State

Texas

Agency

Texas Department of Information Resources

Award Category

Emerging and Innovative Technologies

Project Title

Uniting Minds, Igniting Innovation: The Texas Artificial Intelligence User Group

Project Dates

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Contact

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Idea

What problem or opportunity does the project address?

The Texas Department of Information Resources (DIR) brings innovation to government, transforming how Texas government serves Texans. In June 2023, DIR chartered the Artificial Intelligence User Group (AI-UG), a volunteer forum of public sector employees who seek to hear, learn, and share about artificial intelligence. The participating community members can obtain necessary information about the development, implementation, reporting, education, and guidance on AI standards and practices. They also benefit from shared experiences, discussions, and questions.

The purpose of the AI-UG is to:

- Showcase demonstrations of AI, Robotic Process Automation (RPA), chatbots, ML, and other emerging technologies implementations
- Inform users of upcoming events and training opportunities around AI
- Focus on community member educational needs
- Gather real-world feedback from public sector users
- Prioritize items for in-depth discussions

Why does it matter?

As the population of Texas increases and constituent expectations evolve, maintaining base services and improving the ability to deliver excellent services becomes more challenging. To address this, DIR formed the Texas Artificial Intelligence Center of Excellence (AI CoE) to accelerate innovation and adoption of AI technologies. The AI CoE in turn chartered the AI-UG.

The AI-UG has 530 members as of May 2024, all public sector employees. The AI-UG meets approximately bimonthly, and has also held numerous special events, such as "AI Day" in November 2023, which hosted 150 public sector employees and featured nine presentations from vendor partners, eight technical demonstrations, a panel discussion, and workshops. "AI Day Part 2" is scheduled for May 31, 2024, and will have up to 200 attendees, 20 presentations, and 15 technical demonstrations.

In addition, the AI-UG teamed with DIR's legal counsel to host three "Guardrails" sessions to provide members with guidance and resources for developing policies and procedures for safe and secure AI implementation.
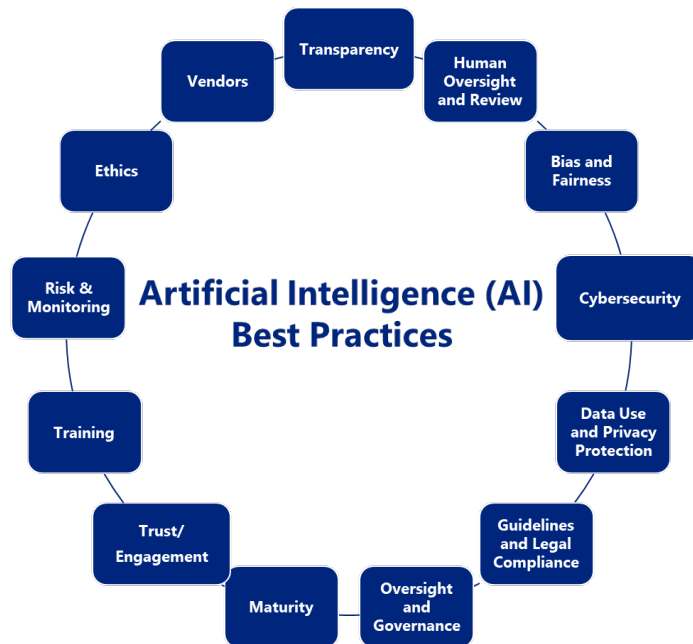
What makes it different?

The AI-UG is entirely user-driven and user-based. While it may invite vendors to present on certain topics and at conferences, all 530 members are public sector employees.

After kicking off the group and setting up the administration, AI-UG meetings typically spotlight a public sector AI or Intelligent Automation (IA) project. The member/presenter discusses what

business needs led to the project, how it was implemented, what went well and what was challenging.

The AI-UG also has an active Teams forum where members post articles, links to events, and pose questions to the AI-UG for input.

Meetings typically have between 200 and 300 attendees and extensive Q&A sessions afterward.

What makes it universal?

By enhancing public sector workers' AI knowledge and skill set, The AI-UG addresses the following State CIO Top Ten Priorities:

1. Cybersecurity and Risk Management: AI is revolutionizing Cybersecurity

2. Digital Government/Digital Services: Chatbots, smart search, and digital assistants are all not only enhanced by AI, but AI drives innovation in those sectors

3. AI/Machine Learning, RPA: Such topics are the *raison d'etre* of the AI-UG

4. Legacy Modernization: many systems, particularly in the realm of Cybersecurity and citizen engagement, are being enhanced by or replaced with AI, IA, and RPA.

5. Workforce: the workshops, training modules, and conferences sponsored by the AI-UG prepare the workforce for the changing landscape of public sector service. The AI-UG is a source for upskilling training licenses as well, with AI-specific training modules and course curricula.

6. Data Management / Data Analytics: The AI-UG intends to focus on Data Management as part of its overall approach to Guardrails workshops and resources. Having established

the need and provided the templates for policy development, future workshops will include a focus on data governance, architecture, strategy and intelligence.

8. Identity Access Management: similar to Cybersecurity, AI is driving the evolution of IAM, and AI-UG presenters have discussed IAM projects based on Intelligence Automation and RPA.

Implementation (25%)

What was the roadmap?

The AI-UG evolved from DIR's AI Center of Excellence (CoE.) In June 2023, the CoE invited all state Information Resource Managers (IRMs) to an AI "Round Table" to discuss policy, potential training, and any AI projects planned or in-flight.

It quickly became clear a regular cadence and platform for engagement on AI topics in the public sector was necessary and urgent. The recently chartered Texas Innovation and Education Center (TIEC) was the ideal program to create and drive the AI-UG, and comports with the DIR's mission of supporting all DIR customers in making informed decisions about technology solutions through strategic planning, reporting, and project services.

