration, tightening federal budgets, and uncertainty about future commitments has prompted you to seek innovative approaches to diplomacy and development. However, it is unfortunate that government bureaucracies are not more innovative – particularly when funding has been more abundant. Moreover, if your intent to establish a web-based one-stop resource center is not properly addressed, it risks reinventing the mistakes of the past, once again saddling taxpayers with an IT system that costs too much and works relatively poorly.

In response to the points set forth in the RFI, here are some suggestions on how to mitigate that risk:

(a) Offices need to collaborate with private sector partners that share similar visions and engage in innovative practices that promote our diplomacy initiatives which, in turn, enables the Department to continue to carry out our mission critical functions in challenging budgetary times.

For purposes of public diplomacy and development, collaboration should focus on common and complementary objectives documented on the Web in an open, standard, machine-readable format like Strategy Markup Language (StratML, ISO 17469-1 & ANSI/AIIM 22:2017). Since agencies are already required by [section 10](#) of the GPRM Modernization Act (GPRAMA) to publish their strategic and performance plans and reports in machine-readable format, the first step is for the Department of State and all of its bureaus, embassies, and programs simply to comply with the intent of the law.

The second step is to invite and challenge potential partners to publish complementary performance plans, using the stratml:Relationship elements to link their performance capabilities to the objectives of the Department and its components.

The third step is to challenge value-added intermediaries to demonstrate how such open, standardized, machine-readable data can be leveraged to support not only diplomacy and collaboration but also engagement of stakeholders and tracking of results.

(b) There must be a shift in the old paradigm of "government think" of relying solely on government assets, resources, and abilities to solve complex challenges to more of a "group think" paradigm where collaborative relationships and innovation drive new solutions to these challenges.

Yes, government agencies must become more collaborative, including through engagement with non-government stakeholders. However, the paradigm shift must also move beyond the groupthink that identifies centralized “proprietary” data-stovepiped so-called “one-stop” portals as a proper and innovative means of progress. Instead, the focus should be first and foremost on enabling *decentralization* IT systems and *fungibility* of software programming logic and services through the application of *open, machine-readable data standards*.

While it may be appropriate for the Department and its components to use a preferred set of software programs, partners and other stakeholders should not be expected, much less required, to do so. Diplomacy, engagement, and partnership should not be dependent upon any particular IT “platform,” system or software program(s). All that should be required for public purposes is to make the necessary information available on the Web in open, standard, machine-readable format. Beyond that, stakeholders should be free to use whatever tools, applications, and services they prefer.

The intent should not be to create yet another walled, ivory towered “garden” but, rather, to let a thousand or, better yet, a million flowers bloom all around the globe.

(c) Innovation will encourage cost savings and business ideation throughout the Department. Specifically, the platform and toolkit is intended to aid embassies and regional bureaus with limited budgets in identifying and securing innovative services (for purchase and no cost), and guiding them through the process of creating and operationalizing innovative practices such as prizes and challenges.

Again, the focus should not be on any particular “platform” but, rather, the critical need for open *data* standards – which will enable usage not only of myriad tools but also many different services, each with its own particular utilities. If anyone understands the need to avoid attempting to impose needless and counterproductive constraints upon others, diplomats should. The minimum requirement is to be able to communicate efficiently and effectively, and in the cyberspace, that means open data standards specifying not only the semantics but also the structure of the records.

For example, if the documentation of challenges is posted anywhere on the Web in open, standard, machine-readable format, it will be very easy for Google-like services to bring them to the attention of interested stakeholders. Equally importantly, if RFI and challenge respondents publish their performance reports on the Web in StratML (ANSI/AIIM 22:2017) format, the “winners” can be determined semi-automatically, either by “authorities” within the Department or preferably by crowdsourcing evaluations among the prospective *beneficiaries* of the challenges. The best form of “crowdsourcing” the selection of “winners” is actual usage by stakeholders, e.g., in an open market.

