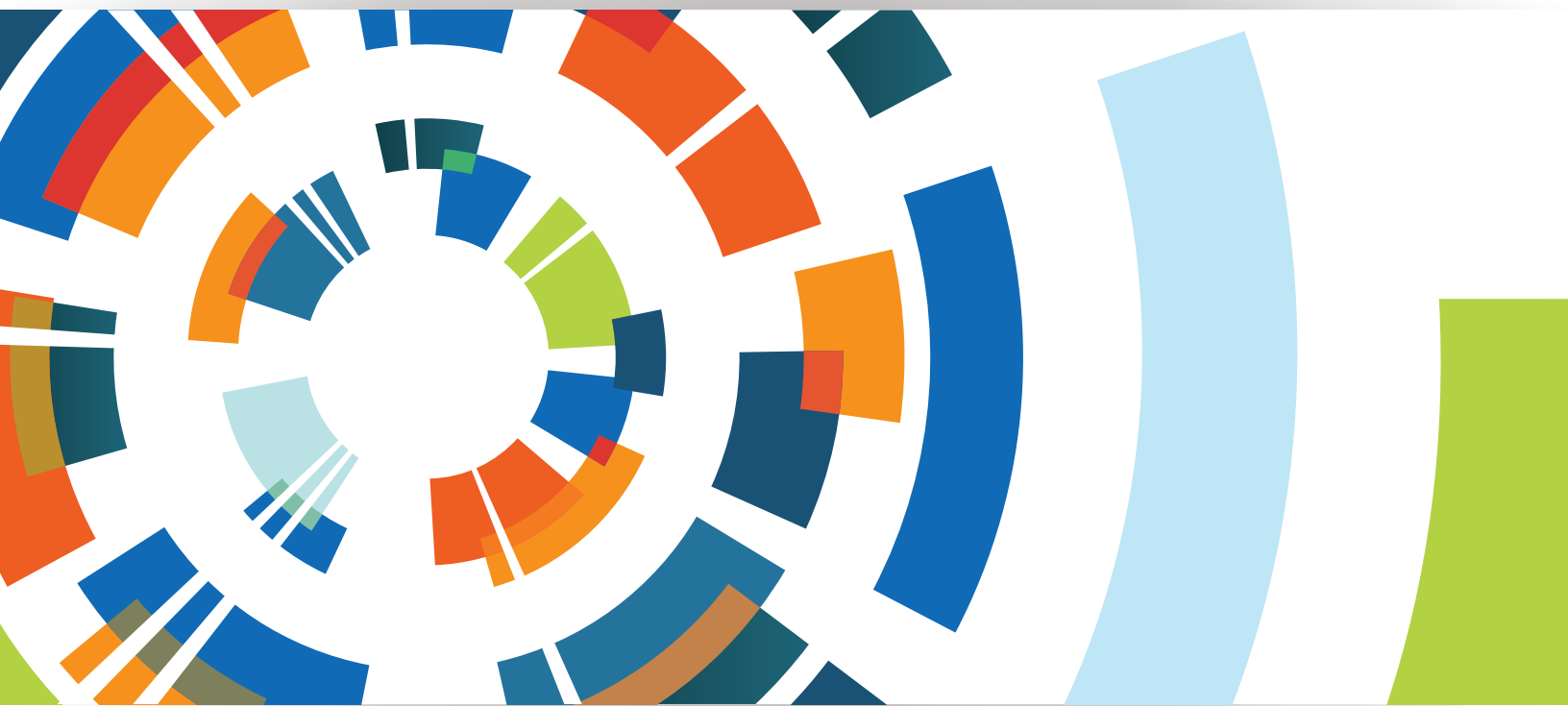


# A CLOSING WINDOW: ARE WE MISSING THE OPPORTUNITY FOR CHANGE?



JANUARY 2015

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# METHODOLOGY AND OVERVIEW



## OVERVIEW

For over a decade, the Professional Services Council (PSC) and Grant Thornton LLP have conducted a biennial Acquisition Policy Survey. The survey captures opinions and insights of federal government acquisition leaders on the current state of the acquisition profession, noteworthy trends, and future challenges and opportunities. The purpose of the survey is to capture perspectives and insights from the acquisition community to inform government leaders and industry executives on the state of federal acquisition.

The number of respondents to our 2014 survey (51) is not large enough to be statistically precise. The targeted population of respondents instead provides qualitative insights into the perspectives, challenges and solutions driving acquisition across the federal government. The survey illustrates discernible trends where the preponderance of common views is stark or where we can draw conclusions based on the results of the surveys conducted over the past 12 years. Taken as this larger body of work, hundreds of government acquisition leaders have provided their insights on acquisition and related issues. We use this larger data set to draw longitudinal trends where apparent.

This report covers the survey findings in five principal areas: Budget Uncertainty, Workforce, Access to Innovation, Communications and Collaboration, and Oversight and Compliance. These issues are, of course, greatly interdependent. Budget realities directly impact workforce training, experience, and hiring. The workforce directly impacts value determination and communication and collaboration. Oversight and compliance effect, and are a result of, all four of these areas.

## METHODOLOGY

In the summer and fall of 2014, representatives from PSC member firms conducted in-person interviews with more than 50 federal officials, representing a broad cross-section of the federal government, including senior acquisition executives, front-line contracting professionals, congressional staff, members of the oversight community and others.

In order to engender candid responses, we guaranteed the anonymity of the answers provided by our survey participants and do not attribute quotations or responses to specific individuals. Interviewees, interviewers and survey contributors are listed at the end of the report. The analysis or interpretation of their responses reflects the views solely of the survey's sponsors, PSC and Grant Thornton.

Until the 2010 survey, we referred to the report as the "Procurement Policy Survey." Since 2010, we refer to this report as the "Acquisition Policy Survey" to better reflect the broader federal acquisition community involved in the investment strategy, requirements definition, procurement, use and disposition of services in the federal government.

One unique feature of the 2014 survey is the inclusion of two smaller survey groups—young acquisition professionals and industry representatives—in addition to our traditional population of federal acquisition leaders. While the focus of the survey remains firmly on federal acquisition leadership, throughout the report we compare how the views of these acquisition leaders align or differ from both their employees and their industry partners.





# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Like so many components of the federal workforce, federal acquisition professionals are remarkable in both their focus on mission and their ability to get things done, often despite daunting barriers. They recognize the critical role of the acquisition professional in providing sound decision making and stewardship to achieve their agency's mission.

The ability of the federal acquisition workforce to deliver quality outcomes, however, is only partially determined by their individual commitment and talent. Outcomes are also driven by the environment and culture in which the workforce operates. Professional development opportunities, required policies and practices, and other external factors also play key roles. Previous installments of this biennial survey have consistently identified important and worrisome challenges that inhibit the workforce, and the broader acquisition system, from delivering optimal results. Respondents have consistently identified a lack of training resources and opportunities, misalignment of critical skills to operational needs, process-driven decision making, resistance to communication and collaboration, and excessive oversight, as primary areas of concern.

Thus, our first priority with the 2014 survey was to determine if and where the situation has improved from prior years. Has the budget situation improved enough to enable strategic acquisition planning? Have the government's investments in acquisition workforce development—which have been significant—helped restore or create needed capabilities? Has the relationship with industry become more open and collaborative, within the appropriate confines of ensuring fairness in the competitive process? Has the application of oversight been employed in appropriate and streamlined ways to minimize risk, inform decision makers, but not obstruct acquisition operations?

Regrettably, the answer to these questions is “not really.”