No funds however had been set aside for this effort, so DIR relied on operational resources: The Director of Strategic Digital Services serves as chair, all meetings are Teams based, the Teams channel serves as the primary repository for presentations, example policies, and links to education resources. AI Day One and AI Day Two were free events with no charge to attendees and no sponsorship requirements for presenters.

Industry presenters at AI Day include:
- Google
- Microsoft
- AWS
- IBM
- McKinsey & Company
- Salesforce
- ServiceNow
- Gartner
- Forrester

…and many other leaders in the AI sector.

Similarly, the AI-UG Guardrails workshop relied on operational resources, including DIR's privacy attorney, and relied heavily on the NIST AI Risk Management Framework (RMF,) which is free to use.

DIR procured and distributed 135 online upskilling licenses, mostly to AI-UG members. We worked with the online training vendor to create an AI Curriculum, including courses focusing on foundational AI concepts, security, governance, risk management, and implementation.

Now that the AI-UG has been ongoing for almost a year, meetings have undertaken a regular pattern of members presenting about AI and IA projects. The following entities have presented to the AI-UG and conferences:

- Tarleton State University
- MD Anderson Cancer Center
- Texas Department of Transportation
- Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board

Success is measured primarily with user engagement and feedback. With over 530 active members and up to 300 attendees per AI-UG meeting, and 200 in-person attendees at conferences, member engagement is very high.

All 200 slots for AI Day part 2 were filled within five days of opening registration. The feedback from the first AI Day included:

- *"15 years with the State and it's the best learning platform we have ever had access to"*

- *"The courses are definitely worth the time and effort. The [course] I just completed is really beneficial to my job role and I use the skills I learned on a daily basis"*

Who was involved?

After the community of Information Resource Managers (IRMs) voiced the need for a permanent organization to support AI practitioners, DIR moved quickly to establish the AI-UG. DIR's Executive Leadership Team immediately approved initiating work on the charter.

DIR discussed the AI-UG at key industry events in Texas. The AI-UG chair also presented at DIR governance meetings, DIR internal agency meetings, and specific groups such as the Texas Data Management Advisory Committee (DMAC.)

Although all AI-UG members are public sector employees, it has relied on industry leaders listed above to create presentations and technical demonstrations.

Finally, AI Day 2 was privileged to have Texas State Representative Giovanni Capriglione speak on a panel with DIR Executive Director Amanda Crawford at the event.

In sum, the group reinforces the ties across state agencies, public sector workers at those agencies, industry leaders, and the state legislature with a shared interest in safe, responsible AI projects and programs.

How did you do it?

The AI-UG relies on operational resources, including staffing, the Teams site, available state conference center facilities, and volunteer presenters. Membership, workshops, and conferences are free to AI-UG members.

At times, the AI-UG has leveraged the excitement and interest behind recent AI innovations such as Large Language Models (LLMs) to draw attention to practical enhancements such as robotic process automation projects to increase efficiencies and create capacity for additional constituent services.

Actual AI projects are the responsibility of member organizations, DIR generally and the AI-UG specifically are available as resources to support those efforts, as opposed to directly managing or implementing them.

Impact (50%)

What did the project make better?

The first two meetings of the AI-UG were largely organizational: getting feedback from members on the approach, creating the Teams site, and establishing meeting cadence.

In time, organizations began putting policies in place and developing projects that comported to those policies. That's when the AI-UG became a true user group, with members taking turns discussing successes in opportunities in real-world scenarios. This led to engaged discussions an approach, governance, and maintenance of AI and IA systems.

Further, by using the online upskilling licenses, learners including those in the AI-UG community, have enrolled in over 300 courses, taken over 100 assessments, and are averaging 6.8 hours of coursework per learner. This includes the AI and Digital Transformation curricula that DIR and the training vendor designed for this audience.

Finally, with 500 active members across 60 agencies, meetings that regularly host up to 300 participants, and in-person conferences with over 200 attendees, there is no doubt the Artificial Intelligence User Group created a statewide public sector community of practice in under a year.

How do you know?

The above sections describe the growth in size and scope of the AI UG. A few testimonials from the conferences and workshops sponsored by the AI UG:

> *"It was nice to engage with and learn from experts in the AI industry without the sales-driven tactics."*
>
> *"Fantastic day.   Thank you for helping understand AI."*
>
> *"Lot of great take aways".*
>
> *"Great kickoff event! No suggested changes come to mind. I look forward to continuing to participate with DIR in statewide AI initiatives."*

What now?

The AI-UG is chartered and will be an ongoing concern for the foreseeable future. Unlike Centers of Excellence, which typically include the goal of becoming obsolete when the desired organizational change takes place; User Groups can remain in place as a resource to members as the related technology evolves.

As the User Group has grown, so have the resources available to that group, the size of the meetings, and the size of the conferences and workshops. Considering the only allocated funds were earmarked for training, DIR may seek sponsorship for future events from approved industry leaders and vendors.

In addition, DIR's Innovation Lab, an on-site space to break new technology ideas and hold workshops, can continue to grow in tandem with the AI-UG. The Lab already has PCs with instances of AI installed so participants can experiment with GenAI in a secure and monitored environment.

In sum, the AI-UG is a voluntary organization powered by the time and effort donated by participating public sector workers. Individual agencies will measure the success of AI implementations using their own metrics. But the AI-UG's success is best measured by the enthusiasm and support of the public sector community:

> *"I feel DIR has shifted over the last decade or so from being, well, an entity we have to deal with from time to time that may add questionable value to providing outstanding perspective and guidance and being a truly helpful partner with the agencies."*