

THE GOVLOOP GUIDE



**ADDRESSING THE
COMPLEX CHALLENGES
FACING TODAY'S
ACQUISITION PROFESSIONAL**

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INTRODUCTION

From generating requirements, to planning, obtaining and sustaining capabilities, the acquisition process, if implemented effectively, can contribute significantly to accomplishing an agency's mission more efficiently.

As the largest purchaser of goods and services in the nation, the Federal government's acquisition process is complex and under more pressure than ever with tightened budgets and a shifting workforce. This guide:

- ▶ Reveals survey results showing the biggest challenges to successful acquisitions are a widespread lack of understanding about the acquisition process and a lack of training/expertise among acquisition personnel.
- ▶ Defines three phases of the acquisition process: Plan/Define; Obtain; Support.
- ▶ Identifies and explains 11 factors over the three phases that could help Federal agencies achieve more successful acquisition outcomes.
- ▶ Provides easy-reference materials such as a Critical Acquisition Success Factors cheat sheet, a chart to help choose the right contract type, a sample Responsibility Assignment Matrix, as well as more than 20 links to additional resources.

This guide is designed to provide value to everyone involved in the acquisition process - from contracting officers to program managers to key decision makers and stakeholders, including ideas and resources to facilitate the improvement of an agency's acquisition management activities.



SURVEY

Revealing the Reality of Today's Acquisition Workforce

In April 2013, GovLoop and Integrity Management Consulting hosted a survey that received 97 responses from acquisition management professionals from federal (70%) and state / local government (12%). Another 18% of respondents represented contractors, academia or associations. One-third (33%) indicated that they were contracting professionals, while 28% said they engage in program management activities. Roughly 11% of respondents were senior executives. Below is a representative sample of respondent titles:

- Branch Chief, IT Acquisitions
- Chief Architect
- Contracting Officer
- Director, Acquisition Policy
- Professor of Business Cost Estimating
- Program Manager

THE TOP FACTORS FOR SUCCESS

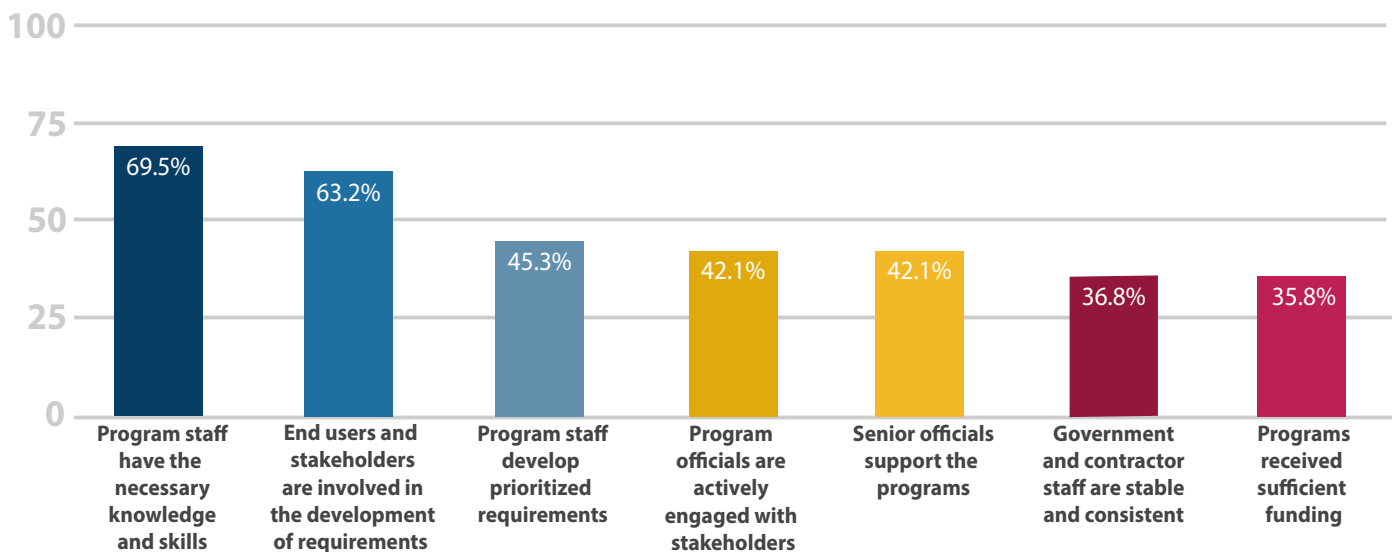
First, respondents were asked, "Which of the following success factors are critical to an effective acquisition?" Potential responses were taken directly from an October 2011 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report entitled, "[Critical Factors Underlying Successful Major Acquisitions.](#)" In that report,

the top five critical success factors that mapped to our study were:

- ▶ Program officials were actively engaged with stakeholders
- ▶ Program staff had the necessary knowledge and skills
- ▶ Senior department and agency executives supported the programs
- ▶ End users and stakeholders were involved in the development of requirements
- ▶ Government and contractor staff were consistent and stable

As shown in Figure 1, the GovLoop study revealed that **seven out of ten respondents believed the most important factor for a successful acquisition was program staff having the necessary knowledge and skills.** The second-highest rated factor, at 63%, was end users and stakeholders being involved in the development of requirements.

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING SUCCESS FACTORS ARE CRITICAL TO AN EFFECTIVE ACQUISITION? (Figure 1)



The next tier of importance - responses in the 40-45% range - included program staff developing prioritized requirements, senior officials supporting the program, and program officials actively engaged with stakeholders. In both reports, the factor that received the lowest response was, "programs received sufficient funding."

When asked for an example of a recent effective acquisition, one individual said that her agency, "identified decision makers early in the project and learned the criteria they would use to make a defensible decision."

Another key success factor that emerged was, in a word, "teamwork." When the team includes program management and contracting staff on equal footing, the

likelihood for success rises substantially. Numerous respondents indicated that the cohesiveness, communications and qualifications of the team were especially important to the effective execution of their acquisition programs:

- ▶ **"The cross-functional team was the key to our success.** All team members agreed that the acquisition was top priority and gave best efforts to cooperate."
- ▶ **"Our proposal evaluation team worked together with the procurement organization** to perform the evaluation of technical proposals and past performance -- we collaborated as professionals."
- ▶ **"Having program and contracts staff communicating constantly** throughout the

procurement was a key for success. When one side doesn't know what the other is doing, miscommunication and problems rise up."

