

STC Consulting and Independent Contracting SIG Survey Results

I. Executive Summary

In August, 2005, the Consulting and Independent Contracting SIG surveyed its members in preparation for rechartering. An invitation to participate in the survey and the link to the online questions was sent via email to all members for whom email addresses were available. The primary purpose of the survey was to evaluate how the SIG currently provides value to its members and how it might improve its service level.

Some 307 SIG members responded to the survey (15.4% of those receiving the invitation).

Of current services the SIG offers, the most valued is the email discussion list. Better technological support of the list should be a high priority.

In terms of services the SIG could potentially add, providing affordable webinars and teleconferences heads the list. By affordable, the majority of respondents mean \$50 or less, preferably less. The most popular topic is marketing oneself and one's services. The CIC SIG should take the lead in providing affordable webinars and teleconferences of value to consultants and independent contractors.

The most valued method for SIG members to market themselves is by obtaining referrals from existing clients and colleagues, followed by networking and volunteering through professional organizations. An online consultant database featuring profiles of members and accessible to potential customers would support both of these marketing methods. SIG members appear interested in such a database, although its fee structure will ultimately determine their level of participation. The SIG will need to work closely with the society in developing and maintaining such a database.

II. Study Methodology

Background and Objectives

As part of the STC Transformation, communities such as chapters and SIGs have been asked to recharter with the organization. The Consulting and Independent Contracting (CIC) SIG has undertaken this process by surveying current members of the SIG to determine how well the SIG is meeting its members' needs and what it can do better in the future. The results of the survey will provide input both for rechartering the SIG and developing its strategic plan.

Methodology

Demographics: As of October, 2005, the CIC SIG included 2,190 members (18 fellows, 28 associate fellows, 993 senior members, 994 members, 133 student members, 23 retired members, and 1 sustaining member). Of these, the society has email addresses for 1,988. A subset, 778, are members of the SIG's email discussion list.

Approach: In early summer, 2005, Linda Gallagher, the manager of the CIC SIG, used the SIG's email discussion list to call for volunteers to put together a survey of SIG members. Six recipients volunteered and subsequently met via conference call to plan the approach to the survey. The team opted to send out an initial survey of broad questions to all SIG members participating in the email discussion list. Following analysis of the responses to this initial survey, the team went on to develop a more quantitative survey, which was sent via eblast to the entire SIG membership for whom email addresses were available.

Initial survey: Team members developed, discussed, refined, and finalized the initial, broad survey questions (six questions total; see appendix 1 in the survey supplement, available separately). The survey was sent to the SIG's email discussion list in late June, 2005, with a one-week deadline for replies. Six percent of recipients completed the survey. At the close of this initial survey, results were tabulated, categorized, and used as the basis for development of the second, more quantitative survey. (The results of this initial survey are not included herein.)

Second survey: The second survey included 14 questions in four general categories: value of current and potential services; webinars and teleconferences; potential consultant database; and demographic data. The survey was prepared and administered using SurveyMonkey. An eblast to the CIC SIG's online membership invited everyone, including those who completed the preliminary survey, to visit the online survey and respond to the questions. The survey remained "live" for 10 days. During this period, 307 SIG members (15.4% of the total who received the invitation) responded to the questions.

