

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
Office of Acquisition and Logistics



Chicago Supplier Relationship Management Forum Report

Submitted by:  
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Ambit Group, LLC, a Service Disabled Veteran Owned Small Business, is a results-driven, strategic management consulting firm. We draw on proven methodologies and a commitment to our client's success to provide services and solutions that deliver meaningful, measurable and sustainable results.

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## Executive Summary

When: October 19, 2010

Where: Marriott O'Hare, Chicago, Illinois

Number of Attendees: One hundred thirty representatives from ninety-six companies

### Industry Breakout Groups

Construction, Design and Engineering

Healthcare

Management, IT and Transportation

Medical Equipment

Other

### Key findings:

#### Training and Education

- Suppliers would like to be provided with a clear definition of the roles and responsibilities of the Contracting Officer (CO) and Contracting Officer's Technical Representative (COTR).

#### Communications

- VA has a problem with poor communication.
  - Participants noted that there are bids and proposals they never hear back about.
  - VA does not acknowledge that invoices have been received.
  - There is a lack of communication surrounding the Request For Proposal (RFP) process. Suppliers would like to be informed of those selected, as well as those who were not. They would like to know how they are measuring against their competitors.
  - Participants want to implement a system that provides feedback stating whether or not they met VA's expectations.
- Communication issues have intensified after the National Acquisition Center (NAC) reorganization.
  - Responses during the RFP question and answer (Q&A) period are rare, often unclear, incomplete, and inaccurate.
- Lack of communication between CO, COTR and suppliers.
  - The CO and user are not always aligned.
  - There is no consistency across VA facilities.
  - Projects are sitting for months at a time and communication between the CO and supplier is non-existent.
- Utilization of technology would benefit everyone. SharePoint-type technology and centralized tools for communications will achieve greater transparency for VA.

#### Process

- The RFI can help VA structure a better focused RFP.

- A draft is sent out before the RFI conveys a sense of openness and partnership. This helps VA more effectively understand what's available in the market, what makes sense, and what they want is off target.
- When responding to the RFP, suppliers tend to take the easy route by responding to the black and white even if they have a better solution. It is only after receiving the award that they apply for a contract modification. Giving the end user what they really want.
- Minimize cut and paste requirements in RFPs so it is not "stale" by the time it is published.
  - There are a lot of problems pertaining to shelf life of requirements/specifications.
  - More homework needs to be done before the RFP is put out.
  - Often VA the purchasing agent does not consult the end user.
  - DOD brings consultants in who are experts to help with solicitation development. These consultants cannot bid on the work. They work with staff at DOD to determine what they want, and The CO can rely on the consultant.
- There is an issue with too many mistakes being found in the proposals.
  - COs and COTRs are unfamiliar with services that need to be acquired from suppliers.
  - There are often unclear requirements in acquisition documents and SOWs.
    - There are often incomplete, inconsistent or confusing specifications in RFPs.
  - The National Contracts process works well - especially the process for developing RFPs by committee. Some participants advocated for broader use of these types of committees and a stronger partnering relationship between VA and suppliers in terms of interacting with these committees.
- Suppliers have seen as many as seven addendums to RFPs.
  - A CO told the participant that they were able to disqualify 20 out of 40 respondents because of addendums.
- Acquisition guidelines and procedures are not consistently practiced.
- There's no standard way to determine best value. Lowest price often means something is left out. Developing a more standardized method for determining best value would benefit everyone involved.
- Award notification is not concise and occasionally absent.
  - Suppliers are often called by the end user, before they have received any notification of winning the award.
  - There is also no notification of losing the award or explanation of why.
- The CO does not always do a good job of conveying contract parameters after award, so end users don't know products/services are available or how to properly access them.
- There are no clear levels of authority or escalation processes.
- Contract modifications are taking too long.
  - There are numerous problems with the modifications process, including slow response times and confusing requirements.
- Participants reported good experiences in being able to move delivery dates.
- Participants stated that the modification process is horrendous.
  - Modifications sit in limbo, and nothing can happen until someone responds.

