

SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION VENDOR COMMUNICATION PLAN

1) **Statement of agency commitment.**

We are committed to working collaboratively with industry to improve vital communications in all phases of the acquisition process. This document provides our agency plan for reducing unnecessary communication barriers with industry, publicizing communication opportunities, and prioritizing engagement opportunities for high-risk, complex programs or those that fail to attract new vendors during re-competition. We will share this plan with our acquisition team members to clarify the nature and schedule of engagement opportunities for industry.

To improve industry communication, SSA will:

- Establish agency-wide communications, policies, and practices through a strategic, integrated approach that includes all members of the acquisition team.
- Develop communication systems that foster transparency, accuracy, efficiency, and message unification.
- Communicate with industry partners early, frequently, and constructively.
- Include small businesses in our communications with industry.
- Include industry partners that we have not worked with in the past.
- Create agency-wide procurement forecasts to identify opportunities for additional communication with industry.
- Protect nonpublic information from disclosure, including industry's confidential information and the agency's source selection information.

2) **Identification of senior agency and bureau (if applicable) official responsible for promoting engagement.**

Michelle King, the Deputy Commissioner for Budget, Finance, and Management (DCBFM) is the agency official responsible for promoting industry engagement. The DCBFM actively encourages industry engagement through discussions with other senior agency officials responsible for programmatic execution, and by initiating policies and practices within the directly subordinate organization responsible for agency procurement.

3) **Brief description of efforts undertaken or planned to reduce barriers and promote engagement.**

General examples of barriers to competition in the Federal Government include: overly restrictive statement of work and evaluation criteria; short proposal response times; insufficient market research by Contracting Officer's Technical Representatives (COTR); and failure to consider small business sources. As part of our commitment to further reduce these barriers and promote engagement with

industry partners, we have several ongoing efforts.

- Discourage unnecessary barriers to competition in our agency procurement policies, especially in the form of overly restrictive statement of work and evaluation criteria.
- Actively review all requirement packages upon receipt for aspects that may result in barriers to competition.
- Publicize future procurement opportunities on our acquisition and grants forecast webpage.
- Designate specific points of contact within our acquisition office to handle industry inquiries for upcoming procurement opportunities.
- Identify acquisitions that should include industry input in the pre-award phase and the extent of the required engagement.
- Identify acquisitions suitable for small business and socio-economic set-asides, and actively publicize these acquisitions to ensure high degrees of interaction with these specific industry partners.
- Conduct an industry day or a pre-solicitation or pre-proposal conference, when appropriate.
- Encourage and conduct one-on-one engagements with industry in order to facilitate open information exchanges. Sharing information with vendors and engaging in open exchanges and dialogue during the early stages of procurement can provide unique insight from industry and improve the quality of agency requirements and processes. This type of interaction enhances competition and leads to efficiencies in the acquisition process.
- Issue Requests for Information to seek industry comments on upcoming procurement opportunities.
- Issue draft solicitation packages to solicit industry comments on developing agency specifications, as well as proposed evaluation criteria and instructions to Offerors.
- Allow time for exchanges and discussions during the proposal evaluation process, as needed.
- Require COTRs to take mandatory training on market research as part of their internal certification/accreditation. This training focuses on identifying the sources offering the optimal technological fit to meet the agency's needs, as well as consideration of small business sources during procurement planning.

In addition to our ongoing efforts, we also plan to undertake the following initiatives.

- Provide further training to employees and send out reminders on the methods available to reduce barriers to competition.
- Require the preparation of an acquisition schedule timeline that provides adequate proposal response times for all procurements.

- Implement practices to discourage short proposal response times with sensitivity to requesting submittal of proposals near major holidays.
- Expand the use of checklists and templates to improve the process for documenting, screening, and approving sole source and limited source justifications.

4) Criteria for identifying which acquisitions must include vendor input in the pre-award phase.

We will use the following criteria for identifying which acquisitions must include vendor input in the pre-award phase.

- Re-competitions of prior procurements where the requirement did not provide the solution needed, either due to non-performance of the awardee (especially in cases of terminations for cause) or due to inadequate definition of the requirement.
- Acquisitions where we issued a competitive solicitation but only one Offeror responded and market research suggests that more than one vendor may be able to perform the requirement.
- Acquisitions for requirements in which the Government is uncertain about the capabilities of potential Offerors identified in market research.