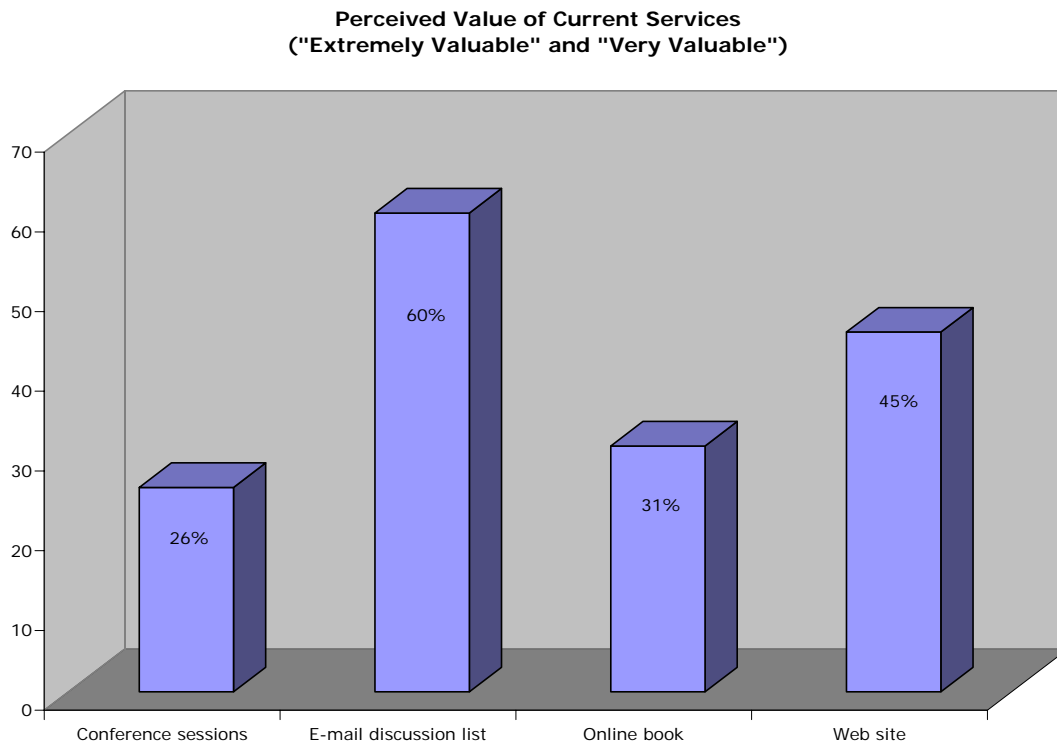
The email invitation to participate in this second survey and the survey questions themselves are found in appendices 2 and 3 in the survey supplement.

III. Findings and Observations

SIG members were asked questions in three areas: current and potential SIG services; webinars and teleconferences as specific SIG services; and the development of a consultant database. Several demographic questions were posed as well. The complete data for the survey questions are located in appendix 4 in the survey supplement.

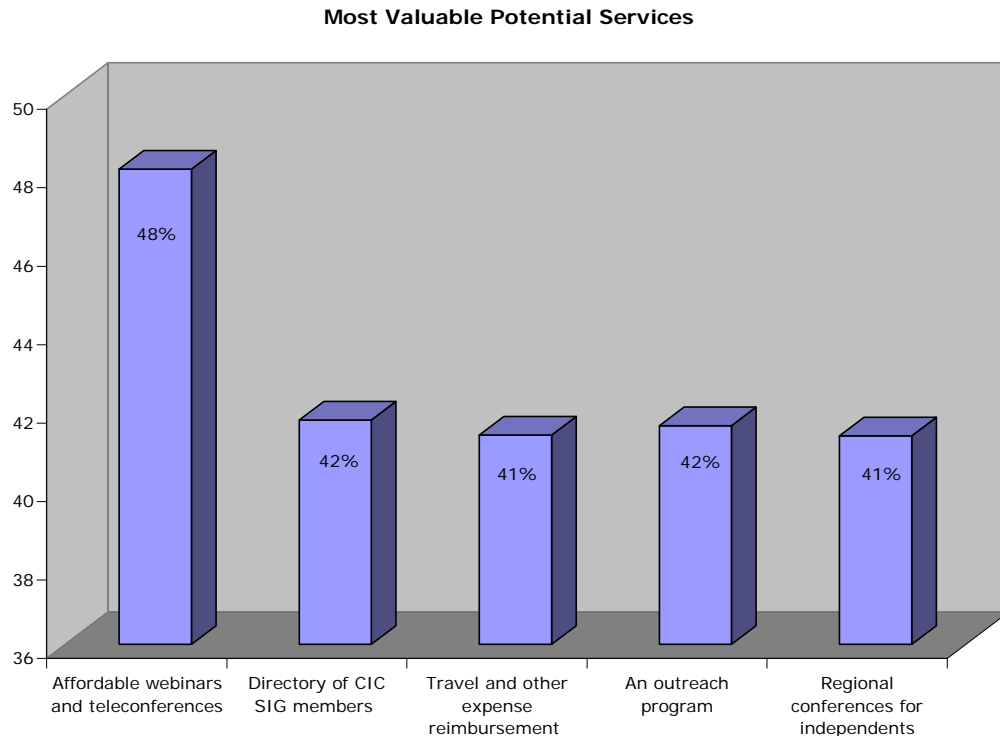
Current and potential SIG services

When asked to **rate current services** that the SIG offers as “not valuable,” “somewhat valuable,” “valuable,” “very valuable,” and “extremely valuable,” an impressive number of respondents (31%) ranked the email discussion list as extremely valuable. When the percentages of responses of “extremely valuable” and “very valuable” were combined, the email discussion list towered above the rest, with 60% of respondents rating it as extremely or very valuable.



