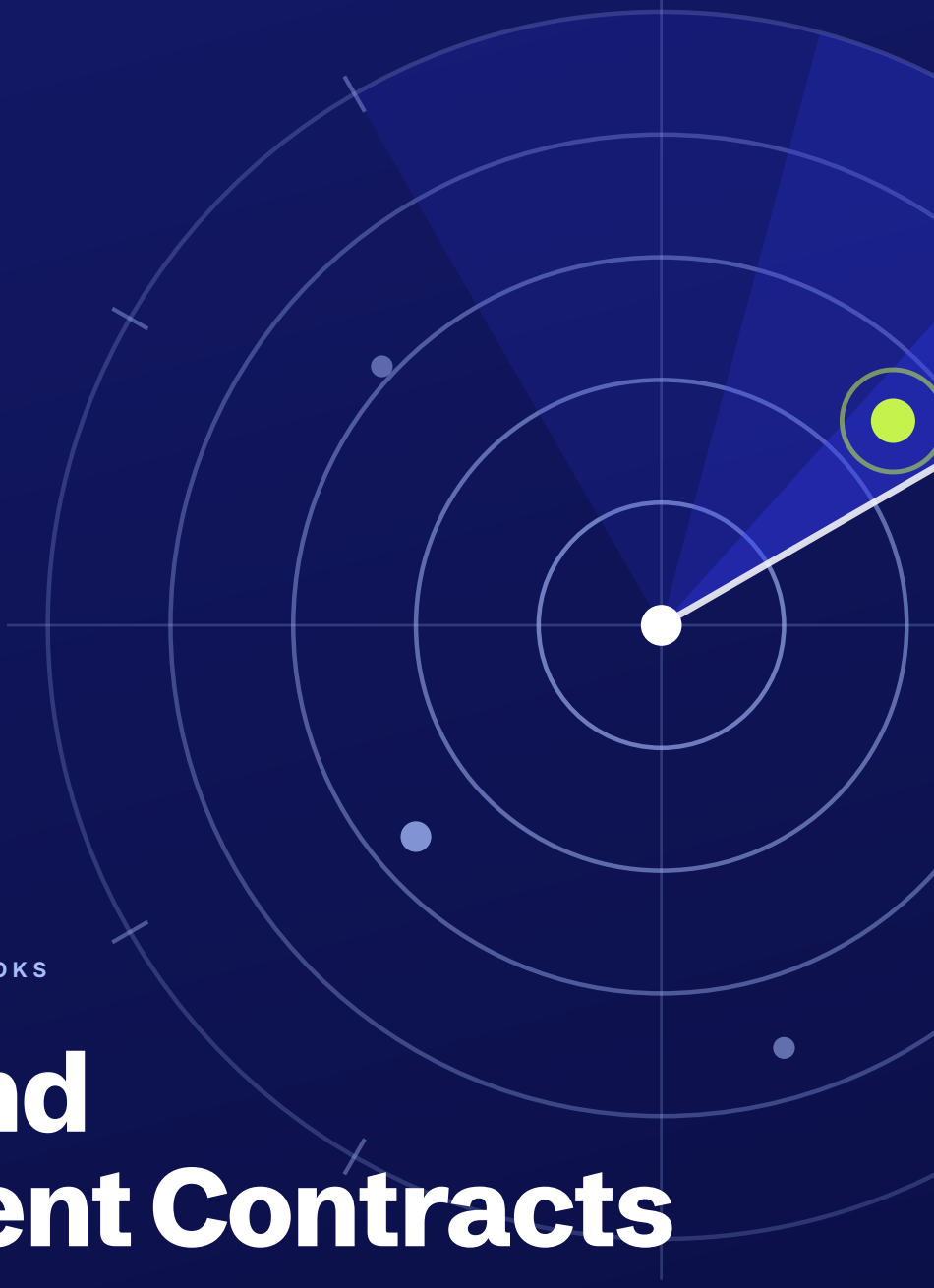
RFP Detector

HANDBOOK 1 OF 5



THE RFP DETECTOR HANDBOOKS

How to Find Government Contracts and RFPs

Where public and private opportunities come from, how to read and search them, and how to decide which ones deserve your bid.

8 chapters | Beginner | About 125 min read | 2026 edition

RFP Detector

How to Find Government Contracts and RFPs

Handbook 1 of 5 in the RFP Detector handbook series

EDITION	LAST UPDATED	SERIES
November 2026 edition	November 13, 2026	Handbook 1 of 5

READ ONLINE rfpdetector.com/guides/how-to-find-government-contracts

⚠ General information, not legal advice

This handbook is general information for businesses, consultants and nonprofits. It is not legal, tax, financial or bidding advice. Registration, certification, bonding and procurement rules change and vary by agency and jurisdiction. Confirm current requirements with the buying agency or a qualified advisor before you rely on them.

RFP Detector is an independent service and is not affiliated with any government agency. Scores are informational.

HOW TO USE THIS HANDBOOK

TIP
A quicker or smarter way to do something.

PRO TIP
What experienced bidders do differently.

NOTE
Context worth knowing before you act.

WARNING
A rule, deadline or risk to check carefully.

COMMON MISTAKE
An error that costs bidders points or eligibility.

EXAMPLE
A realistic sample you can adapt.

- Checklists print with empty boxes, and templates print in a bordered form with every [PLACEHOLDER] highlighted and explained.
- Section numbers (3.2 is chapter 3, section 2) match the contents and the PDF bookmarks.
- Links in this PDF open the matching page on rfpdetector.com, where every chapter is kept up to date.

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BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Foreword

Finding the right government contracts is the first skill in public-sector sales, and the one most firms get wrong. Opportunities are scattered across thousands of buyers (federal agencies, states, cities, counties, public authorities, school districts, universities, hospitals, nonprofits and private companies), each with its own vocabulary, rules and calendar. Firms that search by habit drown in noise or miss the contracts they could have won. This handbook replaces habit with a method you can repeat every week: know the market, search with intent, look early and bid selectively.

It is written for owners, business development leads and proposal managers at small and mid-sized businesses, consultancies and nonprofits, whether you are chasing your first public contract or trying to fill a pipeline that already has a few wins in it. Examples come from New York, New Jersey and Connecticut, where many of our readers work, but the methods apply to any state and to federal agencies nationwide.

How to use this handbook

1. **Learn the market (chapters 1 and 2)**
   Understanding the government contracting market explains who buys, how money flows and what purchasing thresholds mean. **Types of solicitations** shows you how to read any notice correctly.

2. **Build your search (chapters 3 and 4)**
   Building your contract search strategy covers codes, keywords and filters. **Finding RFPs with RFP Detector** turns them into searches, scores, alerts and a 15-minute daily routine.

3. **Widen the net (chapters 5 and 6)**
   Add **private-sector and nonprofit RFPs**, and use **procurement forecasts and early intelligence** to see opportunities before they are posted.

4. **Decide and partner (chapters 7 and 8)**
   Score each opportunity with the **bid/no-bid decision framework**, and find primes and partners through **subcontracting and teaming**.

PRO TIP **Try this before chapter 1**

Open RFP Detector search, type one phrase that describes your main service, filter to the states you work in, and save it as an alert. Keep it running while you read. By chapter 3 you will know exactly how to sharpen it, and you will have real opportunities to practice on.

NOTE **A note on rules and figures**

Purchasing thresholds, certification rules and registration steps change. Figures in this handbook are stated as of 2026 and are general information, not legal advice. Confirm current requirements in each solicitation or with the buying agency.

WHAT YOU WILL LEARN

- Understand who buys, how public money flows, and which contract vehicles and 2026 purchasing thresholds control access
- Tell an RFP from an RFQ, IFB, RFI or sources sought notice in about 60 seconds, and respond the right way
- Build a search profile with the right NAICS, PSC and commodity codes, keywords, negative keywords and filters, then turn it into alerts
- Find private and nonprofit RFPs, and spot public opportunities months early through forecasts, industry days and expiring contracts
- Score every opportunity with a weighted bid/no-bid scorecard, and win work as a subcontractor or teaming partner when you can't prime

WHO IT IS FOR
Small and mid-sized businesses, consultants and nonprofits selling to federal, state, local, education, nonprofit and private buyers, especially in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut

LEVEL
Beginner

CHAPTERS
8 chapters, about 125 minutes of reading

Every chapter is also published online and kept current:
rfpdetector.com/guides/how-to-find-government-contracts

01

CHAPTER 1

Understanding the Government Contracting Market

Before you search for a single RFP, learn the market: who buys, how money moves from a budget to a purchase order, which contract vehicles control access, and why small businesses win a bigger share than most people expect.

16 min read · 8 sections · Updated November 13, 2026

Read this chapter online

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The government contracting market is not one market. Federal agencies, states, cities, counties, public authorities, school districts, universities, hospitals, nonprofits and private companies each buy under their own rules and calendars.
- Federal agencies alone obligated about $755 billion on contracts in fiscal year 2024, and federal law sets a goal of sending at least 23% of prime contract dollars to small businesses.
- Contract vehicles (IDIQs, schedules, statewide and cooperative contracts, BPAs) decide who may compete for many orders.
- Purchasing thresholds decide how formal a buy is. As of 2026 the federal micro-purchase threshold is $15,000 and the simplified acquisition threshold is $350,000; state and local limits differ.
- Small businesses win through set-asides, participation goals, small purchases below formal thresholds and subcontracting, not through insider connections.

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The government contracting market is the largest customer most small businesses will ever sell to, and the most misunderstood. It is not one buyer with one rulebook but thousands of separate buyers, from federal agencies and state departments to school districts, public authorities and hospitals, each with its own budget calendar and purchasing limits. This chapter gives you the map: who buys, how money flows, which contract types control access, what the dollar thresholds mean, and why small firms win more often than the myths suggest.

SECTION 1.1

What is the government contracting market?

People usually picture federal work, yet many small firms win their first contract closer to home: a county public works department, a school district, a housing authority. All of these buyers spend public money, so all follow written procurement rules meant to keep competition fair.

That is good news. The rules require buyers to advertise most opportunities and evaluate offers against published criteria. The market is also steady, because roads, servers and schools need upkeep in any economy. What shifts is where the money goes, which is why tracking budgets and expiring contracts pays off (see **Procurement Forecasts and Early Intelligence**).

$755B
Federal contract obligations, FY2024
U.S. Government Accountability Office: about $445B defense, $310B civilian.

23%
Federal small business goal
Statutory share of prime contract dollars agencies aim to award to small businesses.

27.6%
Small business share, FY2025
Government-wide result on the SBA small business scorecard, above the goal.

$15,000
Federal micro-purchase threshold
Raised from $10,000 on October 1, 2025.

> **NOTE** **Before you start**
> Thresholds, goals and program rules change. Every dollar figure in this chapter is stated as of 2026 and is general information, not legal advice. Before you rely on one in a bid, confirm it in the solicitation or with the buying agency.

SECTION 1.2

Who buys? The main kinds of public and institutional buyers

Think of buyers in tiers. Each tier has its own rulebook, its own vendor registration and its own typical contract size. Most successful small firms focus on two or three tiers instead of chasing all of them at once.

TABLE **Buyer tiers, with examples from New York, New Jersey and Connecticut**

Buyer	Tri-state examples	Rules they follow	What it means for you
Federal agencies	Defense, Veterans Affairs, GSA, Army Corps of Engineers districts	The Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR)	Largest contracts, most formal process; one registration covers every agency
State agencies	NY Office of General Services, NJ Division of Purchase and Property, CT Department of Administrative Services	State procurement laws	Statewide contracts local buyers can also use; a separate registration per state
Cities, counties, towns	New York City agencies, Westchester and Nassau counties, Newark, Stamford	Municipal bidding laws and local rules	Many smaller, faster buys; M/WBE programs are common
Public authorities	Port Authority of NY and NJ, MTA, NJ Transit, housing authorities	Their own enabling laws and policies	Big capital programs plus steady maintenance; prequalification is common
School districts and BOCES	NYC public schools, suburban districts, NJ county vocational schools	Education and municipal bidding laws	Buying follows the school year; heavy use of cooperative contracts
Public universities	SUNY, CUNY, Rutgers, UConn	State law plus campus policies	Facilities, IT and research, often bought by campus offices
Hospitals	NYC Health + Hospitals and nonprofit health systems	Public rules for public hospitals; private systems set their own	Facilities, clinical services, IT and staffing
Nonprofits	Social service and community development groups	Own policies; federal grant money brings federal standards	Often issue RFPs when spending grant funds
Private companies	Utilities, developers, large employers, prime contractors	Internal policies only	Faster decisions; supplier diversity programs matter

Two tiers are easy to overlook. **Public authorities** run some of the region's largest construction and maintenance programs. **Prime contractors** on big public contracts need subcontractors to meet small-business and M/WBE goals, which makes them buyers too (see **why primes need subcontractors**). Private and nonprofit buyers get their own chapter: **Finding Private-Sector and Nonprofit RFPs**.

> ☆ PRO TIP **Pro tip**
>
> Before you commit to a tier, see what it buys. The sector pages for **federal**, **state**, **local government**, **education**, **nonprofits** and **private companies** show open work now, and the **issuer directory** shows which agencies post most in your field.

SECTION 1.3

How does government spending flow from budget to purchase order?

Every contract starts as a budget line. Know the path to the purchase order and you know when to show up.

The path of a public dollar

01 Budget
A legislature or council approves the agency's budget for the fiscal year.

↓

02 Need and market research
Staff define the requirement and may issue an RFI or sources sought notice.

↓

03 Acquisition plan
Purchasing picks a method (small purchase, sealed bid, RFP or an existing vehicle) based on value and set-aside rules.

↓

04 Solicitation
The opportunity is advertised with instructions, a scope of work, evaluation criteria and a deadline.

↓

05 Evaluation and award
Offers are scored or ranked and a contract is awarded, often after approval by a board, council or oversight office.

↓

06 Orders and payment
Work is released through the contract, task orders or purchase orders, and invoices are paid under prompt payment rules.

Money also flows downhill. Federal grants pass to states, cities, transit agencies and nonprofits, which spend it under their own rules plus federal standards. A federally funded transit or housing project often appears as a local RFP, so don't limit your search to federal notices.

