THE UNIVERSAL SERVICE ADMINISTRATIVE COMPANY (USAC) SEEKS COMMENT ON GOALS AND FEATURES TO BE CONSIDERED FOR THE POTENTIAL INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY MODERNIZATION OF THE SYSTEMS SUPPORTING THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE SCHOOLS AND LIBRARIES PROGRAM OF THE FEDERAL UNIVERSAL SERVICE FUND

Comment Date: March 22, 2013
Reply Comment Date: April 12, 2013

Background

By this notice, the Universal Service Administrative Company (USAC) is seeking comments from interested parties concerning USAC's plans for modernization of information technology (IT) systems supporting the operations of the federal Universal Service Schools and Libraries Support Mechanism (the SLSM, also known as the E-rate Program). This notice does not encompass or seek comments on recommendations for changes to Federal Communications Commission (FCC or Commission) policy or regulations.

USAC is a not-for-profit Delaware corporation. The FCC appointed USAC as the permanent administrator of the Universal Service Support Mechanisms – High Cost, Low Income, Rural Health Care, and E-rate (collectively referred to as programs or support mechanisms) – as set forth in Title 47, Part 54, Section 701 of the Code of Federal Regulations. The E-rate Program makes discounts available to eligible schools and libraries for telecommunication services, Internet access, and internal connections. E-rate is intended to provide eligible schools and libraries access to affordable telecommunications and information services.

The current systems supporting the E-rate Program have reached the end of their lifecycle and require extensive modernization to achieve satisfactory reliability and performance goals, provide an improved beneficiary and service provider experience, and have flexibility and scalability to meet future program requirements. USAC is considering make and/or buy solutions to modernize these systems.

Request for Comments: USAC seeks comments from E-rate program stakeholders, including IT providers, on goals for the E-rate program IT modernization (SLITM) project and on features to be implemented. These comments will be used to shape USAC's current vision of the characteristics of future E-rate Program operations and the SLITM solution. A brief description of the desired features and functions is listed below.

USAC also seeks comments from E-rate program stakeholders, including IT providers, on a draft statement of work (SOW) and its attachments if USAC issues a Request for Proposal (RFP) for the SLITM project. These comments will be used to refine the SOW to enhance the achievement of a successful project implementation. The draft SOW is available at www.usac.org/sl/tools/SLITM/default.aspx.

Specifically, we seek comment on the sufficiency of the attached documentation for potential bidders. Are the systems requirements detailed in the Statement of Work sufficient to support a firm, fixed-price bid? If not, what additional information should be included to enable a firm, fixed-price? Please provide comments on any other aspect of the procurement specifications that could be clarified or improved. Please use the section references in the draft SOW to provide detailed comments.

With respect to the features and functions of the system, are the necessary features and functions contemplated in the new system? If not, what is missing? If not all of the desired certain features and functions are possible, which should have priority? That is, which of the features and functions are "must-have" and which are only desired?

Interested parties may file comments or reply comments electronically on or before the dates indicated above. All information submitted including names and addresses will be publicly available via the web at www.usac.org/sl/tools/SLITM/comments.aspx within two business days from submittal. Also visit this web location for information regarding the SL program and the current program operations. Please note that USAC will post all comments we receive, without change, including any personal information you provide. Anyone can find and read the electronic form of all comments received, including the name of the individual sending the comment (or signing the comment for an association, business, labor union, etc.).

Comments must be submitted electronically by e-mail to SLITMcomments@usac.org. Reply comments may be submitted electronically by via e-mail to SLITMreplycomments@usac.org. Filers should follow these instructions for submitting comments.

- Filers must transmit one electronic copy of their comments with a subject of "SLITM Comments" for initial comments and if submitting reply comments "SLITM Reply Comments" to the respective e-mail address indicated above. The e-mail must be received by 11:59 p.m. EST on the due date.

Include the following information in the beginning of the body of the message: "SLITM Comments" or "SLITM Reply Comments", filer's full name, filer's U.S. Postal Service mailing address, and if represented by counsel, the law firm's name and attorney's name.

