A consultant's guide to better teaming, contracts, and collaboration in aviation

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Introduction: Our shared goals

The aviation consulting industry is built on collaboration. From planning through delivery, our ability to work effectively as teams determines how well we serve our clients, grow our businesses, and build resiliency within the industry.

Despite our shared success, there remain consistent breakdowns in how teams are formed, how subconsultants are engaged, and how contracts are developed and managed. These gaps can not only create friction between large and small firms but can also hold back the outcomes we all strive for: quality work and stronger partnerships.

This white paper, developed by members of the Small Firm Forum and directly based on input from corresponding listening sessions, outlines practical ways consultants can improve how we structure teams, manage contracts, and work together. Details, based on the input of a multitude of firm representatives at the 2025 Symposium round table, are provided as example, and to illustrate specific ways in which new ways of thinking could lead to better outcomes across the industry.

These are not sweeping reforms or long-term aspirations; rather, they're actions we can take now to make our industry more equitable and efficient.

Before the contract: Strengthening teaming from the start

In our industry, true partnerships for pursuits begin before an RFP is even released. Too often, subconsultants are asked to join pursuits *after* an RFP is released, with little lead time or information. They can be expected to assemble materials on short notice, without clarity on requirements or the nature of the ask. This rushed approach leads to inefficiencies, weakening proposals and reinforcing transactional relationships rather than strategic partnerships. This effort is especially taxing on small firms, which have the specialized knowledge and local connections desired by teaming partners but can't afford a department dedicated to assembling materials to meet these requests.

In some cases, consultants are asked by sponsors to submit work up front – essentially providing unpaid deliverables, such as preliminary design concepts or rough estimates – as part of the pursuit process. These asks create an uneven playing field, favoring firms with greater resources and sidelining smaller, specialized partners who can't absorb that level of sunk cost.

In addition to tight timelines and limited information, subconsultants are often asked to commit to exclusivity agreements early in the pursuit process. These requests frequently accompany initial outreach from prime consultants, even when there is limited history of collaboration or clear definition around the role the subconsultant will play. Exclusivity requests can put small firms in a difficult position, particularly without an established working relationship of collaboration or meaningful involvement in the pursuit. Even when the requests are good-natured, forcing small firms to choose one team over another can strain existing partnerships, inadvertently alienating teaming partners and damaging business relationships that they've worked hard to build.

The fix? Subconsultants should be brought into the process earlier, not added after an RFP is released simply to satisfy teaming requirements. That kind of last-minute involvement misses the opportunity to bring long-term value.

Recommended pursuit practices:

- Engage with teaming partners before an RFP is issued to shape strategy and strengthen alignment
- Avoid exclusivity requests unless they stem from an established and collaborative relationship which will end up being beneficial to both parties
- Make a go/no-go decision before asking partners to invest significant time and resources

When pursuit practices are rushed, unclear, or one-sided, we all lose. Following these recommendations leads to better proposals and better outcomes for clients because subconsultants are set up to succeed, not just support. These practices also signal a broader commitment to mutual respect and lasting collaboration.

During the contract: Increasing transparency and fairness in contracts

As consultants providing services in highly regulated industries, we are tasked with reviewing specific terms and conditions outlined in contracts and their associated agreements (e.g., amendments/modifications, subconsultant agreements, task/purchase orders, closeout documents). While these regulations are aimed at ensuring fair practices in each industry, consultants concur that deciphering contract language becomes taxing when trying to comply with strict standards set by various and multiple entities.

Contracts are executed between parties in any binding relationship as a means of mitigating risk, particularly when the parties are providing industry-specific services which may pose risks to another party or the project. Therefore, mutually agreeing to contract terms upfront is of paramount importance to ensure transparency and fairness for all parties.

Agreements may include requirements or "flow-down" clauses that exceed small firm capacities, such as insurance types and limits or software expectations. These flow-downs may be incorporated into agreements without consideration of the burden placed on smaller/specialized firms. Often, smaller subconsultant firms cannot bear the same risk as a larger firm or sponsor. However, even larger, well-established firms and sponsors falter if contract language becomes a point of contention during negotiations.

Another common challenge subconsultants face is negotiating language that is more stringent than that required by the sponsor. Small firms must perform thorough reviews to compare language and flag inconsistencies in the requirements, which is an unnecessary lift that small firms may not have the resources to thoroughly pursue. Contract language should reflect the actual sponsor requirements and avoid overreaching.

In some cases, a sponsor/prime agreement is not provided to the subconsultant for review, so the subconsultant lacks full disclosure and may not have a point of contact to negotiate contract terms.

Risk may be amplified based on lack of review time, especially in cases where subconsultants are faced with tight turn-around times to provide executed agreements before work can begin. When brought into the contract process late, smaller firms may not have sufficient time or resources to negotiate a contract's language. Additionally, contract language may be specific to a particular discipline, project type, or work scope which does not apply to that subconsultant. When required to meet provisions that do not align with their role or the project's scope, the subconsultant may feel pressured to take on outsized risks.

These practices can erode trust and create unnecessary risk, as well as limit the pool of qualified partners willing to engage, thereby shrinking opportunities for all parties.

Contract strategies that enhance collaboration:

- Provide draft contract language as early as possible in the teaming process
- Clarify what materials are required by the sponsor versus preferred by the prime
- Scale contract terms to the size and risk profile of the project
- Align sub-agreement requirements with sponsor expectations
- Provide subs with visibility into the prime agreement and a clear path for raising questions

Firms of all sizes benefit from clarity and consistency in contracting. These steps help teams avoid unnecessary rework, prevent negotiation delays, and reduce strain on partnerships.

After the contract: Building partnerships that last

We all want to deliver outstanding work. Whether a firm is large, small, or somewhere in between, the goal is the same: exceed client expectations, earn trust, and build lasting relationships that create future opportunities.

When we focus on these shared goals, it becomes easier to align our processes and work together effectively. Treating teaming partners as extensions of your own team – bringing them in early, giving them visibility, and trusting them with decisions – results in more cohesive proposals and stronger project delivery.

Ways to foster alignment:

- Invite subs into early conversations with clients when appropriate
- Include them in interview prep and proposal development, not just form submissions
- Engage in mutual mentorship that leverages large firm systems and small firm expertise to build capacity on both sides

We all have something to teach, and to learn, from one another. The best teams operate with a mindset of shared responsibility and shared credit.

Conclusion: Let's lead the way

This white paper is a starting point for doing better, together.

We have the power to improve aviation consulting – and the world which it creates – by building stronger teams, setting clear expectations, and partnering with the long-term in mind. Progress starts with the example we set, and this is true regardless of the size of our firm or our work scope.

If you're involved in assembling teams, developing proposals, or shaping internal processes, you have the opportunity to influence or lead this effort. When consultants communicate clearly and follow through, everyone benefits from cohesive teamwork and consistent results.

While none of these ideas are new, revisiting them with intention is how we raise the standard for how we work and how we move the industry forward.

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