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Decision

Matter of: Amyx, Inc.

File: B-410623; B-410623.2

Date: January 16, 2015

James Y. Boland, Esq., Anna E. Pulliam, Esq., and Dismas Locaria, Esq., Venable LLP, for the protester.

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Young H. Cho, Esq., Charmaine A. Howson, Esq., Renee S. Holland, Esq., and James P. Fuerstenberg, Esq., Department of Energy, for the agency.

Noah B. Bleicher, Esq., and Nora K. Adkins, Esq., Office of the General Counsel, GAO, participated in the preparation of the decision.

DIGEST

1. Protest challenging the agency's evaluation of protester's staffing plan is denied where the agency reasonably determined that protester failed to propose sufficient personnel.
 2. Protest challenging the agency's evaluation of vendors' technical approaches is denied where the evaluation was reasonable, conducted in accordance with the solicitation's evaluation criteria, and otherwise unobjectionable.
 3. Protest challenging agency's evaluation of past performance and relevant experience is denied where the agency properly treated these criteria as two distinct evaluations, and where the evaluations were otherwise reasonable and consistent with the solicitation.
 4. Protest contending that agency's source selection decision placed undue weight on a significant weakness in its quotation is denied where it was not improper for the agency to find the significant weakness to be a primary discriminator in its decision to award to a higher-priced vendor.
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DECISION

Amyx, Inc., of Reston, Virginia, protests the issuance of a task order to 22nd Century Technologies, Inc., of McLean, Virginia, pursuant to request for quotations

(RFQ) No. DE-SOL-0005409, which was issued by the Department of Energy (DOE) for various information technology (IT) support services. Amyx challenges numerous aspects of the evaluation of quotations as well as DOE's source selection decision.

We deny the protest.

BACKGROUND

DOE issued the RFQ on October 29, 2013, to General Services Administration, Federal Supply Schedule (FSS) contract holders pursuant to the procedures set forth at Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR) subpart 8.4.¹ RFQ at 1, 5. The RFQ, provided to small business vendors who held contracts under FSS No. 70 (IT professional services), sought quotations for support services for IT management, operations, and system development and support for DOE's Office of Science (SC).² RFQ at 5; Performance Work Statement (PWS) at 1. The RFQ contemplated the issuance of a single task order with a 12-month base period and four 12-month option periods for tasks to be performed on either a fixed-price or a time-and-materials basis. RFQ at 9-10.

The RFQ advised vendors that award would be made on a best-value basis considering price and the following non-price criteria, listed in descending order of importance: business management, technical approach, past performance, and relevant experience. Id. at 62. The RFQ identified three business management sub-criteria, also listed in descending order of importance: staffing and management plan, key personnel, and workforce transition. Id. For purposes of award, the RFQ stated that the non-price criteria, when combined, were significantly more important than price. Id.

The RFQ included a detailed PWS that identified 16 areas of IT services that the successful vendor would provide to support "approximately 2000 users" at SC locations across the country.³ PWS at 2. Services range from IT strategic planning

¹ The RFQ was amended seven times during the procurement. Citations in this decision are to a conformed version of the RFQ provided by DOE.

² DOE's Office of Science "funds basic research to advance the scientific knowledge needed to provide new and improved energy technologies; to understand the health and environmental implications of energy production and use; and to maintain U.S. leadership in discovering the fundamental nature of energy and matter." Performance Work Statement at 1.

³ The PWS stated that primary SC federal IT oversight is divided between three sites: SC Chicago (SC-CH) located in Argonne, Illinois; SC Oak Ridge (SC-OR)
(continued...)

and enterprise architecture to cyber security and infrastructure operations. Id. One area of the PWS relevant to this protest is the requirement for desk side and virtual desktop infrastructure (VDI) support, which encompassed “desk side support to troubleshoot, repair, deploy, and install hardware, software, and associated IT assets when hands on hardware and software support is required.”⁴ Id. at 10. Other desk side support tasks identified in the PWS include hardware and software maintenance, management of a mobile device pool, preparation of obsolete equipment for disposal, set up of IT equipment and services for SC training and meetings, operation and maintenance of videoconference systems, and various off-site support including off-site support for “executive staff” for access to automated services and capabilities. Id.

The PWS also listed the various SC facilities throughout the country and identified whether on-site desk side support or “on demand” support was required. Id. at 2. For the two SC headquarters facilities (Washington, D.C. and Germantown, Maryland), the PWS advised that on-site desk side support was required during the core business hours of 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. Id. at 2, 8, 10.

Additionally, the RFQ provided various historical data elements of the IT needs at each of the SC facilities. RFQ, attach. 18, Inventory Summary, at 191-92. According to the RFQ, SC-HQ’s Germantown facility had 330 users and the Washington D.C. facility included an additional 50 users. Id. at 191. The RFQ provided that the average monthly help desk ticket volume for both SC-HQ facilities was 760, and the average monthly conference room set ups was 27. Id. The RFQ also provided data on the equipment at each facility, which included 370 workstations, 174 laptops, 225 mobile phones, and 229 printers at the Germantown facility, for example. Id.

Quotation Evaluation

The agency received quotations from eight vendors by the solicitation closing date, including quotations from Amyx and 22nd Century. Contracting Officer Statement of Fact/Memorandum of Law (COSF/MOL) at 4. A DOE source selection evaluation team (SSET) reviewed and evaluated quotations and identified significant strengths, strengths, weaknesses, significant weaknesses, and deficiencies in the quotations. Agency Report (AR), Tab E.1, SSET Report, at 15-91; Tab B, Evaluation Plan,

(...continued)

located in Oak Ridge, Tennessee; and SC headquarters (SC-HQ) located in Washington, D.C. and Germantown, Maryland. PWS at 2; see RFQ at 5.

