

Joint Pitch Day & AFWERX Open Topics: Driving a Culture of Innovation in the AF Cyber Operations Portfolio



MITRE Phase I evaluators: Jon Salisbury, Stephen Dillon, Keith Miller, and Adam Bairos. Not pictured: Christian Fiore, David Long, and Jeff Smith

Technology is accelerating at an ever-increasing pace and is more widely accessible than ever before. This creates better, faster, and cheaper capabilities but also poses new challenges to the Department of Defense (DoD). To keep pace with commercial industry's technology development and harness its great potential, the defense innovation ecosystem is evolving its business models to more closely mirror industry best practices.

One such effort is being led by [AFWERX](#), the innovation arm of the Air Force, whose mission is to be “a catalyst for agile Air Force engagement across industry, academia, and non-traditional contributors to create transformative opportunities and foster an Air Force culture of innovation.” AFWERX, in collaboration with the Air Force Research Laboratory's [Small Business Innovation Research](#) (SBIR) Program, has revamped the traditional SBIR program to be more startup friendly.

Through a quicker application process (five pages), faster award timeline (approximately two months), and a shorter period of performance for Phase I SBIR efforts (three months), the AFWERX SBIR Open Topics are lowering the barrier of entry for nontraditional industry to engage with the DoD.

Seeing an opportunity to drive a culture of entrepreneurial thinking and innovation, the Air Force Cyber Operations Portfolio has built innovation activities into FY20 direct work and is leveraging AFWERX/SBIR resources to engage with companies outside the traditional defense industrial base.

Specifically, the team is working with the AF's Cryptologic & Cyberspace Systems Division from the Command, Control, and Computer Information and Networks Directorate ([AFMC/HNC](#)) and Cyberspace Resiliency Office for Weapon Systems ([AFLCMC/CROWS](#)) to carry out a joint Pitch Day, in which MITRE has played a central role by fostering the collaboration across multiple sponsors and stakeholders and ensuring the activity is deliberate and impactful, with technically sound solutions.

After submitting Focus Areas to AFWERX to be included in the SBIR Phase I Open Topic call, the HNC and CROWS teams (which included 19 evaluators, eight of which were MITRE) evaluated around 600 Phase I SBIR proposals over the course of four days. Of the 600 proposals, the HNC and CROWS teams jointly chose 29 proposals to be considered for Phase I awards. SBIR Phase I awardees will receive \$50,000 for a three-month period of performance with the goal of identifying Air Force end-users who will sign a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) for a potential Phase II award. James Barnett, the Chief Engineer for HNC, said *"MITRE's partnership in this endeavor has been key to the advances we've already achieved and will be instrumental in helping us develop a model for Phase II focused pitch days to maximize our return on investment – ultimately increasing warfighter capability."*

Once Phase I awards are made to companies in late December, the HNC/CROWS team will spend time engaging with awardee companies to down select and then extend invites to companies of interest to participate in spring 2020 joint Pitch Day. Phase II awards can be matched by Air Force, DoD, or venture funding up to \$1.5M+ with a typical period of performance between nine and 27 months. The AFWERX Open Topics are released three times a year (applications open to industry in January, May, and September). The process for submission and opportunities for co-funding are updated with each release in order to maximize impact for the DoD.

The HNC/CROWS Pitch Day has been a success so far, with Lt. Col. Bai Zhu, CROWS Materiel Leader, commenting, *"The value in using these non-traditional acquisition techniques and innovative research efforts along with the whole AFWERX Pitch Day process is to enable rapid proposal evaluations and SBIR contract awards to accelerate maturation of emerging technologies to enhance cyber resiliency of USAF weapon systems."*

Given the positive sponsor feedback to date, the energy behind innovation activities across the Air Force (and DoD), and the great potential for impact through cost-sharing, the Cyber Operations Portfolio is exploring the recurrence of engaging in the SBIR program. Additional innovation activities being pursued in the Cyber Operations Portfolio in collaboration with the [MITRE Bridging Innovation](#) team include actively

engaging in accelerator programs like MassChallenge [Safety & Security track](#) (e.g., shaping the program around sponsor technical challenges, providing technical and domain expertise) and creating partnerships at innovation hubs like [Capital Factory](#) in Austin, Texas.

By shaping and scoping new partnerships and initiatives, the Cyber Operations Portfolio is enabling technology acceleration and ensuring a robust defense industrial base that will ultimately enhance Air Force effectiveness.

You can learn more about engaging in the AFWERX Open Topics SBIR when the MITRE AF Cyber Operations team presents at an Air Force Portfolio Innovation Lunch & Learn in early 2020 or by contacting [Marissa McCoy](#).

—[Marissa McCoy](#), *Cyber Operations Portfolio*

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