Brief Description of the Project

The SLITM solution must support the following functions performed by USAC in conducting SL Program operations:

- Application intake (online and paper forms).
- Application review and decision (automated and manual multi-level reviews and varies based on service type requested).
- Budgeting/obligation of funds (commitment).

- Invoice payment intake and processing (automated and manual multi-level reviews).
- Post-commitment intake and processing such as appeals, audits, and commitment adjustments (automated and manual multi-level reviews).
- Manage status of participants in the SL Program.
- Provide customer service to participants in the SL Program.
- Manage mailing and letter retention.
- Manage eligibility of services supported by the SL Program.
- Manage business rules and user administration.
- Provide reports.

In addition to the foregoing, the solution must have the following capabilities:

- Customer relationship management (including customer service, contact management).
- Document/content management.
- Business rules management.
- Forms design and management.
- Workflow management.
- Data management (entry, retrieval, query, import, and export).
- Reporting.
- Search tools.
- Application level access control/security.
- Fulfillment/notification management.
- Online self-service/portals.
- Financial management or be capable of integration with USAC's financial system for financial management.

The SLTIM will meet the following objectives:

1. Enhance the customer experience for applicants and service providers by:
   (a) Making the application and invoicing process easier and faster.
   (b) Rendering speedier application decisions.
   (c) Supporting applicants and service providers in meeting program deadlines through notifications and alerts.
   (d) Supporting browsers/technologies utilized by applicants and service providers.
   (e) Affording easier access to enhanced search functions to applicants, service providers, and other interested parties.

2. Gain operational efficiencies by:
   (a) Making E-rate Program operations more efficient.
   (b) Providing self-service through applicant and service provider portals.
   (c) Enhancing internal user experience.
   (d) Improving flexibility.
   (e) Responding quickly to FCC rule and program changes.

(f) Storing, retrieving and assembling information for appeals, audits, investigations and Freedom of Information Act ("FOIA") requests quicker and easier.
(g) Reducing costs to operate and maintain IT applications.
(h) Using business rules configured by USAC management to control business functions to reduce the need for IT services to support routine operations;
(i) Enhancing reporting/business intelligence.
(j) Improving the ability to easily and accurately report on new data collected on FCC forms.
(k) Increasing financial management at the transaction level.
(l) Improving integration with USAC's financial/accounting system.

The SLITM will allow for re-engineered operations processes and procedures and will be defined utilizing modern technologies available in the market. The goal is not only to resolve the current business challenges, but also take the opportunity to improve program operations and implement the ability to respond to program changes quickly for the next 10 to 20 years. The three major principles to leverage technology, keep it simple, and make it easy to use are USAC's vision of the characteristics of the SLITM solution.

A. Leverage Technology

USAC intends to replace the current E-rate Program operations system through the deployment of the SLITM solution and is looking to take advantage of modern technology to automate operations and thereby gain maximum operational efficiencies. The SLITM solution will provide maximum automation of tasks while maintaining program integrity. These tasks may include mobile applications, workflow, paperless notification, alerts for changes in application status, alerts for upcoming events, and reminders for actions needed by participants.

USAC supports paper and electronic applications and other program required documentation as well as the issuance of its decisions letters by mail or by fax. Even though USAC may need to continue paper-based submissions and issuances of program materials, the goal is to reduce paper usage whenever possible through the use of e-mail or other electronic notification, content management, and imaging technologies.

B. Keep It Simple

The SLITM solution should demonstrate simple, intuitive ways to navigate, submit applications, review forms and reference documents, make changes and retrieve data. It should contain user-friendly features that enhance communication between USAC and E-rate Program stakeholders. It will provide a simple solution that does not overwhelm the end users. Simply put, the SLITM solution should make information easily accessible, and clearly show the users what it takes to complete each step in the process successfully.

USAC envisions that the solution will:

1. The "apply for funding" process would include easy-to-read instructions for external users and demonstrate an easy look and feel.
2. Allow users to enter the required data once in the application process.