⁴ Virtual desktop infrastructure allows remote access to a user’s desktop/computer for purposes of ascertaining or fixing an issue with the desktop/computer. Contracting Officer Statement of Fact/Memorandum of Law at 25.

at 25. The SSET assigned consensus adjectival ratings for each quotation under the non-price criterion and sub-criterion. See AR, Tab E.1, SSET Report, at 15-91; Tab B, Evaluation Plan, at 27-28.

The consensus evaluation results of Amyx’s and 22nd Century’s quotations were as follows:

		Amyx	22nd Century
Business Management (45%)	Staffing and Management Plan (25%)	Satisfactory	Good
	Key Personnel (15%)	Good	Good
	Workforce Transition (5%)	Good	Good
Technical Approach (30%)		Good	Good
Past Performance (15%)		Outstanding	Good
Relevant Experience (10%)		Good	Satisfactory
Overall Weighted Score ⁵		7.55	7.70
Total Evaluated Price		\$40,170,320	\$42,053,180

AR, Tab E.1, SSET Report, at 7, 14.

In rating Amyx’s quotation as satisfactory under the staffing and management plan sub-criterion, the SSET identified a significant strength, three strengths, a weakness, and a significant weakness. The SSET assigned Amyx’s quotation good ratings under the other business management sub-criterion. With respect to key personnel, the SSET assigned strengths to three proposed personnel “based on their leadership, experience in performing similar work [and] complexity to the PWS, and qualifications.” Id. at 22. The SSET also noted as a weakness under the key personnel sub-criterion that the proposed key person for cyber security was not a

⁵ Pursuant to the evaluation plan, the adjectival ratings corresponded with numerical ratings (i.e., an outstanding rating received 10 points; a good rating received 8 points; and a satisfactory rating received 5 points), and each criterion and sub-criterion was assigned a weight consistent with its relative importance as stated in the RFQ. AR, Tab B, Evaluation Plan, at 20, 27-29. The SSET multiplied the numerical ratings with the criterion weight, which resulted in a weighted score for each criterion. Id. at 29. The sum of the weighted scores reflects the vendor’s overall weighted score. Id.

certified information systems security professional (CISSP).⁶ Id. The SSET identified four workforce transition strengths for Amyx's proposed workforce transition timeline, employee orientation approach, establishment of positive labor relations, and for the firm's transition management team approach. Id. at 20-21.

With respect to the technical approach criterion, the SSET identified 10 strengths in Amyx's quotation that covered multiple areas of the PWS. Id. at 15. Under the past performance criterion, the SSET assigned Amyx's quotation an outstanding rating due to exceptional performance ratings and positive comments in the past performance information that the evaluators reviewed. Id. at 24-26. Finally, with respect to relevant experience, the SSET noted that team Amyx had performed work of similar size, scope, and complexity to the PWS requirements. Id.

Source Selection Decision

DOE's Deputy Director for Resource Management served as the source selection official (SSO) for this procurement. The SSO reviewed each vendor's quotation, considered the SSET report, received a briefing from the SSET chairperson and the contracting officer, and conferred with the SSET members.⁷ AR, Tab G, Selection Decision, at 9. In his selection decision, he summarized the results of the SSET's evaluation of quotations and performed a comparative analysis for each criterion. Id. at 8-54.

The SSO concluded that Amyx, 22nd Century, and a third vendor submitted "technically superior" quotations as compared to the other five vendors. Id. at 59. In his price/technical tradeoff, the SSO explained that the advantages offered by 22nd Century, under staffing and management plan, warrant the "slight price premium" of \$1,882,860. Id. Ultimately, the SSO concluded that 22nd Century's quotation represented the best value to the agency, offering "an extremely attractive combination of a sound technical approach in areas that are of critical importance to me, and are the most important, under the RFQ, with a price of \$42,053,180, which is proportionate to the benefits offered." Id. at 61.

DOE issued the task order to 22nd Century on September 30, 2014, and this protest followed.

⁶ The SSET report inaccurately states that the CISSP certification was a PWS requirement. See AR, Tab E.1, SSET Report, at 21. However, the source selection official noted the SSET's error--CISSP was a requirement, but not necessarily for the key person--but nonetheless concluded that the lack of CISSP certification for Amyx's proposed key person for cyber security remained a weakness. AR, Tab G, Selection Decision, at 34 n.2.

⁷ The SSET did not make an award recommendation. COSF/MOL at 49.

DISCUSSION

Amyx challenges numerous aspects of the agency's evaluation under the non-price criteria. The protester contends that its quotation was deserving of more strengths and the weaknesses assigned to its quotation lacked a reasonable basis. Amyx also complains that the evaluation was unequal because Amyx's quotation was superior to 22nd Century's quotation, despite the assignment of similar ratings. Protest at 18. Lastly, the protester objects to the award decision, arguing that the SSO downplayed the advantages offered by Amyx and placed undue weight on the significant weakness assigned to the quotation under the staffing and management plan sub-criterion. Supplemental (Supp.) Protest at 16, 21.

We have carefully considered all of the protester's arguments and find that none provides a basis to sustain the protest.⁸ We discuss some of Amyx's principal contentions below.

Where, as here, an agency issues an RFQ to GSA FSS contractors under FAR subpart 8.4 and conducts a competition, we will review the record to ensure that the agency's evaluation is reasonable and consistent with the terms of the solicitation and applicable procurement laws and regulations. Digital Solutions, Inc., B-402067, Jan. 12, 2010, 2010 CPD ¶ 26 at 3-4; DEI Consulting, B-401258, July 13, 2009, 2009 CPD ¶ 151 at 2. A protester's mere disagreement with the agency's judgment does not establish that an evaluation was unreasonable. DEI Consulting, *supra*. For procurements conducted pursuant to FAR subpart 8.4 that require a statement of work, such as this one, FAR § 8.405-2(f) designates minimum documentation requirements. Neopost USA Inc., B-404195, B-404195.2, Jan. 19, 2011, 2011 CPD ¶ 35 at 7; FAR § 8.405-2. Additionally, in a FAR subpart 8.4 procurement, an agency's evaluation judgments must be documented in sufficient detail to show that they are reasonable. Id.

