

# DOD OUTSOURCING

Are **COST SAVINGS**  
**ESTIMATES**  
**OVERSTATED?**



# OUTSOURCING:



As DOD and other government agencies increasingly rely on outsourcing to boost efficiency and increase cost savings, the estimated savings may actually be overstated.

**BY SCOTT SCHOFIELD**

## In its 1999 final report, the House Appropriations Committee stated:

The Committee harbors serious concerns about the current DOD outsourcing and privatization effort. While the Committee recognizes the need to reduce DOD infrastructure costs, the cost savings benefits from the current outsourcing and privatization effort are, at best, debatable. Despite end-strength savings, there is no clear evidence that this effort is reducing the cost of support function within DOD with high-cost contractors simply replacing government employees.<sup>1</sup>

There are seven specific reasons why the House Appropriations Committee's concerns that the Department of Defense (DOD) may be overestimating its cost savings from outsourcing may be well founded.

### Inadequate Records

DOD has had difficulty in accurately identifying and assessing current costs because it and many other agencies do not maintain adequate financial records of work performed in-house.<sup>2</sup> For DOD, the financial data used to calculate current costs, as well as the resulting cost savings, is stored in the Commercial Activities Management Information System (CAMIS) database. Among other things, each DOD component is required to enter the original manpower baseline cost of the function being outsourced, the estimated cost savings of the competition, and the actual costs for the first five years after the competition is completed.<sup>3</sup> However, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) has reported concerns about the accuracy and completeness of data contained in CAMIS.<sup>4</sup> As early as 1990, GAO expressed concerns that CAMIS contained inaccurate and incomplete data.<sup>5</sup> Also, in a 1996 report, the Center for Naval Analyses found that the data in CAMIS was incomplete and inconsistent among the services and recommended that the data collection process be more tightly controlled so that

data would be consistently recorded.<sup>6</sup> In 2000, GAO again reported deficiencies in the CAMIS database.<sup>7</sup>

GAO found that data, once entered into CAMIS, was often not modified to reflect changes in—or even termination of—contracts. Some competitions that were recorded as “completed” were still underway or had not even begun yet. In some cases, data was not adjusted and removed from the system, even when bases were closed or realigned. Also, GAO found that CAMIS did not accurately track baseline costs or reasons for contract changes, and did not contain accurate and complete data on items such as program implementation or contract administration costs.<sup>8</sup> All of these factors have combined to make developing accurate baseline cost estimates and tracking cost savings very difficult to accomplish.

### Acquisition and Investment Costs

DOD does not always consider all of the investment costs associated with performing competitive sourcing analyses and transitioning to either the government's Most Efficient Organization (MEO) or to performance by contractor. The total sourcing costs often include:

- Training of government personnel involved in the A-76 outsourcing process;
- Production of study documents (performance work statement, MEO, etc.) by government employees with contractor support;
- Source selection and evaluation board costs, to include the salary of government employees evaluating contractor and government proposals;
- Independent review of government documents;
- Lost productivity and redistribution of work normally done by employees directly or indirectly involved in the study;
- Transition costs, including employee workshops, job fairs, additional administrative support to affected employees, management of potentially adverse employee impacts, and transition training;
- Contractor phase-in and overlapped expenses associated with loss of government workers prior to the contract start date;
- Voluntary separation incentive payments to reduce the effects of reductions in the workforce;
- Severance pay; and



- Priority placement program entitlement expenses for displaced employees gaining employment outside the commuting area.<sup>9</sup>

In fiscal year 2004, DOD estimated that acquisition and investment costs totaled \$3,000 for each position outsourced.<sup>10</sup> Since DOD's savings projections have not adequately accounted for these costs, the expected level of savings is significantly reduced in the short-term.<sup>11</sup>

## Transfer of Costs

Some outsourcing initiatives that appear to reduce costs merely do so by transferring a portion of their costs to other organizations. For instance, cost reductions achieved through privatized housing are often incurred as higher outlays for housing allowance.<sup>12</sup> If a base manages its own housing units, the housing allowance due to the residents is retained by the base to cover its maintenance expenses. If the housing is privatized, the base is no longer responsible for maintaining the housing units and is able to reduce its maintenance budget. But, at the same time, it must begin to pay housing allowance to its residents so they, in turn, can pay rent to the contractor. Unless the increase in housing allowance is considered in the outsourcing analysis, the cost estimates will not be accurate and savings will be overstated.