Fiscal years in the tri-state area

A buyer's fiscal year shapes when opportunities appear: a new budget brings new programs, and the final quarter brings pressure to commit money before it lapses. The federal year starts October 1 and New York State's April 1; New York City, New Jersey, Connecticut and most school districts start July 1, while many New York and New Jersey counties and towns use the calendar year.

> **TIP** **Pro tip**
>
> Put the fiscal-year start dates of your top five buyers on your calendar, then count back three to four months from each one. That is roughly when next year's requirements are being written, and when an RFI response or a short capability briefing can still shape them (**budget calendars by government**).

SECTION 1.4

Contract vehicles explained: single award, IDIQ, cooperative and BPAs

A contract vehicle is the legal container that orders flow through, and it decides who may compete. If a buyer orders from an existing vehicle and you are not on it, you cannot bid that order, however good you are.

Glossary

Single-award contract	One buyer, one vendor, a defined scope and price. You compete once, and if you win, the work is yours for the term.
IDIQ (indefinite delivery, indefinite quantity)	A contract that fixes terms, prices or labor rates and a ceiling but not exact quantities. The buyer issues **task orders** (services) or **delivery orders** (products) as needs arise. On a multiple-award IDIQ several vendors hold the contract and compete for each order.
GWACs and the GSA Multiple Award Schedule	Government-wide federal vehicles: GWACs for IT, the schedule for a wide range of commercial products and services. Agencies order from them without a full new competition.
Statewide or centralized contracts	Contracts a state awards once for many users. New York's Office of General Services manages roughly 1,500 centralized contracts that state agencies, local governments, school districts and other authorized users can buy from. New Jersey and Connecticut run their own.
Cooperative contract (piggybacking)	A contract awarded by one public entity or purchasing group that other public entities may use when their own law allows it. Schools and towns like it because it saves them running a separate solicitation.
Blanket purchase agreement (BPA)	A simplified “charge account” for repeat purchases from a trusted source. Federal BPAs are often set up under a schedule contract.

Requirements contract	The buyer agrees to buy all of its needs for an item or service from the vendor during the term at set prices, without a guaranteed quantity. Common in city purchasing for supplies and routine services.

> ✕ COMMON MISTAKE **Common mistake**
>
> Treating a vehicle award as revenue. A spot on a multiple-award IDIQ, a schedule or a statewide contract is a license to compete, not a guaranteed order. Holders who don't market themselves to buyers can go years without one, so budget for that marketing before you bid for a spot.

To see which vehicles carry work in your field, look up incumbents on **contractor profiles**. They show past contracts, the agencies served and end dates, which helps you spot the vehicles and recompetes worth tracking. **How to research an incumbent before you bid** walks through it.

SECTION 1.5

What are purchasing thresholds, and why do they matter?

A purchasing threshold is a dollar line that decides how formal a purchase must be. Below the lowest line a buyer may simply pay by card; in the middle they collect a few quotes; above the top line they must advertise a formal bid or RFP. The lines tell you which opportunities you may never see advertised.

TABLE **Selected purchasing thresholds as of 2026 (general information; confirm current figures with the buyer)**

Buyer	Threshold	What it means
Federal agencies	$15,000 micro-purchase threshold	Purchases at or below this amount can be made without competing quotes when the price is reasonable, often with a government purchase card.
Federal agencies	$350,000 simplified acquisition threshold	Buys above $15,000 and up to $350,000 use simplified procedures and are generally reserved for small businesses when two or more capable small firms are expected to offer.
New York State agencies	$50,000 general discretionary limit	Agencies may buy without a formal bid up to this amount if they document a reasonable price. Purchases of $50,000 or more must still be publicly advertised.

Buyer	Threshold	What it means
New York State agencies	$500,000 for NYS small businesses; $1.5 million for certified MWBEs and SDVOBs	Higher discretionary limits for these firms under the state Procurement Council's August 2025 guidance. Construction and design services follow other rules.
New York City agencies	$20,000 micropurchase limit ($35,000 for construction)	Small buys with minimal competition.
New York City agencies	Up to $1.5 million (M/WBE noncompetitive small purchase)	Agencies may buy from city-certified M/WBEs without a formal competition up to this amount.
New Jersey towns, counties and authorities	$17,500 bid threshold, or $53,000 with a qualified purchasing agent	Above the threshold, contracts must be publicly advertised and bid unless an exception such as professional services applies. Quotes are needed above 15% of the threshold ($2,625 or $7,950). Effective July 1, 2025.
Connecticut state agencies	Up to $100,000 delegated purchasing	Agencies may buy directly, generally after at least three written quotes where practical; small one-time buys up to $25,000 may skip quotes (state guidance revised July 2025).

Two lessons follow. First, many public purchases never reach a formal RFP; they go to vendors the buyer already knows, which is why a complete **vendor profile** and a sharp capability statement matter (try the **capability statement templates**). Second, New York's limits for certified minority-owned, women-owned and veteran-owned firms are far higher than the general limit, which turns certification into a real sales channel (see **Small-Business and Diversity Certifications**).

> ⚠ **WARNING** **Common mistake**
>
> Splitting a job to stay under a threshold. Buyers may not break one requirement into smaller purchases to avoid competition, and New York's guidance tells agencies to count all purchases of the same item expected over twelve months as one. Never suggest it to a buyer: it puts both of you at risk.

SECTION 1.6

Why small businesses win government contracts

Public buyers are required, not merely encouraged, to give small businesses a fair share. Federal law sets government-wide goals, agencies report results yearly on the SBA scorecard, and states and cities add their own programs.

TABLE **Federal small business contracting goals (statutory, as of 2026)**

Goal category	Target	Who counts
Small businesses (all)	23% of prime contract dollars	Firms under the size standard for the contract's NAICS code
Small disadvantaged businesses	5%	Includes 8(a) program participants
Women-owned small businesses	5%	WOSB and EDWOSB firms
Service-disabled veteran-owned small businesses	5%	Raised from 3% by the defense authorization act for fiscal year 2024
HUBZone small businesses	3%	Firms based in, and employing residents of, historically underutilized business zones

In fiscal year 2025 small businesses received about 27.6% of federal prime contract dollars, beating the 23% goal, while the women-owned and HUBZone goals were narrowly missed. An agency that is short of a goal has every reason to look harder for qualified firms in that category.

- **Set-asides.** Federal buys above $15,000 and up to $350,000 are generally reserved for small businesses, and larger buys are set aside when market research shows at least two capable small firms (the “rule of two”).
- **Subcontracting plans.** Large federal primes on most contracts above $900,000 (a higher floor applies to construction) must usually submit small business subcontracting plans, so they actively look for small partners.
- **State and city programs.** New York's higher limits for certified MWBEs, SDVOBs and small businesses, New York City's M/WBE noncompetitive small purchase method, and Connecticut's set-aside program (a goal of 25% of eligible state agency purchases for certified small businesses, a quarter of that for minority-owned firms) all steer work to smaller companies.

- **Speed and focus.** Small firms answer questions the same day, put an owner on the account and price without heavy overhead. Many requirements are also too small to interest national firms.

WORKED EXAMPLE

Example: how a set-aside changes the field

✓ STRONG

> A federal facility in New Jersey needs grounds maintenance worth about $180,000 in total. Several small landscaping firms answer the sources sought notice, and the value sits inside the simplified acquisition range, so the contracting officer sets it aside for small businesses. A 15-person local firm now competes against similar-sized peers instead of national companies, and its local crew becomes a deciding factor.

ⓘ NOTE **General information, not legal advice**

Set-aside eligibility rules change. Confirm your status with the agency or a qualified advisor before claiming it in an offer.

SECTION 1.7

Government contracting myths vs reality

What people believe vs what actually happens

Reality

- ✓ Public buyers must follow published rules and criteria. Relationships help you understand needs; they don't let anyone skip the process.
- ✓ Goals and set-asides reserve a large share of federal buys for small firms, and many local contracts are small.
- ✓ Sealed bids go to the lowest responsive, responsible bidder, but RFPs usually weigh approach, staff and past performance alongside price.
- ✓ Research opportunities first, then register with the buyers you actually target.
- ✓ Incumbents have an edge, but recompetes do change hands, especially when a challenger prepares months ahead.
- ✓ Prompt payment laws set deadlines (most federal invoices are due within 30 days) and often require interest on late payments.

Myth

- ✕ You need insider connections to win.
- ✕ Only big companies win government work.
- ✕ The government always picks the cheapest offer.
- ✕ You must register everywhere before you can even look.
- ✕ Every opportunity is wired for the incumbent.
- ✕ The government pays slowly, so cash flow will suffer.

The myths make public work sound closed. In practice it is one of the most transparent markets there is, because the rules force buyers to publish what they want and how they will choose.

SECTION 1.8

Where to start this week

Turn market knowledge into a pipeline

1. **Pick your lanes**
   Choose two or three buyer tiers and a realistic service area. A 10-person firm in Queens might start with New York City agencies, public authorities and Long Island school districts.

   > **Tip:** Write your lanes down; it speeds up every later decision.

2. **Learn to read a solicitation**
   Read **Types of Solicitations** so you can tell an RFP from a sealed bid from a sources sought notice at a glance.

3. **Build a search profile**
   Choose your codes, keywords and filters with **Building Your Contract Search Strategy**, then run it in **RFP Detector search** and turn it into alerts.

4. **Study who wins today**
   Look up incumbents and likely competitors on **contractor profiles** to see their past contracts, agencies and end dates. Expiring contracts are your recompete list.

5. **Register where you will bid**
   Use the **registration handbook** to set up federal, state and city vendor accounts for the buyers on your list, starting with **Getting Bid-Ready**.

Market-readiness checklist

CHECKLIST · 6 ITEMS

- [ ] I know which two or three buyer tiers I am targeting first
- [ ] I know the fiscal-year start dates of my top buyers
- [ ] I can name the contract vehicles my target buyers use for my kind of work
- [ ] I know which purchasing thresholds apply to my typical job size
- [ ] I know whether I qualify for a set-aside or certification program
- [ ] I have read at least ten real open RFPs in my category on RFP Detector

Frequently asked questions

How big is the government contracting market?

Federal agencies alone obligated about $755 billion on contracts in fiscal year 2024, according to the U.S. Government Accountability Office. State and local buyers add a very large market on top. The more useful question is how much your target buyers spend on your kind of work: estimate it from past awards on contractor profiles and open RFPs in search.

What is an IDIQ contract?

An indefinite delivery, indefinite quantity (IDIQ) contract sets terms, prices or labor rates and a maximum value for a period of years without fixing exact quantities. The buyer then places task orders for services or delivery orders for products as needs arise. On a multiple-award IDIQ, holders compete for each order, so winning a spot is a ticket to compete, not a sale.

What is the federal micro-purchase threshold in 2026?

As of 2026 the federal micro-purchase threshold is $15,000 and the simplified acquisition threshold is $350,000. Both were raised for inflation on October 1, 2025, from $10,000 and $250,000. Higher thresholds apply in some contingency and emergency situations, and state and local governments set their own limits, so always check the rules of the specific buyer.

Can a small business really win government contracts?

Yes. Federal law sets a goal of awarding at least 23% of prime contract dollars to small businesses, and agencies reported about 27.6% in fiscal year 2025. Set-asides, subcontracting plans on large primes, and state and city programs for small, minority-owned, women-owned and veteran-owned firms all steer work to smaller companies.

How is state and local contracting different from federal contracting?

Every state, city, county, authority and school district follows its own procurement laws, thresholds, registration and fiscal year, while federal agencies share one rulebook and one registration. Local contracts are usually smaller, and local presence and responsiveness count for more. Many small firms win locally before moving to federal work.

What is a set-aside contract?

A set-aside is a contract reserved for a class of bidders, such as small businesses or firms certified under the 8(a), HUBZone, women-owned or service-disabled veteran-owned programs. As of 2026, federal purchases above $15,000 and up to $350,000 are generally reserved for small businesses, and larger ones are set aside when market research shows at least two capable small firms. States and cities run their own versions, such as New York State's discretionary purchases from certified MWBEs and SDVOBs. Most contracts are not set aside, so certification is optional; see **which certifications to pursue**.

→ KEEP GOING

Types of Solicitations: RFP, RFQ, IFB, RFI and More
Read any notice correctly in 60 seconds
rfpdetector.com/guides/how-to-find-government-contracts/types-of-solicitations-rfp-rfq-ifb-rfi

Building Your Contract Search Strategy
Codes, keywords and filters that find the right work
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Procurement Forecasts and Early Intelligence
See opportunities before they are posted
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Getting Bid-Ready
What to have in place before you register
rfpdetector.com/guides/how-to-register-for-government-contracts/getting-bid-ready-before-you-register

Browse open RFPs
Federal, state, local, education, nonprofit and private
rfpdetector.com/rfps

Contractor profiles
Past contracts, agencies and end dates
rfpdetector.com/contractors

END OF CHAPTER 1

Next: 02 Types of Solicitations: RFP, RFQ, IFB, RFI and More

02

CHAPTER 2

Types of Solicitations: RFP, RFQ, IFB, RFI and More

Every public opportunity arrives with a label, and the label tells you what the buyer wants back and how they will choose. Learn the solicitation types, how awards are decided, and how to identify any notice in about 60 seconds.

16 min read · 12 sections · Updated November 13, 2026

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The basis of award matters more than the label. “Lowest responsive, responsible bidder” means a sealed bid; “best value” means a proposal; “most qualified” means qualifications-based selection.
- RFPs let the buyer weigh quality and price and often negotiate. IFBs are decided on price among bids that meet every requirement. RFQs are quick, price-focused requests for smaller buys.
- RFIs and sources sought notices are not solicitations, but answering them can decide whether a future contract is set aside for small businesses.
- Grants fund a public purpose; contracts buy goods or services for the buyer's own use. They have different rules, documents and evaluators.
- Check every notice for set-aside or participation-goal language before you invest time: it decides whether you can bid as a prime.

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2.2 What is an RFP (request for proposals)? 22
2.3 What is an RFQ (request for quotations)? 23
2.4 IFB and ITB: sealed bids and the lowest responsible bidder 23
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There are several types of solicitations in public contracting: RFPs, RFQs, IFBs, RFIs, sources sought notices, requests for qualifications and more. Each one tells you what the buyer wants back (a price, a proposal, a qualifications package or just information) and how the winner will be chosen. Misread the type and you write the wrong response: a 40-page narrative for a sealed bid that is decided on price alone, or a bare price sheet for an RFP that awards most of its points to approach and experience. This chapter explains every common type, compares them side by side, and shows you how to identify any notice in about a minute.

