

In the Trenches *Making the Grade on Funding*

The Schools and Libraries Program, commonly known as E-Rate, is a federal program that makes discounts available to eligible schools and libraries for telecommunications services, Internet access and internal connections. E-Rate is funded through the Universal Service Fund (USF), which collects fees charged to companies that provide interstate and/or international telecommunications services. The USF is administered by the Universal Service Administrative Company (USAC) under the direction of the Federal Communications Commission.

Solix, Inc. of Parsippany manages the operation of the E-Rate program for USAC as a neutral administrator. The company developed an automated application process that is now used by more than 90 percent of the schools and libraries that apply for E-Rate grants nationwide.

E-Rate grants range from 20 percent to 90 percent of the cost of eligible services and equipment, depending on the average household income level and the urban or rural status of the area in which the school or library is located.

Funding is requested under four categories of service: telecommunications services, Internet access, internal connections and basic maintenance of internal connections. Eligible schools, school districts and libraries may apply individually or as part of a consortium.

Solix ensures that all applications, regardless if submitted electronically or by paper, are given equitable attention.

After an application has been entered into Solix' processing system, anomalies are flagged for specific review. Changes in an applicant's requested grant level from the previous year or applications from schools or libraries that have never applied for E-Rate grants are examples of entries that will receive additional evaluation.

Solix' reviewers analyze each application to determine eligibility for the equipment or services requested and to validate the requested grant based on the community's average income level. Each reviewed application then undergoes several layers of quality review to ensure strict adherence to program guidelines and to verify that supporting documentation was properly archived and referenced.

Upon completion of the application review process, a funding commitment decision is issued to notify the applicant and the equipment/service vendor of the approval, modification or denial of the request. During each funding year, Solix delivers more than 150,000 notifications to applicants and vendors and notifies the USAC of approved applications.

If the demand for E-Rate exceeds available funds, support is first allocated to the schools and libraries in communities where the need is greatest, based upon poverty level.

Solix has reviewed nearly 400,000 applications, representing more than one million individual grants, on behalf of E-Rate since the program began in 1998. In addition, the company has reviewed approximately 6,000 funding commitment decisions for potential adjustment or recovery of improperly disbursed funds, processed almost 2 million requests for reimbursement and handled 25,000 appeals during the same time period.

The USAC announced in May it would release 18,200 funding commitment decision letters (a record amount) to Funding Year 2010 school and library applicants. The

letters account for more than \$429 million in support and represent more than 40 percent of all applications received by the filing deadline. This first wave of current year funding decisions was the largest ever for the program. Subsequent waves of funding decisions are made until all have been processed.

Solix is a process outsourcing firm serving government and commercial clients. The company provides solutions for program administration, with an emphasis on eligibility determination, funds distribution, grant administration and compliance reviews.

Solix-managed programs include Internet and telecommunications infrastructure grant administration for schools, libraries and rural health care providers; low-income telephone and electric service discount certification and verification; and support services for the physically impaired. Solix offers peer review and grant administration services, with a focus on high-technology research, economic development projects and social service programs.

For more information on the E-Rate program, visit <http://www.usac.org/sl/>.

Member Perspective... *Self-Development Through Self-Coaching*

By Howard Guttman

As September rolls around and a new school year begins for learners from kindergarten to college, my thoughts naturally turn to "education" and how we define it.

In the Western world, we are taught to look for wisdom outside ourselves. Typically this involves mastering facts, from the 3Rs to the Theory of Relativity. We tend to ignore another type of education – one that focuses internally and that can be of equal or greater value as we strive to become more accomplished and better human beings.

When we do think about developing ourselves, many of us believe it is something we cannot do alone. Think of all the paid teachers, trainers, career counselors, diet organizations and other professional "coaches" that people turn to for help.

Yet there are millions of people out there, in both the business world and everyday life, who would like to improve themselves in some area of their life but for one reason or another cannot or choose not to avail themselves of the services of a professional coach.

For them I recommend a self-coaching

process – one that can be used by the vast number of people who are intent on creating a new future for themselves, either by modifying or changing behavior that is hindering them or by adopting new, more productive habits to improve their performance on the job or in their life.

For these people, the first place you should turn is not to some outside agency or program but inward, to yourself. Change is, first and foremost, an interior game; you are the star player. Self-coaching is a way for you to undertake the process of self-development, enabling you to achieve breakthrough performance on the job and in your life.

Personal change is something that occurs in one of two basic ways. It happens either by chance or by choice. I grew up in inner-city Newark in the 1960s. It was a tough, ethnic ghetto where there was a widespread sense among residents that they were at the mercy of larger forces over which they exercised little or no control. In their mind, personal change was not a matter of choice; it was completely outside their control. Not surprisingly, many never escaped the confines

of the inner-city.

I do not subscribe to this way of thinking. I believe that, short of deep-seated psychological or emotional impediments to self-improvement – which require the intervention of a psychologist or psychiatrist – most of us are capable of moving from where we are now to some better place. We can achieve the happy ending we desire.

Here are the seven steps that I recommend to coach yourself to win:

Step 1 – Determine whether or not you are self-coachable. Ask: Am I able, ready and willing to permanently change my behavior?

Step 2 – Select your intention and commit to it. Ask: What is my ultimate goal?

Step 3 – Identify/enroll a guide and a circle of support. Ask: Who are the people who can provide me with insight about my behavior and who will be honest with me?

Step 4 – Solicit feedback. Ask: What can these people tell me about my current behavior and how it needs to change? Or: What do I need to do to take my game up to the next level?

Step 5 – Analyze and respond to the feedback. Ask: What's the message these people are giving me, and how will I respond?

Step 6 – Develop your game plan. Ask: What actions am I going to take, by when?

Step 7 – Track success and recalibrate. Ask: Am I accomplishing the goals I committed to? If not, what do I need to do to get back on track?

Not everyone is up to the self-coaching challenge, which is why I recommend taking a deep look within to assess your ability, readiness and willingness to achieve permanent behavior change through self-coaching. But for those who can undertake the journey, the rewards are many and often life-changing.

Howard Guttman is principal of Guttman Development Strategies, Inc., a Mt. Arlington-based consulting firm specializing in executive coaching; building horizontal, high-performance teams; strategic and organizational alignment; and management development training. His third book, *Coach Yourself to Win: 7 Steps to Breakthrough Performance on the Job and in Your Life*, will be published by McGraw-Hill this month.