



Why JOC/SABER Programs Fail

Job Order Contracting (JOC) and SABER programs are intended to accelerate project delivery, enhance cost visibility, and provide a reliable mechanism for executing recurring facility repair, maintenance, and minor construction. Yet across many federal and DoD installations, these programs underperform or fail outright.

The core reason is **not that JOC/SABER programs encounter problems**, all delivery systems do.

They fail because **owners and contractors recognize issues too late to take corrective action**.

Across dozens of USAF, DoD, and public-sector programs, three recurring patterns consistently undermine predictability, transparency, and performance:

1. Launching the Program Before Proper Setup

Many JOC/SABER programs begin **without foundational alignment** among Civil Engineering (CE), contracting, end-users, and the JOC contractor.

Typical failures include:

- A JOC contract awarded *without* an objective, [locally researched unit-price database](#).
- CE and Contracting not aligned on execution strategy, cost transparency expectations, or workflow.
- Program controls implemented late, leaving early deviations undetected.

Once delivery begins, teams struggle to relate estimates, schedules, and costs to **real performance drivers**, leading to mistrust, disputes, and rework.

This mirrors findings in construction management research showing that **front-end planning quality is the single greatest predictor of project success** (Gibson et al., 2010).

2. Reporting Overwhelms Analysis

JOC/SABER programs often produce massive documentation—processing bundles, UPB line items, internal reviews, monthly reports, QA reviews, and COR documentation.

Yet **very little effort is spent interpreting signals** such as:



- Why a task was priced differently than expected
- Why the schedule slipped at the early planning stage
- Why the volume of NPP/NTE requests is growing
- Why estimates diverge from benchmarks

As in traditional construction control systems, **data without interpretation becomes noise** (Flyvbjerg, 2023). The result is predictable: early warning signs are missed.

3. Critical Program Information Gets Lost in Day-to-Day Activity

Under operational pressure—emergency work, end-of-year funding, mission-critical demands—teams focus on **throughput**, not clarity.

What gets buried:

- Cost anomalies in the UPB
- Patterns in contractor performance
- Indicators of CE understaffing
- Misalignment between planning, procurement, and execution
- Unit-price trends that signal cost escalation

Cognitive bias, availability bias, and operational tempo distort the true state of cost and schedule performance, just as research in project psychology predicts (Kahneman, 2011).

The Consequence: Issues Become Problems Before Anyone Notices

When early deviations are missed, the JOC/SABER environment becomes reactive instead of proactive.

Common outcomes include:

- NPPs/NTEs overrun
- ROM estimates rejected
- Work orders stall
- CE loses confidence in the contractor
- Contracting steps in late, increasing cycle times
- The program enters a “death spiral” of mistrust and inefficiency

By the time the organization recognizes the problem, correction is expensive, politically sensitive, or impossible within the contract term.

What Successful Programs Do Differently

Successful JOC/SABER programs build **predictability and transparency early and continuously**, typically through:

- Objective, locally researched cost data (the cornerstone of cost visibility)



- Aligned planning, procurement, CE, and contractor workflows
- Clear performance metrics tied to cost, schedule, and collaboration
- Systematic early-warning signals
- Shared situational awareness rather than siloed reporting

This reflects the broader project-delivery research consensus that **early visibility is the strongest determinant of performance** (Morrow, 2011).

Conclusion

JOC and SABER programs do not fail because the delivery method is flawed.

They fail because **programs identify the truth too late**.

Without early alignment, continuous insight, and verifiable cost transparency, the program loses predictability—leading to the same structural failures observed across the wider AECOO sector.

References

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