SECTION 2.1

What is a solicitation?

A solicitation is a buyer's formal request for vendors to submit something that can lead to a contract: a bid, a quote, a proposal or a statement of qualifications. It sets the scope of work, instructions, deadline, evaluation method and contract terms. Market research notices such as RFIs come before a solicitation and cannot lead directly to an award.

> ⚠ **WARNING** **Labels are not always reliable**
>
> Buyers use these terms loosely. “RFQ” can mean a request for quotations or a request for qualifications, “ITB” and “IFB” mean the same thing, and some agencies call every solicitation an RFP. What controls is the substance: the basis of award and what the document asks you to submit. Always read the evaluation section before you decide how to respond.

SECTION 2.2

What is an RFP (request for proposals)?

An RFP asks vendors to propose how they would meet a need, and lets the buyer weigh quality against price. It is the usual choice when the work is complex, when several approaches could succeed, or when experience and staff matter as much as cost: consulting, IT systems, human services, design-build, program management. Federal agencies generally use RFPs for negotiated buys above the simplified acquisition threshold ($350,000 as of 2026).

- **What you submit:** a technical or management proposal, staffing and resumes, past performance, a price or cost proposal, and required forms.
- **How the winner is chosen:** published evaluation criteria, often weighted (for example approach 40%, experience 30%, price 30%), scored by a panel.
- **Negotiation:** the buyer may hold discussions, ask for clarifications and request final proposal revisions before award.

- **Effort:** the highest of any type. Plan on days to weeks of work, depending on page count and requirements.

Because RFPs reward strategy, they are where small firms can beat larger rivals with a sharper understanding of the problem. The whole **proposal-writing handbook** is built around them, starting with **How to Read and Shred an RFP**.

SECTION 2.3

What is an RFQ (request for quotations)?

An RFQ asks for a price for a defined product or service, usually for smaller or simpler buys: supplies, equipment, routine repairs, short service engagements. Federal agencies use RFQs under simplified acquisition procedures and when ordering from schedule contracts; cities, towns and schools use them for purchases below their formal bid limits. Responses are short: a price sheet, a few forms, sometimes a brief description of what you are offering.

In federal buying, a quotation is not an offer. The government places an order based on your quote, and a contract is formed when you accept it in writing or by starting the work. That is why you should read the terms on the order itself, not just the RFQ.

> ☆ PRO TIP **Pro tip**
> RFQs are the easiest way to build public-sector past performance. Answer them quickly and accurately, keep a library of standard forms and insurance certificates, and track every quote in your **pipeline** so you can follow up.

SECTION 2.4

IFB and ITB: sealed bids and the lowest responsible bidder

An invitation for bid (IFB), also called an invitation to bid (ITB) or request for bids, is the classic sealed bid. The buyer writes a complete specification, vendors submit a firm price by a fixed time, bids are opened publicly, and the contract goes to the **lowest responsive and responsible bidder**. There is usually no negotiation and no scoring of technical quality. Construction, road work, commodities and many routine services are bought this way, and state laws such as New Jersey's Local Public Contracts Law require public bidding above set dollar limits.

Glossary

Responsive	Your bid meets every material requirement of the invitation: correct forms, signatures, acknowledged addenda, required bid security and no conditions the buyer didn't ask for. A non-responsive bid is rejected however low the price.
Responsible	You are able to perform: you have the capacity, licenses, financial strength, integrity and track record. The buyer can investigate this before award.
Bid security (bid bond)	A guarantee, common in construction, that you will sign the contract at your bid price if you win. See **bid, performance and payment bonds**.

WORKED EXAMPLE

How a low bid loses

✕ WEAK

> A painting contractor submits the lowest price on a school district IFB, $14,000 below the next bidder. At the public opening the clerk notes that the bid does not acknowledge Addendum 2, which changed the paint specification, and the bid bond form is unsigned. The district rejects the bid as non-responsive and awards to the second-lowest bidder. The fix costs nothing: a pre-submission checklist that confirms every addendum, signature and form.

SECTION 2.5

RFIs and sources sought notices: market research you should answer

A request for information (RFI) and a sources sought notice are market research. The buyer is still deciding what to buy, how to buy it, or whether capable small businesses exist. Neither leads directly to a contract, and many say outright that they are “not a solicitation.” Federal agencies use sources sought responses partly to decide whether to set a future contract aside for small businesses under the rule of two.

That makes them worth answering. If capable small firms stay silent, the buyer may conclude none exist and open the contract to everyone, including large companies. A short, specific response also puts your name in front of the people writing the requirement months before the RFP appears. For where these notices fall in the buying timeline, see **pre-solicitation signals**.

What a strong sources sought response includes CHECKLIST · 7 ITEMS

- [ ] Your company name, Unique Entity ID, CAGE code if you have one, and point of contact
- [ ] Your size status and any certifications for the NAICS code listed in the notice
- [ ] Two or three short examples of similar work, with value, client and dates
- [ ] Direct answers to every question the notice asks, in the same order
- [ ] How you would bid: as a prime, as a subcontractor or as part of a team
- [ ] Polite feedback on any requirement, NAICS code or contract approach that would shut out capable small businesses
- [ ] A one- or two-page capability statement (see the **capability statement templates**)

SECTION 2.6

RFQual and SOQ: qualifications-based selection

A request for qualifications (RFQual, RFQu or sometimes just RFQ) asks for a statement of qualifications (SOQ) instead of a price. It is the standard method for architecture, engineering and surveying. Under the federal Brooks Act, agencies rank architect-engineer firms on demonstrated competence and qualifications, usually from the Standard Form 330, and only then negotiate a fair price with the top-ranked firm. New York State follows the same model for design services over $25,000: the agency ranks at least three of the most qualified firms, negotiates with the first, and moves to the next if it cannot agree on a fair fee. Many cities, counties and authorities have similar rules.

Buyers also use qualifications rounds to build prequalified or on-call lists for construction management, environmental services and IT. Getting on the list is the first step; work then comes through task orders or mini-bids among list members. If your work is design or professional services, track RFQuals as closely as RFPs.

SECTION 2.7

Pre-solicitation, sole source, emergency and other notices

Pre-solicitation notice	Advance word that a solicitation is coming, with a summary of the requirement and an expected release date. Use it to line up partners and start your outline.
Combined synopsis/solicitation	A federal format for commercial products and services that puts the notice and the full solicitation in one document. Response windows are often short.
Special notice	A catch-all for industry days, draft RFPs, pre-bid conferences, forecasts and other announcements.
Notice of intent to sole source	The buyer plans to award without competition, usually because it believes only one vendor can meet the need. Many public buyers must publish this notice first, which gives other vendors a short window to show they can do the work.
Emergency procurement	A purchase made quickly, with limited or no competition, to address a genuine threat to health, safety or property. Rules usually require documentation and after-the-fact reporting.
Addendum or amendment	A change to an open solicitation: new dates, answers to questions, revised specifications. You must acknowledge every one.
Call for proposals and NOFO	Usually grant language: a call for applications or a notice of funding opportunity, not a request to buy services.

TIP **Pro tip**

If you can genuinely do the work in a sole source notice, respond by the deadline with a concise capability statement that addresses the stated reason for the sole source. Agencies must take credible responses seriously, and a good one can turn a sole source into a competition.

SECTION 2.8

Grants vs contracts: which one are you looking at?

Grants and contracts both move public money, but they are different instruments. Under federal law, a contract is used when the main purpose is to acquire property or services for the government's direct benefit or use. A grant transfers money to carry out a public purpose, such as running a youth program or a research project, with limited government involvement. A cooperative agreement is a grant in which the agency stays substantially involved.

	Contract	Grant
Purpose	The buyer gets goods or services for its own use	The recipient carries out a public purpose
You submit	A bid, quote or proposal	An application with a program plan and budget
Who decides	Contracting officers and evaluation panels	Program staff and review panels
Typical recipients	Businesses of every kind, plus nonprofits	Mostly nonprofits, governments, universities
Money terms	Price or cost for deliverables	Budget for allowable costs; may require matching funds

The two connect. When a nonprofit or city spends federal grant money, it must follow federal procurement standards and often issues its own RFP for the services it needs. That is a major source of work for consultants, evaluators and contractors (see **Finding Private-Sector and Nonprofit RFPs**).

SECTION 2.9

Best value vs lowest price: how are awards decided?

TABLE The four common award methods

Method	How the winner is chosen	Where you see it	How to compete
Low bid	Lowest price among responsive, responsible bids	IFBs for construction, commodities, routine services	Sharp pricing and flawless compliance
Lowest price technically acceptable	Lowest price among offers rated acceptable on pass/fail technical criteria	Some RFQs and RFPs for well-defined services	Clear every technical bar, then price tight
Best value tradeoff	Weighted scoring; the buyer may pay more for a better offer	Most RFPs	Strengths the evaluators can score, at a defensible price
Qualifications-based	Most qualified firm first, price negotiated after	Architecture, engineering, surveying	Relevant projects, strong team, clear approach

Find the method in the section usually titled “Basis of Award” or “Evaluation Criteria.” It tells you where to put your effort. Your pricing approach should follow from it too; see **Pricing Strategy and Cost Proposals**.

SECTION 2.10

How set-asides and goals appear on a solicitation

A set-aside limits who may compete as the prime contractor. A participation goal lets anyone compete but requires the winner to use certified firms for part of the work. Both show up near the top of a notice or in a special section, and both decide whether you should bid as a prime, a subcontractor or not at all.

Set-aside vs participation goal

Set-aside

- ✓ Federal: total or partial small business, 8(a), HUBZone, SDVOSB, WOSB and EDWOSB set-asides
- ✓ New York State: discretionary purchases an agency limits to MWBEs, SDVOBs or NYS small businesses
- ✓ Connecticut: contracts set aside for certified small and minority business enterprises
- ✓ Only eligible firms may bid as the prime

Participation goal

- ✗ New York State and New York City MWBE and SDVOB goals stated as a percentage of contract value
- ✗ Federal subcontracting plans required from large primes
- ✗ DBE goals on federally funded transportation projects (paused in each state until its 2026 DBE reevaluation ends)
- ✗ Anyone may bid; the prime must meet the goal or document good-faith efforts

You can filter by set-aside in **RFP Detector search** and see whether a notice is set aside on its results card. If you hold a certification, add it to your private matching profile so your Fit score reflects it. Certification steps are in **Small-Business and Diversity Certifications**; this is general information, so confirm eligibility with the agency.

SECTION 2.11

Solicitation types compared: RFP vs RFQ vs IFB vs RFI

TABLE **Every common notice type at a glance**

Type	Buyer wants	Award basis	Negotiation?	Your effort	Best move
RFP	A proposed solution and price	Best value or weighted scoring	Often	High	Bid if you can score well on the criteria, not just price
RFQ (quotation)	A price for a defined need	Lowest price or best value, simplified	Rarely	Low	Answer fast and accurately to build past performance
IFB / ITB	A firm sealed price	Lowest responsive, responsible bidder	No	Medium	Price sharply and check every form and addendum

Type	Buyer wants	Award basis	Negotiation?	Your effort	Best move
RFI	Information and ideas	None (no award)	No	Low	Answer to shape the requirement and get known
Sources sought	Evidence of capable firms	None (informs set-aside decision)	No	Low	Respond if you are small and capable
RFQual / SOQ	Qualifications and team	Most qualified, price negotiated after	Yes, with top firm	Medium	Lead with directly relevant projects
Pre-solicitation	Nothing yet	Not applicable	No	Low	Start planning and teaming now
Sole source notice	Proof another vendor can do it	Intended award to one firm	No	Low	Respond only with a credible capability case
Grant / NOFO	An application for funding	Merit review panels	Sometimes	High	Apply only if you are an eligible recipient

SECTION 2.12

How to identify any solicitation in 60 seconds

The 60-second notice check

1. **Read the title and number (5 seconds)**
   Prefixes such as RFP, IFB, ITB or RFQ are a hint, not proof.

2. **Find the basis of award (20 seconds)**
   “Lowest responsive and responsible” means a sealed bid. “Best value,” “most advantageous” or weighted criteria mean a proposal. “Most qualified” means qualifications-based selection. “For planning purposes only” or “not a solicitation” means market research.

3. **See what they want back (10 seconds)**
   A bid form or price sheet only, a narrative proposal plus price, a qualifications package, or a capability statement.

4 **Check eligibility (10 seconds)**

Look for set-aside, certification, prequalification, licensing or vehicle-holder requirements that could rule you out.

5 **Check the dates (10 seconds)**

Note the due date, the question deadline and any mandatory pre-bid meeting or site visit. Missing a mandatory meeting can disqualify you.

6 **Decide and log it (5 seconds)**

Save it, watch it or pass. Saved RFPs land in your **pipeline**, and the **bid/no-bid knock-out questions** help with the harder calls.

WORKED EXAMPLE

Example: an "RFQ" that is really a sealed bid

✓ STRONG

> A Westchester town posts "RFQ 2026-14, Snow Removal Services." A quick read of the award section says the contract goes to the lowest responsible bidder, a bid bond is required, and bids will be opened publicly on a set date. Despite the label, this is a sealed bid. The right response is a complete, carefully checked bid package at your sharpest price, not a marketing brochure.

RFP Detector labels each notice by type and lets you filter by it, and the **RFP Detector Score** accounts for the notice stage, so an RFI and a full RFP are not ranked alike. To set up type filters and alerts, see **Building Your Contract Search Strategy**.

Frequently asked questions

Q What is the difference between an RFP and an RFQ?

An RFP (request for proposals) asks how you would do the work and lets the buyer weigh approach, experience and price, often with negotiation. An RFQ (request for quotations) asks for a price for a clearly defined product or service and is used for smaller, simpler buys. If a document called an RFQ asks for qualifications instead of price, it is a request for qualifications, which is a different process again.

Q What is the difference between an RFP and an IFB?

An IFB (invitation for bid) is a sealed bid: the buyer writes a complete specification and awards to the lowest responsive, responsible bidder, usually with no negotiation and no technical scoring. An RFP awards on best value using published criteria and may involve discussions. IFBs reward sharp pricing and flawless paperwork; RFPs reward a persuasive, compliant proposal at a defensible price.

