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# Governmentwide Acquisition Contracts: A New Measure of Respect

By Brian Robinson

**T**he late comic Rodney Dangerfield might have had something to say about the current state of governmentwide acquisition contracts (GWACs). Despite their size, reach and efforts to encompass just about every need that agencies have for purchasing information technology, somehow they don't seem to get the respect they should.

GWACs have been around since the 1990s, they've delivered billions of dollars' worth of goods and services, and they are proven procurement vehicles. And yet many agencies seem to thumb their noses at them.

In the past four years there has been a marked shift to the use of agency-specific multiple-award contracts (MACs) at the expense of GWACs, particularly those run by the General Services Administration, according to market research firm Input.

"Business for GWACs has been relatively flat," said Kevin Plexico, senior vice president for research and analysis services at Input. "Many of the larger agencies just feel they have a better fit [to their requirements] when they run procurements through their own contracts."

And yet look at some of the recent history of GWACs.

The revenue posted by NASA's Solutions for Enterprise-Wide Procurement (SEWP) contract tripled in just two years. GSA's Alliant program, which has been running for only a year, snagged the Defense Department as a customer in its first week, and most recently was selected by the State Department to help it design and maintain its enterprise-wide network infrastructure through the Vanguard 2.0 IT consolidation effort. Even the National Institutes of Health's long-running Chief Information Officer-Solutions and Partners (CIO-SP) contract is bringing in a steady \$1 billion a year.



You figure somebody must be doing something right.

GWACs are multiple-award, indefinite-delivery, indefinite-quantity contracts that provide for a range of customizable solutions to fit most IT needs. Some, such as those run by NASA and NIH, are designed to first provide for their own agencies' needs but have broad enough scopes that they readily fit with other agency requirements.

They cover a range of contract types such as fixed-price, cost-reimbursement, time-and-materials, and labor-hour. Because they are fully competed ahead of time, agencies need to issue only task orders or delivery orders without having to go through the lengthy competition process. Orders placed through GWACs are also not subject to the requirements of the Economy Act of 1933, unlike MACs.

The contracting agencies guarantee that the GWACs meet all government procurement regulations. Agencies ordering off them can use either standard contracts or negotiate terms to meet their own requirements. GWACs also support small-business goals, and many of the upcoming GWACs have separate contracts just for small businesses, with dollar ceilings similar to those of the main contract.

The difference between GWACs and agency-specific MACs is that agencies that run GWACs must be authorized to do so by the Office of Federal Procurement Policy. Such authority so far has been given to only four agencies: GSA, which currently runs 8 active GWACs; NIH, with three; NASA; and the Environmental Protection Agency, which runs a GWAC for recycling and disposal of electronic equipment.

The big problem GWACs face in the next year or two is that government contracting overall will probably be down, said Ray Bjorklund, senior vice president and chief knowledge officer at

FedSources, which makes it a tough environment to compete in.

“Customers are looking for such things as adaptability, ease of ordering, ease of administration, low pricing and consistency with their own policies” in the contracts they use, he said. “Above all, they are looking to mitigate any of the risks associated with procurements.”

To go to the GWACs and outside their MACs, which they feel they have a large measure of control over, agencies need to feel comfortable about the level of risk they are taking, Bjorklund said. That’s probably a reason SEWP has done so well recently; the contract office there has indicated it will do whatever is necessary to lower the hurdles.

“They tell agencies that whatever they want to figure out legally they will do it, and they’ll do it overnight,” he said. “As far as risk mitigation is concerned, that certainly seems to have worked.”

GSA knows what it needs to do. It has suffered from a lingering reputation for poor customer service from the time it had the monopoly on government contracting services. GSA Administrator Martha Johnson has referred to that several times in recent presentations, and told the audience at FOSE 2010 that, when agencies were required to buy from it, GSA didn’t know “how to spell ‘marketing’.”

She now talks about agencies partnering with GSA because it can absorb some of their risk.

“We want agencies to know that we will partner with them and will advocate their position to make sure that the [GWAC vendor] is following the terms of the contract,” said Mike O’Neill, GSA’s GWAC program manager. “There’ll also be a continuous effort on our part to let people know what Alliant and our other contracts are about and how they are available for their use.”

That kind of outreach will be vital for GWACs in general because many of them are changing. Alliant and its small-business variant are follow-on contracts to GSA’s Applications ’N Support for Widely-diverse End-user Requirements (ANSWER) and Millennia and Millennia Lite contracts, for example, but they’ll differ substantially to their predecessors by being closely aligned with the requirements of the federal enterprise architecture.