Acquisition plans for high-risk, large-dollar value (\$10 million and over), and complex acquisitions of products and services must include a comprehensive vendor engagement strategy that:

- Includes at least one industry day, or a pre-solicitation or pre-proposal conference;
- Allows for a reasonable amount of one-on-one engagement;
- Allows time for discussions, as needed, and in accordance with Federal Acquisition Regulations (FAR) Part 15, during the proposal evaluation process; or
- Requires a written justification to the file as to why these steps are unnecessary.

Contracting Officers (CO) may apply any or all of the techniques indicated above for acquisition plans below the \$10 million threshold if the CO determines that the acquisition warrants or may benefit from increased vendor engagement. COs must include an acquisition milestone plan for new procurements valued in excess of \$1 million, whether or not discussions are anticipated. By planning in advance for the possibility of discussions and incorporating them into acquisition milestone plans, the agency will maintain the necessary flexibility to raise and resolve any issues and ensure that time constraints do not hinder us from engaging in discussions.

5) Publications of engagement events to include industry days, small business outreach sessions, pre-solicitation conferences, and request for proposal question and answer sessions, etc. (posted and updated regularly using “special notices” function on www.fedbizopps.gov and on other sites identified by the agency).

Engagement events will include industry days, small business outreach sessions, pre-solicitation and

pre-proposal conferences, and request for proposal question and answer sessions. We will post these events using the existing “special notices” function on the Federal Business Opportunities website www.fedbizopps.gov.

6) **Brief description of roles and responsibilities of agency personnel.**

- **Senior Agency Officials** - Senior Agency Officials include the Commissioner and Deputy Commissioner of SSA, Associate and Deputy Associate Commissioners, and other high-ranking agency personnel that interact with industry. These individuals provide high-level and general programmatic and procurement information to industry partners. Senior Agency Officials are responsible for disseminating agency policies within their organizations, and ensuring that staff implement the policy direction of the Senior Procurement Executive.
- **COs** - Play a key role in the exchange of information with industry partners across all phases of the procurement cycle. Because of their high visibility to industry partners and their sole authority officially binding the Government via contract, the CO is a principal agent in exchanges. Serves as the Source Selection Authority in awarding contracts and responsible for leading or facilitating communication engagement activities. Establishes and maintains ground rules for information sharing and ensures high integrity and fairness during all phases of the acquisition process. Uses information gained through the vendor communication exchange process to influence solicitation requirements and the source selection process, including contract type, level of small business participation, multiple awards, payment structure, and evaluation criteria. Collaborates with the Office of the General Counsel and Small Business Program representatives.

The CO also addresses efforts to remove barriers to competition. Attends vendor communication meetings, as appropriate, to better understand industry capabilities and requirements in order to enhance the Government’s solicitation requirements. Under Competition in Contracting Act, 41 U.S.C. Section 253(a) (1) (A), COs have a duty to promote and provide for competition and to provide the most advantageous contract for the Government. Therefore, COs must be proactive and take any necessary steps or actions to maximize competition.

- **Contract Specialists** - Support the CO in all aspects of the procurement process. Attends communication exchange meetings and may represent the CO. Actively seeks out engagement opportunities with industry, where feasible, and engages in vendor outreach activities. Attends vendor communication meetings to better understand industry capabilities and requirements in order to enhance the Government’s solicitation requirements. Assists agency program managers and Contracting Officer’s Technical Representatives in conducting market research and identifying potential vendor partners, including small businesses.
- **COTRs** - Provide regular and procurement specific exchanges with industry partners in their role as the Government’s monitor of contractor performance. Plans and coordinates communication exchange activities with the CO and Contract Specialist. Uses information gained through the vendor engagement process to enhance the quality of agency requirements and budget estimates. Attends vendor communication meetings to better understand industry capabilities and requirements in order to enhance the Government’s requirements contained in the statement of work, performance work statement, or statement of objective.

