

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



**Houston Supplier Relationship Management Forum**  
**Summary 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: November 16th, 2011

Where: Westin Oaks, Houston, Texas

Number of Attendees: 65

### Industry Breakout Groups

- Healthcare and Medical Equipment
- Construction, Building, and Engineering
- IT Broadcasting and Management
- Other

### Key Findings

#### Processes

- The bill payment process is inefficient; when there are problems there is a lack of communication and feedback.
- Better defined timelines with metrics/thresholds were strongly recommended by Suppliers and measured as a key concern by all participants.
- The procurement process does not always allow Suppliers to provide best value.
- There is a persistent perception among Suppliers that a "Good Old Boy" network drives procurement decisions with Purchase Agents (PA) and hospitals.

#### Communication

- Poor communication from VA, especially in the form of unreturned calls and emails, continues to be a problem for Suppliers.
- VA suffers from a lack of internal communication; hospitals, Veteran Integrated Service Networks (VISN), and national contracting centers always seem to be working with different information.
- Suppliers would like VA to provide more pre-solicitation communication. Better communication between the Supplier and the VA before a solicitation will improve results throughout the acquisition process.

#### Education and Training

- Several of the participants expressed concern over evident knowledge gaps on the part of VA Contracting Officers (CO). How can Suppliers help to educate the CO on technical subject matter?
- COs must also be taught what they should be articulating their requirements and pricing to get more value from Suppliers.

#### RFI/RFP

- The overall quality of RFPs that VA releases is poor; they include contradictory, unnecessary and inappropriate requirements.
- There are many problems with original solicitations. The requirements are often outdated and reused (cut and pasted from past solicitations).
- VA cannot always procure what it needs because the solicitation information is out of date and end users are not engaged in contracting.

## Bids and Proposals

- Proposal Evaluations:
  - VA does not use technical experts to evaluate highly technical products.
  - End users (medical staff) and CO do not speak. This leads to poorly developed requirements and purchasing incorrect products.

## SDVOB/VOB Recertification

- The Service Disabled, Veteran-Owned Small Business (SDVOSB) and Veteran-Owned Business (VOB) certification and re-certification processes take too long. If a Supplier is currently going through the re-certification process they cannot bid (or win) SDVOB/VOB set asides. This is a lengthy, cumbersome process, during which many Veteran-owned companies lose money.

## Positive Attributes of the VA-Supplier Relationship

- Suppliers find that the COs from the VA Acquisition Academy are responsive, engaged, and willing to work with Suppliers to find solutions, despite being vastly overworked.
- Communication between COs and Suppliers is improving, but it is still inconsistent.
- The kick-off and teaming sessions held at the time of contract award are very helpful to both Suppliers and VA in clarifying the scope and setting expectations of all those involved.
- After award, the VA personnel are a pleasure to work with.

## Recommendations

### Processes

- VA should make sure people use the evaluation systems at the end of a contract and access that data when evaluating proposals from Suppliers that have worked with VA in the past. VA should also consider streamlining evaluation forms that are included with RFPs to make them more consistent so that clients of Suppliers don't have to fill out different forms every time an RFP is issued.

### Communication

- VA should be more forthcoming with information (e.g. status of solicitations, awards) and be more accessible to Suppliers to respond to questions.
- A system should be in place allowing Suppliers to see a timeline for responses and the status of their submissions.
  - Getting in touch with key contact personnel was communicated by Suppliers to be somewhat of a challenge and such a system would allow the Suppliers to check on the status of a proposal or any other submitted material.
  - Suppliers want a method of determining the status of their contact person or alternative contact person (away messages on email and voicemail if on vacation, etc.)
- There is inconsistency across VISNs regarding VA's mission and personnel structure. Some VISNs have different staff levels/positions, which makes it difficult to know who to contact from VISN to VISN.

### Education and Training

- VA needs to implement universal, consistent training to ensure collective understanding of the FAR, VAR, and contracts.

- In particular, VA needs to communicate to COs, PAs, and Suppliers:
  - How and when to use FedBid
  - Contract types, what they are, when to use, which supersedes
  - How and when to use GSA Advantage

#### RFI/RFP

- Institute “the same or equal to” language into the product requirements section of RFPs.
- VA should use the draft RFP process more often and make better use of the results. It often seems as if comments received during that process are not incorporated.

