

Federal IT Acquisition Leads Look to Streamline Process

Delivery should be simpler, better, faster and stronger, agencies officials said.

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Plans to improve current hurdles in federal IT acquisition include making requirements capability-focused and more dynamic, shortening the acquisition timeline and working closely with contractors through the process, top agency officials said during the 2019 AFCEA Homeland Security Conference last week.

The General Services Administration, as the primary procurement agency for the federal government, is looking to remove friction in all aspects of acquisition by taking a whole-of-organization approach.

“What we’re doing from an innovation standpoint is a couple of things that really affect the culture of [Federal Systems and Integration Management Center] and how we approach acquisitions,” said Jim Pichè, the homeland sector director for FEDSIM. “We’ve ‘projectized’ all of [our acquisitions] ... every acquisition we take on, we engage with our customers, and within two weeks, we’re going to establish an acquisition timeline with key milestones, and usually we can estimate the acquisition outcome within plus or minus 30 days.”

He added that FEDSIM is using standardized templates to help streamline some of GSA’s largest projects, and also created “FEDSIM University” — training courses for all of GSA’s program managers and contracting officers to educate them about the process and how it relates to mission outcomes.

On the delivery side, the Department of Homeland Security has implemented a series of task orders in its continuous diagnostics management (CDM) program known as Dynamic and Evolving Federal Enterprise Network Defense (DEFEND) task orders, which allow DHS to change the terms and requirements of its contracts in response to new capabilities and threats.

“As the threat changes, as technology changes over the course of five or six years, we can adapt in terms of the direction that we provide to the integrators,” said Kevin Cox, CDM program manager for DHS. “We’re not locked into the definitions that we started out with in year one. That’s really been key to helping us develop an approach to better support the agencies and components within the agencies.”

One key focus of streamlining acquisition is shortening the timeline between the initial request and the final delivery. “We cannot wait for an acquisition,” said Carlene Iletto, the executive director of the Products and Services Delivery Office in the DHS Office of the Chief Intelligence Officer. “We can’t wait six months, because by that time, my components have moved on to another capability or another tool that will meet their requirements. If there’s anything I can say for changes in our acquisition to be more innovative, it would be speed, knowing your customer, and making sure that we have clear, concise requirements.”

Pichè added that FEDSIM would focus on clear communication with contractors during the acquisition process, but that communication is a “two-way street.”

“Don’t wait to file a protest,” he said. “If you feel like something really weird is going on with an acquisition ... tell us early so we have an opportunity to correct it, because nothing hurts my customers more than a protest that delays the accomplishment of their mission.” He added that this proactive communication would help FEDSIM identify improvements to the contracting cycle and procurement system.

Ileto encouraged even closer public-private partnerships. “We should be walking side by side just like we’re having a love affair. Seriously,” she said. “I am so serious about this. There should be a partnership like no other because ... industry is so far ahead of [government] ... in everything.”

Even though industry has the technological and competitive edge, the government has a role in this relationship, she added. “Industry is creating a product that they want to have meet every possible capability and need that the government has,” Ileto said. “We don’t need that. I can honestly tell you every product is not going to meet every need. The industry needs to understand our cybersecurity community within the federal government and where it’s going. And we need to understand the industry technology roadmap and where you guys are going. That partnership helps us to align, helps us to produce and helps us to be successful and meet our mission.”

“We look at our relationship with industry just as we look at our relationship with the agencies – as a partnership,” Cox underscored. “If we are not partnered together – working closely with the agencies, working closely with industry – we’re not going to be able to provide optimal value to our mission holders.”

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