Grant Thornton

PSC PROFESSIONAL SERVICES COUNCIL

Aligning for Acquisition Success:

Overcoming Obstacles to Results

2016

The 8th Biennial
Professional Services Council
Acquisition Policy Survey

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PSC PROFESSIONAL SERVICES COUNCIL

PROFESSIONAL SERVICES COUNCIL (PSC)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Acquisition Policy Survey, now in its eighth biennial edition, is the only comprehensive survey of federal acquisition professionals. The survey includes extensive interviews with federal employees at all levels who comprise the federal acquisition workforce, from senior leaders to front-line contracting officials to those who oversee their work. We are the only survey that has regularly asked over the last fourteen years about the health and capabilities of the federal acquisition workforce, the impact of perturbations in federal budgets and spending, and the effect of oversight and compliance. This long-term evaluation gives us, and all who are interested in the federal acquisition ecosystem, unique insights.

Over the first eight years of this survey, federal spending on the purchase of goods and services grew significantly, while in the last six years it has declined year-over-year. The size of the federal acquisition workforce was shrinking during the first eight years of the survey, but over the past six years it has recovered in numbers—but not in experience or capabilities. Over the past fourteen years, federal budgets have been marked by long periods of instability and uncertainty, defined by continuing resolutions and government shutdowns.

Through this survey effort, we probed on a set of five core topics currently affecting federal acquisition: workforce, budget, communications and collaboration, access to innovation, and oversight and compliance. While each discrete area affects acquisition outcomes, these elements are interconnected. For example, we were interested in understanding how the acquisition system and its workforce respond to issues such as "innovation" and communications. Obviously the federal acquisition community cannot change the federal budgeting process or the oversight regimes. But there are areas where they have direct control over their actions—such as in workforce training or communications—where further improvements are needed. Overcoming challenges to optimizing each of these individual elements will drive broad based results.

Despite external and internal pressures, the federal acquisition system still has been remarkably resilient and successful. Overwhelmingly, the federal acquisition system delivers to agencies the needed goods and services, when they are needed, and at fair and reasonable prices. Although improvements in federal acquisition must be made rapidly in many areas, including all of those highlighted in this survey, we also appreciate the complexity and diversity of that system.

WORKFORCE

The survey showed mixed results on the status of the acquisition workforce. While respondents reported positive trends in workforce capability, lingering weaknesses in critical skillsets persist. Workforce development and the ability to hire the right talent are key challenges. More than a competency gap, this year's interviewees expressed concern about a capacity gap, wherein the existing workforce, however skilled it may be, simply does not have the time and resources to keep up with demand. The government also continues to suffer from a capability gap when it comes to hiring, training, and retaining acquisition workers, particularly in the face of ongoing retirements of seasoned contracting professionals. All of these factors contribute to an apparent confidence gap, as workers remain unprepared or unwilling to take well-reasoned risks to exploit potential innovations or cost savings, instead defaulting to familiar, often suboptimal, strategies, practices, and even outcomes.

BUDGET

Despite ongoing budget challenges, the message from survey respondents was clear: regardless of the headaches, inefficiencies, and strain, the acquisition community is committed to "getting the job done." That the federal acquisition system has continued to deliver in an age of budget uncertainty is evidence of this fact.

COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION

As with the workforce and budget stability, communication is foundational to successful acquisitions. This message has been repeatedly emphasized by federal leadership, desired by many frontline professionals, and echoed by industry. However, open communication has not been routinely practiced at operational levels. Instead, communication between government and industry is viewed as inherently risky.

INNOVATION

On the whole, respondents are concerned the government does not have a consistent, successful strategy for soliciting, evaluating, and contracting for innovative ideas from industry, whether in the "traditional" or "cutting-edge" contracting space. In fact, the government often views the traditional contracting base as being mutually exclusive from innovative offerors. This concern is further reflected in respondents' confusion about the various meanings of "innovation." This disconnect affects the methods, tools, and barriers for obtaining innovative products and services through the acquisition process.

OVERSIGHT AND COMPLIANCE

Strengthening the relationship between acquisition and oversight officials is a key area where improvements in communication and collaboration could yield significant benefits. Policymakers and oversight bodies need to understand the impact of the requirements they place on an already complex acquisition system that is operating beyond its capacity according to survey respondents. Several key insights include:

- Use of federal procurement as a social policy tool rarely supports efficient and effective federal procurements. Using the government contracting process to advance policy goals–even well-intended ones–creates tension.
- Constantly shifting oversight and compliance requirements are a major impediment to efficiency. Respondents say it is not necessarily oversight requirements themselves, but rather the variability and number of requirements that present significant challenge.
- "Constructive" vs. "destructive" oversight and compliance. Respondents recognized that some oversight requirements yield immediate changes and improvements in acquisition, while others seem aimed at identifying fault and attributing blame after the fact.

The transition to a new president and the start of a new Congress in January 2017 may provide both the opportunity and the impetus for change. As the authors of this survey, we stand ready to work with government officials in finding the best possible solutions to these challenges. We also should not wait to start.

OVERVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

Since 2002, the Professional Services Council (PSC) and Grant Thornton LLP have conducted a biennial Acquisition Policy Survey. The survey captures opinions and insights of federal government acquisition leaders on the current state of the acquisition profession, noteworthy trends, and future challenges and opportunities. The purpose of the survey is to capture perspectives and insights from the acquisition community to inform government leaders and industry executives on the state of federal acquisition.

Representatives from PSC member firms interviewed 80 federal officials, more than in any previous survey. Participants in this year's survey represent a broad cross-section of the federal government, primarily senior acquisition executives, but also front-line contracting professionals, congressional staff, members of the oversight community, and others. Responses give insight into the current perspectives, challenges, and solutions driving acquisition across the federal government. Moreover, the survey responses illuminate discernible trends when combined with results of surveys conducted over the past 14 years. Taken as a larger body of work, hundreds of government acquisition leaders have provided their insights on acquisition and related issues.

This report covers survey findings in five areas: Workforce, Budget Stability, Communication and Collaboration, Access to Innovation, and Oversight and Compliance.

WORKFORCE

The acquisition workforce is a major focus of this survey. We define the acquisition workforce broadly to include not just contracting officers, Contracting Officer's Technical Representatives, and their counterparts, but also program managers, auditors and oversight officials, agency counsel, and other personnel who participate in acquisition.

Participants were asked to assess how important several elements of the acquisition process were to successful outcomes. Respondents ranked the acquisition workforce highest in its impact on acquisition outcomes, with nearly all respondents affording it the highest score (see figure 1). One respondent summed it up succinctly saying, "[W]orkforce capabilities are foundational, [and] training is the key to success in all areas." Interestingly, obtaining "innovation" ranked last in importance, even below the scores for oversight and compliance.

This is a troubling indictment of the current state of affairs and the resources made available or used by that workforce. Agencies have invested significant funding in attracting, retaining, and training its workforce to see so little improvement.