A similar scenario can occur when military workers are replaced with civilian workers. Many agencies use substantially fewer workers when military personnel are replaced with civilians. In fact, some agencies estimate the workers needed ratio to be 0.6 civilians for each military position.<sup>13</sup> The reason for this low substitution factor is that military members are often unavailable at their primary duty station due to training, local details, or deployments. However, whenever the civilianization of military positions is used to reduce the size of the workforce, some of the assumed savings may be difficult to realize.<sup>14</sup> If the training, details, and deployments meet valid and continuing defense requirements, the burden of supporting them is not eliminated by civilianization. Rather, the burden is shifted to other agencies with military workforces.<sup>15</sup> An example would be communications personnel who are replaced by civilian personnel and then transferred to a different base that still uses military communications personnel. The increase in personnel costs at the other base would need to be included in the analysis to determine the true cost of outsourcing the positions.

Another concern is that even though military positions may be outsourced, the overall military authorizations in that service may not decline because the military positions that are deleted from one function are

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put to use in another function. An example would be if communications billets were eliminated and the billets were increased in the intelligence career field.

In any scenario, the end result of an outsourcing initiative that reduces costs could actually be a net increase in personnel costs for DOD if the cost reductions in the outsourcing agency do not outweigh the personnel costs that were transferred to another agency or unit.

### Forced Labor Rates

Contractors are required by law to provide their employees working under government contracts with a minimum level of pay and benefits. For example, service workers are covered by the Service Contract Act and construction workers are covered by the Davis Bacon Act. Both of these Acts direct the Department of Labor to establish flat hourly rates for skill classifications in different geographic areas based on the median level of pay for each job classification in each area.<sup>16</sup> These rates are periodically reviewed and updated as necessary.

The result of these Acts is that contractors are essentially forced into paying these rates to every worker, regardless of the nature of the work being performed. This occurs because contractors are not allowed to pay their workers below the minimum rate. At the same time, contractors usually do not desire to pay their workers above the rate because it would raise their costs and reduce their chances to be awarded the contract. Since the labor rate is equal to the median level of pay for the job classification in the local area, the government often pays for an average worker, regardless of the skill level that is actually required to perform the work. If the work could be done by a lower-skilled worker, the government would end up paying for an overqualified worker. If the work should be done by a higher-skilled worker, there may be quality issues to address.

### Imprecise Cost Factors

Cost estimates are based on assumptions. The validity and accuracy of these assumptions have a direct impact on the validity

and accuracy of the cost estimate. There are three primary cost factors, or assumptions, that have come under a great deal of scrutiny, which are discussed below.

### Minimum Cost Differential

In order to win a competition, the contractor must meet a minimum cost differential of at least 10 percent less than the MEO's proposal (or \$10 million, whichever is lower).<sup>17</sup> This is intended to cover the transition costs required to convert from government to contractor performance. However, there are three main problems with this cost differential.

First, it assumes that all contracts will have transition costs equal to the minimum cost differential. Not only is this blatantly naive, but it fails to consider that some contracts, such as those performing very large or complex tasks, can have drastically different transition costs than those performing smaller or simpler tasks.

Second, the rate is not uniform across different costs. For instance, if the MEO bids \$1,000, the contractor would need to bid \$900 (\$100, or 10 percent, lower than the MEO bid) to win the contract. If the contract was much larger and the MEO bids \$1 billion, the contractor would only need to bid \$990 million (\$10 million, or one percent, lower than the MEO bid) to win the contract.

Third, the rate is very arbitrary in nature. For instance, if the MEO bids \$95 million and the contractor bids \$85.6 million—\$9.4 million less—the contractor would not win the competition because it failed to meet the minimum cost differential. However, if



the MEO had bid \$95.2 million instead, the contractor would have met the differential and been awarded the contract. It seems that a contract of such magnitude should be decided by more than a mere 0.20 percent (\$200,000/\$95 million) difference in cost. However, at present there does not appear to be very much leeway for the agency to use its own discretion to weigh the transition costs versus the cost savings for its particular requirement.