While a significant percentage of respondents indicated they had seen some improvement over prior years, a solid majority indicated that things have not improved overall or not improved sufficiently to “move the needle.”

**Given that the acquisition workforce is in the midst of a generational transition, this is an extraordinary opportunity in time to drive significant changes in culture, practices and capabilities. Missing this window of opportunity could have impacts for years to come.**

As was true in our 2012 report, survey respondents cited the budget as the top barrier to optimal performance. In this year's survey, nearly 60 percent agree the budget situation has become more unstable over the last two years. In fact, budget instability, that is, a lack of certainty about funding, was cited as being more detrimental to agency operations than specific budget reductions, and as having a cascading effect on other areas. Budget instability restricts spending on training and the hiring of needed resources. Not knowing programmatic funding levels precludes effective tradeoff analyses and planning. Programs place an over-emphasis on cost savings as opposed to programmatic outcomes as a principal goal of the acquisition process. This then naturally translates into a similarly narrow oversight perspective on cost elements, often at the expense of a more holistic view which, when combined with an

already punitive oversight environment in which collaboration is not encouraged, ultimately has a chilling effect on the process as a whole and on all of its participants.

The skills of the acquisition workforce also continue to be a primary concern. The overwhelming majority of respondents continued to cite significant weaknesses in critical skills areas including business acumen, negotiating skills, and conducting complex information technology acquisitions. For example, no respondent ranked workforce business acumen as being excellent; and only 20 percent rated it as “good.” Further, while over two-thirds of respondents said they believe negotiating skills are important or extremely important in acquisition, only a small fraction said they believe their workforce has adequate negotiating skills.

While those findings are consistent with previous years' surveys, this year one of the most significant takeaways was the low value placed on pursuing innovation through the acquisition process. In sharp contrast to the stated goals of administration and agency leaders, and many on the operational side of government, survey respondents ranked innovation as next to last in a list of key objectives for acquisition. Additionally, our 2014 survey asked how acquisition leaders are able to use sourcing for operational performance to create innovation and best value for the agency mission. Little consensus is apparent from the results. There appeared to be little agreement on the role of trade-off analyses or business case assessments to achieve innovation, and similarly little connection to the type of acquisition strategy or vehicle employed. Notably, 60 percent of government respondents believe they and their agencies use LPTA (lowest price-technically acceptable) contracting appropriately and are confident in their agency's ability to set the right technical requirements, but less than one-third say they use such strategies primarily as a cost- or time-savings tool. In contrast, 84 percent of industry respondents believe LPTA is used too frequently and over 50 percent believe LPTA is rarely used appropriately. This continues to be an area of substantial disconnect between the government acquisition community and its industry partners. Anecdotally, and unconnected to this survey, there is evidence of growing concern among agency “customers” about the mission and performance impacts being felt by the over-use or misapplication of LPTA strategies.

On a more positive note, survey respondents also indicated that they are seeing improvement in both internal (cross-functional) and external (industry) communications and collaboration. Acquisition executives report that despite this improvement, work remains to be done. Government-wide efforts such as the “mythbusters” guidance from the Office of Management and Budget have not been sufficient to fully address the risk-averse approach to communication with industry. This concern was likewise voiced by industry respondents, with over half saying that open communication with government has actually worsened in the past two years.

To no one's surprise, the current state and scope of oversight continues to be a significant concern for the effect it has on acquisition operations. Acquisition leaders understand the need for oversight. However, the burden required to be responsive to internal and external overseers is substantial, often non-value added and a key force in creating the risk-averse environment. Respondents did report some optimism for current acquisition reform efforts to address this imbalance and it will be interesting and important to revisit this issue in our 2016 report.

So, where does this leave us? The messages of the findings are clear:

1. There is a growing risk that, absent significant, holistic change in workforce planning, development, and support, the acquisition workforce and ecosystem will be increasingly distanced from the kinds of innovations that can greatly enhance mission performance, even as they fundamentally change the way in which the work is performed.
2. There remains a clear need for the various communities across government, including the Congress, to align their objectives and interests. Collaboration is essential to change the current punitive, rigid, risk-averse environment into one of smarter, more strategic execution. If getting the workforce to "think" is a primary objective, the environment in which they work needs a great deal of attention.
3. This survey, like all of its predecessors, clearly documents gaps in the acquisition workforce's business acumen and related skills, strongly suggesting a continuing need to re-think and re-design the education and training of the acquisition workforce. Only a small percentage of that workforce is procuring goods and services in a monopsony market that lacks clear commercial characteristics. The rest are doing so in a highly competitive, commercial or commercial-like environment and, for them, core business skills are critical but in short supply.
4. The acquisition workforce is increasingly buffeted between policy prescriptions and on-the-ground expectations. Immediate budget pressures often drive less than optimal buying behaviors. The workforce is told to pursue innovation but too often lacks the tools and institutional support to do so.
5. Finally, Congress needs to act to restore regular budget order so the proper planning needed to address all of the other challenges can be put in place.

In summary, the results of the 2014 PSC Acquisition Policy Survey show a government acquisition community that continues to face barriers to functioning effectively. Budgetary uncertainty, a shortfall in workforce capabilities, communication with industry and growing oversight/compliance issues continue to place constraints on acquisition professionals to achieve their agency missions. Considerable work remains in building an acquisition ecosystem that consistently delivers excellence and maximum value.



# BUDGET CHALLENGES AND UNCERTAINTY

Our 2012 Acquisition Policy Survey report, titled “The Balancing Act,” showed a federal acquisition community facing significant budget instability. Continuing resolutions, escalating political budgetary intransigence, and impending sequestration all weighed heavily on survey respondents during this cycle. This instability continued to worsen following publication of our 2012 survey report, leading to a 16-day civilian agency shutdown in October 2013. The government shutdown failed to lead to any political agreement on long-term budget stability. Little progress has been made on solving the deeper fiscal issues that are at the source of this lingering instability.

The impacts of budget instability manifest themselves throughout this survey in a variety of ways. Survey respondents cited budget instability as a leading impediment to long-term agency planning and effective trade-off analysis. Reductions in budgets have decimated workforce training accounts in many civilian agencies while hiring freezes have required already strained workforces to do even more. Routine maintenance activities are being postponed, leading to increased agency operating costs down the road. Budget concerns are clearly affecting the acquisition process. Acquisition executives identified cost savings as second only to quality on the scale of most important objectives for the contracting process, followed by agility/flexibility, speed, innovation, and accessibility. Here, too, the connection between the impacts of the fiscal environment on government agencies and the very similar impacts of an excessive focus on LPTA acquisitions on companies is not being made.

**Budget instability has been a significant challenge over the last two years, forcing agencies to adapt and remain flexible.** Not surprisingly, most interviewees (59 percent) felt budget stability had gotten worse over the last two years. Sequestration and continuing resolutions have created instability throughout the federal government. Few respondents were optimistic about the environment improving in the near term. One important distinction made by some respondents is that while budget reductions are hard, budget instability is harder. Budget reductions can be mitigated—to some degree—through planning, reprioritization, and other tactics. When an agency does not know what its budget will be, however, meaningful planning or effective execution of even high priority programs becomes untenable.