Q Should I respond to a sources sought notice?

Yes, if you are a small business that could perform the work. Federal agencies use sources sought responses to decide whether at least two capable small firms exist, which determines whether the contract is set aside for small businesses. Keep it short: who you are, your size status and certifications, two or three relevant projects, and direct answers to the questions asked.

Q Can you win a contract from an RFI?

Not directly. An RFI is market research and cannot result in an award. A good response can still shape the eventual requirement, influence the set-aside decision and introduce you to the people who will evaluate the RFP, which is why experienced contractors answer the RFIs that matter to them.

Q What does lowest responsive and responsible bidder mean?

Responsive means your bid meets every material requirement of the invitation: forms, signatures, acknowledged addenda and bid security. Responsible means you can actually perform, based on capacity, licenses, finances and track record. The contract goes to the lowest-priced bidder who passes both tests, so a low bid with a missing form loses.

Q What does best value mean in government contracting?

Best value means the buyer weighs price against non-price factors such as technical approach, staffing and past performance, as described in the evaluation criteria. In a tradeoff evaluation the buyer may pay more for a stronger offer if it explains why. In a lowest price technically acceptable evaluation, the buyer picks the lowest price among offers that pass every technical requirement.

Q What is a notice of intent to sole source?

It announces that a buyer plans to award a contract without competition, usually because it believes only one vendor can meet the need. Many public buyers must publish the notice before awarding. If you can genuinely do the work, send a concise capability statement by the deadline that addresses the buyer's stated reason; a credible response can lead the buyer to compete the requirement instead.

→ KEEP GOING

Understanding the Government Contracting Market
Who buys, thresholds and contract vehicles
rfpdetector.com/guides/how-to-find-government-contracts/understanding-the-government-contracting-market

Building Your Contract Search Strategy
Codes, keywords and filters
rfpdetector.com/guides/how-to-find-government-contracts/building-your-contract-search-strategy

The Bid/No-Bid Decision
Decide fast which solicitations to pursue
rfpdetector.com/guides/how-to-find-government-contracts/bid-no-bid-decision-framework

How to Read and Shred an RFP
Turn a solicitation into a compliance plan
rfpdetector.com/guides/how-to-write-a-winning-proposal/how-to-read-and-shred-an-rfp

Capability Statement Templates
For RFI, sources sought and sole source responses
rfpdetector.com/guides/proposal-templates/capability-statement-templates

Search open RFPs by notice type
RFPs, RFQs, IFBs, RFIs and more
rfpdetector.com/search

END OF CHAPTER 2

Next: 03 Building Your Contract Search Strategy: Codes, Keywords and Filters

03

CHAPTER 3

Building Your Contract Search Strategy: Codes, Keywords and Filters

A good search strategy finds every opportunity you could win and very little you can't. Choose the right classification codes, build keyword lists in the buyer's own language, set filters that match your real capacity, and keep the whole profile tuned.

15 min read · 9 sections · Updated November 13, 2026

Read this chapter online

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Use codes and keywords together. Codes catch well-classified notices; keywords catch the many state and local notices that carry no code or the wrong one.
- Federal buyers use NAICS and PSC codes; many state and local buyers use NIGP or UNSPSC commodity codes. Pick a focused set in each system your buyers use.
- Write keywords the way buyers write: synonyms, agency jargon, acronyms and deliverables. Add negative keywords to cut the noise.
- Set filters to your real capacity: service area, contract value, set-aside eligibility and the notice types you want.
- Save your best searches as alerts and review the profile every quarter. A search strategy is a living document.

IN THIS CHAPTER

3.1 Why a search strategy beats browsing 35
3.2 NAICS, PSC, NIGP and UNSPSC: the four code systems 35
3.3 How do you pick your NAICS, PSC and commodity codes? 36
3.4 Building your keyword list: synonyms and agency jargon 38
3.5 Negative keywords: cut the noise without losing leads 39
3.6 Which search filters matter? Geography, value, set-aside and notice type 40
3.7 Building and maintaining your search profile 41
3.8 Worked example: a 12-person IT services firm in New Jersey 43
3.9 Worked example: a construction contractor in the Hudson Valley 44

A government contract search strategy is the written set of codes, keywords and filters you use to find opportunities, plus the routine you use to keep it sharp. Without one, you either drown in irrelevant notices or quietly miss the ones you could have won. With one, the right RFPs come to you every morning. This chapter shows you how to choose your NAICS, PSC, NIGP and UNSPSC codes, how to build keyword and negative keyword lists in the buyer's own language, which filters matter, and how to turn it all into a search profile and alerts, with complete worked examples for an IT firm and a construction contractor.

SECTION 3.1

Why a search strategy beats browsing

Every search fails in one of two ways. **Too narrow**, and you miss opportunities because the buyer used a different word or code than you expected. **Too broad**, and you spend hours scrolling past janitorial contracts when you sell software. A strategy balances the two on purpose, and lets you measure which way you are failing so you can fix it.

The search strategy loop

01 **Codes**
Pick the NAICS, PSC and commodity codes that describe your work.

↓

02 **Keywords**
Add synonyms, jargon and acronyms buyers actually use.

↓

03 **Negatives**
Exclude terms that bring in work you never do.

↓

04 **Filters**
Match service area, value, set-asides and notice types to your capacity.

↓

05 **Alerts and review**
Save searches as alerts, then tune them from what you see and what you miss.

SECTION 3.2

NAICS, PSC, NIGP and UNSPSC: the four code systems

Public buyers classify what they buy with standard codes. Four systems cover almost everything you will meet in the United States, and each buyer tends to use one or two of them. Federal notices carry NAICS and PSC codes. State and local buyers often use a commodity code system for vendor registration and bid notifications.

TABLE **The four classification systems compared**

System	Format	Who uses it	IT example	Construction example
NAICS (North American Industry Classification System)	6 digits; the first 2 are the sector	Federal solicitations (sets the size standard), many state and local registrations	541512 Computer Systems Design Services	236220 Commercial and Institutional Building Construction
PSC (Product and Service Code)	4 characters; products are numeric, services start with a letter	Federal agencies, to describe exactly what is being bought	DE01 help desk and end-user support (labor)	Z2AA repair or alteration of office buildings
NIGP Commodity/Services Code	3-digit class, 5-digit class-item, longer codes for detail	Many states, cities and schools; New Jersey's NJSTART uses 5-digit codes and New York City's PASSPort codes align with NIGP	Class 920: data processing, computer, programming and software services	Class 909: new building construction services; class 914: construction trades
UNSPSC (United Nations Standard Products and Services Code)	8 digits in four 2-digit levels: segment, family, class, commodity	Some states and institutions; Connecticut's CTsource registration uses it	8111: computer services (under segment 81)	Segment 72: building and facility construction and maintenance services

NOTE **Before you start**

Code lists are revised on their own schedules: SBA size standards follow NAICS 2022 and SBA proposed a restructured size standard table in 2026, the PSC manual is updated regularly, and NJSTART uses the 2025 NIGP release. Use each buyer's current lookup tool when you register, and treat the examples here as illustrations.

SECTION 3.3

How do you pick your NAICS, PSC and commodity codes?

Choose a focused, defensible set of codes

1. **List what you actually sell**
   Write down your services and products in order of revenue and capability. Codes should describe work you can perform and document today, not work you hope to do someday.

2. **Choose a primary NAICS code**
   Pick the six-digit code that best matches your largest line of business. It is the code most buyers and partners will see first.

3. **Add three to eight secondary NAICS codes**
   Cover your other real lines of business and the codes buyers commonly assign to your kind of work. Search past and open RFPs to see which codes appear on the contracts you want.

   > **Tip:** In **RFP Detector search**, the NAICS filter matches by prefix: entering 5415 also finds 541511, 541512, 541513 and 541519.

4. **Check your size under each code**
   Small business status is decided per NAICS code, using the SBA size standard for that code (average annual receipts or employees). You can be small under one code and large under another.

5. **Map your PSC codes**
   Pick the four-character federal codes that describe your services or products precisely, for example DE01 for help desk support or Z2AA for office building alterations.

6. **Map commodity codes for state and local buyers**
   Use each buyer's own lookup to choose NIGP or UNSPSC codes. Pick specific item codes rather than broad class headers, and include incidental codes for supplies you provide with your service.

> ✕ COMMON MISTAKE **Common mistake**
> Selecting dozens of codes “just in case.” Long lists flood your inbox with noise and make your profile look unfocused to buyers and prime contractors. A short, accurate list plus good keywords finds more of the right work.

Codes are only half the job. Many state, local, school and nonprofit notices carry no code at all, or a code chosen in a hurry. That is why the next step, your keyword list, matters as much as the codes. Registration-specific code advice is in **Choose your NAICS and commodity codes**.

SECTION 3.4

Building your keyword list: synonyms and agency jargon

Buyers describe the same work in different words. A school district wants “technology support,” a county wants “managed IT services,” a federal agency wants “end user services.” Build your list in layers so you catch all of them.

TABLE **Keyword layers with examples**

Layer	What to include	IT services example	Construction example
Core terms	Plain words for your main services	IT support, network support, cybersecurity	renovation, roof replacement, general construction
Synonyms	Other ways buyers say the same thing	help desk, service desk, desktop support	rehabilitation, alterations, reroofing
Agency jargon	Public-sector phrases	managed services, end user services, IT staff augmentation	job order contract, capital improvement, ADA accessibility upgrades
Acronyms	Short forms that appear in titles	NOC, SOC, MSP, ITSM	GC, HVAC, JOC
Deliverables and standards	Outputs and named frameworks	vulnerability assessment, penetration testing, Microsoft 365 migration	roof membrane, window replacement, asbestos abatement

RFP Detector's keyword search understands three operators. Put a phrase in quotes to match it exactly, put a minus sign before a word to exclude it, and use OR between alternatives. A plain query without operators also matches NAICS titles and solicitation numbers and tolerates small typos.

WORKED EXAMPLE

Example keyword queries

> `"help desk" OR "service desk" OR "desktop support"` finds the three common names for the same service.
>
> `"roof replacement" OR reroofing -design` finds roofing construction but drops design-only solicitations.
>
> `cybersecurity -training -awareness` keeps security work and drops security awareness training.

> **PRO TIP** **Pro tip**
>
> Harvest keywords from real solicitations. Each time you find an RFP you would love to win, copy the exact phrases from its title and scope into your list. Buyers reuse their own language year after year, so their wording is the best predictor of their next notice.

SECTION 3.5

Negative keywords: cut the noise without losing leads

Negative keywords remove notices you would never bid. Use them carefully: a negative that is too broad silently hides good opportunities, and you will never know what you missed. Exclude specific words that signal work outside your lane, not general words that appear in many scopes.

Good negatives vs risky negatives

Good negatives

- ✓ Specific services you never offer: janitorial, elevator, dredging
- ✓ Wrong product types: an IT services firm excluding furniture or vehicles
- ✓ Work you can't legally do: design-only services for a builder without a design license
- ✓ Recurring noise you see every week in your results

Risky negatives

- ✗ Broad words that appear in good scopes: services, support, maintenance
- ✗ Buyer types: excluding “school” can hide large district IT contracts
- ✗ Generic contract words: training, consulting, management
- ✗ Anything you added once and never reviewed

In your private matching profile, an exclude keyword works differently: when it appears in an RFP's title, it caps that RFP's Fit at 20 instead of hiding it, which is a safer way to handle borderline terms. You can add up to 25.

SECTION 3.6

Which search filters matter? Geography, value, set-aside and notice type

TABLE RFP Detector search filters and how to set them

Filter	What to set	Why it matters
Sector	The buyer tiers you chose: federal, state, local, education, private, nonprofit	Each tier has its own rules and registrations
State	States where you can perform, plus “Nationwide / Remote” if you work remotely	Matches place of performance, or the issuer's state when none is listed
Category	Your one to three main categories	A broad first cut before codes and keywords
NAICS	Your primary and secondary codes or their prefixes	Catches well-classified notices, mostly federal
Notice type	RFP, RFQ, IFB, RFI, sources sought, presolicitation and others	Separate early-stage notices from live bids
Set-aside	Programs you qualify for, such as small business, 8(a), HUBZone, SDVOSB or WOSB	Shows where you face less competition
Value	A minimum and maximum that match your capacity and bonding	Keep “Include RFPs without a value” on, because many notices don't publish one
Due and Posted	Due within 14 to 60 days; posted within 24 hours for daily review	Hides deadlines you can't make and shows what is new
RFP Detector Score and Fit	A minimum score or Fit once you trust them	Ranks opportunities by quality and by match to your profile

Set the value range from your real capacity, not your ambition. A firm with a $2 million bonding limit gains nothing from $20 million bids except as a subcontractor, and those are better found through **teaming**. The **RFP Detector Score methodology** explains how scores are calculated, **Fit and the matching profile** covers personal relevance, and **every search filter explained** covers the search screens in detail.

SECTION 3.7

Building and maintaining your search profile

Your search profile has two parts in RFP Detector. The **matching profile** is private to your organization and powers the Fit badge: up to 5 categories, 20 NAICS codes, 20 PSC codes, 25 keywords and 25 exclude keywords, plus your service states (or nationwide and remote), self-reported certifications and contract size range. **Alerts** are saved searches: run a search, choose Save as alert, and pick instant (at most hourly), daily or weekly delivery in the app and by email, with an optional minimum Fit. Full setup is in Finding RFPs with RFP Detector and setting up RFP alerts.

A maintenance routine that keeps results sharp

Daily — **Triage alerts**
Save, watch or pass on each new match in a few minutes. Note any irrelevant result and the word that caused it.

Weekly — **Tune keywords**
Add phrases from RFPs you liked and negatives from repeated noise.

Monthly — **Run a missed-opportunity check**
Search closed RFPs in your category for anything you would have bid but never saw, and add the missing code or keyword.

Quarterly — **Review the whole profile**
Check codes against wins and losses, update certifications, service area and value range, and retire alerts nobody reads.

Yearly — **Refresh codes and registrations**
Check for new code releases and size standard changes, and update your vendor registrations to match.

TEMPLATE

Search profile worksheet

Copy-ready online

A one-page plan for your codes, keywords, filters and alerts. Fill it in once, share it with your team, and revisit it every quarter.

WHEN TO USE Use it when you first set up your search and alerts, when you add a new service line, and at each quarterly review.