FIGURE 2
Trends and Expected Changes in Acquisition Workforce Capability

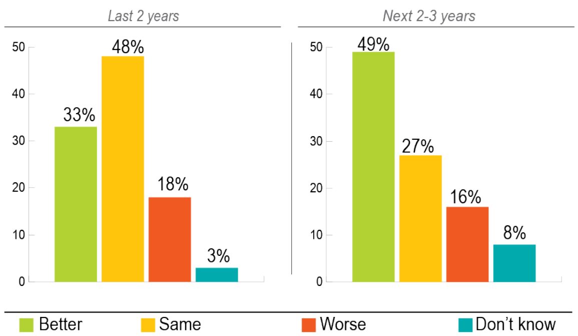
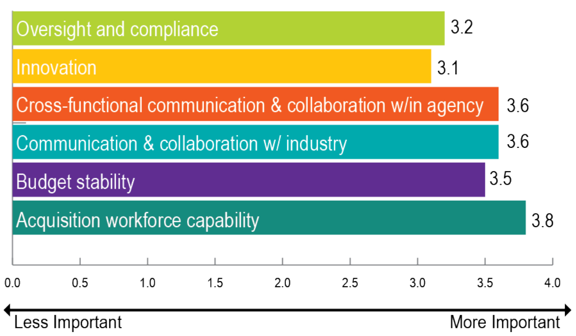


FIGURE 1
Importance of Elements to Achieving Desired Acquisition Outcomes



"[I'm] worried about a 'status quo' approach to some contracts. Again, we need to be sensitive to looking for ways to get better results and we must challenge 'status quo' situations."

CURRENT STATE AND TRENDS

Respondents were asked whether the workforce has improved, stayed the same, or gotten worse over the past two years, and which way these trends will progress over the next two to three years. As shown in figure 2, a third said, on the whole, acquisition workforce capabilities have improved, yet almost half said they remained stable. When looking ahead, trends improve slightly, with almost half expecting workforce improvement and just under a third anticipating them to remain at current levels. In both cases, slightly less than 20 percent said the workforce had worsened, or that they expected deterioration in the future. These trends are consistent with 2014, when over 75 percent of interviewees rated the acquisition workforce as stable or improved.

To further evaluate the workforce, participants were asked to assess specific skill areas and trends in each area over time. Survey results revealed shortfalls in a number of important areas.

For example, selecting appropriate contract type(s) and evaluation strategies was a highlight. It is considered of highest importance to acquisition outcomes by more than 75 percent of respondents and nearly 75 percent assessed the workforce's current abilities in this area positively. Forty-seven percent believed these skills have improved over the last two years, while 42 percent said they remained stable. Looking ahead, respondents split evenly on whether skills would stay the same or improve (see figures 3 and 4).

Developing detailed requirements/scopes of work was assigned the highest priority by 87 percent of respondents. Participants indicated, though, this is an area where the workforce is struggling, with more than half assessing the current state as fair or poor—worst among the skills areas surveyed. Respondents were the bluntest on this capability gap. "This might be the most important and it's what the government does worst," one respondent said, "We're terrible at this." Despite such a poor assessment, 38 percent indicated workforce skills have improved in this area over the last two years, and 53 percent said skills remained stable. Seventy-one percent expected these skills to improve; about a quarter predicted they would remain stable (see figures 5 and 6).

FIGURE 3
Ratings of Importance and Current Workforce Capabilities for Selecting Appropriate Contract Type(s) and Evaluation Strategies

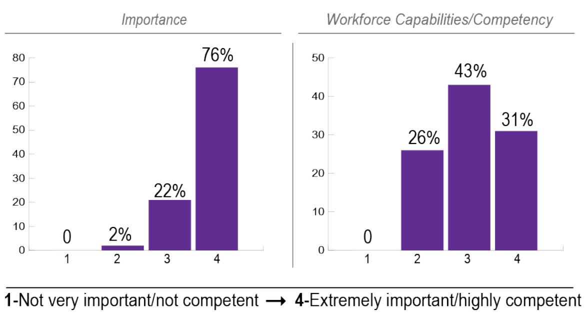


FIGURE 5
Ratings of Importance and Current Workforce Capabilities for Developing Detailed Requirements/Scopes of work

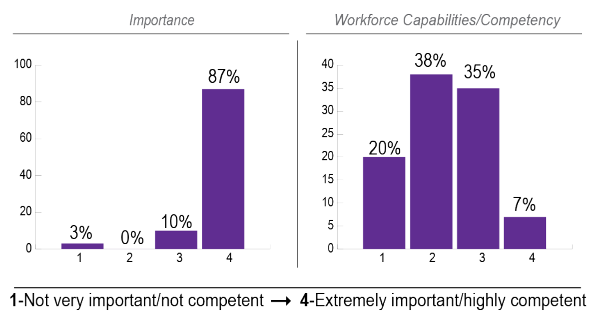


FIGURE 4
Trends in Acquisition Workforce Skills in Capabilities for Selecting Appropriate Contract Type(s) and Evaluation Strategies

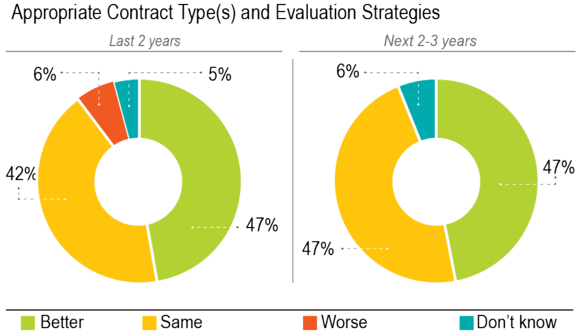
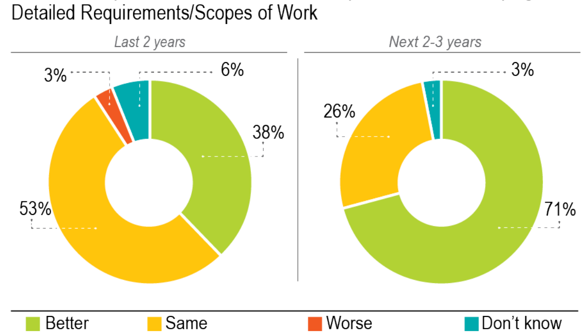


FIGURE 6
Trends in Acquisition Workforce Skills in Capabilities for Developing Detailed Requirements/Scopes of Work



Evaluating technical and price proposals was rated highly in terms of importance, with 87 percent assigning it the highest priority. This was also one area in which survey participants felt their agencies are doing fairly well, with nearly 75 percent rating the workforce competent or highly competent. Thirty-five percent of respondents reported improvement in this area, while 56 percent said skill levels had not changed. One respondent lodged a specific criticism, "[We are] asking for way too much, [but] not always asking for the right or most helpful things; [we are] good at evaluating what we ask for, but don't often come up with a totally different basis for evaluation." Fifty percent of respondents anticipate improvements; 44 percent said things would stay the same (see figures 7 and 8).