- **Agency Program Managers** - Provides an active and direct effect on the formulation and execution of agency acquisitions. Provides strategic advice and direction to agency COTRs in the development of requirements and establishment of agency technology priorities. Agency Program Managers have regular interaction with industry while performing market research and information gathering.
- **Chief Information Officer (CIO)/Chief Technology Officer** - The SSA CIO acts as the agency's Chief Technology Officer, and these responsibilities rest with the Deputy Commissioner for Systems. The CIO provides input and direction across all areas within the agency involving information technology and telecommunications, especially in the arena of identifying new and emerging technologies. These efforts routinely involve procurement and are coordinated through a specialized staff, the Office of Systems Contracting, Acquisition, Planning and Program Staff. In this capacity, the CIO conducts regular vendor outreach and communication efforts.
- **Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business Utilization** - Plays a key role in communicating the agency's acquisition message to industry, specifically small businesses. Conducts small business outreach conferences and meetings to assist businesses in understanding agency business practices and procedures, and small business contracting opportunities.
- **General Counsel** - Provides legal advice and policy guidance to agency personnel that interact directly with industry partners. Provides guidance and opinions to agency officials to ensure the proper conduct of interactions with industry.
- **Ethics Officers** - Provides guidance and feedback to ensure we address issues concerning organizational conflicts of interest and do not unnecessarily impede proper engagement between the agency and vendors. Provides guidance to ensure proper business practices, procurement integrity, and avoidance of personal conflicts of interest.
- **Other Agency Officials** - Includes personnel from the Office of Communications/Press Office and the Freedom of Information Act Office. Disseminate procurement related information to industry and collect information from industry. Industry partners often contact these individuals first.

7) **Training and awareness efforts for employees and contractors.**

We will strive to improve upon our policies and practices as they relate to interaction with industry partners. As part of this effort, we will deliver training to all agency personnel that communicate with industry to ensure they understand their roles, responsibilities, and the appropriate communication vehicles for industry engagement (see Appendix A for training matrix). We will also share a list of key facts and strategies to assist agency personnel in promoting fair and appropriate engagement during various acquisition phases (see Appendix B for key facts and strategies).

8) **Existing policies and regulations.**

We will encourage all agency personnel who communicate with industry to use the following

relevant FAR and agency-specific policies.

- *FAR Part 5: Publicizing Contract Actions*
Mandates the publicizing of Government contract opportunities and award information in order to: increase competition; broaden industry participation in meeting Government requirements; and address small business concerns in obtaining contracts and subcontracts.
- *FAR Part 10: Market Research*
Prescribes policies and procedures for conducting market research to arrive at the most suitable approach to acquiring, distributing, and supporting supplies and services.
- *FAR Part 11: Describing Agency Needs*
Requires that agencies describe their needs to promote full and open competition and only include restrictive provisions or conditions to the extent necessary to satisfy the needs of the agency or as authorized by law.
- *FAR Part 15: Exchanges with Industry Before Receipt of Proposals*
Provides methods for engaging in early exchanges between Government and industry.

FAR Part 34: Major System Acquisition

Describes acquisition policies and procedures for use in acquiring major systems.

- *Agency Specific Policies*
Our Administrative Instructions Manual System and Acquisition Handbook provide specific agency guidance and policies on the interaction of agency personnel and industry partners. This information, which we publish on the agency's internal website, is supplemental to the FAR guidance.

9) Plans to follow-up with employees and industry representatives within 6 months of posting the plan, and further refinement and improvement of communications.

As part of our ongoing and continuous improvement measures, we will explore the feasibility of implementing the following.

- Posting our industry acquisition communication plan, as well as links to relevant Office of Management and Budget documents (e.g., policy letters, and “myth-busters” documents) to our Intranet policy page.
- Obtaining customer satisfaction feedback from industry personnel via direct conversations, as well as soliciting anonymous feedback through our external public facing website.
- Configuring our public facing website to:
 - > Provide further information on strategic procurement planning, including detailed forecasts of significant requirements expected in the next fiscal year.
 - > List all current large contracts and blanket purchase agreements with information on the value, contractor, and purpose of the contract or agreement.

- > Allow businesses to upload capability statements and marketing documentation. Our acquisition office will act as an active repository of industry information to facilitate programmatic market research.
- Disseminating internal guidance and feedback in training efforts for employees to ensure effective use of communication approaches with the vendor community.
- Designating a staff level point of contact to facilitate industry outreach and interaction between industry and agency officials.
- Conducting semi-annual industry days across different industry market sectors (e.g., facilities or information technology services), when appropriate.
- Establishing mandatory contract specific participation goals for small businesses to strengthen subcontracting opportunities.
- Developing a comprehensive industry engagement strategy tailored and suited for the procurement of specific identified acquisitions.
- Identifying in the SSA's acquisition forecasts and plans those procurements that are likely to involve additional communication with industry.
- Using new and innovative technological solutions to tap the understanding of industry partners during pre-request for proposal phases, such as market research. Examples of such solutions include the use of the following online wikis for posting draft requirements document and obtaining vendor feedback.
 - > <http://citizen.apps.gov/>
 - > <http://www.betterbuyproject.com/forums/29690-market-research-and-requirements-definition-phase>
- Publicizing communication engagement opportunities on the Federal Business Opportunities website (www.fedbizopps.gov), including pre-solicitation and pre-proposal conferences for high dollar, high-risk, or complex programs, or those that fail to attract new vendors during re-competition.

