



Streamlining the Contract Award Process

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A longstanding challenge and source of interminable frustration for Department of Defense (DoD) program managers (PMs) is the often excessive timeline associated with conducting a source selection and awarding a contract.

PMs either can reluctantly accept the lengthy timeline or use innovation and resources available to them to streamline that process. The sooner a contract is awarded, the quicker a PM can get to the work of product development, testing and deployment to the warfighter.

The program management office (PMO) for the Army Contract Writing System (ACWS), in concert with the Army Contracting Command—Rock Island (ACC-RI) in Illinois, implemented several innovative methods to significantly reduce the timeline required to award the initial ACWS contract. The ideas for efficiency and innovations outlined below can be used by other PMs to streamline their own contract award processes with similar effect.

In the following question-and-answer (Q&A) interview, LTC Rob Wolfe, product manager for the ACWS program, explains some of the most impactful efficiencies that he and his team implemented to facilitate a source-selection decision and contract award in just 11 months after release of the request for proposals (RFP). Contracting activity baseline goals for that process often take more than twice as much time.

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Q: Does the Army Contracting Enterprise recognize that the contract award process needs to be reduced—and if so, what are they doing about it?

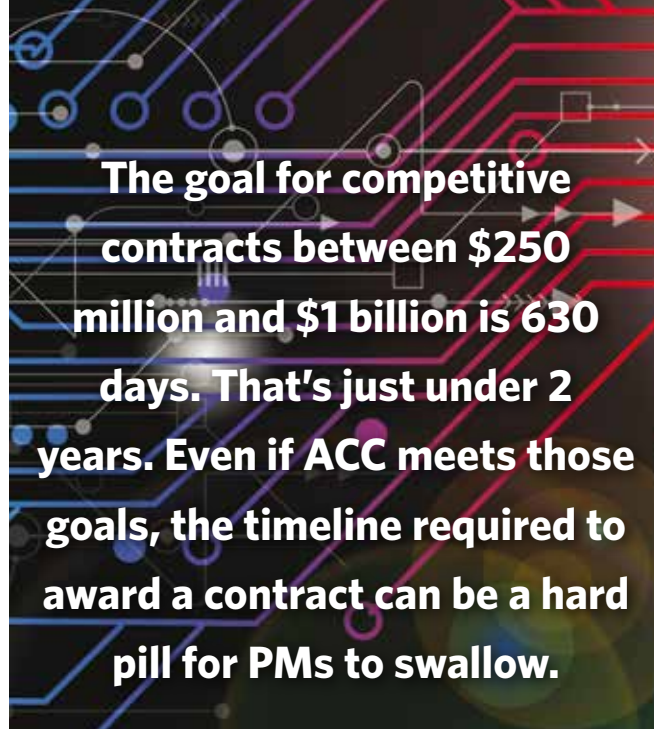
A: Sure. I believe they do. The Army Contracting Enterprise has long recognized the need to reduce what they refer to as Procurement Action Lead Time (PALT). PALT is the timeline required to achieve all work in which a contracting activity is engaged to award a contract. This work includes acceptance of a complete and actionable requirements package, release of a RFP, and conduct of a source selection culminating in the award of a contract. As an example, the commanding general of the Army Contracting Command (ACC) distributed a memorandum on Jan. 18, 2017, to the ACC workforce. The memo established a PALT baseline, by dollar threshold and acquisition type, and encouraged the workforce to achieve these baselines unless unusual circumstances are involved. This is great news, but for PMs, even the timeline goals for the PALT baselines can seem excessive to PMs. For example, the PALT baseline for a competitive contract estimated at between \$50 million and \$250 million is 600 days. The goal for competitive contracts between \$250 million and \$1 billion is 630 days. That's just under 2 years. Even if ACC meets those goals, the timeline required to award a contract can be a hard pill for PMs to swallow.

Q: How did the ACWS program reduce the PALT timeline as it worked toward awarding a contract?

A: Well, before we released the development RFP in April 2016, our team began looking for ways to improve the efficiency of the PALT process. Their initial efforts focused on listing all PALT activities in an Integrated Master Schedule (IMS) so their start times and durations could be identified and analyzed. They soon realized that many of the events that were originally planned to be conducted in a serial manner could be sequenced so that one event could start shortly after the other, with both then conducted in parallel. There are three great examples of this.