SEARCH PROFILE WORKSHEET
Company: [COMPANY_NAME] Owner of this profile: [PROFILE_OWNER] Last reviewed: [REVIEW_DATE]

1. TARGET LANES
Buyer tiers (pick 2 to 3): [BUYER_TIERS]
Service area (states, counties or remote): [SERVICE_AREA]
Contract value range we can perform: [MIN_VALUE] to [MAX_VALUE]
Set-aside or certification programs we qualify for: [CERTIFICATIONS]

2. CLASSIFICATION CODES
Primary NAICS: [PRIMARY_NAICS]
Secondary NAICS (3 to 8): [SECONDARY_NAICS]
PSC codes (federal): [PSC_CODES]
NIGP codes (for buyers that use them): [NIGP_CODES]
UNSPSC codes (for buyers that use them): [UNSPSC_CODES]

3. KEYWORDS
Core terms: [CORE_TERMS]
Synonyms: [SYNONYMS]
Agency jargon and acronyms: [JARGON_AND_ACRONYMS]
Deliverables and standards: [DELIVERABLES]
Negative keywords: [NEGATIVE_KEYWORDS]

4. FILTERS
Sectors: [SECTORS]
States: [STATES]
Notice types: [NOTICE_TYPES]
Due within: [DUE_WINDOW]
Minimum Fit or score (optional): [MINIMUM_FIT]

5. ALERTS
Alert 1: [ALERT_1_NAME], [ALERT_1_QUERY], delivery [ALERT_1_CADENCE]
Alert 2: [ALERT_2_NAME], [ALERT_2_QUERY], delivery [ALERT_2_CADENCE]
Alert 3: [ALERT_3_NAME], [ALERT_3_QUERY], delivery [ALERT_3_CADENCE]

6. REVIEW NOTES
Relevant results last quarter: [RELEVANT_COUNT] Irrelevant results: [IRRELEVANT_COUNT]
Opportunities we missed and why: [MISSED_OPPORTUNITIES]
Changes made at this review: [CHANGES_MADE]

FIELDS TO FILL IN · 8

[BUYER_TIERS]	For example: NYC agencies, public authorities, Long Island school districts.
[MIN_VALUE] / [MAX_VALUE]	The smallest job worth your time and the largest you can perform, bond and finance.
[CERTIFICATIONS]	Only programs you hold or qualify for today, such as WOSB, SDVOSB, MBE or NYS small business.
[PRIMARY_NAICS] / [SECONDARY_NAICS]	Six-digit codes; check your size under each one.
[PSC_CODES], [NIGP_CODES], [UNSPSC_CODES]	Fill in only the systems your target buyers use.
[NEGATIVE_KEYWORDS]	Specific out-of-lane terms only; avoid broad words like services or support.
[ALERT_1_QUERY]	The keyword query and key filters, for example: "help desk" OR "service desk", NJ and NY, RFP and RFQ.
[MISSED_OPPORTUNITIES]	Closed RFPs you would have bid but never saw, and the code or keyword that would have caught them.

SECTION 3.8

Worked example: a 12-person IT services firm in New Jersey

WORKED EXAMPLE

Search profile: managed IT and cybersecurity, central New Jersey

✓ STRONG

The firm: a certified women-owned small business offering help desk, network support and security assessments to public clients, with staff who can work on-site within about 90 minutes of its office or remotely.

Codes: primary NAICS 541512, secondaries 541513, 541519 and 518210. PSC codes DE01 (help desk), DG01 (network support), DJ01 (security and compliance) and DD01 (service delivery and ITSM). NIGP class 920 item codes for NJSTART and New York City; UNSPSC family 8111 for Connecticut.

Keywords: IT support, managed services, help desk, service desk, desktop support, network support, end user services, cybersecurity, vulnerability assessment, penetration testing, Microsoft 365 migration, NOC. **Negatives:** janitorial, furniture, vehicles, radio, elevator.

Filters: sectors state, local and education, plus federal for set-asides; states NJ, NY and PA plus Nationwide / Remote; value $25,000 to $2 million with RFPs without a value included; notice types RFP, RFQ, RFI and sources sought.

Alerts: “Tri-state public IT support” (daily, minimum Fit 60); “Federal WOSB and small business IT set-asides” (daily); “Cyber RFIs and sources sought” (weekly), so the firm can answer market research early.

SECTION 3.9

Worked example: a construction contractor in the Hudson Valley

WORKED EXAMPLE

Search profile: building renovation and roofing, lower Hudson Valley

✓ STRONG

The firm: a 30-person general contractor and roofer, New York State certified MBE, with bonding capacity of about $3 million per project. It wants public renovation work from towns, school districts, housing authorities and state facilities.

Codes: primary NAICS 236220, secondaries 238160 (roofing) and 236118 (residential remodelers, for housing authority work). PSC codes Z2AA, Z2JZ and Z1AA for occasional federal facility work. NIGP classes 909, 910 and 914 for New York City buyers.

Keywords: renovation, rehabilitation, alterations, general construction, roof replacement, reroofing, window replacement, ADA accessibility upgrades, job order contract, capital improvement. **Negatives:** dredging, paving, bridge, design services.

Filters: sectors local, state and education; state NY; category Construction; value $100,000 to $3 million with RFPs without a value included; notice types IFB, RFP and presolicitation; a custom due-date range that starts two weeks out, leaving time for site visits and pricing.

Alerts: “Hudson Valley renovation bids” (daily); “NY public roofing” (instant, because roofing bids often have short windows); “NY MWBE-goal construction over $3 million” (weekly), to find primes that need certified subcontractors. Incumbents on expiring contracts are checked on contractor profiles before each bid (see expiring contracts and recompetes).

Frequently asked questions

Q How do I find my NAICS code?

Start with your largest line of business and find the six-digit NAICS code whose description matches it most closely, using the official NAICS lookup or the SBA size standards table. Then look at the NAICS codes printed on past and open solicitations for the work you want; buyers' choices are the best guide to which codes matter. Most firms end up with one primary code and three to eight secondary codes. See also choosing NAICS codes for federal registration.

Q How many NAICS codes should I list?

Enough to cover the work you can actually perform and document, which for most small businesses is four to ten codes in total. Listing dozens of codes adds noise to your alerts and can confuse buyers reviewing your profile. Remember that small business size is judged separately under each code.

What is the difference between NAICS and PSC codes?

NAICS codes classify industries and decide which SBA size standard applies to a federal solicitation. PSC codes describe exactly what the government is buying in that contract action, with four characters: numeric codes for products and codes beginning with a letter for services. A federal notice usually carries one of each.

What is an NIGP code and who uses it?

The NIGP Commodity/Services Code is a classification system used by many state and local governments, schools and authorities. Codes run from a 3-digit class to a 5-digit class-item and longer detail levels. New Jersey's NJSTART uses 5-digit class-item codes for vendor registration and bid notifications, and New York City's commodity codes align with NIGP classes.

What keywords should I use to search for government contracts?

Use the words buyers use, in layers: core terms for your services, synonyms, public-sector jargon, acronyms, and named deliverables or standards. Copy phrases from solicitations you would love to win, combine alternatives with OR, use quotes for exact phrases, and add a few specific negative keywords to remove recurring noise.

How often should I update my contract search?

Triage new matches daily, tune keywords weekly, check for missed opportunities monthly, and review the whole profile quarterly. Each year, check for new code releases and size standard changes and update your vendor registrations to match.

→ KEEP GOING

Finding RFPs with RFP Detector

Search, scores and alerts in practice

rfpdetector.com/guides/how-to-find-government-contracts/finding-rfps-with-rfp-detector

Types of Solicitations

Choose which notice types to track

rfpdetector.com/guides/how-to-find-government-contracts/types-of-solicitations-rfp-rfq-ifb-rfi

Procurement Forecasts and Early Intelligence

Add forecasts and recompetes to your search

rfpdetector.com/guides/how-to-find-government-contracts/procurement-forecasts-and-early-intelligence

Searching RFPs and Reading Opportunity Scores

Every filter and score explained

rfpdetector.com/guides/how-to-use-rfp-detector/searching-rfps-and-reading-scores

Federal Vendor Registration and Your UEI

Where your NAICS codes are recorded

rfpdetector.com/guides/how-to-register-for-government-contracts/federal-vendor-registration-and-uei#choosing-naics-codes

Open RFP Detector search

Try your codes and keywords now

rfpdetector.com/search

END OF CHAPTER 3

Next: 04 Finding RFPs with RFP Detector: Search, Scores and Alerts

04

CHAPTER 4

Finding RFPs with RFP Detector: Search, Scores and Alerts

A strategy for finding RFPs worth your time: build searches that match how you sell, triage with the RFP Detector Score and your Fit, let alerts do the watching, and spend fifteen focused minutes a day on it.

16 min read · 9 sections · Updated November 13, 2026

Read this chapter online

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Search once across federal, state, local, education, private and nonprofit RFPs, then narrow with filters.
- The **RFP Detector Score** rates the opportunity for a typical qualified bidder; **Fit** rates how relevant it is to *your* organization. They answer different questions.
- Turn every search you repeat into an **alert**, and keep three to five alerts that each do one job.
- Save promising RFPs the day you find them so deadline reminders and amendment notices start working for you.
- A **15-minute daily routine** beats an occasional two-hour search marathon.

IN THIS CHAPTER

4.1 Where RFP Detector fits in your search strategy 49
4.2 How to search for RFPs: queries, filters and sorting 50
4.3 Reading an RFP page in two minutes 51
4.4 What the RFP Detector Score tells you (and what it doesn't) 53
4.5 Fit: how relevant an RFP is to your organization 54
4.6 Setting up RFP alerts that catch the right opportunities 55
4.7 Saved RFPs, the pipeline and deadline reminders 56
4.8 A daily 15-minute RFP routine 58
4.9 Common RFP search mistakes and how to avoid them 59

Most businesses that struggle to find RFPs are not short of opportunities. They are short of a system. Notices are scattered across thousands of agencies, schools, hospitals, companies and nonprofits, and checking them one by one eats the hours you need for proposals. This chapter shows you how to find RFPs with RFP Detector as a deliberate strategy: which searches to build, how to read the **RFP Detector Score** and your **Fit**, which alerts to keep, and a 15-minute routine that keeps your pipeline full.

> **NOTE** **Strategy here, step-by-step tutorial elsewhere**
>
> This chapter is about *how to think* when you search. For instructions on every screen, follow the companion tutorial: **Searching RFPs and reading scores** and **Tracking bids, the pipeline and alerts**. If you haven't defined your codes and keywords yet, start with **how to pick your codes**.

SECTION 4.1

Where RFP Detector fits in your search strategy

RFP Detector monitors public procurement records and the open web every day and turns each notice into a structured page with the same facts in the same places. Federal, state, local, education, private and nonprofit RFPs live in **one index**, so a single search can surface a city janitorial bid, a university IT RFP and a federal small-business set-aside side by side.

Every listing is labelled so you know what you are looking at: **Federal notices**, **Other public notices** (state, local, education, institutional and private notices published elsewhere) and RFPs **Posted on RFP Detector** directly by the buyer. The strategic shift is simple: stop *visiting* sources and start *defining* what you want. Once your searches describe your market precisely, alerts bring matches to you and your time goes into deciding and writing.

6
sectors in one search
Federal, State, Local, Education, Private, Non-profit

0–100
RFP Detector Score on every scored RFP
The same for every visitor

3
alert cadences
Instant, daily or weekly

SECTION 4.2

How to search for RFPs: queries, filters and sorting

Open Search and type the words a buyer would use to describe your work. The search looks across titles, solicitation numbers, issuers, summaries and descriptions, and plain queries forgive small typos in titles. Every word you type must appear, in any order. Three operators do the rest: quotes for an exact phrase ("snow removal"), a minus sign to exclude a word (janitorial -uniform), and *or* between words to match either (custodial or janitorial).

Results default to **Open** RFPs; switch to **Closed** or **All** to research what an issuer bought before. Sort by **Best match** (when you've typed a query), **Newest**, **Closing soonest**, **Highest score** or **Highest value**. Every filter is kept in the page address, so you can bookmark or share a search exactly as you built it.

TABLE **The search filters and when each one earns its place**

Filter	What it does	Use it when
Sector	Federal, State, Local, Education, Private, Non-profit	You sell only to certain buyer types
Due	Due within 7, 14, 30 or 60 days, or a custom date range	You need lead time to prepare
Posted	Posted in the last 24 hours, 7 days or 30 days	Your daily check of what is new
RFP Detector Score	Grade chips (A 80+, B 65+, C 50+, D 35+) or a minimum score	You need to triage a long list
Fit (your profile)	Minimum Fit, when signed in with a matching profile	You want relevance to your own capabilities
Category	26 service and product categories	Your work maps to one or two categories
State	Any US state, plus Nationwide / Remote	You can perform only in certain places
Notice type	RFP, RFQ, IFB, RFI, sources sought, presolicitation and more	You want early signals, or only biddable notices
Issuer	Specific agencies, governments and organizations	You are watching target buyers
NAICS	Industry codes, found by typing a code or a word	Notices that carry industry codes
Set-aside	Small business, 8(a), HUBZone, SDVOSB, WOSB, EDWOSB and others	You hold a certification

Filter	What it does	Use it when
Value	Minimum and maximum, including estimates	Bonding, staff or cash flow limit your size
Listing	Federal notices, Other public notices, Posted on RFP Detector	You want only buyer-posted RFPs, for example

> ☆ PRO TIP **Pro tip: keep "Include RFPs without a value" switched on**
>
> Many state, local and private notices never publish a dollar figure. Switch that option off while filtering by value and you silently drop a large share of real opportunities. Filter by value to remove the obviously too big, not to demand a number on every notice.

If a search returns nothing, RFP Detector suggests which filter to remove and how many results each removal brings back. For the reasoning behind each filter, see **filters that matter**. For a quick scan without building anything, use the hubs: **new RFPs today**, **closing soon**, **local government** or **facilities**.

WORKED EXAMPLE

Worked example: a commercial cleaning company on Long Island ✓ STRONG

> **Query:** custodial or janitorial -laundry. The *or* catches both words buyers use for the same work; the exclusion drops linen contracts the company doesn't handle.
>
> **Filters:** Sector = Local, Education and State; State = New York; a custom due-date range starting a month out; value up to $2M with "Include RFPs without a value" on.
>
> **Result:** a short list of school district, town and state agency cleaning bids with time to prepare. The team sorts by **Highest score**, opens the top ten, saves four and clicks **Save as alert** so tomorrow's new matches arrive by email.

