

August 2023

## New Name, Enhanced Mission

*APEX Accelerators have been matchmaking experts for 35+ years. Learn how their engagement with industry can help you and your agency*

VAO Research Institute

VAO recently had the pleasure of sitting down with Khalil Mack, director of APEX Accelerators (formerly known as Procurement Technical Assistance Centers) for the Department of Defense (DoD) Office of Small Business Programs (OSBP). Our interview focused on the myriad ways his team of 90-plus support centers are boosting American entrepreneurship, establishing stronger supply chains, and connecting companies with government counterparts.

*Interview has been edited for length and clarity.*



### From the Frontlines

*In an effort to help bridge the gap between senior acquisition professionals and individuals who are new to the world of government contracting, VAO wants to create a space where past lessons can inform the future practice, where prior experience can shape tomorrow's procurement.*

*In learning about someone else's story, you will be able to reflect on your own. Hear from trailblazers and how they managed a tough acquisition. Get career-proven career advice and learn the habits that bring success in the business of acquisition.*

*"If there are items important to an agency or specific ways of doing business, we want to know so we can develop the training and tools to help businesses be ready when the opportunity arrives." — Khalil Mack, director of APEX Accelerators*

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**“I often get asked what APEX stands for, but it isn’t an acronym. It’s a destination ... We geared our mission and vision around reaching an apex, or summit”**

**“Our counselors ... assess the specific challenges and needs of each business and develop tailored strategies to help them overcome obstacles and secure federal contracts”**

### **What is the APEX Accelerators program?**

The purpose of the program is to increase the number of businesses — small and large — successfully participating in government contracts by providing top-notch procurement assistance to a wide range of industry partners. That assistance could include anything from registering in databases required for eligibility (e.g. System for Award Management (SAM)), resolving performance issues post-award, and continued opportunity matching between companies and requirements holders. We also help match businesses and primes for sub-contracting opportunities.

Another area of focus is education and training. We essentially gather information from every willing agency about their needs vis-à-vis the government industrial base, explaining to them that we’re trying to attract as many companies as possible. If there are items important to an agency or specific ways of doing business, we want to know so we can develop the training and tools to help businesses be ready when the opportunity arrives.

Knowledge and information are key. If we can get this information out to our 90-plus APEX Accelerators, then they are in a better position to support industry.

### **Why are APEX Accelerators important for federal contracting?**

Let me answer this by first explaining my own background and experience with the program. Prior to joining OSBP, I served as a contracting professional in DoD for many years. I started off as a cost/price analyst for the Army, and I also worked at the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and General Services Administration (GSA), specializing in finance, budget, and acquisition. Here’s the catch: I was largely unfamiliar with the Procurement Technical Assistance Program (PTAP) when I served as a contracting officer (CO/KO), which is an absolute shame.

Upon learning more about PTAP’s service offerings, I was amazed at all the good work taking place, work COs often performed ad hoc because no one was around to help these companies get their start with federal contracting. So I’m very passionate about this program for that particular reason. I think APEX Accelerators can do a great job with their service offerings, and I think they take a lot off of the CO’s plate, helping create that perfect match between vendor and buyer.

The other major contribution APEX Accelerators make to federal contracting concerns mitigating the barriers to entry for businesses — especially small ones — trying to secure federal contracts. There’s a maze of entry points to get into government contracting, whether it be through SAM or speaking with requirements holders, and it can be overwhelming to know where to start.

Once these companies do figure out where they’re going to enter, they face incredibly complex procurement processes, which are lengthy, bureaucratic, and time-consuming. Oftentimes these businesses lack the resources and expertise to navigate the processes effectively. The stringent criteria for qualification requirements businesses have to meet — things like past performance, financial thresholds, certifications, security clearances, access to clear facilities — present a real challenge for companies.

This is precisely where APEX Accelerators intervene to provide tailored training, support, and guidance for industry stakeholders. Federal contracting needs more of this structured engagement between industry and government acquisition professionals, and that’s exactly what APEX Accelerators provide.

