Whither Grants.gov?

S2S and the future of federal grant applications

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In the Sept./Oct. 2008 issue of NCURA Magazine, Grants.gov staff delivered a summary of recent history in an article, "*Grants.gov Today and Tomorrow*". While the "yesterday" and "today" aspects of Grants.gov were well described, the "tomorrow" was barely mentioned.

Everyone is familiar with the pain associated with the PureEdge version of Grants.gov, and the applicant community is still slogging through the final conversion to Adobe forms, over 18 months later than it was originally scheduled. But it's "tomorrow" that the applicant community should be most concerned about, given the history and current state of the service.

First, let's acknowledge the successes of Grants.gov. They've been effective at persuading all the agencies to use the service and to post opportunities in a (mostly) consistent format. They've also produced a usable web site experience. The "Find" side of the service is quite mature and effective.

The "Apply" side of the service is where the difficulties reside. Granted, PureEdge didn't work out so well, and it was imperative to move to a different platform. However, we have to question the wisdom of rebuilding the PureEdge interface in the Adobe format. The original justification for doing so was to "limit the effects of the transition on applicants," which would have made sense if the original interface had anything worth saving. As it stands, the decision to replicate the PureEdge interface in Adobe has resulted in a ponderous and clumsy user experience that promises to be with us tomorrow… and beyond.

One of the more surprising statements in the article was that "Grants.gov encourages the use of a system-to-system (S2S) interface for organizations and institutions with a large volume of application submissions." What's surprising about this is how little active support the S2S standard actually receives from Grants.gov.

Grants.gov encourages use of S2S presumably because S2S submissions arrive with much lower support requirements and much fewer multiple submissions. Since S2S submissions are direct transmissions of XML data, the Grants.gov servers do not have to extract XML from the forms as with PureEdge/Adobe submissions. Since most submission errors originate in the downloadable forms packages, these submissions create much higher support burden for the applicants, as well as on Grants.gov servers and support staff. Based on data presented by Grants.gov at the FDP meeting in Sept, 2008, they receive as many support calls as they do submissions.

Even though S2S submissions are faster and easier, the Grants.gov site offers few indications to the applicant community that there is any alternative to the PureEdge/Adobe forms. The Grants.gov site gives the clear impression that the only viable method for submitting is to download the PureEdge or Adobe viewers. Despite it being in the best interests of Grants.gov for more submissions to come via S2S, they make no effort to educate the applicant community about alternative submission tools.

Consequently, S2S submissions are a small percentage of the volume at Grants.gov. Over 90% of all submissions are done via PureEdge and Adobe forms. If the S2S format is more efficient, less error-prone and easier to process, why doesn't Grants.gov make it easier to do business via S2S?

We at Cayuse think the S2S standard is one of the better and least utilized public computing protocols. If, instead of rebuilding PureEdge in the Adobe format four years ago, Grants.gov had moved toward a web-based interface based on S2S, we'd have a much different landscape today. In effect, the decision was made to swap one set of desktop forms for another, while perpetuating many of the inherent usability issues. Downloadable forms were a good solution in the mid-1980s but it's a Web world now and S2S is the way to go.

As it stands today, S2S earns little attention compared to the emphasis on Adobe forms. For example, in the recent "System Build 2008-02" referred to in the Grants.gov article, the S2S community received a few enhancements from the many that we had been requesting for several years. However, S2S integrators were not notified that the changes had been made until System Build 2008-02 had been put into production, even though the technical details had been available for weeks or months in advance. If the S2S community were on par with the downloadable forms, specifications would have been shared in advance, giving S2S vendors and university systems time to update their systems to take advantage of the changes.

So, back to the title question: "whither Grants.gov?" In the NCURA article, the Grants.gov authors state that they are "considering new technology for a future system architecture." Clues to this future were visible in Grants.gov's own Sources Sought Notice (an SSN is basically a Request for Information), issued in early September. In that SSN, Grants.gov stated that it intends to "no longer be in the ownership and management of IT." They're also considering implementations in "a cloud computing environment," with "software-as-a-service (SaaS) capability" as part of a new solution.

What do all these buzzwords actually mean, and where is Grants.gov actually heading? There are two different paths that Grants.gov could take.

One path would be to continue trying to rehabilitate the downloadable forms model and try to transform it into a web-based model. In this scenario, Grants.gov would likely continue to invest in the proprietary Adobe technologies. They seem intent on exploring the concept of "cloud computing" and investing in the new development architecture Adobe is promoting. This approach implies a long design and development phase, resulting in a new technology approach several years from now. It would be yet another derivative of the downloadable forms model, likely carrying forward baggage from the past. It would also come with the risk associated with developing software on a new, proprietary platform.

Given the current emphasis on Adobe technologies at Grants.gov, this approach would seem to have the inside track and a legitimate question might be: do we trust the people who brought us the Adobe version of PureEdge, and the "Broken Pipe" problem to design the next generation of Grants.gov? Further, what role will the grants community have in shaping the future?

The other path would be to take better advantage of the proven web-based S2S standard. The private sector already has examples of scalable, SaaS approaches to Grants.gov, built on the S2S web services. There are strong arguments for leveraging existing commercial software and rolling out a web-based version of Grants.gov in the very near term. It's frequently faster and less expensive to buy rather than build, and the applicant community is clamoring for a true web-based platform. There is also a significant investment in S2S solutions at key universities in the U.S. that need to be protected.

As we look at models for the future, it's important to keep a perspective on the balance of successes and failures. Clearly, Grants.gov has delivered some real improvements to the grants community, on both the applicant and grantor sides. Furthermore, they are diligent and focused, if somewhat opaque at times, in their approach to communication and problem resolution within the current configuration. However, in the interests of providing a solution of real value to the research community we would like to see Grants.gov de-emphasize the outdated forms-based model and invest in, promote and extend the proven S2S model already in use. It will be interesting to see how Grants.gov proceeds in their planning for tomorrow, and whether they engage the grants community in the process.

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