#### Bids and Proposals

- COs should use subject matter experts (SME) to help them understand products/services and respond to questions that may arise during the proposal process.
- Allow Suppliers to provide product samples to evaluation committees with their bids.

#### Online RFI / RFP / RFQ portals

- It is confusing and time-consuming to find relevant solicitations; standardize to one bid solicitation publication or site.
- Suppliers recommend developing a mechanism to provide a view of all VA opportunities, regardless of the contract vehicle.
  - The proposed system discussed by Suppliers was one that is different than FedBizOps, in that it would be specific to VA and list **all** opportunities for all contract types.

## Healthcare and Medical Equipment

Facilitator: Doug Black

Note Taker: Amy Clifford

### Key Themes

- VA is inconsistent in its interpretation of rules and understanding of contracts, especially BPAs.
- There is a lot of confusion among Suppliers over the FedBid program.
- Proposal Evaluations:
  - VA does not use technical experts to evaluate highly technical products.
  - End users (medical staff) and Contracting Officers (CO) do not speak. This leads to poorly developed requirements and purchasing incorrect products.
- Contract types:
  - Which contract types supersede the other -- Blanket Purchase Agreements (BPA), GSA, or Prime Vendor?
  - Suppliers often see VISNs bundling unrelated products and services into one contract, for which no single company has the resources to do.
- There is a persistent perception among Suppliers that a "Good Old Boy" network drives procurement decisions with Purchase Agents (PA) and hospitals.
- The SDVOB/VOB certification and re-certification processes take too long. If a Supplier is currently going through the re-certification process they cannot bid (or win) SDVOB/VOB set asides. This is a lengthy, cumbersome process, during which many Veteran-owned companies lose money.
- Suppliers find that the COs from the VA Acquisition Academy are responsive, engaged, and willing to work with Suppliers to find solutions, despite being vastly overworked.
- Several of the participants expressed concern over evident knowledge gaps on the part of VA COs. How can Suppliers help to educate COs on technical subject matter?
- There is a need to educate COs about what they should be putting in their requirements and pricing, as well as ways to take advantage of what Suppliers offer.

### Recommendations

- VA needs to implement universal, consistent training to ensure collective understanding of the FAR, VAR, and contracts.
- In particular, VA needs to communicate to COs, PAs, and Suppliers:
  - How and when to use FedBid
  - Contract types, what they are, when to use, which supersedes
  - How and when to use GSA Advantage
- Allow Suppliers to provide product samples to evaluation committees with their bids.
- Institute "the same or equal to" language into the product requirements section of RFPs.
- Include technical expertise in requirements development and evaluation panels.
- Continue the programs at VA Acquisition Academy.

## Building, Construction, and Engineering

Facilitator: Pat Tallarico

Note Taker: Dan Palcic

### Key Themes

- There is inconsistency across VISNs regarding VA's mission and personnel structure. Some VISNs have different staff levels/positions, which makes it difficult to know who to contact from VISN to VISN.
- Requirements from VA headquarters are not effectively communicated to all contracting staff. Suppliers specifically cited SDVOB utilization requirements as a problem.
- Delays in the procurement process cost the Supplier and VA money. When money is lost in the procurement process it means there is less available to serve the Veterans.
- Communication between COs and Suppliers is improving, but it is still inconsistent.
- The procurement process does not always allow Suppliers to provide best value.
- Solicitations that are not clearly worded add risk to the Supplier and VA.
- The kick-off and teaming sessions held at the time of contract award are very helpful to both Suppliers and VA in clarifying the scope and setting expectations of all those involved.
- After award, the VA personnel are a pleasure to work with.

### Recommendations

- VA should use the draft RFP process more often and make better use of the results. It often seems as if comments received during that process are not incorporated.
- VA should have more conversations with Suppliers before solicitations come out to add clarity to RFPs, which will potentially reduce the cost to VA because Suppliers will have to take on less risk.
- VA should make sure people use the evaluation systems at the end of a contract and access that data when evaluating proposals from Suppliers that have worked with VA in the past. VA should also consider streamlining evaluation forms that are included with RFPs to make them more consistent so that clients of Suppliers don't have to fill out different forms every time an RFP is issued.
- VA should be more forthcoming with information (e.g. status of solicitations, awards) and be more accessible to Suppliers to respond to questions.
- VA is currently using a lease model for new facilities where they work with a developer to build a building that VA will use for 20 years. This adds another layer of communication in design-build processes. If VA goes back to design bid build approach and buys its buildings, it could eliminate that layer of communication, which can save construction costs and ultimately save money by owning their buildings.
- VA should tie its COs' compensation with the results of the closeout survey. It may improve CO performance.
- COs should use SMEs to help them understand products/services and respond to questions that may arise during the proposal process.

