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INSIDE THIS ISSUE

CANADA'S ARMY
Commander of the Reserves

REGIONAL REPORT
Quebec's Defence Industry

INDUSTRY PROFILE
ADGA Group

JAMES BEZAN
Conservative Party
Defence Critic

**ARMY SUPPLIERS
GUIDE**



CHECKING BOXES In defence of bureaucracy

BY LINDA WOLSTENCROFT

"A box-checking exercise? What a waste of time!"

The above sentiment is prevalent, and rightly so because in the defence business everything we do is fraught with seemingly mundane hoops to jump through. Why can't we skip the "nonsense" and just get to the point?

And if the product or service we are offering obviously meets the requirement, why must we go through such a tedious process?

“As a defence industry, our business is accountable to the public

And while under contract to provide a product or service, why is there so much detailed reporting?

The answer is public accountability, and this can be missed while we focus on simply wanting to get the job done. As a defence industry, our business is accountable to the public. Wherever we are selling in the world, we are accountable to the people of that country because it is government money that is funding the sale. And, in our own country, if we export, we are accountable to the people of our country to follow export control regulations and ensure that our equipment is being used for legitimate purposes according to our country's foreign policy.

The recent incident of Canadian-made vehicles reportedly being used in violence against citizens abroad shows the importance of following protocol and checking those boxes.

Contrary to what some believe, following process is not illogical nor is it a waste of time. Sure, there is always room for improvement in any process, and government

processes are not exempt from this. But when selling, this is not the time to change the process. We have other vehicles in place to do that. In Canada, associations such as Aerospace Industries Association of Canada (AIAC) and the Canadian Association of Defence and Security Industries (CADSI) represent the industry's voice to government. We also have many departments within government that work together to continuously improve the process. When it comes to our work as companies selling to government, we simply have to accept, understand, and follow the process.

During an initial foray into selling products and services to the US, one Canadian company discovered that despite the ability to provide the requirement exactly as asked for, there was a lengthy and difficult process to undergo within Canada before even getting to the point of submitting their bid.

First, the Canadian company had to convince the Canadian consulate that their offer could match what was required and the resulting contract would result in a win-win situation for the US government and Canada. The trade commissioners reviewed their internal guidance, likely a checklist, to determine whether precious Canadian government resources should be spent helping the Canadian company. This would be considered the company's first "sale." To accomplish this, the Canadian company had to engage the necessary contacts and understand the process.

Second, the Canadian company had to convince their prospective US customer that the border would not be a problem. This would be the first bureaucratic process the Canadian company had to understand: how to pass information and products over the border. It was crucial that the Canadian company understood each element of the process that was required to legally and quickly traverse information and products. No sale would be made if the US buyer discovered

that there was a showstopper in the process of passing information and products.

Third, once the US buyer was on board and was convinced that the border could be managed, the Canadian company had to become an approved source. This turned out to be a comprehensive process that took several months, required hundreds of pages of submissions and many more meetings. The longevity of this process was dependent on the priority of the US buyer and the quality of the Canadian submission. This wasn't the only priority of the US buyer. Therefore, when the US buyer turned their attention to the submission, the submission had to be clear and all check boxes must be ticked and accounted for. Otherwise, the US buyer would set it aside and work on something else until the unchecked boxes could be resolved. This could result in delays and decrease the probability of the Canadian company winning this business quickly.

Lastly, once the Canadian company was approved, the contracting process could begin. Whether the contract is sole-source or competitive, the US contracting process is complex. The complexity increases when the bidder or contractor is a Canadian company. Fortunately, Canada has the Canadian Commercial Corporation (CCC), which assists Canadian companies in contracting with the US. In this case, it was a competitive procurement with mandatory terms and conditions. The box-checking exercise of the Canadian company was to diligently review each and every contractual item, seek advice from CCC, ask questions of the US buyer, and finally be in a position to agree with the terms and conditions. It would be a serious mistake if the Canadian company had not done their diligence on this front.

In the end, after the competitive process, the Canadian company was awarded a multi-year, multi-million-dollar contract.

Checking boxes – in this business, it's a necessary evil.

Linda Wolstencroft is president of Aerospace BizDev Inc., which provides strategy and business development assistance in the aerospace and defence sectors. For more information or to contact Linda visit: www.aerospacebizdev.com