FIGURE 7
Ratings of Importance and Current Workforce Capabilities for Evaluating Technical and Price Proposals

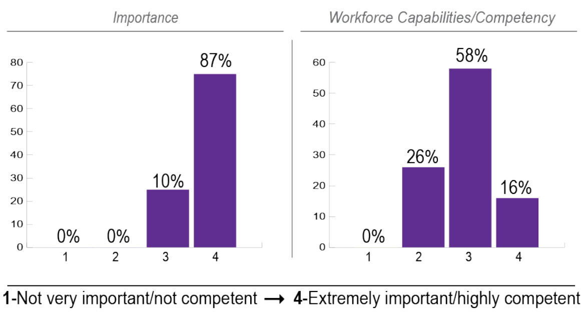
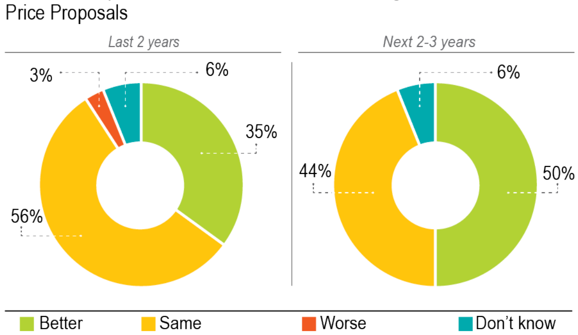


FIGURE 8
Trends in Acquisition Workforce Skills in Evaluating Technical and Price Proposals



In contrast to technical and price evaluations, those surveyed placed less emphasis on defining "technically acceptable" for Lowest Price Technically Acceptable (LPTA) evaluations, assigning it the lowest importance among the skills surveyed. Respondents' assessment of current performance in this area reflected its relatively low priority, giving it middling marks. Twenty-nine percent said these skills improved; while 54 percent said they remained the same. Looking ahead, these trends reversed, with well over half expecting improvement and just under a third predicting stability (see figures 9 and 10).

The relative lack of emphasis reflected many respondents' views on the importance of LPTA, which may be attributable to the larger issues facing the workforce. As one respondent said, "The [Frank] Kendall ['Appropriate Use of Lowest Priced Technically Acceptable Source Selection Process and Associated Contract Type'] memo on LPTA was good, but it really highlights the challenge of getting good information out to the workforce. No matter what he says, it seems to be misunderstood by some in the workforce in problematic ways. Often he is providing high-level guidance, not specific directions to be applied without thinking. LPTA should only be applied for items that are truly commercial and readily available."

FIGURE 9
Ratings of Importance and Current Workforce Capabilities for Defining Technically Acceptable for LPTA Evaluations

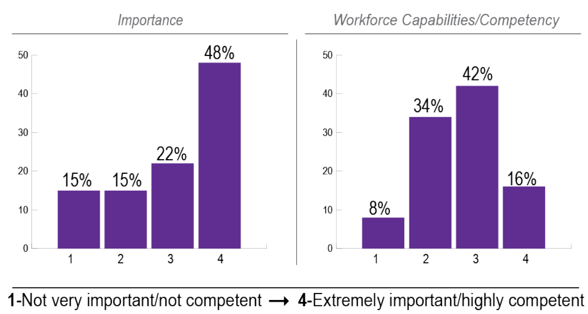
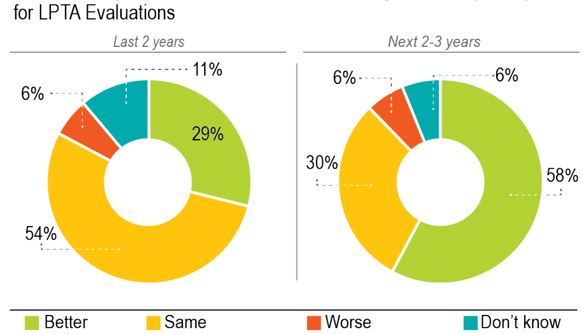


FIGURE 10
Trends in Acquisition Workforce Skills in Defining Technically Acceptable for LPTA Evaluations



Critical thinking and ability to understand contractors' approach was rated highly in importance. However, respondents were evenly split on whether the workforce was performing well in this area. Thirty-six percent thought critical thinking skills had improved. The estimate of future progress showed 50 percent were optimistic critical thinking abilities would get better, while 34 percent expect them to stay the same (see figures 11 and 12).

The gap between current workforce capabilities and where acquisition leaders would like the workforce to be was evident. One respondent lamented the lack of critical thinking in the current workforce, and the exacerbating effects of resource pressures, "There is simply not enough time or experienced personnel to do everything that we need to do or want to do. We need more people who are capable of critical thinking and they must be allowed time needed to do this."

FIGURE 11
Ratings of Importance of Critical Thinking and Ability to Understand Business Approach

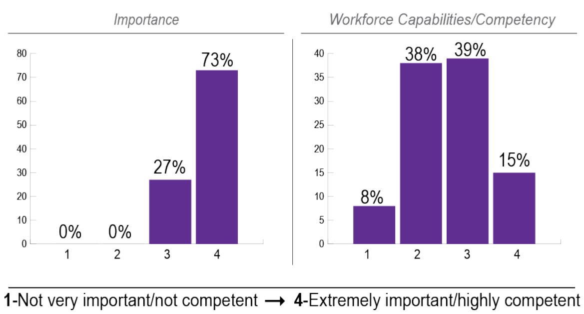
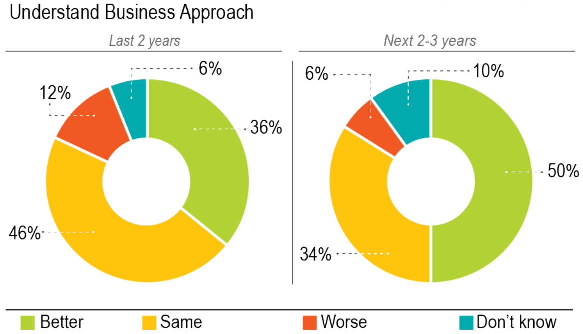


FIGURE 12
Trends in Acquisition Workforce Skills in Critical Thinking and Ability to Understand Business Approach



Negotiation was near the bottom in terms of both reported importance and current workforce capabilities, with one respondent remarking that "Negotiating is a lost skill." A little more than half believed negotiating ability remained stable; under a third reported improvement. Forty-one percent expected continued stability, while 47 percent anticipated improvements to come (see figures 13 and 14).

Some respondents attributed the attrition of negotiating skills to decreased demand due to better availability of pricing information and greater market competition, while others cited workload pressures. One of the less optimistic respondents stated, "[It] makes me ill to see us negotiating deals that are not in the best interests of the taxpayer." Still, at least one respondent was more bullish about negotiating abilities, stating, "[s]ome of the rhetoric about the lack of skills within the government acquisition workforce is unfounded. You bring any industry executives you want, and I'll bring my top COs, and I will win a negotiation every time."

FIGURE 13
Ratings of Importance and Current Workforce Capabilities for Negotiation

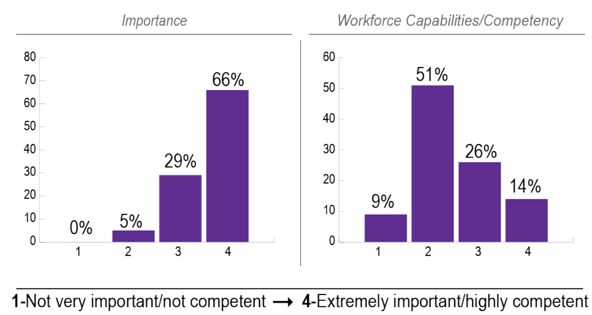
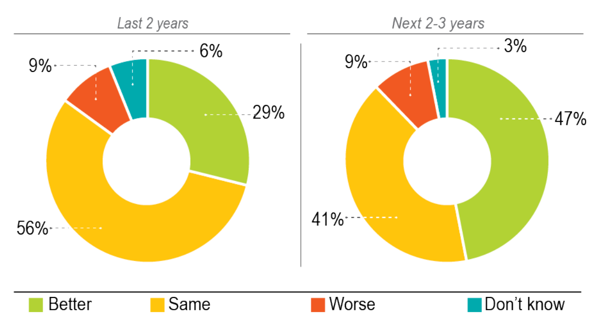


FIGURE 14
Trends in Acquisition Workforce Skills in Negotiation



For executing complex IT acquisitions, respondents assessed the importance of these skills slightly higher than negotiation, though current skills in these areas received similarly poor grades. Twenty-nine percent reported improvements in IT acquisition skills, while 54 percent assessed them as stable. These results reversed when predicting future trends, with 56 percent expecting improvement and 28 percent foreseeing stability (see figures 15 and 16).