In fact, there were many more examples of negative impact when all of the key stakeholders were

CONNECTING CONTRACTING OFFICERS WITH PROGRAM MANAGERS:

In a recent blog post on GovLoop, two subject matter experts presented the unique perspectives of both Contracting Officers and Program Managers. They describe how finding common ground enables effective acquisitions. Read more here:

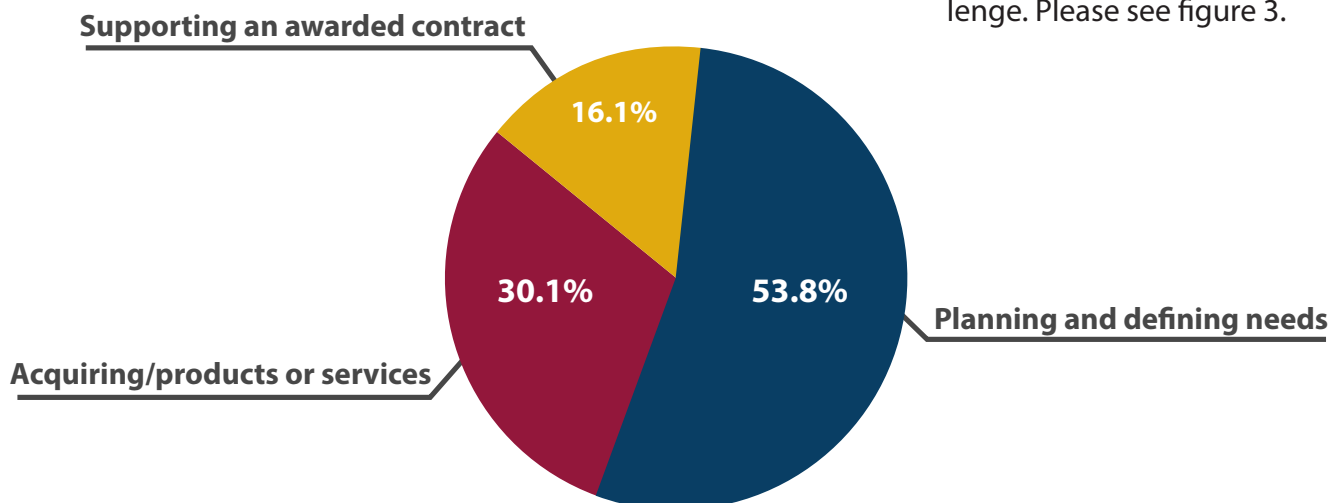
<http://www.govloop.com/forum/topics/why-far-guiding-principles-are-vital-to-co-pm-effectiveness>

not at the table, making this a linchpin factor when it comes to the success or failure of an acquisition.

THE BIGGEST GAPS IN KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

Knowing that participants named “knowledge and skills” as the top success factor, it’s important to understand where staff might find the need for improvement. **When survey participants were asked, “In which acquisition phase do you see the biggest gap in knowledge?” more than half (54%) of respondents pointed to the “planning and defining requirements” phase.** The next closest response was “acquiring / obtaining products or services” (30%) and the fewest number (16%) cited “supporting an awarded contract.” Please see Figure 2.

IN WHICH ACQUISITION PHASE DO YOU SEE THE BIGGEST GAP IN KNOWLEDGE? (Figure 2)



One respondent drove home this gap by stating, **“Requirements personnel can’t write solid requirements, so vendors can’t provide a good bid. It’s all about the upfront work.** Senior management must understand how important this is because mistakes upfront damage the program for decades to come.” Another individual indicated that, “requirements are delivered to the acquisition office without an independent government cost estimate [and] a poorly written scope.” Finally, a survey participant stated that there are “skill gaps in requirement development, assessing risk and managing client expectations” that create difficulties in achieving optimal results when it comes to an effective procurement process.

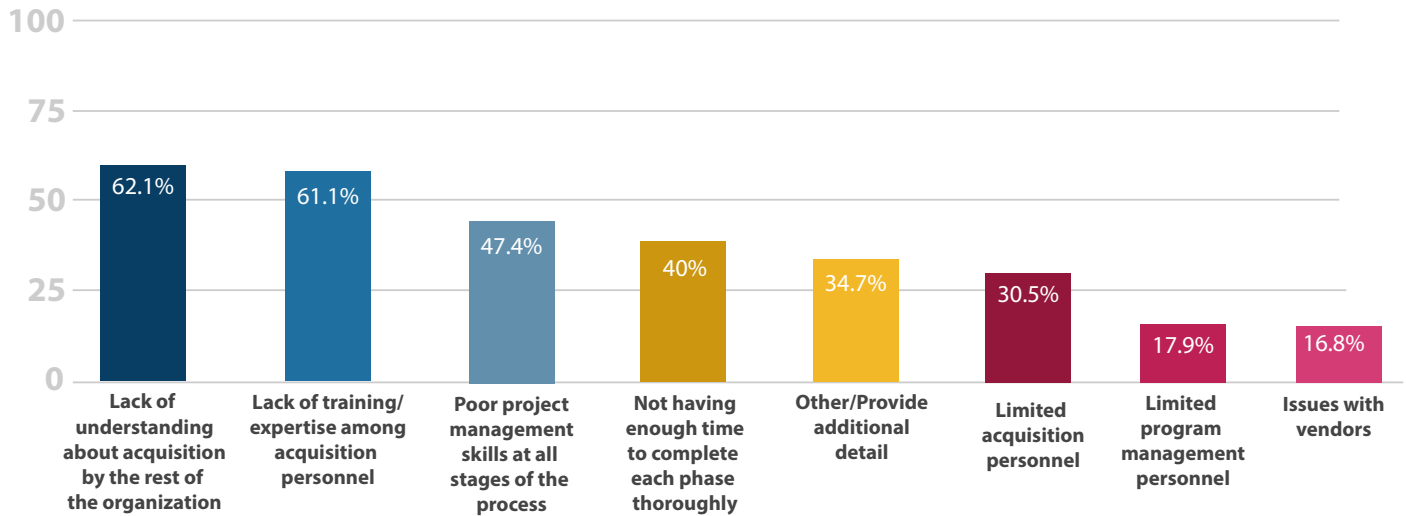
THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES FOR SUCCESSFUL ACQUISITIONS

The top challenge in government acquisition seems to be the need for training - and not just for the acquisition staff. The top two responses to the question, “What is the biggest challenge getting in the way of a successful acquisition outcome in your organization?” are highlighted below:

- ▶ **Lack of understanding about acquisition by the rest of the organization (62%)**
- ▶ **Lack of training / expertise among acquisition personnel (61%)**

The third biggest challenge was, “poor project management skills at all stages of the process (47%).” The least of respondents’ worries, at least according to this survey, were “issues with vendors” and very few respondents cited “limited program management personnel” as a core challenge. Please see figure 3.

