

Federal Acquisitions in a Post-COVID World

Adapting to the new reality in federal government contracting



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List of Acronyms

- CLIN: Contract Line Item Number
- COVID-19: Coronavirus Disease 2019
- DFAR: Defense Federal Acquisition Regulation
- FAR: Federal Acquisition Regulation
- FedRAMP: Federal Risk and Authorization Management Program
- FISMA: Federal Information Security Modernization Act

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Introduction

When it comes to federal government procurement, agencies have several straightforward goals when undertaking acquisitions:

- Conduct a fair analysis of a clearly defined source selection.
- Award contract actions in a timely manner.
- Maintain security and protect the vendor's sensitive information.
- Avoid both pre- and post-award protests.
- Efficiently manage the contracts throughout the entire lifecycle.

That process has never been as simple as it might look from a distance and has become increasingly complex and difficult as agencies' portfolios grow. It has been further complicated by the post-COVID-19 hybrid workplace with the need for both remote and on-site collaborations. With the ongoing concerns over data breaches and information security and the growth in contract values and the size of agency portfolios—especially with their move into the cloud—agencies need a secure digital acquisition solution.

The complex process of tracking and managing all documentation while ensuring compliance with federal regulations and conducting secure, fair deliberations is daunting. Gone are the days of sequestering evaluation teams in a secret offsite location to complete the source selection. Contracting officers cannot simply rely on email, file sharing and spreadsheets. Operating under the shadow of a potential protest, procurement officials need to factor in anywhere from 90 days to over a year onto what already is a time-consuming, arduous process. With the speed of technology development, to have an acquisition take months to years means that the government is always well behind the technology curve.

Once contracts are awarded, managing an increasingly complex portfolio presents its own set of challenges, including tracking hundreds or even thousands of deliverables, coupled with a regular stream of modifications that require reviews within strict time limits. Deliverables that aren't reviewed in the prescribed time must be accepted by the government, even if they are deemed unsatisfactory. Delays in processing contract modifications can increase contract costs and slow much needed technical refresh.

The process has become increasingly difficult for overworked agency procurement teams that do not have all the necessary skills and expertise in-house. An automated acquisition lifecycle, with features to track documentation, secure communications and maintain command of compliance requirements, can streamline the evaluation process, control costs and provide built-in protections against protests.

The time is now for a more comprehensive federal acquisition approach.

Growing Complexity Requires Automated Lifecycle Management

The full lifecycle management of acquisitions requires tools and techniques built to handle the many facets of acquisition, with a flexible platform that can be tailored to each agency's unique needs. The following features are worth considering as agencies make that choice:

Deliver automation where appropriate.

Automation reduces the manual burdens typically assigned to the acquisition teams, creating more seamless, controlled processes. Automated scheduling and workflows, for example, can ensure the source selection plan is followed, and post-award reviews of deliverables are managed on time. They can do the same for modifications, ensuring timely reviews, reducing award times and checking for errors in submissions. Most evaluations still require human judgement; therefore, automation should focus on speeding up the process to augment the human expertise.

Provide secure exchanges between the government and vendors.

A secure structured portal for both vendor and government teams greatly increases the quality, collaboration and efficiency. For example, a portal of this kind provides the mechanism for vendors to make secure and complete submissions while enabling government evaluators to quickly review, comment and act. A bi-directional interface ties the secure vendor communications to specific contract actions, while keeping the focus of the discussion to that specific action, making it easy for the government to stay organized. A technical data repository provides a place where large volumes of data can be stored, organized and shared with appropriate stakeholders. Vendors can review draft documentation and provide feedback, thereby increasing collaboration. Requiring that vendors register to receive this data can also provide insight to the government about potential bidders.

Configure strict access controls to maintain acquisition integrity.

Secure access controls are critical to providing privacy and security, particularly considering FISMA and FedRAMP standards. Agencies need to protect vendor submissions, which may include proprietary technology and pricing models, to ensure that proposal information does not get compromised.

Provide clear vendor guidance to level the playing field.

A digital solution that guides bidders through solicitations can streamline the process for everyone, and especially help small and mid-size vendors who might not have the means to comply with the proposal requirements. It also benefits agencies by opening the process to more bidders, particularly if the agency has a small-business set-aside provision. Vendor proposal submission portals replace spreadsheet-based bid models with a centralized, browser based-model that includes price table inspection rules for vendors to ensure they comply with the pricing requirements.

Maintain transparency to drive competition.

In a multi-award environment, an online and real-time pricing marketplace provides agency stakeholders the ability to compare vendor prices CLIN by CLIN, perform market research, validate quotes, perform budget forecasts, and verify invoices. Additionally, the marketplace creates a continuous competitive environment, providing transparency and incentivizing vendors to lower prices in near-real time as they compete for agency business.

Enable consistency for the evaluation team.

Many source-selection evaluation teams comprise team members with various amounts of experience. Ensuring that the evaluators are following the stipulated process and that the scoring and justifications are tied to the evaluation criteria is key to avoiding potential protests. The solution should facilitate the workflow lifecycle and guide the team, from the start, in reviewing proposals; documenting strengths, weaknesses and risks; recording individual ratings; and providing a simple consensus process, all within a secure collaborative evaluation environment.

Defend against a protest.

No matter how big a procurement is or how complex an agency's portfolio has become, it's essential to be able to anticipate protests and be prepared. A solution that incorporates federal regulations such as FAR and DFAR can provide one level of protection. Making sure that deliberations are secure—whether on-site or in a hybrid setting—can maintain the integrity of the process and provide another defense against protests. Additionally, structured document tools can help agencies respond quickly in the event of a protest, or even preempt them by giving agencies the means to debrief losing bidders.

The Path Forward

Rather than being overwhelmed by the growing complexity of acquisitions, agencies employing an automated lifecycle management solution can streamline their operations and speed up the process to award while holding down costs, meeting security and compliance requirements and avoiding protests. Not only does this approach encourage efficiency, it also ensures both agencies and vendors are aligned throughout the process and reach the same goal. With the resources available, agencies should rethink the traditional methods and look towards a comprehensive, transparent and automated approach.

Noblis' RunAcquisitions® Solution

Built on decades of experience helping agency clients, [Noblis' RunAcquisitions](#) solution secures and manages vendor and government interactions across the acquisition lifecycle, from requests for industry input through contract award, management, and task order closeout. RunAcquisitions helps streamline and accelerate the acquisition process across the entire lifecycle while ensuring compliance with federal regulations. Configurable workflows and role-based permissions are designed to help team members focus on action while maximizing collaboration among team members. By providing secure access from anywhere, RunAcquisitions enables government teams to make defensible award decisions throughout the life of the contract. Whether an agency is looking for a full lifecycle management solution or focusing on a single acquisition phase, Noblis' RunAcquisitions can save time and money while mitigating many of the headaches that come with security, compliance, and contract protests.

About Noblis

We exist to enrich lives and make our nation safer with our shared passion for excellence and innovation.

For more than 25 years, Noblis has been an innovator within the federal government, committed to solving the challenges of today and investing in the mission of tomorrow. As a nonprofit, Noblis works for the public good, bringing together the best possible capabilities, including science and technology expertise and solutions, in an environment of independence and objectivity to deliver enduring impact on federal missions.

Working with Us

Government agencies can access Noblis through a variety of contracting mechanisms. We have several contracts in place and available to Government agencies. We are also a GSA Schedule holder.

For a full list of vehicles, visit noblis.org/contracting or call us at 703.610.2000. Email us at answers@noblis.org.