

## **ARMY PILOT PROGRAM RECOMPETED**

The mid 1990s presented the DoD research community with a unique set of circumstances, the Defense budget was being significantly reduced, while breakthroughs in various technologies offered opportunities for improving American warfighting capabilities. The Army Research Laboratory (ARL) attempted to address this situation with the implementation of the Federated Laboratory (Fed Lab) Program. The goal of Fed Lab was to establish a collaborative research environment bringing together the best researchers from academia, industry and the government. The program was designed to focus on those technologies where the critical mass of expertise resided outside of the Government. These technologies included sensors, displays, software and intelligent systems, telecommunications, and distributed simulations. Fed Lab strategy called for the establishment of a collaborative research environment in each of these technical areas. The legal authority employed to implement the program was Cooperative Agreements (31 USC 6305, Using Cooperative Agreements). This authority was selected because of the flexibility it provides, the inherent public purpose benefit of basic research, and the need for substantial involvement on the part of the Government. As a result of continuing budget reductions, awards were made in only three of the original five technical areas. To be eligible for a Fed Lab award offerors were required to form consortia comprised of, at a minimum, an industrial lead, a major university, and an Historically Black College or University, or a Minority Institution (HBCU/MI). Over the five-year period of performance, the program generated numerous technical papers, personnel rotational assignments, as well as other technical achievements and demonstrations. The program was deemed a significant success and was just recently recompeted and expanded in 2001. This article discusses the lessons learned, and details the arduous process of implementing the successor to Fed Lab, the Collaborative Technology Alliances (CTA) Program.

While Fed Lab was considered a significant success, there were aspects of the program that warranted improvement. These aspects included the emerging need for appropriate mechanisms to facilitate transition of research results to specific Army applications, the relatively untapped involvement of other government agencies (OGAs) and a period of performance that would provide ample time to fully exploit the relationships formed and the research potential of the Program.

Successful Fed Lab offerors were awarded cooperative agreements, which are very similar to grants, except for the degree of Government involvement. Like a grant, a cooperative agreement does not provide for profit or fee. As a result, experience showed that successful Fed Lab offerors were somewhat reluctant to transition research results to Army applications while performing under the cooperative agreement. In fact, since the transition effort is designed to meet specific Army needs, they are more appropriately performed under a procurement contract (31 USC 6303, Using Procurement Contracts). Consequently, as Fed Lab matured, a number of separate, sole source procurement contracts had to be awarded to facilitate technology transfer efforts. The CTA competition provided for the award of a cooperative agreement to the consortium as a whole, for the basic research effort. The CTA competition also provided for the

award of a procurement contract to the consortium lead for the technology transition effort. Under the technology transition contracts the other consortium members may perform as subcontractors as appropriate. A single CTA proposal and evaluation addressed both efforts, with award of both instruments resulting from a single proposal. One award made (with both instruments) for each technical area.

The Fed Lab program provided a collaborative research environment that included the Army Research Laboratory (ARL), industry and academia. Most, if not all of the Fed Lab research requirements were dictated by ARL and the consortia members. In order to maximize the benefits to the Government from the effort needed to solicit a program of this magnitude it was determined early on to invite input from other government agencies. A number of DoD and other Federal organizations accepted the invitation and provided input to the CTA Program. Their input included the addition of specific technical areas of interest as well serving as evaluators of the proposals.

Congressional language limited the Fed Lab period of performance to five years. This was unfortunate because the formation of consortia requires a considerable period of time. In addition, since the average Fed Lab consortia had ten members there was a considerable familiarization process both within the consortium as well with Government researchers. Time was needed to develop these relationships and maximize their benefits in the collaborative research environment. As a result CTA was established with a base period of performance of five years with a single three year option period. This structure provides the awardee an incentive to excel as well as maximizes the benefits of forming a successful consortium.

Once Departmental support for CTA was confirmed, the solicitation process began in earnest. The success of Fed Lab led to the expansion of the program from three technical areas to five. The five areas are Power and Energy, Advanced Decision Architectures, Communications and Networks, Robotics, and Advanced Sensors. A team comprised of a contracting/grants officer, business law attorney and technical staff was assembled to begin work on the solicitation documents. The team decided to take an uncharacteristic "open" approach to the solicitation process. A draft solicitation or program announcement including a description of the technical areas of interest, evaluation criteria, and sample award documents were posted on the CTA webpage in mid-May 2000. The posting of the program announcement was shortly followed by an Opportunity Conference that was hosted at ARL in June 2000. The purpose of the conference was to provide potential offerors a forum in which to raise questions and network with potential consortium members. Conference presentations included a contractual and legal overview as well as technical discussions. The comment period for the draft program announcement resulted in insignificant changes to the announcement and the final version was issued in early August 2000. In mid-August 2000, ARL hosted an open house where potential offerors could familiarize themselves with ARL research interests, facilities and capabilities as well as network with potential partners. Proposals were due in November 2000.