SECTION 4.3

Reading an RFP page in two minutes

Every RFP page uses the same layout, which is what makes fast triage possible. Learn where things live once and you can decide in about two minutes whether an RFP deserves a full read.

The two-minute read

1. **Scan the badges and the due panel**
   The top shows the sector, notice type, status (including **Closing soon** and **Amended**), the listing label and, when it applies, a **Not openly competed** warning. The due panel shows the response deadline, questions deadline, pre-bid meeting (flagged **Mandatory** when required) and anticipated award date when published.

   > **Tip:** A mandatory pre-bid meeting next Tuesday is often the real deadline.

2. **Read the summary and key facts**
   Key facts lists the issuer, category, NAICS code, set-aside, place of performance, value (marked when estimated), submission method and contract term when known.

3. **Check the score breakdown**
   Each factor shows its points with a sentence explaining it. Low points for time or clarity often say more than the total.

4. **Skim requirements, documents and contacts**
   Open the documents before you commit time; the real scope and evaluation criteria live there.

5. **Look at the timeline and the issuer**
   The timeline records amendments such as a moved due date. **More from this issuer** shows what else the buyer is publishing.

6. **Save it or skip it**
   Click **Save** to put it in your pipeline, or move on. **Download report (PDF)** gives you a free summary to share with a partner; it needs no account.

> ⚠ **WARNING** **Always confirm on the official solicitation**
> RFP Detector is not affiliated with the organizations that issue RFPs. Confirm every date, time zone, form and requirement on the official solicitation before you submit; when you're signed in, the RFP page links to it. Take any **Confirm on the official solicitation** notice seriously.

SECTION 4.4

What the RFP Detector Score tells you (and what it doesn't)

The **RFP Detector Score** answers one question: *how attractive and workable is this RFP for a typical qualified bidder, today?* Every RFP starts at 50. Six weighted factors move it up or down depending on how the RFP compares with a typical one, and the contributions add up to the score. Unknown facts count as neutral, so a missing value never drags an RFP down by itself.

TABLE **The six factors (current weights; the methodology page always shows the weights in force)**

Factor	Weight	The question it answers
Value	20	How much money is on the table?
Competition & access	20	Who can bid, and how concentrated is the market?
Issuer & market	20	Does this issuer actively buy this kind of work?
Time & stage	15	Is there a workable window, and is this a real chance to bid?
Clarity & completeness	15	Is the notice clear and complete enough to respond to?
Freshness	10	How new is it?

TABLE **Grades and what to do with them**

Grade	Range	Label	A sensible first move
A	80–100	Excellent	Open it today if it's in your lane
B	65–79	Strong	Worth a full read when Fit is good
C	50–64	Fair	Read the breakdown to see what pulls it down
D	35–49	Limited	Only if it's squarely your specialty
F	0–34	Poor	Usually a pass; check for a “Not competed” cap

Notices that are not openly competed (sole-source signals, brand-name-only requirements) and purely informational notices are **capped at 30**. Closed, awarded and cancelled RFPs show a grey **Score at publication**, frozen as of the day they were posted, and unscored RFPs are never shown as an F. Open RFPs are rescored when they change and every night.

COMMON MISTAKE **Common mistake: treating the score as your odds of winning**

The score doesn't estimate your probability of winning and isn't advice to bid. It is the same for everyone, and nobody can pay for it or edit it. Use it to decide what to *read first*, then decide with the **bid/no-bid decision framework**. Full details are on the **score methodology** page.

SECTION 4.5

Fit: how relevant an RFP is to your organization

Where the score is public, **Fit** (0–100) is private. It measures how well an RFP matches your organization's matching profile, only signed-in members of your organization see it, and it never changes the public score.

RFP Detector Score vs Fit

RFP Detector Score

- ✓ Public, the same for every visitor
- ✓ Rates the opportunity: value, competition, issuer activity, timing, clarity, freshness
- ✓ Answers: “Which of these 40 RFPs do I read first?”
- ✓ Filter with grade chips or a minimum score

Fit

- ✗ Private to your organization
- ✗ Rates relevance: NAICS, keywords, eligibility, geography, contract size
- ✗ Answers: “Is this actually our kind of work?”
- ✗ Filter with a minimum Fit, and set one on alerts

TABLE What goes into Fit

Component	Weight	What helps
NAICS	35	A full six-digit match counts most; shorter shared prefixes count partially
Keywords	25	Your keywords in the title count more than in the body
Eligibility	15	Holding the certification a set-aside requires
Geography	15	Work inside your service states, or nationwide/remote
Contract size	10	Value inside the size range you set

Labels are **Strong fit** (75+), **Possible fit** (50–74) and **Weak fit** (below 50). Three caps prevent false positives: an excluded keyword in the title caps Fit at 20, a set-aside needing a certification you haven't listed caps it at 25, and a notice that isn't openly competed caps it at 30.

Build a matching profile that makes Fit useful

CHECKLIST · 8 ITEMS

- [ ] Up to five categories you actually sell, not everything you could do.
- [ ] Your NAICS codes (up to 20), led by codes with past performance.
- [ ] Keywords buyers use (up to 25), with synonyms: custodial, janitorial, cleaning.
- [ ] Exclude keywords for look-alike work you never do (see **negative keywords**).
- [ ] Service states, nationwide or remote.
- [ ] Only certifications you hold today.
- [ ] A realistic contract size range for your bonding, staff and cash flow.
- [ ] If the Vendor workspace is on, a current vendor listing: Fit reads it.

SECTION 4.6

Setting up RFP alerts that catch the right opportunities

An alert is a saved search that sends RFPs **first seen since its last run** that match its filters. Each RFP is sent once per alert, and no email goes out when nothing matches, so a well-built alert never becomes noise. The fastest way to make one is to build a search you like and click **Save as alert**; the editor opens with your filters filled in (the issuer filter isn't carried into alerts yet, so use keywords to watch a specific buyer).

TABLE **Alert settings that matter**

Setting	Options	How to choose
How often	Instant (at most hourly), Daily (7:00 AM ET), Weekly (Monday, 7:00 AM ET)	Daily for most; instant for short-fuse RFQs
Channels	Always in the app; email on or off	Keep email on for core alerts
Minimum RFP Detector Score	Any, 50+, 60+, 70+, 80+	50+ trims broad alerts

Setting	Options	How to choose
Minimum Fit	Off, 50+, 60+, 75+ (needs a matching profile)	60+ is the default and a good start
NAICS	Codes or prefixes (5415 matches 541511)	Prefixes catch related codes

Treat alerts as a small portfolio where each one has a single job. Three to five is plenty for most small businesses; more than that and you start skimming instead of reading.

1. **Core:** your main service and states, daily, minimum Fit 60. This is the one you act on.
2. **Adjacent:** work you can do but rarely chase, weekly, minimum score 60.
3. **Early signal:** Sources sought, RFI and Presolicitation notices in your categories, weekly (see pre-solicitation signals).
4. **Set-aside:** your certification's set-aside with no category limit.
5. **Private and nonprofit:** Sector = Private and Non-profit (see finding private RFPs).

> **TIP** **Before you start: check “Matches right now”**
> The alert editor shows how many open RFPs match right now. Hundreds? Tighten before saving. None? Loosen one filter: alerts send only *new* RFPs, so an alert that matches nothing today may stay silent for weeks. Signed-in organizations also get **Suggested alerts** from their matching profile; rename and tune them to fit your portfolio.

SECTION 4.7

Saved RFPs, the pipeline and deadline reminders

The moment something looks promising, click **Save**. It lands in your organization's **Saved** list and on the **pipeline** board, where it moves through **Saved, Qualifying, Preparing, Submitted** and finally **Won, Lost** or **No bid**.

From alert to decision

01 **Alert**
New matches arrive in the app and by email

02 **Saved**
Worth a closer look

03 **Qualifying**
Documents read; bid/no-bid underway

04 **Preparing**
Decision made; proposal in progress

05 **Submitted**
Waiting on the buyer

06 **Won, Lost or No bid**
Record the outcome and the reason

Each saved RFP has notes, a checklist you can assign to teammates, an internal due date and an activity log. Set the internal due date several days before the issuer's so reviews and signatures don't collide with submission day.

Saving switches on the safety nets. Deadline reminders reach the owner of each item in Saved, Qualifying or Preparing at 7:00 AM ET, by default three days and one day before the due date (seven days, two days and the day itself are optional). You're notified when a tracked RFP is amended. The **Calendar** shows due dates, question deadlines, pre-bid meetings and internal due dates, with a private feed you can subscribe to from Outlook or another calendar app. Notifications arrive in the app and by email; your mobile number is used only for verification codes.

SECTION 4.8

A daily 15-minute RFP routine

Short-window opportunities reward the business that looks every morning, and a fixed routine stops RFP hunting from filling the day. Block 15 minutes on your calendar, ideally after the 7:00 AM ET daily digests arrive.

The 15-minute routine

Minutes 0–3 — Clear your alert digests
Open the alert emails or **Notifications**. Scan titles, issuers, scores and Fit. Open anything plausibly yours in a new tab; ignore the rest without guilt.

Minutes 3–8 — Two-minute reads
Badges, due panel, key facts, score breakdown. Check mandatory pre-bid meetings and certification requirements first; they disqualify fastest.

Minutes 8–11 — Save or skip
Save the keepers, assign an owner and add a one-line note on why. An unread maybe costs more than a clear no.

Minutes 11–13 — Check what changed
Read amendment notices and reminders on RFPs you already track. A moved due date or new addendum can change your plan.

Minutes 13–15 — Move the pipeline
Move items forward or to **No bid** with a reason. Anything in Saved for more than a week needs a decision.

Weekly 30 minutes and monthly tune-up

CHECKLIST · 6 ITEMS

- [ ] Weekly: rerun your core search without “Posted in 24 h” to catch anything an alert missed.
- [ ] Weekly: review RFPs closing in the next two weeks and read the early-signal alert properly.
- [ ] Monthly: rebuild or retire any alert that sent nothing you opened.
- [ ] Monthly: add exclude keywords for irrelevant matches you keep seeing.
- [ ] Monthly: update the matching profile for new certifications, codes or states.
- [ ] Monthly: check target issuers for expiring contracts and recompetes.

SECTION 4.9

Common RFP search mistakes and how to avoid them

Habits that work vs habits that waste time

Do this

- Search the words buyers use, with synonyms joined by or
- Filter first by what disqualifies you: location, certification, size
- Use the score to order your reading and Fit to judge relevance
- Keep a handful of alerts, each with one job
- Save promising RFPs the same day so reminders start
- Confirm details on the official solicitation before you submit

Avoid this

- Searching only your own jargon or a single NAICS code
- Stacking every filter at once and concluding the market is empty
- Skipping RFPs that publish no dollar value
- Ignoring sources sought and RFI notices because they aren't bids yet
- Keeping maybes in your head instead of the pipeline
- Bidding because the score is high without reading the documents

Being findable helps too. Buyers who post on RFP Detector can search the free **vendor directory**, and organizations that click **I'm interested** on a buyer-posted RFP appear in the buyer's workspace. A complete listing (see **For vendors**) means some opportunities find you.

Frequently asked questions

Q How do I find RFPs for my business?

Define your market first (services, codes, keywords, locations, certifications, contract size), then search one index that covers federal, state, local, education, private and nonprofit buyers. On RFP Detector, build a search at **Search**, filter by what disqualifies you, sort by score or closing date, and save it as an alert so new matches arrive every morning.

Q What is the RFP Detector Score?

A 0–100 rating of how attractive and workable an RFP is for a typical qualified bidder today. Every RFP starts at 50 and six weighted factors (value, competition and access, issuer and market, time and stage, clarity and completeness, freshness) move it up or down. It is the same for everyone, can't be bought or edited, and doesn't predict whether you'll win. See the **methodology**.

Q What is the difference between the score and Fit?

The score rates the opportunity and is public. Fit rates how relevant it is to your organization, using your NAICS codes, keywords, certifications, service area and contract size range. Fit is private to signed-in members of your organization and never changes the public score.

Q How often should I check for new RFPs?

Daily, briefly. A 15-minute routine after the 7:00 AM ET daily digests catches short-window RFQs and leaves time to prepare bigger bids. Add a 30-minute weekly review and a monthly alert tune-up.

Q Can I find private and nonprofit RFPs, not just government bids?

Yes. Use the Sector filter (Private, Non-profit) or the **private companies** and **nonprofits** hubs, and read **how private-sector RFPs differ** for how those buyers work.

Q Do I need an account to search RFPs?

No. Search, RFP pages, scores and the PDF report are free without an account. A free account lets you save RFPs, use the pipeline, set alerts, see Fit and open the official solicitation link from the RFP page. **Sign up here**.

→ KEEP GOING

Building your contract search strategy
Codes, keywords and filters before you search
rfpdetector.com/guides/how-to-find-government-contracts/building-your-contract-search-strategy

Procurement forecasts and early intelligence
Spot opportunities before the RFP is out
rfpdetector.com/guides/how-to-find-government-contracts/procurement-forecasts-and-early-intelligence

Bid/no-bid decision framework
Decide what to pursue after you find it
rfpdetector.com/guides/how-to-find-government-contracts/bid-no-bid-decision-framework

Tutorial: searching RFPs and reading scores
Every screen, step by step
rfpdetector.com/guides/how-to-use-rfp-detector/searching-rfps-and-reading-scores

Tutorial: tracking bids, the pipeline and alerts
rfpdetector.com/guides/how-to-use-rfp-detector/tracking-bids-pipeline-and-alerts

How the RFP Detector Score works
rfpdetector.com/methodology/score

Search open RFPs now
rfpdetector.com/search

END OF CHAPTER 4

Next: 05 Finding Private-Sector and Nonprofit RFPs

05

CHAPTER 5

Finding Private-Sector and Nonprofit RFPs

Corporations, health systems, universities, foundations and property managers buy a huge range of services through RFPs, but most don't have to advertise them. Here is who issues private and nonprofit RFPs, how their process differs from government bidding, and how to get invited.

