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R E P O R T

Air Force Contingency Contracting

Reachback and Other Opportunities
for Improvement

John A. Ausink, Laura Werber Castaneda,
Mary E. Chenoweth

Prepared for the United States Air Force

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1776 Main Street, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, CA 90407-2138

1200 South Hayes Street, Arlington, VA 22202-5050

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Summary

The Air Force’s contracting career fields for both officers and enlisted personnel are under stress because of increased demands placed on them by deployments for contingency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Evidence of stress includes

- a deploy-to-dwell ratio of 1:1, which currently means that contracting personnel can expect to deploy for six months, return home for six months, and then deploy again
- a heavy reliance on the Air Force for contingency contracting positions, as indicated by the fact that 70 percent of the positions in the Joint Contracting Command Iraq/Afghanistan (JCC-I/A)¹ are filled by Air Force contracting personnel
- the potential difficulty of retaining experienced, senior-level personnel in the career field, as indicated by a decrease in the average career length of enlisted personnel from over ten years in FY 2004 to under seven years in FY 2008, and a decline in the number of personnel in the “journeyman/craftsman” cohort of personnel with 11 to 15 years of experience.

One potential approach to decreasing deployment stress on the career field is to increase the use of “reachback” for some contracting functions. This means that tasks normally accomplished by deployed contingency contracting officers (CCOs) in theater are accomplished by personnel outside the theater of operations—perhaps in the continental United States (CONUS). For example, legal review of a contract might be done by a specialist in CONUS instead of the CCO in theater. This could mean that fewer people need to be deployed or the workload of those deployed could be decreased.

This report uses data from four sources—CCO after action reports (AARs), focus groups, interviews with subject-matter experts, and purchasing data recorded in the Joint Contingency Contracting System (JCCS)—to examine what CCOs do and to better understand some of the challenges they face while accomplishing their mission.²

Our initial intent was only to develop broad criteria for the use of reachback, examine JCC-I/A purchases that could be made using reachback, and estimate the potential deployment impact if reachback were used for certain categories of purchases. However, we learned that, while CCOs recognized the potential of reachback to reduce deployments, they felt it had more potential to improve other aspects of contingency contracting, such as continuity of workflow, standardization of contract requirements, concentration of contracting expertise in

¹ After this report was completed, CENTCOM established the CENTCOM Contracting Command, which is based in Qatar. JCC-I/A transitioned to the new organization in June 2010.

² We believe that our work with the AARs represents the first time that this data source has been analyzed in such detail to provide insight into what CCOs do while they are deployed.

one location, and training for CCOs. Participants in interviews and focus groups also highlighted the fact that many of the factors that increased the stress of deployed contracting personnel would not be affected by reachback, but could be affected by other policy changes. As a result, we reached conclusions not only about the potential of reachback to reduce deployments but also about the need for policy and procedural changes to address other causes of stress.

Reachback and Deployments

The potential to decrease deployments by using reachback for purchases in certain categories is substantial, but reducing them enough to affect the deploy-to-dwell time may be a challenge because of the number of joint billets involved. We recommend that the Air Force do the following:

1. Use the analysis presented in this document to refine the estimates for potential decreases. (See pp. 31–34.)
2. Examine in more detail the reachback experiences of the organizations discussed in this document to learn how to take advantage of other benefits of reachback, such as strategic purchasing and the concentration of expertise for large source selections. (See pp. 21–27.)

Approaches to Relieving Other Sources of Stress

To address other areas that contribute to the stress on deployed CCOs, we recommend that the Air Force do the following:

1. Facilitate support for better requirements and statements of work development by customers. This will help relieve CCOs of what they consider to be a time-consuming “extra” duty. (See pp. 40–44.)
2. Work to consolidate requirements to fewer contracts. Our data analysis shows that CCOs in JCC-I/A wrote more purchase orders than any other type of contract—most of them used only once. Consolidation will help reduce the CCO workload. (See p. 12.)
3. Revise its policies to allow the deployment of lower-grade contracting personnel and the deployment of other career fields (such as acquisition) to positions that are currently filled by contracting personnel but do not actually require someone with a warrant.³ This would increase the size of the pool of deployable personnel and would have the added benefit of providing training for inexperienced contracting and acquisition personnel. (See pp. 46–47.)
4. Periodically review deployed personnel allocations to ensure that the number and skill mix at a given deployed location is appropriate. (See pp. 46–47.)

³ The extent of an individual’s authority to obligate funds and commit the government contractually is expressly defined in a “warrant” or other instrument of delegation, such as orders or certificates of appointment (U.S. Government Personnel Management Office, 1983).

5. Clarify the roles of other personnel in the contracting process (e.g., contracting officer's representatives, quality assurance evaluators) so that CCOs can focus on their primary duty of purchasing goods and services for the warfighter. (See pp. 39–45.)