The CTA program announcement was unique in that it represented one of the first times that a single solicitation would result in the award of two distinct instruments, namely a contract and a cooperative agreement. As a result, a complex evaluation scheme was designed that was broken down into distinct areas for the research portion, technology transition, program management and cost. Within the research portion, each of either 3 or 4 technical areas were evaluated using evaluation factors that included technical merit, credentials, facilities, dual use potential relevance and intra-alliance linkage. The technology transition factors included a plan to execute the technology transition program, past performance, a response to a sample task, and small business outreach. The management factors included articles of collaboration, program management, and collaboration. The program announcement included a budget for the research component, and offerors were directed to propose within the budget. Further, offerors were informed that the technology transition contract would have a ceiling of \$60M, and offerors were requested to propose appropriate labor categories that would be used to issue task orders on a time & materials basis. As a result, the cost proposal was evaluated for cost reasonableness, realism and affordability. Offeror cost share was encouraged, but not required. Cost share impacted the evaluation only if it provided improvements to the research, management, or technology transition areas. The program announcement included a chart giving the specific weights for all of the factors within a research alliance. A sample chart is provided below:



The CTA program announcement resulted in the submission of twenty-one proposals. Each of the research areas generated adequate competition. The twenty-one proposals included over two hundred and forty (240) separate entities. Consortia membership ranged from eight to over twenty members. It is important to note that it is not uncommon when a proposal includes multiple commercial entities that the parties are oftentimes reluctant to share their proprietary cost information. As a result a single proposal might include multiple, separate cost proposals all submitted under separate cover. As a result the contracts and administrative staff must be ever vigilant to understand the complete proposal and ensure that all elements of the proposal have been submitted, cataloged, and properly evaluated.

The CTA evaluation process reflected the formal source selection process. A Source Selection Evaluation Board (SSEB) comprised of nearly seventy government employees were first briefed on the evaluation process, identities of the offerors, and conflict of interest considerations. From that time forward each proposal was assigned an alpha-numeric code which was used for all future discussions and documentation of the evaluation results. Individual evaluators were assigned specific evaluation factors. Each evaluator assigned a score from one to ten for each factor. Once the individual evaluators completed their individual evaluation they met in predetermined groups to come to a consensus score for each factor. If an evaluator scored a factor within a research, management, or technology transition area, then he or she had to score the same factor on all other proposals within that research area. If the score of an individual evaluator was more than 2 points from the agreed to consensus score, the evaluator was required to document how he or she came to agree with the consensus score. A minimum of three evaluators scored each factor. The evaluation results were reviewed by a team comprised of the grants/contracting officer, legal counsel, and the SSEB chairman. Review by this team focused on ensuring that the evaluation documentation was prepared in accordance with the Source Selection Evaluation Plan (SSEP) and was thorough and defensible. The evaluation results were then reduced to a briefing that was presented to the Source Selection Advisory Council (SSAC). The SSAC was comprised of high ranking personnel from the Army research and development community. The SSAC briefing, with the SSAC recommendations added, was then presented to the Source Selection Authority (SSA). The SSA briefing resulted in the approval of the competitive range for each research area. Those offerors determined not to have a reasonable chance of being selected for award (and therefore not included in the competitive range) were notified of such and were offered an opportunity for a debriefing after awards were made under the CTA program. The decision to defer the debriefings until after award was based on the fact that many of the offerors were members of multiple teams in various technical areas, and it was felt that debriefs prior to award might provide an unfair advantage to some consortia. During the SSA briefing it was determined that site visits would be conducted for each proposal in the competitive range.