- If VA gets the RFP correct many modifications can be avoided. Getting experts involved early on will help with the process.
- Delivery generally flows smoothly.
- Suppliers are interested to know how COs and COTRs are evaluated. They would like to be part of the evaluation process if possible.
- When the Army and VA are working together, things get complicated. There is not enough coordination, communication, and definition of roles and responsibilities when working on interagency contracts.
- One participant questioned how VA can effectively evaluate proposals during the August-September rush. There is no time to ask questions and get them answered.
- Only two participants have had debriefings.
  - VA does not always respond to requests for debriefings.

## **Recommendations:**

### **Training**

- VA should monitor the private sector for advice, suggestions, and best practices.
- VA should encourage mentor protégé for large and small firms, including those firms that are very small.
- COs and COTRs must be familiar with procurement processes and supplier activities.
  - COs must understand the proper contract type required to encourage best value.
  - COTRs should know how to prevent minor contract issues.
  - COTRs should have field experience and adequate training.
- VA should reinforce that all contract decisions need to be in the best interest of the patient.

### **Communications**

- There needs to be a stronger link between the end user and the purchaser.
  - Lack of understand the market results in unnecessary restrictions on the requirements or assuming inferior products are equal.
  - Suppliers spend a lot of time trying to educate COs.
- VA should provide feedback for various stages of the acquisitions process.
  - Regular, scheduled status updates on forthcoming awards would be very helpful.
  - Announcing award dates would help VA transparency and supplier business planning.
  - Feedback or updates on awards which have passed their anticipated award date would be helpful.
  - Provide suppliers with timely and accurate responses to questions and provide feedback on the response process.
    - (e.g. "Your question has been forwarded to the Integrated Product Team (IPT) team for response.")
  - Suppliers want to be notified of RFI/RFQ/RFP status.
  - VA should send out an abstract to losing bidders so you know where the price was in relation to the winner, who won, and what the bid was.

- This information should be available automatically, not just through Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request.

### Process

- VA needs a system to make sure that SDVOSB companies are legitimate and qualified.
  - A set of standards should be put in place to avoid corruption and mandate that suppliers provide adequate proof of SDVO certification.
- VA should develop processes that ensure more consistency across VA facilities.
  - Consistent acquisition practices will result in reduced risk to the supplier, more accurate pricing, and lower costs for VA.
- COs should engage suppliers and end users before, during, and after the RFI/RFP stage.
  - Engagement during the creation of an RFP will minimize Q&A later.
  - Suppliers requested a short teleconference or web conference scheduled shortly after the publication of an RFP.
    - This conference would allow VA to provide a quick walkthrough of the RFP and hold an immediate Q&A. Suppliers feel this can further reduce the number of questions VA must respond to during the Q&A period.
    - The conference can be posted online for those unable to attend to view later.
- VA should standardize the information needed for RFIs.
- VA should hold kick off meetings for projects.
  - Kick off meetings give the CO and supplier a chance to go over schedules and any issues that need to be addressed up front.
- VA should employ an automated system for invoicing
- Incremental progress payments would be beneficial, especially for small businesses.
- VA should provide performance evaluations for suppliers.
- VA should hold closeout meetings.

## Construction, Design, and Engineering

Facilitator - Doug Black  
Note Taker – Jennifer Rhea

### Key findings:

- Suppliers would like to be provided with a clear definition of the roles and responsibilities of the Contracting Officer (CO) and Contracting Officer's Technical Representative (COTR).
- Contract modifications are taking too long. Projects are sitting for months at a time and communication between the CO and supplier is non-existent.
- Suppliers are interested to know how COs and COTRs are evaluated. They would like to be part of the evaluation process if possible.
- There is a lack of communication surrounding the Request For Proposal (RFP) process. Suppliers would like to be informed of those selected, as well as those who were not. They would like to know how they are measuring against their competitors.
- There is an issue with too many mistakes being found in the proposals. VA seems to throw everything in them in an effort to protect themselves. Suppliers are concerned VA is looking for a reason to throw out their RFP submittal. They are being told if they don't address each and every concern, whether applicable or not, they will be thrown out. This can result in the more qualified bidder losing to someone with no team and inadequate qualifications.
- Award notification is not concise. Suppliers are often called by the end user, before they have received any notification of winning the award. There is also no notification of losing the award or explanation of why.