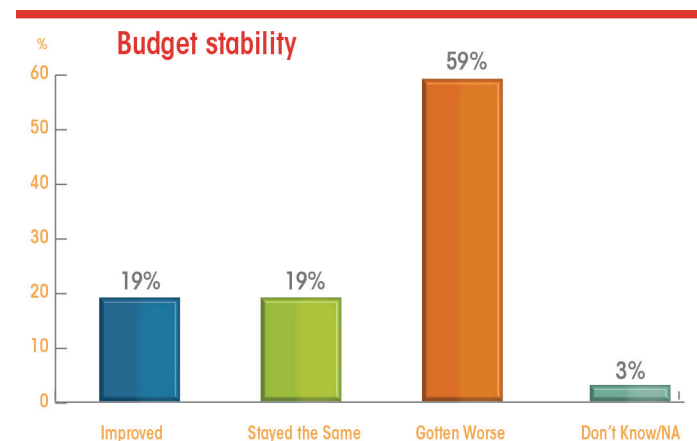
**Budget uncertainty obstructs innovation.** Many acquisition leaders seem to equate innovation with higher costs, with some lamenting that they would like to focus more on innovation, but the current budget situation precluded doing so. Budget limits may be inhibiting acquisition professionals from pursuing innovation. In fact, few participants acknowledged that innovation can actually reduce costs over the long run, even with an increased initial investment. Rather, innovation was seen simply as “doing more with more,” rather than doing the same or more with less. However, this also suggests a limited understanding of the shift to an “as a service” business model, which is increasingly common across the commercial marketplace and is taking hold in government. In such a model, the capital investments are made

by the supplier with the customer procuring its required capabilities as a service, rather than through capital expenditures. This will be further explored later in this report.

**The worst is not necessarily over.** Many respondents worry about the impact of continued budget reductions on their agencies’ ability to execute their mission successfully. They explained that the actions to reduce spending over the past few years are not sustainable in the long term. Deferring maintenance and canceling training may reduce expenses in the short run, but have longer term impacts on agency cost, operational capabilities, and ultimately agency mission performance.

**Rising acquisition professionals also identified budget instability as a substantial obstacle for success.** Consistent with responses from the acquisition executive survey respondents, rising acquisition professionals noted that agencies have slashed acquisition training funds. As a result, professionals with less experience and limited or no training are being given responsibilities that exceed their abilities. These respondents report that the omnipresent pressure to focus on cost reductions hampers capability development, as well as critical thinking and long-term planning.

“We don’t need acquisition reform. We need budget stability and competent people to do acquisition and competent companies to do the work.”



## BUDGET TAKEAWAYS:

- Budget instability has been a significant challenge over the last two years, forcing agencies to adapt and remain flexible.
- Budget uncertainty is of greater concern than even shrinking budgets. Lack of stability in this area has a cascading effect on the workforce, on innovation, and on oversight and compliance concerns.



# WORKFORCE

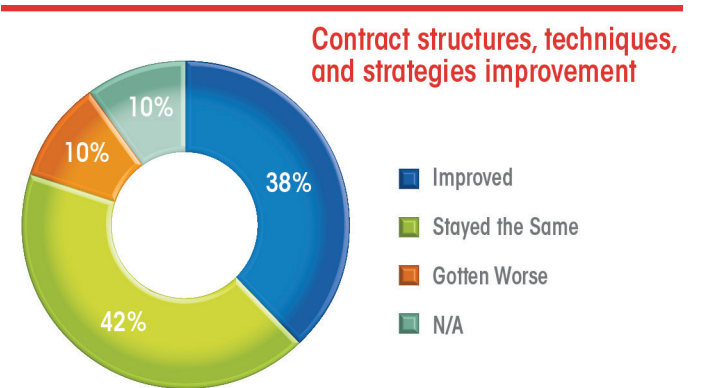
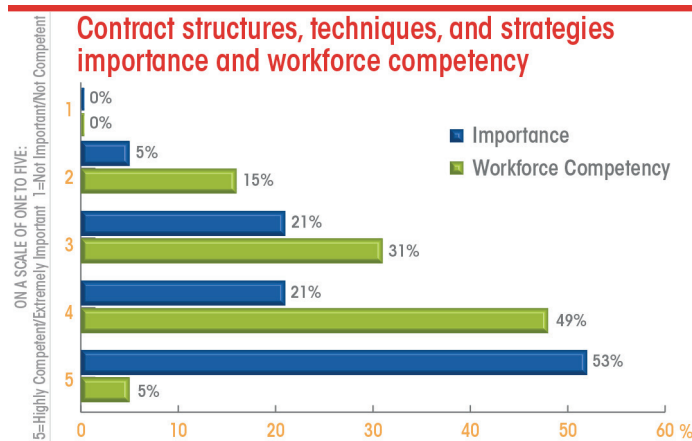


Federal acquisition professionals have shown remarkable dedication to getting the job done despite significant obstacles. As in previous surveys, however, this year's results showed that workforce composition, capabilities, development, and training continue to be a major concern of federal acquisition leaders. Survey respondents reported that their staff have gaps in many core competencies critical to delivering optimal quality and results. Previous surveys showed that significant investments in innovative workforce development strategies were needed to build critical skill sets. The effects of budget reductions and instability, and the associated impact on training, oversight, and professional development, have contributed to continued shortfalls in these areas.

Many acquisition leaders reported some progress in their workforce's capabilities over the past two years, despite recognizing continued, significant deficiencies. Over 40 percent of the interviewees stated that overall acquisition workforce capability had improved, while almost 30 percent reported it stayed the same. Competencies identified as inadequate for mission needs included negotiation skills and the ability to understand business risk. Acquisition workforce development has been a key focus area over the last decade. The continued lack of noticeable, broad-based improvement should raise concerns with the current approach to acquisition training and development.

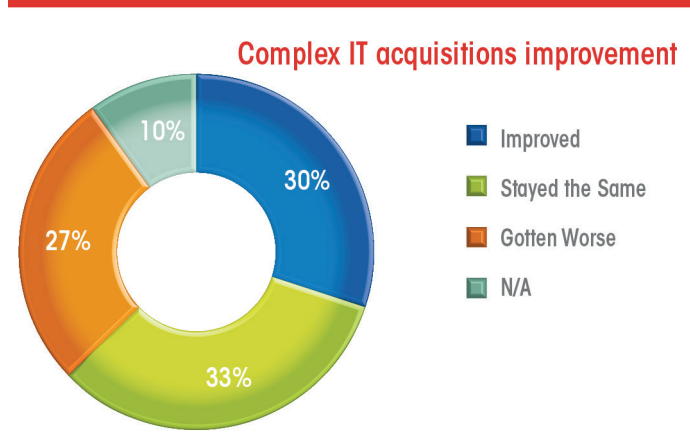
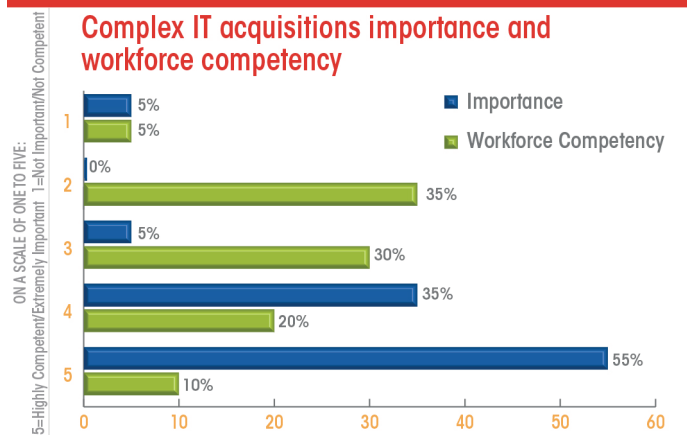
**Contract structures, techniques and strategies.** Correctly selecting the right contract structure, selection technique, and acquisition strategy is a core element of a successful acquisition. An agency's

ability to procure the needed set of capabilities or products, at the best price and of the needed quality, will all hinge on these decisions. Over 50 percent of acquisition leaders rated the selection of correct contract structures, techniques and strategies as extremely important, **yet only five percent rated their workforce as highly competent in these skills.** The curriculum at the government's major acquisition training institutes, such as the Federal Acquisition Institute (FAI) and the Defense Acquisition University (DAU), specifically focuses on improving these skills. The Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR) guidelines governing these topics are embedded in core coursework for acquisition certification programs and related acquisition training. Only 38 percent of acquisition leaders saw improvement in their workforce's skills in these areas over the past two years.



