

BEYOND BARRIERS

ACQUISITION ON A WAR FOOTING

2026 State of Warfighting Acquisition Survey

Conducted by Atomik Research for MITRE

MITRE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2026 State of Warfighting Acquisition survey provides a **second-year benchmark** of stakeholder sentiment across the Department of War (DOW) industrial base.

The results indicate recent transformation efforts – particularly those aligned to the Acquisition Transformation Strategy and FY2026 NDAA – are beginning to generate stakeholder **confidence and measurable momentum**.

However, progress remains uneven, and stakeholders are not yet seeing consistent, system-wide outcomes.

WHY MITRE

As a nonprofit, objective partner to the Department of War, MITRE is well-positioned to commission and analyze this annual survey to provide insights into the strength and performance of the overall acquisition system.

By proactively measuring trends, identifying systemic challenges, and highlighting areas of progress, MITRE informs transformation efforts with real-world conditions and grounds them in evidence.

These insights provide leaders with the clarity needed to sustain momentum, focus resources, and ultimately deliver capabilities to the warfighter more effectively.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

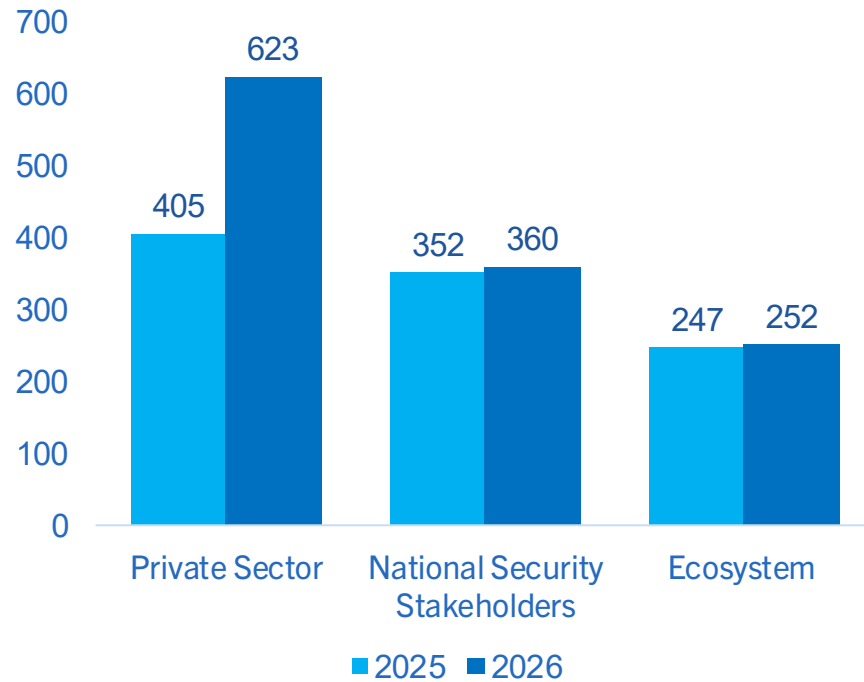
MITRE commissioned Atomik Research to conduct an online survey of 1,235 stakeholders within the greater U.S. industrial base and acquisition space.

The margin of error is +/- 3 percentage points with a confidence level of 95%.

Fieldwork took place between March 13 and March 31, 2026.

SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

Survey Participants by Industry



- **PRIVATE SECTOR:** Traditional and nontraditional DOW contractors and companies looking to become DOW contractors
- **NATIONAL SECURITY STAKEHOLDERS:** Military officers, civilians, and other federal government employees who work in, or have duties related to, DOW acquisition
- **ECOSYSTEM:** Academia, think tanks, nonprofits, and other non-governmental organizations

While all respondents work within the greater U.S. industrial base, **65%** stated to have significant involvement or are experts/authorities in acquisition.

Source: MITRE / Atomik Research State of Warfighting Acquisition Survey

Base: All Respondents (n=1235) Data collected March 13-31, 2026

All respondents were screened for Industry, Job Function, Title/Role. Segmentation distinctions and qualifiers are the same as those used in the 2025 survey.