Observations: The CIC SIG has an active email discussion list, and it is clearly the SIG’s most valued service to its members. Suggestions for better technological support to keep the list “alive and healthy” should be sought and addressed as a high priority. Ways to make the web site a more valued service might also be explored.

Respondents were also asked to **rate a list of potential services** (11 in total) that the SIG currently does not provide. When the percentages of responses of “extremely valuable” and “very valuable” were combined for the top five potential services, the most valuable was affordable webinars and teleconferences (48%). Of the other top potential services, none stood out as significantly more valuable than the others (hovering between 41% and 42%).



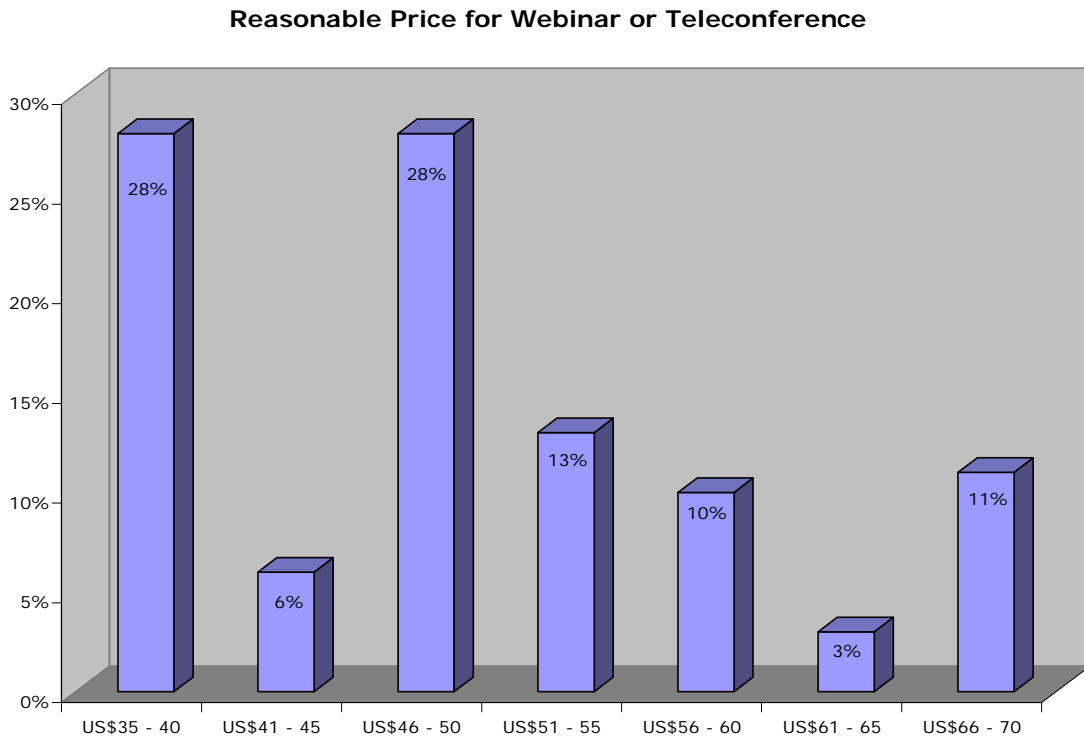
Observations: The CIC SIG has the opportunity to take the lead in providing affordable webinars and teleconferences of value to consultants and independent contractors.

When asked for **additional suggestions for services that the SIG might offer**, 74 of the 307 survey participants (24%) provided input, offering a total of 88 suggestions. These suggestions were categorized by topic. Sixteen percent of the comments related to not being aware of all the services the SIG currently offers; an additional 26% of comments were either not pertinent to the question or related to the structure of the survey itself. The two main substantive suggestion categories related to dissemination of useful information (11%) and improvements to the email discussion list (9%). A complete listing of responses can be found in appendix 5 in the survey supplement.