Site Visits were conducted in order to facilitate meaningful discussions for each proposal. In order to maximize the benefits of the site visits, each offeror was given a matrix that provided the offeror with information concerning the evaluation of their proposal. This matrix indicated whether the offeror did not meet, met, or exceeded the government requirements for each

evaluation factor. In addition, many of the factors also had brief narratives that articulated the basis for the factor score, listing notable strengths and weaknesses. These matrices also included clarification questions for each offeror concerning their proposal. The matrices were provided to the offeror at least one week prior to the site visit. An attempt was made to schedule the site visits within each research area as close as possible, so that each offeror had relatively the same amount of time to prepare for the site visit. Offerors were notified that the Government team would not take away any materials from the site visit. Offerors were informed that shortly after their site visit they would be provided an opportunity to submit a thirty page Final Proposal Revision (FPR) which would be used, as a complement to the initial proposal, for the final evaluation. In the interest of fairness, each site visit was limited to four hours, and was attended by a core team consisting of the grants/contracting officer, legal counsel, SSEB chairman, and an administrative assistant. This core team was complemented with technical experts familiar with the Government's evaluation for each factor. Each offeror within a research area was visited by the same Government team. Each site visit began with a brief discussion of the ground rules and a discussion of cost and contracting issues. Once these matters had been addressed, the offeror was allowed to proceed as they desired. Each offeror was encouraged to use the time at the site visit to discuss the Government's evaluation and ask the Government site visit team clarification questions. This ensured that each offeror understood the Government's evaluation of its proposal, and could make any changes it deemed appropriate in the FPR. It should be noted that there were several offerors who were included in the competitive range that needed to make significant improvements to their proposals in order to have a chance to receive award. Those offerors were informed of such at the site visit, and were advised that it was their decision as to whether to continue in competition and submit an FPR.

The evaluation of the FPRs was conducted using the same criteria and procedures as with the evaluation of the initial proposals. Again, the evaluation materials were distilled to the requisite award decision briefing for the SSAC and the SSA. The team that compiled the award decision briefing was advised to consider the debriefing process, thereby minimizing the need for duplicate efforts. The awardees were selected and awards made in June 2001. It was not until the awardees had been selected that their identities were revealed to the SSAC and SSA. All offerors were afforded an opportunity for a face-to-face debriefing.

Since the SSA briefing was produced with the debriefings in mind, only minor editing of the results of the evaluation (to delete numerical scores, etc.) was necessary to prepare the bulk of the debriefing. Once again a core team of the grants/contracting officer, counsel, administrative assistant, and the requisite technical experts attended each debrief. ARL relied heavily on the AMC Debriefing Guide in preparing for the debriefings. Each debrief was limited to no more than two hours. The debriefings began with a discussion of the ground rules for the debriefing. This was followed by an in-depth discussion of the evaluation process so as to ensure each offeror that they had been treated fairly and that the Government had followed the evaluation process described in the solicitation. Technical discussions focused generally on a single slide representing a summary of the evaluation of the offerors proposal. Below is a sample of the single slide for a research program with three technical areas (TA1, TA2, and TA3). Although

each factor was given a numerical score for the purposes of this chart the scores were translated into colors. Red reflected a score that failed to meet the government requirements (scores 0-4), yellow reflected a score that met the government requirement (scores 5 and 6), and green reflected a score that exceeded the government requirement (scores 7-10). This particular chart provided an excellent roadmap for the technical discussions, and was readily understood by all attendees.



## FPR DISCUSSION & SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT



FINAL SCORES			
FACTOR	TA 1	TA 2	TA 3
A	Green	Yellow	Green
B	Green	Green	Yellow
C	Green	Green	Green
D	Green	Green	Green
E	Yellow	Green	Yellow
F	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow
G	Green		
H	Green		
I	Yellow		
J	Green		
K	Green		
L	Green		
M	Green		

  

ORIGINAL SCORES			
FACTOR	TA 1	TA 2	TA 3
A	Green	Yellow	Green
B	Yellow	Yellow	Red
C	Green	Green	Yellow
D	Green	Green	Yellow
E	Yellow	Red	Red
F	Yellow	Red	Red
G	Yellow		
H	Yellow		
I	Red		
J	Green		
K	Red		
L	Green		
M	Green		

In conclusion, the CTA competition was a grueling but rewarding experience. The process did not result in a single protest or even the hint of one. Many of the debrief attendees complemented ARL on their professionalism and appreciated the extra effort expended to ensure that all offerors were treated fairly. To date CTA has proceeded with only minor growing pains, but the effort to involve other government agencies has proven to be successful. In addition, the core staff responsible for implementing CTA have fielded numerous inquiries from other government agencies interested in establishing similar programs in other research areas.

Patrick J. Emery  
Attorney/Advisor  
301.394.1696

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Patricia J. Fox  
Contracting/Grants Officer  
919.549.4272

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