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SPECIAL REPORT

THE STAYING POWER OF SEWP

The contract continues to be the go-to vehicle for agencies needing to acquire advanced commercial technology.

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SEWP STILL LEADS THE WAY

SEWP endures as the gold standard when it comes to government IT acquisition contracts.

With nearly 150 approved contractors, a huge array of products, and stellar customer service, it's no surprise NASA SEWP (Solutions for Enterprise-Wide Procurement) is still going strong after 24 years. This Government-Wide Acquisition Contract (GWAC) is now in its fifth iteration and available to all federal agencies. It provides a fast, easy, and cost-effective way for agencies to buy hardware, software, telecommunications and networking equipment, peripherals, and associated services. In FY2015 alone, nearly 25,000 orders for federal agencies totaling $2.55 billion were processed through SEWP.

While there are other GWACs available for agencies to use, there are many reasons SEWP maintains its lead status. The first is price. SEWP has the second lowest processing fee at .39 percent. The NIH CIOCS contract is currently at .35 percent. For common configurations of laptops and desktops, SEWP has implemented strategic sourcing. With this in place, agencies simply shop for the lowest price on these pre-negotiated builds.

"It has made competition fierce, but that drives down the price of these standard configurations," says Carroll Genovese, CDW-G's SEWP Program Manager. "Not only does this ensure agencies are getting the best price, it also speeds up the process."

Strategic sourcing is an important part of category management, a method the federal government uses to increase efficiency, reduce redundancies, optimize funds spent on commodity IT, and lower acquisition costs. It does this by creating categories for common spending and costs. Through category management, and more specifically strategic sourcing, the government saved about $470 million in FY2015. There is also the potential for much greater savings, according to a GAO report. GSA expects growth to continue on contracts including SEWP throughout FY2017.

Customer service is another major reason agencies continue using SEWP. The SEWP Program Manager Joanne Woytek makes customer service a top priority. Her team is known for working around the clock to guide customers through the quoting process.They continuously monitor requests from quote through delivery.

The SEWP team ensures an extremely fast turnaround when required. For example, if an agency requests a product or service not currently on the contract, SEWP can often add it within the hour. In other cases, an agency may have a 24-hour time period in which to buy products or services. Once the request is entered into the SEWP QRT (Quote Request Tool), the SEWP program office sends an e-mail to all contractors selected for that particular requirement. If the request is out of the ordinary in any way, the SEWP office will contact contractors personally to get fast help to the customer.

SEWP holds their contractors accountable with publicly visible "scorecards," which rate contractors on reporting, customer satisfaction, information distribution, and contract adherence. "High ratings are something all contract holders value greatly," says Genovese.

SEWP also keeps tabs on how well vendors and equipment manufacturers are adhering to quality requirements. It has recently begun encouraging manufacturers to attain specific ISO certifications to ensure the integrity of the equipment they are selling and prevent the possibility of counterfeit equipment.

Requiring companies to have ISO certification is just the latest effort by the SEWP program office to give agencies peace of mind and ensure a smooth acquisition experience. It's that attention to detail and customer focus that keeps agencies relying on SEWP for their technology needs. •

SEWP AT YOUR SERVICE

The service aspects associated with the SEWP contract ensure a smooth process.

Agencies using the NASA SEWP contract to buy commodity hardware, software, networking and telecommunications equipment and services know they can quickly and efficiently resolve virtually any question or concern they have. In fact, that's why SEWP has been such a popular GWAC for the past two decades.

When it comes to customer service, SEWP Program Manager Joanne Woytek leaves no stone unturned. That's why, besides the standard FAQs, forms, documents, and live chat, SEWP has a 50-person customer service team ready to step in and help at a moment's notice. That team can help with everything from setting up a contract and figuring out how to get the products you need to submitting quotes and troubleshooting.

To understand the basics of SEWP, including what's available and how to use SEWP's online tools, SEWP offers free onsite training, as well as training via WebEx and video. More advanced training also is available. Over the years, the SEWP team has also developed a set of user-friendly tools to help with market research, submitting and tracking quotes, researching providers, and developing an agency catalog. These tools make it fast and simple to use SEWP.

- The Quote Request Tool (QRT) is an online tool for submitting a request for availability and pricing information from contract holders. It automatically factors in scope, availability and Fair Opportunity Compliance, so agencies don't have to worry about the details. Instead, they can focus on submitting quote requests and keeping track of their orders. The tool also flags users when there is an issue with the contract, manufacturer, or specific products.
- The Market Research Tool (MRT) lets users search by product or provider, then use that information to create a Request for Information (RFI) with the QRT. The MRT also helps users request that SEWP add specific products or providers to the system—something the SEWP team can address within an hour in most cases.
- The GSS Catalog Tool is SEWP's strategic sourcing tool. The Government-wide Strategic Solutions (GSS) for Desktops and Laptops, version 3 which was completed June 2017, provides three pre-configured, pre-competed desktops and the same number of laptops. Agencies can search for the lowest price on these pre-configured units and quickly and easily buy those with the lowest price.
- The Provider Lookup Tool is a searchable online list of SEWP providers with details about their companies, the products on contract, and pricing. Users can search by keyword, product names, company, or providers.
- Agencies can work with the SEWP program office to create their own personalized Agency Catalog, which lists reoccurring products or services required by the agency, along with established pricing. This relatively new offering saves time for agencies by eliminating the need to search through the entire SEWP catalog every time it needs those products or services.
- SEWP also provides 22 reports to help agencies track purchases. Reports are available at the agency level and product classification level. Reports also are available on how well agencies are meeting FITARA requirements and other government initiatives.

