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The Reality Test

Combating Artificial Credentials in an AI-Driven Acquisition Environment

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INTRODUCTION

About the Speaker

Paul Wamsted

VP of Bid & Proposals
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Ph.D. Candidate in Technical Communication and Rhetoric, Texas Tech University

- Solution architect and proposal professional spanning 20+ year government IT career
- Obtained ~$100M in contract value, including winning multiple IDIQ awards, throughout career
- Academic research in AI usage, ethics, and alignment

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Agenda

- Learning Objectives
- Context
- AI in Acquisition: The New Landscape
- The Risk of “Artificial Credentials”
- The Proposal Pipeline: Proposals as Attack Surface
- Critical Evaluation Techniques
- Modernizing Evaluation: “Reality Tests”
- “Reality Tests”: A Contractor’s View
- Example Deep Dives: Technical Orals, Live Demos, War-Room Scenarios
- Integrating Authentic Expertise Checks
- Balancing Speed & Rigor for MTA
- Key Takeaways & Recommendations
- Review & Wrap-Up

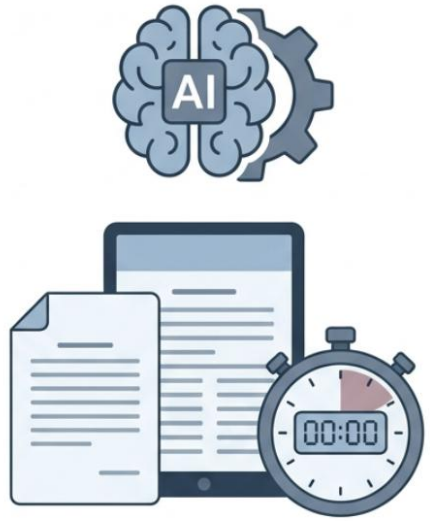
Key Learning Objectives

- Explain how generative AI reshapes proposals and risks “artificial credentials.”
- Critically assess AI-generated proposal content for true technical depth.
- Understand proposals as an attack surface.
- Design and apply innovative evaluation mechanisms (video, orals, demos).
- Integrate expert verification into the source selection process.
- Balance speed and rigor for rapid prototyping and fielding.

Context

- Generative AI has radically accelerated proposal writing and tailoring.
- Air Force/DoD mandate rapid acquisition—Middle Tier of Acquisition (MTA) focuses on prototyping and fielding speed.
- Adversaries are shortening their development cycles.
- Mission risk: Selecting teams based on “paper” credentials delays fielding and jeopardizes outcomes.

Non-AI-Assisted
Weeks



AI-Assisted
Days or Hours

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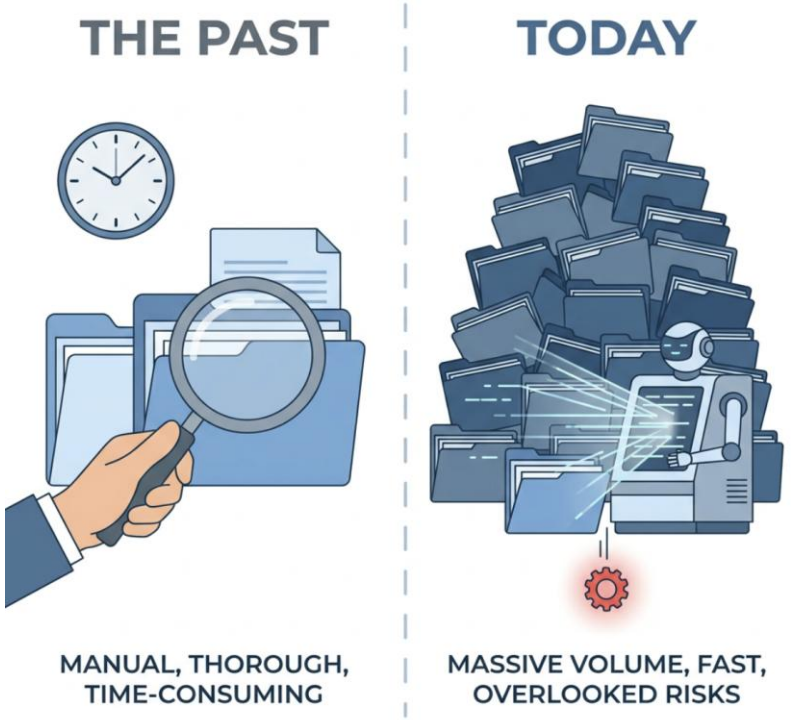
AI IN ACQUISITION

The Changing Landscape

How AI is changing proposals:

- Advanced models generate polished, technical narratives at speed and scale.
- Contractors can present themselves as highly sophisticated, regardless of true expertise letting the model provide the detail.
- AI tools auto-generate detailed responses, often outpacing human review.
- AI can (and often does) provide first review of proposals for compliance and credibility.
- Potentially hundreds of companies can submit proposals due to the lower barrier of time and cost.