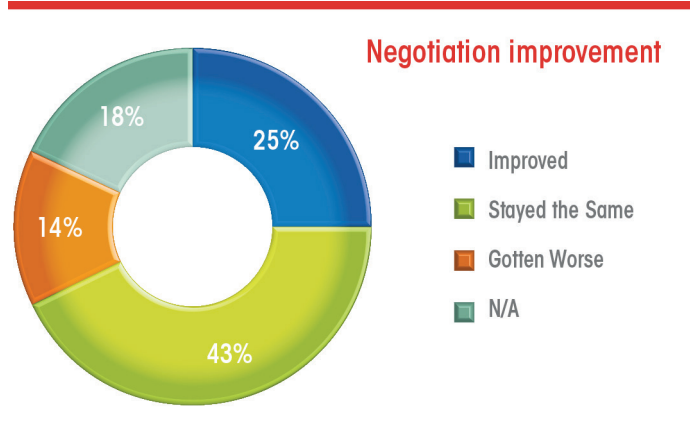
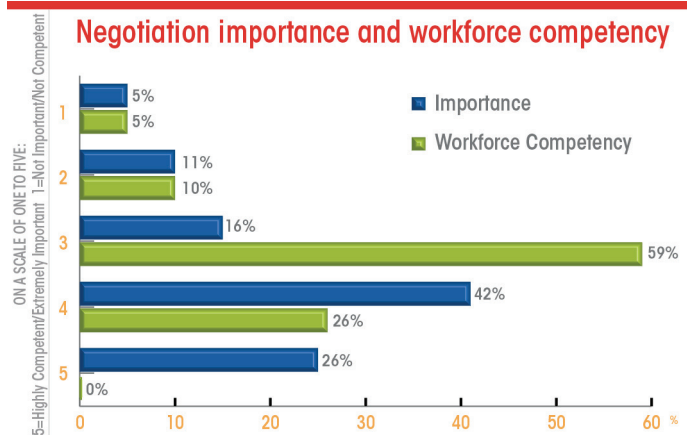
# WORKFORCE

**Possessing complex IT acquisition skills** is becoming increasingly important for the federal acquisition workforce. The pace of technological change continues to quicken and businesses are adopting entirely new models and solutions to keep up. Accessing technology innovations and solutions is critical to reducing agency costs and improving performance. The trend of rapidly deployable technology is likely to grow in the near term. Participants from this year's survey reported that complex IT acquisition skills are and will continue to be vital if the government wants to position itself to take advantage of such capabilities. As illustrated in the chart below, 55 percent of respondents rank complex IT skills as extremely important. However, they also recognize that their workforce's skills are not keeping up with demand. Only **10 percent of acquisition leaders ranked their workforce as highly competent in complex IT acquisitions**, and only 30 percent saw improvement in these skills over the past two years. As the government demand for IT grows, this trend will require specific attention. The workforce needs to not only understand what they're buying but how to buy it in the marketplace. Respondents further noted that workforce capabilities to manage the convergence of services and technology into "as a service" solution buying are insufficient for what the market has to offer.



“Our ability to successfully negotiate comes from our understanding of costs, and we are creating tools to help us understand costs.”

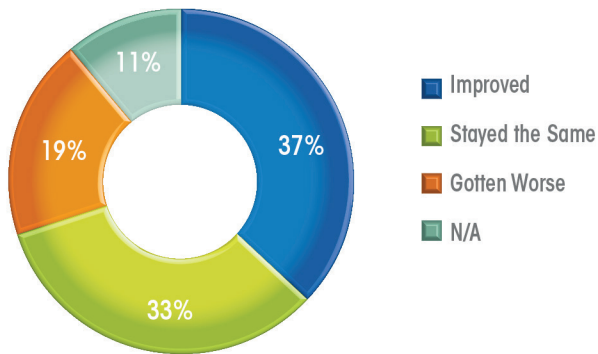
**Negotiation skills** differ from other competencies in that they are vital to every deal. In this year's survey, nearly 70 percent of acquisition leaders ranked negotiation skills as important or very important. When asked to rate the competency of their workforce in this area, over 70 percent of respondents said the workforce was either average or below average. While acquisition leaders clearly acknowledged that it is still of great importance, this lack of capability presents a clear risk to sound buying decisions and effective stewardship of taxpayer resources. Though 25 percent of respondents acknowledged some improvement in this area, far more saw little change or even a worsening of this skill set within their teams.



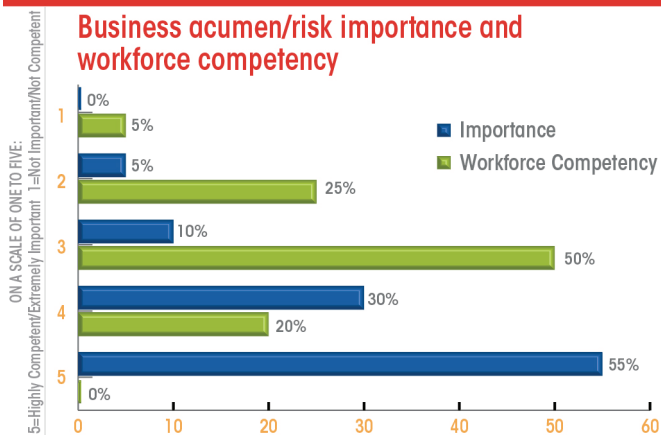


“The training is out there, but that cannot make up for experience. But now the new hires of three, four and five years ago have some experience under their belt, so it’s getting better.”

### Business acumen/risk improvement



### Business acumen/risk importance and workforce competency



call attention to the clear and continued need to re-think and re-design the education and training system. Some interviewees felt the current training standards have been set too low, that training and certifications are not a substitute for functional experience, and that some training requirements can lead to a “check the box” profession that lacks critical thinking. One acquisition leader quipped that “The bar for CO’s should be set at the same level as the bar is set for Certified Public Accountants. Some certifications are a joke; you can study a few weekends and get certified.” As another agency respondent put it, “It’s a combination of certification and quality. On-the-job training is required to fully train...You can’t teach experience.”

The value of on-the-job training/experience was echoed by many of the young professionals that were interviewed for the survey. However, many of them also want improved training that includes more real-life case studies and situations. One such example of success is the DHS Contractor Debriefing sessions held in 2013 and 2014 and planned for 2015. These sessions have focused on the government’s actions, but also brought industry into the training mix to act as role-players in simulated debriefing sessions to give government personnel a better sense of how industry views debriefings and reacts to various feedback from contracting personnel.

**Respondents also reported continuing challenges in the recruiting and hiring of qualified personnel to meet future needs.** Accessibility of critical skills is a core issue. Seventy-nine percent rated this as “difficult” or “extremely difficult.” Less than five percent of those who reported difficulty hiring the critical skills they need said that these skills do not exist in the market, while only 14 percent responded that the government cannot compete with the private sector. As one respondent said, “The skills exist, and people are banging down the door to get in. OPM is the problem.”

