



NRO's Acquisition Center of Excellence Receives Inaugural Mythbusting Award

The American Council for Technology and Industry Advisory Council (ACT-IAC) honored the NRO's Acquisition Center of Excellence (ACE) on May 29 with one of three inaugural 2013 Mythbusting Awards at a ceremony held in Washington, D.C., during the ACT-IAC Mythbusting Forum. The awards recognize federal agencies for their improvements to vendor communications in the acquisition process. The Department of State and the Department of Homeland Security were also honored.

ACE was recognized for the comprehensive design of its vendor communications, including an innovative vendor registry and its pioneering openness with industry, among other achievements, which have enabled the center to significantly improve source selections and to become the de facto acquisition center for the Intelligence Community (IC).

The Mythbusting Awards reflect the objectives of the Office of Management and Budget's Office of Federal Procurement Policy (OFPP) as detailed in "Mythbusting" memos issued to federal agencies in 2011 and 2012 on "Addressing Misconceptions and Further Improving Communications during the Acquisition Process." As stated in the 2012 memo, "More effective vendor engagement results from a change in both government and industry organizations."

ACT-IAC, a non-profit, public-private partnership dedicated to improving government through the application of information technology, further refined the OFPP goals through a survey of more than 2000 government and industry professionals that identified the top five myths of acquisition. NRO's ACE provides tools and facilities that effectively counter all five myths.

NRO's Management Services and Operations Director, Brian Malone, while serving as director of the Office of Contracts in the 1990s, conceived the ACE as "a place to do source selections away from Westfields and in a contained setting." Supported by then-NRO Director Keith Hall, the ACE was established in March 1997.

Since its inception, ACE has developed increasingly efficient means to interface with industry partners and potential acquisition sources. The center supports all facets of acquisition, including managing potential sources, source selections, and contracts. The

Top Five Myths of Government Acquisition

As identified by the American Council for Technology and Industry Advisory Council

1. Government agencies can't meet one-on-one with a potential offeror.
2. A protest is something to be avoided at all costs, even if it means the government limits conversations with industry.
3. Getting broad participation by many different vendors is too difficult; government agencies are better off dealing with the established companies we know.
4. Conducting discussions/negotiations after receipt of proposals will add to much time to the schedule.
5. Since communication with contractors is like communication with registered lobbyists, and since contact with lobbyists must be disclosed, additional communication with contractors will involve a substantial additional disclosure burden, so government agencies should avoid these meetings.



center is currently tracking approximately 130 acquisitions, almost all of which will be awarded. In 2012 alone, ACE assisted with more than 120 acquisition efforts and helped award contracts worth over \$4 billion.

One of the several ACE tools and support functions promoting greater openness is the IC Acquisition Research Center (ARC), which includes an online contractor registry that has grown to include more than 3,000 vendors with the proper clearances to participate in IC acquisitions. ARC users may also take advantage of its database of current IC solicitations and business opportunities, its library of acquisition templates and materials, and an assortment of online courses.

Although operated by ACE, the ARC has become the default tool for many other IC agencies which have noticed its benefits and made this virtual business portal their “go-to” source for vendor interaction. Among principal users of the ARC and other ACE tools are CIA, NGA, and, increasingly, DIA, with additional DoD components also using its resources when needed.

The ARC is not exclusively the domain of the IC. Industry may also use its resources. For example, a large company may search the ARC registry for potential sub-contractors for a solicitation announced on the same portal, or a small company may want to identify a larger company that could make a comprehensive bid that includes the smaller company’s products. ARC access greatly facilitates these contractor-to-contractor interactions.

The ARC is also not the only ACE initiative meriting notice. ACE has implemented additional tools that contributed to the Mythbusting recognition:

- Decision Point, the center’s source selection evaluation tool, reduces time while improving quality. Using the software, source selection teams can better manage the selection process; easily trace decisions back to stated criteria; and develop clear, defensible documentation.
- Agencies and contractors alike are welcome to use the ACE facility located near NRO headquarters. Here, industry partners can access ACE resources or conduct business from one of the facility’s secure rooms—a boon particularly to smaller companies who often have no SCIF of their own.
- ACE employs a mix of government and contractor acquisition consultants, experts in source selection and contract evaluation. Consultants work with each source-selection team, even traveling to customer sites, to guide the process to a successful outcome. Since ACE began, its consultants have assisted with more than 1,000 acquisitions and selections.
- ACE’s School of Acquisition Excellence provides training in a variety of learning environments for its IC customers, including traditional classroom instruction, online courses, and customized “Just-in-Time” training delivered when and where it’s needed.
- The director of the NRO Office of Contracts meets with contractors one-on-one twice a year during two-day ACE-sponsored Industry Forums. Additionally, rather than narrowly defining proposals that may exclude potential partners, ACE puts out initial draft



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requests for proposals, allowing industry the opportunity to weigh in on the final criteria. This transparency and collaboration inevitably procures more thoughtful, well-vetted acquisitions.

As the 2013 Mythbusting Award reflects, NRO's ACE has become a clear leader in IC acquisition. The center maintains and encourages the most open communication between industry and government of any IC component and will continue improving the efficiency of source selections for all involved.

"This sharing of knowledge is so valuable that it cannot be measured in dollars and cents," said Debra Scheider, the director of the NRO Office of Contracts.

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