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Contractors seek edge by hiring former feds

Feds' knowledge of acquisition regs considered a big plus

BY Aliya Sternstein

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Managers who leave the government for private-sector opportunities find that their understanding of the inner workings of federal acquisition procedures makes them attractive additions to the staff.

Technology companies that want a piece of major homeland security contracts are enlisting executives who have experienced the bidding process from the other side, corporate recruiters say.

Evan Scott, founder of executive search firm Evan Scott Group International, works with companies that try to sell their technologies to the Homeland Security Department, the Defense Department and intelligence agencies.

"The people that we recruit are the people that have lived and breathed this marketplace," Scott said. "They know how to work the integrator community."

The government's procedures for ensuring fair and open competition can entangle vendors in rolls of red tape. For example, the Federal Acquisition Regulation is 1,923 pages long. Vendors must download compressed files of the Defense FAR before they can pore over the epic.

Scott's clients, who make products such as biometric software and security appliances, pay him one-third of the anticipated first year's salary to approach former government officials who are now in the private sector. Scott has scouted board directors for big enterprises such as SRA International and small start-ups such as Tarantella, a secure remote access software provider based in Santa Cruz, Calif.

Terrorism and border control are driving forces behind the search for executives who have served in the government, he said.

One former fed, J. Michael Gibbons, vice president of Unisys' Enterprise Security Services, said his experience as a 15-year employee at the FBI has helped him in writing proposals for Unisys.

"I think I know how to write concisely and to the point and answer what the government is looking for," said Gibbons, who has helped deliver security products to DHS and the Transportation Security Administration. "I wouldn't

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say I have a great advantage in winning contracts, but at least I'm invited to bid."

Vendors with federal credentials also have an advantage in earning the confidence of government agencies, Gibbons said.

"Experience and a demonstrated track record translate into someone you trust, [and] information security is really about trust," Gibbons said. "If you've been inside the government, it doesn't mean you'll get special favors when you get out, but at least you'll understand the business of government."

Likewise, Douglas Norton, director of government business development at Siemens Maintenance Services, said his 32 years in government — he split his time between the Air Force and NASA — is an asset for the company in communicating with federal customers. Norton now provides logistical support for passenger- and baggage-screening devices at U.S. airports.

A federal background gives executives insight into federal contracting that the average corporate-lifer does not have, Norton said. "If you want to dig into the FARs and [Defense] FARs, you can. They're written in English," he said. "But they are long and voluminous, and there's no substitute for having gone through the procurement process."

Federal exchange students

Not all federal managers who switch to the private sector leave government permanently. Through a program sponsored by the Office of Personnel Management, information technology professionals in the public and private sectors are encouraged to spend a few months in the other sector.

The initiative, called the IT Exchange Program, allows government and the private sector to share — rather than compete for — IT talent. Federal workers who participate in the program get a glimpse of industry technologies and management practices, while industry workers see the challenges that agencies encounter in providing services to the public.



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