The Risk of Artificial Credentials

What are "Artificial Credentials?"

- When proposal polish does not equal real technical depth or operational expertise.
- "Paper teams" look mission-ready but may falter under actual delivery.

Impact on Acquisition

- More responses requires more time, or *complete* AI-driven review, which can lead to blindspots
- Delayed fielding and retrofitting when chosen vendors cannot deliver.
- Increased risk for Warfighter due to overrated capabilities.
- Potential adversarial threat due to sharing of technical documents in the (pre-) proposal phase of acquisition.

THE PROCUREMENT PIPELINE

Proposals as Attack Surface

Exploitation of Bidder's Libraries and Reading Rooms

- Malicious actors can leverage synthetic corporate identities to sign Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDAs), granting them legitimate access to highly sensitive repositories.

Weaponization of the Q&A Process

- Under the guise of clarifying RFP requirements, adversaries can use the formal bidder Q&A periods to ask highly targeted, probing questions that force the target organization to reveal existing vulnerabilities.

Bypassing Perimeter Defenses via Initial Vetting

- AI lowers the barrier to entry, allowing threat actors to generate flawless, compliant, and highly credible proposal responses. This artificially bypasses initial procurement gates, embedding the attacker into the trusted vendor evaluation pool.

Exposure of Sensitive Technical Architectures

- To facilitate accurate scoping and pricing, agencies and prime contractors routinely expose detailed operational blueprints, legacy system flaws, and IT roadmaps to prospective bidders—data that serves as a perfect reconnaissance payload for a cyberattack.

Critical Evaluation Techniques

How to identify superficial sophistication and malicious intent:

KNOW THE RED FLAGS

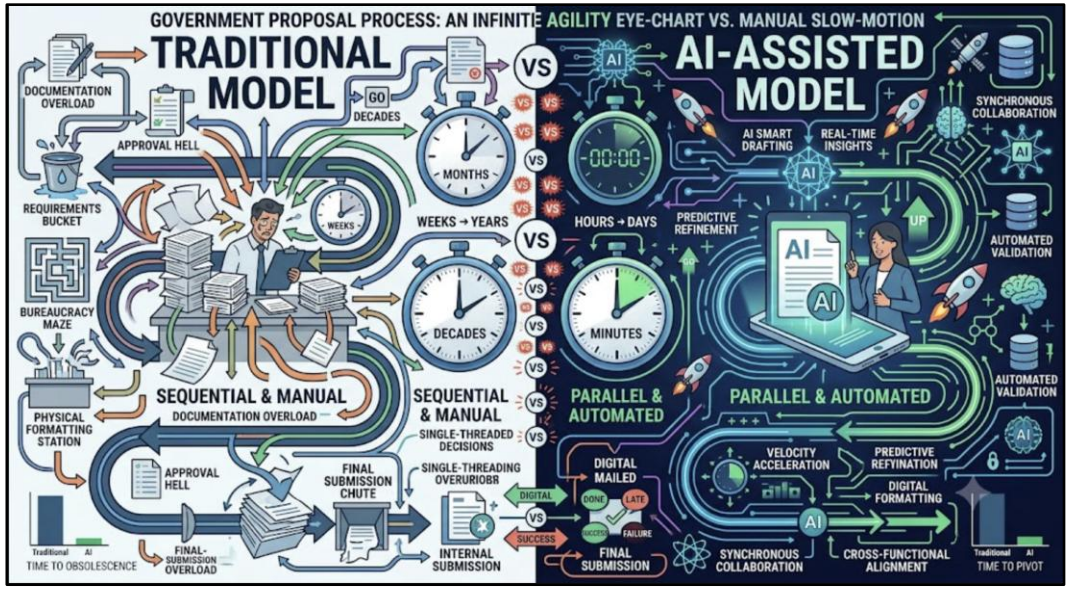
- “Too good to be true” narratives, vague technical details, generic success stories, “eye” charts.
- Technical questions that do not have bearing on the solicitation

UNDERSTAND HOW TO CROSS-REFERENCE CAPABILITY CLAIMS

- Past performance, technical references, staff biographies.
- Human-in-the-loop evaluation of these claims to ensure synthetic identities are not used
- Go beyond CAGE Codes and SAM.gov registries

PROBE FOR DEPTH

- Specificity about systems, architectures, past deployments.