WHAT IS THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE GETTING IN THE WAY OF A SUCCESSFUL ACQUISITION OUTCOME IN YOUR ORGANIZATION? (Figure 3)



One respondent reported that there is a significant need for “learning the acquisition language” and “understanding the FAR.” Moreover, “program office staff often lack even basic understanding of procurement and acquisition,” said another survey participant.

Unfortunately, these problems are visible to vendors as well. One contractor “wondered if the contracting agents in the Purchasing Department have sufficient knowledge and/or understanding of the procurement process.”

THE TROUBLE WITH LACK OF TRAINING

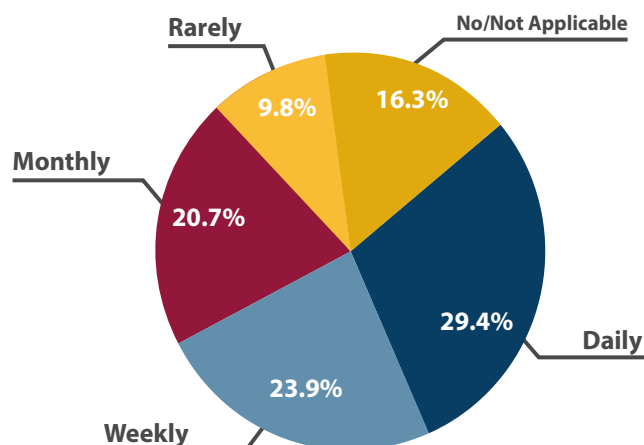
The GovLoop survey also asked, “How often does training / understanding of the acquisition process hamper your team’s ability?” The top answer, as shown

in Figure 4, was “daily” (29%) followed by “weekly” (24%), and “monthly” (21%). Only 16% of respondents said “no / not applicable” and 10% marked “rarely.”

These survey results corroborate the findings of a December 2012 report entitled, [“The Balancing Act: Acquisition in an Unabated Crisis,”](#) that is based on the biennial “Acquisition Policy

Survey” conducted by the Professional Services Council. That study gains the insight of senior government procurement executives and practitioners regarding the state of federal procurement practices. One particularly poignant excerpt from that report sums up the challenge with training and its impact on the workforce:

DOES LACK OF TRAINING / UNDERSTANDING OF THE ACQUISITION PROCESS HAMPER YOUR TEAM’S ABILITY? IF YES, HOW OFTEN? (Figure 4)



Said one respondent, “We need more funding for training, and more focus within training programs on integrating each staff’s function within the ‘big picture’ on agency procurement.” Another acquisition professional said, “We’ve made incredible strides in increasing the acquisition workforce to reasonable levels, but I worry that in this budgetary environment we will go back in the other direction... our training is still not right. We’re not agile enough in pushing training at the time of need. We have to train people, and if we don’t get the training out, people will start doing things their own way.”

Moreover, the report cites having “trained acquisition professionals” as one of the top three challenges of our present acquisition environment.

ACQUISITION MANAGEMENT CONSIDERATIONS (Figure 5)



As demonstrated by our survey results, acquisition is a complex arena with a variety of challenges. Acquisition professionals have many factors to weigh when planning any acquisition - and many tools at their disposal to address these challenges. Figure 5 shows a few of the considerations that acquisition professionals must evaluate every day. While this guide cannot touch on every consideration, the next section reveals insights from several experts in the field on some of the most important aspects.

LEADING PRACTICES IN PROCUREMENT: AN INTERVIEW WITH BILL MCNALLY,

Senior Procurement Executive at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)



In order to gain expert insights from a current executive in government acquisition, GovLoop interviewed Bill McNally, NASA’s Senior Procurement Executive. Based on his nearly 35 years of experience, McNally recommended six core practices to help agencies improve their acquisition process, underscoring the advice shared throughout this guide:

Take a strategic approach to acquisition: McNally said that NASA “has a strategic acquisition

process where we start off looking at each mission directorate and their portfolio of requirements and budget and schedule to make sure everything is aligned.” If a program has multiple projects, NASA holds an acquisition strategy meeting to make sure they are well integrated. Once a program is going, the agency has a program management council that guides and looks at various milestones of a program, monitoring it through the entire lifecycle. Moreover, the agency holds monthly baseline performance reviews to measure the overall performance of acquisition infrastructure. “If you just

focus on programs and not some of these other elements that support the program, you could start running into some problems,” said McNally.

Define expected outcomes: As an agency begins to build out an individual statement of work, McNally noted that it should start with what he calls, “a zero-based approach to develop requirements. Any requirement you want to put in the contract needs to support the ultimate desired outcome. So you start with nothing, and then each item needs to earn its way into the contract.” The best results emerge when agencies are resolute and tenacious about running requirements through this stringent filter.

Conduct market research prior to releasing a solicitation: Once the requirements are defined, McNally stressed the importance of performing market research. “Agencies can do a lot of market research without having to talk to anyone, just through the use of the Internet,” said McNally. An agency can learn a great deal of background information, such as product definitions, technical capabilities and side-by-side comparisons. McNally was quick to note, however, that web-based research should not replace communicating directly with industry. At NASA, contract officers periodically engage in one-on-one meetings with industry members pre-solicitation in order to discuss potential outcomes and requirement needs. This practice supplements and strengthens what NASA learns through its online research.

Engage with industry throughout the process: McNally said that another critical element is to engage with industry. “If you have a complicated requirement, then you want to start showing industry some of your draft requirements on the document so they can take a look at it and have questions.” Agencies want to make sure that industry really understands the requirements in order

to elicit strong proposals and accurate pricing. “If a statement of work is well-defined, then industry will be interested in bidding on the job and won’t view it as too risky,” said McNally. Once a contract is awarded, the vendor will likely perform more effectively since they have had input on the deliverable requirements throughout the process.

Analyze transaction costs: McNally pointed out that there are costs associated with creating proposals and managing the acquisition process. At NASA, McNally has led the charge to take a hard look at transaction costs. For instance, McNally is looking at costs associated with getting a contract. “That could be internal, like how many hours of workforce and how many people does it take to define a requirement, create a solicitation, evaluate proposals and award those contracts,” said McNally. There are also external factors and agencies should assess the cost of industry in spending their resources to prepare task orders against an IDIQ contract. “Government is paying for the task order, so that’s a transaction cost.”

