

# Contrasting Acquisition Mindsets: A Comparative Analysis Between Industry and Air Force Senior Procurement Leaders



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## Abstract

This thesis uses a qualitative research approach to examine how differing mindsets between Air Force procurement leaders and private industry executives shape acquisition decisions and training effectiveness in government contracting. It addresses two research questions:

- (1) How do the mindsets of senior leaders involved in the Air Force procurement process compare to those of senior executives involved in the procurement process?
- (2) What factors influence the development of their mindsets?

The study hypothesizes that the Air Force's compliance-driven, risk-averse culture contrasts with private industry's adaptive, innovation-oriented approach, influencing both acquisition outcomes and workforce development. It evaluates Air Force contracting training structures, particularly the Career Field Education and Training Plan (CFETP), against industry best practices and incorporates interview-based insights from government and private-sector participants.

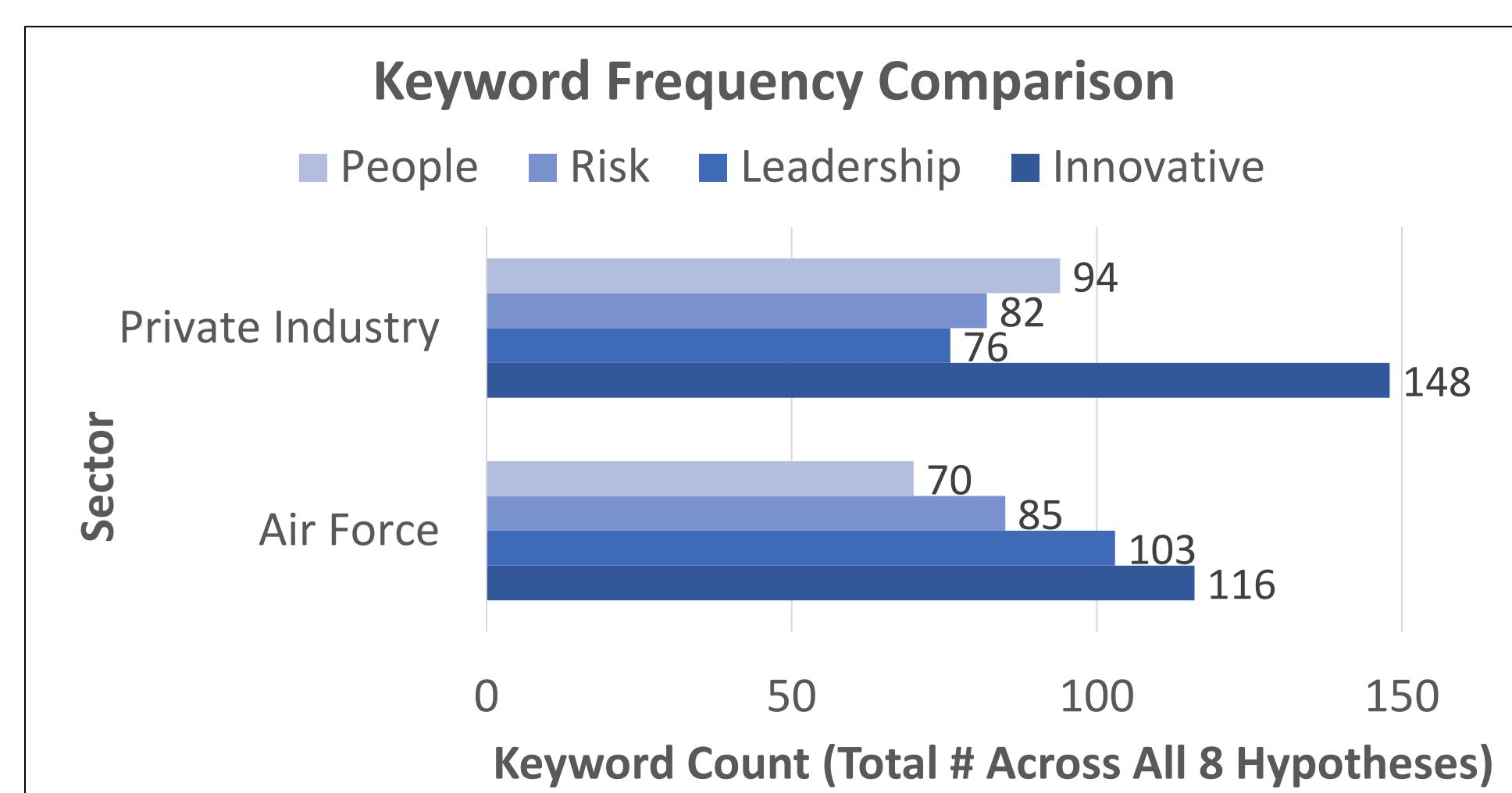
Findings show that organizational culture, leadership philosophy, and structural incentives strongly shape mindset development, revealing opportunities to strengthen innovation, efficiency, and agility in DoD acquisition and Air Force contracting career development.