GSA also expects to make awards for its Connections II contract later this year, a follow-on to its successful Connections

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**Ray Bjorklund,**  
FedSources

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I contract that provides telecommunications equipment and services for building and campus environments.

The same goes for NIH’s upcoming CIO-SP3 contract, which will be a follow-on to both the current CIO-SP2i and Image World 2 GWACs.

NIH has rolled out a completely new electronic system for managing CIO-SP2i, said Rob Coen, deputy program director of the NIH Information Technology Acquisition and Assessment Center, which will allow for easier communication with customers about the specifics of CIO-SP and the business they can do through it.

The system also will provide an opportunity for people at the center to reach out to agencies to explain to them the advantages of GWACs overall.

“That’s an important two-way street, and when I got here a year ago I said this was something we need to do,” Coen said. “Many people in government have been doing procurements a certain way for 20 years or more, and we want to show them that there’s a different way to do it that’s much faster and easier.”

Coen doesn’t agree that business for GWACs has slowed, citing the increase in SEWP’s traffic and the fact that Alliant has been gaining traction.

“I do think GWACs will be around for a while and that there is a good demand for them,” he said. “I believe there will be a great opportunity for these programs some way into the future.”

Even those who see agency-specific MACs getting more favor don’t see GWACs going away.

“GWACs are definitely valuable, particularly for those agencies that don’t have their own resources to run contracts, or if a vendor they prefer is on the GWAC,” Plexico said. “They definitely have a role to play in the market.” ◊

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*Brian Robinson is a freelance writer for 1105 Government Information Group’s Custom Media unit, an independent editorial arm of 1105 Government Information Group. Custom Report topics are chosen in response to interest from the vendor community; however, sponsors are not guaranteed content contribution or review of content before publication.*

# NIH Gears Up For New GWAC Opportunity

**T**he third version of the National Institutes of Health's Chief Information Officer-Solutions and Partners (CIO-SP) governmentwide acquisition contract is slated as a follow-on contract, but in some ways it's a completely different animal.

First, the NIH Information Technology Assessment and Acquisition Center (NITAAC), has completely revamped the way it runs its GWACs. A sophisticated Web site and online tools promise a much smoother experience for users, and they include an e-ordering system that has stripped turnaround times to just hours in many instances.

Current CIO-SP2i (CIO-SP 2 Innovations) customers have gotten a taste of that, but for CIO-SP3 users, it's the only environment they will know.

Additionally, CIO-SP3 will be closely tied to the Federal Health Architecture (FHA), which is the means by which all federal agency efforts backing national health care information technology initiatives will be coordinated. More than 20 military and civilian agencies will need to install IT systems that will allow them to securely move health information among one another and with state, tribal and local governments, and private industry.

A draft request for proposals (RFP) for CIO-SP3 points to bioinformatics and electronic health records as featured areas within the GWAC's scope that support FHA, although other task areas also support architecture objectives.

The RFP's specific objective is to obtain health-related IT expertise that will relate to all of the contract's 10 task areas, said Mary Armstead, NITAAC's new program director, though the GWAC's traditional objective to provide "any and all IT" for its customers will also continue.

"But based on where [the government] is now with health care initiatives, we saw this as an excellent opportunity to extend CIO-SP's functionality," Armstead said.

Every vendor on CIO-SP3 will have to

have expertise with health IT, said Rob Coen, NITAAC's deputy program director, and extensive experience with general IT solutions and services.

CIO-SP3 is the latest in the line of CIO-SP GWACs that stretches back to 1996, when NIH became one of the first federal agencies to get authorization from the Office of Federal Procurement Policy to run a GWAC. The new \$20 billion, 10-year contract will also incorporate the functions of NIH's Image World 2 GWAC, which, like CIO-SP2i, expires at the end of this year.

Imaging will be a separate task area under CIO-SP3. These are the systems and services that support the collection, storage, and retrieval of digital images, including scanned documents, medical images, geographical information systems, video and photographs.

NIH intends to award an almost identical version of the contract just for small businesses that would also have a \$20 billion ceiling. However, it would have a user fee of 0.75 percent vs. 1 percent for the main GWAC.

"We like the idea of small-business vendors having a playground of their own because it affords them a certain amount of protection they wouldn't have without this set-aside," Armstead said. "We have very high expectations for it."

Other task areas in the CIO-SP3 contract will include CIO support, outsourcing, IT operations and maintenance, integration services, critical infrastructure protection and information assurance, digital government, enterprise management systems, and software development.

In addition to support for FHA, CIO-SP3 will follow what seems to be the norm for GWAC recompetes by also making sure its task areas support the federal enterprise architecture, including non-IT components such as supply-chain management and collection of metrics for agencies' Performance Reference Models.

