

Thoughts on Procurement Strategy and Principles

When TTS/18F Office of Acquisitions works with partner agencies to determine a procurement strategy, we will want to focus on requesting bids for modules that are simpler for vendors to understand and to allow them to propose in ways that demonstrate how they will deliver. The information below describes some of the key principles we advise our partner agencies to include in their solicitation documents. We've included some examples from RFP's issued under our agile BPA on behalf of our partner agencies, in order to demonstrate these principles.

1. Focus on working code vs. exhaustive documentation

This can be seen in Section 6 (Deliverables) of a [Performance Work Statement](#) our partners at HUD used in their request for proposals. You'll note that we don't ask for a "Project Management Plan", "Project Milestone Schedule", or other artifacts that are commonly used in government procurements. This is intentional - in keeping with agile software principles, we believe it is counterproductive to require a vendor to stick to a plan they proposed in the dark vs. being able to adjust to the government's needs as they learn in each sprint when working with the government's product team.

2. Focus on deliverable acceptance criteria that adds value.

The lack of "management documentation" should not be taken as a lack of rigor or oversight. As you can see in the [Quality Assurance Surveillance Plan](#) for HUD, we focus on working code at the end of each sprint. We also define what the government considers acceptable when it comes to working software. In other words, we minimize the amount of planning documentation, because we recognize much of this becomes a "crutch" after the award of a

contract. Instead, we focus on the critical deliverables that will be required after contract award - working software that passes automated tests and delivers value to the end users.

3. Focus on finding firms that demonstrate modern practices.

We require vendors and their staff to have experience working on modern, agile software teams. This can be seen in our key personnel requirements in the [PWS](#), as well as some of the agile principles that are referenced in the objective, background, and task sections of the PWS. We also assess this as part of their "Technical Approach" and "Staffing Plan" that the [RFP](#) requires to be submitted with their proposals and we discuss with them during their oral presentations.

4. Focus on what's important in your RFP.

In our [RFPs](#), we limit the amount of information required in the proposals to data that will add value to decision-makers on the government's evaluation team. We normally limit the written content to 10 pages or less. In the past, we've even required an open source mock-up or prototype of some functionality related to the software that needs to be developed. Again, we push for "showing" vs. "telling" in order to avoid the superfluous information that so often comes when proposals are written for government buyers. We look for ways to see as much evidence as possible from the actual "do'ers" on the team, such as the engineers or coders, prior to making an award decision. We also request access to previous open source repositories from the company or their developers so that we can review their previous work. We don't think bidding for RFP's should take weeks of time from vendors, and we don't think evaluating proposals should turn into a months-long process. The goal is to get to work.

5. Whatever is done by the vendor should be done "in the open".

Our contracts require open management tools, and require vendors to open up their agile "rituals" to the government's product team. We want our partner agencies' cross-functional product teams to have constant access to the software code repository as well as the management tools being used for communication on the vendor team. As the product owner, our partner agencies should attend all of the sprint planning and retrospectives that occur - the vendor is working for you, so you serve a critical role in what is being developed. Our partners should also be invited to the daily standups so that you can assist the vendor team in unblocking issues that stand in the way of successful sprint delivery. It's acceptable if the vendor asks that the clients attend "listen-only" so that the vendors' scrum team can get through their stand-up sessions in a timely manner - this will depend on what works better for the vendors' individual scrum masters.

6. Release early, release often.

Software code developed by the vendor team needs to be deployed into production, preferably via a cloud environment, so that it can be tested with real users in production. Feedback on new features needs to be taken seriously by the product team and the vendor(s). Each subsequent sprint/iteration needs to be informed by user feedback so that whatever is delivered provides value to the end users. This is the fundamental change to how most government agencies work, and the product team will need to ensure alignment on this approach with their central IT and Governance oversight teams. It's also something that takes time to learn, and might cause some discomfort - but it's critical if the partner agency wants the end results to satisfy the various users of the software being developed.

We recognize this is a lot of information to digest and some of the terms might be new to our partner agencies. We'd be happy to go over any questions they have and clarify anything that might not make sense. We often plan on more group sessions to further level-up on product management, and devops in particular, and so that we can hear more directly from partners to address any concerns they may have. We're excited to get to work!