



Department of State

Vendor Management Plan

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United States Department of State

Acquisition Management Directorate

Category Management Program

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1. Introduction

1.1. Department's Mission

The U.S. Department of State (Department) leads America's foreign policy through diplomacy, advocacy, and assistance by advancing the interests of the American people, their safety and economic prosperity. To successfully execute its mission, the Department operates an annual procurement portfolio of over \$11 billion and almost 6,000 unique vendors. Additionally, the President's Management Agenda challenges all agencies to deliver 21st Century services by modernizing information technology, increasing transparency and accountability, and building an advanced workforce. Each of these directives will have a role in developing the Department's relationships with its vendors.

1.2. Vendor's Role in Mission Delivery

While the Diplomatic Mission of the Department is a uniquely governmental function, many aspects of operating and managing a strong organization are not uniquely governmental functions and can therefore be supplied by or supported by the vast vendor community, both domestic and foreign. Therefore, it is critical to maintain a viable and innovative industrial base, promote worldwide economic development, and support mission-critical functions for every bureau within the Department. This includes frequent communication and engagement with our critical small business community, with additional information found on the Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business Utilization (OSDBU) [website](#). Access to current market information is critical for Department Program Managers (PMs) as they define requirements and develop acquisition strategies in collaboration with the assigned Contracting Officers (COs). The Department encourages productive communications between all bureaus and our industry partners to ensure a solid understanding of the marketplace and to negotiate and award contracts for effective solutions at reasonable prices.

1.3. Basic Principles of Working with Vendors

Early, frequent, and constructive engagement with industry is a fundamental practice when planning Department acquisitions. Conversely, inadequate industry engagement in the acquisition planning process can reduce the clarity of Department requirements and the effectiveness of our vendor engagements, especially the contracts that manage individual working relationships. Artificial barriers to engagement often stem from an abbreviated planning horizon or misconceptions among members of the acquisition community about appropriate vendor communications. The Department is committed to investing in longer-term acquisition planning to alleviate these issues.



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Vendor communications are critical at each stage of the Industry Engagement Process—basic market awareness, pre-award market research, solicitation and award for a specific contract, post-award communication and detailed performance expectation setting, operational performance, and contract administration. Basic business and social good practices are to be extended by and to all stakeholders in the vendor / Department operating environment—simple practices such as responding to emails or phone calls within 24 hours, keeping appointments to the times and durations that have been previously scheduled, or directly explaining reasons for any changes. These are the most basic principles with which to conform by both vendors and the Department. The remainder of this Plan will detail additional ways in which the Department is working to continuously improve its relationship with vendors.

1.4. Department Vendor Management Plan

The purpose of this document is to establish basic operating principles of engaging with vendors that will apply across the entire Department. This Vendor Management Plan will mature as both Department personnel and vendors become comfortable with the framework, and all stakeholders become increasingly familiar with the expectations of both the vendor community and the internal operations of the Department. The Vendor Management Plan will be reviewed annually and updated, as needed.

1.5. Compliance Requirements

OMB memo [M-19-13](#) “Category Management: Making Smarter Use of Common Contract Solutions and Practices” directs all agencies to “develop effective vendor management strategies to improve communications with contractors, especially those that support mission critical functions.” Each agency is required to develop and maintain a Vendor Management Plan that, in part, must “address pre-award industry engagement strategies” and “post-award strategies for vendor dialogue... [which] may include top suppliers or high priority requirements....” OFPP’s 2011 memo’s [“Myth-Busting”: Addressing Misconceptions to Improve Communication with Industry during the Acquisition Process](#)” requires all agencies to develop a Vendor Communication Plan. This Plan is a combined document satisfying both the Vendor Management Plan and Vendor Communication Plan requirements. It provides an in-depth description of the Department’s Industry Liaison (pre-award) program and its Vendor Management (post-award) program and the steps that the Department is taking to go above and beyond to create the optimal experience for its potential and current vendors.