The initial plan called for using one team that would evaluate written proposals and then evaluate the live software demonstrations in sequential order. The staff decided it would be more efficient to form a separate live demonstration evaluation team and to conduct the live demonstrations in parallel with proposal evaluations. The live demonstration evaluation team had to be created from functional personnel, because the PMO didn't have sufficient staff, but use of this second team saved roughly 2 months of schedule.

The second efficiency initiative streamlined the evaluation report review cycles. During the Source Selection Evaluation Board (SSEB), there were two occasions when the SSEB chair, the Contracting Officer (KO) from ACC-RI, and attorney from Army Materiel Command were required to review evaluation reports. Normally these types of reports are done in sequential order (SSEB chair, legal, then KO,) and often from separate



locations. The ACWS team decided that it would be much more efficient to bring together all three personnel in one room for a weeklong review session. We made a compelling case to leadership to permit the KO and attorney to travel from their home stations and dedicate an entire week to one program. The results were extremely productive. The days (and nights) were long, but each set of reviews was completed in less than a week. If done serially from separate locations, this same process could have taken several weeks.

The final example involved the Source Selection Advisory Council (SSAC) and Source Selection Authority (SSA) updates. Typically, the source-selection process requires the SSEB Chair to update the SSAC and SSA at specific points along the source-selection path. These updates normally are conducted first for the SSAC, then a second is conducted for the SSA. Since these meetings require significant preparation, coordination and often travel, the program saved substantial time and resources by executing them jointly. With agreement of the SSA, the ACWS program conducted all SSAC and SSA updates together in one forum, saving potentially weeks of schedule. This joint update process continued well into the source selection until the SSAC conducted its comparative analysis work, which was conducted without the SSA present.

There are other efficiencies, but those discussed above were the most impactful.

Q: What was the single most valuable time-saving initiative the ACWS team implemented during the PALT process?

A: Without a doubt, the best decision we made was to collocate our KO with the SSEB chair and the SSEB team. I will acknowledge that doing this is something that all programs

may not be able to do, but if they are able to make it happen, it will make a world of difference. The KO's duty station was at ACC-RI and the source selection evaluation took place at Fort Belvoir, Virginia. The KO agreed to an extended temporary duty assignment (TDY) in the National Capital Region (NCR). The TDY period began just days before the offerors' proposals were submitted to the government and lasted until the conclusion of discussions 180 days later. Because the KO worked in the same space with the SSEB team, he was able to follow and discuss key issues and provide immediate feedback. He became a trusted member of the team. The KO's daily presence on site saved months of long-distance coordination, e-mail exchanges, and phone conversations during which clarity and efficiency would have been the first victims. At the conclusion of discussions and while the offerors prepared their final proposals, the KO went back to his duty station at Rock Island. He returned to the NCR with the attorney, in a TDY status, to conduct the final evaluation report legal and reviews.

If PMs are not able to make any other changes to the PALT process, I recommend co-locating with the KO as that one thing.

Q: Conducting formal discussions with offerors during a source selection can be very time consuming. Was the ACWS team able to implement any efficiencies in that process?

A: Yes, we were. We learned very early in the source-selection process that communicating with offerors was a necessary but tedious and lengthy endeavor that often led to misunderstanding. Our first eye-opening experience took place shortly after the offerors submitted their initial proposals to the government.

The KO needed to clarify a point in the proposals regarding past performance so he sent one e-mail to the applicable offerors. That single e-mail resulted in 50 e-mail exchanges between the KO and the offerors. If a similar ratio were experienced for each comment or question that had to be discussed with the offerors, the process could result in thousands of e-mail exchanges. We just knew that we could never support a process that was so inefficient and that could generate a seemingly endless trove of e-mails and questions. We had to find a more efficient way to communicate with the offerors.

We implemented a better solution during formal discussions with the offerors. Formal discussions typically are very time consuming because they involve an inefficient process wherein industry prepares questions and then, metaphorically speaking, throws them over the fence to the KO for an answer. The government team then prepares responses and throws them back to industry. This same process can be repeated hundreds of times, often without providing a sufficient or clear outcome.

Our solution was to conduct two separate, one-on-one discussions with each offeror team. The purpose of the first one-on-one discussion was to ensure each offeror's understanding of the Evaluation Notices (ENs) generated from evaluation of the initial proposals. Each offeror team met with the KO, the SSEB chair, and the technical factor and subfactor leads. Offerors asked questions and the team provided direct and clear responses. The KO directed the entire process. The purpose of the second meeting was for the offerors to respond to the ENs and to ensure that the government understood those responses.

