



Insourcing vs. Outsourcing: The Never-Ending Story

By Matthew Weigelt

Jul 06, 2011

Insourcing vs. outsourcing is the debate that never ends. It just goes on and on, my friends.

That's how it feels every time Federal Computer Week publishes an article on insourcing or outsourcing — or just about anything else related to the federal workforce. Inevitably, our readers begin weighing in on the subject, first by responding to the article itself and then by responding to one another's comments.

It's understandable, of course. The insourcing or outsourcing of federal work affects the livelihood of people, whether they are government or contractor employees. The intensity of the debate often reflects those high stakes, as readers argue that their side is better qualified for the work and a better deal for the government and that, unlike the others, their group is willing to go the extra mile to get the job done. Sometimes people even resort to name-calling.

Nevertheless, readers often offer sensible suggestions that move the debate along or provide valuable perspectives on broader issues.

For example, "sd" from Washington, D.C., wrote that agencies should have more options. It doesn't help to limit them to choosing between insourcing everything or outsourcing it all.

"One policy would not work, and insourcing or outsourcing decisions should be made on a case-by-case situation," the reader wrote.

Some members of Congress are attempting to do that by lifting a temporary ban on public/private competitions for federal work. However, other lawmakers and employee unions say it's a bad idea.

Another reader, Bob, gave a diplomatic response. He wrote that many organizations need a mixture of military personnel, civilian employees and contractors to achieve their missions.

"Each group brings different talents to the workplace, and each must be considered when trying to 'rightsize' the government," he wrote, adding that officials need to remember that policies aimed toward just one group don't help.

The decision to insource or outsource should not be made on principle but in light of the work that needs to be done, Bob wrote. First, officials need to determine the functions, then they should ensure that the workforce is made up of the right mix of people to perform those functions, he said.

“The average American understands that if their costs are too much, they must determine what they no longer need and then stop paying for it,” he added.

RT recommended that officials making decisions on bringing work in-house should consider how long contractors have been doing a job. They should seriously review the work for insourcing if a company has done the work for more than five years and half of its employees have been there that long or more.

That might be something the government should be doing, although not always. However, contractors still might be the best option, wrote a reader going by “rfd kcmo.” As a current federal employee and a former contractor in an IT position, this reader said the contractor company did an excellent job. And at times, the reader has found companies to be more flexible when it comes to sick leave, grievances and long vacations.

Unfunded mandates and unhappy customers

Other readers entered the debate with different issues. It’s not about insourcing or outsourcing, one reader wrote, instead it’s “all the bureaucratic nonsense.” Agencies deal with unfunded mandates all the time and must allocate money for them. It eats up a large chunk of money, “and the operating budget is gone and no work has yet to be accomplished.”

“Until that’s fixed, none of the rest of it matters,” the reader said.

Despite the surfeit of ideas, one reader found conversation less than satisfying. Gordonzola described the insourcing and outsourcing debate as a repetitive fluctuation: “It goes up and down like a sine wave.”

In the end, it could be that no one will win this debate.

“As time goes on, the coddled, overpaid workers from both sides will become indistinguishable,” Gordonzola wrote. “The real customers are the American people, and they are not satisfied with either employees of the U.S. government or contractors.”