15 min read · 11 sections · Updated November 13, 2026

Read this chapter online

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Private and nonprofit buyers aren't required to advertise most purchases, so **relationships and bidder lists** matter more than in government work.
- Expect **supplier onboarding** before you can bid: tax forms, insurance certificates, security questionnaires, sometimes prequalification.
- Nonprofits and universities spending **federal award money** must follow federal procurement standards, which makes their larger purchases more open and predictable.
- Private RFPs move faster, often require an **NDA**, and expect negotiation; read the contract terms as closely as the scope.
- RFP Detector covers private and nonprofit RFPs too: filter by sector, watch buyer-posted RFPs and keep a vendor listing buyers can find.

IN THIS CHAPTER

5.1 How private-sector RFPs differ from government bids 62
5.2 Who issues private and nonprofit RFPs 63
5.3 Corporate procurement and supplier diversity programs 64
5.4 Supplier portals, onboarding and prequalification 65
5.5 Selling to hospitals and health systems 66
5.6 Universities and colleges 66
5.7 Foundations and nonprofits that issue RFPs 67
5.8 Real estate, property managers, co-ops and condos 68
5.9 Responding to private RFPs: NDAs, speed and negotiation 68
5.10 How to get on private and nonprofit bidder lists 69
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Government is the biggest buyer, but it isn't the only one that runs formal bids. Private-sector and nonprofit RFPs come from corporations, hospitals and health systems, universities, foundations, nonprofits and property managers, and together they buy almost everything a small business sells. The catch: most of them aren't required to advertise. This chapter explains who issues these RFPs, how the rules differ from public bidding, and the practical steps that get you onto the lists of companies and institutions that only invite vendors they know.

SECTION 5.1

How private-sector RFPs differ from government bids

A government RFP is governed by procurement law: public notice above set thresholds, published evaluation criteria, standard contract terms and a formal protest process. A private RFP is governed by the company's own policy and whatever it chooses to write in the document. Nonprofits sit in between: they follow internal policies, and when they spend government or federal award money they must also follow the funder's procurement rules.

TABLE **Government, private and nonprofit RFPs side by side**

Question	Government	Private company	Nonprofit or university
Must it advertise?	Yes, above set dollar thresholds	No; invitation-only is common	Depends on funding; federal award money brings public-notice rules for larger buys
Who can bid	Any responsible, registered vendor (unless set aside)	Whoever the buyer invites or approves	Often open, sometimes invite-only
Evaluation criteria	Published in the solicitation	May be partly or fully undisclosed	Usually published for formal RFPs
Timeline	Weeks to months, fixed by rules	Often days to a few weeks	Varies; board approval can add time
Negotiation	Limited and structured	Normal and expected	Common
If you lose	Debriefs and protest rights exist	No formal protest; ask for feedback	Internal appeal at most
Contract	Standard government terms	The buyer's master agreement, negotiable	The buyer's agreement plus funder clauses
Confidentiality	Proposals may become public records	NDA often required before documents	Varies

> ☆ PRO TIP **Pro tip: private buyers reward preparation, not paperwork**
>
> In a public bid, a compliant proposal from a stranger can win. In a private RFP, the buyer usually already knows two or three of the bidders. Your goal is to be one of the names they know *before* the RFP is written.

SECTION 5.2

Who issues private and nonprofit RFPs

TABLE **Buyer types, what they buy and the usual way in**

Buyer	Typical RFPs	Usual way in
Corporations	Facilities, IT, marketing, staffing, consulting, logistics, construction	Supplier portal, supplier diversity office, category managers
Hospitals and health systems	Environmental services, food, security, construction, IT, consulting	Supply chain department, vendor credentialing, group purchasing contracts
Universities and colleges	Construction, dining, IT, research services, events, printing	Purchasing office bidder registration, department buyers
Foundations and nonprofits	Evaluation, strategy, communications, IT, audit, program delivery	Program staff, published RFPs, referrals
Property managers, co-ops and condos	Cleaning, security, elevators, boilers, roofing, facade work	Managing agents, boards, vendor compliance onboarding
Developers and general contractors	Trade subcontracts on private projects	Prequalification and bid invitations by trade

SECTION 5.3

Corporate procurement and supplier diversity programs

Large companies buy through **category managers**, procurement specialists who own a spend area such as facilities or marketing. When a contract is up for renewal or a new need appears, the category manager runs a **sourcing event**: a request for information to see who is out there, then an RFP or RFQ to a short list, then negotiation and award.

A typical corporate sourcing event

01 **Need or renewal**
Category manager plans the event

↓

02 **RFI**
Market scan; builds the invite list

↓

03 **RFP or RFQ**
Sent to a short list of approved suppliers

↓

04 **Presentations**
Two or three finalists present

↓

05 **Negotiation**
Best and final offer, contract redlines

↓

06 **Award and onboarding**
Master agreement and statement of work

Supplier diversity programs are the most reliable door into a large company for a small, minority-owned, women-owned, veteran-owned or disability-owned business. Their staff connect diverse suppliers with buyers, run matchmaking events and track two kinds of spend: **Tier 1** (the company buys from you directly) and **Tier 2** (you work as a subcontractor to one of the company's prime suppliers, who reports that spend back to the company).

Most programs ask for a recognized certification. Corporations usually accept national third-party certifications for minority-owned and women-owned businesses, and many also recognize government certifications; check each program's list. See **which certifications to pursue** before you apply.

> **TIP** **Tier 2 is the fastest start**
>
> Becoming a direct supplier to a large company can take many months. Its facilities, IT and construction primes often need diverse subcontractors sooner, to meet the diversity commitments in their own contracts. Ask supplier diversity staff which primes have Tier 2 goals in your category, then approach those primes; **how to approach a prime contractor** explains how.

SECTION 5.4

Supplier portals, onboarding and prequalification

Before a large organization invites you to bid, it usually wants you registered in its **supplier portal**, the online system where it keeps approved vendors. Registering is free and rarely guarantees an invitation, but not registering usually guarantees you won't get one. In construction and facilities, many owners add a formal **prequalification** step that checks your safety record, financial capacity and experience before you can see bid documents.

Supplier onboarding packet: have these ready — CHECKLIST · 9 ITEMS

- [ ] Signed W-9 and legal entity details that match your tax records exactly
- [ ] Certificate of insurance showing your coverage and limits; expect to name the buyer as additional insured
- [ ] Banking details for electronic payment, on letterhead or a bank letter
- [ ] Diversity certificates, with expiration dates
- [ ] Capability statement and three references with contact details
- [ ] Safety record for field work: written safety program, and your experience modification rate if you are a contractor
- [ ] Security answers for IT and data work: policies, incident response, and any independent audit report you hold
- [ ] Financial statements or a bank reference for larger contracts

- [ ] Licenses and permits required in the buyer's state or city

✕ COMMON MISTAKE **Common mistake: registering and waiting**

A portal profile is a filing cabinet, not a sales channel. Buyers search it when they already have a need and a few names in mind. Pair every registration with a short introduction to the category manager or supplier diversity contact, and update your profile when you add capabilities or certifications. Insurance details are covered in certificates of insurance and additional insured status.

SECTION 5.5

Selling to hospitals and health systems

Hospitals buy in two very different ways. For medical and many routine supplies, much of the buying runs through **group purchasing organizations (GPOs)**, which negotiate contracts that member hospitals buy against; a clinical product usually also needs approval from the hospital's **value analysis committee** of clinicians and supply chain staff. For services and projects such as environmental services, food, security, construction, IT and consulting, hospitals more often run their own RFPs.

- **Vendor credentialing:** anyone who enters clinical areas typically registers with the hospital's credentialing process, with proof of immunizations, background checks and training. Budget time for it.
- **Patient data:** if your work touches protected health information, expect to sign a HIPAA business associate agreement and answer a security questionnaire.
- **Public hospitals:** city, county and state hospital systems usually follow public procurement rules, so their bids look and behave like government RFPs.
- **Way in:** the supply chain or procurement department, the supplier diversity office if there is one, and facilities or department heads for service needs.

SECTION 5.6

Universities and colleges

Public universities and community colleges generally follow state or local public procurement rules, so their formal bids resemble agency RFPs and appear under the Education sector. Private universities set their own purchasing policies, but there is a rule that opens many of their larger purchases: **when a university or nonprofit spends federal award money, it must follow the federal procurement standards** for grant recipients.

TABLE **Federal procurement standards for grant recipients (as of 2026; recipients may set lower thresholds)**

Purchase size	Method	What it means for you
Up to the micro-purchase threshold (generally $15,000; recipients can self-certify up to $50,000)	Micro-purchase	Can be bought without quotes if the price is reasonable; relationships decide
Above micro-purchase, up to the simplified acquisition threshold ($350,000 for awards made on or after October 1, 2025)	Informal small purchase	Price or rate quotes from an adequate number of qualified sources; get on the quote list
Above the simplified acquisition threshold	Formal: sealed bids or proposals	Public notice, evaluation factors stated in advance, proposals from multiple qualified sources

The same rules tell recipients to consider small businesses, minority-owned businesses, women's business enterprises and veteran-owned businesses, including by **placing them on solicitation lists**. That gives you a legitimate reason to ask a university purchasing office or a grant-funded nonprofit to add you to its list for your category. Thresholds change with inflation adjustments, so confirm current figures with the buyer.

SECTION 5.7

Foundations and nonprofits that issue RFPs

Foundations hire consultants for program evaluation, strategy, communications, technology, research and grantee capacity building. Larger nonprofits issue RFPs for audits, IT managed services, fundraising software, facilities, and program delivery they subcontract under government contracts. Their RFPs tend to be short, mission-driven and judged as much on understanding and approach as on price.

WORKED EXAMPLE

Strong vs weak: opening a response to a foundation evaluation RFP

✓ STRONG

> **Strong:** “Your RFP asks whether the youth employment pilot changed participants' earnings after one year, and whether the model can work in two more boroughs. We propose a mixed-methods evaluation that answers both questions by your board's June meeting, using the program data you already collect plus 30 participant interviews.”
>
> **Weak:** “We are a full-service consulting firm with 15 years of experience serving clients across many sectors.” The strong version restates the funder's actual questions and decision date; the weak one could be sent to anyone.

> **NOTE** **Read the funding behind a nonprofit RFP**
> If a nonprofit is buying with government or federal award money, the RFP will usually say so and include required clauses (insurance, record keeping, sometimes wage rules). Those clauses flow down to you. If it is buying with unrestricted or foundation money, the process is closer to a private company's.

SECTION 5.8

Real estate, property managers, co-ops and condos

Property owners and their managing agents buy cleaning, security, elevator and boiler service, roofing, waterproofing, landscaping and snow removal on recurring contracts. In New York City, co-op and condo boards approve major contracts, often after the managing agent collects several competing bids. Local rules create predictable demand: for example, the city's facade inspection program requires periodic inspections of buildings taller than six stories, so facade engineers and restoration contractors bid on cycles.

- **Managing agents** run vendor lists across many buildings. One good relationship can open dozens of properties.
- **Vendor compliance** is strict: current insurance certificates naming the owner and agent as additional insured, licenses and a W-9 before any work.
- **Developers and general contractors** issue bid invitations by trade on private projects, usually after prequalification.
- **Timing:** ask when each building sets its annual budget; service contracts are usually reviewed then.

SECTION 5.9

Responding to private RFPs: NDAs, speed and negotiation

Private RFP habits that win vs habits that lose

Do this

- ✓ Sign the NDA quickly, after checking its term and what counts as confidential
- ✓ Ask for a clarification call; private buyers usually allow one
- ✓ Mirror the buyer's language and business goals, not procurement jargon
- ✓ Read the master agreement early: liability, indemnity, insurance, payment terms
- ✓ Price with room to negotiate, and know your walk-away number
- ✓ Ask for feedback whether you win or lose

Avoid this

- ✗ Treating a 10-day private deadline like a 30-day public one
- ✗ Submitting a government-style compliance binder to a busy executive
- ✗ Assuming the lowest price wins
- ✗ Discovering net-90 payment terms after you've signed
- ✗ Sharing confidential RFP details with partners not covered by the NDA
- ✗ Going silent after a loss

Payment terms deserve special attention. Government payment timing is often set by prompt-payment rules; private payment timing is whatever the contract says, and large companies may ask for 60 days or longer. Factor that into your cash flow before you bid. For writing the response itself, see **how to shred an RFP** and **price to win**.

SECTION 5.10

How to get on private and nonprofit bidder lists

Six steps to get invited

1. **Pick 20 to 30 target organizations**
   Choose buyers that need what you sell, near where you work, at a size you can serve. Browse **issuers** by sector to see which companies, schools and nonprofits already publish RFPs on RFP Detector.
2. **Find the right door**
   For each, identify the supplier diversity office, the purchasing office, or the department head who owns the budget. The company's supplier or vendor information page usually names the process.
3. **Register and onboard**
   Complete the supplier portal profile or bidder registration with your onboarding packet ready, so you're approved before a need appears.

4 **Introduce yourself in writing**

Send a short, specific email (template below) with your capability statement. Ask to be added to the invitation list for your category.

> **Tip:** Tailor your capability statement with the advice in **tailoring and sending a capability statement**.

5 **Show up where buyers are**

Matchmaking events, supplier diversity fairs, industry association meetings and local business councils put you in front of buyers without a sales pitch.

6 **Follow up with value, quarterly**

Share a relevant result, a new certification or an insight about their sector. Persistence without value reads as noise.

TEMPLATE

Bidder list introduction email

Copy-ready online

A short first-contact email to a purchasing, supplier diversity or department contact at a company, institution or nonprofit.

WHEN TO USE — After you've registered in the buyer's supplier portal (if it has one) and before any RFP is open. Don't send it to a contact named in an active solicitation; use the solicitation's own question process instead.

Subject: **[YOUR COMPANY]** - **[SERVICE CATEGORY]** supplier for **[BUYER NAME]**

Dear **[CONTACT NAME]**,

I lead **[YOUR COMPANY]**, a **[CERTIFICATION, IF ANY]** **[SERVICE CATEGORY]** firm based in **[CITY, STATE]**. We have registered as a supplier with **[BUYER NAME]** (**[SUPPLIER ID OR "registration completed DATE"]**).

