Anne Laurent **NCMA Director of Professional Practice and Innovation**

I'm excited to bring you news of the latest experiment by our 2022 Innovation in Contracting Award Winner, the Defense Department Chief Digital and AI Office Tradewind initiative.

And even more than that, we are grateful for Bonnie Evangelista's, thoughtful and open article about what Tradewind is attempting to accomplish beyond offering innovative ways to understand and apply artificial intelligence (AI).

Evangelista is a DoD Senior Procurement Analyst and Tradewind Manager. Her explanation of the new AI Solutions Marketplace as a safe space for "unlearning" common practice is worth reading and pondering. For all contract management professionals, this is a moment of immense challenge to common practice.

Paved cow paths simply will not suffice in an era of electric cars and vertical takeoff and landing aircraft. Only alacrity, creativity, and willingness to take risks, with its implied willingness to fail and learn, will enable our government and companies to buy technology as it develops at the speed of necessity.

This is in spades what Tradewind is trying to encourage and support with its new marketplace and a host of other initiatives. Not surprisingly, this work isn't easy to describe. We don't yet have the language to talk about what is just beginning and is intentionally breaking familiar paradigms. As Evangelista describes in her story about a change-reluctant colleague, most of us are uncomfortable working without the safety net of rules, policy, and common practice.

I love Evangelista's direct style and her willingness to let us watch as she ponders the why of risk aversion and the how of challenging it. Her compassion for the contracting community shines through. So does her excitement in creating a place for all to safely try on new ways of buying and of thinking – "unlearning," in her words.

New AI Marketplace Is a Safe Place for Unlearning Common Knowledge

By Bonnie Evangelista

The Tradewind[1] team hasn't stopped since winning the 2022 NCMA Innovation in Contracting Award.[2] We're continuing to push boundaries and experiment with novel methods that disrupt the conventional government purchasing workflow.

Next up is the Tradewind Solutions Marketplace.[3] It is a place for Department of Defense (DoD) organizations to browse pre-competed, rapidly awardable, commercial and noncommercial artificial intelligence (AI), data, and digital capabilities available for purchase upon selecting a solution. More specifically, we're streamlining the ability to search, view, review, compare, contrast, contact, negotiate, and procure data, analytics, digital and AI capabilities solutions through this unprecedented digital environment.

The Defense Department Chief

Digital and AI Office (CDAO)[4] was stood up in February 2022 by integrating the Joint Artificial Intelligence Center (JAIC), Defense Digital Services (DDS), the Chief Data Officer, and the enterprise platform Advana into one organization. The CDAO created Tradewind to provide an ecosystem to quickly transition AI concepts from idea to working project. It tests proofs of concept through application and analysis of real results using an array of solicitation methods and other transaction authority (OTA).

A Cultural Transformation

The ecosystem engages AI innovators in industry, academia, nonprofits, and government. Using agile methodologies to monitor and assess work output, the CDAO team quickly homes in on what works and what doesn't during contract execution and adjusts. Our goal is to award prototype agreements in 30 to 60 days or less so the DoD can quickly, repeatedly, and ethically put AI technologies into use.

Realizing this vision requires an organizational culture transformation as much as a technological transformation, the July 2021 Biannual Report to Congress of the Joint Artificial Intelligence Center (JAIC)[5] reaffirms this notion. "Longstanding traditions, processes, and methods must be reshaped to reflect the realities and opportunities of a modernized security apparatus."

Leaders recognize DoD acquisition processes, regulations, and culture pose hurdles for rapid procurement and delivery. The federal contracting process in particular is not known for its speed and nimbleness. Some acquisition professionals seek strategies to avoid contracting all together because of its traditionally rigid and burdensome nature.

In its efforts to take on cultural transformation, CDAO is the primary sponsor of the Tradewind Solutions Marketplace initiative. CDAO seeks to establish a low-barrier entry point for industry and academia to identify technology solutions, ongoing research efforts, and proposed development activities that are relevant to the DoD.

In August 2022, we released a teaser draft for comments to crowdsource the marketplace program features. These are managed and executed by our Tradewind non-profit partner and marketplace manager, IN3 – Indiana Innovation Institute.[6] IN3 works with a network of more than 200 industry, academic, and government partners to manage complex national security technology projects.