### **Why the name change? Has your mission changed?**

The program has been around for over 35 years, but when my office took over PTAP in October 2022 we decided to undertake a rebranding campaign. We wanted to both reener-

gize the program and draw more attention to what has been a hidden gem for DoD as well as the federal government and industrial base more broadly.

In many ways, we're entering a new era. The program was with the Defense Logistics Agency (DLA) almost since its inception, and Congress saw fit to transition the program to OSBP. With that transition, we were charged with revitalizing the program and discovering new and innovative ways to maximize its success. One significant change worth mentioning here is that under PTAP, a company needed to be in business for two years before they could use PTAP resources. Since the program transitioned to OSBP, that's no longer a requirement.

We also decided that the name "Procurement Technical Assistance Program" didn't really scream "Hey, come and do business with the government" or "Come to us: We will help you navigate this maze of government contracting."

I often get asked what APEX stands for, but it isn't an acronym. It's a destination for our small businesses, our supply chain, and our warfighters. We geared our mission and vision around reaching an apex, or summit. Of course, the name change also signals our efforts to keep up with the evolving government procurement landscape and increased complexity of federal contracting. We wanted to make sure we had especially enhanced our small business support.

That said, our mission has not changed, and our product offerings are not changing, but we *are* enhancing our services and offering new ones.

### **How do APEX Accelerators support small businesses seeking entry into the federal marketplace?**

Our main function is individualized guidance, with our counselors offering one-on-one assistance to businesses. They assess the specific challenges and needs of each business and develop tailored strategies to help them overcome obstacles and secure federal contracts. We help these businesses determine whether they're ready to perform; we share with them misnomers about doing business with the federal government; and we prepare them for some of the obstacles they may face. Our curriculum, trainings, and workshops are very robust in this regard.

We also assist with market research. There's a kind of matchmaking process where we help these companies identify requirements in the federal government for which they may



**Mack (right) and other APEX Accelerators leaders with the owners of small business Arlo Solutions at the DoD Mentor-Protégé Summit in March.**

be eligible, and then we help folks in the federal government identify companies that may be able to fill their specific need.

And we do all this at no cost. We are providing top-notch assistance and guidance solely to benefit industry and federal agencies.

### **How does APEX differ from other federal small business programs?**

The Small Business Administration's (SBA's) Small Business Development Centers (SBDCs) help with company structure, financing options, and things like that. Once a company has their structure set up —once they're incorporated and ready to do business — that's when we pick up the ball.

Our primary focus is helping navigate government contracting and offering specialized knowledge and expertise in federal, state, and local procurement processes. Some of the services APEX Accelerators do particularly well include: bid matching, opportunity identification, proposal development assistance, subcontracting opportunities, networking, and matchmaking events.

I should note: We will not write a proposal for these companies, but they can definitely bounce ideas off us or give us a chance to review their work and make sure everything is there that's in the solicitation.

So we feel our product offerings are diverse and different from what other programs offer.

### **What do you think are the top industry areas for engagement? How are APEX Accelerators supporting those companies and their needs?**

One of the top industries right now is advanced manufacturing. Of course, artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) are in the news a lot right now. If I had to choose a third, I would say robotics and autonomous systems.

Because these industries are so hot right now, we're able to easily help companies find opportunities to bid on within DoD and the government industrial base. And our support extends to things like bid preparation and development, as well as answering questions about compliance and security requirements.

### **What are some other ways APEX Accelerators help businesses?**

First and foremost, I want to emphasize training. We are educating these companies on cybersecurity, we're teaching them about foreign ownership, control, and influence (FOCI). In the case of DoD, we instruct them about Wide Area Workflow (WAWF), which is the system companies would use for invoicing. We will train companies on whatever system is specific to the agency they are looking to do business with. I also want to stress that we help companies understand the basics of government contracting as well, the need-to-know matters that will help them survive.

