Q. What are SWIDs?
A. SWIDs, or more properly, SWID Tags, stand for SoftWare IDentification tags. SWID tags are defined by the ISO/IEC 19770-2:2009 specification, published by the International Organization for Standards (ISO). SWID tags are XML files, each of which is associated with one specific software product. Each software product (including different versions and releases of that product) has its own SWID tag, differentiated by the fields of the SWID tag's XML. Because of this, one can look at the list of present SWID tags to get an indication as to which applications and versions thereof are present on an endpoint. SWID tags support a variety of uses, including software inventory management, license management, and endpoint policy compliance.

Q. What does SWID Message and Attributes for IF-M offer to users of TCG's Trusted Network Communications (TNC) or IETF's Network Endpoint Assessment (NEA)?
A. The SWID Message and Attributes for IF-M specification enables collection of certain information about endpoint software state as part of a TNC health check. This specification standardizes how SWID tag information can be requested by a policy server (i.e., a TNC Policy Decision Point or a NEA Server) and returned by a TNC (or NEA) client on the endpoint. The TNC Endpoint Compliance Profile (ECP) describes the use of TNC protocols and interfaces to enable automated gathering of compliance information from endpoints on a network. In support of this goal, the ECP requires that endpoints provide their SWID tag collection to a policy server where it is passed to a Configuration Management Database (CMDB) for long-term storage. The SWID Message and Attributes for IF-M specification supports this capability by defining how TNC clients are to collect SWID tags and defining the structure of the IF-M messages used to send SWID-related information to a policy server. The ECP also requires that endpoints monitor for and automatically report relevant changes in their configuration rather than waiting for a policy server to request an update. SWID Message and Attributes for IF-M supports this requirement by enabling endpoint monitoring of their SWID tag collection and spontaneously reporting any observed changes to the policy server. These capabilities of SWID Message and Attributes for IF-M can also be applied to TNC implementations outside those described by the ECP.

Q. What of information does SWID Message and Attributes for IF-M allow a TNC client to report?
A. The SWID Message and Attributes for IF-M allows TNC clients to report the SWID tag inventory of an endpoint to a policy server. This inventory could come from multiple sources, including both XML files collected from an endpoint's file system, as well as SWID tags that might be dynamically generated from other software management systems, such as the Linux Red Hat Package Manager (RPM). Inventory reports can consist of either full tags or of the unique SWID tag identifier strings that uniquely identify a particular SWID tag. The former are larger but provide additional details through the body of the tag file, while the latter are more concise but provide no details beyond the SWID tag's identification.

In addition, TNC clients that support SWID Message and Attributes for IF-M also monitor the endpoint for changes to its SWID tag collection. Changes to this collection are logged and can be reported as change events. This allows the TNC client to report "deltas", reflecting changes in SWID tag collections on an endpoint, rather than needing to send a full inventory whenever a policy server needs to be updated.

Finally, SWID Message and Attributes for IF-M supports certain types of targeted queries from a policy server. Specifically, the policy server can ask a TNC client to report whether any instances of a specific list of SWID tags are present on an endpoint. This supports more targeted data collection about an endpoint's SWID tag collection.

Q. You must pay to download ISO's SWID specification. Do implementers of SWID Message and Attributes for IF-M need to buy the ISO specification?
A. ISO does charge a fee to download its SWID specification. However, the ISO SWID specification is not necessary to implement the SWID Message and Attributes for IF-M. Implementers need access to the SWID XML schema, but this is freely available from TagVault, TagVault is a non-profit organization founded by the IEEE-ISTO to assist and encourage in the adoption of SWID tags. Between the SWID XML schema and the information contained in the SWID Message and Attributes for IF-M, implementers can create TNC clients and policy servers that support SWID tags without the ISO specification.

Q. ISO will be releasing a new version of the SWID specification in 2015. Will SWID Message and Attributes for IF-M be compatible with this new release?
A. Yes. The authors of SWID Message and Attributes for IF-M coordinated with representatives from the ISO working group to ensure that the specification would be compatible with either the 2009 or 2015 SWID tags. More generally, SWID Message and Attributes for IF-M is largely agnostic to the structure of the SWID tags that it collects and conveys. As such, SWID Message and Attributes for IF-M is minimally impacted by the ISO revision effort.

Q. Who is using SWID tags today?
A. SWID tags are seeing growing adoption by software publishers. According to TagVault, software developers that are or have pledged to support SWID tags in their products include Adobe, Hewlett Packard, IBM, Microsoft, and Symantec, among many others.

Q. Who has implemented SWID Message and Attributes for IF-M today?
A draft of SWID Message and Attributes for IF-M has been incorporated into the strongSwan TNC implementation.