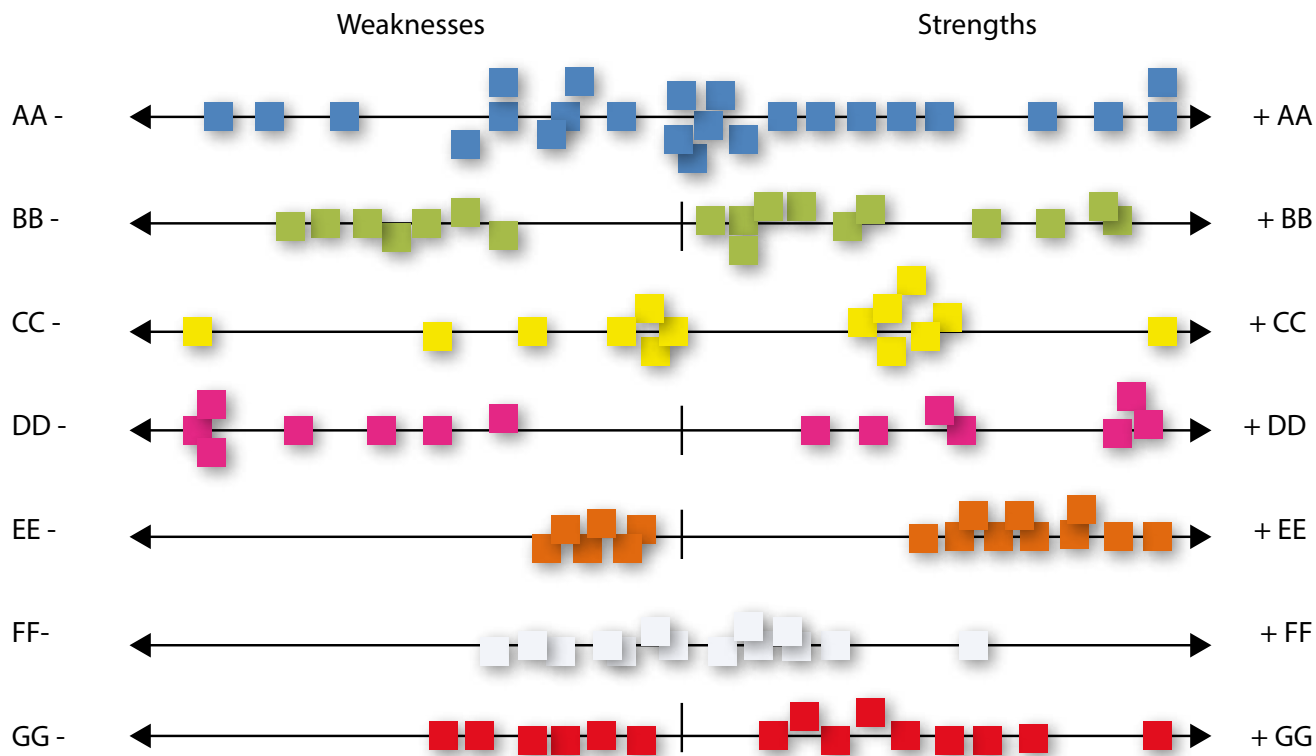
Each meeting took between 2 to 5 hours, depending on the number of questions. This same process when executed in the

Figure 1. Example of Board 1

	AA		BB		CC		DD		EE		FF		GG	
	S	W	S	W	S	W	S	W	S	W	S	W	S	W
Price														
Technical Capability	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■
Management Capability	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■			■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■
Past Performance	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■
Small Business	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■			■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■

Source of Figures: ACWS Product Management Office.

Figure 2. Example of Board 2



typical fashion could last months with less favorable results. Several of the offerors said they had never experienced a more positive exchange because it provided the clarity they needed to better prepare their final proposals.

Because he felt the offerors were well prepared to make necessary changes to their original proposals, the SSEB chair felt comfortable requiring all offerors to submit final proposals within 30 days after discussions were ended. For the ACWS team, it was a period of intense activity but well worth the effort for the results and schedule savings it enabled.

Q: What, if anything, did you do to make the proposal evaluation process more efficient?

A: I knew that to be able to meet the aggressive schedule goal we set for ourselves to complete the source-selection process and award the contract within 11 months we had to establish a reasonable limit for the time the SSEB team could evaluate each proposal. That goal was set at 2 weeks. The first week was spent reading the proposal thoroughly, taking notes and formulating responses. The second week was used to caucus and draft the initial reports. The only way the SSEB team could meet this tight timeline was for the members to prepare themselves in advance. We spent several weeks on that preparation.

