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**DECISION**



**THE COMPTROLLER GENERAL  
OF THE UNITED STATES**  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

*[Protest Against Air Force Contract Award]*

FILE: B-196211

DATE: August 15, 1980

MATTER OF: Applicon Incorporated

**DIGEST:**

Restrictive interpretation of term "off-line" ascribed by protester to ADP specification requirement that ADP equipment operate off-line or on-line is not reasonable when specification is read as a whole and in conjunction with written answer to question posed at preproposal conference.

Applicon Incorporated protests the award of a contract for the lease (with option to purchase) of an automated graphics system by Air Force Communications Service (Air Force) to M & S Computing, Inc. (M&S). The procurement was conducted by means of two-step formal advertising with award based on responses to Request for Technical Proposals (RFTP) F11628-79-R-0012, and bids from technically acceptable offerors under Invitation for Bids (IFB) F11628-79-B-0084. Applicon was not the low bidder.

Essentially, Applicon complains that the Air Force relaxed the specification by accepting the M&S proposal because M&S failed to provide both on- and off-line edit station operation, and thus submitted what Applicon views as an unacceptable proposal. We disagree.

As described in the RFTP statement of work, the automated graphics system was to consist of 10 distinct elements, including "editing" or "edit," "test generation" and other functionally identified stations. The system is to supplant manual drafting procedures and techniques by establishing an automated drafting process capable of allowing up to six operators to:

"dynamically construct, store, retrieve, manipulate, associate, edit and reproduce graphic and alphanumeric information visually and/or interactively in order to produce all

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types of engineering drawings within the disciplines of electrical, electronic, mechanical, architectural and topographical [engineering]."

In this connection, the edit stations were required to:

"permit display \* \* \* manipulation and modification of drawings and other graphics information and [to] enable \* \* \* the operator to easily and rapidly perform the editing functions."

Specification paragraph 3.2.4.1 also states that:

"The edit station shall be able to:

"Operate in a stand alone (off-line) or on-line mode.

"'Off-line was defined by the solicitation as a mode of operation 'performed without being dependent on the system controller'; and on-line is defined as a mode of operation 'under the constant control of the system controller'."

Applicon argues the solicitation required that edit stations operate in both modes at the user's option because of its belief that the definitions show the Air Force's need for something more than a simple "refresh capability." True "off-line" capability, the protester concludes, requires edit station processing capability, i.e., capability separate from that provided to support the system controller. Only Applicon proposed dual mode capability making its proposal, it believes, the only one which conformed to the requirements set out in the solicitation. Consequently, Applicon contends, it should have received award.

The Air Force, on the other hand, states that the specification was intended to permit the use of both an on-line or off-line mode as deemed appropriate for the

system proposed. However, the Air Force does not agree, with Applicon with respect to what was meant by "off-line". The Air Force states that it was the "obvious intent" of the request for technical proposals to solicit a system capable of being operated from several "substations" simultaneously without interference from the other stations. This, the Air Force claims, can be accomplished by a system such as Applicon's which allows the edit and text generation stations to function completely independently of the system controller ("true" off-line capability), or by systems in which the edit station is capable of performing a number of less complex functions (such as a local refresh capability) without burdening the central processor. In effect, the latter stations are not "under the constant control" of the system controller since they have a limited capability to function on their own. While these stations do not possess the "true" off-line capability Applicon insists was required, they are able to operate in a limited way without being dependent on the system controller. The Air Force says it never meant to require fully independent off-line operating capability because it was attempting to permit offerors to propose timeshared systems which could be operated from several substations simultaneously and did not intend to restrict offerors to proposals to furnish dedicated systems such as Applicon proposed. Rather, the Air Force contends, it sought to recognize that installations having no more than a local refresh capability can be connected to share use of one central processing unit to give the appearance of simultaneous (i.e., interactive) operation.

Applicon points out that the "off-line or on-line" provision was included as the first item in a list of mandatory text editor requirements and that the solicitation listed four widely scattered Air Force design activities situated in Oklahoma, Illinois, New York and Hawaii. Noting that emerging automated graphics technology is beginning to include equipment capable of communicating between remote sites, Applicon states that it thought the Air Force included an off-line requirement to assure that central storage and control capacity would be unburdened by edit station operation. The Air Force acknowledges that it does intend ultimately to provide communications between those four sites.

We believe the question for resolution here is not whether a dual operating mode was required, but rather the meaning which can reasonably be attributed to the phrase "off-line." In this connection, we agree that when paragraph 3.2.4.1 of the specification, is isolated from the balance of the specification it can be given the meaning Applicon finally chose to apply -- that a "true" off-line capability must be included in the equipment. We do not agree, however, that it can reasonably be interpreted that way when the specification is read as a whole and in conjunction with the answers given to questions raised at the preproposal conference. For example, in addition to the definitions of on-line, off-line, specification paragraph 3.2.1 provides that:

"Each subsystem, work station and/or equipment \* \* \* [be so designed and connected so as] to perform simultaneous (appear simultaneous to the operators) digitizing, editing and plotting operations for all types of engineering drawing data with no degradation in system performance." (Emphasis added).

In addition, several specific questions were asked with respect to the Air Force's intent regarding the text editing stations' on-line or off-line operating modes. Most of these questions were answered merely by referring the questioners to the specification definition for these operating features. While we believe Applicon's confusion could have been alleviated with more direct answers, one answer, dealing with the system requirement that it be able to produce permanent ink drawings "off-line", should have resolved any confusion that existed. The questioner stated:

"[Off-line] is interpreted to mean 'logically detached' from the system controller. In such an environment, each hard copy unit would have to be under the control of a device that has access to the data required to be plotted. This implies that the hard copy devices have access to a data storage device

and a controller separate and distinct from the system controller. \* \* \* Does AFCS mean that these devices must be logically disconnected from the system controller or would it be sufficient to generate hard copies on these devices in a background mode which does not significantly interfere with other processing and editing? Typically these devices are not provided with off-line and on-line control capabilities \* \* \*."

The Air Force replied:

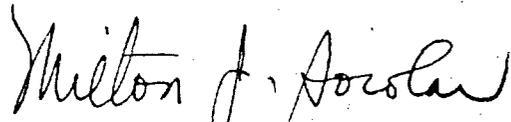
"If a 'background mode' provides the same results as off-line without noticeable interference then the effect and intent of off-line operation has been achieved [but] the simultaneous operation of SOW paragraph 3.21 \* \* \* must be strictly adhered to." (Emphasis added).

Similar comments were made with respect to the text editing stations and the text generation stations, i.e., that these devices generally do not have "true" off-line capability.

We believe that the Air Force observation regarding the sufficiency of a background mode operation was adequate to alert offerors to the meaning which the Air Force ascribed to "off-line" -- that the "true" off-line operating capability was not a requirement of the specification if the desired result could be achieved in a different fashion. We do not believe that it was reasonable for Applicon to either ignore the Air Force reply or to assume that the intent of "off-line" operations when applied to hard copy devices would vary when applied to other items of equipment. See California Computer Products, Inc., B-193329, July 23, 1979, 79-2 CPD 1.

We find no merit to Applicon's restrictive interpretation of the specification.

The protest is denied.



For The Comptroller General  
of the United States