**Business Acumen** capability repeats the pattern of being rated highly important, but inadequate in the current acquisition workforce. Fifty-five percent of acquisition leaders rate it as extremely important, but none of the acquisition leaders surveyed rate their workforce as highly competent in this area, and only 20 percent rate the competence as four out of five. While 37 percent reported some improvement over the past two years, a majority of respondents listed this skill as having stayed the same or gotten worse over that period. As with negotiation skills, business acumen is vital for successful business relationships and effective stewardship of public resources.

**The skills gaps** all come together at one stark data point: a significant portion of federal acquisition leaders listed their workforce’s skills as the most significant inhibitor to their agency’s ability to obtain innovative solutions—more than any other single factor.

Unless and until workforce planning, development and support systems are overhauled, the acquisition workforce and ecosystem will be increasingly distanced from the kinds of innovation that can achieve effective acquisition outcomes.

**Training processes and resource options have improved but are still not succeeding in closing skills gaps.** The weaknesses identified in workforce skills

## ACQUISITION PROFESSIONALS

Acquisition professionals anticipate “as a service” (XaaS) buying will increase over time, but see a capability gap in their current workforce competency. Over 85 percent of interviewees foresee that “as a service” buying will increase or increase significantly over the next two years, and thus 60 percent rated this skill area as very or extremely important. But the future use and current importance do not reconcile with 79 percent of interviewees rating their current workforce competency in this area as average or lower. Further, 44 percent of the interviewees rated their acquisition workforce as either “marginally capable” or “not at all capable” of conducting an “as a service” based acquisition. These numbers are supported by a statement from one respondent, “Two years ago buying things as a service was not that important to us... and probably not across the federal sector. But over the next year or so it’s going to become more important, so it’s a competency we need to grow.”

Every cohort surveyed recognized the growing importance of “as a service.” In spite of this, they also suggest that the workforce is not adequately prepared, and the government continues to apply traditional training models even to new business models, which impacts competencies and exacerbates skill gaps. This weakness is likely also steering contract type selection, as the survey shows the workforce struggles to implement XaaS solutions for increasingly complex problems.

# WORKFORCE

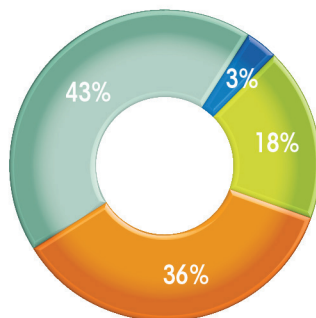
According to these leaders, the people they need are out there and want to work for the government, but “the government hiring process is totally broken. It takes way too long and it’s way too complicated.” Almost 60 percent of respondents identified either “hiring freezes/budget pressures” or HR issues as the primary reason for this difficulty.

**Despite optimism about the desired skills existing in the market and candidates wanting to work for the government,** government shutdown and attendant workforce furloughs were concerns. More and more senior/tenured employees are leaving for retirement or seeking new opportunities. While the full effects of the shutdown are difficult to calculate, we heard from several respondents that it acted as a catalyst to hasten the “brain drain” of experienced workers. Several respondents noted the ongoing wave of senior-level retirements is likely to continue unabated.

The potential effects of the “brain drain” caused by retirements, government poaching, and competition with the private sector was the most cited concern facing rising acquisition professionals. The future acquisition workforce will have to develop and mature very quickly to fill the growing void created by these departures. One respondent provided the insight that the new generation was more innovative while the older generation was more familiar with the traditional acquisition system and processes. Familiarity with the system, coupled with a lack of interest in innovation, leads to an undesirable rules-driven acquisition environment. Interest in innovation without thorough understanding of the rules, as could happen with a substantial generational shift, is also problematic. Balancing experience loss with the drive for change among younger workers must be a key objective for the government going forward.

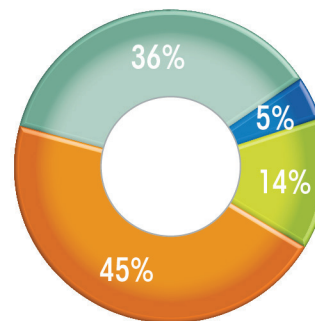
## How difficult has it been for your agency/ organization to hire employees with critical skills you need?

- Not at all difficult
- Not difficult
- Difficult
- Extremely difficult



## If you answered “difficult” or “extremely difficult” to the previous question, why do you think this?

- The skills don’t exist in my market
- We can’t compare with the private sector
- Hiring freezes/budget pressures
- Other



## WORKFORCE TAKEAWAYS:

- Workforce composition, capabilities, development, and training continue to be a major concern of federal acquisition leaders.
- Ongoing skills gaps were identified in a variety of areas including business acumen, complex IT, and negotiation.
- Lack of required workforce skills were identified as the most significant inhibitor to obtaining innovative solutions.
- Training processes and resource options have improved but are still not succeeding in closing skills gaps.
- Respondents also reported continuing challenges in the recruiting and hiring of qualified personnel to meet future needs.

# ACCESS TO INNOVATION



**Agency acquisition professionals are not focused on innovation.** Acquisition executives surveyed this year placed low importance on innovation and accessibility as desired objectives of a sound acquisition process. Innovation was rated as the fifth of six objectives of a sound acquisition process. Accessibility (lower barriers to entry) by vendors was an even lower priority. Many respondents conceded it was hard for new vendors—those seen by government as likely to introduce new and innovative ideas—to break into new markets.

Yet these areas have been identified by a variety of senior government acquisition leaders including Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology and Logistics Frank Kendall, Deputy OMB Deputy Director for Management Beth Cobert, and others, as being high priorities. This highlights a key, internal disconnect. If these important leadership objectives are not trickling down to, or being accepted by, higher-level government executives, then the mid- and field-level workers carrying out acquisitions are sure to be far less likely to pursue them. This also does not bode well for the implementation of other initiatives emerging from OMB, GSA, or DoD.

Challenges to innovation appeared elsewhere in the survey results as well. For example, the relative attention to innovation was apparent in survey respondents' comments related to source selection methods. Our survey unveiled a stark difference of opinion between government professionals and their private-sector partners about the role and usage of the LPTA selection process.

**Government personnel feel they are using LPTA source selection methodologies appropriately.** Almost 40 percent of interviewees rated their agency's ability to select appropriate contract type(s) and evaluation strategies as "improved." **"We only use it when it's the right requirement, and I haven't heard any complaints when we do use it," said one federal acquisition executive.**

Over 60 percent of interviewees stated that they either do not use LPTA, use it only where appropriate, or use it when there is a lack of industry differentiation. Only 28 percent of interviewees stated they

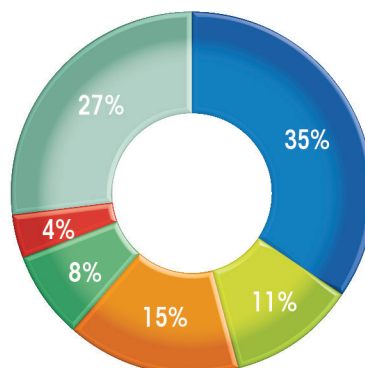
use this strategy either as a cost savings measure, to save time, or because they lack the ability to employ more complex strategies. Only one interviewee stated they used LPTA strategies due to fear of protests. At the same time, however, 40 percent of respondents who said their agencies use LPTA also acknowledged they are less than fully confident in their agency's ability to set the right technical requirements for LPTA procurements.