Modernizing Evaluation "Reality Tests"

Innovative mechanisms to combat artificial credentials:

- **Video Submissions:** Real engineers, operators introduce themselves and discuss project roles.
- **Technical Orals:** Live, interactive sessions testing problem-solving and mission understanding.
- **Scenario-Based 'War Rooms':** Teams respond to realistic operational scenarios on-the-fly with limited, to no, internet access.
- **Live Technical Demonstrations:** Real-time product or system capabilities where reviewers ask for non-scripted capability.
- **Third-Party Code Reviews:** External validation of technical solutions.
- Use example architectures and tech stacks, never real-world.

"Reality Tests" from a Contractor's View

Capable contractors want to demonstrate their technical ability:

- Paper proposals demonstrate technical experience not technical capability.
- Exercises allow technical personnel to demonstrate real technical know-how.
- Technically capable personnel are not concerned about not knowing the questions beforehand.
- Technically capable personnel are ready to pivot based on new info introduced in the middle of exercises.
- Legitimate contractors want to protect the customer's information, not get access to what is not needed

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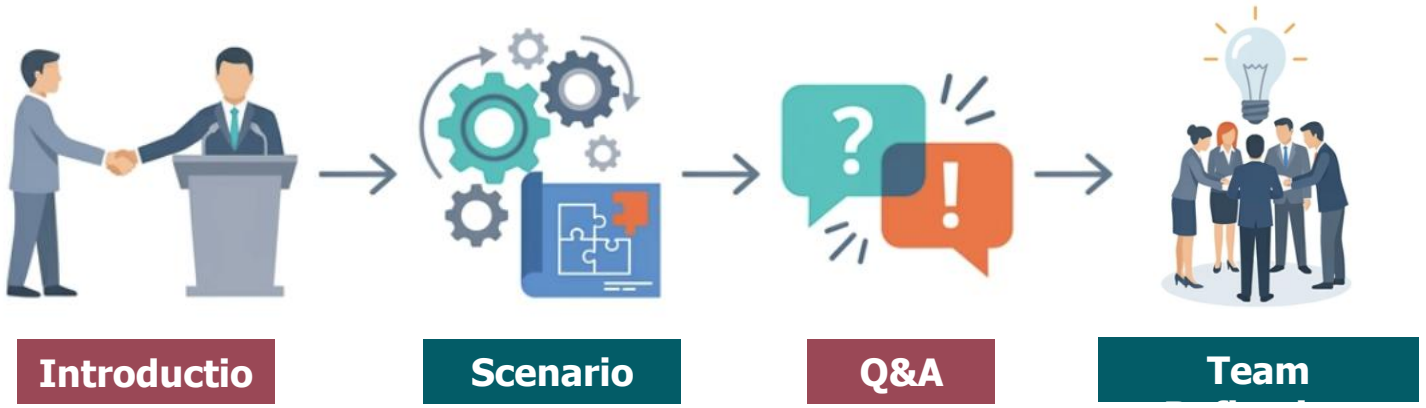
Example Deep Dive: Technical Orals

Why orals outpace paper responses:

- Tests real-time thinking—no room for rehearsed answers.
- Probes domain familiarity relevant to Air Force networks, tactical data links.
- Structured scenarios: Respond to mission challenges, explain system architectures, address integration issues.



