

Source Selection Simulation

Intact Team Training
on Picking a Provider

Tom Elsesser ■ Bill Long



Our Defense Acquisition Workforce struggles with a shortage of employees skilled in source selection—the art or science of choosing a provider for a product or service. The significant lack of experience is due to the recent hiring of many new workforce members, and few of these have been through the highs and lows of essentially a sequestration while determining the most likely offeror. Col. (Brig. Gen. select) Cameron G. Holt, then serving as director of contracting for Air Force Life Cycle Management Center (AFLCMC/Contracting Organization) at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida, identified this concern and spoke with Defense Acquisition University (DAU) Professor Bill Long about ways to resolve this dilemma.

While he was developing contingency contracting training, Long came up with the idea of developing an interactive development platform. This would allow the team to develop from remote locations and also record the results in a DVD, to allow troops in remote locations access to Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR), Defense Federal Acquisition Regulation Supplement (DFARS), policies, procedures, templates and

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examples. Troops would be able to practice with the DVD and then carry it with them on deployment, even to forward operating locations.

Holt said he thought the Air Force had enough source-selection training through its current Air Force Phase I/II Source Selection training but experience was still missing. It was understood that experience could not be “manufactured,” but we realized we could manufacture a simulated experience. The intent would be to allow those about to enter a source selection to get a sense of the process, documentation and tasks experienced during a source selection so that, when faced with the real source selection, a sense of familiarity would allow for a steeper improvement curve—and, most important, an increased likelihood of success. The need for a simulation, to use Holt’s analogy, was that “We would not put a pilot in the seat of a new \$100 million stealth fighter before giving her flight simulation time. The argument for source-selection simulation (SSS) training

is equally valid; before having people be responsible for a \$100 million source selection, give them some ‘stick and throttle time’ in the simulator.”

From this, the idea of experiential training developed. We believe the most effective way to achieve experiential training is to have participants do what they will need to do in a source selection. Rather than present them the rules and policies about what they will be doing in a month or two, the concept is to have them *do* what they will be doing in a month or two. We believe that the best method to do so is through intact team training. This goes hand in hand with DAU’s concept (stated in the Acquisition Learning Model) of interacting with acquisition workforce members at their jobsites.

Over the last year, DAU-South Region Contracting Professors Long and Tom Elsesser and Science, Engineering and Test Professor Ed Adkins developed a DAU Targeted Training Program for Source

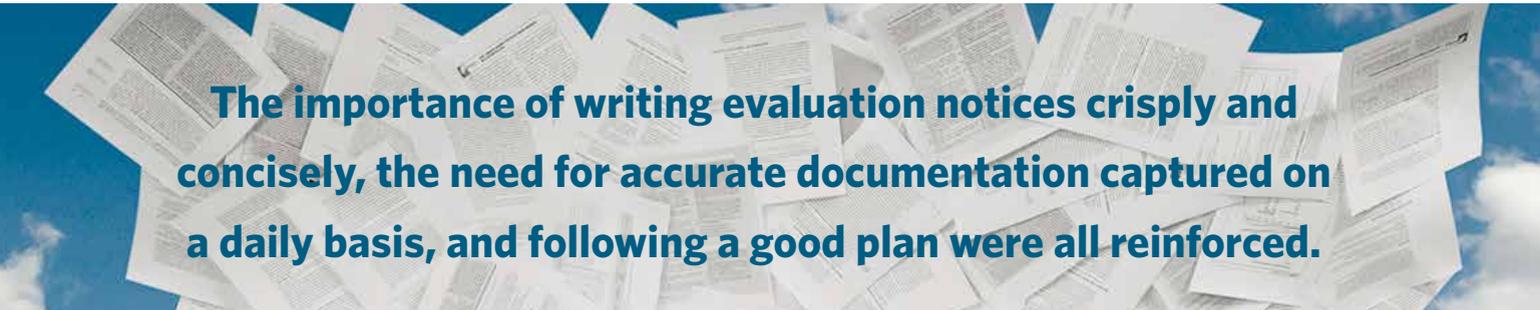
Selection Mission Assistance. The professors interviewed many Air Armament (Eglin Air Force Base) acquisition professionals. In particular, they spoke with the Eglin AFL-CMC Acquisition Center of Excellence. These conversations were to identify, from the broad to the specific view, what outcomes the team would like to see. This was an important step, as we wanted to design a program that addressed specific goals rather than one that used previously developed material to meet minimal needs.

We asked a Source Selection Evaluation Board (SSEB) chairman and a procurement contracting officer who had recent source-selection experience, “What would you like to see from your employees as a result of participating in this simulation?”

Given the preferred outcomes of our sponsor, we were able to target our simulation around key events that participants needed to be aware of. The four-day simulation was designed to take a group from proposal receipt to contract award (and protest).

Before the simulation session, those scheduled to participate receive some information—primarily the RFP—which they are to review. Members walk in on the first day and immediately must surrender their cellphones and electronic devices, which lends a dose of reality to the experience.

While there is some presentation by the facilitators, most of the time is devoted to hands-on exercises.



The importance of writing evaluation notices crisply and concisely, the need for accurate documentation captured on a daily basis, and following a good plan were all reinforced.

They both responded that they believed that, if workforce members understood the importance of—and had some experience in—writing Evaluation Notices (ENs) and grasped the critical importance of proper documentation, source-selection efforts would be greatly improved.

With this guidance, we moved out to create a simulation we could conduct in a week’s time. Trying to replicate a six- to 10-week event in four days was ambitious. We quickly realized we could neither cover every activity nor capture each event in depth.

