

Transcription

Announcer:

"Behind the Buy" is a series of podcasts featuring stories from members of the Federal acquisition workforce who have successfully executed best practice IT contracting strategies from the Digital Services Playbook and TechFAR to help their agency meet its mission.

Anne:

Hello, I'm Anne Rung, the Administrator of the Office of Federal Procurement Policy - OFPP. The Administration has embarked on a comprehensive approach to fundamentally improve the way that the Government delivers services to the public. As part of this effort, our team at OMB recently launched the Digital Services Playbook and TechFAR Handbook to help guide agencies leverage best practices from the private sector and encourage agency use of innovative contracting practices. Today, we have an extra special guest to kick off our first "Behind the Buy" series. Mark Naggar, from the Department of Health and Human Services serves as the Project Manager for the HHS Buyers Club, which is part of the IDEA Lab run by the Department to formulate, test, measure, and scale innovative ideas. IDEA stands for Innovation, Design, Entrepreneurship, and Action. Mark executed on these best practices and strategies, and we are excited to have him here.

Welcome Mark!

Mark:

Thanks – happy to be here.

Anne:

Let's jump right in – I understand that shortly after you came to HHS headquarters, the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation approached you for help with an acquisition challenge. What was it?

Mark:

ASPE was looking for web redesign work – for example, HHS' web content management system, public website, intranet, and two legacy databases – a common requirement for every agency. They came to me with a 28-page Statement of Work and were clearly headed down the traditional path of a 6-month procurement, likely resulting in the selection of a contractor with the best-written proposal.

Anne:

What suggestions did you make?

Mark:

We made four suggestions:

First, convert the SOW into a simple, results-based statement of objectives permitting offerors to propose their own innovative solutions.

Second, break the solicitation into two stages, minimizing the burden on the agency and the participating small businesses, as this was a set-aside.

Third, request a short concept paper and pricing proposal – rather than a detailed proposal – for Stage One.

Fourth, during Stage Two, give offerors in the competitive range nominal funding, via purchase orders, to develop prototypes demonstrating their concepts and testing their ability to deliver design and coding in a short timeframe.

Anne:

If I'm not mistaken, your four suggestions for reducing burden are directly supported by the Digital Services Playbook and the TechFAR, two tools released by OMB in the last year.

Mark:

That's correct. The use of prototyping and end-user engagement is taken from Play Four, a key play of the Playbook, which calls for agile, iterative practices. The TechFAR aims at providing guidance to contracting and legal personnel on the execution of this play.

Anne:

What impact did Play Four and the TechFAR have on this procurement?

Mark:

Playbook's staged solicitation approach reduced the burden for small businesses to compete, and the nominal funding covered costs to develop a prototype, which in turn enabled the Government to better assess their capabilities.

The TechFAR enabled good participation -- 24 proposals, which included the short concept paper and proposed pricing. Offerors told us the requirement for a concept paper reduced their burden and cost from that of having to produce a more traditional detailed proposal.

Anne:

Would you suggest this approach for everyone in need of prototyping?

Mark:

Your ideal choice of acquisition strategy always depends on your specific requirements and the context of the acquisition.

Agile was definitely the correct choice for this project. We found the staged approach and use of funding particularly helpful here because the work was set aside for small business.

Anne:

How did you engage offerors pre-award and post-award?

Mark:

During Stage One, offerors were allowed one week to submit questions, which we then promptly answered.

During Stage Two, we held a single conference call with all five of the selected contractors at once, to fully discuss the process, the evaluation factors, and to encourage as many questions as possible from all stakeholders. We felt this would greatly benefit them as they developed their prototypes, as it would lead to a more interactive session, similar to a press conference.

Post-Award, we asked for the vendors to “debrief” us on how the process went and how we could improve. I developed a set of questions and sent them to all Stage Two and half of Stage One companies. I also followed up with informal phone conversations to understand them fully.

They appreciated and thanked me for the opportunity to have their voices heard and improve the process.

I learned two lessons from all of this.

