Export Solutions Chatbot for International Trade Administration

REQUEST FOR INFORMATION

DATE: December 19, 2023

I. DISCLAIMER

The following information is provided in accordance with FAR 15.2, Exchanges with Industry Before Receipt of Proposals. The Government presents this Request for Information (RFI) to seek input from industry on the stated requirements and potential acquisition strategy. This is not a Request for Proposal (RFP) and offers will not be accepted. The Government will not make an award resulting from this RFI. Any information received in response will be used to inform a potential solicitation with the intent to make a Government contract award.

This RFI does not guarantee the release of a solicitation. Responses to the RFI will not be disclosed outside the Government; however, Respondents shall consider information received may be used to shape a future public solicitation and therefore avoid providing proprietary information that could otherwise be disclosed through the solicitation process. Responses to the RFI are voluntary and costs will not be reimbursed.

II. INTRODUCTION

The International Trade Administration (ITA), a division of the Department of Commerce, is a U.S. Federal agency committed to creating prosperity by strengthening the competitiveness of U.S. industry, ensuring fair trade and compliance with trade laws and agreements, and supporting innovative, sustainable, and inclusive economic growth. Established to foster economic development and to contribute to the growth of American jobs, ITA plays a crucial role in the international trade landscape. The agency facilitates exports from the United States, attracts foreign direct investment into the country, and provides comprehensive information, analysis, and advice on international trade, investment, and economics.

In line with its commitment to innovation and service excellence, ITA is seeking to enhance its client services through the implementation of a chatbot solution on Trade.gov. This initiative, driven by the objectives of the 21st Century Integrated Digital Experience Act (IDEA), aims to streamline access to accurate information, reduce the workload on ITA field staff, and improve the overall client experience (CX).

The chatbot will leverage natural language understanding and integrate with existing systems and content management platforms, providing clients with accurate and up-to-date information from a limited set of web pages, videos, and PDFs. This Request for Information (RFI) invites vendors with expertise in chatbot development, low-code/no-code platforms, and conversational user experiences to provide information on their capabilities, technical approach, and pricing models.

III. BACKGROUND

The International Trade Administration (ITA) is responsible for promoting international trade and supporting American businesses in the global marketplace. A key resource for ITA clients is the Export Solutions content on Trade.gov, which provides essential information on exporting. However, clients often face challenges in easily locating the desired information, leading to a less than optimal client experience. Additionally, the burden of answering common questions falls on ITA Field Staff, detracting from their ability to focus on high-touch, high-impact exporting services.

To address these challenges, ITA is exploring the deployment of a chatbot on Trade.gov. This solution aims to provide quick access to accurate and up-to-date information, thereby enhancing the client experience and reducing the workload of field staff. However, the development and deployment of such a chatbot comes with its own set of challenges:

- Ensuring the chatbot's accuracy as the Export Solutions content evolves.
- Integrating the chatbot with existing systems.
- Meeting a tight deployment timeline.
- Allocating staff time for oversight and maintenance.

This RFI aims to gather information from potential vendors who can address these challenges and develop a chatbot solution that aligns with ITA's goals and objectives.

IV. SCOPE

The planned chatbot's scope is defined by the following parameters:

- Content sources: The chatbot will be trained on a select set of web pages, videos and their associated transcripts, and PDFs and other documentation from the Export Solutions content (https://www.trade.gov/export-solutions) on Trade.gov. These sources are chosen for their relevance to common client inquiries and their ability to provide comprehensive information.
- Natural language understanding: The chatbot will be designed to process user inquiries in natural language, facilitating conversational interactions.
- Integration with existing systems: The chatbot will integrate with existing systems and content management platforms for seamless access to up-to-date information.
- User feedback and continuous improvement: The chatbot will incorporate user feedback mechanisms for continuous improvement and relevance.
- Analytics, Reporting, and Auditability: The chatbot will include analytics and reporting capabilities to track its performance and user interactions. It will also have the ability to audit the input and output of the bot, ensuring transparency and accountability in its operations.
- Extensibility for future capabilities: The chatbot system will be designed with extensibility in mind, allowing for potential future expansion to incorporate related content from other parts of Trade.gov, such as country commercial guides and market intelligence. Additionally, the system could potentially accommodate additional business process functionalities, such as client referrals to staff, office consultation calendaring, and foreign language capability.

Through this RFI, ITA seeks to gather information from potential vendors capable of addressing these challenges.

V. OBJECTIVES OF THE RFI

Through this RFI, we aim to achieve the following objectives:

1. Identify potential sources: Gather information on vendors with experience in developing and deploying chatbots for government or large organizations, particularly those with expertise in low-code/no-code platforms and natural language understanding.
2. Evaluate chatbot development platforms: Assess the compatibility, features, and capabilities of low-code/no-code chatbot development platforms. Preferably those that can integrate with our target architecture (Microsoft 365, MS Power Platform, MS Azure PaaS/Native Development Tools).
3. Assess vendors' capabilities: Understand vendors' expertise in natural language understanding, conversational user experiences, and their ability to develop chatbots that provide accurate and up-to-date information as the Export Solutions content on Trade.gov evolves.