For additional information on the importance of machine-readable document standards, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Machine-Readable_Documents

Bottom line, Department offices still need to carry out their global priorities and initiatives during lean budgetary times to promote our diplomacy mission. What we would like assistance in trying to answer is how can S/GP introduce them to and guide them through utilizing, leveraging and implementing innovative methods and practices to aid them in continuing their vital, mission critical work?

Global priorities require usage of a global “platform,” namely the Internet and the World Wide Web, whose essence is a relatively simple set of technical standards. To the degree those standards are supported, the Department and all of its components can essentially use Web-based tools and applications without cost to the taxpayers. Moreover, rather than relying upon S/GP as the bottleneck to innovation, everyone within the Department and all of its stakeholders will be empowered to be creative, innovate, and demonstrate to others the utility of their efforts.

As with Google, Facebook, LinkedIn and other “social” networking services, little or no training or guidance should be required on the tools themselves. The need for training is indicative of usability problems. However, unlike social networking services, *business* networks – including those addressing the business of government – should focus on the achievement of common and complementary objectives. The last thing we need is more generic “socializing” at the taxpayers’ expense.

To solidify a strategy and comprehensive set of innovative tools and methods that will prepare Department offices to advance diplomacy through interactive partnerships. The Request for Information (RFI) provides an opportunity for interested parties to supply S/GP with information on industry capabilities and perspectives for deploying a Department-wide innovation platform and toolkit, as well as feedback and metrics, on free and for-purchase services. Services to include the following:

To solidify its strategy, the first thing the S/GP should do is begin to comply with guidance to publish not only its plans and reports in machine-readable format but also all of its other public records. For additional commentary on that point, see <https://gcn.com/articles/2017/05/10/machine-readable-data.aspx>.

Hackathons: An event in which a large number of people meet to engage in collaborative computer programming.

The agendas for hackathons should be published as performance plans in ANSI/AIIM 22:2017 format to facilitate collaboration before, during, and after each event as well as ongoing performance reporting. Taxpayers have already paid for far too many events that are far too exclusive (time and space limited) and far too unproductive.

Moreover, the computer programs developed at such events should be expected, if not required, to be capable of ingesting and outputting data in applicable open, standard, machine-readable formats. Otherwise, by definition, they are simply new proprietary data stovepipes imposing needless inflexibility and cost upon the taxpayers.

It would also be very helpful if the purposes of each software program were documented in StratML format, using the stratml:Relationship elements to link (strategically align) their capabilities (performance indicators) with the government objectives they support. Doing so will enable value-added intermediaries to facilitate discovery of such software components and engagement of potential users and performance partners.

Challenges, Competitions, Prizes: Mechanisms that allows the public to solve problems for an organization and receive awards for the best solutions

A primary challenge is to overcome the logic of the bureaucracy that seems to lead inexorably to large, inflexible, centralized, proprietary data stovepipe systems that cannot easily “talk” to each other. That has continued to occur despite guidance like Raines’ Rules, issued more than two decades ago. See <https://www.slideshare.net/Aamir97/raines-rules-revisited-a-decade-later> It is as if the bureaucracy is incapable not only of following direction but also learning from the mistakes of the past.

GPRAMA requires agencies to document management challenges and publish their performance plans in machine-readable format. If and, hopefully, when the Department complies with the law, it will be easy for value-added intermediaries to enable qualified stakeholders to implement solutions to those problems, thereby dynamically contributing to continuous improvement on an ongoing basis.

Crowd Sourcing: The practice of obtaining information or input into a task or project by enlisting the services of a large number of people, either paid or unpaid, typically via the Internet.

The primary problem is not a lack of people willing to contribute but, rather, the inefficiency and ineffectiveness of systems for providing information, input, and feedback. For example, the RFI system itself is highly inefficient. No one should be forced to read any, much less many documents as long as 15 (or more) pages to find information of direct interest to them, based upon their own objectives.

