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The Ultimate Guide to Getting Started in Government Contracting for Non-Traditional Contractors

[Guide](#)[FYI](#)



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Introduction

If you have never been awarded a prime government contract, then you are considered a "non-traditional contractor", and the government wants you. In today's economy, government contracting plays a significant role in driving growth and providing a stable source of revenue for businesses. For non-traditional contractors, government contracts offer a wealth of opportunities to expand their client base, diversify their services, and build a sustainable business model. The challenge is just getting started. This comprehensive guide will walk you through the basics of government contracting, preparing your business for government opportunities, bidding on contracts, and building a successful government contracting practice.

Part 1: Understanding Government Contracting Basics

1.1 Types of Government Contracts

There are various types of government contracts available at the federal, state, and local levels. These contracts can be either prime or subcontracting opportunities, depending on whether the contractor is directly contracted by the government or working under another contractor. When it comes to government contracting, there are several different types of contracts that non-traditional contractors should be aware of. One of the most common contract types is known as a fixed-price contract. Under this type of agreement, the contractor agrees to complete a specific project or set of tasks for a predetermined price that is agreed upon in advance. Fixed price contracts typically require fewer complex proposals. Another type of government contract is known as a cost-reimbursement contract. With this type of agreement, the contractor will be reimbursed for any allowable costs that they incur during performance. These costs might include things like materials, labor expenses, or other necessary expenditures related to completing the job at hand. Cost-type contract typically require greater reporting requirements such as highly detailed calculations of your overhead expenses. Of course, these are just two examples among many different types of government contracts that may be available to non-traditional contractors. Depending on your unique skills and areas of expertise, you may find yourself better suited for one type over another. It's important to do your research and understand all your options before deciding which direction you want to take in pursuing work within the world of government contracting. **Pro tip: your best bet for breaking into government contracting is to start with Fixed Price contracts.**

1.2 The Procurement Process

If you're a non-traditional contractor looking to break into the world of government contracting, understanding the procurement process is crucial. The government procurement cycle begins with identifying needs and defining requirements for goods or services that they require. This could be anything from office supplies to complex IT systems. Once these requirements have been established, the government will issue a Request for Proposal (RFP) or Request for Quotation (RFQ). An RFP is typically used for more complex

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you want to win the contract. When responding to an RFP or RFQ, make sure you read through all the documentation carefully and understand what's required before submitting your proposal. You should also aim to provide as much detail as possible about how you plan on meeting their needs while highlighting any unique selling points that set you apart from other bidders. Ultimately, winning a government contract takes time and effort but by understanding the procurement process and ensuring your proposal ticks all their boxes, it's achievable. The bidding process involves submitting proposals in response to the RFP or RFQ, after which the government evaluates the bids and selects a winner based on factors such as price and technical capabilities. Many times, the government will issue a Request for Information (RFI) or Sources Sought (SS) announcement prior to publishing an RFP or RFQ. These pre-solicitation announcements give you an early opportunity to get your name in front of the customer and are crucial to winning.

Pro Tip: If you haven't talked to the customer or responded to an RFI/SS, don't waste your time writing a proposal

1.3 Legal and Regulatory Requirements

To successfully participate in government contracting as a non-traditional contractor, it is important to understand and comply with various legal and regulatory requirements. One of the key regulations that contractors must adhere to is the Federal Acquisition Regulations (FAR), which governs federal contracts. The FAR outlines specific rules and procedures for acquiring goods and services on behalf of the government, including how proposals are submitted, how payments are made, and what types of clauses must be included in contracts. In addition to complying with federal regulations like the FAR, contractors must also ensure they are following any state or local regulations that may apply to their particular contract. These can vary depending on the location of the project or service being provided. Another critical area where compliance is necessary is labor and employment laws. Contractors need to be aware of wage and hour requirements, workplace safety standards, affirmative action regulations, among others. Failure to comply with these laws could result in penalties or even loss of future contracting opportunities. Overall, understanding legal and regulatory requirements is a crucial part of succeeding as a non-traditional contractor in government contracting. By prioritizing compliance from day one, contractors can position themselves for long-term success while avoiding costly mistakes along the way.