SPEED

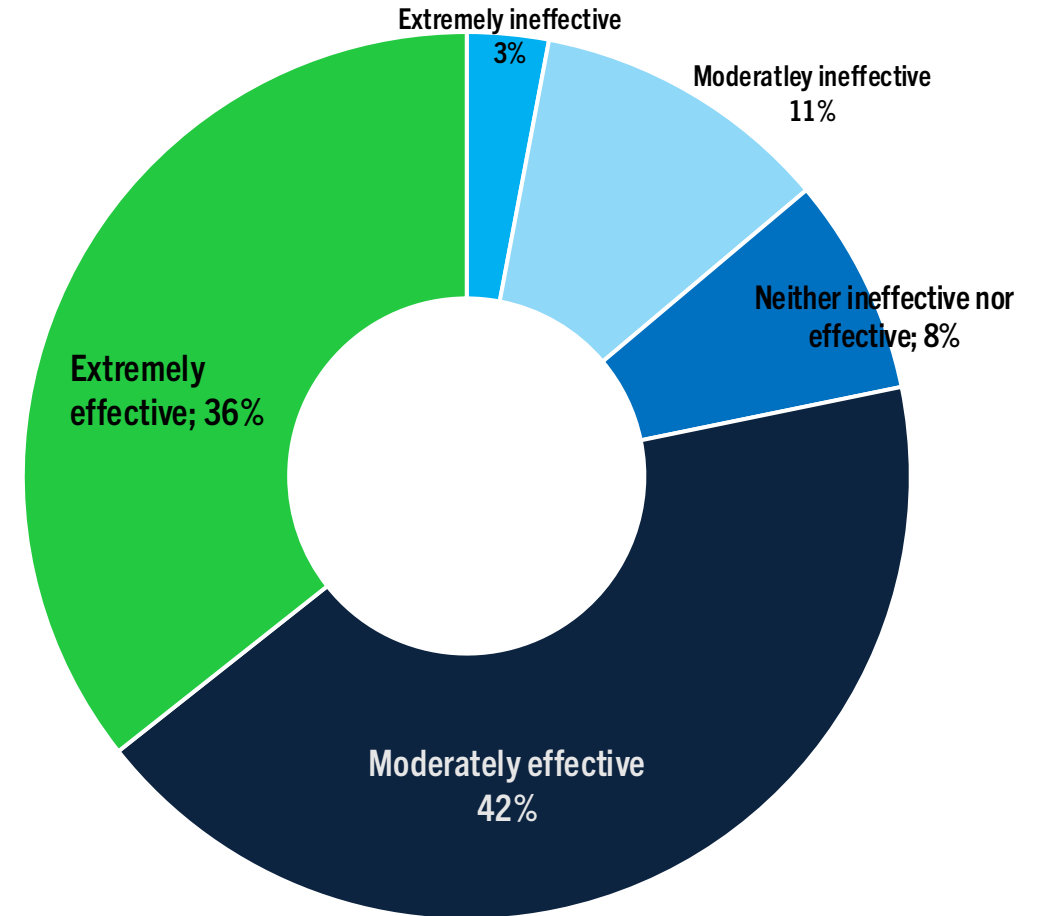
The Secretary of War’s Nov. 7, 2025, memo directing the acquisition transformation states: “Speed to Capability is now our organizing principle.”

Survey participants seem optimistic about the ability of recent changes to deliver on that directive.

The most cited positive impact of recent changes, at 48%, was speed in the acquisition process.

79% of respondents rated the DOW’s ability to rapidly field capabilities as moderately or extremely effective.

How effectively is the DOW acquisition system currently able to rapidly field capabilities to the warfighter?



