How I'd Use GenAI if I Were Still in Government
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It's been over a decade since I last served in government, and I miss public service. Recent developments in Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) make me wonder how I'd use it if I were still in government. Short version: Like a powerful and potentially dangerous tool. I'd embrace GenAI for rules-based repetitive tasks that can be automated, freeing up my time for more interesting work that requires human judgement. I'd also monitor carefully so results produced by GenAI didn't have "hallucinations" or unintended consequences that reinforce biases in the training data that feed large language models (LLMs).

In my last government job, I was responsible for $100 million of public safety and homeland security grants. There's no way I'd delegate decisions about safety and public well-being to a machine. But I would have AI do the work of making sure the grant applications were responsive to the criteria, and I would have AI summarize the strengths and weaknesses of the proposals. I'd still have human beings setting strategy, and making the decisions on how best to align funding with strategy. More specifically, here's how I would use generative AI both for grant-making and for management of the organization:

Ways I'd use Gen AI in grant making:

- **Strategy development.** I would definitely *not* use GenAI in strategy development, except as a research tool to find an answer to a specific question when I wanted something faster than a human could produce it. I'd always double check the results for "hallucinations." To me, strategy development and setting priorities are the tasks that require human judgement (and are the most fun), so I would guard those tasks from being outsourced to any machine.
- **Grant solicitation.** When sending out an announcement of grant funding availability to cities and towns to solicit their ideas for the funding, I'd use GenAI to create the first draft of the summary of the grant and the proposal submission instructions. I'd set the criteria and funding strategy and feed that into the tool. Once GenAI created my first draft announcement, I'd edit and finalize it and check it for accuracy. That would speed up the process and improve consistency and accuracy across the dozens of grant programs we handled.
- **FAQs.** Once a grant announcement goes out, someone in each of the 351 cities and towns in Massachusetts reads it and decides whether to pursue it and, if so, how much funding to request and what project to pursue. Inevitably, this involves a fair amount of back and forth with grant staff about deadlines, requirements and the like. If staff could offload some of the questions that get asked repeatedly to a GenAI chatbot, that would free them to have more in-depth conversations around idea development that taps into their expertise and creativity, instead of using up the work day just answering the same questions over and over.

- **Grant review.** Once grant proposals come in from cities and towns, I'd get a Gen AI tool to screen each one for completeness. An incomplete grant proposal is not eligible for further consideration, and when I was in that job, some poor staffer had to page through every one of the 300+ applications to make sure they all had addressed each evaluation factor and met all criteria to be eligible for review. A bot could do that faster and without getting tired or distracted. Any application rejected as incomplete would be reviewed by a staff person because when a municipality gets rejected for funding, I need to be able to meet with the mayor or state rep or senator and show them why the application was ineligible. Once we have the eligible proposals, I'd ask a GenAI bot to create brief summaries so we humans could do a first read of shorter documents, then focus in on the ones that are most interesting and best meet the criteria. I would have a staff person read the application for any proposal that was ruled out to be sure we didn't accidentally cast aside something great. Then at the final consideration stage we'd read the full applications of those who made it past two rounds of generative AI screening. I'd probably cut my initial review time by 50-70% and could then give more energy to the most important part of the work, which is making the tradeoffs necessary to create a balanced portfolio of what we believe will be the most impactful investments.
- **Presentation of grant recommendations and decisions.** To offload tedious tasks from staff, I'd get GenAI to help prepare materials for final signoff on decision-making by my boss and the governor. GenAI could create bullet points or single paragraph summaries of 25+ page grant proposals faster than staff could, and could map the results across the state faster and more accurately than staff could. GenAI could probably help with some graphic descriptions of the types of funds awarded and projects proposed in a nicer format than we might do on our own.

Ways I'd use GenAI in management of the organization:

- **Continuous learning and improvement.** I'd use GenAI to look across the total portfolio of grant investments over a few years to look for trends. What did we miss and where do we need to make more investments? How could we be better stewards of public funds? The research and statistical analysis team would have a field day with generative AI because it would allow them to do far more work than they previously had time to do.
- **Performance management.** I'd use generative AI to answer queries like "graph the performance of agency x on performance measure y on a quarterly basis for the last 3 years." I'd know that on a task like that I'd be getting results faster than a human could produce them, and since I owned the source data I would not be worried about hallucinations. I would use generative AI to help analyze the data, but when it comes to meeting with an agency head to talk about their performance that's still a human interaction to listen to their issues and understand what resources they need to make improvements in service delivery. And when it came to meeting with the governor to discuss performance, no bot could replace the interaction of the agency leader and the state's CEO.

- **Drafting job descriptions and RFPs.** Writing a job description or a statement of work for an RFP can be a tedious task, but having a rough draft created by GenAI gets the process started, streamlining it and eliminating procrastination. This would be a welcome way to speed up the slow timeline for government hiring and procurement.
- **Skill building.** State and local governments generally underinvest in human capital. When I was in state government, my agency had zero training dollars and I built that up gradually. Today, I'd find ways to leverage GenAI personalized skill building. There are lots of chatbot tutors being built for kids, so it's time to get some to teach grownups too. I'd like to see every manager have proficiency in project management so they can bring projects in on time and on budget and know ahead of time when a project is going off track (see the Big Dig, projected to cost $2.5 B and then ended up over $14B!). They should know how to understand and interpret data and be able to see through common data challenges and make data-informed decisions. And they should be taught how to motivate and manage their teams.
- **Fraud.** Fraud detection is where I'd want to rely on federal partners with much bigger budgets to develop anti-fraud tools that I could use. Recent advances in AI are enabling a new era of fraud detection, and federal agencies are in active pursuit. Sometimes the challenge is getting federal tools translated to the state and local level, so that would be something I'd work on if I were in government today.

In summary, I'd try to take some risks using GenAI and learn from them. The culture in government can be risk averse, so if I were in government today I'd make sure not to penalize staff who came up with ideas that did not succeed, because that's how we learn. My goal would be to create, as Amy Edmondson of Harvard Business School calls it, psychological safety – a culture in which failure is an opportunity to learn and grow, not a pathway to being sidelined or shunned. Nvidia has its lead executives give a presentation of every decision made along the path when some product fails. I love that they learn from rather than hide from mistakes, and I wish all organizations would. If I were in government today, that would be my aspiration.