Agency leaders also believe they have the flexibility to select the optimal source selection methodology appropriate for each particular acquisition. Most stated that the use of LPTA strategies bolsters their organization's ability to achieve cost-effective acquisition outcomes that successfully fulfill mission demands. "We're not using LPTA that much. I made everyone very aware that I don't like that evaluation approach. It's not to say 'don't use it,' but use it correctly. We have moved slowly to 'price performance tradeoffs' and had special training to make sure that people understand how to do a price performance tradeoff," said one respondent.

Another of the agency respondents provided insight into his current experience with LPTA, saying, "I think there is a place for LPTA and, where it is appropriate, it is an effective strategy. When you get to a place where you say I don't care, we're just going to do it LPTA, that's going to hurt your mission. I think we probably do fairly well at splitting it [LPTA and Cost/Technical Tradeoff] at the beginning, but that still doesn't mean you go down the best value train and don't end up getting sucked back into an LPTA environment."

## Which of these most significantly inhibits your ability to obtain innovative solutions?

- Workforce skills
- FAR/Agency regulations
- Fear of oversight/Protests
- Lack of innovative solutions offered by contractors
- Don't Know/NA
- Other



# ACCESS TO INNOVATION

## LPTA IN THE NEWS

Bloomberg Government released a study in October 2014 analyzing thousands of government solicitations over the past five years, looking at the selection methods used to make awards. The results of the study demonstrate the steady increase in use of LPTA source selection methods across the government, a 138 percent increase over the past five years. However, the study also noted that the percentage of awards employing LPTA selection methods has remained virtually unchanged over the past five years, remaining around 60 percent throughout the duration of this period. Under these conditions, it is possible for both the government and industry to have valid perspectives on the use of LPTA methodologies. The government would see a stable proportion of all awards employing LPTA methodologies, while at the same time industry would see a steadily and significantly increasing number of LPTA solicitations. <http://about.bgov.com/premium/lpta-dominates-best-value-source-selections-bgov-insight/>

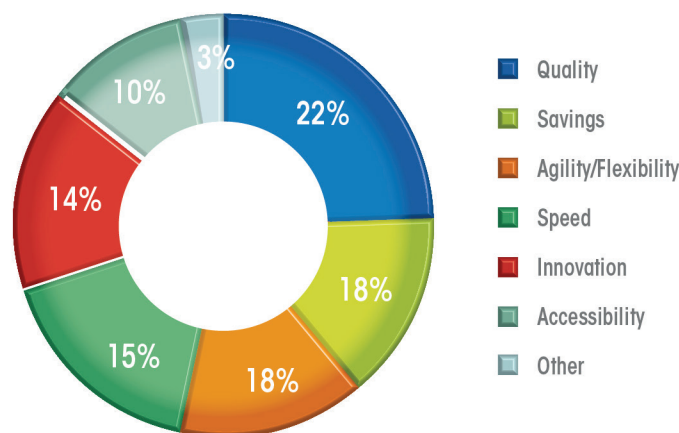
In July, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) also released a report concerning the use of LPTA at the Department of Defense. Like the BGov report, GAO found an increase in the percentage of LPTA source selections at the department in fiscal year 2013 vs. fiscal year 2009—from 26 to 36 percent. GAO also estimated that “approximately 93 percent of the 2,851 new, competitively awarded contracts awarded in fiscal year 2013 with obligations greater than \$1 million” used either tradeoff or LPTA best value processes. From its sample of 16 case studies, GAO concluded that DoD generally employed appropriate source selection processes based on its “ability to clearly define its requirements and its knowledge of potential vendors,” consistent with FAR guidance and internal DoD processes.

Despite these agency responses in this survey, industry continues to view the use of LPTA as one of the most significant challenges to offering innovation and top quality. PSC’s 2012 survey of its members showed LPTA to be the No.1 issue of concern, and 84 percent of industry respondents in the 2014 survey felt their clients used LPTA selection processes too often. Recent findings from Bloomberg Government and the GAO found that the use of LPTA continues to rise as an evaluation tool.

Finally, access to innovation is almost certainly impacted by a lack of clear vision of the relative roles of a wide range of sourcing options (e.g., stand-alone contracts, MAC/GWACs, 18F, grants/cooperative agreements, challenges/competitions, contractors). When asked what key factors drive their approach to sourcing and use of available contract vehicles, respondents showed no clear consensus. Given the tightening budgetary environment, clear and consistent principles on which to base these critical decisions will help lead to greater innovation and better results.

“...the challenge comes from culture. We are trying to promote innovation but we send a message of regulation and oversight.”

Relative priority of objectives of a sound acquisition process



## ACCESS TO INNOVATION TAKEAWAYS:

- Innovation is not a key objective of respondents to the 2014 acquisition policy survey, despite the priority placed on this objective by top federal leaders.
- Opportunity exists to drive a consistent approach to valuing sourcing alternatives such as intra- and inter-agency offerings and outsourcing to drive innovation and cost savings.
- Government personnel feel they are using LPTA source selection methodologies appropriately. This positive view of LPTA usage is in conflict with industry, which views this selection approach as a key inhibitor to innovation.



# COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION

Respondents generally reported that communication and collaboration, both with industry and internally within respondents' respective agencies, had improved in the past two years. Yet many cited industry's lack of familiarity with their agencies as a barrier to entry for contractors or an inhibitor of innovation. These statements appear to be in conflict. Few respondents cited the utility of statements of objectives, RFIs or draft RFPs in soliciting innovative ideas from industry.

What does industry say? Companies generally are much more pessimistic about the level of communication between government and industry and the skill level of the federal acquisition workforce than their government counterparts.

**According to most government respondents, agency collaboration with industry has improved, with some positive results.** Over 62 percent reported improved communication and collaboration with industry. However, they also say that this communication and collaboration has resulted in only minor improvements in the government's ability to understand contractors' approach to risk management and business decision-making process. Nor has improved collaboration resulted in more innovative offerings from contractors. That said, only two interviewees cited lack of acceptable contractor offerings as most significantly inhibiting access to innovative solutions. Compare this to risk aversion on the part of government acquisition personnel, which was cited four times as often. Other views on

government/contractor communication provided a different perspective, with one government respondent noting that in regard to contract negotiations, **"CO's have a mentality that they want to win and they want you to lose, and are not always interested in seeking a win-win solution."**

**Internal agency collaboration and communications have also improved, but with mixed results.** Cross-functional collaboration has improved (60 percent) along with improved attention from agency leadership (66 percent), reflecting improvements in communication and collaboration both horizontally and vertically within agencies. Though both have improved, results are mixed.

*“The message from the top is clearly promoting communications, but the workforce is still hesitant. The culture is still ‘we are the government, you are not.’”*

*“Having early interaction with industry during the solicitation process even as we are drafting our solicitation [is a best practice]. I think the more we can communicate that requirement and have an understanding with industry, the more that industry can internalize it and propose something back.”*

## BARRIERS TO ENTRY

Innovation can be closely related to access to new ideas. Often, new ideas come from new offerors, which can make barriers to entry for new vendors an impediment to innovation.

Agencies identified a number of potential barriers to entry for new contractors. The most frequently cited barriers to entry, in order of frequency, were:

- 1) Knowledge of agency mission and requirements;
- 2) Incumbency;
- 3) Lack of presence on agency IDIQ contracts;
- 4) Lack of small business or socio-economic qualifications; and
- 5) Offerings that don't align to agency needs.

## COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION TAKEAWAYS:

- According to most government respondents, agency collaboration with industry has improved and yielded some positive results; however, this again conflicts with industry's view.
- The lack of communication with industry is driven in part by a lack of understanding of what is appropriate.
- Barriers to entry continue to exist for companies not currently an incumbent.