Improve and modify processes continuously: Finally, McNally suggested that agencies focus on identifying ways to engage in continuous improvement. “It used to be called total quality management and then later Six Sigma -- call it what you want, but you always have to continue to look at your process,” said McNally. Based on that ongoing analysis, agencies should keep only the value-added pieces and make adjustments to remain lean and nimble.

McNally’s expert insights show the need for agencies to focus on ways to streamline the acquisition process throughout the entire procurement lifecycle. In doing so, agencies can make smarter acquisition decisions.

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ACQUISITION AND PROGRAM MANAGEMENT

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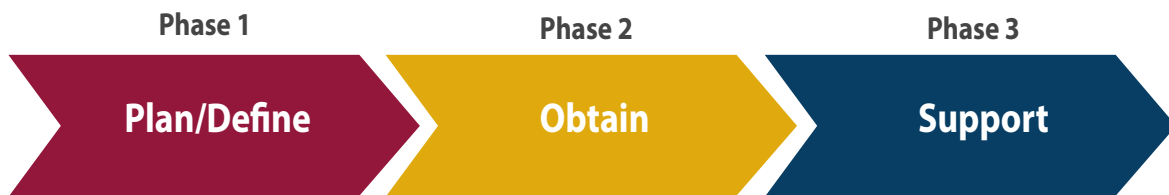




SUCCESS

Responding to the Reality of the Acquisition Workforce

THE ACQUISITION PROCESS



In understanding the day-to-day experience of the acquisition workforce, the most important next step is to provide insights for improving the execution of each of the phases of the acquisition process. Below we outline those phases and offer several critical success factors for each one based on interviews with seasoned subject matter experts.

Before looking at the critical success factors in each phase, it's important to outline the phases themselves:

- ▶ **Phase 1: Plan / Define** is the period in which agencies identify the key stakeholders, conduct market research, gather and define requirements and determine the type of contractual vehicles to be used throughout the life of the acquisition program.
- ▶ **Phase 2: Obtain** includes agency activities, such as releasing the solicitation, receiving and

analyzing proposals and quotations, narrowing and selecting the vendor(s) as well as awarding the contract itself.

- ▶ **Phase 3: Support** is the final phase where an agency administers the contract(s), from working directly with the vendor to evaluating the outcomes to making scheduled payments and, ultimately, closing out the contract.

It's important to note that an acquisition program may require multiple kinds of contractual vehicles throughout its lifecycle. The plan, obtain and support processes may not be singular occurrences, depending on what is being acquired. If an agency has a complex acquisition, the three phases will continue throughout the lifecycle, especially when using an agile philosophy. As a result, this process is fluid as it is tailored to each unique acquisition. With that process foundation in mind, let's explore the critical success factors in each of those phases.

PHASE 1

Plan/Define

1. DEFINE REQUIREMENTS

The importance of this first step in the acquisition process cannot be overstated. In fact, one survey respondent unequivocally stated that, “Any acquisition with clear, concise requirements and active communication is always successful.” Another said, “If requirements can be developed properly, then chances for improved outcomes are not only increased, but actually exist.” In this initial activity, it’s critical to engage in an information exchange that seeks industry input during the requirements definition phase. [In the Myth-Busting memo released by the White House in February 2011](#), it recommends:

“Although industry may have had their best technical representatives engaged with the program manager, the contracting officer should communicate to vendors as much information as possible about the government’s needs as early as possible. As a result of early communication, the contracting officer may learn some things that suggest that an approach somewhat different than planned may cause increased competition, more small business participation, lower prices, or even a better definition of the government’s technical requirements.”

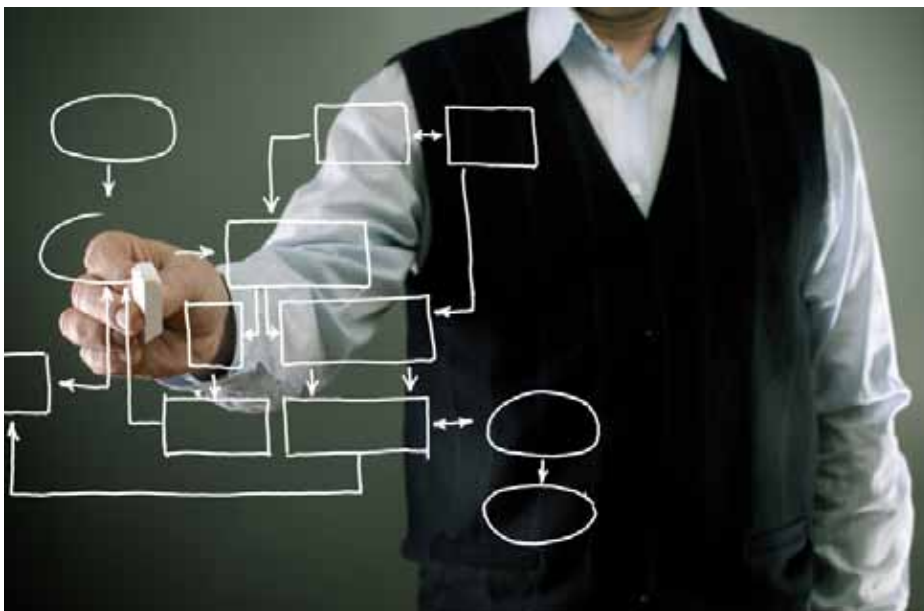
Industry days, pre-solicitation and pre-proposal conferences, and requests for information are key strategic approaches to defining and solidifying requirements as part of “promoting a common understanding of the contracting requirements, the solicitation terms and condi-

tions, and the evaluation criteria.”

Moreover, the memo reminds program managers that it’s important to get input from the contracting officers in these early stages as well. This guidance was reinforced by respondents to the GovLoop survey, who said that agencies should, “Train the program staff to get the acquisition staff involved earlier in the process” and that “requirements training is incredibly vital.” One respondent recommended the use of the [Acquisition Requirements Roadmap Tool \(ARRT\)](#) developed by the Defense Acquisition University, which includes introductory and training videos to help program and contracts staff to derive optimal value from ARRT’s methodology and step-by-step approach to requirements definition.

2. ASSEMBLE AN EXCEPTIONAL INTEGRATED PRODUCT TEAM (IPT)

According to Mike Ipsaro, Technical Director of Integrity Management Consulting, “the more stacked the IPTs are with folks who are cross-trained in both contract and program management, the better the chance of success in planning, defining and executing an acquisition.” With more than 16 years supporting Civilian and Defense agencies, Ipsaro has found that an agency performs most effectively if it has IPT members that:



“have certifications in program management and espouse and practice the principles of program management - such as define requirements clearly and completely, identify gaps and perform rigorous analysis to determine the preferred alternatives to close gaps, lay out the acquisition strategy based on solid requirements, and conduct thorough market research.”

