

Richard Boly

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Leading the Office of eDiplomacy within the U.S. Department of State



Technology and new innovations have triggered changes in the ways people interact. The U.S. Department of State has sought to leverage these new innovations in service of its diplomatic and development goals. In this dynamic, interconnected world, State has also sought to restructure its organization and how it operates, advancing diplomacy by pursuing effective knowledge-sharing while expanding the use of collaborative technology.

According to Richard Boly, Director, Office of eDiplomacy, Bureau of Information Resource Management (IRM) within the U.S. Department of State, it's about identifying better ways to find and share information and to network, thus enabling and encouraging State personnel to securely and effectively contribute knowledge anywhere, anytime. "It's an effort to put end users in the decision-making process and help develop platforms for collaboration and information sharing from the grass roots ... if somebody has the information that another person needs that they can find each other. It's not a hierarchal, command and control knowledge management approach," explains Boly. He acknowledges that the success of his efforts rests on changing habits and mindsets from a need to know to a need to share: "it's fundamental to what we do," he declares. "If you don't collaborate and share internally, you're never going to share externally. In the end, the culture you have when nobody's looking is going to be the culture you have when people are looking."

Boly leads the office charged with making eDiplomacy the way to collaborate within the department, most specifically by developing and managing a range of social media and collaborative platforms that provide staff access to

knowledge resources, expertise, idea generation, and a secure collaborative environment across physical and organization boundaries. The department's ability to maintain institutional knowledge has always been a challenge given that foreign service assignments typically last two years. This makes it even more critical to maintain institutional memory, foster collaboration, and cultivate connections within the department. Boly identifies Diplopedia as a key platform to do just this; it offers staff access to what he calls "evolving and persistent knowledge." Diplopedia enables department staff to create a broad, informative, and expanding reference tool for knowledge-sharing about the department, its programs and offices, as well as international affairs issues. "It's a wiki built on the same software as Wikipedia; it has grown tremendously. We have over 17,000 articles, nearly 6,000 contributors, and about 35,000 page views a week. Increasingly, it's the place where people go to find information," says Boly. He offers a real-world example of its usefulness. "We helped our desk officers develop a portal within Diplopedia called Deskikipedia. It is an aggregation of all of the information that a desk officer would need to perform their duties. It's incredibly effective and useful."

Boly's efforts also provide ways to transcend organizational boundaries and geographic constraints. "If we think about Diplopedia as a [wiki of] evolving and persistent knowledge, then 'content with conversation' can be found on our multi-author blogs hosted on Communities @ State." This environment encourages staff to form online communities, publish information, connect with others, and foster discussion. "We have about 70 active blogs. About two-thirds are open to the interagency foreign affairs community and a third are restricted," notes Boly. He points out that staff can also create personal blogs to share their individual perspectives using the MyBlog@State tool.



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Many of these resources are architected to help personnel do their jobs better. “Every time we make a gain,” declares Boly, “I want to institutionalize that gain, so that it becomes woven into the very fabric of how we do diplomacy.” The best way to institutionalize a gain is by developing platforms that help staff do their job better, faster, and more efficiently. “Then these folks become,” according to Boly, “the biggest advocates for the work that we’re doing.” To further complement these efforts, Corridor, a professional networking platform, was launched in May 2011. Boly describes it as having the best qualities of both LinkedIn and Facebook. Members post information about their professional accomplishments and expertise, expand their professional network of connections, and discover and access the expertise of colleagues worldwide. “We have over 11,000 users, which is a significant portion of the department ... as I mentioned before, diplomats move around every couple of years, so this platform is great for the enterprise,” says Boly.

The importance of harnessing technology and maturing it according to the needs of those it serves cannot be overstated. “We always say it’s not about the technology; it should never be the focus. The focus should be, what is the end user trying to achieve and can we achieve it faster, easier, or better through the right tool for the right challenge?” declares Boly. The Virtual Student Foreign Service (VSFS) program is part of a growing effort to harness technology and marry it with the commitment to global service among young people. It has as its end cultivating new forms of diplomatic engagement. “Secretary Clinton launched the VSFS program,” explains Boly, “in her NYU commencement address in May of 2009. We started with digitizing the typical internship. It’s been tremendously successful. We’ve seen the number of offices, embassies, and consulates offering projects increase dramatically year to year. We’ve seen an even faster growth in the number of students wanting to participate.” Boly notes that the program offers a useful way for department offices and foreign posts to draw on additional resources at no cost. “The 2.0 version of the program takes advantage of the virtual world, introducing a micro-tasking platform which enables embassies to put out a discrete task to an expanded pool of eInterns with the opportunity to participate in digital diplomacy.” Boly’s office was also instrumental in expanding the department’s virtual footprint with the creation of the Virtual Presence Post. “This was actually the first program to come out of eDiplomacy; it’s evolved

tremendously as technology has evolved.” It helps to focus and improve State’s engagement with specific communities where the U.S. has no physical diplomatic facilities.

Boly also underscores his office’s role as a convener that brings together diplomats, technologists, academics, and entrepreneurs to explore innovative ways technology can address global diplomatic and development objectives. “There are two great initiatives. Tech@State enables a deep dive into the convergence of diplomacy, development, and technology. TechCamp is a wonderful platform that allows technologists to meet with civil society leaders to tackle problems and identify the viability of using low cost, easy to implement technology to solve them.”

Though much has been accomplished in the area of eDiplomacy, there’s more work to be done. “We have a lot of ideas that we’re excited about pursuing,” Boly notes. “We need to integrate more closely the various platforms we’ve discussed—Diplopedia, Communities@State, and Corridor. I’d also like to look at our more traditional communications, cables, and explore the possibility of wrapping a conversation around them. How exciting would it be to have these formal diplomatic cables have a conversation wrapped around them?”

Boly has always been a proponent of entrepreneurialism. In a sense, the goals of eDiplomacy as pursued by IRM’s Office of eDiplomacy share similar qualities. “Entrepreneurs are not afraid of failure. If they were afraid of failure, they wouldn’t be entrepreneurs because the probability of failure is really high ... In government, it can be tough to confront failure, but without confronting it we don’t learn; if you don’t push yourself you’re not going to have that transformational change.” ■

To learn more about IRM’s Office of eDiplomacy, go to www.state.gov/m/irm/ediplomacy.



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