# OVERSIGHT AND COMPLIANCE

**Respondents understand the need for oversight/compliance, but continue to find the extent of activity in this area a significant burden.** While almost half of interviewees rated “oversight/compliance” as improved, they also identified ongoing problems with burdensome oversight and compliance demands related to small business goal achievement, IG audits (and, for defense agencies, DCAA audits), GAO activity, and budget requirements. The sheer volume of regular data calls, ill-defined data calls, and ad-hoc data calls combine to weigh on an agency’s procurement office. Additionally, auditors can lack functional knowledge of acquisitions, which distracts procurement staff as they educate the auditors regarding acquisitions. Additionally, based on the feedback received from the **young professional respondents, over 62 percent stated that the oversight and compliance regime is out of balance.**

Responses on the role of Congress in oversight were varied. Many responses noted an increase in congressional oversight stemming from increased focus on fiscal responsibility as well as partisan conflict. While the respondents agreed with the need for congressional oversight, many had concerns with the amount of time and attention these efforts take away from mission priorities. Among the concerns noted were the large turnover in Congress leading to the loss of institutional knowledge on acquisition issues, a narrow focus on contracts that wind up on the front page of the newspaper, disregard for contracting successes or less “sexy” contracting issues, and a perceived politicization of contracting problems, as seen in the Healthcare.gov controversy.

**One area in which there was broad consensus among this year’s respondents was that agency and congressional leaders are clearly paying greater attention to federal acquisition issues.**

Notably, the attention described by respondents extends beyond traditional acquisition leadership to include high-level agency leadership, including secretaries and deputy secretaries, as well as congressional attention. The recognition by leadership for the opportunity to institute acquisition reform provided some optimism for improvement.

## THE MOST BURDENSOME OVERSIGHT OR COMPLIANCE REQUIREMENTS RESPONDENTS IDENTIFIED WERE:

- “Two year requirement for commercial pricing”
- “Staffing approval process”
- “Service Acquisition Inventory Requirements”
- “Clinger-Cohen Act. It’s an extremely onerous process to get approval in preparation for a milestone”
- “IG audits by people who don’t understand what they are auditing”
- “Not any one thing, but the constant addition of new ad hoc requirements”
- “The overall volume of audits [both internal and external] is overwhelming”
- “Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA). This is the single largest impediment to collaboration with industry. The FAR does not prevent us from having industry help write requirements, FACA does.”

“ One person picks up a phone and complains so now I have to spend three months gathering information on something that is not actually a problem. We are beating back a horde of bad ideas. The pendulum has swung too far.

## OVERSIGHT AND COMPLIANCE TAKEAWAYS:

- Respondents understand the need for oversight/compliance, but continue to find the extent of activity in this area a significant burden.
- Agency and congressional leaders are clearly paying greater attention to federal acquisition issues.



# CONCLUSION



For over a decade, Grant Thornton and the Professional Services Council have conducted this biennial survey of federal acquisition leaders. We continue to be struck by the consistency of issues and challenges facing this community over time. From human capital to policy and process, respondents report little change in what inhibits their ability to optimize efficiency, effectiveness and quality. With each survey a few new, significant insights emerge; and with each survey, other refrains remain constant.

Our key takeaway from the 2014 survey results is that while the abject crisis of morale that was evident in earlier surveys has abated somewhat, the acquisition workforce and system have a long way to go to achieve their objectives. Several key themes emerged from this year's survey.

## BUDGET

Budget instability has been a significant challenge over the last two years, forcing agencies to adapt and remain flexible. The budget was cited as the top barrier to progress in addressing the challenges facing the acquisition workforce. Nearly 60 percent said that the budget situation has become more unstable over the last two years. Results showed little confidence that the situation will improve enough to engage in meaningful planning and prioritization activities. The impact on budget is significant, cascading into other areas of concern. Agencies are unable to hire the resources they need, or train the resources they have. Without a stable budget, agency leaders cannot make tradeoff decisions based on known resources, and are left to find cost savings where they can. Oversight increases, leaving the undertrained workforce to fall back on process-driven approaches to procuring goods and services using low-risk decision models. Congress needs to act to restore regular budget order to reduce uncertainty and allow for the planning required to address the other challenges.

## WORKFORCE

Every version of this survey has highlighted significant issues and opportunities associated with the federal acquisition workforce. In earlier surveys, there was a combination of concerns driven by impending retirements and excitement about the possibilities a new generation offers. More recently, survey respondents have shifted their focus to the workforce's lack of key skills. Gaps in negotiating skills, business acumen and the ability to acquire complex IT have been prominently identified in each of the last two successive surveys.

Despite optimism for improvement in this latest survey, the general view of federal acquisition leaders is that the workforce remains an issue of real concern. This is exacerbated by the now-evident generation gap that has emerged. The expected retirement wave is now underway and the anticipated "bathtub" (the gap between senior leaders and the next layer down) is equally evident. Thus, it is easy to understand the growing concern that current trends are causing an increased rate of experience and knowledge loss.

This survey, like its predecessors, clearly documents gaps in the acquisition workforce's business acumen and related skills, strongly suggesting a continuing need to re-think and re-design the education and training of the acquisition workforce. Only a small percentage of

that workforce procures goods and services in a monopsony market that lacks clear commercial characteristics. The majority are procuring goods and services in a highly competitive, commercial or commercial-like environment and, for them, core business skills are therefore critical, but also in short supply.

Even beyond those issues, and despite some positive comments offered by some respondents regarding training resources, this year's survey continues to highlight the need for rethinking some or all acquisition workforce training and development approaches. Indeed, while some respondents had positive comments about existing training resources, including the Defense Acquisition University, the broader question raised is why the same gaps in business acumen, negotiating skills, understanding of the (rapidly changing) technology and services markets remain. Objectively, this fact raises real questions as to whether the current training resources and regime, despite the positives they offer, are effectively delivering the kind of contemporary training and development the modern workforce needs. As PSC has characterized it in other reports, "are we training the workforce for the fight they will be asked to fight or for the fight they have traditionally fought?"

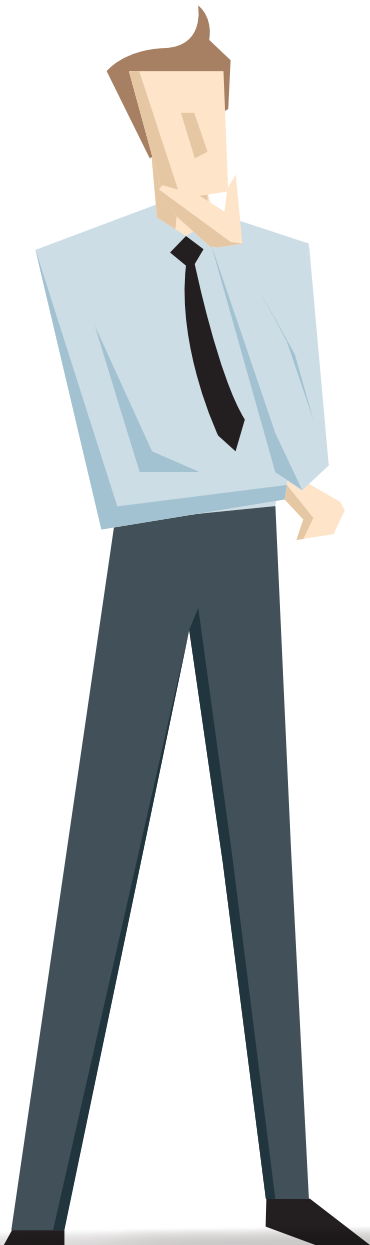
Survey respondents were very clear about the need for increased on-the-job training, which is widely accepted to be a crucial element of any workforce's development and yet remains underutilized in the government environment. In a time of budget constraints and human capital challenges, it is increasingly difficult to provide the kind of real-life training that can educate and acclimate younger professionals, particularly across functions.