Furthermore, agencies should ensure that qualified IPT members are “empowered to make decisions,” which bolsters enterprise accountability and speeds execution. Lastly, be sure IPT members engage senior leaders early and throughout the process via “continuous communications so that all levels of the chain of command are kept abreast of the latest developments.”

3. PLAN TO MEASURE

Most acquisition professionals understand that defining requirements is one of the most important facets of an acquisition, but the part that often gets missed from the very outset of many contract processes is planning to measure. “Whether it’s a helicopter program, weapons system, or an IT system and you want 95% availability rate, you have to plan measurement into your requirement - tools, data, software, etc.,” said John Coombs, who spent 22 years in the United States Army and per-

VIEW ACQUISITION THROUGH A HOLISTIC LENS:

One cross-cutting success factor for agencies - an approach that should be integrated throughout the life-cycle - is to engage in a continuous, comprehensive, portfolio-based review of its programs. Instead of assessing each individual program, look holistically across the programs and compare them according to relative performance and how effectively they are performing from a programmatic perspective. Examples of questions to ask when taking a holistic approach might include:

- ▶ **Are the program outcomes being achieved?**
- ▶ **Is the agency receiving value for the money being spent?**
- ▶ **Are the requirements being met?**
- ▶ **Are the programs on budget?**
- ▶ **Are there duplicative requirements that can be combined or substituted?**

All too often, program managers are rewarded for getting their programs through - but when are they rewarded for making the tough decision to cancel a poor-performing program? The political aspects of contract management are inescapable, but as much as they can, senior leaders should isolate the decision making process from the political arena and

make or support decisions based on what they think is best. By measuring programs from a portfolio perspective, it’s easier to justify these hard choices based on concrete data and a clear methodology.

In addition, it is important to consider whether or not an agency is measuring the real value from its spending. It’s relatively easy to measure time (was it on schedule?), cost (was it delivered within budget parameters?) and scope (did we receive “X” number of widgets?), but it’s harder to measure actual value. For instance, an agency might ask: Did a particular acquisition lead to increased efficiency in a process, enabling improved speed of execution across the organization? Are staffing resources liberated from routine tasks that enables them to focus their attention on higher-value activities? In an environment of lean budgets, agencies should take a step back and consider the broader value that can be achieved through a strategic approach to acquisitions.

formed procurement support in 19 countries.

Agencies need to ask:

- ▶ **How are we going to measure the outcomes?**
- ▶ **What are the acceptable quality levels that must be met?**
- ▶ **Who is going to check the measurements?**
- ▶ **Where and how will we obtain the data?**
- ▶ **How will we measure the success of our program?**

“You’ve got to identify the data that you need to see how the program is performing effectively,” said Coombs, now a Senior Fellow at Integrity Management Consulting.

Coombs continued, “A poorly performing contractor can almost always be tied back to a poorly written contract. And a poorly written contract can almost always be tied back to a poorly defined requirement. It’s so important to get it right the first time, and to do that you must have an IPT that defines the metrics for success.”

Of course, the government also has duties and responsibilities in any acquisition. An agency must not only plan to measure the contractor, but the government

ENSURE LOWEST PRICE TECHNICALLY ACCEPTABLE (LPTA) SUCCESS

Lowest price technically acceptable (LPTA) is becoming more prevalent in today’s era of tight budgets. GovLoop survey respondents and Integrity subject matter experts offered the following insights when it comes to contracts:

- ▶ **Use LPTA only when the requirements are clear.**
- ▶ **When under cost pressure, use caution in selecting the minimally qualified vendor to meet the requirement level.**
- ▶ **Try to limit LPTA to solutions where you can adequately define requirement discrepancies; otherwise, strive for best value.**
- ▶ **Focus on defining the aspects of technical acceptability (e.g., past performance, personnel, technical approaches) – these are the most important factors in any procurement.**

For more information and insights on LPTA contracts, please see the blog post entitled, [“Best Value of LPTA? One Size Does Not Fit All in Acquisition.”](#) or join the ongoing conversation on GovLoop: [“In Government Contracting, Does Cost Trump Results?”](#)

team’s performance as well. A high-performing IPT will be sure to hold itself accountable for exceptional execution of project requirements.

PHASE 2

Obtain

Once an agency positions the right people around the table and defines the measurable requirements, the next phase includes obtaining products or solutions. As discovered in the survey, the second biggest gap in knowledge and skills for agency employees was found in the “Obtain” phase. Critical success factors for this phase follow.

1. PICK THE RIGHT CONTRACTING TYPE

There are many individual contract types, and even more variations and combinations. Picking the right type often comes down to asking the following questions:

- ▶ **How well defined is the requirement?**
- ▶ **How can we best meet the stated requirements?**
- ▶ **How is the effort currently executed?**
- ▶ **How predictable are the issues that might require an increase in performance?**

► **To what degree can the work be broken into distinct deliverables?**

► **How much risk do you want to absorb?**

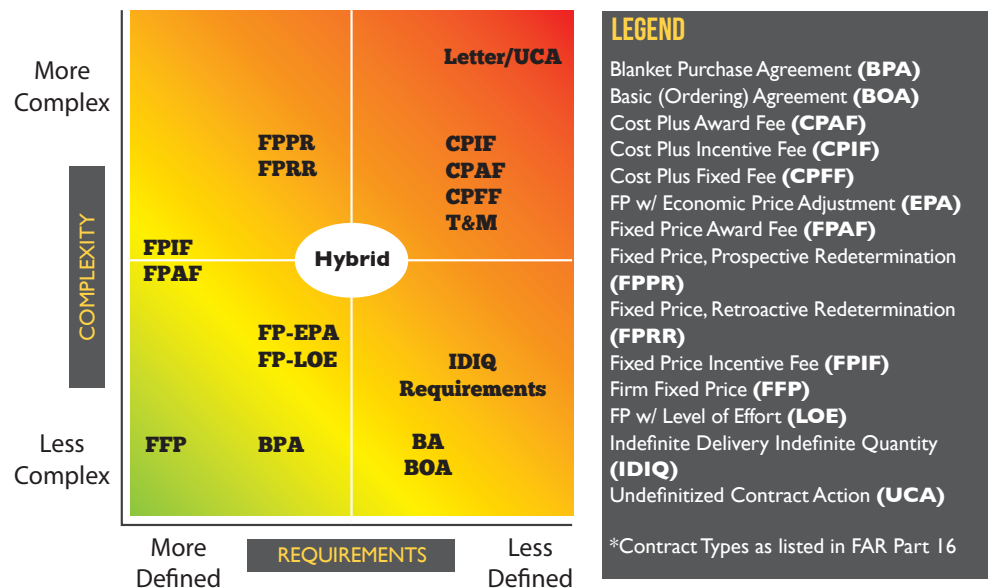
Integrity Senior Fellow John Coombs noted, “Don’t just stick with the popular contracting method of the day.” These flexibilities in contracting have been around for decades and are designed to help government be as efficient as possible in procuring products and services. Through training and experience, the more sophisticated variations become easier to use over time.