1.6. Department Stakeholders Involved in Vendor Engagements

The Department cannot conduct successful industry engagement and vendor management (VM) without Department-wide cooperation and participation, from Department leadership



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down to the individual contract level. The following section outlines the key stakeholders involved in pre- and post-award vendor engagements and their roles.

1.6.1. Senior Procurement Executive

The Department's Senior Procurement Executive (SPE) is responsible for the general direction of the Department's vendor engagement efforts and receives support from the highest management levels within the Department's acquisition program. Based on the direction of the Senior Procurement Executive, the following positions have the shared responsibility to execute an effective Vendor Management Plan: Bureau Executives, OSD/BU Director, Category Management Director and the Department's Competition Advocate.

The SPE is responsible for promoting vendor engagement, approving updates to this Plan as needed, and supporting the Heads of Contracting Activity's (HCAs) implementation and oversight of the Plan.

1.6.2. Heads of Contracting Activity

HCAs are responsible for overseeing the implementation of vendor engagements, removing any unnecessary communication barriers, and taking active steps to increase engagement with industry, including large and small businesses.

1.6.3. Program/Project Manager (PMs)

PMs assist with VM strategies using their expertise in specific functional areas, such as assisting the CO in determining the type(s) of exchanges with industry that would be most beneficial and should take place before receipt of proposals. PMs also participate in procurement forecast meetings and acquisition planning.

PMs maintain proper business relationships with contractor employees in a cooperative effort involving the CO and other program personnel in contract management. When working with industry, PMs always keep the CO advised of issues relating to interactions with industry.

1.6.4. Contracting Officer's Representative (COR)

CORs are responsible for providing technical direction and ensuring contractors do not perform inherently governmental functions or unauthorized personal services and that contract management controls are enforced. CORs also support personal services reviews on contracts susceptible to improper contractor relationships.

CORs may engage in technical communication with contractors or issue technical direction but are not authorized to initiate and/or modify contracts. CORs should always keep the CO advised of issues relating to interactions with the contractor, both the regular reporting requirements and through ad hoc communications as both necessary and appropriate.



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CORs also participate in VM initiatives by providing feedback and suggestions for communication improvements on an ongoing basis.

1.6.5. Contracting Officer (CO)

The CO, with input from program office and other Government advisory groups, determines the type(s) of exchanges that will take place with industry before receipt of proposals. The CO also reviews business operational requirements and consults with the Competition Advocate and OSDDBU for opportunities to maximize small business participation. The CO is responsible for determining, prior to award, that a contract does not include inherently governmental functions or unauthorized personal services and that controls are in place to protect against contract management vulnerabilities.

After a contract award, the CO develops and maintains proper business relationships between contractor employees and program personnel involved in contract management. The CO acts as a conduit to leverage those relationships toward improving the Government acquisition process. The CO is also responsible for investigating any claims of inappropriate interaction with contractors and taking appropriate action if necessary to ensure proper contractual relationships. They may engage in technical communication with contractors such as providing debriefs and entering CPARS and, unlike CORs, are authorized to initiate and/or modify contracts and issue technical direction.

1.6.6. Acquisition Innovation Advocate

The Acquisition Innovation Advocate (AIA) works with the Department's workforce to encourage the testing of new acquisition ideas and better ways of executing existing practices and working with other agencies to share best practices and lessons learned in the Acquisition Innovation space. The AIA can influence the acquisition techniques used by the Department and therefore the experience of vendors. To contact the Department's AIA, reach out to AcqInnovation@state.gov.

