

Featured Article

“Acquisitions Aren’t Getting Any Easier...Or Are They?” Interview with Senior Contracting Officer Jason C. Heddy



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Introduction:

Recently one of the GSA Assisted Acquisition Service Contracting Officers found himself sitting between Martha Johnson, GSA Administrator, and Steven Kemp, FAS Commissioner, at the GSA Excellence in Acquisition awards ceremony receiving one of GSA’s highest awards for acquisition excellence and we wondered how using the Alliant GWAC helped him capture the excellence award.

Interview Questions:

Can you describe the acquisition you worked using Alliant?

Our requirement was for highly complex Information Technology (IT) technical support executing a variety of development and operational IT activities for the testing and development of a major weapons systems. The support included a wide variety of network engineering support, test and evaluation, security, software, database and computer systems development, project and configuration management, video teleconferencing, and operational test and evaluation support.

The acquisition was a recompetete of an existing task order issued under the legacy Millennia Lite GWAC. The incumbent was not an Alliant GWAC contract holder and therefore we anticipated a great deal of industry interest resulting in an intense competition and an incumbency transition.

How did you go about developing your evaluation criteria?

I believe the most powerful sentence in FAR 16.5 is found under FAR 16.505(b)(1)(ii) where it says, “the contracting officer may exercise broad discretion in developing appropriate order placement procedures.” When I conduct acquisition planning and collaborate with customers, I always focus the discussions regarding evaluations on identifying the key discriminators for successful contract performance. Once you have those discriminators identified in essence you have your evaluation criteria. In our case, those discriminators were numerous and highly technical. That posed a challenge.

It became overwhelmingly apparent that using a more traditional evaluation approach was going to be laborious on all parties, consume a great deal of valuable time, and be difficult in addressing all our discriminators. So we needed a new and innovative solution to drill straight down to what mattered. So I took the flexibilities built in to FAR 16.505 to heart and developed a multiphased evaluation process that I felt addressed our challenges.

How did your multiphase evaluation work?

In Phase I, which I coined a “Capability Demonstration (CD),” offerors would essentially sit for structured technical interview. It was open to all current Alliant primes and the entire scope of the requirement was on the table. During acquisition planning we had carefully prepared a number of questions tied to key technical discriminators. For each question we had also devel-

oped the framework that a strong response should include.

All CDs were done in person and very few restrictions were levied on the number of participants for any offeror. Our team wanted to hear directly from the technical experts of an offeror and the style of the presentation didn't matter. The offeror first saw the questions thirty (30) minutes before their scheduled demonstration. They managed their own allocated time and each event was recorded.

At the conclusion of the CDs, all the offerors were rated and given a "viable" or "non-viable" notice as detailed in our Request for Quote (RFQ). It essentially put each offeror on notice on their likelihood of being successful in winning the award. At this point, the technical portion of the evaluation was complete. After ten (10) CDs we issued three (3) "viable" and seven (7) "non-viable" notices.

Phase II, which consisted of price and past performance, was open again to all offerors who participated in Phase I. While this might sound like an advisory multistep process or a competitive range determination as defined in FAR 15, it was not. No one was excluded from continuing. It was simply designed as an opportunity for offerors to make a "business decision" as to how best to spend their precious bid and proposal dollars.

We had no idea what was going to happen. Were all the offerors going to submit Phase II packages or only the viable offerors? Sure enough...only those who were determined "viable" chose to proceed. Those that decided not to continue were offered debriefs at their request. We received the remaining Phase II submittals, conducted our final evaluations of those past performance and price, and made an award decision.

Did this strategy save you time?

It saved everyone time. From the contracting officer to the technical evaluation personnel to the offerors themselves, it truly was a successful streamlining initiative.

One of the hardest things we do as acquisition professionals is conduct evaluations. Many times customers who are assigned to a technical evaluation have rarely done it before. They may or may not have professional writing skills. Imagine reading through and adequately documenting an evaluation on what can often be hundreds of pages of documentation. Our interview style multiphased approach created an ability to cut right to the core of key technical discriminators. Information is proposed and evaluated right on the spot.

We conducted ten (10) CDs and documented the evaluations within nine (9) business days. It was an intense time, but it was also amazing to see how much time was saved by everyone. If we had required written technical proposals under a more traditional evaluation scheme with ten (10) offerors, the evaluation and documentation period in my opinion would have easily taken five (5) times that amount of time, if not longer.

How did industry respond to this type of approach?

Based on the feedback we received, industry truly found the process to be fair, innovative, and appreciated the focus on streamlining. The fact is in our current economy, companies have fewer and fewer dollars to spend pursuing new opportunities. The more time and money spent assembling quotes/proposals...the fewer opportunities a company can pursue. With an ever increasing push for more competition, we have to be sensitive to the financial limitations within industry. The amount of competition we receive on any acquisition and the cost for industry to compete on that same acquisition are inheritably intertwined.

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Interview with Senior Contracting Officer Jason C. Heddy—Continued

Is this a repeatable process?

Yes. In our office we've already employed this evaluation method on other Alliant acquisitions with similar success. Scale, complexity, or contract type of the requirement does not seem to be a factor. For example, in another acquisition the scale was much smaller, it was firm fixed price, and we used much fewer questions, but again we executed the evaluations in record time. In a similar manner as before, those that were deemed "non-viable" also opted not to continue.

Would you use a multiphased approach for all procurements under Alliant?

To me the real differentiator in choosing an evaluation method is the needs of the customer. Are they more comfortable with a traditional approach? Do they have the writing skills and experience with technical evaluations? Do they have the time? Do they want to review documentation? If so, then the answer is most likely to pursue a more traditional written approach. When I talk to people about this process I always encourage people to simply ask the customer a question...if I could provide you an opportunity to sit across from the offeror and ask them face-to-face a series of questions do you believe you could determine and evaluate accurately their capability to meet your requirement?

What are the problems and pitfalls of this process?

You have to do thorough acquisition planning and develop a keen level of trust and intimacy with your customer. The "upfront" work is the key to success or failure. The importance of identifying those key discriminators and of developing the questions cannot be understated. If a question is not going to separate one offeror from another...it's not worth asking. You also can't ask a question only one (1) offeror could possibly know the answer to. Additionally, the security of the questions is also paramount. If the questions are leaked, even inadvertently, it would destroy the integrity of the evaluation. Finally, a frank and honest debrief is essential. Offerors have to know why they were deemed "non-viable" in Phase I or why they lost in Phase II.

In summary, what are the best practices for conducting a multiphased procurement?

The single most important best practice is to have open, direct, and honest communication with industry and the customer. This evaluation practice brings everyone out from behind the security of their office or cubicle. It puts people face-to-face. I spent a great deal of time embedded with the customer developing the requirement and the questions. We held a couple different industry outreach events with the Alliant primes to explain the process and solicit feedback. While everyone was a bit outside their comfort zone, people knew exactly what to expect before the first demonstration began. That was essential to our success. In our business everything hinges on effective communication.

The Enterprise GWAC Division would like to thank Mr. Heddy for his time and effort in supporting this Special Edition of the Enterprise GWAC Procurement Times. With the continuous pressure on contracting officers to do more with less we believe the use of multiphased procurements can play a key role in acquiring complex IT services in less time and less money and ultimately be a win - win for all parties in the acquisition process. For more information on this article or multiphased acquisitions in general please contact Ms. Mimi Bruce, Director Client Support Enterprise GWAC Division at 925-735-1641 or Mr. John Cavadias GWAC Contracting Officer at 858-537-2261.

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