Staffing and Management Plan

Amyx challenges the evaluation of its quotation under the staffing and management plan sub-criterion. Specifically, Amyx objects to the SSET's finding that the protester did not adequately demonstrate sufficient desk side support for SC-HQ. Protest at 10; see AR, Tab E.1, SSET Report, at 18.

⁸ For instance, one of Amyx's arguments with respect to DOE's evaluation under the key personnel sub-criterion is that its quotation should have been rated higher than 22nd Century's because Amyx identified more key personnel in its quotation. Supp. Protest at 14-15; Comments at 32. Given that the RFQ did not provide for the assignment of strengths based solely on the number of key personnel proposed, Amyx's argument reflects nothing more than its disagreement with the agency's conclusions.

Under the staffing and management plan criterion, the RFQ instructed vendors to submit a detailed plan to staff each PWS task, including desk side support. RFQ at 55. Pursuant to the RFQ, the plan had to “ensure that an adequate workforce is available with the appropriate skills and qualifications necessary to safely and effectively accomplish the work over the term of the task order.” Id. More specifically, the RFQ required that the staffing plan “contain a detailed explanation as to how each of the labor categories proposed for each position at each SC location will fulfill all of the requirements of the PWS addressing roles, responsibilities, and authorities of personnel within the proposed organization.” Id.

The agency was to evaluate various elements under the sub-criterion, including the adequacy of the vendor’s staffing plan. RFQ at 63. The SSET reviewed Amyx’s staffing and management plan and identified certain features as strengths and another as a significant strength. AR, Tab E.1, SSET Report, at 18-19. The significant strength was assigned because Amyx proposed to have a [deleted] at each of the three main SC sites (SC-CH, SC-OR, and SC-HQ). Id. at 18. The SSET identified as strengths Amyx’s “thorough, detailed, and realistic” staffing plan; Amyx’s proposed use of [deleted] to augment its management structure; and Amyx’s uniform benefits package and ability to hire and retain its workforce.⁹ Id. at 18-20. The SSET also assigned a weakness under this sub-criterion because Amyx did not identify in an organizational chart in its quotation the role that each

⁹ With respect to the strength related to Amyx’s staffing plan, the protester complains that the SSET actually intended to assign a significant strength because the SSET narrative described the strength as one that “appreciably increases the probability of success[.],” which was part of the evaluation plan’s definition of a significant strength. Protest at 8; Comments at 23; AR, Tab E.1, SSET Report, at 19 (underline added); see Tab B, Evaluation Plan, at 25 (defining a strength as a feature that “increases the probability of success[.]” and a significant strength as a feature that “appreciably increases the probability of success[.]”). The agency maintains that the SSET’s use of the term “appreciably” was nothing more than a typographical error, and that the strength was not mischaracterized. COSF/MOL at 29. Here, we find the agency’s explanation persuasive. The SSET did not expressly identify the strength as a significant strength (as it did in all other instances that a significant strength was assigned), and, in assigning the sub-criterion rating, the SSET included the attribute in its count of strengths (3) and not significant strengths (1). See AR, Tab E.1, SSET Report, at 18. Moreover, the record reflects that the SSO recognized that the report used the phrase “appreciably increases,” and he subsequently confirmed with the SSET that the evaluators did not intend to assign a significant strength to the staffing plan. AR, Tab G, Selection Decision, at 22 n.1; Request for Dismissal, attach. 1, Declaration of SSO, at 1. Consequently, Amyx’s complaints in this regard are unavailing.

member of Amyx's team had in performance of the PWS.¹⁰ Id. at 18. Lastly, the SSET identified as a significant weakness that Amyx did not propose sufficient desk side support at SC-HQ. Id. Specifically, the SSET noted that Amyx proposed two individuals to support the 380 SC-HQ users, an approach that the SSET found was "not feasible and will not be effective." Id. The SSET concluded that this approach "appreciably increases the risk of unsuccessful Task Order performance," and the significant weakness was assigned. Id.

The protester argues that the significant weakness was unwarranted because the firm met the RFQ's requirement to provide desk side support. Comments at 21. Amyx explains that using two individuals to perform desk side support services was sufficient because the firm could rely on the availability of virtual desktop capabilities, such as VDI, to resolve user problems without having to physically go to the user's desk side. Protest at 12. Amyx contends that this approach was "innovative, cost effective, and feasible," and should have been considered a strength. Id. at 10, 12.

Here, we have no basis to question the significant weakness assigned to Amyx's quotation under the staffing and management plan sub-criterion. The record reflects that the SSET was concerned that the provision of two individuals for the two headquarters locations (in DC and MD), supporting a total of 380 users was not sufficient. The agency questioned the feasibility of Amyx's quotation because it did not provide any details regarding how it planned to support the SC-HQ locations with only two individuals. For example, the agency noted that Amyx's quotation did not explain where the individuals would be located (two in one location, or one in each location). This was a concern to the agency because having the two individuals assigned to one location would increase the possibility of both Amyx employees simultaneously assisting users at one office, leaving the users at the other office without desk side support services altogether. COSF/MOL at 23. While Amyx contends in its protest submissions that each technician would be based at one of the SC-HQ locations, which would alleviate the agency's concern, such clarity was not provided in the firm's quotation. See Comments at 21. It is a vendor's responsibility to submit a well-written quotation for the agency to evaluate, and a vendor that fails to do so runs the risk that its quotation will be evaluated unfavorably.¹¹ See InfoZen, Inc., B-408234 et al., July 23, 2013, 2013 CPD ¶ 211 at 5.