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Example Deep Dive: Live Demos & "War" Rooms

Putting proposals to the test:

- Real-time product demonstration or operational exercise.
- Example: Tactical data link demo—show how system performs under realistic conditions.
- "War" Room scenario: Teams receive a mission scenario, must coordinate and solve in real time.
- Scope of scenario within scope of proposal, but personnel cannot pre-work an answer

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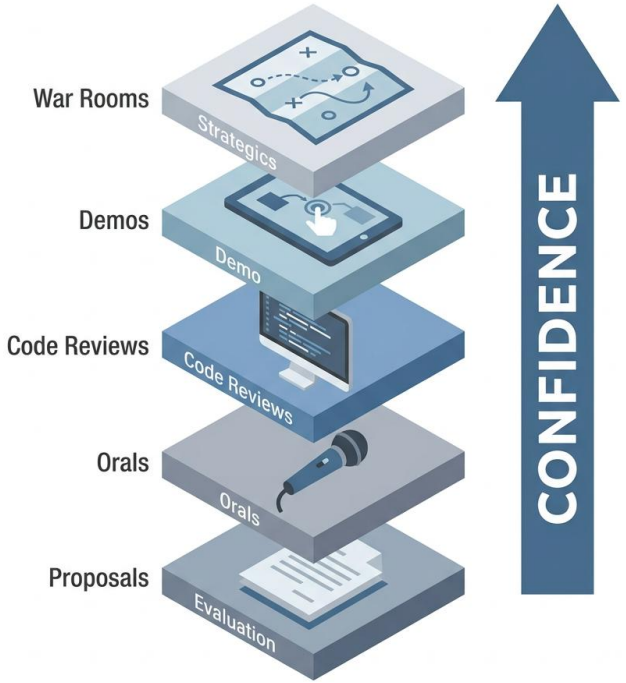
Integrating Authentic Expertise

How to make verification seamless:



- **Layered approach:** Run video, orals, demos, code reviews alongside paper evaluations.
- **Redirection:** Include “off the cuff” questions in live exercises.
- **Embed cross-team evaluation:** Include government and industry SMEs.
- **Grade hands-on performance:** Technical scoring in demos and scenario solves.

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Balancing Speed & Rigor for MTA & Beyond

Finding the right mix:

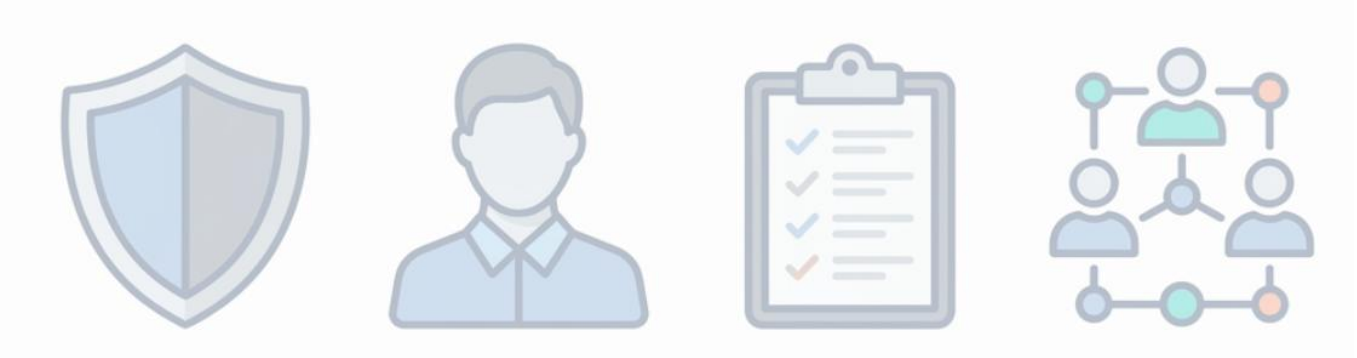
- MTA mandates rapid prototyping, but requires defensible, fair selection.
- Digital and interactive methods speed evaluation and increase accuracy.
- Trade-offs: More realism, more time, but less risk to mission.

Evaluation Method	Speed	Rigor	Risk
Paper-Only	High	Low	High
Video/Technical Orals	Med	Med	Med
Live Demo/War Room	Lower	High	Lower

Takeaways & Actions

Summary actions:

- Don’t mistake polish for substance—demand proof of expertise.
- Front-load verification mechanisms (video, orals, demos, code review).
- Invest in scalable, reality-based evaluation practices.
- Collaborate with both government and industry for robust fielding.
- Understand the time that these activities require but the risk reduction they offer.



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Review

- Explained the new proposal landscape.
- Explained the risks that AI proposals can realize.
- Examined how “reality” tests can be used to critically evaluate capability.
- Described how contractors are ready to demonstrate their capability.
- Explained how contractors are ready to support alternate “reality tests” that allow our teams to provide the best value for the warfighter.

Questions & Discussion

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