Observations: A surprising number of respondents are not aware of services the SIG currently offers. We should focus on promoting those services more effectively.

Webinar and teleconference services

CIC SIG members were asked about webinars and teleconferences as a service from the SIG. Specifically, they were asked how much they consider **reasonable to spend on webinars and teleconferences**, and also about potential topics. Given a range of prices, the majority (62%) deemed \$50 or below to be the highest price they consider reasonable for a 90-minute webinar or teleconference.



Observations: SIG members clearly are interested in having access to affordable webinars and teleconferences. To be attractive to independents, however, “affordable” must be \$50 or less, preferably less. The current \$99 webinars appear to be outside of the comfort zone for most independents. The SIG should explore ways to provide this service to its members for \$50 or less, including: looking at alternative, less expensive webinar and teleconference providers than the society currently uses; subsidizing a portion of the expense from the SIG’s own resources; and submitting a grant to cover a portion of the cost.

Nearly 42% of those who took the survey provided suggestions for topics of webinars and teleconferences. The total number of suggestions was 246. These suggestions were categorized by topic; the top six topics are listed below, with the percentage of total comments they represent.

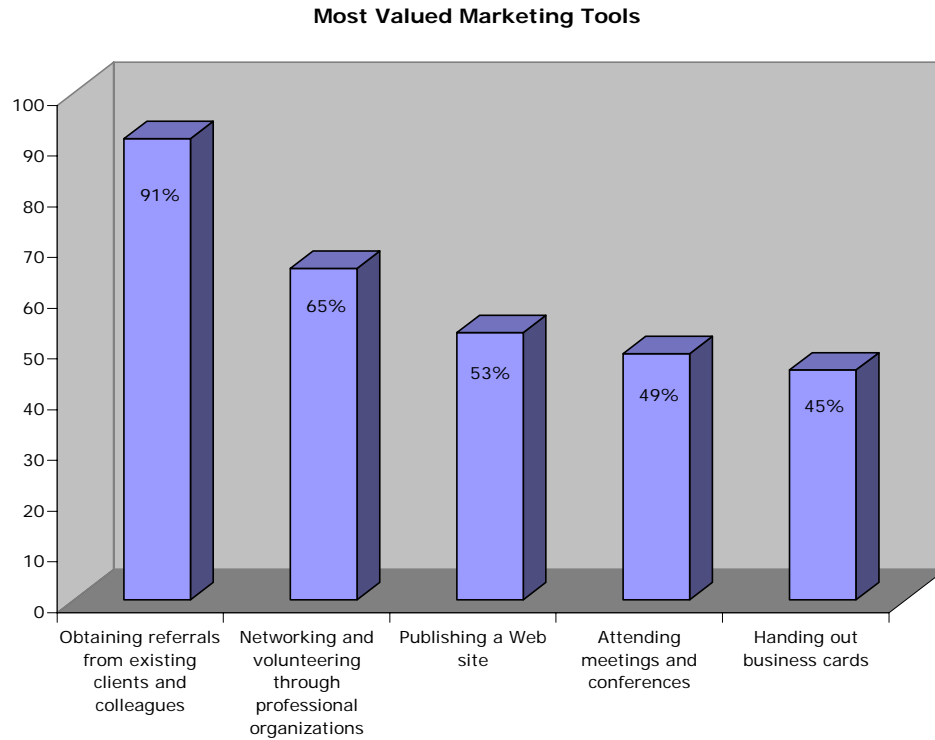
Topic	% of total comments
Marketing yourself and your services	21%
Miscellaneous issues, mainly for start-ups	11%
Accounting for start-ups and veterans	9%
Keeping up with technology	7%
Contracts	6%
Specifics of software	6%

Observations: Marketing oneself and one’s services is far and away the webinar/teleconference topic of most interest to respondents. Most of these topics are recurring themes at the CIC SIG progression at the annual conference, but only a small number of SIG members attend the conference. Perhaps a two-part webinar series presented by six “star conference presenters” (30 minutes each presenter) would be a good start to addressing this interest.

Also, the ongoing series in *Intercom* by Bette Frick might be parlayed into a webinar series for independents. Previous *Intercom* authors who have written the independent business column might also be asked to become involved.