¹⁰ Amyx proposed to perform the task order with two subcontractors. AR, Tab E.1, SSET Report, at 2; Tab C, Amyx Non-Price Quotation, at 3.

¹¹ Amyx also asserts that the approximately two dozen personnel it proposed to staff at SC-HQ (to perform other aspects of the PWS) could provide desk side support in emergency situations. Comments at 21. Again, the agency had no basis to consider this approach because the protester neglected to discuss it in its quotation. See InfoZen, Inc., B-408234 et al., July 23, 2013, 2013 CPD ¶ 211 at 5.

Moreover, we note that Amyx's quotation demonstrates that even if it had assigned one individual to each location, there would be times when only one individual would be supporting both locations. For example, the record establishes that while the PWS required on-site desk side support during core business hours of 7 a.m. to 6 p.m., PWS at 8, Amyx's staffing plan indicated that one of its employees would be available only from 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. and the other from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.¹² AR, Tab C, Amyx Non-Price Quotation, at 48. Thus, only one technician was available to service both facilities during a two-hour window in the morning and a two-hour window in the afternoon. On this record, we disagree with the protester's contention that DOE's concerns regarding Amyx's proposed staffing are misplaced.¹³

The protester nonetheless asserts that its quotation addressed how it would meet the desk side support requirements with only two individuals because it proposed the use of VDI to resolve the majority of service calls remotely, which would reduce the need for desk side support. See Protest at 11; AR, Tab C, Amyx Non-Price Quotation, at 18. In its quotation, Amyx proposed to rely on consolidated "Tier 1" help desk technicians based in SC-CH to provide virtual support for all SC locations, and to use "Tier 2" technicians for on-site desk side support if a Tier 1 technician was unable to resolve the reported incident. AR, Tab C, Amyx Non-Price Quotation, at 16, 18. According to Amyx, under this approach desk side services primarily would be limited to "the occasional hardware/device replacement," which Amyx insists, without any support, occur infrequently. Comments at 20.

We disagree with Amyx that its emphasis on VDI renders the significant weakness unreasonable. In this respect, the PWS identified numerous tasks that required in-person, on-site desk side support, including, for example, the deployment, installation, and maintenance of hardware; the set up of IT equipment and services for training and meetings; and the maintenance of videoconference systems. PWS at 10. Thus, we agree with the agency that the use of VDI does not eliminate the need for sufficient personnel to perform many desk side support tasks. See COSF/MOL at 26. Indeed, the PWS expressly identified the locations where desk side support (vice on demand support) was required, which included both SC-HQ facilities. Id. at 2. The record further reflects that VDI has not been fully implemented throughout SC, and that the virtual tool is being implemented first at

¹² In its quotation, Amyx provided shift schedules to "accommodate coverage of geographically dispersed sites." AR, Tab C, Amyx Non-Price Quotation, at 47.

¹³ We also find no merit to Amyx's argument that the significant weakness is objectionable because the firm proposed the "same ratio" of desk side support at the two other primary SC sites, but DOE did not express similar concerns about Amyx's staffing at those sites. Here, the protester's assertion simply is not supported by the record. AR, Tab C, Amyx Non-Price Quotation, at 17, 48-49; RFQ, attach. 18, Inventory Summary, at 191-92.

SC-OR (with SC-CH as the “backup site”), not at SC-HQ. See AR, Tab A.10, RFQ Questions and Answers, at 19. Given these facts, we find unpersuasive Amyx’s contention that its proposed use of VDI demonstrates that the SSET’s findings were unreasonable with respect to the firm’s ability to perform desk side support services at SC-HQ.

Lastly, Amyx objects to the significant weakness on the basis that it is internally inconsistent with the SSET’s evaluation of its technical approach to help desk and desk side support under the technical approach criterion. Protest at 12-13; see AR, Tab E.1, SSET Report, at 16. Under the technical approach criterion, the SSET evaluated the vendor’s approach to performing the PWS, and the SSET highlighted as a strength Amyx’s approach of a single help desk tool with consolidated help desk support in SC-CH and local desk side support to meet the requirements of the PWS. AR, Tab E.1, SSET Report, at 12. The protester’s argument that this strength reflects an improper inconsistency in the evaluation is not compelling.

In this respect, pursuant to the RFQ, the agency evaluated separate and distinct aspects of the quotations under the technical approach criterion and the staffing and management plan sub-criterion. See RFQ at 62-63. Specifically, the agency’s evaluation under the technical approach criterion did not take into consideration vendors’ proposed staffing levels, instead focusing on vendors’ approaches to perform the PWS tasks. Accordingly, in assigning Amyx a strength for its approach to perform the help desk services (under the technical approach criterion), the SSET reasonably did not evaluate the firm’s proposed staffing levels. On the other hand, as explained above, the RFQ required the agency specifically to evaluate vendors’ staffing plans under the staffing and management plan sub-criterion, which is where the significant weakness at issue was assigned. Thus, we find nothing objectionable with the fact that the agency both praised the firm’s overall technical approach to help desk and desk side support and, under a different criterion, identified a flaw with respect to the actual number of employees proposed to perform desk side support at SC-HQ. See Corps Solutions, LLC, B-409298.2, Aug. 21, 2014, 2014 CPD ¶ 244 at 7 (strength assigned for overall merit of proposed approach to exercise methodology was not inconsistent with weaknesses assigned for perceived lack of detail with respect to one type of exercise); Northrop Grumman Info. Tech., Inc., B-290080 et al., June 10, 2002, 2002 CPD ¶ 136 at 4 n.3 (evaluation findings were not inconsistent where evaluation under different subfactors was based on different criteria).