1.6.7. Industry Liaison

The Industry Liaison serves as a conduit among acquisition stakeholders and promotes strong Department-vendor communication practices. As part of its Myth-Busting campaign to challenge entrenched misperceptions held by the federal acquisition workforce about procurement-related engagements between public and private sectors and promote innovative vendor communication practices, the Office of Management and Budgets (OMB), Office of Federal Procurement Policy (OFPP) issued a series of memorandums. In the fourth memo, *Strengthening Engagement with Industry Partners through Innovative Business Practices* (April 30, 2019), OFPP requested that each federal agency designate an Industry Liaison to accelerate the federal government's adoption of industry engagement best practices. OFPP's desired



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outcomes include the federal government increasing its understanding of the commercial marketplace, attracting new contractors, and encouraging current industry partners to adopt new processes and develop, test, and offer more modern solutions. The memo recommended the Industry Liaison's responsibilities include, at a minimum, the following:

1. Promote timely responses to general vendor requests where appropriate, including from new entrants and small businesses
2. Assist program and acquisition personnel to develop strategies for engaging potential vendors that can provide capabilities necessary to achieve agency missions
3. Review and update, as appropriate, the vendor communication plan to improve interaction throughout the acquisition lifecycle
4. Work with the Agency's Acquisition Innovation Advocate (AIA) and OSDDBU to drive practices that improve communication with vendors and counter misconceptions that drive a risk-averse culture
5. Encourage vendor feedback on agency acquisitions, such as through the use of Acquisition 360, and, to the extent possible, monitor marketplace interest in agency requirements
6. Share stories on the Innovation Hub (via the government-wide Acquisition Gateway) to promote the adoption of good communication practices

To contact the Industry Liaison, reach out to IndustryLiaison@state.gov.

1.6.8. General Counsel

The General Counsel provides guidance and trainings to Department staff on legal issues surrounding communications with industry such as "Conflicts of Interest" and "Discussions and Other Exchanges with Offerors."

1.6.9. Ethics Officers

Ethics Officers provide guidance to Federal employees regarding maintaining proper business relationships with contractor employees, financial conflicts of interest, and accepting gifts.

1.6.10. Small Business Technical Liaison

The Small Business Technical Liaison (SBTL) is a full-time employee of the Acquisition Management Directorate (AMD), the Department's contracting entity. The SBTL serves as a strategic partner to Department leaders and business support teams, providing creative and thoughtful solutions to small business requirements and needs. The SBTL promotes awareness of Department products and services focused on small, women, minority, and veteran owned business enterprises and entrepreneurs through outreach directly to businesses and organizations serving these businesses. The SBTL also serves as the Small Business Advocate.



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1.6.11. OSDBU

OSDBU works to maximize prime and subcontracting opportunities for U.S. Small Businesses. To support this mission, OSDBU reviews the Department's acquisition strategies to increase the probability of participation by small businesses as prime and subcontractors, including utilizing small business and socioeconomic set-aside programs. OSDBU assists in facilitating small businesses in seeking payments, unduly restrictive contracting actions, investigating complaints, and training. OSDBU hosts numerous events throughout the year to engage with the small business community and learn about new companies that have never worked with the Department. OSDBU also assists COs in researching small businesses to identify capabilities that might align with Department requirements.

1.6.12. Acquisition Policy Directorate and Business Operations

The Department's Acquisition Policy Directorate and Business Operations personnel keep acquisition staff apprised of information and training on vendor communication by issuing guidance through Acquisition Alerts, postings on the Department's Intranet, and training sessions.

1.6.13. Other Officials

All Federal employees interacting with contractors are responsible for ensuring their interactions are fair, impartial, and in compliance with Federal and Agency acquisition and ethics policies. All Federal employees are responsible for protecting sensitive information. Information Security Officers assist with issues related to safeguarding sensitive information.

2. Vendor Management

VM builds upon the principles of Supplier Relationship Management (SRM) to strategically engage with the Department's industry partners after contracts are awarded and throughout the contract lifecycle. The Department is committed to actively engaging with its vendors to foster and promote a better experience of doing business for both the Department and the vendor. Department initiatives to connect with industry do not end once a contract is awarded. The following are the key objectives of VM:

1. Promote honest and open dialogue and enhance executive-level communications
2. Take advantage of supplier capabilities to uncover potential opportunities for innovation, reduce costs, and drive better mission outcomes
3. Align on core strengths and areas for improvement in the relationship between the Department and its vendors



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2.1. Expectations of Our Vendors

The Department encourages all vendors to abide by the below expectations in order to create the optimal VM experience. VM is a two-way engagement and if vendors do their part, the Department will be better equipped to improve its vendor engagements and relationships moving forward.