One – Don’t underestimate the value of feedback from stakeholders.

Two – Post-award feedback should be part of EVERY acquisition, because there’s ALWAYS room for improvement.

Anne:

I’m so glad to hear you say that because vendor feedback is essential for continuous improvement.

I'm curious, what did your customers think of the process?

Mark:

They were very pleased. Instead of the 6 months that is typical for this type of procurement, the entire process took just 8 WEEKS from the announcement of the RFP.

They especially liked the use of prototyping, because it gave them a far better sense of the offeror's likelihood for successful performance than is determined from a text-based proposal, which generally turns into a contest of who is the best proposal writer.

Anne:

Is this process something that you think is manageable by a junior member of the workforce, or does it require lots of experience?

Mark:

This specific process is manageable by a junior member of the workforce, if given the right training and supervision. This approach has been taken many times throughout Government, yet it is rarely used. At HHS, neither the procurement team, program office, nor any of the other internal stakeholders had ever tried it. The majority of the offerors had never experienced it, either.

Anne:

The core of agile development is flexibility in responding to customer feedback. How do you collect this feedback during development?

Mark:

The contractor and project team communicate daily using a variety of mostly free online tools, enabling quick, effective decision-making. Desktop sharing and conference calls are the basics, but they also use other tools to collaborate and improve service delivery way beyond traditional methods. For example, both teams share access to JIRA AGILE – that's J-I-R-A – a scrum planning and monitoring tool for story/backlog/task monitoring and priority adjustments. OWNCLOUD is used as an enterprise file sharing. And THE BRAIN is the mind mapping tool for taxonomy generation and shared mind map editing.

While I'm not endorsing any of these tools, the consistent interaction and collaboration using this technology stack is tremendously helpful for rapid iteration between stakeholders. Listeners should read the accompanying blog post for specific web addresses, but keep in mind there are many other great tools available.

Anne:

Thanks for sharing those tools, Mark.

Are you doing anything to capture your experience, so other parts of HHS – or the rest of the Government – can replicate or adopt a modified version of this strategy?

Mark:

That's where the Buyers Club comes in. We stood up the Buyers Club for three reasons:

First, to test innovative acquisition techniques and share the results with everyone.

Second, to develop newer, easier, and more adaptive acquisition models and processes, because markets constantly change.

And third, to reach out and engage all key stakeholders with effective education.

In fact, we're developing additional resources for better, more innovative acquisitions, including:

- Common barriers and solutions
- Best practices, Dynamic templates, and audience-specific guidance
- Potential Pitfalls, Lessons Learned, and
- Opportunities for collaboration

Anne:

Can other agencies, besides HHS, access this information?

Mark:

Yes. Agencies can access the HHS' Buyers Club by going to [hhs dot gov slash idealab](https://hhs.gov/idealab) to read a use case, see the statement of objectives and other materials associated with this particular acquisition.

Anne:

Anything you can share about other innovative acquisition strategies you are thinking about?

Mark:

Our ambitious strategy and execution plan is available on our landing page, which mentions the iterative development of our innovative acquisition decision diagram. Once fully-functional and tested, it will add tremendous value.

We plan to continue testing the various plays and acquisition methods throughout HHS and working with all stakeholders to help them meet their own unique mission needs.

We're continually collaborating with other agencies to spur more innovative acquisitions.

Anne:

Mark, thank you for sharing your advice and experience at the HHS Buyers Club. We at OFPP think it is truly significant you've created a place where ideas can be tested and results can be captured and shared with others.

As a matter of fact, we're talking to agency senior procurement executives about standing up Buyers Clubs in their agencies and then linking them together through a Federal Buyers Club, to facilitate sharing innovative contracting ideas and best practices across agencies, through a trusted community of practice.

In the meantime, we encourage anyone who wants to share a recent experience, especially a "Playbook or TechFAR-related" experience, to contact OFPP, so that we can share your success story with the community.

Everyone, thanks for tuning in.

Listen for us next time, where we'll continue to take you Behind the Buy.