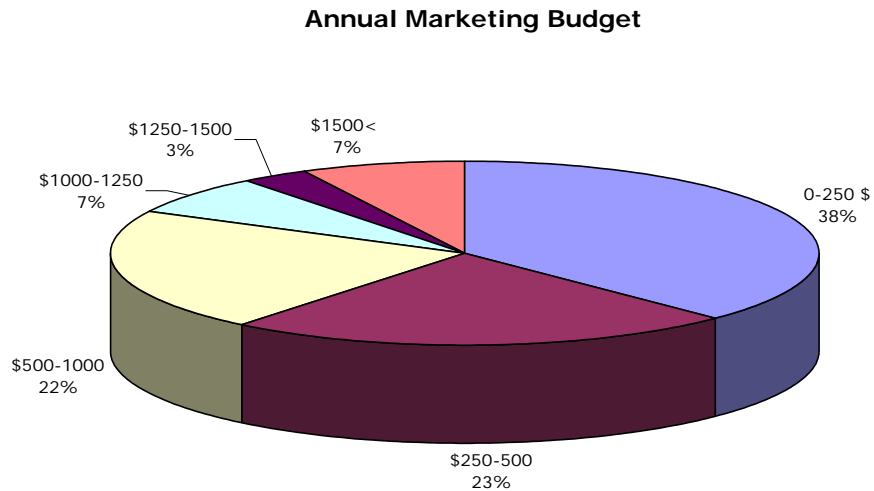
Consultant database

As a prelude to understanding the context within which a consultant database might serve SIG members, they were asked to rate the value of various marketing tools. The figure below combines the responses of “extremely valuable” and “very valuable” for the top five tools.



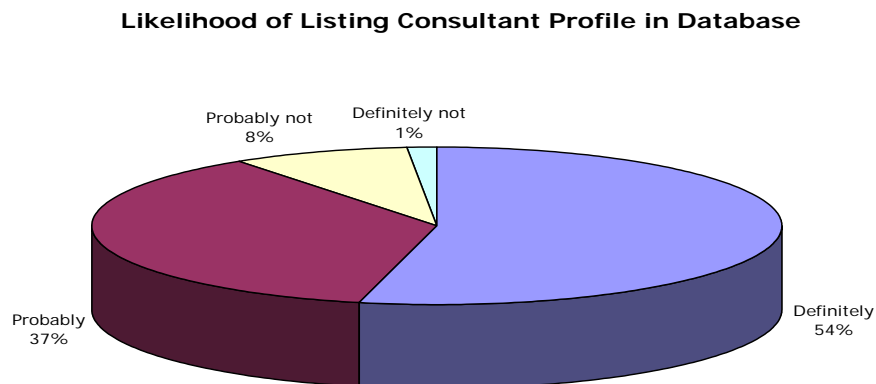
Observations: A full 91% of respondents rated obtaining referrals from existing clients and colleagues as extremely or very valuable. A consultant database could serve well in this regard. Also, almost two-thirds of respondents rated networking and volunteering through professional organizations as extremely or very valuable. This latter topic might be a good candidate for a webinar/teleconference.

To get an idea of the amount of money SIG members currently devote to their marketing budget, they were asked to choose an appropriate range from those shown in the figure below. The largest number (38%) spend between \$0 and \$250. Those spending between \$250 and \$500 (23%) and between \$500 and \$1000 (22%) are next in ranking.



