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DECISION



**THE COMPTROLLER GENERAL
OF THE UNITED STATES**
WASHINGTON, D. C. 20548

FILE: B-220677 **DATE:** February 5, 1986
MATTER OF: NBI, Inc.

DIGEST:

Where protester proposes meeting peripheral plug-to-plug compatibility requirement with an "intermediate device" consisting of a computer, data format conversion device, modem, and a telecommunications line, agency properly rejected proposal as technically unacceptable because it reasonably interpreted the solicitation as only allowing an intermediate device in the nature of an adapter.

NBI, Inc. (NBI), protests the rejection of its two proposals to provide a word processing system under request for proposals (RFP) No. DAKF49-85-R-0370, issued by the Department of the Army, Fort Sam Houston, Texas. The RFP seeks a word processing system for Building 44 consisting of computer hardware/software and capable of "full and complete inter-operability" with two extant Wang Laboratories, Inc. (Wang) word processing systems located in Building 44 and Building 16. ^{1/} NBI's proposals were rejected for failure to: (1) meet the RFP's plug-to-plug compatibility requirement; (2) meet the RFP's file/data sharing and transfer requirement; and (3) propose system cabling compatible with the Fort Sam Houston local area network.

We deny the protest.

We find the first ground of rejection is dispositive of the protest.

^{1/} Building 44 contains a system consisting of a Wang central processing unit (CPU) and 24 peripheral devices - printers/workstations; Building 16 has a Wang CPU and 16 peripheral devices.

The record shows that the offerors were advised prior to submission of their proposals that it was the Army's intent to procure an addition to the existing Wang system in Building 44 and ultimately to join this augmented system to both the Wang system in Building 16 and a separate Wang central computer in a local area network (Wang local area network). The Army contends, and NBI has not denied, that NBI "was aware of the Army's need for flexibility of movement and inter-connectivity of the peripherals to the existing [WANG] CPU due to the 5th Army's location in two buildings."

The RFP (issued Jan. 25, 1985) sought, at paragraph C.3.2.2.1, a CPU able to support at least 32 peripheral devices and at paragraph C.3.2.2.2., stated:

"Regardless of the total number of peripheral devices supported, system must concurrently support a minimum of 24 CRT workstations and devices must be plug compatible with WANG['s CPU]."

Moreover, the RFP, at paragraph C.3.2.4., set out Inter-Operability requirements which provided that an offeror's:

". . . proposal must provide full and complete inter-operability between itself, WANG['s CPU], and WANG['s local area network] Proposed system must provide the following system to system functions:

(SYSTEM TO SYSTEM)

- (1) . . .
- (2) . . .
- (3) File sharing/transfer
- (4) . . .
- (5) . . .
- (6) Specialized peripheral sharing (e.g., Graphics workstation)
- (7) Logon (logically attach peripheral devices to any of the systems)"

Amendment 0001 (issued July 2, 1985) further emphasized the need for compatibility with the Wang system by stating:

"Each system component, the CPU, workstations, and printers must be individually capable of direct interface with the WANG [CPU] or the WANG [local area network]."

Prior to the preproposal conference (July 18, 1985), NBI challenged the above-quoted paragraph C.3.2.2.2. as unduly restrictive. NBI asked:

". . . why is 'full and complete inter-operability' between this newly requested system and the WANG [CPU], and WANG [local area network] a minimum requirement to meet these specifications? Only WANG can offer full and complete inter-operability to WANG systems. Other vendors can offer full and complete interaction through a communications link, but could not answer specifications . . . in the affirmative."

The Army responded to NBI's question by issuing amendment 0003 (July 23, 1985) which: (1) added the sentence, "Intermediate or conversion devices may be used to obtain plug compatibility," to paragraph C.3.2.2.2; (2) added the sentence, "The use of intermediate conversion devices to accomplish the above is acceptable," to paragraph C.3.2.4; and (3) deleted the amendment 0001 requirement of direct interface between the new system components and the Wang CPU and Wang local area network. On this basis NBI submitted its two proposals.

The issue before us is the propriety of the Army's excluding NBI from the competitive range for NBI's failure to provide plug-compatible peripheral devices in either of its proposals. The Army interprets paragraph C.3.2.2.2, as amended, as requiring that NBI's peripheral devices have the capability of connecting, either directly or by means of an intermediate device, to the existing Wang CPU. On the other hand, NBI views amendment 0003 (allowing the use of intermediate or conversion devices to obtain plug compatibility) as authorizing an alternate to direct/indirect connection of NBI peripheral devices to the spare ports (unused peripheral connectors) on the existing Wang CPU.