Compliance with section 10 of GPRAMA will enable value-added intermediaries to make it far easier for stakeholders to discover objectives of interest to them and to engage far more effectively in accomplishing those objectives. In particular, compliance with GPRAMA will empower stakeholders to link their own performance indicators to government agency objectives, thereby streamlining the process of identifying and evaluating potential inputs, including via crowdsourcing.

Design Thinking: A methodology used by designers to solve complex problems and find desirable solutions for clients.

While this issue is not directly applicable to the StratML standard, service providers supporting the standard will certainly be able to facilitate the process of solving complex problems, by: a) breaking down the visionary solutions to complex problems into longer-term goals, near-term objectives, and measurable performance indicators; and b) engaging qualified stakeholders far more efficiently and effectively in performance partnerships in pursuit of those objectives.

Round Tables: A facilitated discussion with members from outside the Department that generates ideas on a common subject.

While the common wisdom is that discussion is always good, the reality is that we already have far too much of it that is far too unproductive, if not counterproductive, e.g., by accentuating political polarization. Rather than merely focusing on “common subjects,” input should focus on explicit objectives and be evaluated in accord with performance metrics specified for each objective.

The best kind of inputs are those that can be processed directly in the value chain leading from inputs to outputs and to outcomes. In and of itself, discussion is of little use. It must be processed in order to have utility and too much of it that is ill-focused is a bigger part of the problem than the solution. The problem is well characterized by the phrase “too much talk and too little action.”

Round table discussions may be fun and informative but, properly employed, they complement rather than substitute for more productive forms of engagement in support of the achievement of explicit objectives.

Big Thinks: A knowledge forum that helps organizations find smarter ideas faster by catalyzing conversations around topics most critical to business success.

It is common knowledge that good ideas are plentiful and, thus, cheap but good implementation are far rarer and, thus, valuable. A corollary is that what's needed is not more "thinking," large or small, but more doing. Prospects should be explored for skipping the first three stages of the Tuckman model and proceeding directly to performing in pursuit of common objectives supporting shared values. See <http://stratml.us/references/Cut2Chase.pdf>

It terms of thinking big about the broader picture, consideration should also be given to prospects for moving beyond democracy, voting, and majoritarianism, to direct peer-to-peer engagement. For more information along those lines, see <http://stratml.us/references/DictatorshipDemocracyPerformance.pdf>

Diplomacy Lab: A public-private partnership that enables the U.S. Department of State to crowdsource research and innovation related to foreign policy challenges by harnessing the efforts of students and faculty experts at colleges and universities across the U.S.

Facilitating the discovery and engagement of performance partners is among the purposes of the StratML standard. While efforts are underway to "open" science, the research and education communities should be encouraged, if not required as a condition for public funding, to embrace the good practice required of Federal agencies by section 10 of GPRAMA. If and, hopefully, when they do, value-added intermediaries can turbocharge management by objectives (MBO) on a worldwide scale. Among the result will be far more expeditious and effective integration of research results into practice, including the practice of diplomacy.

Accelerators: Innovative, startup funding mechanism that helps entrepreneurs with a business idea of their own and professional development.

Among the most effective things the Department might do is comply with section 10 of GPRAMA so that value-added intermediaries can enable entrepreneurs to more easily and clearly understand the Department's objectives and strategically align (link) their product and service offerings to those objectives.

Incubators: Spaces that specifically target and help new and startup companies to address their needs and develop their business ideas to transform them into sustainable realities

Attempting to create yet another so-called "one-stop space" would be to repeat the mistakes of the past. Business networking services should be based on an open, machine-readable data standard like StratML. Such services will empower entrepreneurs to strategically align their capabilities with public objectives far more efficiently and effectively than ever before possible.

It is not Uncle Sam's role to determine when or where collaboration can occur but, rather, to facilitate its occurrence by supporting the necessary and relevant standards, like StratML.