In sum, we find reasonable the SSET’s assignment of a significant weakness on the basis that Amyx proposed insufficient staffing to successfully provide desk side support at SC-HQ. We also find unobjectionable the SSET’s determination that Amyx’s quotation exhibited some risk under the staffing and management plan sub-criterion and demonstrated a satisfactory understanding of the contract requirements. While the protester’s arguments reflect its strong disagreements with the agency’s conclusions, they fail to provide a basis to sustain the protest.

Technical Approach

Next, Amyx challenges the agency's evaluation under the technical approach criterion. Amyx asserts that its quotation deserved a higher rating under the criterion. Amyx also argues that it was unreasonable for the SSET to assign the same ratings to its quotation and 22nd Century's given the "clear advantages" of Amyx's quotation. Supp. Protest at 12. We disagree.

The evaluation of quotations and assignment of adjectival ratings should generally not be based upon a simple count of strengths and weaknesses, but on a qualitative assessment of the quotations consistent with the evaluation scheme. See Epsilon Sys. Solutions, Inc., B-409720, B-409720.2, July 21, 2014, 2014 CPD ¶ 230 at 6. In this regard, it is well-established that ratings, be they numerical, adjectival, or color, are merely guides for intelligent decision making in the procurement process. See Envtl. Restoration, LLC, B-406917, Sept. 28, 2012, 2012 CPD ¶ 266 at 5. Moreover, there is no legal requirement that an agency must award the highest possible rating, or the maximum point score, under an evaluation factor simply because the quotation contains strengths and/or is not evaluated as having any weaknesses. See Applied Tech. Sys., Inc., B-404267, B-404267.2, Jan. 25, 2011, 2011 CPD ¶ 36 at 9.

We find no basis to object to the agency's assignment of a good rating to Amyx's quotation under the technical approach criterion. Under the criterion, the agency was to assess a vendor's approach to performing the PWS services. RFQ at 62. The RFQ identified seven elements the agency would evaluate, including, for example, whether the quotation demonstrated a thorough and detailed understanding of SC's IT environment and technology; demonstrated a detailed approach to perform the PWS; and demonstrated a detailed and comprehensive strategy for transitioning the technical work. Id. at 62-63. The SSET reviewed Amyx's quotation, identified 10 strengths, no weaknesses, and rated the quotation good under the criterion. AR, Tab E.1, SSET Report, at 15-18. With respect to 22nd Century's quotation, the SSET identified nine strengths, no weaknesses, and rated the quotation good as well. Id. at 87-90.

The record reflects that the 10 strengths identified in Amyx's quotation encompassed five of the elements being assessed. AR, Tab E.2, SSET Comparative Analysis Table, at 1-2. The record further shows that the strengths covered multiple areas of the PWS, including: "enterprise architecture, application development, understanding of the technical environment, help desk and desk side support, strategic planning, quality assurance, transition of technical work and incorporating industry best practices into the Program Management Office (PMO) functional area." AR, Tab E.1, SSET Report, at 15. In assigning the quotation a good rating, the SSET stated as follows:

Based upon the multiple strengths encompassing multiple areas of the PWS, the quality of the strengths, no significant strengths, and no weaknesses, the proposed technical approach demonstrates a good understanding of PWS requirements, and an effective approach to perform the work that results in a high probability of successful task order performance with the likelihood that performance expectations will be exceeded.

Id. Thus, the record confirms that the SSET assigned ratings based on the nature and quality of the strengths, and not a simple tally of the number of strengths, as the protester would have preferred. See Epsilon Sys. Solutions, Inc., supra. Moreover, the record does not support Amyx's position that its quotation warranted a higher rating because the SSET did not identify any weaknesses. Consequently, Amyx's argument that its 10 strengths combined with no weaknesses merited the assignment of an outstanding rating reflect nothing more than its disagreement with the agency's judgments. On this record, we find the agency's evaluation of Amyx's quotation under the technical approach criterion to be unobjectionable.

We find equally unpersuasive Amyx's complaints regarding the evaluation of 22nd Century's quotation under the technical approach criterion. As noted above, the SSET identified nine strengths in 22nd Century's quotation and assigned the quotation a rating of good. AR, Tab E.1, SSET Report, at 87-90. The SSET explained as follows:

Multiple strengths (4) were related to help desk and desk side, which are direct customer support functions, as these areas are the customer facing organizations of IT services. The proposed technical approach demonstrates a good understanding of PWS requirements, exhibits limited risk, and an effective approach to perform the work that results in a high probability of successful task order performance with the likelihood that performance expectations will be exceeded.

Id. at 87. Thus, the record show that whereas Amyx received its good rating based on multiple strengths across multiple PWS areas, the SSET assigned 22nd Century's rating for different reasons. We disagree with Amyx that 22nd Century's quotation warranted a lower rating or was less advantageous solely because Amyx's strengths covered more technical approach elements and more areas of the PWS than 22nd Century's. See Supp. Protest at 11; Comments at 10. The agency assigned ratings based on the quality, nature, and volume of the individual strengths received, not a count of how many PWS tasks were encompassed by the strengths. The SSET highlighted that 22nd Century's quotation was particularly strong in help desk and desk side support and demonstrated a good understanding of the PWS, hence the good rating. In any event, the fact that both vendors were assigned the same adjectival rating does not mean that they were "technically equal," as the protester complains. See Supp. Protest at 10. As noted above,

adjectival ratings are guides for intelligent decision making, Envtl. Restoration, LLC, supra, and the record here reflects that, ultimately, the SSO looked beyond the ratings in making his award determination.