APPENDIX A - TRAINING MATRIX

Agency Personnel	Responsibilities	Communication Vehicle to Industry	Training Needed	Frequency of Training
Senior Agency Officials	High-level procurement forecast and information dissemination to industry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Face-to-Face Briefings • Emails <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social Security Administration Internet website 	Ensure officials are aware of responsibilities concerning information dissemination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As needed
Contracting Officers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dissemination of procurement-specific information • Market research/information gathering • Information dissemination to industry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Office of Acquisition and Grants (OAG)-lead training • Meetings • Emails • OAG website • Phone calls 	Ensure contracting officers are aware of responsibilities concerning industry interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ongoing
Contracting Officer's Technical Representatives (COTR)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Market research/information gathering • Requirements development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OAG-lead training • Meetings • Emails • OAG website • Phone calls 	Ensure COTRs are aware of responsibilities concerning industry interaction and market research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ongoing
Program Managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Market research/information gathering • Requirements development • Information dissemination to industry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OAG-lead training • Meetings • Emails • OAG website • Phone calls 	Ensure program managers are aware of responsibilities concerning industry interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As needed
Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business Utilization (OSDBU)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information dissemination to industry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ongoing training • Meetings • Emails 	Ensure staff is familiar with Office of Management and Budget policies concerning interaction with industry partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As needed

APPENDIX B KEY FACTS AND STRATEGIES

- Government officials can generally meet one-on-one with potential Offerors as long as no Offeror receives preferential treatment. These meetings need to be coordinated and take into consideration the phase or stage of the specific acquisition.
- Generally, there are no legal reporting requirements or restrictions on meeting with contractor representatives during the pre-solicitation or market research phase of a procurement. These meetings and discussions with contractors can provide information useful to all parties and, therefore, should be encouraged.
- Rigidly restricting communications with industry will not prevent a protest; in fact, limiting communication might actually increase the potential for a protest.
- To conduct formal discussions (after receipt of proposals) is a key decision for the CO to make after consulting with other members of the acquisition team. Avoiding formal discussions solely because of schedule concerns may be counter-productive, may compromise obtaining the best value, and may cause delays and other problems during contract performance.
- Exchanges with industry are not likely to increase the chances of receiving an unsolicited proposal, and submission of an unsolicited proposal will not affect the procurement schedule. The unsolicited proposal process is separate from the process for a known agency requirement that we acquire using competitive methods.
- Providing feedback via post-award debriefings is important for both Offerors and the Government; therefore, agencies should generally provide feedback, whenever possible. Conducting post-award debriefings does not increase the potential for a protest.
- Organized industry days, as well as pre-solicitation and pre-proposal conferences, are valuable opportunities for the Government and industry to exchange information on upcoming requirements and the offerings available in the commercial marketplace.
- Communications with industry are not the responsibility of a single member of the acquisition team. The Government can obtain valuable feedback from industry on items such as technical requirements, terms and conditions, pricing structure, performance metrics, evaluation criteria, and contract administration matters. The feedback from industry improves both the contract award and subsequent contractor performance.
- The Government should not shortchange industry with overly limited windows of communication and exchange in the request for proposal stage, particularly by allowing for short proposal preparation timeframes. When the Government provides industry with a short proposal preparation period, the Government may receive fewer proposals, and the ones it receives may not be as well developed. If the Government does not provide industry with sufficient time to prepare proposals, industry may perceive that the Government is not truly interested in competition or quality.

- The Government should not limit exchanges with industry in ways that stifle competition or favor incumbents at the expense of other competitors. The Government loses when we limit ourselves to the companies we already work with. Instead, we need to look for opportunities to increase competition and ensure that we provide all industry, including small businesses, fair consideration.