There was both optimism and anxiety around the adoption of TechFAR and the Digital Services Playbook as contributing to improvements. One respondent offered a caution, noting, "the TechFAR covers agile, but needs to be expanded [because] unless you're in the agile world, you won't read it." Respondents reported "pockets" of expertise within their agencies and a few stated there is less demand for major IT acquisitions. Some have either moved to a sustainment focus or are employing agile acquisition capabilities and undertaking smaller, rather than larger, more complex IT programs.

Finally, regarding the emerging trend toward buying "as a service" (XaaS), respondents ranked these skills as both the least important and least well developed, with 61 percent rating them as fair or poor. Thirty-two percent of respondents reported improvements over past years, and another 43 percent said skills were stable. Fifty-six percent of the same respondents expect improvement over the coming years, while 26 percent anticipate buying "as a service" skills to remain the same (see figures 17 and 18). Participant responses seemed to reflect continued confusion or lack of familiarity with the nature of buying as a service and its role in federal acquisition. Echoing this sentiment, one respondent observed, "We need a comprehensive and systematic approach. Right now, DoD is not a smart buyer. There is too much opportunity for industry to add-in features or services that are unnecessary." While one noted "Cloud is not new, it's been around forever," few, if any, respondents cited any consumption-based buying examples other than cloud computing or outside of the IT space.

FIGURE 15
Ratings of Importance and Current Workforce Capabilities for Executing Complex IT Acquisitions

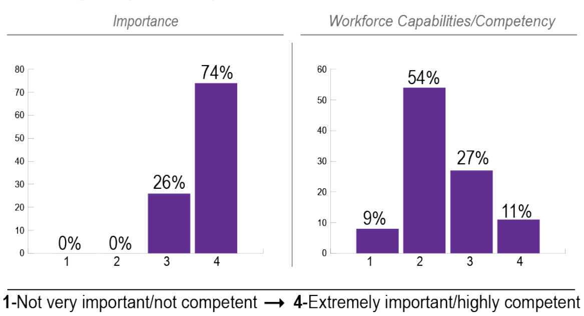


FIGURE 17
Ratings of Importance and Current Workforce Capabilities for Buying "as a service" (XaaS)

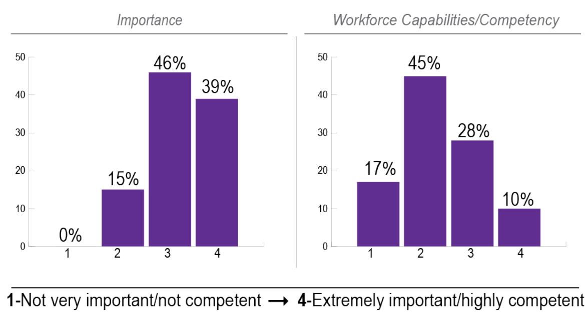


FIGURE 16
Trends in Acquisition Workforce Skills in Executing Complex IT Acquisitions

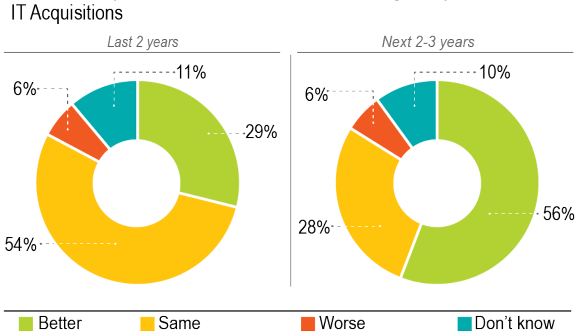
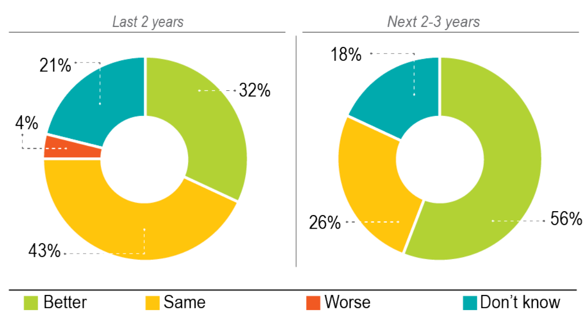


FIGURE 18
Trends in Acquisition Workforce Skills in Buying "as a service" (XaaS)



WORKFORCE AND HIRING CHALLENGES—NOW, AND IN THE FUTURE

In light of skills shortfalls, participants were asked to name the biggest challenges facing the acquisition workforce over the next several years, particularly for rising acquisition professionals. In addition, they were also asked what they are doing to prepare the workforce for these challenges and how difficult it has been to hire individuals with needed skills.

Several interrelated themes emerged. One respondent summarized many of them, saying, "I could spend an hour on this question alone – the challenges with teaching and retaining the millennial generation, and their changing roles; the acquisition workforce of tomorrow really needs strong skills in communication, team leading and building, things we're not teaching today; preparing for how things are changing." Many cited generational issues as a major challenge—both in terms of replacing retiring baby boomers, and of training and retaining the millennials being hired to replace them. "The federal employment construct of a 'job for life' is not the mindset for millennials," one respondent observed. Even when agencies hire new employees, many do not stay with them long enough to reap the benefits of the training they receive.

Further, ongoing retirements mean new hires do not benefit from mentoring and on-the-job training at the hands of their more experienced colleagues, which many identified as a critical component in gaining a grasp of the full spectrum of acquisition. "If you don't have people on the job who can model thinking, show what questions need to be asked, and here's what you need to understand about the buying environment, it's a challenge. You can't learn that from a book. We're doing a really great job pumping people through formal acquisition training, but on the job execution, seasoning, tolerance for mistakes so you can try new things, etc., is a challenge."

CAPACITY, NOT CAPABILITY

Agencies are struggling to keep up with changes in policy while acquisitions are on the rise. Workforce respondents said, "Workload is the biggest challenge. The number of obligations and actions continue to rise but the staff remains the same…OFPP and other initiatives to increase the workforce have not helped." A number of participants cited new oversight and compliance requirements, like the labor policy Executive Orders, as challenges. Other commonly reported barriers included budget pressures and the need to develop critical thinking skills. Critical thinking was viewed as particularly important to understanding the marketplace as agencies implement federal initiatives such as category management and agile acquisition, which necessitate a deeper knowledge of what is being purchased than might traditional models.

