How Emerging Tech Can Improve Federal Acquisition Processes

New research suggests cross-functional teams and emerging tech can improve government acquisition.

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A group of technology and acquisition experts collaborated in an effort to identify best practices to improve federal acquisition processes, discovering that cross-function teams and modernized tools and techniques are key elements.
Officials from the IRS and General Services Administration Technology Transformation Services presented the results of a research project that explored ways to leverage in acquisition processes during an ACT-IAC Emerging Technology community of interest meeting Tuesday.

“What we wanted to do with this paper was look holistically at the emerging technology universe, so we mentioned blockchain is certainly part of that,” IRS Acquisition Manager Jaime Gracia said. “We were also looking at opportunities to find information on leveraging robotic process automation, artificial intelligence, machine learning and big data as a view of what’s the art of the possible.”

The project took place in four parts: first examining how emerging technologies are affecting the federal acquisition lifecycle, examining the technology closely and how to implement it, vetting people and processes, and finally ending with the publication of the research.

The research resulted in three takeaways, both in terms of modernizing the federal acquisition process itself and acquiring improved and emerging technologies:

- Improve training by learning best practices from industry and translating them to a federal training baseline
- Implement modern techniques, such as Agile methodologies, while also learning why certain techniques suit particularly situations, how to implement them respectively, and what to do to continuously show value
- Integrate appropriate tools, such as AI or RPA, after stress-testing a process, allowing more time for personnel to focus on high-value work

To integrate emerging technologies smoothly into the acquisition process in an optimal and cross-functional manner, GSA Federal Acquisition Service TTS Director Omid Ghaffari-Tabrizi explained that an integrated agency team — not just integrated project teams — is critical.

Ghaffari-Tabrizi described the five IATs the group identified in its research to improve federal acquisition, which included a technical team, acquisition team, operations team, general counsel, finance team and a team focused on IT and the CIO and CISO.
“When it comes to actually getting emerging technologies into the acquisition process itself or into any other program-level kind of project itself, you’re really going to need the support of the entire agency in various different ways,” Ghaffari-Tabrizi said. “It’s not going to be necessarily everybody on board every single day, of course, but there are multiple touch points that will be necessary for any sort of modernization effort to successfully take hold.”

The ultimate goal, Ghaffari-Tabrizi added, is to deliver value to the end user.

Gracia provided instances in which agencies like the IRS and Department of Health and Human Services leveraged emerging technologies to deliver that value in their acquisition processes. For instance, he praised HHS Accelerate’s use of automation and blockchain in sharpening procurement.

“We studied, certainly, HHS,” Gracia said. “We got some great information about the types of emerging technologies they’re using, most famously their distributed ledger blockchain technologies for a lot of their procurement functions as they’re looking at really a holistic big-data approach to using a lot of procurement information, how to buy better, how to use category management better, and how to negotiate better with a lot of the information that they’re currently having in their contract writing systems, and how to leverage that also with their HHS Accelerate program.”

Gracia also highlighted his own agency’s work in using automation to expedite highly manual acquisition work.

“At IRS, we have quite a bit of experience doing this today in regards to using bots and using information in RPA to really get a lot of the manual work out of the way and getting to more strategic work, especially now as we go into the fourth quarter — that’s very important for us to free up those entities so that we can increase productivity and streamline our processes,” he added.