Along with the tools and personalized service the SEWP program office provides, agencies can expect whatever help they need from enterprising contract holders. CDW-G, for example, which holds the record on the number of SEWP contract awards, provides agencies with access to a highly trained program management staff.

One of CDW-G's most helpful tools for agencies is its SEWP website. The easy-to-use site lets users search for available products and pricing. For micro-purchases—orders of less than $3,500 that don't require competition—users can simply add items to a cart and buy them quickly, without quotes required via e-mail or phone.

"We do what it takes to be responsive to our customers' needs," says Carroll Genovese, CDW-G's program manager for SEWP. •

COLLABORATION IS KEY TO SUCCESS

These days, collaboration is critical to ensure effective operations and mission fulfillment.

The ability to collaborate—within an agency, among different agencies, among federal and state agencies, and with the private sector—has never been more important. Effective collaboration fosters shared services, saves money, increases efficiencies, and leads to more effective services.

It can even improve security. In fact, collaboration has become an important way to share effective cybersecurity practices. It's so important that NASCIO, the organization representing state CIOs, recently made it a priority to partner with federal agencies to improve cybersecurity across the board. NASCIO's efforts to foster collaboration even extend beyond cybersecurity and federal government to state-to-state collaboration and state-to-local collaboration.

The federal government is equally interested in increasing collaboration. According to the Office of the Federal CIO, far too few federal workers and teams are using modern collaboration tools. The Office notes federal departments and agencies don't often use collaborative capabilities compatible with those of other federal departments, or even with state, local or tribal entities.

To address this issue, GSA is exploring ways to increase the use and breadth of collaboration tools throughout the federal government. It's looking for tools to promote more effective asynchronous collaboration (where people can collaborate, but not necessarily at the same time), and synchronous collaboration (where users are in different locations, but communicating with each other simultaneously).

What GSA is getting at is something agencies have been grappling with for some time—the lack of modern, secure, integrated collaborative tools that go beyond simple chat and text. SEWP V, a fixed-price, government-wide IDIQ contract, offers a full array of collaboration tools; from file sharing and online tools to conferencing technology to full unified communication.

File sharing and online tools like Box and Microsoft Office 365 can help team members quickly access information and distribute it throughout a group. Those tools also help them share reports and work on documents in a secure space. Google's GSuite for Government is another option. This provides simultaneous real-time collaboration from any device, via Docs, Hangouts, Sheets and more. It can also help create sites specific to a project or team.

Google's Jamboard is another collaborative tool—one with a whiteboard-like surface that lets team members add images and notes. There is also Cisco Spark Board, a touch-based collaboration device that lets participants share documents, drawings and presentations on a screen, sketching them directly on the screen if desired. Team members can participate from their own devices, adding details or making changes.

Conferencing technology—either room-based or via the cloud—also fosters collaboration. Avaya, Cisco, Polycom and Lifesize are major vendors in this area, providing high-quality, low-latency solutions to improve the quality of meetings and help foster collaboration. These solutions are more than high-quality video and audio. They also provide 360-degree cameras, sensors, and intelligent switching, and everyone is included in the collaborative experience.

Then there are comprehensive collaborative solutions based on the unified communication (UCC) model. These typically include telephony, conferencing, messaging, presence and instant messaging, clients, and communications-enabled business processes. According to IDC, more than one-third of organizations currently use UCC and another third plan to implement it within two years.

Top UCC vendors include Cisco, Microsoft and Mitel. Most also have cloud-based alternatives that are certainly worth considering. Unified Communications as a Service (UCaaS), the cloud-based version of UCC, provides the most options and benefits for large-scale collaboration in a proven, lower cost model. A survey from IHS Markit found that organizations are gradually moving toward cloud-based UC services as they realize the potential benefits. •

THE MANY USES FOR ADVANCED DATA VISUALIZATION

Deriving the maximum value from organizational data requires advanced visualization.

From the earliest days of computer technology, the ability to visualize data has been an important part of analyzing and presenting information. For years, data visualization was fairly rudimentary, often done via spreadsheets. However, spreadsheets didn't often let users manipulate data to view different outcomes. The next step was moving to infographics, generally a combination of images, statistics and charts designed to make a point.

Over the past decade, enterprising companies have taken the concept of data visualization to much greater levels. It now has the capabilities to handle even larger data sets and more diverse and unstructured data. Today's advanced data visualization solutions are catalysts for understanding why specific events occurred, interpreting relationships between entities, identifying relationships and patterns and predicting future trends.

