

NCO Hopes His Experience in Industry Can Help Army Contracting

By Jonathan (Jay) Koester - NCO Journal

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Sgt. 1st Class Patrick Dennis is an NCO in the 51C (contracting) military occupational specialty. As such, he helps the Army buy services and supplies from private industry.

“We get contracts and we go out and procure those contracts in the civilian market,” Dennis said. “They place bids on the contracts, and we either award to the lowest offer, or, if we’re looking for specific other things, then we award to another company.”

So when Dennis submitted his packet to participate in the Training With Industry program, he wanted to see the other side of that equation, learning how private industry goes about putting in contract bids and doing business with the Army. He was pleased to be placed with Microsoft in Reston, Virginia, where he is working with the company’s federal sales business.

Almost immediately, Dennis was surprised that, even at a huge corporation like Microsoft, with hundreds of people working on federal contracting, there are still knowledge gaps and confusion on how some things work in Army contracting.

“I would think, at a major corporation like Microsoft, they would almost 100 percent understand the contracting processes of the government,” he said. “They know the big picture, but you do still see that there are gaps where they don’t understand some of our processes. Because I know Microsoft is like that, that tells me there’s probably an even larger gap with the smaller vendors the Army works with.”

Dennis said he is hoping he can use the knowledge he is gaining during his year at Microsoft to help the Army reduce those knowledge gaps when he returns to the Army for his utilization assignment. He hopes to explain to other contracting NCOs what vendors might need help in understanding.

“Getting to see this side of things at Microsoft, I’m looking at how I can take what I learn and bring it back to a contracting team, battalion or brigade,” Dennis said. “I want to use the knowledge from here to better the next unit I am in, or improve the processes. I think a lot of what we learn here can transfer back to a contracting unit.

“We get so wrapped up in getting the process completed,” he said. “As NCOs, we have other things to do besides contracts. We have the Army mission. We have training we have to do. I think focusing a little bit more on vendor education would help make our jobs a lot easier in the long run. It would help whoever we’re doing business with, as well. I see that there are a lot of conflicts and headaches between the two.”

To help the vendors at Microsoft understand more about the Army contracting process, Dennis helped put together a training session about Army acquisitions.

“We had a bunch of people around here interested in taking that training so they could better understand the acquisition processes,” Dennis said. “I got a lot of good feedback from that. A lot of people might know the bigger picture, but not the small details of why stuff takes so long in contracts and acquisitions. I get a lot of questions, and as I keep getting questions, I just keep building up those slides to incorporate the questions.”

Pat Brady, business manager in the federal department at Microsoft and Dennis’ supervisor, said Dennis’ NCO professionalism has helped him stand out at Microsoft.

“Because he comes from that procurement background, he has that analytical skill,” Brady said. “He leverages his interpersonal skills to establish the rapport with the stakeholders that he’s dealing with. He goes through the methodology of trying to think through some of the problems and issues they are dealing with. And he’s very results focused. He looks at what he is trying to drive to, then achieves that. I’ve gotten tremendous feedback as I’ve had him work with people.”

Dennis is one of the first two NCOs to join the TWI program at Microsoft. He said it has been a

great experience that he hopes continues.

“I think this is a good opportunity for NCOs,” he said. “Something like this doesn’t come very often. I think it’s good for anyone who wants to get a vision of how the corporate world works. I think this program is good for the military, as well. We can bridge a lot of the gaps between contract specialists knocking out contracts and the vendors who are winning the contracts.”