### Personnel Cost Overhead Rate

Since 1996, MEO cost estimates have applied a flat overhead rate of 12 percent to direct personnel costs.<sup>18</sup> This overhead rate is intended to cover two types of overhead: (1) operations overhead and (2) general and administrative (G&A) overhead. Operations overhead includes costs that are not 100 percent attributable to the activity, but are generally associated with recurring management and support of the activity. G&A overhead includes the salaries, equipment, space, and other activities related to headquarters, accounting, personnel, legal sup-

port, and data processing management, as well as similar common services performed outside the activity.<sup>19</sup>

There are indications that the 12 percent overhead rate can misstate the marginal cost of overhead support for in-house performance. Operations overhead is often undiminished by outsourcing because outsourcing does not reduce the command, executive, and functional oversight responsibilities at higher organizational levels, such as the installation, major command, or service headquarters. G&A overhead is often undiminished because contractors occupy government-furnished facilities and use government-furnished equipment. In fact, the only significant overhead costs saved through outsourcing are associated with the personnel and payroll support of the displaced workforce.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, GAO has voiced concern that this rate, which is specified in the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) A-76 Circular, lacks an analytical basis and

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may be overstating, or understating, the overhead costs associated with in-house performance.<sup>21</sup> In fact, the 12 percent rate is reportedly nothing more than a compromise between private-sector interests, which argued for government overhead rates ranging from 15 to 30 percent, and rates used in earlier A-76 competitions, which generally ranged from 0 to 3 percent. If true, this allegation would seriously question the validity of the rate.

**Personnel Cost Estimates**

MEO cost estimates use the salary of a general schedule (GS) employee at step five, and a federal wage system (FWS) worker at step four, plus a fringe rate stipulated in the A-76 Circular. There has been concern that these cost estimates may not be very accurate because they are not based on the actual personnel costs associated with the individuals occupying the particular positions.<sup>23</sup>



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This method of determining personnel costs could lead to either an overestimate or an underestimate of the actual baseline personnel costs. If the workforce has been in place a long time and there is little turnover, the average pay level is likely to be above step five for GS workers and step four for FWS workers. In such a situation, the actual wage and salary costs would be underestimated. On the other hand, if the average step is low, the estimates would overestimate the actual wage and salary costs.<sup>24</sup>

### Cost of Personnel Reductions

The majority of cost reductions from outsourcing competitions come from reductions in personnel, which are often the result of a reduction in work scope.<sup>25</sup> In principle, the scope of work is reduced because the function is no longer needed, but often it is actually the result of the agency doing a poor job defining the work package that is to be performed by the contractor.<sup>26</sup>

A reduction in personnel is usually only associated with contractor performance. The fact is that even when the MEO wins an A-76 competition, the new in-house organization typically restructures the work and reduces its number of employees.<sup>27</sup> The end result is that regardless of whether the reduction in work scope is intentional and what organization wins the competition, the size of the workforce is usually reduced.

As previously discussed, the estimated cost savings associated with contractor performance are often overestimated. Unfortunately, the same is also true when the MEO is implemented. After winning the competition, the in-house organization will usually conduct a reduction in force (RIF) to scale the organization down to its proposed size.

During a RIF, DOD offers eligible personnel a cash incentive of up to \$25,000 to retire or to voluntarily separate.<sup>28</sup> Those who do not voluntarily separate are either given a position within the new organization or are given priority placement into other jobs

within DOD for which they are qualified. Often, the personnel remaining in the organization are downgraded to lower-graded positions, the purpose of which is to lower the average personnel pay grade and reduce the organization's personnel costs. Unfortunately, on paper, this is usually little more than an exercise. According to RIF procedures, government employees who accept a lower-graded position are eligible to retain their former grade and pay for two years. At the end of the two-year period, if the employees remain in the same position, their grade may be lowered but their pay will not.<sup>29</sup>

The following example from Wright-Patterson Air Force Base illustrates how government personnel are affected when the MEO wins the A-76 competition.<sup>30</sup> The organization originally had 623 personnel (428 civilian and 195 military). After the competition, all military personnel were assigned to other duties and 83 full-time civilian positions were eliminated. Of those eliminated, 28 obtained other government positions, 53 chose voluntary separation, and two were involuntarily



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separated. Of the remaining 345 civilians in the organization, 52 percent experienced a reduction in grade, 31 percent remained at their same grade, one percent obtained a higher grade, and 15 percent changed wage systems, making it difficult to determine the full impact on their grade level. A visual representation is depicted in **FIGURE 1** (below).