PREPARING THE WORKFORCE

Respondents cited a number of strategies they are employing to prepare their workforce to meet these challenges. Many touted on-the-job training and traditional education, such as that provided by the Federal Acquisition Institute (FAI) and Defense Acquisition University (DAU). Notably, some acquisition leaders also identified more far-reaching or transformational efforts they are undertaking to develop the acquisition workforce for the future. Several indicated that they are making use of rotational assignments to immerse workers in experiences across the range of acquisition functions. As one noted, "Staff rotations… sacrifice specialization in the short-term, but yield greater impact in the future." Another said of their rotational assignments, "We're throwing them into the deep end with a mentor as a 'lifeguard,' giving them the broadest range of experience possible…We're trying to promote that there can be innovation in acquisition…and will try anything within the confines of the rules…It gives them opportunities to try new and different things, and to keep engaged, which is hard by the nature of the work. There's never been a better time or greater need for it than today."

A number of other leaders told us they have begun to implement formalized workforce career development and succession plans. Rather than workers becoming "leaders by accident," these models seek to identify and develop workforce leadership potential early in their career. One leader summed up how agencies, and the federal government as a whole, need to rethink their workforce development training paradigms:

"[We] need to define the entire career development continuum and define career paths that managers can adhere to, to give [the workforce] something to aspire to [and] set different expectation for leaders and staff…to get people thinking about how to ensure organizational readiness, and deliberate thoughtful succession planning. Right now we have a one-size fits all competency model, but what each role does is very different and we haven't defined or developed these differences in a competency model."

Such career development models "build strategic leadership and require a diversity of experience," for which rotational assignments help to build a foundation. In addition to rotations and formal workforce development plans, respondents cited new data analytics capabilities as driving their workforce strategies, including determining the right workforce balance—the appropriate mixture of government and contractor personnel to achieve agency mission needs.

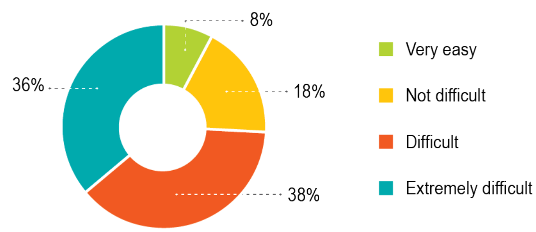
HIRING CHALLENGES PERSIST

While the federal acquisition leaders quoted above are beginning to break the mold, the reality is that the status quo prevails for most. Perhaps the most stark data points revealed by the survey is that 36 percent consider hiring difficult and 38 percent consider hiring extremely difficult. These data points have remained nearly constant since the 2014 survey (see figure 19).

Even if an agency can attract qualified candidates to an acquisition position and compensate them sufficiently to compete with the private sector, the federal hiring process simply takes too long and makes it too difficult to get the right people in the right place. "The federal hiring process is not easy or efficient," said one understated survey participant, echoing many others.

FIGURE 19

How difficult is it to hire employees with the needed skills



TAKEAWAYS

- **The survey showed mixed results on the status of the acquisition workforce. Respondents reported seeing positive trends in workforce capability, but revealed lingering weaknesses in certain critical skillsets.**
- **Workforce development and hiring persist as key issues.**
- **More than a competency gap, this year's interviewees expressed concern about a capacity gap, wherein the existing workforce, however skilled it may be, simply does not have the time and resources to keep up with demand.**
- **The government still suffers from a capability gap when it comes to hiring, training and retaining acquisition workers, particularly in the face of ongoing retirements of seasoned contracting professionals.**
- **All of these factors contribute to an apparent confidence gap, as workers remain unprepared or unwilling to take well-reasoned risks to achieve potential innovations or cost savings, instead defaulting to familiar, often suboptimal, strategies.**
- **These are troubling attributes and results, given the central role that the acquisition workforce must play in the federal procurement ecosystem.**

"There is simply not enough time or experienced personnel to do everything that we need to do or want to do."

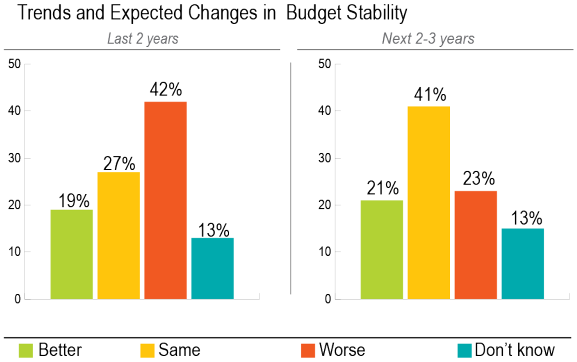
BUDGET

If the workforce is the engine that powers the federal acquisition system, then funding is the fuel. Respondents have reported the effects of budget pressures on their ability to execute missions since the inception of this survey. While budget debates receive a great deal of attention, Congress has not passed all of the regular appropriations prior to the start of the new federal fiscal year since 1994. While many trends come and go, budget uncertainty seems to never go out of style.

CURRENT STATE AND TRENDS

When asked whether budget conditions have improved, stayed the same, or gotten worse over the past two years, 42 percent of respondents said things had gotten worse, while 27 percent said the situation had remained stable, and 19 percent thought things had improved. Over the next two to three years most anticipate little change, with 41 percent of respondents expecting things to stay the same. However, 23 percent anticipate increased budget instability while 21 percent predict improvement (see figure 20).

FIGURE 20
Trends and Expected Changes in Budget Stability



IMPACT OF UNSTABLE FUNDING

The survey asked participants about how the repetitive use of continuing resolutions has affected their acquisition strategies and planning. Despite their generally unfavorable assessment of budget conditions, respondents conceded that it is not a new development and they are learning to deal with it. Many believed that the government shutdown in October 2013 was the low point, and since then, agencies have been able to mitigate at least some of the consequences of "chaos budgeting." As one respondent put it, "We are in a stop/start environment, which does not work well for acquisitions." Another noted that while there will always be budget challenges, "Smart contracting officers have been able to navigate around them."

Budget instability exacerbates the capacity issue. Respondents bemoaned the increased workload caused by the current budget environment, especially because delays in the budget push procurements later in the year. As many as 50 to 75 percent of contracting actions take place in the fourth quarter. The contracting workforce is experiencing substantial strain from increased demand with diminishing resources. Recent cuts focused on agency headquarters personnel, which often includes the contracting staff. Respondents also pointed to the increased use of funding modifications as a leading cause of the increased workload for both federal and private sector contracting professionals.

MITIGATION STRATEGIES

Respondents reported the use of several different acquisition strategies to diminish the impact of a chaotic budget environment. These strategies include the use of bridge contracts, the move to IDIQ vehicles, and the use of firm-fixed-price (FFP) deliverable based contracts. Some respondents also noted tight budgets put focus on supposed cost saving mechanisms, such as Low Price Technically Acceptable (LPTA).

TAKEAWAYS

- **Despite ongoing budget challenges, the message was clear: regardless of the headaches, inefficiencies, and strain, the acquisition community was committed to "getting the job done."**
- **The federal acquisition system has continued to deliver during an extended period of budget instability.**

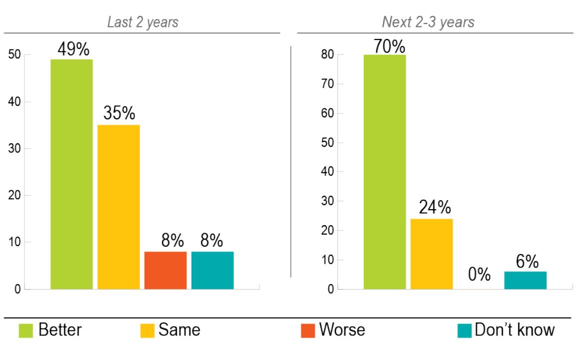
COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION

There was broad agreement among respondents that communication and collaboration—both with industry and within and between federal agencies—is an important component of a well-functioning acquisition system. Despite the attention given by agency leadership and survey respondents to promoting communication and collaboration, however, there are mixed views on whether significant improvement is evident. One respondent noted, "There are long-standing 'friction points' resulting from years of distrust. We need an environment where we work together once a contract is awarded," while another highlighted that "the negotiation process has become very contentious."

