



Wyatt Kash | Croom buttons up

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By Wyatt Kash

Editor's Desk | Commentary: DISA's two-supplier approach to collaboration services could be one way to get fresh technology into the field

The need for speed in bringing information technology projects to fruition — versus the chronic delays that thwart the government's best intentions — was a central if familiar theme at the AFCEA International LandWarNet conference last month.

The contrast between the military's acquisition process and the private sector's approach was hard to ignore in remarks by Marine Corps Brig. Gen. George Allen and Cisco Systems executive Brad Boston. Allen voiced frustration over installing a major communications and data network in Iraq, using technologies considered the latest available "from an acquisition point of view, but which, in fact, were four years old." Cisco has had challenges streamlining IT, too, but its success in standardizing systems and moving services to the Web drew nods of envy.

Allen, Boston and others, however, should keep an eye on the Defense Information Systems Agency.

DISA Director Lt. Gen. Charles Croom, in a bid to speed the delivery of services on DISA's Net-Centric Enterprise Services system, is rolling out dueling online collaboration services — from IBM and Carahsoft Technology. Croom calls it a two-button solution.

The idea was to get away from spending 18 to 24 months to produce 500-page requirements documents, waiting 36 to 48 months to get something built and then another eight months to test it. Instead, let competing companies work out how to deliver the latest in Web conferencing, instant messaging, application sharing and other collaboration tools.

The dual-supplier approach — both firms have won the playoff for now — flies in the face of government efforts to eliminate duplicative systems. But the potential benefits are intriguing.

First, DISA cuts years out of the development and deployment process. Second, it brings market-tested solutions to its customers on an ongoing basis. And third, with each supplier needing to keep an eye on the other, each is more likely to focus on innovation and customer satisfaction than on building a monolithic system.

Croom said this and other efforts — such as teaming operators, developers, testers and acquisition staff in a sandbox to streamline project development — aren't a sure bet. But this much is for sure: Croom deserves credit for taking a new tack — and the outcome of his two-button strategy will be worth following.

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