Note that this is a simulation, not a workshop. We have a particular set of documents we use to conduct the simulation. The simulation is designed to familiarize participants with what they will be doing, not to conduct a dry run of the pending source selection. A primary concern was to avoid the perception of a dry run, which would invite a protest from the offerors who did not win in the simulation.

In practical terms, using the source-selection material for the simulation does not work. You likely will have the request for proposal (RFP), but you will not have offeror proposals that will provide the basis of the evaluation process. There are other drawbacks, but not having proposals eliminates the use of actual materials in any circumstance.

We can and do make adjustments to the simulation to mirror local practice—for example, in risk assessment. There are two methodologies for evaluating—combined or separate. We can build the simulation to either methodology.

On the first day we introduce ethics and organizational conflicts of interest. The key topic is a review of the proposals received and document findings on subfactor worksheets. The day closes with the team reviewing its work with the SSEB chairman.

On the second day, the participants write ENs to prepare an initial evaluation and competitive range briefing and present it to an independent review team. For the simulation, the facilitators serve in that review role. Again, we close the day with the team reviewing its work with the SSEB chairman.

On the third day, participants conduct discussions and evaluate offeror EN responses, and this activity includes evaluating the Final Proposal submission. Participants update subfactor worksheets and close the day, as always, with the team reviewing its work with the SSEB chairman.

The final day focuses on preparing and presenting the final decision brief to the Source Selection Authority (SSA). If possible, we have a local acquisition official serve as the SSA. This provides an additional dose of reality. We ask for insights after the briefing from the guest SSA and then debrief an unsuccessful offeror and, if time permits, a protest.

There are facilitator presentations throughout, but they are short and are used to remind participants of key points and desired outcomes of the exercise to follow. We also provide some time for participants to ask questions and discuss—but the intent is to create, as much as possible, a source-selection environment.

We start each day with a friendly competition between teams. The group is divided into three technical subfactor teams and we keep a running score each day and crown a champion the afternoon of the last day. The competition is based on topics exercised the previous day.

Even more dynamic is the creation of the SSS Tool. Drawing on his success in using a similar tool in contingency contracting, Long decided we should use a Web-based platform for presenting the simulation. Teaming with DAU Knowledge Project Officer Kathy Spainhower and DAU staff members Jennifer Zearley, Leesa Thomas and Brian Bohr, the group designed and built a training architecture under private workspace created on DAU's Acquisition Community Connection website. This training architecture created a way for the instructors to easily collaborate and share materials during the simulation development. This architecture also became the means of copying a mirror image of the training website onto a DVD for classroom delivery. The DVD provides students a "takeaway" tool that contains Department of Defense (DoD) and Service-specific policy and/or guidance, tools, templates and training.

At this point it became clear that what would be very valuable for our Eglin customer had broad application not only across the Air Force but throughout the DoD. So the tool development team included areas for each Service, to allow us to make available each Service's source-selection directives and guidance.

RFP for a 10-year multiple-award task order contract with an estimated value at \$19 billion. On Oct. 14-18, 2014, Elsesser led a DAU-West team consisting of Contracting Department Chairman Douglas Constant, Program Management Department Chairman James McNulty and Professor Salvatore Cianci through DAU's first SSS intact team training away from a DAU facility. DMEA brought 33 members to the SSS. Like the others, this SSS provided a realistic environment, immersing participants in activities necessary to effectively conduct their upcoming source selections. The importance of writing evaluation notices crisply and concisely, the need for accurate documentation captured on a daily basis, and following a good plan were all reinforced. Notable participant feedback included "very valuable"; "the exercises are realistic, showing what I can expect in the source selection"; "This is real!"; "The simulation gave me some great ideas"; "Great to do this with people I will be working with in the source selection."

Stemming from the SSS success, DAU-South is developing a prequel to the Source Selection Simulation. Realizing the battle often is won or lost before entering the Source Selection Facility, we are crafting a four-day Acquisition Planning Simulation. The Acquisition Planning Simulation will address acquisition planning activities leading up to release of the RFP. Tentative key focus areas include risk assessment, acquisition strategy and Section M evaluation criteria. This simulation will fill another gap in the learning process.



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So far, the development team has hosted successful pilots with DAU-South instructors and with Air Force and Army personnel. Feedback from each validated the training materials and tools on the DVD and identified areas for improving the efficiency and effectiveness in delivery of SSS intact team training.

On Sept. 30-Oct. 3, 2014, Professors Long and Elsesser delivered DAU's first-ever Intact Team SSS Training to Eglin's AFLCMC Professional, Engineering and Administrative Support Services (EPASS) Program Source Selection Team. The SSS intact team provided this 19-person EPASS source selection team "stick and throttle time" in the simulator to ensure improved acquisition outcomes for their five-year, \$50 million per year program.

Defense Microelectronics Activity's (DMEA) Advanced Technology Support Program team is preparing to release a draft

Again, there are many courses and manuals for doing these acquisition planning activities but little experience among members of the workforce. As with the SSS tool, we will partner with the DAU Knowledge Project team and use DAU's Acquisition Community Connection website as our platform. We hope to create a simulation that will give participants practical application in the various activities and documents of the planning process.

The team also is working on a Services scenario for the SSS as part of an ongoing fiscal year 2015 Mission Assistance project for Army Contracting Command. As time permits, we are making the current SSS tool more robust, with Service-specific tools, templates, training and source-selection policy websites. It is our intent to update material semiannually. 

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