Serco, an international service company headquartered in the UK, has managed a number of CERN service contracts since the mid-1990s.

The company’s first contract was for the support of desktop computers used by the 3000 CERN personnel and 7000 experimental visitors who are typically onsite at any one time. This activity has been re-tendered several times since then with differing scopes. The current contract, staffed by around 20 technicians, covers up to 15,000 desktop systems including Linux and Microsoft Windows PCs and Apple Macs. It is expected to run until at least 2023 and includes support for CERN’s audio-visual and e-mail services.

Another of Serco’s early contracts was a multi-million Swiss Franc contract to provide technical support work (operation, maintenance and consolidation) for CERN’s accelerator complex including the experimental and test areas; the first contract was in 1997 and Serco has been running the third generation since 2011. The current seven-year contracts have been extended for at least three years to cover the long shutdown of the accelerators and experiments scheduled for 2019-2020 and during which many parts of the complex will undergo major modifications and upgrades. At peak times these contracts have employed around 200 staff.

In 2001 Serco added a further contract for services for the maintenance and operation of cryogenic installations around the site. It has retained these contracts on every subsequent re-tender.

Although the labour market in Geneva has become more competitive, the Serco contract manager Christian Prieur is still able to find qualified employees, partly because they know that working at CERN is interesting and offers the opportunity for skills development. He says employees often realise “they have a lot
to learn technically” and the company offers each team member three days training per year either internal training, with an external provider or, where appropriate, through participation in CERN’s own training courses. He says the “employees are very engaged” and this is evidenced by the low turnover figures of less than 5% per year.

Serco has established a local management office on the French side of the border, very close to CERN. Where the company feels a bid from a collaboration would better satisfy the technical requirements or size of the tender, it will look for a suitable UK or European partner. This approach has been very effective and has been used in several incarnations of the industrial support contracts including the current versions.

Christian is in no doubt about the benefits of working with CERN, “it’s the number one science laboratory in the world – working with CERN is good for our image”. CERN encourages its suppliers to rise to technical challenges and improve efficiency. Success often opens up new opportunities for companies and this is certainly true for Serco which has developed procedures and applications for its CERN contracts that have been rolled out elsewhere in the company.

Christian strongly advises companies interested in working with CERN to always complete and return market surveys, even if they eventually decide not to bid when they see the detailed requirements. He also warns new bidders that CERN is a very complex and competitive organisation, “you might not be successful with your first bid, but don’t give up! If we’re not successful on a bid, we ask for feedback, and we learn from the feedback.”

Serco has been working successfully with CERN for more than 20 years; it has an approach that clearly works.

Further information

STFC manages the UK subscription to CERN. UK membership of CERN gives our physicists and engineers access to the experiments and allows UK industry to bid for contracts and UK nationals to compete for jobs and research positions at CERN.

STFC funds a number of large international science facilities besides CERN. The STFC Business Opportunities team works to increase the return that the UK gets from tenders and contracts at these facilities by providing free assistance to UK companies and helping them to access tenders at these facilities.

The international laboratories include: CERN in Geneva, Switzerland; ESO in Garching, Germany; ESS in Lund, Sweden; SKA in the UK, South Africa and Australia; European X-FEL in Hamburg, Germany; the ESRF and the ILL in Grenoble, France; and FAIR in Darmstadt, Germany. We are not involved in contract opportunities for our national facilities.

If you would like to be alerted to upcoming tender opportunities or to hear about events to connect with the facilities please register with us.

Credit: CERN