Pro Tip: look for NIST 800-171 requirements in solicitations, complying with these cyber security requirements can be complex and expensive.

Part 2: Preparing Your Business for Government Contracting

2.1 Registering Your Business

To bid on government contracts, your business must first obtain a Unique Entity Identifier (UEI) number from [SAM.gov](https://sam.gov). Next, register with the System for

Pro Tip: Check out our post on setting these up [here](#)

2.2 Certifications and Set-Asides

Many government contracts are set aside for small businesses with specific certifications, such as 8(a) Business Development Program participants, HUBZone-certified businesses, Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Businesses (SDVOSB), and others. Obtaining these certifications can provide a competitive advantage by making your business eligible for set-aside contracts and other benefits. The certification process typically involves applying and supporting documentation to the relevant agency.

2.3 Developing a Capability Statement

A capability statement is a critical marketing tool for government contractors, as it showcases your company's skills, experience, and unique selling points. An effective capability statement should include information about your business's core competencies, past performance, certifications, and key personnel. Tailor your capability statement to appeal to government clients by emphasizing your ability to meet their needs and deliver value.

Part 3: Finding and Bidding on Government Contracts

3.1 Identifying Contract Opportunities

Start your search for contract opportunities by visiting sam.gov, the federal government's online portal for contracting opportunities. State and local governments typically have their own procurement websites where they post contract opportunities.

There are also a large number of Other Transaction Agreement opportunities that do not follow the strict rules of the Federal Acquisition Regulations (FAR), these are often simpler to apply to and be awarded. [Advanced Technology International](#) has a number of managed OTA consortiums that may suit you, the Defense Department's CDAO also has the [Tradewind](#) AI OTA with a very simple video submission process. If you are looking for a low-risk way to get into the government market.

The [Small Business Innovative Research Program](#) is another way to break into government contracting with a lower barrier to entry. With proposals in the 5-25 page range for \$250,000-\$2,500,000 range, it is a low-cost/high-benefit route for companies that develop new technologies.

The sam.gov website is not the easiest to navigate, most government contractors use "bid matching" services that aggregate the data in a more useful form. The most cost-effective tool in our opinion is govtribe.com. Another great resource is the Apex Accelerators

Pro Tip: if you get frustrated with sam.gov try a bid matching service

3.2 Network

many opportunities will require you to join or build a team of companies to effectively compete, so you need to build relationships with industry and government. One way to do this is through networking and attending industry events. By attending these events, you can broaden your knowledge about the industry and gain insights into current trends, challenges, and opportunities. Furthermore, networking provides an opportunity for you to meet other companies in your field who may be looking to partner, these connections can lead to potential partnerships or collaborations that could help you win contracts down the line. In addition, attending industry events allows you to meet representatives from various government agencies who may have upcoming contract opportunities that align with your capabilities. Building relationships with these individuals can give you access to information about future contract solicitations before they are officially released. Overall, investing time in networking and attending industry events is essential for any non-traditional contractor looking to break into government contracting. It not only helps uncover new opportunities but also builds valuable relationships that can contribute towards long-term success in this sector. Pro Tip: Do some research on companies you would like to partner with and set an agenda for yourself at these events, have a list of companies you want to talk to and what opportunities you want to talk with them about, then lead the conversation with what you can offer a potential partner.