4. Explore strategies for maintaining chatbot accuracy and relevance: Learn about vendors' approaches to ensuring the chatbot remains accurate and relevant over time, including methods for updating the chatbot's knowledge base and integrating with content management systems and data sources.
5. Review case studies: Examine examples of similar projects completed by potential vendors, including case studies and customer references, to evaluate their ability to deliver a successful chatbot solution that meets ITA's goals and objectives.
6. Understand pricing and support options: Gather information on vendors' pricing models, support offerings, and any additional services related to chatbot development, deployment, and maintenance. A high-level budgetary estimate for all products and services is desired for both implementing and sustaining a chatbot.

VI. INSTRUCTIONS FOR SUBMITING RESPONSES

NOTE: Respondents are requested to title the subject line of the email transmitting their response as follows: *Insert Respondent Name*_Response to ITA Export Solutions Chatbot RFI

Interested parties are requested to respond to this RFI with a white paper. Please provide the following information in your response:

1. Company background: Include details about your company's size, location, years in business, and any industry-specific focus or specialization.
2. Relevant experience: Describe your experience in developing and deploying chatbots for government or medium to large organizations, with a particular focus on projects that are similar in scope or complexity to the Trade.gov chatbot. Please highlight any instances where customer centricity or human-centered design principles were integral to the development process and how they contributed to the success of the project.
3. Technical capabilities: Explain your expertise in low-code/no-code chatbot development platforms, natural language understanding, and conversational user experiences. Include information about any specific platforms or technologies you have worked with that are compatible with our target architecture (Microsoft 365, MS Power Platform, MS Azure PaaS/Native Dev Stack).
4. Technical approach: Outline your general approach to developing and deploying a chatbot for Trade.gov, including the platform(s) you would use, how you would ensure the chatbot provides accurate and up-to-date information, and any strategies for integrating with content management systems and data sources.
5. Strategies for maintaining chatbot accuracy and relevance: Describe your methods for ensuring the chatbot remains accurate and relevant over time, including processes for updating the chatbot's knowledge base, monitoring content changes on Trade.gov, and incorporating user feedback.
6. Service offerings: Provide information on your service offerings related to chatbot development, deployment, and maintenance, including any ongoing support, training, or consulting services available to clients.
7. Case studies: Provide at least two case studies of projects you have completed that are similar in scope or complexity to the Trade.gov chatbot. Include a brief description of the project, the challenges faced, the solutions implemented, and the outcomes achieved. If possible, also provide any relevant metrics or performance indicators that demonstrate the success of the project.

8. Pricing and Support Options: Please identify your general pricing structure for chatbot development, deployment, and maintenance, outlining any initial and recurring expenses. We also request information on your support services, including specifics of service level agreements, response times, and the various support channels available. An aggregate budgetary estimate for all products and services is essential. If your pricing model is based on capacity, kindly provide a clear method for cost calculation or present estimates in well-defined tiers, enabling a transparent understanding of the cost variations at different capacity levels.

Responses are limited to 15 pages excluding cover page/letter. Responders shall include the information requested below in their cover page.

Information Requested	Vendor Detail
Company Name:	
Company Address:	
DUNS:	
CAGE Code:	
Facility Clearance Level (e.g., TS or Secret):	
Primary Contact:	
Title:	
Phone/Email:	
Primary/Relevant NAICS:	
Small Business? Y/N	
*List All Qualifying Socioeconomic Categories if a qualified Small Business:	
Number of Years in Business:	
Number of Employees:	
Interest to Prime or Sub this Effort:	
List of Federal Supply Schedule (FSS) contracts and/or other governmentwide ordering vehicles the respondent holds.	

After a review of responses, the Government may at its discretion contact one, more than one, all or none of the respondents to obtain additional information necessary to determine Respondent capabilities and/or to obtain clarification on information provided.

VII. CONFIDENTIALITY

The Government will not directly disclose or distribute information received in response to this RFI. However, the Government reserves the right to use information provided to develop the requirements and acquisition strategy process which will be publicly released. Any such information used in this manner will be publicly disclosed. No proprietary, classified, confidential, or sensitive information should be included in your response. The Government reserves the right to use any non- proprietary technical information in any resultant solicitation(s). The Government will not use information provided in this response for evaluation purposes.

VIII. DUE DATE FOR RESPONSES

The due date for responses to this RFI is **5 JANUARY 2024 at 11:00 AM Eastern Time**. Responses shall be submitted by email to kpendergast@doc.gov, kvultaggio@doc.gov and cwallis@doc.gov.