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by Anthony Parker
President, Parker Tide

The Right People at the Right Time

The federal government is the largest buyer of services in the world. To manage this, it has developed a rigid system of purchasing those services that starts with issuing a request for proposals (RFP) to potential sellers. And obtaining written responses to those RFPs outlining why that seller is the most qualified to provide the services the buyer requires. Included in that response are generally the resumes of potential employees that are qualified to provide those services.

So far, so good. The buyer has all the information it needs to make a decision on which potential seller to select. But this is where the problems begin: the buyer, for whatever reason, delays making a choice and the sellers are stuck in limbo. Frequently weeks and sometimes months pass before the buyer selects the seller, leaving the seller to scramble to actually getting the proposed employees or qualified substitutes in place in a short period of time. For services sellers, this means they could lose the very talent they proposed to win the work with.

The key personnel provided in the proposal are generally highly qualified and are in great demand. They will not quietly “sit on the bench” while waiting for the buyer to make its decision and companies often can’t afford to pay a roster of benchwarmers. This poses a great challenge for contractors trying to meet the demands of agencies in need of quick and effective staff augmentation after award. Frequently these delays require a full replacement of employees because those that were originally presented have found other work. Finding qualified employees on short notice is a challenge because the pool of qualified candidates is small. This is particularly true for qualified staff holding specialized qualifications or high level security clearances.

A second issue facing bidders is whether to offer those same qualified employees for another RFP prior to learning whether the seller has won the first RFP. Because the talent pool is small and those highly qualified employees are in high demand, there is always the temptation to provide the resume of one highly qualified employee for more than one RFP with the fastest decision maker winning out.

So what is the solution? In the perfect world, the federal government would select the seller more quickly. But they are constrained by a number of variables. RFPs are “pulled” because their needs have changed; budgets remove the funding for that particular RFP; priorities change; the contracting office is so weighed down by the volume of RFPs that require decisions. It



would be folly to think that the federal government can or will change. So that places the need to change on the seller.

First the seller needs to really know the “back story” for each RFP. Is the need really strong? Is the government going to move on the RFP expeditiously?

Second, the seller needs to stay in touch with candidates. Find them short-term work if possible. Touch base with them on a regular basis. Get them to commit to at least giving you notice prior to taking another assignment.

Third, stay in a particular line of work and don’t try to respond to multiple types of RFPs. If the seller stays in a small group of specialties, it will be easier to continue to recruit for those specialties. That way, when the buyer does make its decision, the seller will be able to respond immediately, either with the candidates proposed in the response to the RFP or with fully qualified substitutes.

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