## Methods

- 1) Qualitative comparative research design examining Air Force and private industry mindsets
- 2) Purposive sampling of experienced senior leaders across both sectors
- 3) Semi-structured interviews conducted via MS Teams; supplemented by document review of CFETP and Contracting Flight Plan
- 4) Multi-stage coding process: manual transcript cleaning, in vivo coding, ChatGPT-assisted gerund/thematic coding, and restructuring data by sector and question
- 5) NVivo analysis workflow: import of all datasets, creation of sector cases and question nodes, word-frequency analyses, text-search keyword coding, and Matrix Coding Queries for all eight hypothesis
- 6) Cross-sector triangulation integrating interview patterns, NVivo outputs, and policy context to evaluate mindset drivers

## Results & Impact

Six of eight hypotheses were supported, showing that Air Force leaders emphasized compliance, hierarchy, and mission constraints, while private-industry executives stressed innovation, adaptability, and people-driven leadership. These patterns align with Institutional Theory and Learning Organization Theory, demonstrating how sector environments shape procurement mindsets.



Hypothesis Statement	Interview Sections Used to Test	Air Force Keywords (Nvivo Matrix Query results)	Private Industry Keywords (Nvivo Matrix Query results)	Supported? (Y/N/P)
H1 - Air Force leaders' mindsets are shaped by structured mentorship and procedural training, while private executives' mindsets are shaped by experiential learning and diverse environments.	S1 - Background and Experience S2 - Training, Education, and Development	Career, Contracts, Leadership, Learning	Manage	Y
H2 - Air Force leaders' training systems emphasize compliance and technical precision, while private sector leaders emphasize autonomy and innovation in professional development.	S2 - Training, Education, and Development	Learning, Training	Innovative, Risk	Y
H3 - Private industry executives will more frequently reference adaptability and innovation as leadership priorities, whereas Air Force leaders will emphasize standardization and stability.	S3 - Procurement and Acquisition Decision-Making	N/a	Contracts, Cost, Government, Innovative, Risk	Y
H4 - Air Force contracting leaders will demonstrate a more risk-averse mindset, emphasizing compliance and procedural correctness, while private industry executives will demonstrate greater risk tolerance and a results-oriented approach to decision-making.	S4 - Risk, Innovation, and Flexibility S9 - Additional Insights	Risk	Innovation, Leadership, People, Risk	Y
H5 - Air Force leaders describe hierarchical, process-driven cultures while private industry leaders describe decentralized, empowerment-focused cultures.	S5 - Cultural Influence on Procurement Decision-Making	Contracts, Innovative, Thinking	Culture, Leadership, People	Y
H6 - Air Force leaders frame mission orientation around compliance and stewardship of taxpayer funds, while private leaders frame it around customer satisfaction and competitive success.	S6 - Public vs Private Sector Comparisons S9 - Additional Insights	Incentives, Innovation	Government, People, Risk	P
H7 - Environmental and policy constraints are the dominant external factors shaping Air Force leaders' mindsets, while market competition and customer demand dominate in the private sector.	S5 - Cultural Influence on Procurement Decision-Making S7 - Long Term Trends and Industry Practices	Capability, Industry, Mission, Share	Change	P
H8 - Air Force performance incentives emphasize compliance and process integrity, while private sector incentives emphasize innovation and measurable results.	S8 - Bridging the Gap and Future Recomendations S9 - Additional Insights	Leadership	Change, Innovative, Mission, People	Y

## Future Research

- 1) Develop CFETP update by integrating private-industry findings (iterative learning, psychological safety, and outcome-based incentives)
- 2) Explore how these practices can be embedded across contracting training pipelines to reinforce innovation early in careers
- 3) Study mindset formation among CGOs/ contract specialists and why innovative personnel become discouraged or leave for industry
- 4) Expand analysis across the Joint acquisition community to identify conditions that improve innovation, interoperability, and retention



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