The government advertised an estimated \$97 million in cost reductions by implementing the MEO. After all, they eliminated 278 of 623 positions (almost 45 percent), and reduced the pay grade of over half the remaining personnel. Assuming the reduction in personnel would not adversely affect the unit’s mission readiness, this outsourcing competition appears to be very successful indeed. However, we can use the same facts to tell a very different story. There were originally 623 personnel in the organization. After the MEO was implemented, 195 military members and 28 civilian personnel were moved into other government positions. While these personnel were taken off the organization’s payroll, they were still government employ-

ees and their salaries were just transferred to different government organizations. In summary, the government, in its entirety, only realized a reduction of 55 positions (nine percent), and of the 55 positions that were eliminated, 53 were paid up to \$25,000 each (or \$1,325,000 total) to separate voluntarily. Furthermore, while over half the remaining personnel were reduced in grade, no immediate cost savings were realized since they indefinitely retained their same pay.

When we consider that only two positions were eliminated at no-cost, up to \$1.325 million was paid to separating employees, and an estimated \$3,000 per competed position was spent to conduct the competition, it appears that this outsourcing initiative may have actually cost the government up to \$3.2 million! This example serves as a perfect illustration of how cost savings can be overestimated even when the in-house organization wins the A-76 competition.

### Cancelled Competitions

Another reason for overstated cost estimates is cancelled outsourcing competitions. The savings estimates used by DOD are based on the number of positions slated for competition. However, historically, more than 40 percent of initiated competitions have been cancelled before completion.<sup>31</sup> While there is no available data on the cost savings generated by these cancelled competitions, we can assume that they are low because whenever a competition is cancelled, the activity normally remains in-house, and the in-house management is under no obligation to implement the MEO or to otherwise improve efficiency.<sup>32</sup> In addition, there will be some cost incurred for each of these cancelled competitions, albeit less than a completed competition. Therefore, even if completed competitions yield an advertised 30 percent savings, the expected savings generated by each initiated competition are far less.<sup>33</sup>