## **APEX Office Comes to the (Contract) Rescue**

**"Our APEX office is invaluable to us at the 2d Contracting Squadron. We have a fantastic working relationship with them. During a very busy end of fiscal year, we had a local contractor that was not registered in SAM and was a bit confused about the process. We called the APEX office, who reached out to the contractor and helped him get the required registration, then worked with SAM folks on getting it approved quickly so we could make the award before time ran out.**

**"This is just one small story about how APEX supports our contracting efforts. In truth, we reach out to our APEX office regularly. Just the other day I met with a local contractor who would have never thought to bring her business to the federal level without the help of our local APEX office in Shreveport. They are one of the best APEX offices I have ever worked with in my 30+ years in contracting."**

**– Marla Poirier, Director of Operations at 2d Contracting Squadron, Barksdale Air Force Base**

And part of this means making sure a company is ready to do business with the government. Does a company have its elevator pitch ready? Does it have a thorough and concise capability statement free of spelling errors and grammatical mistakes? And sometimes we have to pose questions like: “Is government contracting right for you at this particular point in time?” “Does your company have what it takes to navigate the maze?”

Each accelerator also holds matchmaking events, which can be with requirements holders or primes actively trying to get these small businesses opportunities. We talk to primes and say, “Hey, this small business has this capability, might you have an opportunity?” There’s some real advocacy work that goes on behind the scenes.

One of the other main pillars we are undertaking is making sure these companies know what DoD and other federal agencies are doing to attract industry. We will share information about mentor-protégé programs. Or we’ll inform a company about a big push at this or that agency to meet their Historically Underutilized Business Zone (HUBZone) goal and the opportunities that might entail.

### **What are some benefits small businesses can provide that larger companies can’t when it comes to strengthening the defense and industrial bases?**

Both large and small businesses provide innovation, but small businesses seem to be doing it in a different way. They’re developing technology under the radar of the government, and oftentimes they aren’t even trying to sell it to the government. They have cutting-edge technology they’re selling to other people, when it’s our warfighter who really needs it.

Small businesses also tend to offer greater flexibility and agility; they’re able to change directions much more quickly and adapt to changing market conditions or even customer needs, which is very important for what we do. Their nimbleness allows them to quickly develop specialized expertise in niche markets or within specific industries. Small businesses also harbor that entrepreneurial spirit and drive for innovation many people identify as the backbone of the country and the economy, and I agree.

Of course, these elements can also be true of larger businesses and sometimes there may be a need for a larger business to act as an integrator, especially within a bigger system, but I don’t think you can have too many small businesses in the game.

### **Let’s talk cybersecurity: Zero trust is evolving paradigms, and some say new requirements will push small businesses out of the marketplace. How are you approaching this?**

First and foremost, we are developing our curriculums for our APEX Accelerators. We’re working to train the trainers as zero trust evolves, and we’re making sure they have everything they need to be able to educate businesses on how important cybersecurity is.

We constantly hear about cybersecurity in the news and elsewhere. As a result, folks have become kind of numb to the concept and they fail to see how the threats are continuously evolving, which means the response to eliminating those threats must also evolve.

As we talk to businesses about implementing a zero-trust framework, we also prioritize basic security practices. We make sure to train companies to do simple things, like regularly backing up data, updating antivirus software, and staying informed about emerging threats.

Of course, we keep others up to date by making sure we ourselves are up to date and our accelerators are providing the necessary information as often and as thoroughly as possible.

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## Tell us more about the work you're doing on mitigating FOCI.

FOCI has been getting a lot of attention over the last couple years. We were specifically charged by Congress to make sure we are training businesses on this topic, which is incredibly complicated and fairly nuanced.

There are all sorts of scenarios in which a foreign entity could come to exercise some degree of influence within the supply chain. For instance, a foreign company that starts in a subsidiary in the U.S. has a commercial and government entity (CAGE) code, but it may not be clear that that's the case. Or a company has investments in a competitor country and they might gain access to a technology we don't want them to have access to.

The bottom line is we are trying to inform, educate, and bring awareness to what foreign ownership, control, and influence is all about.