The framework shown in Figure 6 depicts a general representation of which contract type may be most appropriate based on knowledge gleaned from the risk assessment and analysis of alternatives. The more rigor applied to the research and analyses, the more confident will be your assessment of the two variables (Complexity and Requirements).

2. TAKE AN AGILE APPROACH

An Agile methodology applied to modular (or incremental) acquisition eliminates the traditional Big Bang approach, which typically requires a much larger budget, well-defined requirements from the outset and inevitably results in sunk costs. A modular approach allows for a smaller investment of funds into the different increments as they roll out, which enables program managers to better execute the

CHOOSING THE RIGHT CONTRACT TYPE (Figure 6)



budget in an era of fiscal constraints. Three other benefits to this approach are:

- **increased opportunities for small businesses to be part of the program,**
- **program managers having increased visibility into the performance of contractors, and,**
- **an ability to switch contractors mid-stream.**

The real benefit is, at pre-determined or set points, to reassess program needs and to incorporate changes into the program in response to a constantly evolving environment. Moreover, an Agile methodology may require new approaches, including the development of an Agile acquisition strategy at the outset of a

program or project which may include using a different contract type depending on what is most appropriate for each phase. The ultimate objective of this approach is increasing your likelihood of achieving program success by performing in discrete, measurable chunks.

3. ENGAGE END USERS AND STAKEHOLDERS TO VALIDATE REQUIREMENTS AT THE RIGHT TIME

End users are among the most important stakeholders in validating requirements. A program office should be part of the requirements validation process, but program offices should not be validating requirements in isolation. A 2010 report entitled, [Achieving Effective Acquisition of Information Technology in the](#)

[Department of Defense](#) strongly recommends that, “End users’ requirements must be addressed at the outset and in future increments.” While the report is specifically focused on IT, this recommendation is applicable to most large-scale acquisitions. The report goes on to say that, “End user testing avoids the unintended but real consequence of users attempting to overload requirements into the first capability increment.” Adopt continuous testing and involve end users throughout the development process. In summary: begin and end with the end users, as appropriate.

PHASE 3

Support

Finally, we come to the third phase of the acquisition process, outlining some of the key factors that increase an agency’s likelihood of success in the execution of the support phase:

1. ASSIGN CLEAR ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Once a program office initiates an acquisition, confusion often arises as to support roles and responsibilities. Specifically, which entity supports which part(s) of the investment operationally and financially, respectively? Roles and responsibilities should be assigned early on in the process and need to be articulated in the solicitation so vendors

clearly understand the scope of their roles. If not, they will see expanded risk and the proposed price could be much higher. Additionally, the government team must execute their responsibilities on time or else they could end up with claims of government delay that risk derailing the schedule and driving up costs.

Consider using a responsibility assignment matrix (RAM) to create alignment among team members from different organizations regarding ‘who does what.’ Along one axis, list the integrated product team member names and/or titles and on the other axis list the tasks. For instance, a team might include a Leader or Sponsor, a Contract-

ing Officer, a Program Manager, Technical people, a business analyst/cost estimator, a Contracting Officer’s Representative, etc. Sometimes these matrices can be very involved, but it’s scalable and helps to align people with the work and the offices with the scope. For example, in the support phase, having a cost estimator/business analyst responsible for performing continuous operational analysis to assess whether deployed investments are still delivering the intended value can pay dividends.

Below is a simplified example of a responsibility assignment matrix:

Resource Responsibility	Leader / Sponsor	Contracting Officer	Program Manager	IT Manager	Business Analyst	COTR	Legal Counsel
P - Primary Responsibility							
A - Approval Authority							
S - Supporting Responsibility (Contributor or Reviewer)							
I - Information Only							
Project Funding							
Task/Deliverable 1	A	P	S	S	S	S	I
Task/Deliverable 2	A	S	P	P	S	S	I
Acquisition Planning							
Task/Deliverable 1							
Task/Deliverable 2							
Contracting							
Task/Deliverable 1							
Task/Deliverable 2							
Requirements Analysis							
Task/Deliverable 1							
Task/Deliverable 2							
Program Implementation							
Task/Deliverable 1							
Task/Deliverable 2							
Program Evaluation /Reporting							
Task/Deliverable 1							
Task/Deliverable 2							

An agency must also keep in mind that these stakeholders should be involved throughout the entire acquisition lifecycle. In an excellent guide entitled [Seven Steps to Performance-Based Services Acquisition](#), agencies are encouraged to “retain at least a core of the integrated solutions team on the project for contract management. Those on the team have the most knowledge, experience, and insight into what needs to happen next and what is expected during contract performance. Contract award is not the final measure of success. Effective and efficient contract performance that delivers a solution is the goal.” While responsibilities may change during the process, the team should work together every step of the way, from requirements definition to final reporting.

2. HAVE A DISCIPLINED REPORTING PROCESS

If an agency has done a good job in defining the requirements, the reporting process is what provides critical visibility into program and contract performance. Disciplined reporting creates a feedback loop for communicating how well a segment of work or task is performing. However, it’s also possible that good information is communicated in an ineffective way.

That’s why it’s important to not only focus on *what* is being reported, but on *how* it is being de-



livered. Different stakeholders might require varying formats or mediums – whether that’s in-person vs. electronic delivery, briefing slides or a standard reporting template. With the proliferation of web-based and video-based presentation technology as well as online communities of practice and internal knowledge management portals, there is clearly the opportunity to leverage technology for increased communication. Be aware of the different styles on a team and how people prefer to filter and understand information. For example, some people prefer eyes or ears, but a PM executing a program is well advised to work with stakeholders to identify what works for them.

