

Proactively Tailored Acquisition Pathways

The “Google Maps” of Accelerated Acquisition

Inefficient acquisition practices contribute to billions of dollars in cost overruns, years of schedule delays, and degraded system performance, and pose a risk to the delivery of critical mission capabilities. Given the increasing complexity and challenges of the nation’s acquisition system, new “tailored” acquisition pathways can produce more timely and effective purchases. Tailored acquisition pathways can be likened to Google Maps, providing an optimal route for common categories or types of acquisitions. With them, the Trump administration has an opportunity to save billions of dollars and achieve timely acquisitions—including those vital to national security.

A New Way of Thinking About Acquisitions

The federal acquisition system is a complex enterprise that requires professionals with many years of experience to expertly execute. While many in the acquisition workforce (including program managers, contracting officers, systems engineers, testers, and others) are encouraged to tailor the acquisition process to deliver capabilities efficiently, most do not have the experience, knowledge, or resources to facilitate tailoring. Furthermore, several institutional obstacles make tailoring acquisition processes and activities a challenging exercise.

Many policies and processes guide the execution of government acquisition practices. The Big “A” federal acquisition system is one that brings together requirements, budgeting, and processes to deliver systems, services, and capabilities. To successfully tailor the acquisition process, the workforce must consider program documentation, acquisition phases, decision reviews, and more. Knowing where to even start tailoring so many elements is frankly daunting.

Expecting acquisition professionals to tailor the acquisition processes on their own is like handing them a map and telling them to figure out the best way to drive from New York City to Los Angeles. If

this is their first time making the trip, they will need a lot of time to study the map, plan the route, talk to others about shortcuts, and deal with traffic and detours along the way. Perhaps they will reach their final destination, but not without wasting significant time and fuel.

“Currently, DoD [acquisition] programs can spend up to two years meeting 49 information requirements and staffing them through up to 56 organizations for approval.”

—GENERAL ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE REPORT, 2015
“DOD SHOULD STREAMLINE ITS DECISION-MAKING PROCESS FOR WEAPON SYSTEMS TO REDUCE INEFFICIENCIES.”

But proactively tailored acquisition pathways present a new and different approach. Such pre-filtered pathways are Google Maps for acquisition. Routes are optimized for the type of product or service being acquired, with turn-by-turn guidance for each acquisition phase. Tailored acquisition pathways provide the acquisition workforce with a

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pre-charted route that guides the workforce on a path for success. They provide the most relevant information, processes, and documentation for each type of acquisition, and give the workforce the flexibility to adapt the process based on the specific characteristics of a particular program. Proactively tailored acquisition encourages the workforce to think critically and to customize the acquisition the best way they see fit within the constraints of the regulations' intent and statutory requirements.

While each acquisition program has unique requirements and features, several categories or groupings within such programs could benefit from having their own tailored model. These pathways could be developed based on the type of system (e.g., aircraft, ships, business systems, information technology) or general categories of products and services (e.g., agile software development, commercial software licenses) while allowing further process tailoring as required.

The Challenge of Tailored Acquisitions

The current practice of using a generalized acquisition lifecycle framework that the workforce must figure out how to tailor for each acquisition is not effective. For instance, acquiring an IT system is significantly different from buying a jet fighter, yet most government organizations use a generic acquisition framework as the same starting point.

Furthermore, experienced acquisition professionals are in short supply. And those who do have the experience and vision to deviate from the traditional methods and tailor processes often face resistance from policy and process owners. While current

acquisition policy guidance encourages tailoring, there is, in practice, no policy statement or guidance on when and how tailoring should be conducted—leading to sub-optimal acquisition strategies and inefficient program execution.

Making Tailored Acquisitions Easier

Proactively tailoring a suite of acquisition pathways will help programs focus on their core elements. As a result, the workforce will be able to navigate the lifecycle faster, leveraging the best practices and exemplary strategies of many previous programs. This will enable them to spend less time identifying the processes and documents required and more time designing innovative strategies to deliver mission-critical capabilities.

The following are key steps the Trump administration may want to consider in implementing such a practice:

- Advocate for a new approach to acquisition with an emphasis on streamlining processes and accelerating the workforce's learning curve.
- Mandate federal agencies to assemble multi-functional teams to develop a limited set of tailored acquisition pathways based on common types or categories of products and services.
- Promote education and training on acquisition tailoring for the workforce.
- Invest in digital tools to enable dynamic tailoring and the scaling of best practices.

For further ideas about applying the guidance in this paper to your agency's particular needs, contact federaltransition@mitre.org.