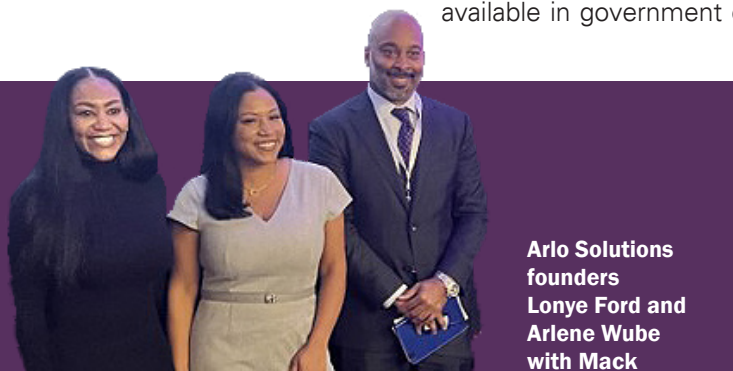
## How are APEX Accelerators supporting DEIA initiatives?

We take diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) very seriously. In fact, when our program transitioned from DLA to OSBP, we established a brand new set of goals and metrics that include DEIA efforts. We've increased our outreach and are actively engaged in efforts to raise awareness among minority-owned small businesses about the opportunities available in government contracting. We're really trying to make sure these companies

know that now is a wonderful time to be doing business with the federal government.

I mentioned earlier the mentor-protégé program, and we are working with them to help facilitate mentorship programs that pair minority-owned small businesses with experienced contractors or even successful minority entrepreneurs.

And, we have implemented a system to track and report on the success and impact of our efforts to increase participation of minority-owned small businesses within government contracting, which comprises part of how the accelerators will be graded.



Arlo Solutions  
founders  
Lonye Ford and  
Arlene Wube  
with Mack

## APEX Accelerators Success Story

**"A Washington, D.C.-based cybersecurity company called Arlo Solutions was founded in 2014 by two women, one of whom is a service-disabled veteran of the Air Force. Starting out, they had no idea how to get a federal contract, but they found a local PTAP counselor, came in, and said, "Hey, we need your help." The PTAP office helped them make sure they were translating solicitations and understanding how to respond, ultimately saving time and effort for both them and the agencies they submitted proposals to. The center even walked them through the process of making sure the rates they were proposing would be sustainable. They got their first contract in 2016 and have since become another resource federal agencies can consider for their cybersecurity needs. As of April 2023, they had 100 employees, and their annual revenue was \$21 million last year. They were also named as a finalist in the 8(a) Business of the Year category for the 2023 National Small Business Industry Awards."**

**– Khalil Mack**

## If you could share a message to government acquisition personnel, what are some overlooked things they need to know about industry?

When I was a contracting officer, I would get unsolicited emails from businesses that were offering their services, and sometimes they were quite aggressive. There were times when I was out in public with my family or socializing with friends, and I would get approached with all kinds of questions: "Hey, would you take a look at my proposal?" or "I didn't win the bid, can you put me in contact with someone who can help?"

The reality is these businesses and the people behind them are trying to earn a living. Sure, some of them are seeking profits, but many of them are passionate about the mission and patriots for our country. As a CO, you don't have much room on your plate to help them out.

Had I known about this program, it would have been so easy to connect industry with a resource that will help businesses achieve their goals: “Go to [apexaccelerators.us](https://www.apexaccelerators.us) and find your local center, and you’ll be off and running.”

So my message to VAO subscribers: Please send businesses to us that ask for help. We are here for them. And in supporting them, we are also supporting you and your agency’s mission. It’s a win-win for everyone.

The other thing I want to mention has to do with industry collaboration and communication between government employees and small business professionals, or industry more broadly.

From the time they enter the Defense Acquisition University (DAU), 1102s are taught all about the risks of improprieties and dangers of interacting with industry. No one wants to be wearing an orange jumpsuit, but the situation has become such that we are afraid to simply reach out to our counterparts in industry and talk about important topics germane to everyone, such as trends with supplier diversity or risk management. I think it’s important to overcome that fear as long as you’re not doing anything that causes a conflict of interest or is illegal. There needs to be dialog, whether through forums, meetings, or industry events. We should be actively working with industry, because they provide us with a perspective we don’t have, and we can do the same for them. ◆

*Are you an acquisition leader who’s willing to share your knowledge and advice with fellow acquisition professionals? Contact us at [VAOCustomerCare@gotovao.com](mailto:VAOCustomerCare@gotovao.com).*

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