- VA should consider multiple ways to address the acquisition challenges it faces. There may be less complicated and expensive ways to improve Supplier relationships than hiring more people (e.g. make jobs/processes easier and more transparent).
- Suppliers should be able to do more evaluations of VA facilities/staff.
- VA should exercise their authority under PL109461 more often.



## IT Broadcasting and Management

Facilitator: Harold Gracey

Note Taker: Tony deFreitas

### Key Themes

- Suppliers would like to see more transparency regarding all types of upcoming opportunities. They agreed that more information given provided on all upcoming opportunities would be a benefit to VA as well as themselves.
- Suppliers would like VA to provide more pre-solicitation communication. Better communication between the Supplier and the VA before a solicitation will improve results throughout the acquisition process.
- Communication between program staff and CO on requirements was identified by participating Suppliers as a key concern and area of improvement for the VA's acquisition process.
- Better defined timelines with metrics/thresholds were strongly recommended by Suppliers and measured as a key concern by all participants.

### Recommendations

- A system should be in place allowing Suppliers to see a timeline for responses and the status of their submissions.
  - Getting in touch with key contact personnel was communicated by Suppliers to be somewhat of a challenge and such a system would allow the Suppliers to check on the status of a proposal or any other submitted material.
  - Suppliers want a method of determining the status of their contact person or alternative contact person (away messages on email and voicemail if on vacation, etc.)
- Suppliers would like to receive feedback on the RFIs or RFPs they submit to VA that do not win.
  - VA's perception of what content was well received and what content was not would be beneficial.
- Suppliers recommend developing a mechanism to provide a view of all VA opportunities, regardless of the contract vehicle.
  - The proposed system discussed by Suppliers was one that is different than FedBizOps, in that it be specific to VA and list **all** opportunities for all contract types.
- Suppliers recommended a matrix of the different contracting activities and vehicles they use and the functional areas they solicit for to be available for review.

## Other

Facilitator: Paul Cooper

Note Taker: Ben Rebach

### Key Themes

- There is no standardization among VA offices and sites.
- It is hard to get in the door at VA client sites.
- VA doesn't always procure what they need because the solicitation information is out of date and end users are not engaged in contracting.
- VA lets in products that don't meet customer specifications: e.g. country of origin.
- The bill payment process is inefficient; when there are problems there is a lack of communication and feedback.
- Processes (e.g., contract modification and change process) are slow.
- VA personnel are great.

### Recommendations

- Suppliers would like to see more solicitations for SDVOSBs.
- Suppliers want more promptness in contract modifications.
- The change process for implementing new solutions should be streamlined.
- It is confusing and time-consuming to find relevant solicitations; standardize to one bid solicitation publication or site.
- Keep the Supplier input group in operation on a permanent basis.
- Streamline the bill payment system and have more ownership for assuring any payment problems will be overcome.

## APPENDIX A: Agenda

Time	Description
8:00 am	<b>Registration and Networking</b>
8:30 am	<b>Introduction</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Welcome</li> <li>▪ Goals of this forum and why it's important</li> <li>▪ Forum agenda overview</li> <li>▪ Roles of attendees, facilitators, VA representatives</li> </ul>
8:45 am	<b>VA SRM Initiative Update</b> Presentation followed by Q&A <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Goals of SRM Management Process</li> <li>▪ Progress to date</li> <li>▪ Additional challenges ahead</li> </ul>
9:15am-9:30am	<b>Participant Survey, Round 1</b> Description and directions for participant survey
9:30 am	BREAK
9:45 am (including 10 minute break)	<b>Facilitated Breakout Session</b> Thoughts or impressions about working with VA
12:00 pm	LUNCH
1:15 pm	<b>Plenary Session: Report from Breakout Groups and Cross-Group Observations</b>
2:15 pm	BREAK
2:30 pm	<b>"Ask the VA"</b> Facilitated Q&A with VA Acquisition Leadership
3:45 pm	<b>Participant Survey, Round 2</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Feedback on this summit; ideas to improve future forums</li> </ul>
4:15 pm	<b>Winding Down</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Next steps</li> <li>▪ Feedback on this summit; ideas to improve future forums</li> <li>▪ Final thoughts</li> <li>▪ Adjourn</li> </ul>
4:30 pm	<b>Networking Reception</b>