Data visualization tools from leading vendors such as SAS, Qlik and Oracle—all available on the NASA SEWP V contract—simplify gathering and analyzing large, diverse data sets. This includes the ability to interact with the data visually; view data in multiple dimensions; and incorporate animation, bubble charts, word clouds and geospatial heat maps. Users can share visualizations and results securely via the web and mobile devices.

Advanced visualization tools also provide advanced techniques like autocharting, which lets a user select the best graph for the data, along with scenario analysis, automated forecasting, text analysis, and location. Qlik has added a dimension it calls "data storytelling" to its Qlik Sense tool. This helps data analysts incorporate static snapshots, reporting, and live data.

There is really no area in which an agency wouldn't benefit from advanced visualization:

- In the HR offices, it can help leaders analyze staffing resources, training, onboarding, productivity, and optimizing employee management.
- In the IT department, managers can use it to monitor application and system performance or determine what technology the agency needs to improve innovation.
- Advanced data visualization is useful to help determine patterns of fraud, error, noncompliance and abuse. By understanding patterns, analysts can better detect fraud and predict where fraud may occur in everything from tax and revenue departments and benefits programs to procurement, unemployment, and workforce programs.
- Visualization is helpful in making transportation and supply chains more efficient. It can help determine the best routes for air travel by gathering years of flight data information; including point of origin, on-time records, weather, and predictive data. It can also improve fleet management by analyzing data to optimize routes and ensure vehicles are as full as possible during transport.
- Data analytics and visualization are instrumental in improving healthcare at all levels, from financial responsibility and compliance to patient diagnosis and treatment. A healthcare organization or agency can use this technology to combine and analyze multiple data streams across disciplines to pinpoint areas for performance improvements, efficiency or cost savings. To improve patient outcomes, agencies and healthcare organizations can identify patients most likely to benefit from interventions, predict potential safety incidents and readmissions, and find patterns that indicate which patients need case management or help with managing specific diseases.

These examples are just some of the many possibilities that advanced data visualization provides. Investing in a data visualization solution via the SEWP contract is the first step an agency can take toward greater efficiency, productivity, constituent service and cost containment. •

WITH THE RIGHT TOOLS, BIG DATA PROVIDES GREAT INSIGHT

As agencies continue to amass larger data stores, that data can provide significant insight.

Big data—the vast amount of structured and unstructured data that includes data from e-mail, machine sensors, social media, images, web logs and transaction records—continues to grow unabated. As agency data stores grow, they are looking for better ways to store, manage and leverage that data for new and actionable insights.

With tools like object storage and big data analytics, both available on the SEWP V contract, agencies are beginning to realize the potential of those massive data stores. According to a Meritalk survey, 72 percent of federal agencies are already using big data to improve mission outcomes. Over the next three to five years, agencies expect to be rely on it even more to maximize productivity, root out inefficiencies, and identify areas for improvement.

Before agencies can begin mining big data for insights, they must find effective methods to store both structured and unstructured data. Many experts recommend object storage because of its scalability, performance and availability. With object storage, data items are stored in containers called objects instead of blocks, files, or folders. This facilitates faster storage processing of data items. The NASA SEWP V contract offers many leading object storage systems from vendors including Dell EMC, Hitachi Data Systems, HPE, IBM and NetApp.

With data storage under control, the next step is selecting the right analytics tools. Done right, big data analytics is extremely powerful. According to a recent survey, the top uses of big data analytics in government are cybersecurity analytics, predictive analytics for forecasting and pattern recognition, gaining operational efficiency, financial data management and analysis, logistics management, and fraud detection.

Through the SEWP V contract, agencies at all levels of government have access to the leading big data analytics solutions from vendors like Splunk, Microsoft, IBM and SAP. Splunk's big data analytics platform helps agencies collect, index, search, analyze, and visualize all data in one place from a huge variety of sources across geographies, data centers and cloud infrastructures. SAP Vora works hand-in-hand with the SAP HANA in-memory relational database and integrates with Hadoop. This combination of tools can perform advanced analytics including predictive analytics, spatial data processing, text analytics, text search, streamlining analytics, and graph data processing.

Microsoft has taken a slightly different approach to big data analytics. Through a partnership with Hortonworks, Microsoft's entry is HDInsights. This is built with open source components and fully compatible with Apache Hadoop. HDInsight is a cloud-hosted service built for agencies using Azure clusters to run the Hortonworks Data Platform (HDP). Microsoft has other big data analytics offerings as well, including HDP for Windows and the Microsoft Analytics Platform System, which lets users query and combine Hadoop with on-premises relational data.

IBM has a full array of big data analytics engines. One interesting choice is Watson Analytics, a data analysis and visualization solution that aims to simplify building queries non-data scientists. It uses automated predictive analytics to help users build analytics queries in natural language.

Most big data analytics solutions are available both on-premises and in the cloud. SAP's cloud platform for big data services, for example, offers Hadoop- and Spark-based processing in the cloud. This allows for compute bursting when necessary, along with job monitoring, support and security. For most agencies, hosting big data and analytics solutions in the cloud makes a lot of sense. It is an effective way to gain the flexibility and scalability required with fast-growing, diverse data sets. •

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