CIO-SP3 will be one of the flagship contracts for the future NITAAC, which has undergone a complete business overhaul spearheaded by Coen. When he arrived at the center in early 2009, following a stint at the Small Business Administration, he brought with him the idea of customer service as a prelude for good contract performance, with examples of what that has done for the success of NASA's Solutions for Enterprise-Wide Procurement, for instance.

Coen created a new business development approach that sent NIH representatives into the field to explain to agencies the advantages of using vehicles such as GWACs and to train those agencies' acquisition shops about the specifics of CIO-SP2i, Im-

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# Unleashing the Power Of Alliant

The Alliant governmentwide acquisition contract was a much anticipated follow-on to the General Services Administration's Applications 'N Support for Widely-diverse End-user Requirements (ANSWER) and Millennium contracts when it was awarded in August 2007, but a subsequent protest and delay raised many red flags. Its eventual success was anything but assured when it finally opened for business at the beginning of May 2009.

Which is why you could almost hear the relief in the voice of Casey Kelley, Alliant's program manager, when he talked about the first 13 months of the contract's working life.

"A bump in the road was expected," he said, "but we actually finished the last fiscal year in a much stronger position than we anticipated."

By the end of May 2010, 37 task orders had been awarded, worth close to \$545 million. As important, in Kelley's eyes, was the diversity represented in those awards, which involved 18 agencies and 22 of Alliant's 59 industry partners. And there were no protests.

"We've also received over 120 statements of work," he said, "so we have a robust pipeline."

Alliant is designed to provide everything a government agency needs, such as hardware, software and integration services, for medium to large and complex information technology projects. To that end, it continues and extends the combined offerings of ANSWER and Millennium, although users will find some differences.

For example, cost contracting was available previously only under Millennium and Millennium Lite but is now allowed for all of Alliant's business, along with all other contract types. Also, there's a top-secret and approved accounting system requirement at the basic contract level rather than the task order level, which Kelley said should provide for more uniformity throughout the contract.

The biggest change, however, is that Alliant is now aligned with both the federal and Defense Department enterprise architectures. That means IT products and solutions for agency infrastructures as defined by the enterprise architecture

will always be within the contract's scope, making Alliant a template of sorts for next-generation "evergreen" contracts.

"One of the things customers have complained about with other contracts is the need for tech refresh," Kelley said. "But because Alliant is aligned with the EAs, it will always be a state-of-the-market IT vehicle, which means tech refresh is no longer needed."

It also means that things needed to carry out agency IT missions that wouldn't traditionally be considered IT -- such as business practice analysis, hardware disposal and recycling, and system and facility design -- are now within Alliant's scope.

Users also will see a determined focus on customer relationship and service, which has been a weakness of many GSA contracts in the past.

To some extent, this aspect was forced on the Alliant program because of the lag in increasing business as a result of the protest. The immediate concern was to reach out to existing Millennium and ANSWER users, Kelley said, to train them on using Alliant. Now the target is everyone else.

"I'd like every formally accredited procurement officer in the government to be able to use this contract if they feel it is useful to them," he said.

Backing that up is a comprehensive Alliant Web site ([http://www.gsa.gov/Portal/gsa/ep/contentView.do?contentType=GSA\\_OVERVIEW&contentId=14264](http://www.gsa.gov/Portal/gsa/ep/contentView.do?contentType=GSA_OVERVIEW&contentId=14264)) that includes an ordering guide, acquisition templates, access to the Alliant basic contract, and time and materials labor rates.

Additionally, Kelley said Alliant staff is working with customers on defining and meeting their needs. Workers will review customer requirements at no cost upon request, they will provide answers about whether a request is within Alliant's scope within one to two business days, and they will provide recommendations on what best fits those requirements.

Customer calls and e-mail messages will be returned promptly, too, he promised, "typically within hours." ○

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Alliant is designed to provide everything a government agency needs, such as hardware, software and integration services, for medium to large and complex information technology projects.

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# 'The Sky's the Limit' for Alliant Small Business GWAC

By Steve LeSueur

**W**hen GSA officials began planning the Alliant Small Business (Alliant SB) program, they drew from best practices across agency's stable of small business governmentwide acquisition contracts (GWACs), including 8(a) STARS, COMMITS Next Generation, and Veterans Technology Services (VETS). Consequently, when Alliant SB was launched in February 2009, GSA officials incorporated lessons learned for training agency users, collaborating with industry contract holders, and supporting agencies throughout the task order process.