### Recommendations:

- Initiatives should be taken to avoid corruption of the Service Disabled Veteran Owned (SDVO) certification. A set of standards should be put in place to avoid corruption and mandate that suppliers provide adequate proof of SDVO certification (similar to 8a).
- Suppliers would like to know how to get performance evaluations done on their projects.
- Suppliers would like to see more kick off meetings for their projects. It would be beneficial for the working relationship to go over schedules and any issues that need to be addressed up front.
- Suppliers would like to know what happens after they have submitted a Request For Information (RFI). They are not hearing what happened during the sources sought period. There is a universal issue with numbers changing resulting in the suppliers no longer able to find the solicitation. There is wide spread frustration with RFIs disappearing after resources have been dedicated to responding to them. At the very least, suppliers would like to be notified of what happened to the RFIs.
- Suppliers would like to see their project managers (PMs) incentivized to have closeout meetings.
- COTR should be well versed with the contract issues and anything they can do to prevent minor issues. They should also have field experience and adequate training.
- Suppliers would like to see consistency across the board on RFIs. There should be a standard set of information.

- The contract type should be set up to encourage best value.
- VA should encourage mentor protégé for large and small firms, including those firms that are very small.

## Healthcare

Facilitator – Lou Kerestesy

Note Taker - Drew Poiter

### Key Themes

- Lack of communication between CO, COTR and suppliers.
- COs and COTRs are unfamiliar with services that need to be acquired from suppliers.
- There are no clear levels of authority or escalation processes.
- Unclear requirements in acquisition documents and SOWs.
- Acquisition guidelines and procedures are not consistently practiced.

### Recommendations

- Closer relationships between COs and suppliers should be cultivated.
- COs and COTRs need to be more familiar with the business of procurement and the business of the supplier.
- Reducing risk to the supplier through better acquisition practices will result in accurate pricing and lower costs for VA.
- Integration of services within VA will benefit the Veteran.
- VA should look for advice/suggestions/best practices in the private sector.



## Management, IT, and Transportation

Facilitator – Chris Durney

Note taker – Ben Rebach

### Key Themes

- Communication issues have intensified after the National Acquisition Center (NAC) reorganization.
  - Responses during the RFP question and answer (Q&A) period are rare, often unclear, and often incorrect. From large sets of questions, answers are often selective, with some questions being completely ignored.
- When the Army and VA are working together, things get complicated. There is not enough coordination, communication, and definition of roles & responsibilities when working on interagency contracts.
- Utilization of technology would benefit everyone. SharePoint-type technology and centralized tools for communications will achieve greater transparency for VA.
- There's no standard way to determine best value. Lowest price often means something is left out. Developing a more standardized method for determining best value would benefit everyone involved.

### Recommendations

- Provide suppliers with timely and accurate responses. And provide feedback on the response process. (e.g. "Your question has been forwarded to the Integrated Product Team (IPT) team for response.")
- Write requirements that minimize Q&A. Give clear and complete responses.
- Incremental progress payments would be beneficial, especially for small businesses.
- Regular, scheduled status updates on forthcoming awards would be very helpful. Announcing award dates would help VA transparency and supplier business planning. Feedback or updates on awards which have passed their anticipated award date would be helpful.
- Suppliers requested a short web or teleconference to be scheduled shortly after the publication of an RFP. This conference would allow VA to provide a quick walkthrough of the RFP and hold an immediate Q&A. The conference could be posted online for those unable to attend to view later. Suppliers feel this would significantly reduce the number of questions VA must respond to during the Q&A period.

## Medical Equipment

Facilitator – Pat Tallarico  
Note Taker – Andrew Carr

### Key findings

- The National Contracts process works well - especially the process for developing RFPs by committee. Some participants advocated for broader use of these types of committees and a stronger partnering relationship between VA and suppliers in terms of interacting with these committees.
- Delivery generally flows smoothly.
- The CO does not always do a good job of conveying contract parameters after award, so end users don't know products/services are available or how to properly access them.
- Suppliers want more transparency about awards, specifically more information about why people didn't win.
- There are numerous problems with the modifications process, including slow response times and confusing requirements.
- There are often incomplete, inconsistent or confusing specifications in RFPs.
- The CO and user are not always aligned.
- There is not consistency across VA facilities.