The proposed innovation platform and toolkit will offer a variety of services that support innovation tools, techniques and practices, and will encourage innovation for cost savings and business ideation throughout the Department. More importantly, these types of innovation platforms have a proven track record of spurring innovation and enabling Federal agencies to:

- Pay only for success and establish an ambitious goal without having to predict which team or approach is most likely to succeed;

Section 10 of GPRAMA requires agencies to publish their goals and objectives in machine-readable format, like StratML. When the Department does that, value-added intermediaries will empower individuals, teams, and organizations to demonstrate the effectiveness of their offerings in support of public objectives. Ultimately, the results will speak for themselves, in terms of outcomes for stakeholders.

- Reach beyond the "usual suspects" to increase the number of solvers tackling a problem and to identify novel approaches, without bearing high levels of risk

Complying with the law (section 10 of GPRAMA) by using an international voluntary consensus standard like ISO 17469-1 should entail relatively little risk. Doing so will enable all "suspects" to engage in solving public problems, to the maximum extent of their capabilities.

- Bring out-of-discipline perspectives to bear;

When goals, objectives, and performance indicators are documented in machine-readable format, augmented intelligence (AI) can be more effectively applied to discover and engage stakeholders across scientific and professional disciplines. The stratml:Relationship elements can also be used to manually draw and confirm connections among objectives and performance indicators across plans, organizations, and disciplines.

- Increase cost-effectiveness to maximize the return on taxpayer dollars; and

A key way to reduce needless cost is to avoid vendor lock-in due to the lack of usage of open, machine-readable data standard. If the records are maintained in open formats throughout their full life-cycles, IT system switching costs can be minimized.

Another key is to implement software components in relatively small increments, each of which stands on its own, free of dependencies upon other components (as directed by Raines' Rules more than two decades ago).

Software components should become fungible, which is why vendors cannot be expected to support open data standards unless their customers insist. The Department has an obligation to taxpayers to require that any software tools and services it uses support open data standards.

- Establish clear success metrics and validation protocols that themselves become defining tools and standards for the subject industry or field.

As required by GPRAMA, performance metrics should be published in open, standard, machine-readable format. This point hints at the centrality of data standards. That point should be made more explicit. Data standards are key, not any particular tool or protocol.

S/GP seeks a better understanding of existing market capabilities to construct a future RFP. We ask that, in your response to this RFI, your firm provide substantive responses to as many of the following questions as applicable:

- What are your core capabilities and service offerings? Where have they been implemented?

StratML is not a “service”. It is an international (ISO 17469-1) and American national (ANSI/AIIM 22:2017) standard for the content of strategic and performance plans and reports.

Federal agencies have not yet complied with section 10 of GPRAMA, which requires them to publish their plans and reports in machine-readable format, like StratML. However, there are about 4,000 plans in the prototypical StratML collection, including a number of the Department’s plans, at <http://stratml.us/drybridge/index.htm#DOS> and S/GP’s in particular, at <http://stratml.us/carmel/iso/SOGPwStyle.xml>

The tools, apps, and services that have been developed thus far are listed at <http://stratml.us/index.htm#Forms> & <http://stratml.us/index.htm#Services>

- How long have you been in business and how many employees do you have? How many clients do you currently have?

AIIM’s StratML Committee is not a business. It is a standards development organization, of the sort in which agencies are charged with participating. (Reference [OMB Circular A-119](#).) AIIM’s Standards Board chartered the StratML Committee in September 2007. StratML Part 1, the StratML core ([ISO 17469-1](#)) was published on February 11, 2015.

- Is your product scalable?

StratML is not a product but it will enable scalability of software tools and services at the level of the World Wide Web. It will turbocharge management by objectives (MBO) on a global scale.

- Is your product ADA compliant?

StratML is based upon XML, which is plain text and readily accessible via screen readers.

- How do you define an innovation platform and toolkit? What are the advantages and disadvantages to having an internal vs. external interface for the platform and toolkit? How do you measure if the platform is successful?