The payoff was a strong first-year performance. Alliant SB issued 17 task orders worth \$251 million, according to Stephen Triplett, Director of the GSA Small Business GWAC Center. In addition, Alliant SB has 8 additional task orders under consideration.

"We had a great first year with a lot of excitement about the program," Triplett said. "We think that the sky's the limit."

## Helping Agencies Achieve Small Business Goals.

Alliant SB is 10-year GWAC and has a \$15 billion ceiling to provide IT services and solutions to all federal agencies. Although the contracting vehicle has 73 companies, officials say that the average number of bids submitted for each task order has been less than five. "We have just the right amount of competition per opportunity," Triplett said.

The program is self-funding, and so agencies pay a fee of 0.75 percent per task order. Alliant and Alliant SB offer a fee cap of \$150,000 annually per task order on orders in excess of \$20 million per year.

Alliant SB officials take seriously their role as advisors to help agencies satisfy IT requirements using qualified small businesses. They emphasize that each of their small business GWACs have unique capabilities

and specialties that can satisfy a customer's need.

"When customers come to the Small Business GWAC Center, they can choose from the many contracts we offer," Triplett said. "We serve as an honest broker to help them find the best fit."

And when agencies select Alliant SB as their contracting vehicle, they receive continuous support, which starts in a program's planning stages until the final solutions are delivered. "We don't want to be there just in the beginning. We will be there throughout to make sure they get the results they were promised," said Matt Verhulst, Contracts Branch Chief at the Small Business GWAC Center.

## Ensuring Scope Compliance

One of the more popular services offered by the center is its Scope Compatibility Review. At no charge to agencies, the center will review an agency's statement of work (SOW) to ensure that its requirements fall within the scope of the Alliant SB contract. SOWs are reviewed twice a week by the center's panel of experts, who will help agency's refine the document to ensure their needs are met. Following the process, the center will issue a written statement certifying that the project is within scope of the contract.

Agencies can use a template provided by the center to submit their SOWs online at the Alliant SB website.

The center has reviewed 52 SOWs for Alliant SB thus far this year. When all GSA small business GWACs are included, the total number of SOWs reviewed by the center over the same period was 209 SOWs from 20 agencies worth \$3.9 billion

The review process "has been broadly embraced by both DOD and civilian agencies," Verhulst said. "Many use it as a quality assurance tool to make sure that their work requirements will be a good fit and are compatible with one of our contracting vehicles."

## Training Agencies to Use Alliant SB

Contracting and program officials can receive training on how to use Alliant SB through a variety of venues: an online course; a webinar, on-site training, or at a GSA conference or other event. Training is free and typically lasts about an hour. Federal employees also receive continuous learning points that they can count toward training within their agencies.

Alliant and Alliant SB officials collaborated on the training program, and so people learn how to use both contracts. Upon completing the course, warranted contracting officers receive a Delegation of Procurement Authority that authorizes them to use both contracting vehicles.

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# Tracking The Evolution of SEWP

**N**ASA's Solutions for Enterprise-Wide Procurement (SEWP) originally was to be a procurement vehicle for the space agency's Goddard Space Flight Center. It's come a long way.

Now in its fourth iteration since the first SEWP contract was authorized by the Clinger-Cohen Act 14 years ago, sales have surged since SEWP IV opened for business in 2007. Fiscal 2008 sales were \$1.358 billion, double those of the previous year. Another rush saw fiscal 2009 sales reach \$1.875 billion, a 40 percent growth.

That blistering pace has slowed, but even so, sales were up 10 percent year-over-year by the end of May, and SEWP officials believe they will hit \$2 billion for fiscal 2010.

Impressive as all of this is, SEWP's program manager, Joanne Woytek, said it's incidental.

"The goal is not to grow [SEWP], it's to provide the best business solutions for NASA," she said. "The key thing is that we are not a contract, but a program that supports a contract."

That may be what sets SEWP apart from other GWACs, she said. Along with the information technology hardware, software and services offered through SEWP comes a focus on customer service, user tools and outreach. "Most agencies who try to set up these contracts forget" that part of it, she said.

There's also the power of price. The SEWP user fee, which at one time was 0.65 percent, is now 0.5 percent with a \$10,000 cap on the amount an agency has to pay on orders totaling more than \$2 million.

That's the lowest fee of any GWAC. Because SEWP is self-funded and gets no money from NASA – and delivers no money to the agency – whatever increase in business SEWP generates means even further reduction in fees.

It also gives the SEWP office the leeway to increase and improve the program's staff, which was recently split into a user help team and a team for processing requests, both of which work closely to boost contract performance.

The SEWP office handles about 25,000 orders a year, officials said, but the average response time for a request for quotes (RFQ) is three or four days, and most orders can be turned around in a day.