Thus, that Amyx's strengths were spread across multiple PWS areas and four of 22nd Century's nine strengths focused on one PWS area (help desk and desk side support) does not demonstrate an unequal evaluation. Instead, it demonstrates that 22nd Century's quotation was particularly strong in one area, a notion reasonably reflected in the SSET's findings and good rating.¹⁴

Likewise, we find unpersuasive the protester's complaints that the SSET failed to properly evaluate certain aspects of 22nd Century's technical approach because it did not assign the quotation any weaknesses. For example, Amyx argues that its approach for transitioning technical work--one of the elements under the technical approach criterion--was "clearly superior" to 22nd Century's "largely generic" approach. Supp. Protest at 12; Comments at 14. Indeed, the agency agreed, assigning two strengths to Amyx's approach to transition and none to 22nd Century's. AR, Tab E.2, SSET Comparative Analysis Table, at 2. Notwithstanding the protester's assertions otherwise, the agency maintains that the quotations were fully reviewed and evaluated in accordance with the RFQ's evaluation criteria. Our review of the record supports the agency's position that the lack of a weakness assigned to certain aspects of 22nd Century's technical approach does not demonstrate that the agency "overlooked" evaluation criteria, as the protester alleges. See Supp. Protest at 11. The record here does not support Amyx's position that the agency failed to conduct a comprehensive evaluation consistent with the RFQ's evaluation criteria.

In sum, although Amyx reached different conclusions than the SSET when the protester conducted its own evaluation of 22nd Century's quotation, this alone does not demonstrate a flawed evaluation. Accordingly, Amyx's challenges under the technical approach criterion are denied.

¹⁴ To the extent that the protester contends that the four help desk strengths should have been considered one strength by the SSET, the record suggests otherwise. See Supp. Protest at 11. In this regard, the record confirms that the four strengths were not "inextricably linked" such that it was improper for the SSET to not have considered them as a single strength. See COSF/MOL at 14. In any event, as discussed above, ratings were not assigned based on a mere tally of the number of strengths, so Amyx's attempt to link several of 22nd Century's strengths does not demonstrate that the awardee's good rating was unreasonable.

Past Performance and Relevant Experience

Next, Amyx challenges the agency's evaluation under the past performance and relevant experience criteria. Specifically, Amyx contends that it was incongruous for its quotation to be rated good under the relevant experience criterion yet outstanding under the past performance criterion given that the SSET reviewed the same past performance projects under both criteria. Protest at 17. The protester contends that its quotation warranted the highest possible rating under both criteria. The protester similarly objects to the good rating assigned to 22nd Century's quotation under the past performance criterion in light of the satisfactory rating assigned to the awardee's quotation under the relevant experience criterion. Supp. Protest at 19.

Generally, an agency's evaluation under an experience factor is distinct from its evaluation of an offeror's past performance. Commercial Window Shield, B-400154, July 2, 2008, 2008 CPD ¶ 134 at 3. Specifically, as is the case here, the former focuses on the degree to which an offeror has actually performed similar work, whereas the latter focuses on the quality of the work. See id. Where a solicitation calls for the evaluation of experience and past performance, we will examine the record to ensure that the evaluation was reasonable and consistent with the solicitation's evaluation criteria and procurement statutes and regulations. Divakar Techs., Inc., B-402026, Dec. 2, 2009, 2009 CPD ¶ 247 at 5. The evaluation of experience and past performance, by its very nature, is subjective, and a vendor's disagreement with an agency's evaluation judgments does not demonstrate that those judgments are unreasonable. See Glenn Def. Marine-Asia PTE, Ltd., B-402687.6, B-402687.7, Oct. 13, 2011, 2012 CPD ¶ 3 at 7.

We find reasonable the agency's evaluation of quotations under the past performance and relevant experience criteria. As outlined in the RFQ, the agency's assessment under the past performance criterion considered the "quality of performance and successful performance relative to the scope, size, complexity and duration to the work described in the RFQ." RFQ at 65. In contrast, the agency's assessment under the relevant experience criterion evaluated "the relevance and extent . . . that [contracts submitted for review] are similar in size, scope and complexity to the work described in the PWS."¹⁵ Id. at 64. Thus, past performance

¹⁵ The RFQ instructed vendors to submit past performance information on the three most relevant contracts performed by the offeror and the three most relevant contracts performed by each proposed subcontractor or team member. RFQ at 58; id., attach. 9, Relevant Experience and Past Performance Reference Information Form, at 84. Pursuant to the RFQ, the same contracts would be considered under both criteria. Id. at 59. The RFQ also provided for the submission of past performance information questionnaires. Id.; see id., attach. 10b, Past Performance Information Questionnaire, at 86-87.

related to how well a contractor performed, while relevant experience pertained to the type of work a contractor performed-- two distinct criteria. Given the fundamentally different nature of the evaluations, a rating in one factor would not automatically result in the same rating under the other.

More specifically, in rating Amyx's quotation outstanding under the past performance criterion, the record reflects that the SSET focused its evaluation on the ratings and narratives contained in past performance information questionnaires (PPIQs), as well as information from the past performance information retrieval system (PIIRS).¹⁶ See AR, Tab E.1, SSET Report, at 24. For instance, as noted above, the SSET highlighted as a significant strength that Amyx was rated exceptional in all contractor performance attributes on its three PPIQs and that the references' comments were positive. Id.; see Tab E.4, Amyx Past Performance Information, at 2, 10, 15.