Moreover, be sure to define *when* you intend to share information. Is a report sent bi-monthly, monthly, or weekly? Is it delivered in the morning, midday or close of business. The best practice in this regard is to establish a repeatable pace – or “a battle rhythm” as it’s often called in military settings – and stick to it. Adjust, as neces-

sary, based on the changing environment.

Another consideration is the need for program milestones. This is especially useful when trying to innovate or solve a particular problem. Using a stage and gate framework with each phase helps the team to learn more about the potential problem and solution. This approach forces the team to pause and ask, “did we define the problem and solution well?” To practice continuous improvement, consider having a lessons learned milestone after a key phase or task. Consider creating a repository to archive your lessons learned and track your progress in implementing them.

Lastly, reporting should be much more than recording “what got done.” It’s one thing to check boxes for task completion; it’s another to ensure that those completed activities link back to the achievement of strategic organizational metrics, business outcomes, and program require-

ments. Reporting should measure cost, schedule, performance and delivery metrics, and demonstrate clear progress toward program goals.

3. LEVERAGE MENTORING FOR KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

Integrity Senior Fellow John Coombs strongly suggests that agencies should stand up robust mentoring programs. “Instead of academic training or a boring online class that’s made to paint a broad brush for everyone,” he said, “mentoring helps people to solve their problems on actual contracts they are working right now.” Coombs went on to say that having mentors in-house can actually speed up acquisi-

tion lead time so that projects won’t have to be reworked and productivity is enhanced. With mentoring, personnel are running through an actual “exam” in real life instead of a mock exam in a training course.

If agencies are wondering where they are going to get their pool of potential mentors, Coombs recommended recruiting rehired annuitants or tapping the expertise of consultants who have hired former federal professionals. For example, agencies could use “rehired annuitants as mentors and give them five new mid-level/junior people to teach them how to go about the acquisition process through hands-on guidance,” recom-

mended Coombs. “It would be far more cost effective and efficient” and potentially a faster way to get less experienced staff up to speed.

Another way to identify mentors is by leveraging professional associations like the National Contract Management Association, which includes mentoring as a component of its Contract Management Leadership Development Program. Moreover, the Federal Acquisition Institute has released an [Instruction Guide for Mentors and Mentees](#) that includes typical components of a mentoring relationship as well as templates for a mentoring agreement, an action plan and competencies for matching mentors with mentees.

MAKE TRAINING AN ORGANIZATIONAL PRIORITY:

Based on our survey results, training is a cross-cutting facet that strengthens the entire acquisition process. In our survey, we asked, “How would you improve training for senior officials, acquisition and/or program staff in your organization as it pertains to the acquisition process?” Based on respondents’ input, below are three tips for improving acquisition training:

- a. Don’t forget leadership and project management training.** Several survey participants suggested that leadership and project management skills are as important as technical knowledge. While acquisition professionals need to understand the FAR, in order to deliver optimal results, they need to be effective supervisors and understand general project management principles as well.
- b. Incorporate hands-on, on-the-job training.** One of the best ways to help individuals understand a process is to have them directly perform the tasks in a progressive manner. As they demonstrate competency, they may be given greater and more complex responsibilities. The value of this approach is that the team learns while getting real work accomplished. Another method might include asking employees to work in field locations for several weeks each year so they can better understand the needs in end user locations, or participate in rotations to perform other functional roles or even complete a detail in another department or agency.
- c. Use webinars and online learning tools:** With an increasingly distributed and mobile workforce, online training is often the best modality to get knowledge workers up to speed. Agencies can increase the amount and variety of training available, especially electronically, and include examples by moving in-person training to web-based delivery.

Of course, training only solves part of the problem. Sometimes contract professionals will attend training, return to the office and seek to apply what they’ve learned only to have supervisors or seasoned colleagues tell them, “that’s not how we do it around here.” Training, and a new approach that may emerge from that knowledge acquisition, needs to be supported and reinforced organization-wide. While more training is a critical success factor for improving the acquisition process, the most effective employee development initiatives are driven by decision-makers that seek to achieve a longer-lasting impact on an agency’s ability to achieve its mission.

SUMMARY

There are clear challenges for today's acquisition professionals, from staffing limitations to knowledge gaps to budget shortfalls. Moreover, there are organizational and cultural hurdles that prevent agencies from taking a more strategic approach to acquisitions.

The good news is that there are steps that organizations can take to educate staff and enhance their present resource configurations. Three actions that your organization can take right now:

Identify potential trouble spots in each of the acquisition phases. Use the "Critical Acquisition Success Factors" below to determine which success factors can be applied in your organization to improve performance. Some factors will need to be agreed upon and initiated during strategic planning while some can be implemented immediately by making tactical adjustments.

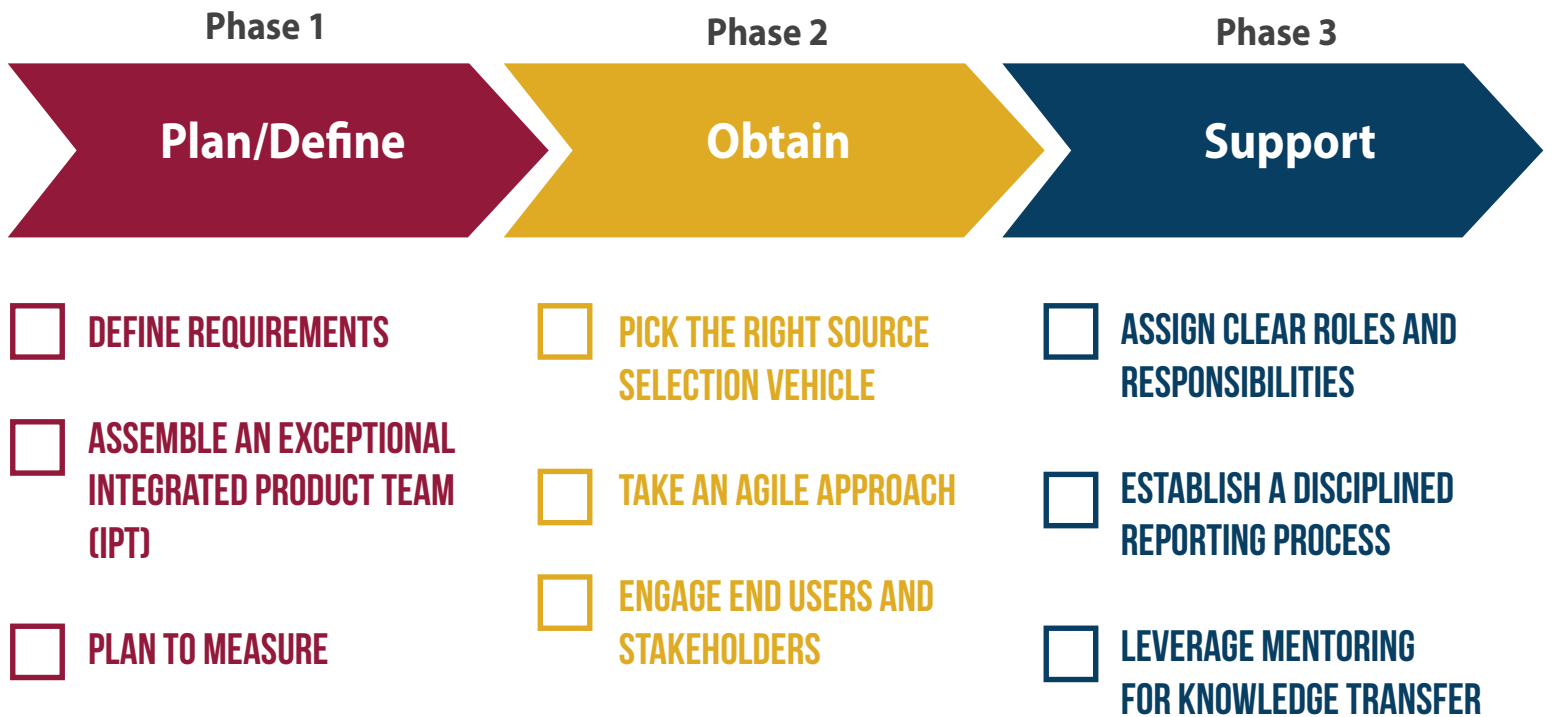
Conduct an assessment to ascertain knowledge gaps. Given the high percentage of survey respondents that cited this core challenge, one worthwhile exercise for an organization would

