



Acquisition Planning: The Government Leader's Guide

Acquisition planning at federal agencies requires smart strategies to avoid waste and delays. Get advice on the government acquisition planning process, common roadblocks, strategies for streamlining, and choosing an acquisition management system.

Ask any government leader about the most complicated processes in their day-to-day work life, and the subject of acquisition planning will quickly arise. Before spending to acquire goods or services, every US federal government agency has to follow the host of rules established in the [Federal Acquisition Regulation](#) (FAR). The FAR prescribes the process you need to follow and the requirements you need to meet to acquire anything for your agency, including technology products and services.

For both first-timers to the acquisition experience and agency pros, this list of regulations can feel overwhelming. While the FAR exists to provide a set of uniform acquisition policies and procedures for federal agencies that hopefully encourage efficiency in government spending, meeting its myriad requirements can be a daunting task—especially when learning how to meet acquisition regulations is not your full-time job.

What is acquisition planning in government?

Nevertheless, acquisition planning is a needed and important part of the overall government [acquisition management](#) process. IT and line-of-business professionals of all stripes will come up against the acquisition planning process as part of their work inside a federal agency. IT teams may find that their line-of-business colleagues don't know where to start with the complex processes or hard-to-use systems. Also, many agencies still rely on highly-manual processes that can introduce errors and kill efficiency. And for line-of-business managers, the overall process may seem intimidating, subject to ever-changing regulations and fraught with possible delays.

You may be the acquisition point person for an agency project, or maybe you're acting as a consultant or playing another role in acquisition planning and the overall acquisition management process. Whatever your involvement looks like, it's important to understand the context and rules around today's federal acquisition landscape—and to learn lessons from your peers who've traveled this road before. Let's dig in.

Learn from experts and your peers on how to improve the acquisition process.

Get the eBook: [Streamlining Government Procurement with a Modern Acquisition Management Solution](#)

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Why acquisition planning matters.

Aside from the fact that it's required by law, the acquisition planning process matters because it's designed to foster government efficiency. The process requires detailed research, encourages competition, and specifies a number of other factors to help government agencies spend taxpayer money in the best possible way.

Acquisition planning is also critical to your chances of receiving better pricing offers from vendors. When you create a request for proposal, the more detailed and well-articulated the requirements, the less risky your contract opportunity seems to vendors. Typically, a less risky contract gets you lower pricing proposals, since your expectations are well defined.

Acquisition planning process: 3 common roadblocks.

Any speed bumps in the acquisition planning process can cause issues for your project. The two most significant problems you could be at risk of are:

- **Delays:** Inefficiency in the acquisition cycle can keep you from getting crucial goods or services within the timeframe you want or need.
- **Waste:** Without proper preparation, your project might unintentionally result in what the FAR aims to prevent, wasted time and resources.

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Before you dive into the acquisition planning process, be prepared to encounter these three common roadblocks that could lead to delays or waste:

1. Personnel changes

Since the contracting office is the only group with the authority to purchase your goods or services, you need your contracting officer to push the project through. Unfortunately, if they decide to leave or get reassigned, which is common, you could be facing more delays. Why? Well, if the project manager and contracting officer haven't mutually documented all agreed-upon process steps, the new contracting officer who takes over won't know what was agreed on. And you may have to repeat your work.

2. Communication difficulties

Contracting offices receive acquisition packages all the time—and often, unexpectedly. If yours lands on their doorstep and it's the first time they've heard about it, they may not be able to get to it for some time because they weren't able to plan for it.

3. Human error and a lengthy approval process

Although human error can be difficult to avoid, it's critical that you meet every requirement outlined in the FAR—and that you get it right the first time. A contract package that doesn't meet the regulation can get stuck in approvals for months as you try to fix mistakes. It's in your best interest to submit everything correctly on the first go around. Also, the FAR changes often—sometimes quarterly—and you have to keep up with the changes.

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4 steps to improve acquisition planning

Does overcoming the roadblocks above feel like an impossible challenge? You might be thinking some amount of delay and wasted resources is unavoidable. But with the right tools and strategies at your disposal, you can perfect your acquisition planning process to get it right the first time, every time—keeping delays and resource waste to an absolute minimum. Both IT and line-of-business professionals in government agencies have an opportunity to make the acquisition planning process much more efficient and streamlined. Consider these lessons learned and best practices:

Prioritize market research in SAM

The System for Award Management, or [SAM.gov](https://sam.gov), is a wealth of information when you start the research process. This database can help you identify where agencies have solved similar problems to yours. You can see how long it took them, how much they spent, which vendors submitted bids, and which vendor they used. This information can help you know where to start and set realistic expectations for your project schedule and cost.

[\(Read our related article: System for Award Management \(SAM\): 3 Tips for Success.\)](#)

Create a central space for collaboration

You'll want to document everything that's agreed upon in your acquisition proposal and make sure the contracting office and other teams can access and approve these documents. Create a digital space where the participants can see what you're working on and where you can all document decisions. Ideally, your documentation will also be digestible and easy for the contracting office team to navigate.

Loop other teams in early

Give the contracting office advance notice about your project, as much as you can, and when you expect to submit it. One possible roadblock not mentioned above is that you'll need to involve multiple parties throughout the acquisition process, which could include legal, policy, contracting, a small business representative, a competition advocate, vendors, finance, and more. Having a way to loop everyone in will help you ensure communication is smooth and effective: Acquisition planning tools help greatly here.

Look for a system that can support you

Rather than navigating the FAR alone, consider adopting an acquisition planning tool that can guide you through the process, automating and cutting through data integration hassles. In addition to helping improve communication, here are just a few things a good acquisition planning software can do for you:

- Identify the documents you'll need throughout the process.
- Auto-populate answers based on your inputs.
- Improve visibility for all participants in the process.

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Acquisition planning tools: 5 criteria to look for

When looking for an acquisition planning tool to streamline the process, look for a technology that meets the following criteria:

- **Centralizes work**

A sophisticated acquisition planning system will provide visibility into the requirements management process so that you and other participants in the process can update and execute on requirements from one place. This makes it much easier to share critical milestones, documents, correspondence, and updates with everyone involved.

- **Is adaptable**

Since the FAR changes so often, you'll want to look for a nimble system that can adapt automatically. This way, you won't have to worry about it yourself, and you won't hit any unexpected requirements-related roadblocks.

- **Makes it easy to work with data**

An acquisition planning tool that can connect to other systems saves you time and solves your data integration problems. For example, instead of having to go to SAM.gov yourself in the research stage, the system can integrate with the site and populate all that data for you. Additionally, a solution that includes a data fabric can connect disparate data sets across the organization, using a virtualized data layer that offers management, speed, and security benefits. (For more on data fabric, read our related articles: [How data fabric works](#) and [Government Acquisition: How to Address 4 Data Integration Challenges](#).)

- **Uses automation**

The software should be able to take inputs from you and then digitally guide you through the acquisition planning process, helping you understand which documents to use and who needs to approve them, then automating the process of getting those approvals.

- **Vendor has experience with the public sector**

Look for a solution backed by a vendor with a proven track record of serving the government with acquisition and a history of successfully delivering projects in the acquisition space. Search for a vendor that is already compliant with the required government certifications.

Once you do the work to acquire an acquisition planning tool, you'll never have to go through the process on your own again. Even better, you and your colleagues gain time back to focus on strategic work, while avoiding delays and waste.

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