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**Along with the information technology hardware, software and services offered through SEWP comes a focus on customer service, user tools and outreach.**

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The office automatically runs a full set of checks on each order and issues full reports to users along with verification that the products involved are carried on the contract and are adequately priced. Likewise, if a request is not within the contract's scope, the SEWP office will also let the user know that.

To further improve customer service, SEWP has developed online tools. It added a chat tool a couple of months ago, and by the end of May users were already spending an average of five to seven minutes online with program help staff. The online RFQ tool was updated in April to allow users to create credit card orders directly from a quote in hopes of further speeding the process.

And in November 2009, the SEWP management system was integrated with Compusearch Software Systems' PRISM acquisition management solution, a Web-based system widely used in government. Now agency procurement workers can click on a button in their PRISM interface to send an order directly to the SEWP office.

Woytek feels there's yet another advantage to being with a contract that serves an agency such as NASA, which is well known for its forward-thinking approach to emerging technologies and future needs.

"I can't think of many things that may happen [in government] in the future that would not be in the current scope of this contract," she said. ◻



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## Alliant Small Business from Page S7

GSA's GWAC Program trained more than 3,600 individuals to use Alliant, Alliant SB and other small business GWACs in fiscal year 2009, and received a 98 percent satisfaction rating from participants in follow-up surveys.

### Partnering with Industry

Alliant SB works with its business partners through the Alliant Small Business Industry Council. They collaborate on messaging and marketing strategy to ensure that agencies understand the solutions Alliant SB offers and how the contract works. The contractors also help Alliant SB officials keep informed about planned projects and requirements among the agencies.

GSA officials also help their business partners by sponsoring events that bring together Alliant and Alliant SB prime contractors to share strategies, learn about each other's capabilities, and find teaming opportunities. "Part of our responsibility at the Small Business GWAC Center is to help our small businesses grow and become large companies if they wish, and to give them opportunities to work within the federal government," said Dean Cole, Business Development Specialist for the center.

### Looking Ahead

During the coming year, Alliant SB officials will be expanding their outreach activities in several areas, said Jean Oyler, who is Director of the Business Development Division at the center. Among the targeted groups are the Small Business Utilization Directors within federal agencies, who are key stakeholders for the center. "We want them to know that they can use these contracts to help them achieve their socioeconomic goals for their agencies," Oyler said.

In addition, the center is getting set to launch a new online dashboard that will enable the center to share information with industry partners and customer agencies. Industry, for example,

will be able to see which agencies are submitting SOWs to the center, or how many delegated contracting officers work within specific agencies. Agencies will be able to view profiles of industry partners to help them evaluate their GWAC options.

The center will continue providing support services to agencies. This includes helping agencies develop requests for information and reviewing SOWs before task orders are awarded, and then providing continuing training and helping to monitor contractor performance after awards. As a result of these efforts, the GWAC program received high marks in the fiscal 2009 annual GSA GWACs customer satisfaction survey. The program received a satisfaction score of 77.8 (on a 100-point scale), nearly 10 points higher than the federal government average of 68.7, as reported on [www.theasci.org](http://www.theasci.org).

In the survey responses, customers cited the streamlined, faster acquisition process and ease of use as key reasons for using GSA GWACs. And the GWAC program scored especially high in customer loyalty categories, receiving an 87.4 rating for "Likelihood to use in the future" and 86.4 for "Likelihood to recommend."

"We are extremely proud of Alliant Small Business," Triplett said. "Small businesses can do a lot of positive things if given the opportunity to compete in the federal government arena." ○

## NIH from Page S5

age World 2 and other contracts, and how they could use them to fulfill their IT requirements.

The Web site and e-ordering are the other side of this revamped approach. Users can now access the system online and upload their contracting requirements, Coen said. All task and delivery can now be fulfilled electronically, and NITAAC says users can also complete online their RFPs or requests for quotes in 10 minutes or less.

Statement-of-work reviews will be turned around within 24 hours, as will any queries and questions users have.

"We make sure the [statements of work] are compliant with all federal regulations, and we'll let them know if we think we can offer anything to make their requirements better or more specific to their needs," Coen said. "We'll do anything that we think can add value."

The one thing that isn't clear yet is when the CIO-SP3

GWAC will be awarded and opened for business. There have been reports that NIH is still negotiating with OFPP about a continuation of its authority to run GWACs, and as of June 1, the final RFP for CIO-SP3 had not been released.

With the existing CIO-SP2i and Image World 2 contracts expiring in December, there may be a need for a short-term extension of those to bridge the gap to CIO-SP3, Armstead said. ○

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