The marketplace initiative is one of multiple Tradewind procurement paths we are piloting to allow DoD customers to acquire AI, digital, and data solutions quickly. If we are successful, we hope to bridge the gap between the solution providers and the government customers across the DoD.

Marketplace Initiatives

Some key features that make the marketplace initiative unique are:

1. It is being set up specifically for short video pitches. We plan to take advantage of the video format to get right to the point and better engage government

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customers with solution showcases, "movie nights," and other regular activities.
2. Videos will be assessed by government, industry, and/or academic subject matter experts before being included within the marketplace.
3. All videos placed on the marketplace feature capabilities that are awardable at any time, by any DoD customer, for any amount, under any contract or other transaction agreement.
4. The program is agnostic as to buyers and buying activities. Awards resulting from the marketplace can be made through the CDAO or any other contracting activity. This includes programs such as partner intermediaries, other transaction-based consortia, multiple-award indefinite-delivery-indefinite-quantity programs, public-private-partnerships, Small Business Innovation Research, and Small Business Technology Transfer programs.
5. All DoD and military service customers can use the marketplace for their relevant requirements.

Who Benefits?

The Tradewind Solutions Marketplace has an anticipated minimum viable product (MVP) go-live target of the first quarter of fiscal 2023. However, the CDAO, and marketplace manager, IN3, intend to continue to collect and consider comments and suggestions from industry, academia, and government throughout the life of the marketplace initiative.

If the marketplace initiative gains traction and moves forward to MVP and beyond, it will be an ideal front door for technology companies with a ground-breaking technology that are struggling to get in front of the right DoD customer. Also interested would be companies that have identified prospective customers, but lack a contracting pathway.

The marketplace will be ideal for organizations that assist technology firms in developing effective pitches; demonstrating relevant applications of their technologies, products, and services; and addressing national security challenges. Companies that invest in emerging technology startups also will find the marketplace a natural fit for showcasing their portfolio firms.

The structure of the general solicitation to be published and subsequent assessments of solutions within the marketplace allow for streamlined procurement of available solutions. This addresses a major barrier to small businesses and nontraditional defense contractors. They no longer will have to hunt for pathways to contracts.

One of the biggest lessons learned in the first year of Tradewind was how cumbersome selection processes can be even when using non-*Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR)*-based selection processes. We found we needed to use different buying approaches depending on the complexity of the customer's capability gap, the customer's familiarity with acquisition, and the customer's willingness to try something new or different.

We were spending large amounts of time and energy tailoring custom procurement strategies to identify the best solution to solve each customer's problem. It proved infeasible to expend so much technical-expert time conducting large-scale white paper reviews or the like just to find the one or two ideas that pique a customer's interest.

Immediately Awardable

The solutions marketplace is intended to quickly put in front of DoD, solutions for end users, acquisition professionals, and anyone who has a problem that needs solving. Solutions in the marketplace will be assessed against predetermined criteria and assigned an "awardable" or "not awardable" rating (see Figure 1). From there, a government customer can choose to have a one-on-one discussion, request a pitch or demo, or initiate a project award with providers within the marketplace that have "awardable" solutions.

How are we able to do this? Upon identifying interested or compelling solutions, the marketplace already has established the competitive environment to comply with *FAR* requirements and non-*FAR*-based authorities for entering into a procurement contract or other transaction agreement. We are extremely intentional in conforming to the competition requirements of 10 USC 4021[7] and 4022,[8] FAR/DFARS Part 35,[9] and Class Deviation 2022-O0007,[10] implementing Section 803 of the fiscal 2022 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). Thus, capabilities showcased in the marketplace are readily available to

be viewed, selected, and awarded by DoD activities.

This element is the foundation of the marketplace. It is where we start to foster and build a new environment we hope will generate a level of creativity not seen before within the government.

I recently read that the definition of common knowledge is information that is so widely accepted, no one questions it.[11] This struck me. I wonder whether the widely accepted common knowledge shared among government acquisition professionals has had the effect of limiting creativity to what's been done before or what we're told is appropriate in a government setting.