Source: MITRE / Atomik Research State of Warfighting Acquisition Survey
Base: All Respondents (n=1235) Data collected March 13-31, 2026
Q4 How effectively is the DoW acquisition system currently able to rapidly field capabilities to the warfighter?
Q7 Which of the following (if any) have been positively affected by the 2025 acquisition reforms? (Select all that apply)
New questions for 2026 survey; unable to compare to 2025 survey

OBTAINING INDUSTRY-DRIVEN COMMERCIAL SOLUTIONS

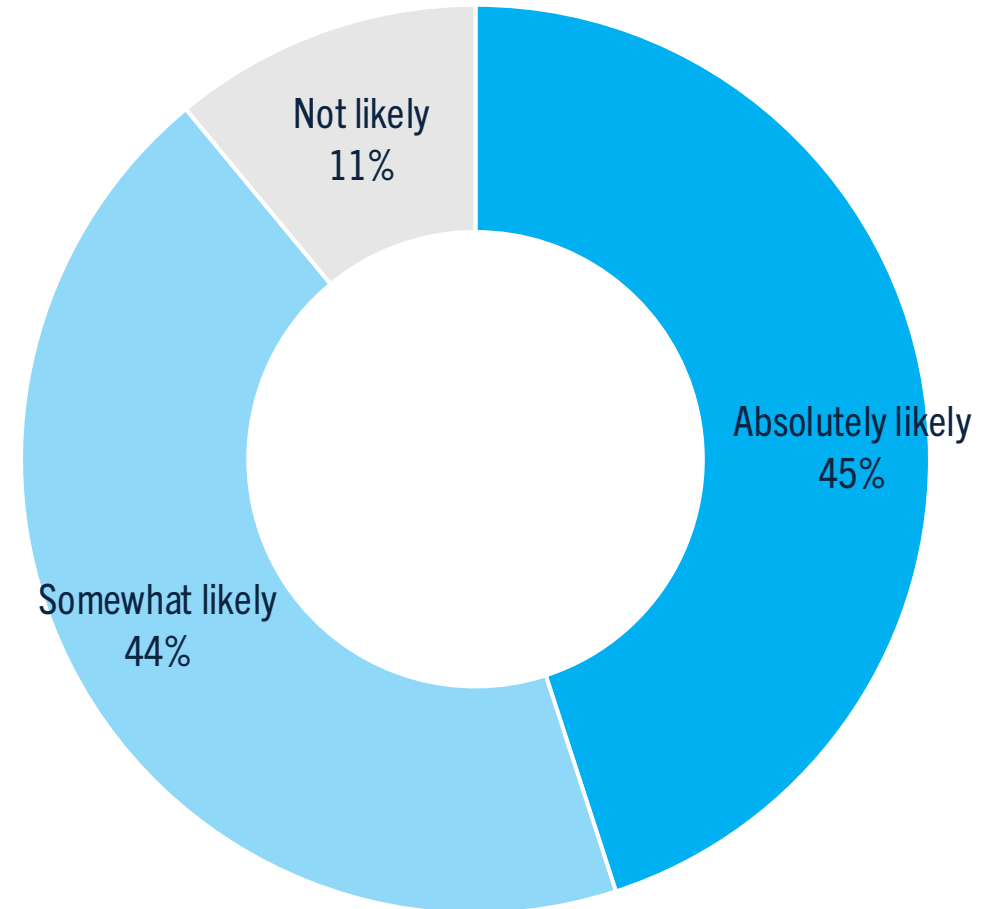
The Acquisition Transformation Strategy talks of a pivot to industry-driven commercial solutions.

45% of respondents said the current DOW acquisition system is “absolutely likely” to deliver industry-driven solutions.

More than half of respondents do not have full confidence in the systems’ ability to deliver.