NBI urges that, if an offeror uses intermediate or conversion devices, the specifications do not require plug/port compatibility between the NBI peripherals and WANG CPU. NBI's position is that it offered an intermediate device (a telecommunications line, modem, and data format conversion device, between the NBI CPU and the Wang CPU) and that, because NBI peripherals are connected to NBI's CPU and then through the conversion device, modem, and telecommunications line to the Wang CPU NBI has met the solicitation requirement. NBI further contends that its interpretation

of the amended specifications is reasonable in light of Department of Defense Federal Acquisition Regulation Supplement, 48 C.F.R. § 270.200 (1984), which states that a plug (plug-to-plug) compatible item "need not perform its functions in essentially the same manner as the referenced product; however, it must perform the same functions as the referenced product."

A fundamental rule of interpretation is that a document's intent and meaning are discerned not on the basis of an isolated section or provision, but by consideration of the entire document with each provision construed in its relation to other provisions and in light of the general purpose to be accomplished. Honeywell Information Systems, Inc., B-191212, July 14, 1978, 78-2 C.P.D. ¶ 39 at 4.

The distinction that NBI makes between the requirements of paragraph C.3.2.2.2, before and after the issuance of amendment 0003, loses sight of the Army's clear intent to purchase peripherals which could be readily moved about within the building (as units were reassigned to different office space) and function as either peripherals to the new system or as peripherals to the existing system. In this regard, we have previously observed that:

". . . the term 'plug-compatible peripheral device' refers to a specific class of computer equipment, such as plug-compatible disk drives, which can replace an existing device made by the mainframe or other independent manufacturer [here, Wang]." ITEL Corp., B-192139.7, Oct. 18, 1979, 79-2 C.P.D. ¶ 268 at 2.

Moreover, we have found that using an adapter to make a peripheral device function with another manufacturer's computer is not inconsistent with a plug-to-plug requirement. Honeywell Information Systems, Inc., B-191212, supra, 78-2 C.P.D. ¶ 39 at 5. Offerors were notified of the Army's interpretation at the preproposal conference when a participant requested clarification of paragraph C.3.2.1.3 which required mounting of hardware and software to interconnect the CPU and main memory with system peripherals or communications links. The Army advised those in attendance that:

"This section applies to any adapters or special connector necessary to implement proposed equipment for total inter-operability with existing equipment. These specifications describe an addition to an existing system."

NBI's proposed approach provides that NBI peripherals, for example, workstations, would be connected to the Wang CPU by a cumbersome system consisting of an NBI CPU, a conversion device, modem and telecommunications line. These items would constitute the adapter or intermediate device between the NBI peripherals and the Wang CPU, and thus, in order to use the NBI peripherals with the Wang CPU, the NBI intermediate system would have to be used as the adapter. The NBI peripherals would always need to be linked to the NBI intermediate devices in order to be used with the Wang system. The record indicates that this approach would limit the agency's ability to relocate workstations and printers for necessary reorganization of staff offices, since NBI peripherals must always perform in conjunction with the NBI intermediate system, and can never directly be used with the Wang system.

While we recognize that the solicitation amendment permitted offerors to satisfy plug-to-plug compatibility by use of an intermediate device, we do not think the agency was required to accept the NBI approach, which involves four devices instead of one adapter device, to satisfy the plug-to-plug compatibility requirement and which still fails to permit efficient inter-operability or compatibility in the access to and distribution of data between the systems as required by the RFP. As noted previously, the Army indicated it was looking for adapters or a special connector to the existing Wang system to provide full and complete inter-operability between the existing and new system.

Generally, proposals that are to be considered within the competitive range are those which are technically acceptable or reasonably susceptible of being made acceptable through discussions--that is, proposals which have a reasonable chance of being selected for award. D-K Associates, Inc., B-213417, Apr. 9, 1984, 84-1 C.P.D.

¶ 396. NBI's proposal was found technically unacceptable because its proposed adapter system failed to meet the Army's requirement for plug compatibility which would provide efficient inter-operability between the existing system and the new system. NBI does not argue that it could have offered the type of adapter contemplated by the Army. Instead, NBI continues to insist that its more cumbersome approach met the RFP requirements. Under these circumstances we think that the agency reasonably concluded that the NBI offer did not have a reasonable chance of being selected for award.

We therefore conclude that NBI was properly excluded from the competitive range and consequently need not discuss the two other grounds for rejection of NBI's two proposals.

The protest is denied.

for Seymour E. Fox
Harry R. Van Cleve
General Counsel