The acquisition workforce is increasingly buffeted between policy prescriptions and on-the-ground expectations. Immediate budget pressures often drive less than optimal buying behaviors. The workforce is told to pursue innovation but too often lacks the tools and institutional support to do so. While administration and agency leaders have stressed the importance of innovation and reducing barriers to entry into the government market, these objectives are not seen as top priorities by those responsible for executing acquisitions. In fact, they rank at the very bottom of the list of objectives the workforce sees as priorities. On some levels, this is neither surprising nor should it be over-analyzed. After all, in an environment of general budget chaos, the workforce is first and foremost focused on getting the job done and reducing costs to meet fiscal demands.

# CONCLUSION

## ACCESS TO INNOVATION

Despite the high priority placed on accessing innovation through the acquisition process by top federal leaders, agency acquisition executives rated innovation as a low priority. In addition, the survey found little consistency in how respondents assess intra- or inter-agency contracts, private sector sources or in-house alternatives to drive performance. Further, a stark difference of opinion exists between government acquisition professionals and their private sector partners about the role, use and implications of LPTA procurements. In almost diametric opposition to government respondents, 84 percent of industry respondents believe LPTA is used too frequently and over 50 percent believe LPTA is rarely used appropriately.



## COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION

While survey respondents indicated they had seen some improvement in communication and collaboration with industry, this issue remains a prominent concern. Lack of communication hampers collaboration with industry. This collaboration is critical for the sharing of useful insights and innovations to help achieve mission results. Further, in other research PSC has conducted, this lack of communication and collaboration (both within government and between government and the private sector) has been a consistent and prominent problem. Therefore, one key objective of any acquisition policy initiative must be to identify new and more effective ways of breaking down barriers and generating the kinds of collaboration that are essential to mission success.

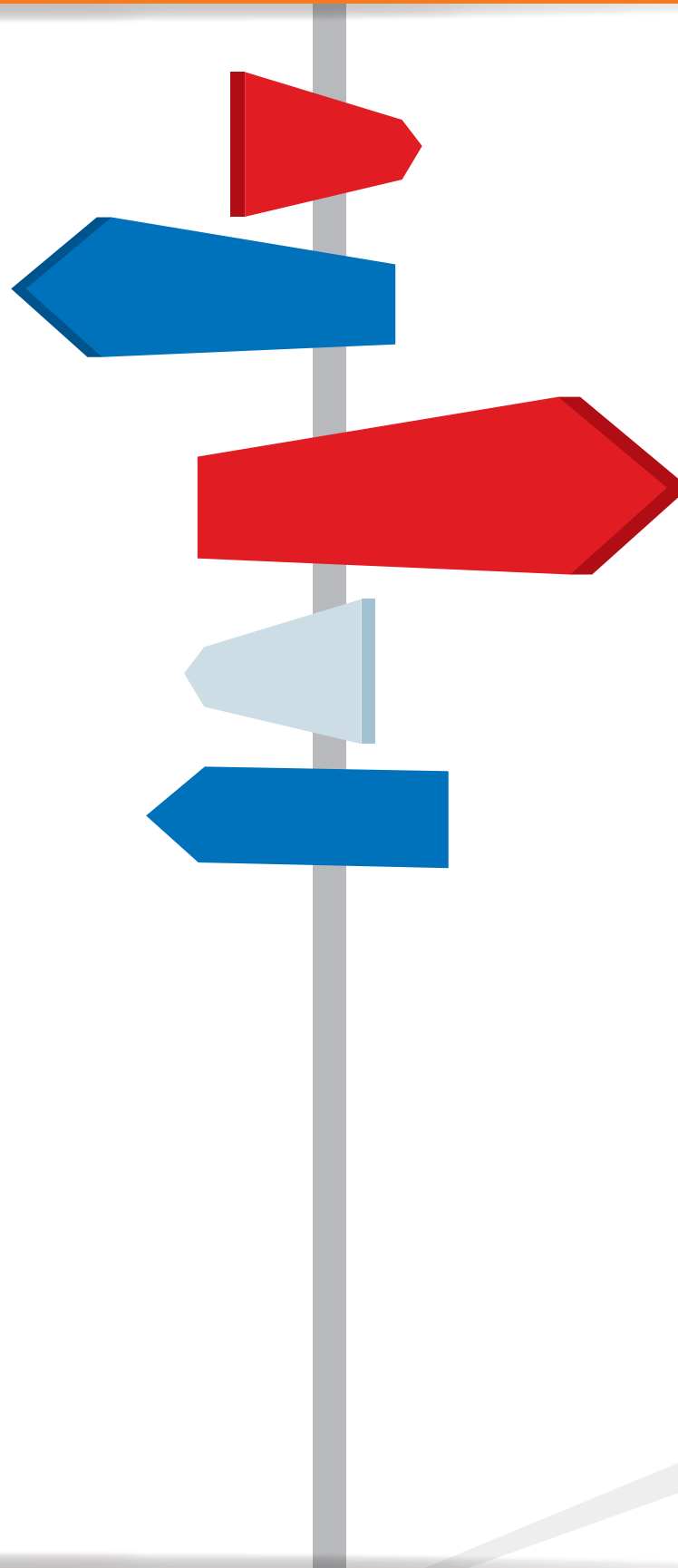
There remains a clear need for the various communities across government, including the Congress, to not only align their objectives and interests, but also work together to change the current punitive, rigid, risk-averse environment into one of smarter, more strategic execution. If getting the workforce to “think” is a primary objective, the environment in which they work needs a great deal of attention.

## OVERSIGHT AND COMPLIANCE

Finally, as has become increasingly the case in each successive survey, it is vital to recognize the central role Congress and the inspector general and audit communities all play in the acquisition ecosystem. As noted in this survey, this attention expands beyond traditional acquisition leadership, as secretaries and deputy secretaries have taken a keener interest in improving acquisition across their respective departments, with DoD, DHS, and the Department of Veterans Affairs being examples. On the congressional front, the acquisition reform initiatives underway within the House and Senate Armed Services Committees, as well as broader IT acquisition reform efforts led by key committee chairmen (the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, the House Homeland Security Committee, and the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, to name a few) and rank and file members of both congressional chambers, indicates that acquisition improvement is emerging as a higher priority.

As these reform efforts, oversight and attention grow, there is a clear need for various communities across government, including Congress, to not only align their objectives and interests, but work to change the current, punitive environment that leads to risk aversion in the acquisition workforce. These organizations must work together to build a smarter, more strategic acquisition ecosystem in which the workforce is encouraged and empowered to think and decide rather than check a box to avoid a mountain of congressional attention for the tiniest of errors.

Sprinkled throughout this survey, as has been the case with prior surveys (including our 2010 survey in which it was the single most significant issue put forth by the respondents), the sense that oversight is having an outsized impact is acute across the board. As noted in the report, there is little question of the importance of the oversight function, particularly in public institutions. However, concerns about disconnects or inconsistencies in knowledge, mission requirements and realities, as well as clear concern about the increasing politicization of acquisition over the last decade, are as strong as ever and remain key causes of the risk aversion, lack of collaboration, and general fear that often permeate the acquisition environment.



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