

Innovative Acquisition (Concept Paper & Prototype) Use Case using a Two-Stage, Down-Select Process for the HHS Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE)

As part of the IDEA Lab Buyers Club program, we plan to share examples of innovative acquisitions. Here's our first installment.

Acquisition Need: ASPE needed a complete analysis, redesign, migration, implementation, and maintenance of a new web content management system (WCMS), public-facing website, intranet, and two legacy databases as well as hosting and marketing.

Description of two-stage, down-select process: The Time & Materials acquisition was set aside for small business competition. A [Request for Proposal](#) (RFP) was issued via FedBizOpps resulting in 24 submitted proposals for Stage One, which only required an eight-page concept paper and pricing proposal. ASPE initially submitted a 28-page traditional Scope of Work (SOW) with a “kitchen sink” full of requirements, but the Contracting Officer, contract specialist, and Buyers Club worked with the project officer to shift toward a Statement of Objectives (SOO) with only 10 pages, resulting in a more innovative approach and an improved acquisition. The down-select approach minimized the burden on small businesses to compete without devoting too much time and effort compared with traditional 20+ page proposal requirements. Contractors, per the evaluation criteria, provided examples of similar work and focused on their technical concept for ASPE's needs, which illustrated their understanding of the requirement. They were allowed two weeks to submit proposals, including a question and answer period during the first week.

Five companies were selected for Stage Two, given roughly two weeks and \$10,000 to submit a revised cost proposal, performance work statement (PWS), and a functional prototype based on the evaluation criteria specifically designed to test their concept and ability to deliver actual design and coding in a short time-frame. All contractors participated in a second, interactive question and answer session via conference call with program management and procurement staff.

Akira Technologies received the award, which took eight weeks from the RFP announcement date. The solicitation and award process of the acquisition worked well for all internal and external stakeholders, though a final use case will be developed once implementation to ensure IT service acquisition success – within budget, on time, and outcome-appropriate with all deliverables being met.

Advantages of this method and why it worked: The staged process with minimal burden appeals to companies of all sizes who can easily develop a short concept paper rather than a lengthy text-based proposal. As a result, offerors can focus on their outcome-based concept and prototype – for which they receive payment, dependent upon the time required to develop. From the Government's perspective, the ability to evaluate real prototypes compared with text-based proposals was instrumental during source selection to determine the company best suited for the overall acquisition.

Feedback from Stakeholders, including lessons learned: Each of the stakeholders indicated they valued the streamlined approach with the concept paper and prototype as it created much less burden than traditional text-only based proposals where it's difficult to measure capabilities and minimize risk to the government. The prototype experiment was the singular favorite aspect by contractors, procurement officials, and program management and everyone involved said they would prefer this type of approach

and participate in the future. Both contractors and program management (Technical Evaluation Panel) would like additional time for prototype development, evaluation, and oral prototype presentations.

The evaluation panel recommends adding in language to cut contractors quickly, such as those whose proposals exceed their budget or are non-compliant for various reasons. All stakeholders need more education on this method as it deviates substantially, yet productively from the status quo. Contractors need better information on how to develop short concept papers and would like strength and weakness feedback after being selected for the next stage. All feel an industry day prior to solicitation release would be valuable for preliminary questions as well as recommendations for RFP improvements. Please visit our site periodically to learn more about other innovative acquisition and procurement experiences.

Communication and Ongoing End User Feedback

The contractor and product owner communicate daily while the contractor submits a new iteration of the system every two weeks (each is a sprint), allowing the product owner to closely monitor and prioritize their work and provide effective end-user feedback. This approach, according to the product owner and ASPE staff, has dramatically changed their mindset about acquisition of IT services. The rapid development of the web system, using the agile sprint cycles, has truly exceeded their expectations.

The agile method also gives the federal project manager more control of the project, in addition to the sprint planning and allows the product owner to effectively align task planning, deliverable acceptance, and invoice monitoring. It was the correct choice for this project. Adapting the acquisition process to match the agile implementation process was worth the effort. In fact, it's made them more mindful of how IT service implementation should be and has set a new standard for how to successfully develop IT systems. Acquisition begins when a need is determined, but doesn't end until all objectives are fully implemented and accounted for.

Using a variety of mostly free online tools that improve collaboration and service delivery, the contractor and product owner enable quick, effective decision making. Desktop sharing and conference calls are the basics. There are many other great tools out there, though. The consistent interaction and collaboration using this technology stack is tremendously helpful for rapid iteration between ASPE and the contractor.

- Both teams share access to JIRA AGILE – a scrum planning and monitoring tool for story/backlog/task monitoring and priority adjustments:
 - <http://bit.ly/1AejhMI>
- OWNCLOUD – used as an enterprise file sharing (and documentation repository):
 - <https://owncloud.org/>
- GIT – the main version control system:
 - <http://git-scm.com/>
- CONCEPTCODIFY is the card sorting tool:
 - <https://conceptcodify.com/>
- THE BRAIN is the mind mapping tool for taxonomy generation and shared mind map editing:
 - <http://www.thebrain.com/>
- GANTTER – used for sharing and online editing of the high-level project planning:
 - <http://www.ganttter.com/>