be the administration of a brief, anonymous survey designed to elicit skills deficits and strengths from which you can determine training needs.

Explore potential training and development options. There are several ways to engage personnel in the process of improving their capacity to effectively execute at every phase of the acquisition process – prioritize staff development as a critical success factor.

This guide outlined several critical success factors that, if implemented, could lead to significant improvements in government acquisitions. Of course, this guide is just one resource and GovLoop invites readers to join the conversations in our online community. In addition, the team at Integrity Management Consulting stands ready to support your efforts, and we would strongly recommend their comprehensive suite of acquisition and program management support services as well as their blog [Integrity Matters](#), which discusses real world applications of best practices.

CRITICAL ACQUISITION SUCCESS FACTORS



CROSS-CUTTING SUCCESS FACTOR 1: VIEW ACQUISITION THROUGH A HOLISTIC LENS

CROSS-CUTTING SUCCESS FACTOR 2: MAKE TRAINING AN ORGANIZATIONAL PRIORITY



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Lead Writer: Andrew Krzmarzick, GovLoop Director of Community Engagement

Lead Designer: Jeff Ribeira, GovLoop Senior Interactive Designer

Designer: Carrie Moeger, GovLoop Design Fellow

Designer: Russell Yerkes, GovLoop Design Fellow

Editor: Steve Ressler, GovLoop Founder and President

Editor: Emily Jarvis, GovLoop Online Producer

Editor: Amy DeWolf, GovLoop Online Producer

For more information on this guide, please contact Andrew Krzmarzick at andrew@govloop.com

About Integrity Management Consulting

Integrity Management Consulting, Inc. is an award-winning provider of Acquisition and Program Management Support Services for the public sector.

Integrity offers end-to-end acquisition and program management support services including contract management support services and training. From setting the foundations of acquisition strategy to the final steps of close-out, their professional team tackles every detail that leads to mission success. They customize their offerings to meet customers' exact needs and specifications from "Big A" acquisitions to smaller procurements that demand the same level of precision and care.

Integrity is committed to advancing the acquisition and program management profession through ongoing dialogue and thought leadership. Integrity takes their work seriously because it benefits not only customers but ultimately affects the quality of Federal performance and the lives of citizens.

Headquartered in Northern Virginia, Integrity serves Federal government clients nationwide which, along with BPAs and MOBIS contract vehicles, ensures fast and flexible service.

2000 Corporate Ridge, Suite 170,
McLean, Virginia 22102 United States
Phone: (703) 349-3394 | Fax: (703) 232-17455

ABOUT GOVLOOP

LOCATION

GovLoop is headquartered in Washington D.C., with a team of dedicated professionals who share a commitment to connect and improve government.

GOVLOOP

734 15th St NW, Suite 500
Washington, DC 20005
Phone: (202) 407-7421
Fax: (202) 407-7501



GovLoop's mission is to connect government to improve government. We aim to inspire public sector professionals by acting as the knowledge network for government. The GovLoop community has over 65,000 members working to foster collaboration, solve problems and share resources across government.

The GovLoop community has been widely recognized across multiple sectors. GovLoop members come from across the public sector. Our membership includes federal, state, and local public servants, industry experts and professionals grounded in academic research. Today, GovLoop is the leading site for addressing public sector issues.

GovLoop works with top industry partners to provide resources and tools to the government community. GovLoop has developed a variety of guides, infographics, online training and educational events, all to help public sector professionals become more efficient Civil Servants.

If you have questions on this report, please feel free to reach out to Andrew Krzmarzick, GovLoop Director of Community Engagement at andrew@govloop.com.

RESOURCES

On GovLoop...

[2013's Top Trends in Acquisition and Program Management](#)

[A Case Study for a Procurement Policy Board](#)

[Agile Acquisition: How Do We Really Do This?](#)

[Government Innovation Success? RFP-EZ Launches \(Interview with Clay Johnson\)](#)

[Lack of Accountability Hinders Contractor Oversight and Performance](#)

[Smoother Acquisition Sailing - An Argument for Increased Communication](#)

[Strategic Sourcing 101 - Reasons Why Your Agency Should Sign On](#)

[The Acquisition Workforce: Are We Going Backwards?](#)

[The Consequences of An Inconsistent Acquisition Strategy](#)

[Think Agile in Modular Acquisition for IT](#)

[Training the Next Generation of Government Contractors](#)

[We Need To Understand Chinese Procurement](#)

[FAR Guiding Principles are Vital to CO/PM Effectiveness](#)

...And Beyond:

[Defense Acquisition University Communities of Practice](#)

[Integrity Management Consulting Knowledge Center](#)

[Integrity Matters blog](#)



734 15th St NW, Suite 500
Washington, DC 20005
Phone: (202) 407-7421
Fax: (202) 407-7501