### Recommendations

- VA should reinforce that all decisions need to be in the best interest of the patient. Sometimes it's confusing who has the final say in determining awards.
- Develop processes that will ensure more consistency across VA facilities.
- VA should hold more conversations earlier in the RFP process with suppliers to exchange information, recognizing the need to maintain transparency and fairness.
- There should be more communication about the status of bids after proposals are submitted.

## Other

Facilitator – Paul Cooper

Note Taker – Leah Krynicky

### Key Themes

- VA has a problem with poor communication and miscommunication.
  - Participants noted that there are bids and proposals they never hear back about.
  - VA provides no acknowledgement that invoices have been received.
  - Participants want a system of feedback to let them know if they met VA's expectations.
- The RFI can help VA structure a better focused RFP.
  - A draft is sent out before the RFI conveys a sense of openness and partnership and helps VA more effectively understand what's available in the market, what makes sense, and if what they want is off target.
  - Suppliers respond to the black and white of what the RFP is asking for even if they have a better solution. After they receive the award, they apply for a contract modification to give the end user what they really want.
- Minimize cut and paste requirements in RFPs so it is not "stale" by the time it is published.
  - There are a lot of problems pertaining to shelf life of requirements/specifications.
  - More homework needs to be done before the RFP is put out.
  - Often VA the purchasing agent does not consult the end user.
  - DOD brings consultants in who are experts to help with solicitation development. These consultants cannot bid on the work. They work with staff at DOD to determine what they want, and The CO can rely on the consultant.
- One participant questioned how VA can effectively evaluate proposals during the August-September rush. There is no time to ask questions and get them answered.
- Suppliers have seen as many as seven addendums to RFPs.
  - A CO told the participant that they were able to disqualify 20 out of 40 respondents because of addendums.
- Only two participants have had debriefings.
  - VA does not always respond to requests for debriefings.
- Participants reported good experiences in being able to move delivery dates.
- Participants stated that the modification process is horrendous.
  - Modifications sit in limbo, and nothing can happen until someone responds.
  - If VA gets the RFP correct many modifications can be avoided. Getting experts involved early on will help with the process.

### Recommendations

- Too many RFI/RFPs appear to be written by people who don't understand the topic and/or have cut and paste previous out-dated solicitations. It would be much better if contracting officers engaged suppliers first; we'd help them write solicitations that get better value for the government and especially for the end users.

- There needs to be a stronger link between the end user and the purchaser. Often, the purchaser does not understand the market he is working in so applies unnecessary restrictions on the requirements or purchases inferior products assuming they are equal. Suppliers spend a lot of time trying to educate COs.
- VA needs a system to make sure that SDVOSB companies are legitimate and qualified.
- Suppliers want more transparency into the award process: who won, what was the winning price? This information should be available automatically, not just through FOIA request. Also, the information provided in debriefs need to be substantial.
- VA should employ an automated system for invoicing like that used by DOD so that suppliers can confirm that it's been received and see the status of their invoice, including what information is outstanding and the payment date.
- VA should send out an abstract to losing bidders so you know where the price was in relation to the winner, who won, and what the bid was.
- The mod process is broken: Requests for modifications sit for long periods of time with no action, phone calls and emails go unanswered. VA needs to fix this and also improve the quality of the original RFP to decrease the need for modifications.
- Improve communication. Suppliers feel like they're in the dark too often about critical information.
- Make it easier for good companies to do work with VA rather than spending time cutting through red tape.

## Appendix A: Agenda

Time	Session
8:30 AM – 9:00 AM	Registration and Informal Interaction – Morning Beverages
9:00 AM – 9:30 AM	Opening Remarks in General Session Room
9:30 AM – 12:00 PM	Breakout Session, Acquisition business processes. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ RFI / RFP</li> <li>▪ Bids / Proposals</li> <li>▪ Award and Kickoff</li> <li>▪ Delivery</li> <li>▪ Contract Modifications</li> <li>▪ Closeout</li> </ul>
12:00 PM – 1:30 PM	Lunch
1:30 to 2:45 PM	Breakout Session, Themes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Contract type (FFP, T&amp;M, CP, etc.)</li> <li>▪ Challenges with unclear requirements</li> <li>▪ COTR concerns</li> </ul>
2:45 to 3:00 PM	Break
3:00 to 3:45 PM	Plenary – VA responses to questions identified in breakout sessions
3:45 to 4:15 PM	Plenary – Structured Live Q&A Session with Audience
4:15 to 4:30 PM	Closing Remarks and Next Steps
4:30 PM – 5:30 PM	Informal Interaction and Mixing - Cash Bar in Firehouse Tavern