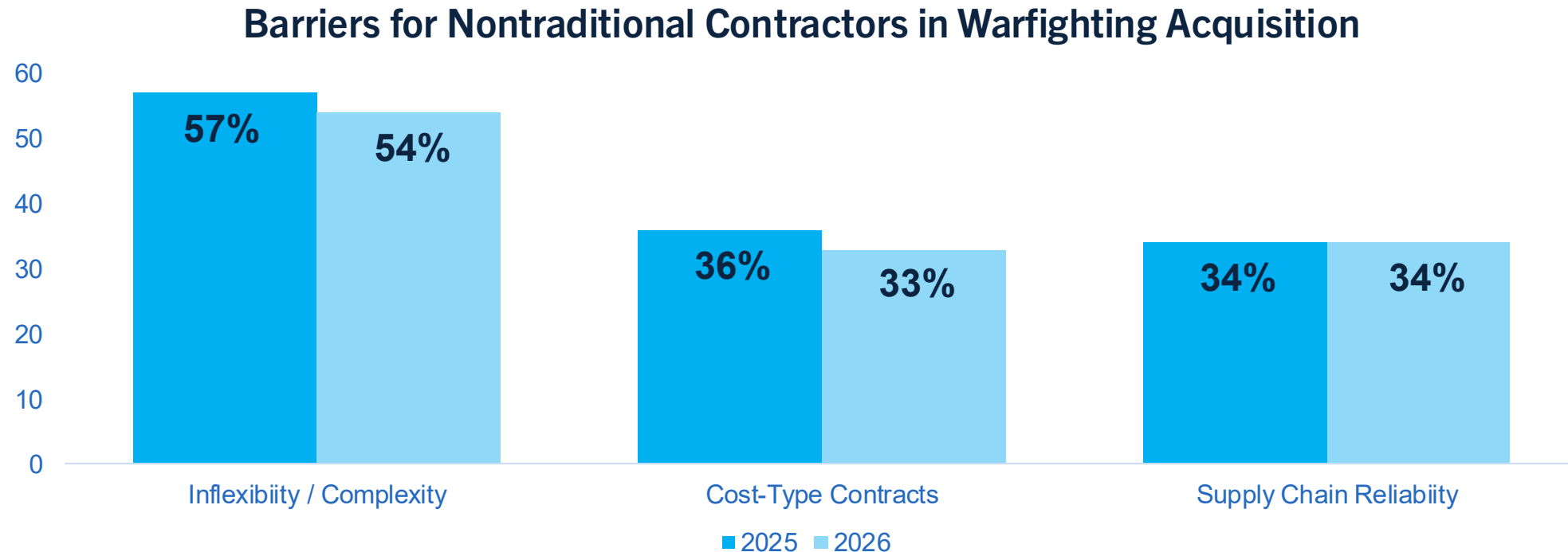
Source: MITRE / Atomik Research State of Warfighting Acquisition Survey
Base: All Respondents (n=1235) Data collected March 13-31, 2026
Q5 Does the DoW acquisition system currently enable continuous delivery of industry-driven solutions?
Does not compare to 2025 survey results.

Effectiveness of Current DOW Acquisition System at Delivering Industry Driven Solutions



BARRIERS FOR NDCs

Survey respondents identified the same **top three barriers** year over year.



Source: MITRE / Atomik Research State of Warfighting Acquisition Survey

Base: All Respondents (n=1235) Data collected March 13-31, 2026

Same Question in 2025 and 2026 survey: Q1 Which of the following factors contribute most to the challenges faced by non-traditional contractors seeking to do business within the defense acquisition ecosystem?

ELIMINATING BARRIERS TO PROGRESS

Sentiment remains strong that recent changes will reduce barriers to progress.

79% said the 2025 reforms were likely to reduce barriers to NDCs.

However, respondents demonstrate there are still significant challenges to achieving better outcomes.

The top challenge, cited both this year and last year, is inflexibility or complexity of the acquisition process at 54% (2026) and 57% (2025).

The takeaway: Respondents are optimistic that recent changes will reduce barriers but still see significant challenges to fully implementing improvements.

Source: MITRE / Atomik Research State of Warfighting Acquisition Survey

Base: All Respondents (n=1235) Data collected March 13-31, 2026

Q1 Which of the following factors contribute most to the challenges faced by non-traditional contractors seeking to do business within the defense acquisition ecosystem?

Q2 How likely or unlikely are the 2025 acquisition reforms to reduce acquisition-related barriers that discourage qualified, non-traditional contractors from increasing investments to participate in DoW Acquisition?

BROADER PARTICIPATION OF NDCs

Interest from nontraditional contractors is high – but existing barriers continue to limit their ability to fully engage.

