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MAKING NASA MORE BUSINESS FRIENDLY: AN SBIR/STTR CASE STUDY

Abstract

Historically, NASA has been notoriously hard to interact with for small businesses and entrepreneurs. In 2016, the Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR/STTR) programs revised its program goals and objectives to be more customer focused and collaborative in order to make SBIR/STTR a go-to program for U.S. innovators. SBIR/STTR is NASA's largest small businesses program that provides approximately $170M in awards annually for research, development, and demonstration of innovative technologies that fulfill NASA needs$
Prior to 2016, NASA SBIR/STTR did not have basic means for companies to get clarity on NASA's needs with respect to the subtopics published in the annual solicitation. Further, NASA did not engage with small businesses uniformly in understanding their capabilities to make the SBIR/STTR solicitation relevant not only to NASA needs but also small business capabilities. To address these challenges, the program initiated several new mechanisms for engaging with small businesses and pivoting the program to better understand the small business customer: • Developing an annual RFI process to provide small businesses a routine and predictable opportunity for input into programmatic barriers, previous year's subtopics, and a forum to submit ideas for new subtopics. • Partnering with the General Services Administration (GSA)'s 18F to use human-centered design to develop a baseline service blueprint and customer experience roadmap from the small business perspective to understand the roadblocks and pain points in engaging with the SBIR/STTR programs. • Convening a program workshop that considered the RFI and 18F inputs as well as providing a forum for small businesses and NASA subject matters to convene and have input into the annual program solicitation.
With the SBIR/STTR programs maturing and growing, NASA also prioritized the modernization of its operations and decades-old systems to improve the user-experience and reduce pain points for small businesses. The program used an agile, user centered approach to modernize the system where companies submit proposals and manage awards—the Electronic Handbook (EHB). This modernization brought change to thousands of users of the system within and outside NASA. There was a large risk for failed user adoption if groups were not properly informed and engaged throughout. To address this, change management throughout the EHB modernization process were priorities.
This paper will provide insights on the results of these efforts in making the NASA SBIR/STTR program more business friendly.