3. Allow for importing and exporting data through various types of formats.
4. Allow for the uploading of supporting documents for external users.
5. Minimize manual reviews and validations, and use prior year application information whenever possible to verify compliance.
6. Provide a simplified method to write, store, modify, and access reviewers' notes and other reference documentation used for application reviews for internal users.
7. Reduce the level of effort required for communication between the reviewers and the applicants and/or service providers (e.g., when reviewers are requesting additional reference documents during reviews).
8. Enable information relationship management to reduce duplicate requests.
9. Simplify the document request process through electronic notification and alerts.
10. Set up calendar items and online reminders for applicants and service (e.g., general program due dates and reminders as well as applicant specific reminders).
11. Simplify the mechanisms for requesting data and displaying application status, disbursements, reviewing status, historical data in real time through various types of formats for external and internal users (e.g., Microsoft® Excel and flat file).
12. Provide a simplified mechanism for data storage to prevent redundancy.

C. Make It Easy to Use

Maximum usability makes the system solution more intuitive to the end user. This concept would be at the core of the solution design. The SLITM solution will support all types of users, including applicants, service providers, E-rate Program management, customer service, USAC Finance, and other USAC divisions. The solution will consider these five characteristics of ease of use: effectiveness, efficiency, engaging, error-free, and ease of learning.

C.1 Effectiveness

Effectiveness is the completeness and accuracy with which the various stakeholders achieve their specified goals. Effectiveness is intended to insure that stakeholders can successfully meet their goals and that their work is done correctly to the fullest extent possible. Some features that could be considered for the SLITM solution to enhance effectiveness are:

1. Automate tasks – whenever and wherever possible – such as auto-assignment and auto-application review based on user-configured program rules and FCC regulations.
2. Include comprehensive and user-friendly reporting features, e.g., dashboard, providing real-time visibility of status and state of applicants, application status, decisions, funds availability, and performance measurement for internal and external users – which includes applicants, service providers, E-rate program management and other USAC divisions.
3. Provide service and invoice deadline approvals automatically based on pre-set rules.
4. Provide an interface to the USAC financial system – committing the correct funding amount, committing to the right applicant, making commitments correctly.
5. Support the recording of E-rate Program financial management at the transaction level; and improve the interface with USAC financial management system to make

fund commitments, capture line items, perform three-way matching, and payment by individual invoice line items.

6. Build user assistance for the applicants into the user interface.
7. Provide terminology in plain language that is appropriate to the task.
8. Offer redundant navigation for ambiguous situations to allow external users to reach the correct outcome.
9. Enhance the customer experience by providing feedback and responses in real time.
10. Maximize security and access control; sign in once and access to all systems in the solution with pre-setup user roles and permissions; time out function when no activity happens for a pre-set amount of time.
11. Present clear error messages and feedback and keep visual intrusions to a minimum for mandatory fields and required data entries.
12. Provide the ability for users to save work and return to it at a later time.
13. Provide a repository for applicants and service providers to catalog, store and retrieve their submissions, supporting documentation and USAC administrator decisions.
14. Provide user-defined reporting in a simple manner.

C.2 Efficiency

Efficiency is the speed (with accuracy) and total resources expended for the stakeholders to complete their tasks using the SLITM solution. The features listed below could be included in the SLITM solution to enhance efficiency:

1. Enhance the customer experience by self-servicing through user portals, real-time response to inquiries and enhanced search capability.
2. Offer self-managed user accounts and password reset.
3. Allow online submission of applications and upload of supporting documents.
4. Allow imaging of all paper documents from external sources.
5. Allow for notifications of paper documents – receipt acknowledgement and business rule-based delivery to appropriate internal staff.
6. Provide a repository for document retention of all reference documents.
7. Trigger letters/phone calls automatically based on the preferred mode of contact.
8. Provide reporting available "anytime," "anywhere" by "any" device, with Internet connection across platforms to "anyone" who participates in the program; and allow to the extent possible stakeholders to perform business intelligent analysis without compromising confidential information, security or integrity.
9. Maximize system scalability to handle both peak and off-peak seasons during the annual program lifecycle.
10. Optimize the solution for smart phone and mobile use.
11. Maximize flexibility of user functions by allowing configurable and user-defined parameters that are configurable when changes to program rules, contents of letters, notifications and alerts occur.
12. Define the tasks from the applicants' point of view.
13. Allow for keyboard, mouse, touch screen and other advanced data input methods and provide keyboard shortcuts for proficient users and a set of choices for one-time or infrequent users.