- In 2025, **76%** said that nontraditional contractors were likely to be discouraged from participating in or dropping out of the industrial base due to excessive barriers.
- This year, **77%** of respondents said qualified, nontraditional contractors are likely to participate in DOW acquisitions **despite existing barriers to entry**.

This willingness to participate does not yet equate to ease of participation. The same structural barriers seen across the broader system – particularly process complexity and inflexibility – remain the primary obstacles for NDCs.

Source: MITRE / Atomik Research State of Warfighting Acquisition Survey

Base: All Respondents (n=1235) Data collected March 13-31, 2026

Q1 Which of the following factors contribute most to the challenges faced by non-traditional contractors seeking to do business within the defense acquisition ecosystem?

Q2 How likely or unlikely are the 2025 acquisition reforms to reduce acquisition-related barriers that discourage qualified, non-traditional contractors from increasing investments to participate in DoW Acquisition?

WORKFORCE CHALLENGES

Acquisition remains an enterprise dependent on people.

National Security Stakeholder Execution Concerns

IMPLEMENTATION OF CSOs

42% cited limited experience and 39% cited cultural resistance as barriers.

“Faster, more flexible acquisition... requires adapting to new processes.”

BUDGET AND STAFFING

34% cited changes to DOW budgets and staffing as challenges impeding the continuous delivery of capability.

“Employee turnover and hesitation has caused a lot of delay.”

IDENTIFYING GAPS AND FINDING SOLUTIONS

24% cited inadequate knowledge as a challenge impeding the DOW acquisition system.

“Inadequate knowledge level/capability of Warfighting Acquisition Workforce represents a significant systemic risk”

Source: MITRE / Atomik Research State of Warfighting Acquisition Survey

Base: National Security Respondents (n=360) Data collected March 13-31, 2026

Q3: Which of the following are significant barriers to DoW's use of Commercial Solution Opening (CSO) processes and Other Transaction (OT) awards by the Warfighting Acquisition Workforce?

Q9: Which of the following are challenges that continue to impede the DoW acquisition system as it moves from identifying a capability gap to fielding a solution?

Q6 Q6: What challenges are currently impeding the DoW acquisition system from supporting the continuous delivery of industry-driven solutions?

OPEN ENDED RESPONSES

TOP THEMES ACROSS ALL PARTICIPANTS

Speed, flexibility, and streamlined acquisition

33% of comments

“We are now seeing a shift from a culture of compliance to one of speed and execution, allowing for iterative delivery of capabilities in months rather than years.”

“The 2025 overhaul replaced the traditional system mindset with a ‘speed to capability’ model, emphasizing rapid delivery—even if solutions are less than perfect.”

AI / Digital Transformation

20% of comments

“AI is the most challenging but it also has the most positive impact when it’s working and the most negative when it’s not.”

“Our ability to use AI to reduce administrative burdens has been incredibly useful”

Non-Traditional Vendor Access

15% of comments

“If your program involves traditional defense contracting, you are likely seeing increased competition from non-traditional commercial firms. Conversely, if you work with non-traditionals, you are seeing lower barriers to entry and faster award timelines.”

“With the new reforms, the entry bar has been lowered, so new players in the industry can rise over the already established giants”

Source: MITRE / Atomik Research State of Warfighting Acquisition Survey

Base: National Security Respondents (n=360) Data collected March 13-31, 2026

Q11 Which of the 2025 DoW acquisition reforms is having the greatest impact (positive or negative) on your program or business?

CONCLUSION

The survey data indicates general confidence in the direction in which the DOW acquisition system is heading. However, stakeholders perceive that **the impact of many changes has yet to be fully realized and significant challenges remain.**

The data indicates that even with large scale pivots, stakeholders' top concerns have remained consistent. These results provide grounds for guarded optimism.

Stakeholders **want changes to succeed** and believe **they can succeed.** But aren't yet ready to say they've seen the benefits.

THANK YOU

For media inquiries, contact
media@mitre.org

To stay engaged with MITRE's
warfighter acquisition work, contact
breakingbarriers@mitre.org