CURRENT STATE AND TRENDS

Almost half of respondents reported improvement in communication and collaboration over the past two years, while over a third observed no change. In the next two to three years, respondents overwhelmingly expected things to get better, with less than a quarter forecasting that they would stay the same and none predicting it to get worse (see figure 21).

FIGURE 21
Trends and Expected Changes in Communication and Collaboration



BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION CONTINUE

As with innovation, the acquisition workforce's gap in skills and experience was called a barrier to more effective communication. When the acquisition workforce does not fully understand the rules, they are not likely to be comfortable fully applying them. This results in contracting personnel who are reluctant to share information with industry even when they are authorized to do so. "We have all of the tools we need [to effectively communicate]. It all comes down to workforce experience," one respondent noted. Another stated, "We are constantly telling the workforce not to be afraid of protests. Acquisition decisions should not be made from a risk-averse point of view just to reduce the risk of a protest." Unfortunately, according to those surveyed, this message has not permeated to the frontline acquisition workforce.

Respondents frequently referenced the Office of Federal Procurement Policy (OFPP) 2011 and 2012 "Mythbusters" memos as important initiatives designed to strengthen communication. Others interviewed had never heard of them. The Department of Defense recently referenced them in their updated 2016 Source Selection Procedures. Hopefully this will spread the message for more open communication to those in the acquisition workforce who have not yet heard it.

Industry days and draft RFPs were highlighted as additional, important tools for engaging industry. One respondent noted that, even beyond the actual information sharing, industry days "help develop empathy between the players." Some respondents noted the importance of the government using these tools to obtain feedback and improve the acquisition, rather than just "check a box." One respondent expressed concern about final RFPs released with only minor typographical changes from their draft version, despite significant industry input. Workload challenges and delays caused by budget uncertainty were named a barrier to more meaningful industry days or issuing draft RFPs.

Survey participants noted the importance and desirability of hosting and attending conferences and other events as tools to promote communication and collaboration between industry and government. Past government scandals have reduced government travel for conferences and even attendance at local events, though this is slowly returning to normal.

Internal communication and collaboration within the government is just as important as government-industry communication, according to those surveyed. One respondent noted, "Everyone acknowledges the need, but it is not happening." This disconnect was reported to be especially problematic between contracting teams and the requiring activities. This disconnect between contracting professionals and their customers, the requirement owners, leads to increased risk of acquisition strategies failing to yield the desired outcomes.

PROMOTING FEEDBACK AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Several respondents mentioned OFPP's Acquisition 360 initiative, which is intended to provide feedback from all stakeholders–including industry–on the effectiveness of select procurements. It is in its early stages, so little information about its effectiveness has been released. Some feared it would evolve into yet another "check-the-box" exercise.

TAKEAWAYS

- **The ability of government and industry to communicate effectively throughout the acquisition lifecycle is critical to acquisition success.**
- **Although this message has been reportedly emphasized by federal leadership, the message has not permeated the acquisition workforce.**
- **Open communication has not been routinely practiced at operational levels. Instead, communication between government and industry is viewed as inherently risky.**

ACCESS TO INNOVATION

Innovation continues to be a watchword, with a number of programs and structures put in place to drive innovation within federal agencies (see figure 22). Not all of these initiatives are purely acquisition focused, but showcase a larger theme over the last few years of looking beyond traditional solutions and techniques to solve government's biggest problems. While many respondents reported progress in tapping into these innovative new programs, others expressed some skepticism, both in the government's ability to innovate and whether the emphasis on innovation is warranted or even fully understood.

A number of interdependent initiatives that seek to tap into cutting-edge commercial capabilities and foster innovative government service delivery are shown below:

FIGURE 22: DRIVING INNOVATION IN FEDERAL ACQUISITION

GSA: 18F & TECHNOLOGY TRANSFORMATION SERVICE

"18F . . . helps other federal agencies build, buy, and share efficient and easy-to-use digital services. We're a team of technology experts that work with agencies to diagnose problems and then work alongside agency teams to find the right solutions." GSA has also created the "Technology Transformation Service" that brings together the work of 18F, the Presidential Innovation Fellows program, and the Office of Citizen Services and Innovative Technologies.

https://18f.gsa.gov/

http://www.gsa.gov/portal/content/129918

U.S. DIGITAL SERVICE: TECHFAR HANDBOOK, DIGITAL SERVICES PLAYBOOK AND MORE

The U.S. Digital Service harnesses best practices in product design and engineering to transform government service delivery. Among its current initiatives are streamlining VA's online benefits claims process and modernizing the U.S. immigration system. Previous key deliverables included the U.S. Digital Services Playbook—a collection of "13 key 'plays' drawn from successful practices from the private sector and government [to help] build effective digital services"—and the TechFAR Handbook that highlights existing flexibilities in the Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR) that agencies can use to implement the playbook, principally with contractor support. A number of federal agencies are also setting up their own digital services teams.

https://playbook.cio.gov/

https://playbook.cio.gov/techfar/

https://www.whitehouse.gov/digital/united-states-digital-service

FITARA

The Federal Information Technology Acquisition Reform Act (FITARA) directed sweeping changes to how the government invests in and manages IT through enhanced transparency and improved risk management; the Federal Data Center Consolidation Initiative; Government-wide Software Purchasing Program; leveraging the Federal Strategic Sourcing Initiative; and numerous other actions.

DIUX

Located initially in Silicon Valley, the Defense Innovation Unit Experimental (DIUx) "will help to cultivate and facilitate a lasting relationship with new innovators...and those who don't always work with DoD, to help expand its innovative ecosystem of ideas." This move by DoD to establish a Silicon Valley "presence" is also being copied by several other federal agencies.

http://www.diux.mil/

INNOVATION LABS

A number of federal agencies have started innovation labs—such as HHS' IDEA (Innovation, Design, Entrepreneurship and Action) Lab—to foster collaboration and leverage innovative ideas within their agencies and across the government. OMB has instructed all federal agencies to establish an "innovation lab" activity.

CHALLENGES AND PRIZES

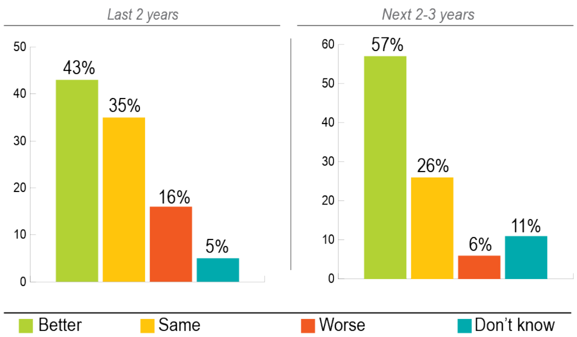
More than 80 agencies across the federal government are administering challenge and prize competitions. These include technical, scientific, ideation, and creative competitions where the U.S. government seeks innovative solutions from the public, bringing the best ideas and talent together to solve mission-centric problems.

www.challenge.gov/

CURRENT STATE AND TRENDS

Forty-three percent of respondents said that access to innovation had gotten better over the past two years and over a third said it remained stable. Fifty-seven percent expected it to improve in the next two to three years, with 26 percent predicting stability and very few expecting deterioration. The dichotomy between respondents' current and future assessments indicates that while the need for innovation has taken hold as a priority, in theory, implementing it in actual practice remains a challenge (see figure 23).

