

NAVSEA SBIR/STTR Programs Team Turns Weather Challenge into Networking Win at National Small Business Conference

NASHVILLE, TN – Braving disruptive winter storms that drastically reduced attendance, the NAVSEA Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) and Small Business Technology Transfer (STTR) Programs Team found a silver lining at the 2026 National Small Business Conference, transforming the low turnout into an opportunity for high-quality, meaningful engagement.

The conference, held from January 27-28 at the Gaylord Opryland Resort & Convention Center, is a cornerstone event for small businesses to connect with federal agencies.

This year, however, severe weather across the Washington, D.C., and Nashville areas saw attendance plummet from an expected 2,800 to just over 600 hardy participants.

For the dedicated businesses and agency representatives who made it, the unexpectedly intimate setting became a significant advantage. The NAVSEA SBIR/STTR Programs Team, joined by the Office of Small Business Programs (OSBP), reported that the smaller crowd allowed for deeper, more substantive conversations than are typically possible at the bustling event.

"The small businesses that were present were highly motivated," the team noted in their debrief. The lower attendance "created an opportunity for a more one on one engagement with small businesses" and gave entrepreneurs the rare chance to meet with the NAVSEA SBIR/STTR teams multiple times.

The NAVSEA SBIR/STTR booth was a key destination, staffed by a team with a broad range of expertise. OSBP representatives Dan Mahan, from Naval Surface Warfare Center Port Hueneme, and David Walz, from Naval Undersea Warfare Center Keyport, connected with service-oriented firms in fields like software, cybersecurity, and legal services.

Simultaneously, the SBIR/STTR outreach team focused on technology and innovation-focused companies, providing them with crucial information about the programs. The SBIR/STTR programs are designed to encourage small businesses to engage in Federal Research and Development with the potential for commercialization.

The engagement numbers tell a story of quality over quantity. Over the two days, the team held more than 40 matchmaking meetings and connected with 89 small businesses. A seminar titled "How to Work with NAVSEA," presented by Mahan and Walz, drew an engaged audience of approximately 30 attendees, eager to learn how to partner with the naval command.

Participants expressed their gratitude for the government's commitment to attending despite the logistical challenges. The productive discussions and positive experiences have led the NAVSEA SBIR/STTR Programs Team to recommend participation in the 2027 conference, confident in the event's value for fostering vital connections within the small business community.