14. Provide maximum system performance with reasonable response time when interacting with the solution.
15. Accept documents through various input methods including but not limited to: portal, e-mail, fax and postal mails.

C.3 Engaging

The SLITM solution should engage the users. Features that could be included in the SLITM solution include:

1. An engaging style of visual presentation: graphic images, colors, multimedia.
2. An enhanced users' experience with a well-designed, informative and readable text.
3. A user-centered design with easy navigation that includes, for example, keyboard shortcuts, menus, links and buttons with clear instructions.
4. A simple menu-command style of system interaction.
5. Ability to move easily between disparate activities with quick return to point last used.

C.4 Error-Free

USAC's ultimate goal is to have a highly-reliable, scalable, durable system solution. Error detection prevents errors caused by the user's interaction with the solution and helps the users in recovering from any errors that do occur. The SLITM solution could include the following features to address effective error detection:

1. Maximized system reliability to ensure data integrity and accuracy.
2. Auto spelling correction for messages, labels and data entry.
3. Easy modifications to keep online information and instructions up-to-date.
4. Hyperlinks that are clear to the users and that work as they should.
5. A simple method for populating and correcting data.
6. Prevention of incorrect actions. Provide a clear description of the problem when errors occur. Include direct link(s) to correct the problem, use clear language, avoid technical jargon, and group dependent fields or choices together.
7. Prohibit or limit users' ability to take invalid actions. Limit choices when possible; provide clear examples for data entry; present only appropriate navigation options.
8. Prohibit or limit users' ability to take irreversible actions. Provide the ability to back track, provide means to undo or reverse actions, and avoid dead-end screens.
9. Plan for the unexpected and handle exceptions properly.
10. Log actions to enable trouble-shooting by customer representatives and support personnel.

C.5 Ease of Learning

USAC realizes the growing use of IT promises an increase in end-user productivity. Despite how well a solution is designed, questions arise. Online help, training and reference materials would be made available and would be easy to understand and follow so the users can learn the solution at their own pace. As the end-user productivity is tied directly to functionality and ease of learning and use, the system functions would fit actual work at USAC and the solution would be easy to learn and use to ensure the

solution can be quickly adopted by USAC internal and external users. The user interface should allow users to build on their knowledge without deliberate effort.

The following characteristics are sought in the SLITM solution:

1. Include built-in online instruction for difficult or advanced tasks and clear instructions on how the solution works, and include an online chat feature.
2. Provide easy to understand user manuals and online assistance with pictures and diagrams to help the end user quickly become familiar with the solution and able to use the solution with confidence to complete necessary work.
3. Provide for the use of frequently asked questions with indexing to assist in easy detection of issues and their resolution.
4. Provide access to training materials, connect to domain knowledge base, and link to reference documents when needed.
5. Allow easy operation by office professional and non-frequent users.
6. Allow users to build on their prior knowledge of computer systems, as well as any interaction patterns they have learned from the solution.
7. Follow the commonly accepted user interface design in the market place and ensure an information flow that is logical and smooth on the user interface.
8. Provide a consistent interface; ensure that terminology does not change; place design elements and controls in familiar locations and have similar functions behave similarly.
9. Place user interface controls where users expect them to be.
10. Make any future development/releases as seamless as possible to the end users with minimal disruption to USAC business operations.
11. Make new functions easy to learn by providing controls predictable to the users.
12. Allow creation of self-maintained user profiles with customizable screen layout based on users' preference and selections.

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