2.1.1. Business Behaviors

Vendors should clearly detail their corporate capabilities and explain explicitly how they will meet the scope of each contractual requirement – overpromising and underdelivering are not acceptable; vendors should understand their own limitations and constraints. Regular reporting requirements will be explicit in each contract.

2.1.2. Communications of Conditions of Performance

By establishing an environment of collaboration, we hope that vendors will feel empowered to communicate issues with the Department early and often. Miscommunication often results in redundant work, wasting both vendor and Department resources. To avoid this challenge, the below list details guidelines regarding the conditions of performance.

1. Vendors should report regularly to the CO and the COR (weekly, monthly, quarterly, etc.). The specific reporting plan and schedule of vendor communication should be included and mutually agreed upon during the contract kickoff.
2. Vendors must invest in understanding the Department's security clearance requirements and the guidance associated with maintaining the appropriate clearance for the work being performed.
3. Vendors must review and understand the Department's data sharing/ownership conditions.

2.2. Department VM Initiatives

The Department is currently engaging in several large- and small-scale VM initiatives to strengthen and improve its relationship with its vendors. These ongoing initiatives are not exhaustive due to the evolving nature of the Department's VM efforts.

2.2.1. Strategically Engage at All Levels with Vendors Across the Department's Portfolio

To gain a deeper understanding of the Department's relationships with its vendors and identify opportunities for improvement, the Department is committed to proactively and strategically engaging with vendors at the executive level throughout the procurement portfolio. This includes collaborating with OSDBU to strengthen connections with small businesses. In vendor engagements, vendors are encouraged to provide the Department with open and honest



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feedback on their business with the Department, as well as any opportunities for the Department to improve the way it does business with vendors. Department leadership is committed to continuing and expanding these engagements and implementing vendor-identified improvement opportunities in a timely manner.

2.2.2. Encourage Open Communication Between Vendors and Program Offices, COs, and CORs

One of the best ways to improve a vendor's experience of working with the Department is for vendors to actively and frequently engage with their Department contacts, as detailed in the three (3) guidelines below.

2.2.2.1. Vendor Communication with COs/CORs

Vendors are encouraged to communicate frequently and proactively with their COs/CORs throughout their contract periods of performance. COs/CORs should be made aware of any changes that might affect the contract performance, such as staffing changes, and are also available to answer any day-to-day questions the vendor may have. Timely communication in this manner can prevent larger issues from arising later in a contract.

2.2.2.2. Vendor Communication with Customers/Program Offices

In addition to regular communication with contracting staff, vendors are also encouraged to communicate with their program offices regarding any specific issues related to their work. For example, vendors that conduct outside the contiguous United States (OCONUS) work should communicate any OCONUS-specific factors they are familiar with, that the Department may not be aware of, at the beginning of a contract. This type of communication will help to avoid delays and issues later on as well as equip the Department to handle similar issues in the future.

2.2.2.3. Vendor Feedback

Finally, to foster continuous improvement in the Department-vendor relationship, regular two-way feedback is encouraged. The Department asks its contracting and program staff to provide consistent feedback to vendors, while vendors are encouraged to share feedback to the Department on how it can better work with its vendors. Regular feedback will help the Department to enact change in a timely and easy manner and will help enable vendors to change their practices without having to wait for CPARS evaluations.

2.2.2.4. Long-term Department VM Goals

To justify the necessity of a robust VM program for the Department, two primary pillars should be considered:



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1. Establishing and maintaining effective channels for vendor feedback to identify opportunities for improving the business relationship and achieving optimal mission outcomes
2. Ensuring the Department provides consistent and direct feedback to vendors throughout the entire contracting lifecycle

These factors highlight the need for the Department to ensure it is deriving the maximum value from the vendors for the relevant contractual requirement(s), given the resources invested. To get the most out of a vendor's service, it is important to track and measure their performance. With regular communication and feedback, the Department can develop a transparent relationship with the supplier, which helps in finding areas of improvement with quick solutions.