In the first instance, the success of the StratML standard will depend upon whether agencies use it to comply with section 10 of the GPRA Modernization Act (GPRAMA). If they do, no application programming interface (API) will be required, either internal or external. Since StratML is based upon XML, any XML-enabled software tools and services can be used, to the extent of their own capabilities.

Ultimately, the success of the StratML standard will be measured by the degree to which it helps anyone on earth to accomplish their own objectives more efficiently and effectively than possible without such a standard. That is a fairly apt description of innovation at scale. Some of the types of tools, apps, and services that will be required are listed at <http://stratml.us/carmel/iso/SMLTASwStyle.xml>.

- What resources are needed to implement this platform and toolkit? How long would it take to implement and go live?

Several of the Department's plans are already available in StratML format at

<http://stratml.us/drybridge/index.htm#DOS>. So in that sense, it has already been implemented.

However, how long it takes the Department to comply with section 10 of GPRAMA remains to be seen and is dependent upon direction from the Department's leaders. If and, hopefully, when such direction is given, implementation can begin immediately.

- What collaboration do you expect from your clients?

The minimum requirement is for the Department to comply with the law, i.e., section 10 of the GPRA Modernization Act (GPRAMA).

- What services would you offer to meet our business issues, as you understand them? How would you bring value?

Usage of the StratML standard would enable the Department to comply not only with section 10 of GPRAMA but also subsections [202\(b\)\(4\) & \(5\)](#) and [207\(d\)](#) of the **eGov Act**, which respectively require agencies to:

- Work together to link their performance goals to **key groups**, including citizens, businesses, and other governments, as well as internal Federal Government operations; and
- Adopt open standards (e.g., StratML) enabling the **organization and categorization** of Government information in a way that is searchable electronically and interoperably across agencies.

Ultimately, beneficiaries of the standard and its supporting services will include anyone who wants to accomplish anything anywhere anytime and needs to engage others, including diplomats and international development agencies.

- How do you manage customer satisfaction?

The standards development process is open to anyone who chooses to participate. Agencies are charged by OMB Circular A-119 with participating in the development and usage of standards applicable to their objectives.

- What tools do you always use on your innovation projects? What do you charge for this? Can you quote a sample project?

Not applicable.

- Can we use your product or does it have to be managed by a technical team? If a technical team is needed, what type of technical support is offered for your product? Does it require additional fees?

The StratML schema is freely available for usage by anyone who chooses to do so. Whether training will be required depends upon the complexity of the tools used to create, edit, share, analyze, and report strategic and performance information. For example, for those who are familiar with Microsoft Word, a StratML plug-in could be used, probably without any training or technical support.

- Will your company be the administrator for this product, or can it be done remotely or by a U.S. Department of State representative?

StratML is not a product and its usage requires no administration. Users are free to use whatever XML-enabled tools, apps, and services they prefer. However, to the degree the Department or anyone else might like to see extensions or enhancements to the schema, they would be more than welcome to participate in the StratML Committee.

- Will you provide training for your product exclusively to us?

Little or no training should be required. However, we will be happy to respond to any further questions that may arise.

- What, if any, contract/BPA vehicles do you provide these tools or services under?

No contract or authorization is required to use the StratML standard. However, agencies must decide for themselves what tools and services they will use to comply with the relevant requirements of GPRAMA and the eGov Act.

- What questions haven't we asked that we should be asking? What is this draft SOO missing?

The key issue is what open, machine-readable data standards will be supported. The RFI shows no apparent awareness of law and policy direction regarding the development and usage of such standards.

Each prospective vendor should be required to document which data standards their products and services support. Failure to support the relevant standards should be disqualifying.

Moreover, to the degree existing data standards may be inadequate to address all of the essential requirements, agencies should participate in enhancing them, as directed by OMB Circular A-119.

- What questions do you have of us, based on this request or the objectives listed?

It would be good to know if the Department plans to comply with the law – particularly section 10 of GPRAMA and the related provisions of the eGov Act cited above.