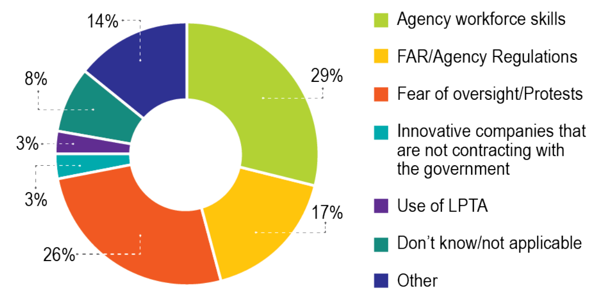
FIGURE 23
Trends and Expected Changes in Access to Innovation



INHIBITORS OF INNOVATION AND CURRENT INDUSTRIAL BASE CAPABILITIES

Reflecting the workforce challenges reported above, when we asked participants about the most significant inhibitors to obtaining innovative solutions to meet their needs, the most frequently cited barriers include: agency workforce skills (29 percent), fear of over-sight or protests (26 percent), and the FAR or agency regulations (17 percent) (see figure 24). Among those things not cited as inhibitors: the inability of con-tractors to offer innovative solutions and innovative companies choosing not to participate in federal contracting. The prevalent use of the LPTA source selection process was also not viewed as an inhibitor to innovation.

FIGURE 24
Barriers to Innovation



These inhibitors are interconnected. Acquisition workers' inexperience means they tend to focus on compliance and don't understand the flexibilities in the FAR. As a result, they tend to be overly risk-averse out of fear of protests or punishment, rather than trying new and different things. As one survey participant put it:

> *"Acquisition offices rarely want to be the first. Just because something hasn't been tested, it shouldn't mean 'no' or 'don't do it,' but 'let's test it'. At some point, you need to try new methods, but motivations differ with incentives. If something goes right, you save money or improve technology, you get a handshake. But if something goes wrong, you lose a protest, you get fired. If there is no GAO precedent or case law, the answer is no; oversight doesn't love innovation."*

Others agreed that an aversion to risk inhibits innova-tion, but questioned the basic premise that innovation is truly understood or desired in federal acquisition. "No one understands what innovation actually means," said one participant. "Innovation is often called IT by government, but that's not innovation, it's an enabler…We need to make sure people use the word the same way: an opportunity to generate value that was not previously perceived or observed, while accepting risk, or introducing something new to a system that hasn't used it before. Don't confuse in-novation with invention." Another said, "There's too much innovation for innovation's sake. Industry needs to better articulate how and why that innovation will benefit veterans, taxpayers and employees."

With respect to the ability of the "traditional" contracting base to deliver innovative solutions, the majority of respondents believed while the capabilities are there, the incentives often are not, and government does a poor job of signaling its desire for innovation. As a result, industry and government both default to familiar solutions. However, at least one survey participant believed, "If we ask clearly, the creative industrial base will provide amazing options."

ATTRACTING NEW MARKET ENTRANTS AND ATTEMPTING NEW APPROACHES

The survey asked participants what they are doing to attract non-traditional contractors. In contrast to their purported desire to access new and different capabilities, their strategies for doing so were more familiar. A number cited 18F, the Agile BPA, micro-purchases, digital services, Other Transaction Authorities (OTAs), and other recent techniques for infusing cutting-edge capabilities into the government. Others pointed to more traditional techniques, such as industry days, interfacing with professional and industry associations, establishing formal supplier relationship programs, and additional methods of communicating with vendors. A few noted they are working to change requirements for past performance to make it easier to bring on companies that have never performed work for the federal government. Many of the strategies are focused on small business. Still others asserted the current contracting community can provide all of the needed capabilities or, conversely, that the government acquisition environment is not hospitable or attractive to innovative entrants. Said one, "Start-ups would be nuts to do business with the federal government."

The survey also asked about innovative or unique approaches to acquisition. Respondents pointed to a wide range of ongoing initiatives intended to spur innovation, including many being spearheaded by the General Services Administration (e.g.,. category management, the acquisition gateway and related "product and price comparison tools," and vendor self-evaluation methods). Others mentioned "outcomes-based value," which may be obtained using a Statement of Objectives (SOO) rather than a traditional Statement of Work (SOW), and a growing emphasis on incentive-fee contracts. A few are looking at using new technical proposal oral presentations, including video presentations and interview-style arrangements. Others reported they are using social media and other communications tools, such as GSA's Interact portal, to encourage vendors to submit unsolicited proposals for new ideas.

TAKEAWAYS

- **The energy being devoted to innovation is immense, though the benefits are not readily apparent.**
- **On the whole, the government does not seem to have a consistent, successful strategy for soliciting innovative ideas from industry, whether in the "traditional" or "cutting-edge" contracting space–which the government often views as being mutually exclusive of each other.**
- **"Innovation" means different things to different people. Some view "innovation" as being alternative acquisitions techniques—regardless of what is acquired. Others looks to the offer being something different, even if traditional acquisition techniques are used. The confusion in what is asked may contribute to the wide variations in responses.**

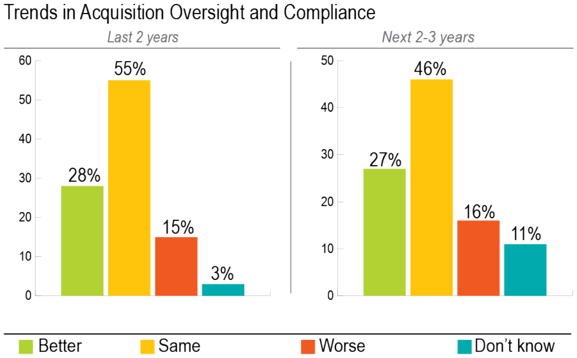
OVERSIGHT AND COMPLIANCE

Oversight and compliance have long been defining aspects of the federal contracting landscape. Many respondents noted the substantial burden of oversight and compliance for both contractors and federal acquisition personnel. Some recently added requirements were seen as valuable, while others were considered beyond what is necessary to foster a competitive, transparent, and responsible acquisition system. As one respondent put it "Oversight plays an important role to help us understand what we should and shouldn't be doing, but the pendulum has swung way too far and now negatively impacts the ability to innovate and tolerate risk."

CURRENT STATE AND TRENDS

The survey asked respondents to assess how oversight and compliance had changed over the last two years and how they expected it to change over the next two to three years. The survey also asked them to identify the most and least valuable compliance and oversight requirements for both government and industry. Finally, respondents identified the biggest compliance burdens for industry. Fifty-five percent said oversight and compliance stayed the same over the past two years, while 28 percent said it improved. Looking ahead, 46 percent expected things to remain stable, while 27 percent anticipated improvement. A few (16 percent) felt the oversight and compliance environment would worsen (see figure 25).