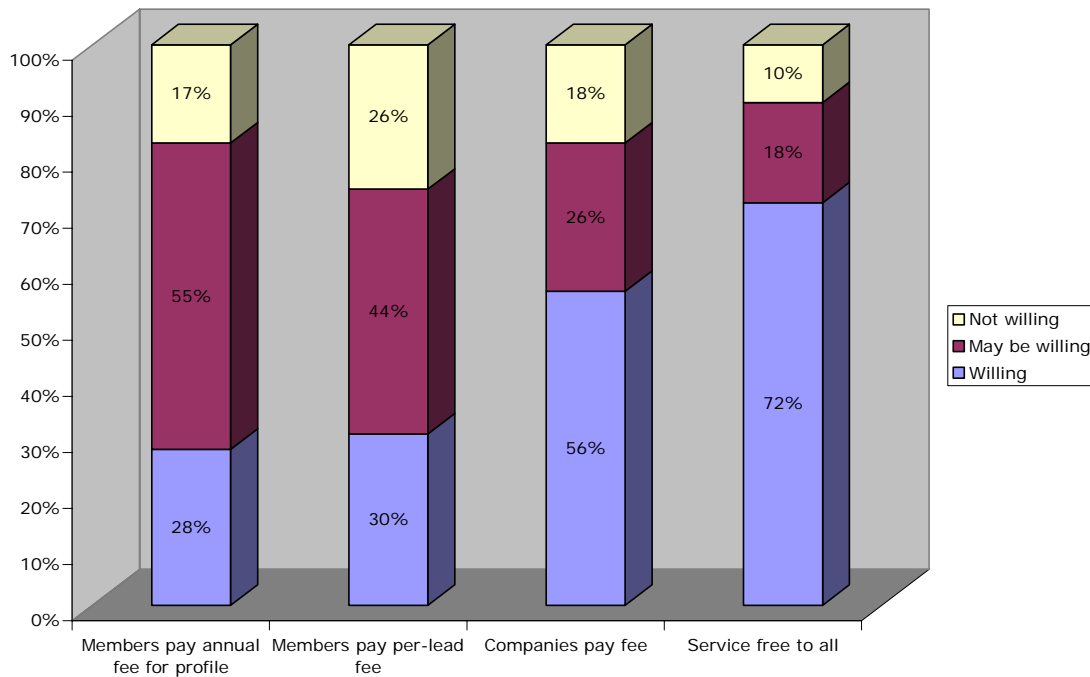
Observations: A full 83% of respondents spend \$1000 or less annually on their marketing budget. Providing ways to leverage this amount would be a great service that the SIG could offer.

When asked their interest level in an online directory that would provide profiles showcasing SIG members to companies who might need their services, a majority (54%) said they definitely would list their profile. The chart below shows the complete results.



When asked how the SIG might finance this service, a somewhat complex answer was obtained. The most popular scenario was for the service to be free to all (72% were willing to participate under this scenario). A reverse picture emerges when respondents indicated that they *may* be willing (as opposed to *would* be willing) to participate under a given scenario. Here the highest percentage was 55% responding that they may be willing to pay an annual fee. The highest percentage (26%) of respondents were *not* willing to participate if the choice were for members to pay per lead.

Participation Under Various Service Models



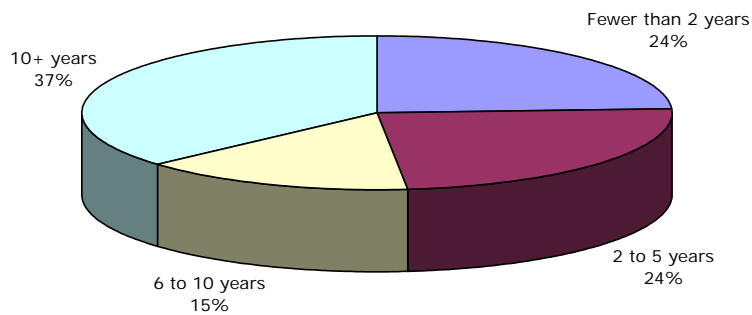
Observations: If the service can be provided free for all, that would meet with most acceptance. Preparing and maintaining such a database would need substantial support from the society, so before this concept develops further it would be wise to determine the feasibility of such support.

Demographics

Several demographic questions were also asked. Of the respondents, the largest percentage (37%) have been consultants for 10+ years. Nearly half have been independent for 5 years or less (24% 2 to 5 years and 24% fewer than 2 years).

In terms of location, the vast majority of respondents (88%) were from the US, followed by Canada (10%). Some 253 chose to indicate a chapter affiliation.

Length of Time as Consultant



IV. Conclusions

In this online survey, the CIC SIG evaluated how it currently provides value to its members and how it might improve its service level. SIG members place high value on current services, with at least one in four rating each of them as either extremely valuable or very valuable. The SIG management deserves kudos for this result. Nonetheless, almost one in seven SIG members proved to be unaware of all services the SIG currently offers. An opportunity thus exists to inform members more fully of these services.

In terms of new services, the SIG should first focus on seeing to fruition the development of affordable webinars and teleconferences of interest to its membership. A second area of focus would be the development of a consultant database, for which there appears to be good support among the membership.

The information gleaned from this survey will be used to move the rechartering process forward and to aid in the development of a new strategic plan for the SIG.