On the other hand, with respect to relevant experience, the SSET thoroughly evaluated whether the contracts submitted for review were similar in size, scope, and complexity to the PWS. See AR, Tab E.3, SSET Report Relevant Experience Summary, at 1-59. In assigning the quotation a good rating under the criterion, the SSET found that one of Amyx's three contracts was relevant to the PWS; the firm's other contracts were deemed somewhat relevant. Id. at 1-2; AR, Tab E.1, SSET Report, at 23. The SSET further found that one of Amyx's two subcontractors demonstrated relevant experience on two previous efforts, but also found that the other subcontractor's experience had only "limited similarity" to the PWS. AR, Tab E.3, SSET Report Relevant Experience Summary, at 2-5; Tab E.1, SSET Report, at 23-24. Based on these findings, the SSET reasonably assigned the quotation a good rating under the relevant experience criterion. Given that the past performance evaluation considered altogether different aspects of the contracts submitted for review, we see nothing in the record, beyond Amyx's opinion of its own quotation, to support a conclusion that the agency acted unreasonably in assigning Amyx's quotation a good rating under the relevant experience criterion.¹⁷ We find equally unobjectionable the agency's evaluation of 22nd Century's past performance and relevant experience. Consistent with the evaluation criteria outlined above, under the past performance criterion, the SSET evaluated how well 22nd Century and its subcontractors had performed on previous efforts submitted

¹⁶ The RFQ provided that the agency could solicit past performance information "from any other available sources," including the past performance information retrieval system. RFQ at 65.

¹⁷ By way of additional context, of the nine contracts team Amyx submitted for review, four were deemed to be relevant, four were somewhat relevant, and one was not relevant. AR, Tab E.3, SSET Report Relevant Experience Summary, at 1-5.

for review. The record reflects that 22nd Century earned a strength because the firm received predominantly very good ratings (with a couple exceptional ratings and a satisfactory rating) and all positive comments on two PPIQs in the record. AR, Tab E.1, SSET Report, at 94-95; Tab E.5, 22nd Century Past Performance Information, at 1-7. The SSET identified as a significant strength that one of 22nd Century's subcontractors received all exceptional ratings and "very positive" comments in a PPIQ for a relevant contract; all exceptional ratings in a PPIRS report on another relevant contract; and very good and exceptional ratings and positive comments on a somewhat relevant contract. AR, Tab E.1, SSET Report, at 94; Tab E.5, 22nd Century Past Performance Information, at 33-51.

With respect to 22nd Century's second subcontractor, the record reflects that this firm's past performance was considered both a strength due to predominantly exceptional ratings and very positive comments on one somewhat relevant contract, as well as a weakness due to predominantly unsatisfactory ratings in a PPIRS report on a relevant contract. AR, Tab E.1, SSET Report, at 94-95; Tab E.5, 22nd Century Past Performance Information, at 13-32. Overall, the SSET concluded that the team demonstrated "more favorable than unfavorable quality of performance and successful performance," and the SSET assigned the quotation a good rating under the criterion. AR, Tab E.1, SSET Report, at 94-95.

Amyx disagrees with the agency's conclusions, arguing that the agency gave disproportionate weight to the subcontractor's significant strength. See Supp. Protest at 20; Comments at 38. We conclude otherwise. As detailed above, the record reflects that the agency reviewed the entirety of 22nd Century's team's performance on previous efforts, taking into consideration both the amount of work the entities were proposed to perform on the task order, as well as the relevance of the contracts being reviewed. The record also does not support the protester's assertion that the agency overlooked 22nd Century's subcontractor's unsatisfactory PPIRS ratings. See Comments at 38. Instead, the record confirms that the agency identified this performance as a weakness, but reasonably concluded that the weakness was "more than offset" by the significant strength and strengths due to performance on six other efforts. See AR, Tab E.1, SSET Report, at 94. There simply is no basis for our Office to conclude that the agency's exercise of its judgment in this regard was unreasonable. See Glenn Def. Marine-Asia PTE, Ltd., supra.

Lastly, we find no merit to Amyx's argument that the agency was compelled to assign 22nd Century's quotation a lower past performance rating given that the SSET assigned the quotation a satisfactory relevant experience rating. As noted above, the evaluation under the two criterion involved distinct considerations. See Shaw-Parsons Infrastructure Recovery Consultants, LLC; Vanguard Recovery Assistance, Joint Venture; B-401679.4 et al., Mar. 10, 2010, 2010 CPD ¶ 77 at 14 (an offeror's experience is different from its past performance, and an agency may reasonably provide for separate evaluation of these factors in a solicitation).

Source Selection Decision

Finally, Amyx objects to the agency's price/technical tradeoff. Amyx argues that the SSO placed undue weight on the staffing and management plan sub-criterion and negated Amyx's "clear advantage" under the past performance and relevant experience criterion. Supp. Protest at 16, 21. Indeed, the pleadings firmly establish that Amyx believes it submitted the best quotation; however, the agency reached a different conclusion.

Where, as here, a procurement conducted pursuant to FAR subpart 8.4 provides for issuance of a task order on a best-value basis, it is the function of the source selection authority to perform a price/technical tradeoff, that is, to determine whether one quotation's technical superiority is worth its higher price. General Dynamics Info. Tech., Inc., B-406030, B-406030.3, Jan. 25, 2012, 2012 CPD ¶ 55 at 6; See InnovaTech, Inc., B-402415, Apr. 8, 2010, 2010 CPD ¶ 94 at 6. In a best value procurement, particularly where technical factors are more important than price, an agency may ultimately focus on a particular discriminator in deciding not to select the low-priced vendor. See Trend W. Tech. Corp., B-275395.2, Apr. 2, 1997, 97-1 CPD ¶ 201 at 5; Teledyne Brown Eng'g, B-258078; B-258078.2, Dec. 6, 1994, 94-2 CPD ¶ 223 at 12-13. Further, an agency may select the higher-rated, higher-priced quotation as reflecting the best value to the agency where that decision is consistent with the evaluation criteria and the agency reasonably determines that the technical superiority of the higher-priced quotation outweighs the price difference. SENTEL Corp., B-407060, B-407060.2, Oct. 26, 2012, 2012 CPD ¶ 309 at 10. Where a price/technical tradeoff is made, the source selection decision must be documented, and the documentation must include the rationale for any tradeoffs, including the benefits associated with additional costs. InnovaTech, Inc., *supra*.