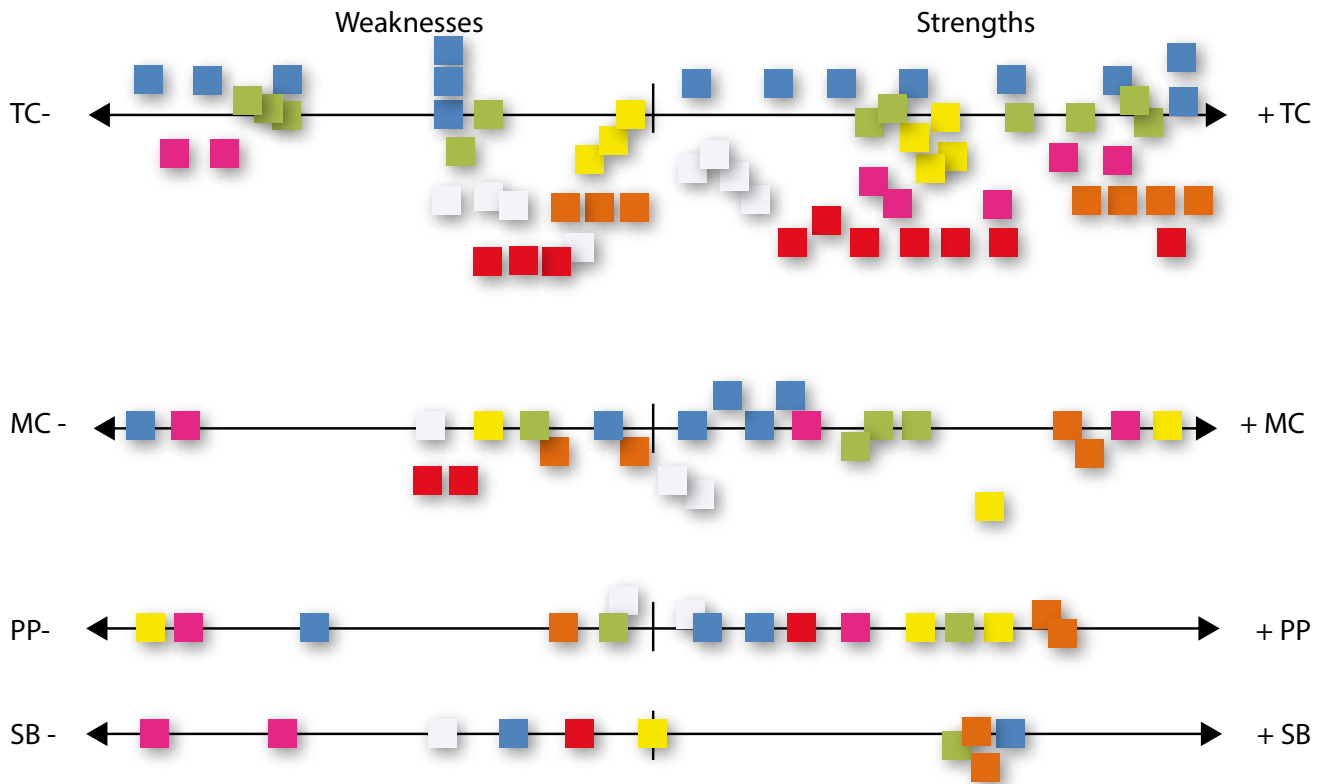
The first thing we did was to conduct an exercise in which every SSEB team member contributed to the development of a

proposal evaluation guide. Team members studied the definitions of adjectival ratings and findings and how they relate to the evaluation. They each prepared a list of authorized references (from Sections L and M) that they would use in their evaluation reports. They also developed a notional list of activities, relevant to their areas of evaluation, that they believed would “meet” the evaluation criteria. This served to ground each of the team members and help them understand the center mark from which strengths and weaknesses could be determined. We conducted these and other, similar exercises to ensure that the evaluators were in the right frame of mind and ready to do their work as soon as they received proposals.

There were several areas of the proposals we needed to evaluate, but for which we didn’t have a government subject-matter expert (SME) to include on the SSEB team. To solve this problem, we used contractor SMEs with specific skills to augment the SSEB team as nonvoting, “technical advisers.” The input from these SMEs proved invaluable and allowed the government team members to meet schedule and focus on writing reports.