## Appendix B: Attendees

First Name	Last Name	Organization or Agency
Ambrose	Christopher	Grant Thornton, LLP
Banks	Ronald	Genesis Integrative Solutions
Bass	Diane	Hill-Rom
Belk	Steve	Locum Medical Group
Blair	David	JM Industrial Supply
Boldt	Jan	Stanley Convergent Security Solutions
Borchelt	Scott	
Brawner	Lance	
Brunner	Bill	Diamond Detective Agency, Inc.
Callies	Kathy	Williams Sound Corp.
Capelo	Herman	Critical Systems Services, Inc.
Case	Lynne	
Childers	Devin	Biomet
Cielocha	Steve	Abbott
Clay	Amos	Chem-Sales, Inc.
Clay	Shirley	Chem-Sales, Inc.
Clendenning	John	EMC Battery Inc
Crandall	Peter	Total Home Health, LLC
Crawford	Randy	Aegis Business Solutions, LLC
Cromwell	Joseph	F J Strahl
Curtis	Douglas	MobilityWorks
Davis	Roderick	Veterans Fire & Life Safety Inc
Dawson	Chris	The Clay Group
DeRosa	Greg	Ecolab Healthcare
Dickson	Ellen	Bailey Edward Architecture
Doubleday	Matt	Affiliated Steam Equipment Company
Doug	Lenzo	Stanley Security
Dsouza	Millie	Natus Medical Incorporated
Ferris	Suzanne	HGA, Inc.
Ghousheh	Samir	Independence Medical
Glab	Jim	RPh on the Go
Goldsberry	David	Cardinal Health
Goldsberry	David	Cardinal Health
Goodbrake	John	Masters Transportation
Granjean	Zorina	The Mihalik Group. LLC
Grau	Lisa	
Grote	Ryan	Nurture by Steelcase
Gullapalli	Prasad	NOVI Energy
Halperin	David	ADM International, Inc.
Hamm	Carole	Abbott Molecular Diagnostics
Harris	Glynda	Radiation Oncology Associates, PC
Harrison	David	Sebesta Blomberg
Hartmann	Mike	Williams Sound Corp.
Hayes	Ryan	Patterson Medical

Honiberg	Scott	Potomac health Associates, Inc.
Honiberg	Scott	Potomac Health Associates, Inc.
Hudson	Randy	Paradigm Engineers and Constructors
Hussong	Brent	Perkins+Will
Jacobs	Theodore	Christner Inc
Jacobson	Scott	Armstrong International
Jordan	John	Diamond Detective Agency, Inc.
Jozefiak IV	Michael	Coordinated Defense Supply Systems, Inc.
Juarez	Steven	SRJ Project Services, Inc.
Kennedy	Vicki	Secure-Idle, Inc.
Kiebles	Dina	AT&T
Koines	Mary Anne	Spectrum Healthcare Resoruce, Inc.
Kumarich	Diane	Addus HealthCare, Inc.
Laird	Bob	Boston Scientific Corporation
Mac Harg	Denny	Advance Prresort Service
Mac Harg	Dennis	Advance Prresort Service
Manuel	Patrice	P/Strada, LLC
McDonald	Bruce	Spectrum Healthcare Resources, Inc.
McElroy	Charles	Advance Prresort Service
McGinn	MaryAnne	Natus Medical Incorporated
McNaughton	Shevaun	Oculus Inc.
Melton	Rodney	Eaton Corporation Affiliation
Michael	Mack	Stanley Security Solutions, Inc - Mechanical Solutions Division
Mueller	Dan	Ecolab
Murray	John	American Medical Systems
Murrell	Marc	Biomet
Nall	Leonard	Government Sales & Services
Nau	Rosann	Dental Arts Laboratory, Inc
O'Connor	J Michael	The Colonial Group
O'Daniel	John	Medline Industries, Inc.
O'Donnell	Neil	
Orlando	Melinda	The Mihalik Group, LLC
Ormsby	John	U.S. Foodservice
Ostrowski	Sandra	Leica Microsystems
Otola	Mpeti	Kepa Services Inc.
Oxford	Lloyd	Veterans Fire & Life Safety Inc
Papazian	Berg	
Patrick	Peterson	Stanley Convergent Security Solutions
Pauls	Chris	Mid America Government Supply
Phillips	Randy	Stiles Office Solutions, Inc.
Portillo	Laura	COSMED USA
Quinnell	Bret	
Rambhajan	David	Industria
Raphael	Gary	ADM International, Inc.
Reynolds	Vicki	
Rodgers	Tamaal	Addus HealthCare, Inc.
Rondinelli	Dale	Mid America Government Supply
Sanders Jr	Kenneth D	Vizionus Enterprises

