

AFRL

EXPLORE

NEW BUSINESS MODEL CREATES A COMPETITIVE PIPELINE OF IDEAS FOR TRANSFORMATIONAL S&T INVESTMENTS

Explore 1.0, a national opportunity call with universal eligibility, sought disruptive ideas to create remarkable new capabilities for the future force. Inspired by the five strategic capabilities described in the Air Force Science and Technology Strategy, Explore version 1.0 posed three operational challenges in 2019 pertaining to in-flight re-arming and refueling, personnel recovery kit delivery and vehicle tracking with commercial imagery.

What was the purpose of this call?

To advance the Air Force S&T strategy, the Air Force created a new approach to doing business, one similar to commercial engagements. Born from a collaborative effort between the Air Force Acquisition Executive, Air Force Warfighting Integration Capability and the Air Force Research Laboratory, Explore aimed to demonstrate a new, more agile and responsive way to engage with potential business partners. Developing a more effective approach for introducing defense challenges to the marketplace offers numerous benefits including enhanced competition for ideas, improved access to the S&T community and stronger partnerships.

What aspects were new and unique?

Based on a mindset motivated by speed, change and openness, this call provided a level playing field for industry, small business, academia, start-ups and government labs in which to compete. Explore featured flexible contracting and partnering mechanisms to build integrated teams and mature solutions faster. Agreements were custom tailored to each partner, including the choice of award vehicle. Negotiations with finalists simply required both parties to agree on a work plan and a select an optimal contracting vehicle.

Explore 1.0 also employed a modified selection process. Air Force stakeholders considered each capability idea and advance a select number for prioritization. Partnerships

were encouraged, and teams could include a mixture of government, industry and academic organizations. Technologists and future force planners participated in every step of the process.

How did this call advance the AF S&T strategy?

The call advanced the transformational component of the Air Force S&T strategy, established partnerships that develop capability ideas, with an eye to maturing them into opportunity spaces for the Air Force and Space Force.

The first Explore call met and exceeded all expectations regarding the volume and diversity of the market response and its ability to find new partners with promising new ideas for the Air Force and Space Force. Ultimately, this call identified exciting ideas from large and small defense firms, commercial businesses and a small start-up.

Will another Explore call be issued?

AFRL is preparing a follow-on call, Explore 2.0, to bring a new set of Future Force Challenges to the national innovation market. The Explore 2.0 campaign will begin early in 2021 with refined processes and an expanded scale.