Another decision we made before kicking off proposal evaluations was to adjust the time we allowed for the teams to complete the first evaluation. Instead of 2 weeks, we planned for the teams to take twice that time to allow them to develop their battle rhythm. We then invited the attorney from ACCRI to meet with the SSEB teams immediately after the teams completed evaluating the initial proposal. The purpose of the

Figure 3. Example of Board 3



attorney's meeting was to assess their process and findings. This legal guidance and feedback helped the teams understand how all follow-on ENs needed to be written and did much to ensure the team started out on the right track. This saved time that otherwise would have been required for rework later.

Q: Bringing together SSAC to conduct a comparative analysis of the proposals requires detailed planning. Can you describe how you planned for the SSAC comparative analysis and how your planning made the best use of the SSAC's time?

A: The ACWS SSAC members were very senior. Because of their seniority and the level of responsibility of their primary jobs, they could only afford to dedicate 2 days for this activity. We had to come up with a process, in advance of their meetings, that would be effective and agreeable to all the members so they could conduct a thorough comparison in a relative short time and arrive at the right recommendation. The concept the PMO team developed was very similar to a scrum in an Agile process. Our process was simple, but highly effective because it allowed SSAC members to quickly organize data into visual patterns of strengths and weaknesses and to discuss their relative values. The process involved three steps using three separate scrum boards.

Step 1 was to identify discriminators (strengths and weakness) by offeror and organize them by evaluation factors. The KO asked each SSAC member individually to list discriminators

that he/she identified during review of the evaluation reports. Additional facilitators recorded these discriminators on colored "sticky" notes, one color for each offeror, and placed them on Board 1. The sticky notes were divided into two columns for each offeror: one for strengths and one for weaknesses.

After each SSAC member provided input, Board 1 looked something like Figure 1. Board 1 allowed the SSAC members to view the initial side-by-side comparison of strengths and weaknesses of each proposal. Figure 1 does not include any source-selection information and the number of offerors does not reflect the actual numbers of offerors in the ACWS source election.

During Step 2, the KO, under the direction of the SSAC members, transferred the colored sticky notes from Board 1 to Board 2, one at a time, by offeror. Board 2 included one row for each offeror that was a continuum with a minus sign to the left, a center mark in the middle, and a plus sign on the right. As the SSAC members transferred sticky notes from Board 1 to Board 2, they discussed the relative importance of each discriminator and placed it in the agreed-to order of importance on the continuum. After the sticky notes (discriminators) for one offeror were all transferred to Board 2, the group started transferring notes for the second offeror, and so on. At the end of Step 2, Board 2 included a listing of relative importance of the strengths and weaknesses of each offeror. At this point, patterns began to emerge that the SSAC could discuss. Figure 2 shows an example of what

Board 2 looked like (no source-selection data were used to create this example).


Step 3 was to arrange discriminators for all offerors by evaluation factor. The board required for this step included a row for each of the four evaluation factors: Technical Capability, Management Capability, Past Performance, and Small Business. The evaluation factors were placed from top to bottom in the same order of importance listed in the RFP. In this step, the SSAC members transferred the sticky notes from one of the offerors from Board 2 to Board 3 and placed them in the rows that corresponded to their appropriate evaluation factors. As they transferred the sticky notes, they took care to maintain the same relative position of importance on the continuum. The sticky notes from the first offeror transferred to Board 3 became the baseline from which the group would judge the importance of every other offeror's discriminator as they were transferred from Board 2 to Board 3.

The result of Step 3 was a visual tool that displayed the strengths and weaknesses of each Offeror, by evaluation factor, arranged in the order of importance as determined by the SSAC members and how they stacked up to the other Offerors. An example of what Board 3 looked like is included in Figure 3. No actual source-selection data were used to create this example.

Once the SSAC identified which stood out among the others, it was then easy to compare the cost of that proposal against the capability provided in that proposal and to make a recommendation as to the best value decision for the Army.

Q: What was the final result of the efficiency initiatives that your team put into practice during the ACWS Source Selection?

A: Well, I'm pleased to say that all the effort the team put into planning an aggressive source selection schedule, combined with the implementation of numerous efficiency initiatives that helped us stay on schedule, all resulted in a final SSA decision just over 8 months after proposal receipt, and contract award after only 11 months. I am convinced that if my team had accepted the status quo, this same process could have taken twice that long.

All PMs know that there are variables they can't control in the source-selection process. But with careful planning, a commitment to reduce PALT, and cooperation from the contracting community, the SSEB timeline can be significantly reduced, allowing PMs a greater likelihood of remaining within their cost and schedule baselines. 

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