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Women business owners face several barriers in competing for federal contracts. I have owned and managed a small manufacturing company for the past nine years and have yet to receive any meaningful federal contracts.

One of the major barriers is certification. Self-certification allows male owned and managed businesses to place a woman's name (often their spouse) as the head of the operation, stating that she has 51% ownership, while, in fact, she has nothing at all to do with the company. I have encountered several businesses that are classified as woman-owned but that's by title and paperwork only – no woman in sight, and if she were asked to tell you about the business she would not be able to do so.

As proof, I was told by Lockheed-Martin that they did not need to add any more woman-owned machine shops because they had plenty of them. I would challenge that statement knowing that there are *very few* that are actually owned and managed by a woman. I have been approved as a supplier by two Primes, but have yet to see any kind of business come my way – not even a RFQ.

The SBA (8)a certification was enormously time-consuming to apply for and I received very little help from the SBA in preparing the documentation; once submitted it was flatly denied because the examiner didn't believe that I was disadvantaged – my basis was that the machine shop sector is a very difficult place for women. One of the first questions I'm asked is, "Why would a woman own a machine shop?" It is definitely considered a man's domain!

When I first purchased the business, I had two former customers tell me outright that they would not do business with a woman – that was at the first meeting and they knew nothing about me. One engineer actually told me that machining was nothing that a woman could understand.

Another barrier is trying to access business through DIBBS; it is not necessarily a difficulty just for women-owned business, but for small (less than 20 employees) business overall. Although I have worked closely with PTAC to try to gain access to contracts on the DIBBS board, I have not had much success.

The DIBBS board is cumbersome and it's difficult for a company my size to be able to dedicate the resources necessary to mine this software. Very small, but qualified, companies like mine cannot spend the hours needed to sift through the various sites within BSM/DIBBS.

Unless you've previously made a part for a government prime contractor and have the exact NSN you are just wasting valuable time on parts that may not have the technical specifications needed to even bid; if you do find the technical info, there is often data missing; the system bounces you to many different links to determine if you can even qualify to bid. The system is really only useful to those shops that were on the front end of the procurement process with the prime. If we make parts for a

prime, we then need the ability to access spare parts by NSN data; that is often not the case – there is a coding that removes the capability to track from the original part to the NSN.

There is still very much an “old boys” network in place. That’s not to say that buyers should be changing suppliers constantly – I believe in keeping good ones until they give you a reason to change, but there should be a place for new opportunities as well in any business.

The Federal goals have no reward or consequences to them! This is a must if the program is ever to succeed and move forward. Is there really a commitment at any level? Nothing happens if the goals are not achieved.

Perhaps rewarding Primes for using “new” small businesses each year – even if they haven’t met the goals, would remove some of the barriers. Something is better than nothing and if they’re making progress, reward them!

A penalty for not meeting goals year after year might also be a good incentive to give small businesses an opportunity! There needs to be some bite to the consequences of not changing. ***Hold people accountable!***

Let’s face it, there are a lot of excellent companies out there that are women-owned and small. Not giving them opportunities often prevents some very positive economic impacts for both the Prime and Federal government, and for the supplier.

Matchmaker events could be much more useful; there is not enough time allotted to meet the Primes and often the people representing the Primes at these events are not receptive to finding new suppliers. More often than not I’ve heard, “we’ve already got someone doing that”.

There are some positives. One of those is the availability of PTAC to provide training and help in understanding the federal requirements. I have been very fortunate to have a great person to work with – Sandra Ledbetter is one of the most knowledgeable and helpful people I’ve had the pleasure of working with. She has introduced me to a couple of Primes who are working hard to give women businesses a chance. Rolls Royce Naval Marine is the largest.

MassMEP has been a huge help with training for Lean Manufacturing, machinist skills training, and supporting efforts to become a supplier to Primes like Raytheon .

Funding is available, but banks and organizations like MBDC appear to be much more risk-averse when working with women-owned businesses.

In closing, the good news is that we are having this session because that means that there is interest in improving and changing the status quo. As I said earlier, there are a lot of excellent woman-owned businesses that add tremendous value to our economy – let’s ensure that they are given an equal chance to succeed by removing the barriers quickly.

And I have to give my plug for manufacturing: I believe that the USA needs to ensure that we continue building our manufacturing capability and not give it away. We are still the most productive country in the world and manufacturing is an absolute necessity to ensure that we remain a global economic power.

Kerstin Forrester
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