

WELCOME TO INNOVATIONS—

a column designed to help you navigate this time of vibrant change by bringing you inspiring ideas, approaches, and methods you can apply.

This month, Maj. Chris Benson shares a tale from behind the scenes of those Air Force Pitch Days you've heard so much about. Chris has built a second career building nontraditional pathways for the Defense Department to acquire new capabilities. His first was spent earning a PhD in mechanical engineering from MIT, working for a venture capital firm, and founding a hardware company.

At the Air Force, he's a cofounder of AFWERX, a team of innovators who encourage and facilitate connections across industry, academia, and the military to create transformative opportunities and foster innovation. He also helped stand up Air Force Ventures, a collaboration between Air Force Acquisition, AFWERX, and Air Force SBIR/STTR to attract commercial innovators and private capital investment to help the Air Force solve problems and deliver better capability.

I hope you enjoy Chris's yarn. It showcases contracting pros in action helping the Air Force spend about \$300 million in government funds, while leveraging \$350 million more in private money between August 2018 and October 2019—all for innovative warfighter capabilities.

I would love to hear from you about your experiences with contracting innovation and any innovations you would like to share. Please write to me at anne.laurent@ncmahq.org.



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Contracting Creativity Powers Air Force Pitch Days

An inside look at the goings-on of the U.S. Air Force's accelerated acquisition process.



BY MAJ. CHRIS BENSON (USAF)

Note: Names and details have been modified to protect confidentiality.

Click, clack, click, clack, click, clack. The desktop drinking dodo bird bobbed in the dark hotel room, lit only by the glow of the laptop screen that it was keeping awake with gentle taps. Each dip of this little bird would keep the computer from falling asleep while the contracting automation script prefilled contracting forms, meaning hundreds of fewer keystrokes for a contracting officer the next day. While this little bird did its job, the screen flickered with websites loading, pages scrolling, and letters and numbers filling text boxes by the hundreds per second, as if Barbara Blackburn, the world's fastest typist, had been

hired to work through the night to make sure small businesses could get on contract with the U.S. Air Force as quickly as possible.

The next morning, 80 people filed into a conference room in a coworking space and sat in a semicircle of chairs arranged like an orchestra pit. Instead of instruments, they fiddled with cell phones and oversized cups of coffee, waiting for their conductor to arrive. Each person had been handpicked from among hundreds of contracting officers who volunteered across the Air Force. Those present were chosen for their ingenuity, professionalism, and collaborative attitude. By now, a few days into the project, this group had settled into its teams for the week and were sitting together. The room slowly filled with muted laughter and stories from the hotel bar. A discerning ear could pick out terms like "2371B," "15 US Code 638," and "Form 9."



A Pitch Day contracting sprint in action. (Photo credit: Maj. Chris Benson (USAF))

Finally, the lead contracting officer, John, assumed his place at center stage and welcomed the team back to the third day of the Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) contracting sprint. Their job was to award all the contracts that had been selected in the previous few days at the Air Force “Pitch Days” and through the online SBIR “open topic.”

Just as he had done the previous days, John started off with a video. This morning, a flying car darted across the screen, taking off vertically in the middle of a city and flying rap-

idly to a field, where the rotors kicked up dust as the aircraft landed next to an injured hiker. The hiker was lifted aboard, and the gleaming vehicle returned to a large building with a red cross on the roof.

The video closed with two logos side by side – one a company’s and the other belonging to the Air Force. John gave a bit of background, letting the team know that this capability was not computer-generated, but rather an actual test flight from a cutting-edge small business headquartered only 100 miles away from where

they were sitting. This small business not only could save hikers, he said, but also, in as little as 18 months, could ramp up to save wounded U.S. military personnel. John explained that the company was funded by a combination of federal government SBIR funds as well as research and development funds from the private sector, meaning the Air Force could get more capability for a lower cost to the U.S. taxpayer.

“There are 400 more small companies just like this one that are trying their hardest to deliver innovations

to increase our national security,” he said. “At the same time, they are trying to grow their companies into global leaders in their particular technology spaces. It is up to your teams of contracting officers, financial managers, engineers, and lawyers to make that happen while you are here for these five days.” Pausing for dramatic effect, he finished: “This is the front line of the technological battlefield with our adversaries. Go get ‘em.”

The teams filed off into their own rooms, each with eight to 10 chairs and a large table filled with laptops, large external monitors, notepads, and a nest of cables. Off to the side stood a whiteboard displaying what could easily be mistaken for a scoreboard. But instead of runs or touchdowns, it listed contracts in process, disqualified, and awarded.

In the “Commander Spock” conference room, Brittany, a contracting officer from New Mexico whose day job was acquiring satellites, opened her laptop with dread. She steeled herself to the day’s task serving as a glorified professional typist, copying and pasting contract data from one excel sheet into a website and then back again. When her Web-based contracting tool loaded, she leaned forward in surprise. The data entry had already been done.

The Desktop Drinking Dodo Bird had done his duty overnight, keeping the automated robotic processing tool on and busy with the administrative work Brittany loathed. Still in disbelief, she leaned in further, double checking the fields to make sure they were correct and showing the others around her. It was all there. Instead of typing drudgery, Brittany began her

day double-checking details, discussing contract clauses, and negotiating intellectual property (IP) data rights and cost volumes with the innovative small businesses. Her job had been transformed from IT-centric to human-centric.

At around 11 a.m., Brittany was working on a particularly difficult contract award, with nonstandard IP demands and complex matching of private funds, program office funds, and SBIR funds. Wanting to get it right, Brittany immediately walked back to the main meeting room, where the semicircle from the morning had been rearranged into a number of “help desks,” each with five or so chairs surrounding a small table. She sat down at one of these small tables with a technical program manager, a financial manager, and a lawyer to hash out the issues. This support team – veterans of each of the five previous contracting sprints that awarded nearly 2,000 contracts – quickly gave Brittany several options for awarding the contract. Pleased with the speed of resolution, she returned to her team’s conference room and awarded the complex deal just in time for her team lunch.

By the end of the week, the team of 80 strangers had awarded more than 500 contracts worth millions of dollars to hundreds of innovative small businesses that had never before worked with the government. Only 21 days earlier, the companies had submitted their 15-slide applications.

The contracting team members had learned a new way of thinking about acquisitions and experienced a whole new way of interacting with

contracting software. They’d made professional connections and forged new friendships. They had come together to do intense paperwork for five early mornings and five late nights and came away having applied not only their contracting expertise, but also decidedly human capabilities: creativity, novel negotiation approaches, collaboration, and analysis.

Since 2018, AF Ventures, a coalition of Air Force organizations, has explored new ways of working with innovative small businesses. Much of this effort has focused on the back end: contracting, finance, and program management. These efforts have resulted in dramatically quicker time to award, a significant increase in the number of new small businesses working with the Air Force, and (potentially) a new approach to government acquisition. **CM**

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The opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the author and do not represent the official positions of the U.S. federal government.

SHARE YOUR STORY

Share Your Stories of Innovation!

NCMA would love to hear about your experiences with contracting innovation and any innovations you would like to share. Please write to Anne Laurent, NCMA Director of Professional Practice and Innovation, at anne.laurent@ncmahq.org.