## APPENDIX B: Attendee List

Last Name	First Name	Organization or Agency
Badru	Motunrayo	
Beaty	Will	Radiometer America
Buchanan	Charles	World Marketing Inc
Buffa	Angela	eData Collectors, Inc.
Burris	James	Wheelchair & Scooter Express LC
Cantu	Elizabeth	J & E Associates
Champagne	Elena	TW Telecom
Cutaia	Jay	BriStar Corporation
Cutaia	Tony	BriStar Corporation
De La Cruz	Gilbert	
DeFino	Tony	TL Services, Inc.
Dowdell	Cisco	Harris Brown
Elsass	Kregg	Page Southerland Page, LLP
Espey	William	B&B Medical Services Inc.
Faison	Hardy	Document Storage Systems, Inc.
Galindo	Martin	Door Control Services
Geggatt	Glen	101 Mobility
Geggatt	Deanna	Home Health Services of Houston, Inc.
Ghousheh	Samir	RGH Enterprises, Inc.
Gordon	Aubrey	STERIS Healthcare Group
Gotleib	Sal	S&L Products and Services Inc.
Gotleib	Leesa	S&L Products and Services Inc.
Graves	Matthew	Bristar
Hagerty	Mike	Cuna Industrial Supply & Logistics LLC
Harris	Marylyn	Harrland Company
Hebron	Duni	Emerald Group, Inc.
Hoskin	Sandra	American Medical Equipment Company
Kent	Steven	Veterans Medical Innovations
Kim	Miran	ETS
King	Leanne	SeeKing HR
Klebba	Art	IMS ( Integrated Medical Systems International, Inc)
Knowles	Glenn	GLMV Architecture
Kozarits	Steve	True North Logistics

La Fleur	Jerry	Standard Office Products/Independent Stationers
Long	Bill	B&B Medical Services Inc.
McGuire	Charlie	IMS ( Integrated Medical Systems International, Inc)
Meadows	Michael	Coley & Associates, Inc.
Mitchell	Dustin	TW Telecom
Palmieri	Dennis	Mercy Medical Equipment
Parkinson	Glena	Nurses Night & Day, Inc
Pongonis	Victor	TL Services, Inc
Romo	Richard	United Personnel
Saunders	Clayton	BLUEWATER MANAGEMENT GROUP
Saunders	Debra	BLUEWATER MANAGEMENT GROUP
Shaw	Dan	Academy Medical
Shoenbeck	Linda	Health Services Advisory Group, Inc.
Shroeder	John	NEC Corporation of America
Shuttler	David	Utility Systems Solutions, Inc. (SDVOSB, SBA 8(a) - SDB)
Strack	Peter	Altarum Institute
Swanson	Ken	Chem-Aqua Inc.
Taler	Terrence	NEC Corporation of America
Taylor	Omega	Contract Consultants, Inc.
Tenison	Joellen	Health Services Advisory Group
Ternier	Jeanne	AHEC/MEDRelief Staffing
Tilley Wilson	Vickie	Dynamic Energy Concepts
Trebitowski	Tina	Bruno Independent Living Aids
Vaughn	David	Vaughn Medical LLC
Vinarskai	Jim	Coley & Associates, Inc.
Waters	Larry	Neopost USA
Wheatley	Robert	HD Supply
Williams	Dan	Sinai Management Group
Zastrow	Stephen	Scanlan International
Zastrow	Zack	Scanlan
Zumwalt	D.J.	National Account Manager

## APPENDIX C: Focus Group Protocols

### Morning Session: Facilitated Breakout Session

#### Thoughts or impressions about working with VA

##### Prompts

- How would you characterize your experiences?
- What have been some of the high points? The low points?
- What changes have you observed (if any) over the past 18 months (Since the SRM Initiative began)?
- What has gotten better? In what ways?
- What has gotten worse? In what ways?

#### Feedback on the Acquisition Business Process

##### Prompts

- 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?

#### Industry Discussion

- How could VA do a better job? What practices from other agencies might VA adopt?

Develop a group list of questions to be posed to VA staff during 1:30 Report Out session.