Schmidt	Teresa	Progressive Industries, Inc.
Schoneich	Andy	American Medical Systems
Schumaker	Jamie	JES Lighting, Inc.
Scroggs	Stephen	ValueOptions
Sean	Bowman	Stanley Convergent Security Solutions
Shaw	Robert	Carlisle Syntec
Shelton	Kathy	PTAC
Shepherd	Darleen	Zimmer US, Inc.
Showell	Ronnell	On-Call Surgical Services
Showell	Ronnell	On-Call Surgical Services
Starkovich	Linda	Tompkins Associates, Inc dba Tompkins Architects
Stephenson	Dustin	Masters Transportation
Steven	Kaiden	Stanley Security Solutions - Access Technologies
Such	Jim	HandiRamp
Swencki	Mark	Total Home Health, LLC.
Taylor	Jeff	Intrinsic Technologies
Taylor	Shawn	Stanley Convergent Security Solutions
Tepatti	Mary-Lynn	Steelcase
Thornton	Jessica	Cardinal Health
Thornton	Jessica	Cardinal Health
Tompkins	Mary	Tompkins Associates, Inc dba Tompkins Architects
Tribout	Matthew	Veterans Fire & Life Safety Inc
Tribout	Matthew	Veterans Fire & Life Safety Inc
Tripoli	Jodi	RPh on the Go
Trompeter	James	DSS, Inc.
Tucker	Bob	Masters Transportation
Turczyn	Charlene	CMW and Associates Corporation
Van Landuyt	Theresa	Abbott Laboratories Inc.
Viola	Karin	NOVI Energy
Vitu	Ed	E. M. VITU, Inc.
Walters	Brenda	3M Company
Warncke	Gary	Medtronic
Weare Orlando	Andrea	Ameridian Golden Eagle
Weber	Dietrah	Stericycle, Inc.
Weiland	Nikki	MobilityWorks
Weiss	Sybil	Alphapointe Association for the Blind
Wright	Tom	Boston Scientific Corporation
Zahler	Melanie	3M Company



## Appendix C: Focus Group Protocols

### Morning Session

Focus on the Acquisition business processes:

- RFI / RFP: When you look at the way VA considers bids and proposals, what would you say works and what doesn't work?
- Bids / Proposals: When you look at the way VA administers its awards and kickoffs, what would you say works and what doesn't work?
- Award and Kickoff: When you look at the way VA administers its awards and kickoffs, what would you say works and what doesn't work?
- Delivery: When you look at the way VA administers the delivery of its contracts, what would you say works and what doesn't work?
- Contract Modifications: When you look at the way VA administers its contract modifications, what would you say works and what doesn't work?
- Closeout: When you look at the way VA administers the closeout of its contracts, what would you say works and what doesn't work?

### Afternoon Session

Afternoon sessions varied from planned session topics based on challenges and topics discovered in the morning session. Individual Office of Acquisition and Logistics (OAL) leaders attended some sessions relevant to their areas of expertise.

### Closing remarks and OAL Leadership Question and Answer Session

OAL leadership hosted a question and answer session with all participants after the closing remarks. This discussion was in response to interest from participating suppliers, and detailed notes may be found in the *Chicago Forum Detailed Breakout Session Notes*.