DHS Procurement Innovation Lab Chief: 'We Succeed or Fail Together'

The agency is exploring the benefits of technologies like AI, blockchain and RPA in federal procurement.

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Artificial intelligence, blockchain and robotic process automation are just a few of the technologies the Department of Homeland Security hopes to incorporate into IT operations, according to Chief Procurement Officer Soraya Correa.
Correa spoke at a Washington Technology Power Breakfast last week about some of her office’s priorities, like taking risks with new innovations, setting up meetings with small business contractors, giving everyone a chance and not being afraid to fail.

“I've always been one of those individuals that really believes there's got to be a better way to do this,” Correa said at the virtual event. “A lot of our contractors have really good ideas about how to do things, but we become risk averse sometimes. We fear that almighty criticism or that we may not be supported if we make a mistake. To be successful, sometimes you're going to stub your toe, you're going to make a mistake and learn from those mistakes.”

Correa created the DHS Procurement Innovation Lab (PIL) in 2015 to encourage contracting officers to take more risks with procurement for DHS.

“The purpose of the Procurement Innovation Lab is to coach our teams on how to do this procurement,” she said, “and help them navigate the landmines and ensure they have my support. You come on into the lab and you bring me your innovative technique, and I'm going to support you, and if you're successful you're going to get awards and hopefully teach people what you did and incorporate your practices in our guide. If for some reason you fail, that's on me. I will take responsibility for that because I want you to try new things.”

The PIL also serves to spark competition among DHS contractors and encourage new contractors to pursue relationships with DHS.

“How do we entice companies to come do business with us? I don't want the same old companies, I want to do business with everybody that's out there,” Correa said.

Correa encouraged existing and potential contractors to explore DHS’ protege program, which provides developmental assistance to small businesses working with DHS, and also DHS’ Silicon Valley Innovation Program, which “is not exclusive to small businesses” and connects entrepreneurs, contractors and industry to DHS to develop the best government IT solutions.
Potential DHS partners should also attend DHS industry days to learn what challenges DHS needs to solve, and “reverse” industry days, where “the purpose is for us to learn from you,” Correa said.

“The reverse industry day is an opportunity for companies to come in with basic topics and share from us and what you think about when you're engaged with the federal government,” she said. “We talk about draft RFPs, what you think about when you're bidding, what drives you to compete, what drives you to protest. The audience is us. And it's not just the contracting folks, most of the program consists of our program specialists. By having the business discussion we learn from one another and think about these things. The reverse industry is very popular, we use it to communicate best business practices and talk about technologies.”

DHS isn’t afraid of new technologies like AI, blockchain and RPA, she added. Correa welcomes them, and she encourages companies to meet with her one-on-one.

“Last year I met with 300 companies myself,” she said. “I believe if we turn to you, the experts out there, we'll have a much better procurement. We succeed or fail together.”