Ongoing management spans relationship building through two-way communication, technology integration for seamless transactions, and alignment on goals. The primary long-term goal of the Department's VM program is to ensure compliance with regulations, proactively monitor risks, and build resilient supply networks while delivering maximum value.

3. Industry Engagement

3.1. Industry Liaison Program

The Industry Liaison utilizes an array of vendor outreach and communication initiatives to achieve the following program goals:

1. Socialize vendor communication best practices to facilitate a more informed dialogue with the industry that:
 - a. Invites market insights on innovative practices/solutions.
 - b. Encourages advanced and detailed review of new and existing opportunities to maximize participation.
2. Facilitate timely and consistent messaging to the vendor community from the Department's program offices and principals through a holistic messaging strategy and coordinated calendar.
3. Leverage its communication platforms to complement messaging strategy and drive productive engagement.
4. Ensure the *Working with Department of State*, hosted on the Department website, provides intuitive access to valuable information for prospective and current vendors working with the Department.



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5. Publish engagement events, including industry days, small business outreach sessions, pre-solicitation conferences, RFP question and answer sessions, etc. on the Department of State Industry Liaison LinkedIn page.

3.1.1. Principles of Industry Engagement

The Department believes both government and industry have shared equities in the success of the acquisition program and together strive to deliver maximum value for taxpayer dollars.

Achieving the desired outcome is reliant on the following principles:

1. Early and frequent communication with potential contractors leads to better acquisition outcomes.
2. Encouraging a diverse industrial base in support of the Department's overall acquisition program is essential to drive price competitiveness and innovation.
3. Removing communication barriers and undertaking efforts to increase competition reduces risk in delivering on the Department's mission by augmenting capacity in the marketplace and achieving budget flexibility.
4. Focused industry communication is required in both pre-award and post-award environments to realize better outcomes for the Department's outsourced capability needs.
5. To attract the best talent and lower barriers to entry for the supplier base, a dynamic (and collaborative) approach to procurement gives our practitioners the flexibility to ideate and incentivizes industry to offer optimal solutions to meet the needs of the Department.

3.2. Dispelling Common Misconceptions

The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) published a series of documents addressing various myths on the topic of vendor relationships across the Federal Procurement sector, as listed below:

["Myth-Busting: Addressing Misconceptions to Improve Communication with Industry during the Acquisition Process \(February 2, 2011\)"](#)

["Myth-Busting 2: Addressing Misconceptions and Further Improving Communication During the Acquisition Process \(May 7, 2012\)"](#)

["Myth-busting 3: Further Improving Industry Communication with Effective Debriefings \(January 5, 2017\)"](#)



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[“Myth-busting 4 – Strengthening Engagement with industry Partners through Innovative Business Practices \(April 30, 2019\)”](#) [A list of additional misconceptions can be found in this OMB memorandum, attachment 2.]

The Department is committed to fostering open communication with industry. To strengthen our communications, we must first identify and address our communication gaps. Some of the misconceptions that hinder effective communication between government and industry and their clarifications are:

1. **Misconception:** “We can’t meet one-on-one with a potential offeror.”
Clarification: Government officials can generally meet one-on-one with potential offerors as long as no vendor receives preferential treatment.
2. **Misconception:** “A protest is something to be avoided at all costs - even if it means the government limits conversation with industry.”
Clarification: Restricting communication won't prevent a protest, and limiting communication might actually increase the chance of a protest - in addition to depriving the government of potentially useful information.
3. **Misconception:** “Industry days and similar events attended by multiple vendors are of low value to industry and the government because industry won't provide useful information in front of competitors, and the government doesn't release new information.”
Clarification: Well-organized industry days, as well as pre-solicitation and pre-proposal conferences, are valuable opportunities for the government and for potential vendors - both prime contractors and subcontractors, many of whom are small businesses.
4. **Misconception:** “Getting broad participation by many different vendors is too difficult; we're better off dealing with established companies we know.”
Clarification: The government loses when we limit ourselves to only the companies with whom we already work. Instead, we need to look for opportunities to increase competition and ensure that all vendors, including small businesses, get fair consideration.

