

Benefits of Early Exchanges With Industry

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Early, ongoing and comprehensive exchanges with industry prior to receipt of proposals provides substantial benefits to the government and industry. A recent example of the benefits of a proactive exchange is the current transition of the Army's large Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) systems integrator contracts.

Faced with the complexity of transitioning its large ERP systems integrator contracts, the Army responded with an unprecedented level of communication and openness with industry. This minimized the number of industry questions and concerns, which enabled maintenance of the acquisition schedule. In turn, industry was able to spend more time developing quality content for proposals, while the government focused on preparing for proposal evaluations.

In late 2012, the Army recognized the need to develop a strategy for replacing multiple SAP (Systems, Applications and Products in Data Processing) ERP software contracts set to expire over the next several years. The Army ERP Services Integrated Project Team (IPT) was chartered by the Project Manager Army Enterprise Systems Integration Program to develop this strategy.

The IPT sought to incorporate Better Buying Power initiatives including strategic sourcing, reducing indirect costs, increasing utilization of small business, maximizing competition, shortening award

cycle times, and centralizing contract planning and administration.

To accomplish the intended acquisition outcomes, a departure was needed from "business as usual." Guidance such as the Office of Management and Budget's "myth-busting" empowered the IPT to set a different tone and establish a genuine and collaborative rapport with industry.

Federal Acquisition Regulation 15.201 is a section that clearly promotes a broad, open, two-way exchange of information between industry and the government throughout the early formative stages of an acquisition, including the development of the acquisition strategy, the evaluation approach, and the solicitation. In addition to encouraging early, open exchanges between interested parties, FAR 15.201 also describes the purpose of these exchanges as improving the ability for government to understand industry capability and for industry to fully grasp the government's requirements. This allows all participants to collectively address concerns, using specific techniques to promote these exchanges, such as industry conferences, market research, one-on-one meetings, pre-solicitation conferences, draft solicitations, requests for information and site visits.

The Army ERP Services IPT decided early on to embrace the guidance in FAR 15.201 and OMB myth busting to the fullest extent possible. Before developing an acquisition strategy or any requirements or solicitation documents, the IPT visited other ERP programs and contracting offices to solicit ideas and lessons learned. These lessons learned shaped a comprehensive plan to engage industry, and this included the following activities:

- Issued a Request for Information (RFI) regarding the definition of requirements, Better Buying Power initiatives and feasibility of acquisition approaches. Because this was the first exchange with industry regarding this acquisition, extra time was dedicated to ensure the RFI was a high-quality instrument that would yield relevant and valuable information. The

RFI included a description of the various task areas, asked specific questions and provided a template for industry to use in responding to the government, as opposed to asking generically for a capability statement.

- Hosted an initial Industry Day to provide information regarding the Army's emerging acquisition for ERP Services. This included presenting an overview of the Army's ERP vision and programs, information on the Department of Defense Framework for Services Acquisition, upcoming acquisition activities and draft schedule.
- Conducted one-on-one meetings with small businesses to better understand their RFI responses and capabilities to perform the Army ERP Services requirement. The one-on-one format created an atmosphere conducive to the open exchange of information, while alleviating industry's concern about compromising competitive advantage in an open forum. Any information gathered during one-on-one meetings affecting the preparation of proposals was shared with industry. If the IPT disclosed or provided specific information about the acquisition to one or more potential offerors, that information was made available to the public as soon as practicable.
- Hosted a second Industry Day to provide an update on the acquisition activities and schedule and to present the selected acquisition strategy.
- Maintained an ongoing dialogue with industry and ensured thorough and timely government responses to questions were provided.
- Posted draft Request for Proposal (RFP) documents (e.g., Performance Work Statement and solicitation sections L and M), and refined them iteratively, based on ongoing industry feedback.
- Hosted a presolicitation conference as part of a third Industry Day in order to review each section

of the RFP, answer questions in real time, and reconfirm the schedule for Final RFP release.

- Conducted presolicitation one-on-one meetings with potential prime contractors to address their questions and have an open and interactive discussion on the draft documents. Posted questions and answers from all one-on-one meetings with updated draft RFP documents.
- Issued Final RFP on schedule.

These early, frequent and constructive exchanges prior to receipt of proposals ensured:

- Trust and credibility between the government and industry.
- A unique and effective acquisition strategy consistent with policy and guidance to utilize existing contract vehicles and increase prime opportunities for small businesses.
- Approval of the acquisition strategy with minimal changes and revisions.
- Adherence to published schedule.
- Common understanding of requirements.
- Final RFP issuance with relatively few questions from industry.
- Maximum opportunity for small businesses to expand into Army ERP Services.
- Validation and buy-in of Better Buying Power initiatives to reduce indirect costs and maintain ongoing and effective competition through on and off ramps.

The success of the acquisition to date is a direct result of the IPT maximizing the opportunity provided by FAR 15.201 to build a foundation of trust and common understanding through open communication between industry and the government.

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