Learning and Unlearning

If that strikes a chord with you, I invite you to look deeper. Have we reached a point at which we're no longer asking good questions in federal acquisition and procurement? Perhaps the time has come for some *unlearning* as well as learning. Unlearning should be celebrated as we begin to contemplate alternative purchasing models, such as the marketplace. Complacency is not our friend as the volatile world around us changes at an ever-increasing pace.

Tradewind provides a safe space for unlearning as well as learning. Leaders across the federal government recognize that innovation will lag, and bureaucracy will flourish, unless we make fundamental changes. And not only in processes, but in what and how our people learn. Tradewind is a safe space for acquisition personnel to test out what's different and new. It is a place where execution meets policy. Tradewind is an environment where we can bridge the gap between conventional contracting wisdom and true acquisition reform. It is where experiential learning transforms into true creativity.

Tradewind intentionally focuses on experimentation and incremental, fast-paced growth to accelerate learning and unlearning. We evaluate solutions and build our internal business processes to support intelligent speed. By design,

Tradewind puts every practice – from identifying user need to contract awards, agreements, and project execution – under a microscope. We do this with intention, excitement, and purpose. We're constantly moving and adjusting based on our past successes to unlearn what doesn't work and codify what does.

The marketplace is an example of unlearning within Tradewind. We start with the basics and simply ask "why?" and "what's going on?" when we're faced with a barrier alert. We muster some courage to offer a different approach, and critically, we run small pilots to see what happens. We believe that when we focus on learning, small successes are easier to find and build upon.

In this instance, the barrier alert jangled when we kept running into logjams. They evolved around decreasing barriers to entry and increasing speed to contract for nontraditional solution providers to offer their capabilities to government customers.

For those of you who are still skeptical about unlearning common knowledge or who don't think unlearning is possible in the government culture, I've seen it happen. I believe it will become more prevalent if we share more examples of unlearning for people to see in practice.

'Forget Everything You Know'

I once worked with a colleague who initially struggled to operate in unencumbered, flexible, and novel environments. More than 20 years of Army experience had formed him into a methodical and structured thinker. As we set out to create new acquisition frameworks, he yearned to have rules to follow and policies to apply. "Forget everything you know," I told him, when he began to be an unproductive contributor in our creative thinking sessions.

Once freed from shoulds and musts, my colleague had less trouble unlearning. He came to embrace the new and different. As a result, his efforts led Army Defensive Cyber Operations to develop an unprecedented problem-solving, solutions-driven acquisition model. The story of this game-changing model won the 2021 Army Acquisition, Logistics and Technology Maj. Gen. Harold J. Greene Award for acquisition writing in the Innovation category.[12]

I share this anecdote to encourage acquisition and contracting professionals not just to think outside the box but stand on top of the box, beside the box, below the box, around the box, is there even a box? Go wherever your creative mind takes you. Creativity and innovation are not limited to technology solutions. We thrive on diversity of thought within Tradewind. In fact, the marketplace is one of our first major attempts to take one of our creative ideas to a larger audience.

For those already engaging in Tradewind, thank you for partaking in a live science experiment and helping us build frameworks, models, and processes that we hope will become a new foundation for the rest of the department. We hope the marketplace concept engages your imagination as much as it does ours. And we hope it spurs ideas for improving models and methods within the marketplace – or for something totally new and different!

Please visit the teaser posted under the opportunities section of the Tradewind Exchange at *www.tradewindai.com*. We would love your feedback so we can continue improving and expanding this pathway to ensure it best serves the needs of diverse customers for AI. CM

Bonnie Evangelista is Senior Procurement Analyst and Tradewind Manager for the Chief Digital and AI Office (CDAO), leading efforts to design and build a rapid acquisition environment to accelerate the pace of digital, analytics, and AI delivery to the Department of Defense. In her previous role, she served as the Deputy Product Lead for Applied Cyber Technologies, leading efforts to provide the infrastructure and environments necessary for defensive cyber innovation and integration. She has an MBA from Liberty University and BA degrees in political science and Spanish from Virginia Tech.

ENDNOTES

1 https://www.tradewindai.com/.
2 https://www.ncmahq.org/Web/Membership/Individual-Award-Pages/Innovation-Award.aspx.
3 www.tradewindmarketplace.com.
4 www.ai.mil.
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