Here, the record shows that the agency made qualitative judgments regarding the significance of the significant strengths, strengths, weaknesses, significant weaknesses, and adjectival ratings assigned to the quotations. As discussed above, the agency's selection decision (which totals 62 pages) provides a summary of each quotation's strengths and weaknesses, as well as the reasoning for the evaluation ratings assigned under each of the evaluation criterion. See AR, Tab G, Selection Decision, at 9-54. Rather than merely counting the strengths and weaknesses and/or relying on the mathematically-derived overall weighted scores, the SSO assessed the relative merits of the quotations in accordance with the solicitation's requirements and evaluation criteria. The SSO explained in detail the advantages (and disadvantages) offered by the different quotations for each criterion and sub-criterion. The record reflects that under some criterion, Amyx's quotation was superior; under other criterion, 22nd Century's or other vendors' quotations were more advantageous than Amyx's. See id. at 20-22, 29-30, 33-34, 39, 46-47, 54.

In his price/technical tradeoff, the SSO discussed in particular the significant weakness assigned to Amyx's proposed SC-HQ desk side support staffing. The SSO specifically noted as follows:

SC HQ, includes an office in Germantown, MD with 330 FTEs and the Forrestal building in Washington, DC with 50 FTEs. Most of the FTEs in Germantown are responsible for making the decisions for the programs that SC funds. The Washington office includes a Presidential appointed and Senate confirmed Director and the Director's political staff, and is the policy center for the execution for the Office of Science mission. Amyx is proposing to service these 380 FTEs with two Desk Side employees. I believe such an inadequate staffing level presents an unacceptable risk to the SC mission.

Id. at 59. In concluding that 22nd Century's quotation was a better value than Amyx's, the SSO acknowledged that Amyx's quotation had slight advantages in the past performance and relevant experience criteria--the two lowest-weighted criteria--but explained that those advantages were completely outweighed by the unacceptable risk of Amyx's desk side support staffing at headquarters. Id. We find that the SSO's tradeoff decision properly represented a qualitative weighing of the strengths and weaknesses in the vendors' quotations and reflected a reasonable assessment of the relative merits of the competing quotations.

We disagree with Amyx's premise that the price/technical tradeoff was flawed because the SSO assigned exaggerated importance to the firm's desk side support staffing at headquarters. As detailed above, the staffing and management plan was the most heavily-weighted sub-criterion under the most heavily-weighted criterion, albeit even if the sub-criterion itself was weighted slightly less than the technical approach criterion. See RFQ at 62. In the final analysis, Amyx's significant weakness became a major discriminator among quotations, a completely reasonable result considering that neither 22nd Century's quotation or the other high-ranked quotation were assigned any significant weaknesses. Ultimately, the SSO concluded that the unacceptable risk of Amyx's staffing level offset the firm's \$1.9 million price advantage, notwithstanding the firm's advantages in the two least-important criteria. The mere fact that an agency's source selection decision turns on an evaluation consideration that is designated as less important is unobjectionable since there is no requirement that the key award discriminator also be the most heavily weighted evaluation consideration. Nat'l Forensic Sci. Tech. Ctr., Inc., B-409457.2, B-409457.3, July 29, 2014, 2014 CPD ¶ 224 at 6; SGT, Inc., B-405736, B-405736.2, Dec. 27, 2011, 2012 CPD ¶ 149 at 10.

We further disagree that the SSO applied unstated evaluation criteria when he noted that the SC-HQ facilities included a "Presidential appointed and Senate confirmed Director and the Director's political staff" and are the "policy center for the execution of the Office of Science mission." See AR, Tab G, Selection Decision,

at 59. The record simply does not support the protesters complaint that the SSO improperly interjected political and personal concerns in his award decision. See Supp. Protest at 17. The fact is that Amyx proposed two individuals to provide desk side support for 380 users at two locations, a staffing level that the agency reasonably found to be not feasible or effective. We fail to see why it was improper for the SSO to note the type of workforce at SC-HQ and the role of the workforce, particularly where the RFQ provided this information and the PWS identified desk side support for “executive staff” as a requirement. See PWS at 1, 10. In any event, the record clearly reflects that the discriminator was the significant weakness itself, which the record shows was not based on the type of users at SC-HQ.

Finally, we find no merit to Amyx’s last contention that the SSO negated the firm’s advantages under the past performance and relevant experience criteria. See Supp. Protest at 21. As noted above, the SSO comprehensively discussed and acknowledged the benefits and disadvantages of the competing quotations under each of the criterion. Contrary to Amyx’s suggestion, the SSO fully appreciated the evaluators’ findings under the past performance and relevant experience criteria. In his comparative assessment, the SSO acknowledged Amyx’s outstanding rating and remarked that Amyx’s past performance was “overall slightly stronger qualitatively” than four other vendors’, including 22nd Century’s. AR, Tab G, Selection Decision, at 54. Likewise, under relevant experience, the SSO concluded that Amyx’s quotation and another quotation offered an advantage over the remaining quotations, including 22nd Century’s. Id. at 46. That the SSO’s ultimate decision hinged on a more heavily-weighted criterion does not demonstrate that the agency negated any advantages offered by Amyx under less important criteria. Although Amyx disagrees with the agency’s best-value determination, we do not see, and the protester has not shown, that it was unreasonable.

The protest is denied.

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General Counsel