FIGURE 25
Trends in Acquisition Oversight and Compliance



A few common areas emerged when respondents were asked to identify the most and least valuable compliance and oversight requirements for both government and industry, and what requirements they view as most burdensome:

- **Inventory of Services Contractors** – many respondents questioned the value of the congressionally-mandated inventory of services contractors. Some asserted that they saw this mandate as primarily a political instrument designed to enable Congress to better understand the number of contractor jobs among their constituents.
- **Overuse of Executive Orders** – Respondents voiced significant concern about the Fair Pay and Safe Workplaces (FPSW) and other social policy Executive Orders. Respondents highlighted their worry about their workforce's ability to understand and enforce these rules. One respondent noted that FPSW "is one of the most far-reaching regulatory changes of the last decade."
- **Executive Compensation Reporting** – as with the inventory of service contractors, respondents questioned the value of executive compensation reporting to agencies and to acquisition outcomes.
- **Data Calls** – responding to data calls was seen as a significant burden. Many respondents felt that much of the data they are required to submit is never used.

Interestingly, the survey results showed significant overlap in the requirements listed as most and least valuable. This disconnect could result, at least in part, from the survey participant's specific role in the acquisition system (eg. acquisition execution vs oversight). Views of an oversight requirement may depend on whether they are the one receiving a report or writing it.

OFPP launched the government-wide category management initiative as an industry proven approach to better buying and managing the government's purchasing power from an enterprise level. Several respondents listed Category Management as a valuable initiative and good idea only "if we do it right."

USING ACQUISITION FOR SOCIOECONOMIC GOALS

Of particular concern was the increased emphasis on imposing "social" responsibilities on the acquisition system, such as the Fair Pay and Safe Workplaces, Trafficking in Persons, and Contractor Paid Sick Leave Executive Orders and their corresponding regulations. Many respondents expressed significant worry about their workforce's ability to understand and implement these rules. "People are looking for contracting officers to be the police enforcing these rules, but contracting officers don't have the time or expertise to play that role. Most people don't know [the Fair Pay and Safe Workplaces rule] is coming." Many respondents were sympathetic to the objectives of these social policies, but felt they should be implemented as part of a new labor law regime, not as part of contracting compliance.

REVOLVING ACQUISITION REFORM INITIATIVES AND ACCUMULATING POLICIES

Respondents noted the challenges posed by congressional acquisition reform, though more concern was expressed for the pace rather than their substance, "New waves of oversight and compliance from the [National Defense Authorization Act] have been a challenge. My staff is overwhelmed just responding to data calls." There was also a concern that changes in Congress and their staff have reduced the acquisition expertise in the legislative branch, and that this lack of experience would lead to some poorly thought out acquisition initiatives. Some respondents lamented that new acquisition reforms were being considered before the results of the last round can be judged.

Respondents also pointed to the magnitude of rule changes, both from Congress and the executive branch, as one of the greatest challenges facing the acquisition workforce,

"Learning and implementing the changing rules, regulations and policies [will be their greatest challenge.] We have no process in place yet for training in and dissemination of new policies as they are rolled out. Training is not taken into consideration until the policies are issued and then everyone is scrambling to build training courses to teach the new requirements."

Another emphasized that last year alone, there were well over 100 policy changes to be implemented. The rapidly changing oversight and compliance regime does not just increase inefficiencies and extend the procurement cycle, it also discourages innovative approaches; contracting officers uncomfortable with their understanding of the rules are less likely to push those rules to their limits.

“CONSTRUCTIVE” VS. “DESTRUCTIVE” OVERSIGHT

Respondents highlighted the difference between “constructive” versus “destructive” oversight. From their perspective, constructive oversight has the objective of improving the quality of acquisition. Constructive oversight requirements may be perceived as burdensome, but respondents understood the potential positive benefits of such requirements. This includes peer reviews and mechanisms for ensconcing leadership attention throughout the acquisition lifecycle. On the other hand, destructive oversight is focused more on punishing mistakes after the fact, with no immediate positive benefit. Inspectors General (IG) investigations were most often cited in this regard, and perceived to be more about punishing supposed culprits than improving acquisitions.

Respondents noted IGs can often access better data from contractors than contracting officials can, as they have subpoena power. Respondents suggested IGs rush to “slap the hand” of a contracting officer whose mistakes came from a lack of information rather than malicious intent. They acknowledged the obvious need for IG investigations, but felt they too often pointed fingers at honest mistakes, long after the mistake could possibly be remedied, with no benefit to acquisition outcomes. Such behavior can have the negative effect of promoting a risk-averse culture and thus hampering successful outcomes and innovation.

TAKEAWAYS

The relationship between acquisition and oversight officials is a key area where improvements in communication and collaboration could yield significant benefits. Policymakers and oversight bodies need to understand the impact of the requirements they place upon an already complex acquisition system that may be operating beyond its capacity. Several key insights include:

- **Use of federal procurement as a social policy tool rarely supports efficient and effective federal procurements. Using the government contracting process to advance policy goals–even well-intended ones–creates tension.**
- **Constantly shifting oversight and compliance requirements are a major impediment to efficiency. Respondents believe it is not necessarily oversight requirements themselves, but rather the number and variability that presents a significant challenge.**
- **“Constructive” vs. “destructive” oversight and compliance. Respondents recognized that some oversight requirements yield immediate changes and improvements in acquisition, while others seem aimed at identifying fault and attributing blame after the fact.**

FACING THE FUTURE

With the presidential election looming, participants were asked which current policies they would like to see continued, which should be stopped, and what new ones should be adopted. Respondents expressed broad support for at least some of the policies and practices put in place during the Obama administration (e.g. FITARA implementation; 18F/Digital Services Playbook/TechFAR; DoD's Better Buying Power; Category Management; Acquisition 360 reviews; and Mythbusters, etc.) Though there was not unanimity among respondents, one said, "None [of these initiatives] should be stopped. They are all at least good starting points with room for improvement to make corrections as the marketplace changes."

Not surprisingly, there was likewise no consensus on specific practices that should be discontinued. A number of respondents emphasized some policies instituted through the acquisition system—many of which bear a tangential relationship to how services are acquired and managed—are a substantial barrier to achieving successful acquisition outcomes. "[We need to] stop issuing new stuff [and] review the policies in place to see which ones we could eliminate," said one respondent. "The layering effect [of policies] makes it harder than it needs to be." As another put it, "We don't need more policy 'help'."

Participants did offer creative suggestions about new initiatives they would like to see in the new administration. A number called for consolidating procurement authority and systems. "A single procurement system for all of government…would be a good investment," one participant asserted. Others called for further empowering or even reinventing OFPP. "As currently established, it's mostly ignored, not providing meaningful guidance," one respondent said. "Meaningful acquisition improvements are mostly happening in DoD." Others looked to the FAR Council for policy changes, "It's slow and cumbersome, but Executive Orders have been way overdone, and are politically driven, not business driven."

One popular suggestion was freezing procurement policy changes. "A set release schedule every year, making changes effective in the future, not retroactive," was suggested. Others sought a Procedures, Guidance and Information to complement the FAR. Similar accompaniments exist for the DFARS and other agency regulations. Some of the more aspirational among our respondents want a multi-year budget cycle or at least timely appropriations, calling that the most important element in effective acquisition strategy and execution.

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