In order to dispel these misconceptions and strengthen Department-vendor communications, the Department supports the following best practices:

1. Communicate early, frequently, and constructively with industry
2. Continually strengthen the partnership between the OSDDBU and the acquisition community to facilitate effective communications with small businesses and the various subgroups
3. Expand competition to include vendors that the agency has not worked with in the past



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4. Identify which procurements in the agency's published procurement forecast (e.g., for mission-critical complex, state-of-the-art requirements or those that fail to attract new vendors during recompetes) may require enhanced pre-solicitation communication strategies
5. Implement vendor engagement strategies for high-risk, large-dollar, and complex programs that:
 1. Include at least one industry day or a pre-solicitation or pre-proposal conference,
 2. Allow for a reasonable amount of one-on-one engagement,
 3. Allow time for discussions, as needed and in accordance with FAR Part 15, during the proposal evaluation process, or
 4. Require a written justification as to why the above steps are unnecessary
6. Protect non-public information, which includes vendors' confidential information and the agency's source selection information

3.3. Commitment to the Development of Small Businesses and Other Socioeconomic Vendor Criteria

OSDBU works with industry partners, acquisition professionals, and program offices to maximize prime and subcontracting opportunities for U.S. Small Businesses. OSDBU reviews proposed acquisitions to ensure that Department procurements consider small businesses to the maximum extent practicable in all acquisitions. OSDBU extends its commitment to developing small businesses by continually ensuring that legislative mandates and Executive Orders regarding small and disadvantaged business utilization are carried out and formulating policies to implement such legislation. Most important is OSDBU's commitment to increasing small business participation in Department acquisitions. This is accomplished through outreach efforts, such as hosting small business events and conferences, and providing training to small businesses and acquisition personnel. The Department encourages both new and established small businesses to participate fully in the broad acquisition process.

3.3.1. Department Initiatives with Small Businesses

Leveraging the variety of outreach and communication initiatives and resources available, the Department is committed to breaking down barriers that small businesses frequently encounter when working with the Department of State. Industry Liaison and OSDBU actively participate in public engagement opportunities at industry meetings, conferences, and other public forums to address topics important to small businesses.



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3.4. Industry Liaison Initiatives

The Department is committed to building collaborative communication between program offices, acquisition offices, and industry partners through an array of outreach and communication initiatives including:

1. Annual Survey of Industry Stakeholders: an opportunity to identify the Department's areas of strength and areas for improvement to elevate the acquisition experience for industry partners
2. Contractor Playbooks: compendiums containing relevant policies, procedures, and workflows for repeated contractor onboarding activities, e.g., clearances and public trusts, badges, and OpenNet
3. *Doing Business with Department of State*: collection of relevant information and business resources for current and prospective vendors on the Department website (<http://state.gov/business/>)
4. Industry Days: government events convened to share information on upcoming procurements to industry
5. Listening Sessions: facilitated discussion with a group of people, aimed at collecting information about their experience
6. Matchmaking: government buyers and qualified vendors connected to discuss potential business opportunities related to capabilities.
7. Post-Award Capability Roadshows: vendor presentations to potential users to ensure maximized value from awarded contracts
8. Reverse Industry Days: industry leaders sharing their perspectives on various topics to the federal acquisition workforce
9. Pre-Solicitation & Solicitation Input Sessions: opportunities for industry to provide input that helps shape requirements development and acquisition approaches
10. Social Media Engagement
11. Vendor Demonstration Meetings: showcasing the application of vendor product offerings based on agency-specified scenarios frequently encountered by user groups in the agency
12. Webinars: live online educational presentations during which participating viewers can submit questions and comments