3.3 Analyzing RFPs and RFQs

When reviewing RFPs and RFQs, pay close attention to the key elements, such as the scope of work (SECTION C), submission requirements and deadlines (SECTION L), evaluation criteria (SECTION M). Assess your company's ability to fulfill the requirements and decide whether to bid based on factors such as your capacity, resources, and potential return on investment. Develop a bid/no-bid decision process to ensure you focus on the most promising opportunities. **Section C: Description/Specifications/Statement of Work** Section C of the standard government contract solicitation is a crucial part of the document that outlines the detailed requirements, specifications, and descriptions of the goods or services being procured. This section serves as the foundation for the entire contract and helps both the government and the contractor understand their respective roles and responsibilities. Some key components found in Section C include:

1. **Scope of work:** This portion of the section defines the general purpose and objectives of the contract. It provides a broad overview of the project, its background, and the context within which the contract will be executed.
2. **Technical requirements:** This part lists the specific technical requirements that the contractor must meet to fulfill the contract successfully. It may include performance specifications, design requirements, or other technical aspects that are crucial to the project.
3. **Performance standards and deliverables:** This section lays out the performance standards that the contractor must meet, as well as any

quality control measures that must be employed by the government to ensure that the contractor is meeting the specified requirements. It may include testing, inspections, or audits that will be conducted at various stages of the project.

5. **Schedule and milestones:** This section specifies the project's timeline, including any key milestones that must be achieved or deadlines that must be met. It helps ensure that the project stays on track and that all parties are aware of their obligations.
6. **Special requirements:** This portion of the section outlines any unique or specialized requirements that are specific to the project, such as security clearances, specialized equipment, or unique materials.
7. **Applicable regulations and standards:** This part lists any relevant laws, regulations, or industry standards that the contractor must adhere to while executing the contract. This helps ensure that the project complies with all applicable legal and regulatory requirements.

Section C of the standard government contract solicitation serves as a comprehensive guide to the project's requirements and expectations, ensuring that all parties are on the

3.3.2 Section L Instructions, Conditions, and Notices to Offerors

Section L of a standard government contract solicitation, also known as "Instructions, Conditions, and Notices to Offerors," provides detailed guidance and information to potential offerors (contractors) on how to prepare and submit their proposals for the contract opportunity. This section is crucial, as it outlines the specific requirements and expectations that the government has for the proposals. Key elements of Section L may include:

1. **Proposal Submission Instructions:** This includes the address or electronic submission method, deadlines, and any specific formatting requirements such as page limits, font size, or file formats.
2. **Proposal Evaluation Criteria:** The government will outline the factors they will consider when evaluating proposals, such as technical capabilities, past performance, and price. Offerors must ensure their proposals address these criteria to increase their chances of winning the contract.
3. **Proposal Representation and Certifications:** Offerors may be required to submit specific certifications, such as the Representations and Certifications (also known as Reps and Certs), as a part of their proposal. These certifications attest to the offeror's compliance with various laws and regulations.
4. **Proposal Organization and Content:** This section details the structure and content of the proposal, including any required sections or documents such as a technical proposal, management proposal, or cost/price proposal.
5. **Amendments and Questions:** Offerors should be aware of the process for submitting questions or seeking clarification on the solicitation. The government may issue amendments to the solicitation, and offerors must acknowledge receipt of these amendments in their proposals.

confidentiality regarding the solicitation and their proposal, as well as sign non-disclosure agreements in some cases.

It is essential for you to carefully review Section L of the solicitation to ensure they fully understand the requirements and submit a compliant proposal.

Failure to adhere to the instructions in Section L.

3.3.3 Section M: Evaluation Factors for Award

Section M of the Standard Government Contract Solicitation is a crucial part of the proposal evaluation process, as it details the evaluation factors that the government will use to determine the award of a contract. This section provides guidelines for both the government contracting officers and the offerors, ensuring that proposals are evaluated fairly and consistently. The main components of Section M include:

1. **Evaluation Factors:** This subsection lists the specific factors that will be considered during the proposal evaluation process. These factors may include technical capability, past performance, management approach, personnel qualifications, and price/cost.
2. **Relative Importance:** Section M also outlines the relative importance of each evaluation factor, specifying which factors are more important than others. This helps offerors understand the priorities of the government and tailor their proposals accordingly.
3. **Subfactors:** In addition to the main evaluation factors, Section M may also include subfactors that further break down the evaluation criteria. These subfactors help offerors focus on specific aspects of their proposals that are relevant to the government's needs.
4. **Evaluation Methodology:** Section M provides information on the evaluation methodology used by the government, including any applicable evaluation standards, scoring systems, or adjectival ratings. This allows offerors to understand how their proposals will be assessed and compared to other proposals.
5. **Proposal Requirements:** This section details the proposal requirements and submission instructions, including any formatting guidelines, page limits, or other restrictions. Offerors must adhere to these requirements to ensure their proposals are considered for evaluation.
6. **Negotiations and Best and Final Offers (BAFOs):** Section M may also outline the government's approach to negotiations, including any potential discussions or clarifications that may occur during the evaluation process. Additionally, this section may describe the process for submitting BAFOs, which are the offerors' final proposals after negotiations have concluded.

Section M of the Standard Government Contract Solicitation serves as a critical guide for both the government and offerors during the proposal evaluation process. By understanding the evaluation factors, their relative importance, and the evaluation methodology, offerors can tailor their proposals to meet the

a system to decide whether you should bid on an opportunity. Section C outlines the detailed specifications and descriptions of the goods or services being purchased. Section L, also known as "Instructions, Conditions, and Notices to Offerors," provides more details on how to submit a proposal and what the government expects. Section M outlines the evaluation factors that will be used to decide which contractor is awarded the contract. This section is meant to ensure that all proposals are evaluated fairly and consistently. **Pro Tip: If anything in Section C, L, or M seems like a stretch, no-bid and move on to the next one, it's better to invest time on a winning bid than waste it on a losing one.**

3.4 Crafting a Winning Proposal

To craft a winning proposal, first understand the evaluation criteria outlined in the RFP or RFQ. Develop a compliant and responsive proposal that addresses all requirements and demonstrates your company's unique strengths. Consider pricing strategies and factors that could affect your costs, such as labor rates, materials, and overhead expenses. Each RFP is a little different and you will have to tailor your own process for responding to solicitations. The follow steps are a good place to start to create a well-structured, persuasive, and competitive government contract proposal.

Step 1: Understand the Requirements

1. **Read the solicitation document thoroughly.** Understand the scope of work, specific requirements, and evaluation criteria.
2. **Identify key terms and conditions.** Note any mandatory requirements, certifications, or qualifications needed.
3. **Clarify any ambiguities.** Reach out to the contracting officer for answers to questions or clarifications.

Step 2: Plan Your Approach

1. **Develop a win strategy.** Identify your unique selling points and competitive advantages.
2. **Assemble a proposal team.** Include subject matter experts, writers, editors, and designers.
3. **Create a proposal schedule.** Allocate sufficient time for research, writing, editing, and review.

Step 3: Write the Proposal

1. **Follow the solicitation's format and structure.** Use the provided templates or adhere to the specified organization.
2. **Write a compelling executive summary.** Summarize your solution, benefits, and key differentiators.
3. **Address each evaluation factor.** Present a clear, concise, and persuasive argument for each criterion.
4. **Provide detailed technical and management plans.** Describe your approach, methodology, and resources.

Step 4: Review and Edit

1. **Perform a thorough internal review.** Check for accuracy, clarity, consistency, and compliance.
2. **Edit for grammar, spelling, and formatting.** Ensure a professional appearance and easy readability.
3. **Conduct a final compliance check.** Verify that all requirements and mandatory elements are addressed.

Step 5: Submit - On Time

If you submit your proposal even one minute late, it's worthless, make sure you submit it on time and try to get confirmation that it was received. **Pro Tip:** Search for all the "shall" and "will" statements in the RFP and make sure your proposal hits all of them, otherwise you won't be compliant.