## Breakdown of Wright-Patterson AFB Personnel Affected by Outsourcing

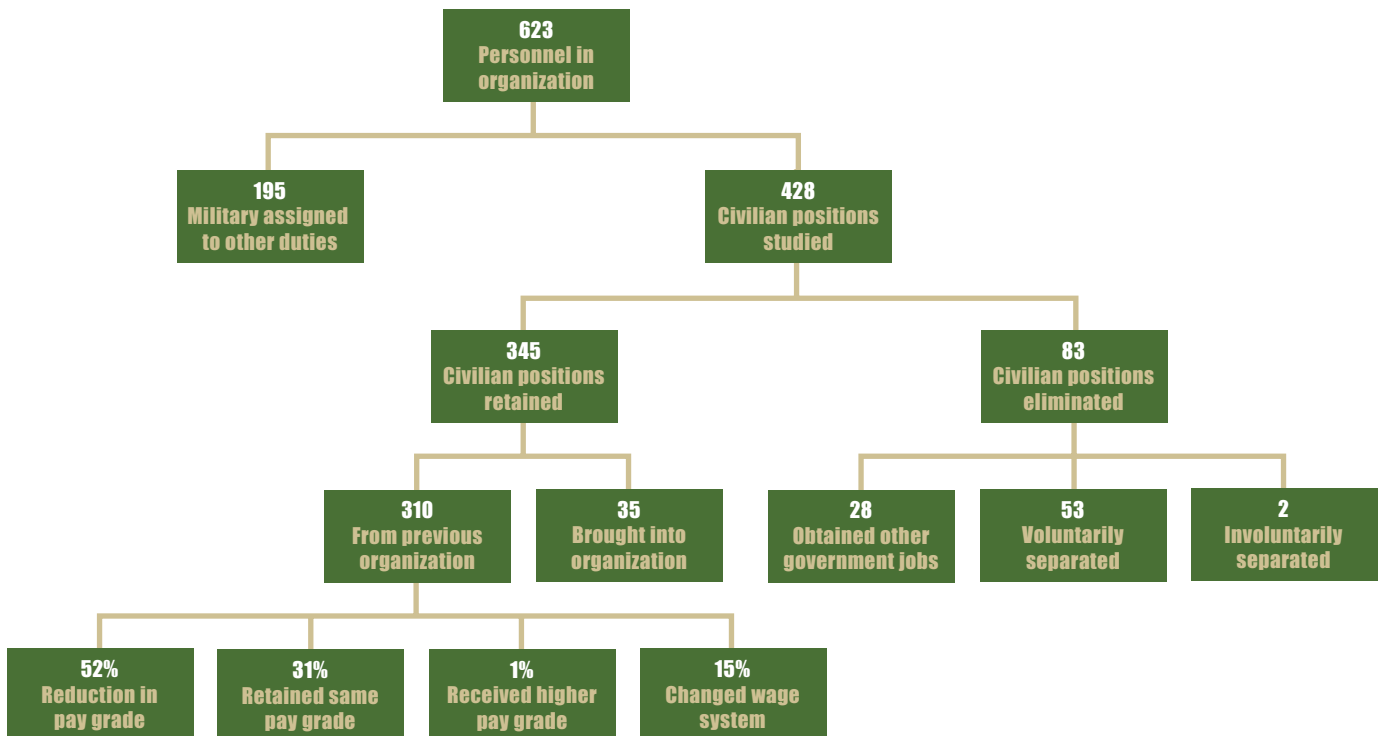


FIGURE 1.



## Result: Overstated Cost Savings

The result of these seven factors appears to be overstated cost savings from A-76 competitions. In a 1997 report on the outsourcing of DOD logistics functions, GAO concluded that \$4 billion out of \$6 billion in projected savings were overstated due to errors in estimates, dubious assumptions, and legal and cultural barriers.<sup>34</sup> Two years later, GAO auditors concluded that its 1998 estimates of savings from competitions were too high, and that the estimated savings between fiscal years 1997 and 2003 were overstated.<sup>35</sup> In 2000, GAO again revised many of its cost-savings estimates and reduced its cost-savings goals even further.<sup>36</sup>

It should be noted that it is very difficult to track cost savings over time because of changing workload requirements and the

effects these changes have on program costs and the baseline from which the estimates are calculated.<sup>37</sup> Even so, savings resulting from A-76 competitions have reportedly ranged from 20 to 30 percent lower than original projections.<sup>38</sup>

## Funding Shortfalls

DOD is trying to use the A-76 process to shift military personnel away from commercial-type functions and into those more directly related to warfighting. The U.S. Air Force, in particular, has made this a high priority, but has not been able to outsource its military positions as quickly as it would like. In fact, the number-one unfunded priority for the Air Force in fiscal year 2004 was \$2.34 billion in funds necessary to move 6,300 military positions out of non-core functions.<sup>39</sup>

This brings up a very interesting question: If outsourcing results in cost savings, why did the Air Force not allocate the funding necessary to outsource these positions? The answer is that many outsourcing competitions actually create funding shortfalls. When the outsourcing activities publicize their cost-savings estimates, their budget is usually reduced by DOD to reflect the savings. DOD, in turn, either has its budget reduced by Congress or redistributes the savings to other projects. Either way, the funding is no longer available for use by the original activity.

## Conclusion

As long as outsourcing competitions realize their estimated cost savings, everyone is satisfied. However, if the competitions fall short of their savings estimates, even by a small amount, funding shortfalls are created. To illustrate, let us assume that a particular organization estimates \$10 million in cost savings by outsourcing and then falls 20 percent below this estimate. In this case, the outsourcing competition would create a \$2 million budget shortfall, despite the fact that it also reduced the organization's costs by \$8 million. When a situation like this occurs, the outsourcing activity has to either absorb the shortfall internally or ask for more funding from DOD. Either way, tough decisions will need to be made, and other projects and missions will likely suffer. Those conducting the outsourcing initiatives need to be aware of the pitfalls and do their best to avoid them to create more accurate cost savings estimates. **CM**

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