Part 4: Building a Successful Government Contracting Practice

4.1 Managing Contracts and Performance

Winning a government contract is just the first step in securing a successful relationship with your government clients. After you secure your contract, it's essential to effectively manage its administration and compliance. This involves various responsibilities such as managing subcontractors and suppliers, ensuring timely delivery of goods and services, monitoring performance metrics and adhering to guidelines specified by the contract. Managing subcontractors and suppliers involves keeping track of their progress towards meeting their obligations under the terms of the contract. It's crucial to ensure that they are delivering high-quality work within agreed-upon timelines, as any delays or substandard work could reflect poorly on your business. It's also important to monitor performance metrics regularly to make sure that all parties involved in fulfilling the requirements of the contract are meeting expectations. Metrics like cost-effectiveness, efficiency, quality assurance standards should be tracked consistently. Reporting on progress is another critical aspect of effective management when working with government agencies. Regularly communicating updates about how well you're performing against benchmarks set out in your agreement can demonstrate commitment to delivering value for your client(s). By staying organized throughout this process, you'll be better able to deliver high-quality results while avoiding unnecessary complications or conflicts that may arise along the way. Ultimately this will help increase customer satisfaction levels making it more likely for future projects from these customers or referrals from them in other areas where they see opportunities for collaboration with businesses like yours!

Pro Tip: Build a strong rapport with your Contracting Officer's Representative (COR).

4.2 Growing Your Government Contracting Portfolio

within budget. These are major factors that the government formally evaluates in [Contractor Performance Assessment Reporting System \(CPARS\)](#). By keeping your performance and evaluation ratings high, you'll build credibility with potential clients and increase your chances of winning new business. Another key strategy for growing your government contracting portfolio is to expand your certifications and capabilities. The more qualifications you have, such as economically disadvantaged small business or veteran-owned status, the more opportunities you'll be eligible for. There are also company certifications like CMMC, CMML, ISO, and others where third-party organizations certify your maturity in specific processes, which lowers the government's risk in selecting your company. Additionally, if there are certain capabilities that are in high demand among government agencies (such as cybersecurity or engineering), consider investing in training or hiring staff with those skills. Building relationships with government clients and prime contractors is also critical when it comes to growing your business. Government procurement can be a complex process but having a network of contacts who can help guide you through it will make all the difference. Stay informed about upcoming opportunities by attending industry events or subscribing to relevant newsletters or websites. Finally, don't underestimate the value of positioning yourself as a trusted partner rather than just another vendor looking for work. This means demonstrating an understanding of each client's unique needs and priorities and being flexible enough to adapt to changing circumstances over time. By building strong relationships based on mutual trust and respect, you'll be well-positioned not only to win new contracts but also to grow your reputation within the industry over time.

Pro Tip: IF you see a particular certification required on more than one solicitation you want to go after, look at getting certified, chances are good that it's a common requirement.

4.3 Overcoming Challenges and Avoiding Pitfalls

Government contracting can be a challenging arena for non-traditional contractors. Unlike established contractors, these businesses may not have experience working within the complex regulations and processes that are unique to government contracts. Additionally, competing with well-established competitors who have long-standing relationships with government agencies can be daunting. To overcome these challenges, non-traditional contractors must invest in education and training for their team members. This will help them develop an understanding of the specific requirements and regulations associated with government contracts. They should also seek guidance from experienced government contractors who can provide valuable insights into navigating this often-complex terrain. Moreover, continuous refinement of approach based on lessons learned is important to ensure success in this field. Non-traditional contractors must remain vigilant in identifying areas where they need improvement and constantly work towards enhancing their capabilities. In summary, overcoming challenges and avoiding pitfalls as a non-traditional contractor requires a proactive approach towards learning, seeking guidance from experts and refining one's approach based on feedback.

received. With dedication and determination, any business can thrive in the



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Pro Tip: Identify your competitors in your market and look for ways to differentiate from them

One Last Thing

Government contracting offers significant potential rewards for non-traditional contractors willing to invest the time and resources necessary to succeed in this competitive market, but it is a very competitive market. Keep in mind that it can take multiple years for an opportunity to go from a requirement to a contract award, so patience and persistence is important. By understanding government contracting basics, preparing your business for contracting opportunities, bidding on contracts strategically, and building a successful contracting practice, you can capitalize on the growth and stability that government contracts can provide. Embark on your government contracting journey with confidence and determination, and watch your business thrive.

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