We help organizations like yours **[SPECIFIC OUTCOME, e.g. keep 24/7 facilities clean and inspection-ready]**. Recent work includes:
- **[CLIENT OR SECTOR]**: **[RESULT WITH A NUMBER]**
- **[CLIENT OR SECTOR]**: **[RESULT WITH A NUMBER]**

I would be grateful if you could add us to your invitation list for **[SERVICE CATEGORY]** RFPs and quotes, or point me to the colleague who manages that category. Our one-page capability statement is attached.

If a 15-minute call would help you judge fit, I am available **[TWO TIME OPTIONS]**.

Thank you for your time,
[YOUR NAME]
[TITLE], [YOUR COMPANY]
[PHONE] | [EMAIL]

FIELDS TO FILL IN · 5

[CERTIFICATION, IF ANY]	Only certifications you hold today, e.g. certified women-owned. Leave out if none.
[SUPPLIER ID OR "registration completed DATE"]	Proves you've done the portal step. Delete the sentence if the buyer has no portal.
[SPECIFIC OUTCOME]	The business result the buyer cares about, in their words, not your service list.
[RESULT WITH A NUMBER]	A measurable outcome from a similar client, e.g. passed 12 of 12 health inspections.
[TWO TIME OPTIONS]	Two specific windows make it easy to say yes.

SECTION 5.11

Finding private and nonprofit RFPs on RFP Detector

RFP Detector covers private companies and nonprofits alongside government, so you don't need a separate routine. In Search, set **Sector** to Private and Non-profit, or start from the private companies and nonprofits hubs. Save the search as an alert so new private RFPs reach you with your government matches.

Watch the **Posted on RFP Detector** listing type too. Companies, nonprofits, schools and agencies can post RFPs free, and on those RFPs you can click **I'm interested** to show the buyer your organization, with an optional note the buyer can answer in your inbox. Saving a buyer-posted RFP also lets the buyer see your organization saved it. Finally, publish a free vendor listing: buyers search the vendor directory by service, NAICS code, state, sectors served and certifications. For the full search strategy, see Finding RFPs with RFP Detector.

Frequently asked questions

Q **Where can I find private-sector RFPs?**

Private companies aren't required to advertise, so you need two approaches. Search an index that includes private and nonprofit RFPs (on RFP Detector, filter by the Private and Non-profit sectors and save the search as an alert), and build direct relationships so you're invited to RFPs that are never published: register in target companies' supplier portals and contact their supplier diversity or purchasing staff.

Q Do nonprofits have to put contracts out to bid?

It depends on the money. Nonprofits set their own purchasing policies, but when they spend federal award money they must follow federal procurement standards: informal quotes for small purchases and formal sealed bids or proposals with public notice above the simplified acquisition threshold ($350,000 for awards made on or after October 1, 2025, unless the nonprofit sets a lower one). State and city funders often add their own rules.

Q How do I get on a company's bidders list?

Register in the company's supplier portal or vendor program, then send a short introduction to the category manager or supplier diversity contact asking to be added to the invitation list for your category, with your capability statement attached. Attend their matchmaking events and follow up quarterly with something useful. Certifications help with supplier diversity programs.

Q What is a supplier diversity program?

A corporate or institutional program that helps small, minority-owned, women-owned, veteran-owned and other diverse businesses compete for contracts. Staff connect suppliers with buyers and track Tier 1 spend (direct purchases) and Tier 2 spend (purchases through prime suppliers' subcontractors). Most programs ask for a recognized certification.

Q Are private RFPs easier to win than government RFPs?

Not easier, different. There is less paperwork and a faster decision, but the field is usually smaller and the buyer often knows some bidders already. Evaluation may weigh relationships, references and negotiation more heavily, and there is no formal protest process if you lose.

Q Should I sign an NDA to see an RFP?

Usually yes; it is standard in private RFPs. Read it first: check how long it lasts, what counts as confidential, whether it is mutual, and whether you may share documents with subcontractors and advisors. This is general information, not legal advice; have an attorney review anything unusual.

→ KEEP GOING

Finding RFPs with RFP Detector
Search, scores and alerts
rfpdetector.com/guides/how-to-find-government-contracts/finding-rfps-with-rfp-detector

Subcontracting and teaming opportunities
Tier 2 and prime partnerships
rfpdetector.com/guides/how-to-find-government-contracts/subcontracting-and-teaming-opportunities

Small business and diversity certifications
rfpdetector.com/guides/how-to-register-for-government-contracts/small-business-and-diversity-certifications

Capability statement templates
rfpdetector.com/guides/proposal-templates/capability-statement-templates

Open RFPs from private companies
rfpdetector.com/rfps/sector/private-companies

Open RFPs from nonprofits
rfpdetector.com/rfps/sector/nonprofits

Publish a free vendor listing
rfpdetector.com/for-vendors

END OF CHAPTER 5

Next: 06 Procurement Forecasts and Early Intelligence

06

CHAPTER 6

Procurement Forecasts and Early Intelligence

The best time to find a government contract is months before the RFP is published. Learn to read agency procurement forecasts and budget calendars, act on pre-solicitation signals, track expiring contracts and run a 12-month capture calendar, all within the rules on contacting buyers.

16 min read · 7 sections · Updated November 13, 2026

Read this chapter online

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- By the time an RFP is published, the requirement is largely set. Bidders who engage months earlier can help shape it.
- Federal agencies publish **procurement forecasts**, and New York City publishes annual **contracting plans** for each agency; read them every year.
- Budget calendars drive timing: the federal year starts **October 1**, New York State **April 1**, and New York City, New Jersey and Connecticut **July 1**.
- **RFIs, sources sought notices and industry days** are your chance to shape a requirement; answer them.
- Use contractor profiles to find **incumbents and contract end dates**, then talk to buyers early, before rules on contact during a procurement kick in.

IN THIS CHAPTER

6.1 Why early intelligence wins government contracts 75

6.2 How to use agency procurement forecasts 77

6.3 Budget cycles and fiscal year calendars by government 78

6.4 Pre-solicitation signals: RFIs, sources sought, industry days and pre-bid conferences 79

6.5 Expiring contracts and recompetes: finding incumbents and end dates 81

6.6 Building relationships within procurement rules 82

6.7 A 12-month capture calendar 83

Most small businesses meet an opportunity on the day the RFP is published, with 30 days or less to respond. Their best-prepared competitors often met it months earlier in a **procurement forecast**, answered the RFI that shaped it, attended the industry day and lined up teammates. This chapter shows you how to build that early intelligence yourself: where forecasts and budget calendars come from, which pre-solicitation signals to act on, how to find expiring contracts and incumbents, and how to build relationships without breaking procurement rules.

SECTION 6.1

Why early intelligence wins government contracts

A solicitation is the *end* of a long planning process. Before it is released, the agency has defined its need, researched the market, estimated a budget, chosen a contract type and decided whether to restrict competition to small businesses. Vendors who engage during that process can influence all of it, legitimately, by answering market research and asking good questions. Vendors who arrive at release can only respond to what is already written.

The procurement lifecycle, and where you can engage

01 **Budget**
Money is requested and appropriated

↓

02 **Forecast and plan**
Expected buys are published

↓

03 **Market research**
RFIs and sources sought notices

↓

04 **Pre-solicitation**
Notices, industry days, draft RFPs

↓

05 **Solicitation**
Formal RFP; contact is restricted

↓

06 **Award and performance**
The clock to the recompete starts

PRO TIP **Pro tip: count backward from the contract end date**

Every service contract ends. If you know an incumbent's contract ends in 14 months, you know roughly when the forecast entry, the RFI and the RFP will appear. That turns a surprise into a schedule.

SECTION 6.2

How to use agency procurement forecasts

Under the Small Business Act, federal agencies must publish **forecasts of expected contract opportunities**, including the ones small businesses can perform. Many post them through their small business office, often called the Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business Utilization (OSDBU), update them around the start of the fiscal year in October and refresh them during the year. Many forecasts focus on purchases above the simplified acquisition threshold, which rose to $350,000 on October 1, 2025.

New York City has its own version. The City Charter requires an annual **contracting plan and schedule** for each agency, listing anticipated contracting actions for the coming fiscal year, with the final plan due by September 30. It covers the type of services, the funding, the number of contracts and the month and year of the next planned competitive solicitation. City agencies also publish annual procurement plans listing upcoming competitive procurements with their term, method and expected quarter. New York State, New Jersey, Connecticut and local governments vary: some agencies publish upcoming procurements, others don't, and their **capital plans** (New Jersey agencies, for example, prepare seven-year capital improvement plans) reveal construction and equipment needs years ahead.

TABLE **How to read a forecast entry**

Field	What it tells you	What to do
Description and NAICS	What is being bought and how it is coded	Match it to your capabilities and add the code to your searches
Estimated value range	Size of the opportunity	Check bonding, staffing and past performance at that scale
Anticipated solicitation quarter	When the RFP should appear	Put it on your capture calendar, 6 to 12 months earlier
Acquisition strategy or set-aside	Who will be allowed to bid	Confirm eligibility; consider teaming if you don't qualify
Incumbent or current contract	Whether this is a recompete	Research the incumbent's contract history and end date
Point of contact	Who can answer questions now	Introduce yourself while contact is still unrestricted

WORKED EXAMPLE

Worked example: turning a forecast entry into a plan (illustrative)

> **The entry:** custodial services for a federal facility in New York, NAICS 561720, estimated $2M to $5M, solicitation expected in the third quarter of the fiscal year, small business set-aside, recompete of an existing contract.
>
> **The plan:** add a weekly RFP Detector alert for janitorial or custodial notices from that agency, including Sources sought and Presolicitation types; look up the agency's **issuer page** for recent awards; email the small business specialist with a one-page capability statement; and price a staffing model now, so the 30-day response window is spent writing, not researching.

⚠ WARNING **Forecasts are plans, not promises**

Forecast entries depend on funding and can slip, change scope or disappear. Treat each one as a lead to verify, not a commitment, and confirm the current status with the agency before you invest heavily.

SECTION 6.3

Budget cycles and fiscal year calendars by government

Money moves on a fiscal calendar, and procurement follows the money. Knowing when each government's year starts tells you when new programs get funded, when plans are published and when buyers rush to spend before funds expire. For how a budget becomes a purchase order, see **how government spending flows**.

TABLE **Fiscal years and budget milestones (as of 2026; confirm dates with each government)**

Government	Fiscal year	Budget milestones	What it means for you
Federal	Oct 1 – Sep 30	President's request early in the calendar year; Congress appropriates, often late, under continuing resolutions	Continuing resolutions usually limit new programs; July to September is the busiest buying season, and September is consistently the peak month
New York State	Apr 1 – Mar 31	Governor's executive budget usually in January; enacted budget due April 1	Newly funded programs turn into procurements through spring and summer

Government	Fiscal year	Budget milestones	What it means for you
New York City	Jul 1 – Jun 30	Preliminary budget in winter, executive budget in spring, adoption before July 1	Agency contracting plans for the year are final by September 30
New Jersey	Jul 1 – Jun 30	Governor's budget message by the fourth Tuesday in February; signed before July 1	Spring hearings signal which programs grow or shrink
Connecticut	Jul 1 – Jun 30	Biennial budget adopted in odd-numbered years, adjusted in even years	Two-year budgets make second-year spending more predictable
Local governments and schools	Varies	Many New York and New Jersey counties and towns use the calendar year; school districts and Connecticut towns generally use July 1	Check each issuer's budget calendar and capital plan

The federal fourth quarter deserves a note. Many appropriations expire if they aren't obligated by September 30, so contracting offices push to award before year-end. That rush favors vendors who are already registered, already known to the buyer and ready to respond to a short RFQ, which is another reason to do the early work. Registration steps are covered in **how to register step by step**.

SECTION 6.4

Pre-solicitation signals: RFIs, sources sought, industry days and pre-bid conferences

Federal acquisition rules encourage exchanges between agencies and industry from the earliest identification of a requirement until proposals are received, as long as they respect procurement integrity. Federal procurement policy officials have repeatedly published “myth-busting” guidance urging agencies to talk to industry before a solicitation. Most state and local buyers use the same tools. These are the signals to watch for (see **RFI and sources sought notices** for how they compare with bid documents):

Glossary

Request for information (RFI)	Market research asking industry about capabilities, approaches or prices. Not a bid, but your answer can shape the requirement.

Sources sought notice	Market research that asks who can do the work, often to decide whether to set it aside for small businesses. In federal buying, if the contracting officer reasonably expects offers from at least two responsible small businesses at fair market prices, the work is generally set aside: your response can make that happen.
Presolicitation notice	Advance notice that a solicitation is coming. For many federal acquisitions it is posted at least 15 days before the solicitation is issued.
Draft RFP	A preview of the solicitation released for comment. Read it like the real thing and send questions about anything unclear or restrictive.
Industry day	A briefing where the agency explains an upcoming requirement, sometimes with one-on-one meetings. Attendance lists also reveal likely teammates and competitors.
Pre-bid or pre-proposal conference	A meeting after the solicitation is issued, often with a site visit. Some are mandatory; skipping one can disqualify you.
Special notice	A catch-all for announcements such as outreach events, intent notices and program updates.

Answer every sources sought notice and RFI that fits your work; the checklist in **what a strong sources sought response includes** covers the content. Industry days take more preparation.

How to get the most from an industry day

1. **Register early and read everything**
   Read the announcement, any draft RFP or statement of work, and the agency's forecast entry. Note what is unclear, restrictive or new compared with the current contract.
2. **Prepare two or three sharp questions**
   Ask about scope, evaluation, contract type or small business participation. Good questions asked on the record often shape the final RFP.
3. **Book a one-on-one if offered**
   Bring a one-page capability statement tailored to the requirement and a short summary of similar work. Listen more than you pitch.
4. **Work the room for teammates**
   Note who attends. Attendee lists, when the agency publishes them, show likely primes, partners and competitors.

5

Follow up within the rules

Send any written comments the agency invites by its deadline, log what you learned, and start teaming conversations while there is still time.

> **Tip:** Reuse what you hear: the agency's own words about its problems become your win themes later.

On RFP Detector, use the **Notice type** filter to select Sources sought, RFI, Presolicitation and Special notice, and save that search as a weekly alert. RFPs marked **Upcoming** mean the solicitation isn't out yet. Note that the score's Time & stage factor discounts notices that are not yet biddable, so early signals often score lower than the eventual RFP; don't skip them for that reason. Federal timing rules are being restated in the 2025–2026 overhaul of the federal acquisition regulations, so check current minimums.

SECTION 6.5

Expiring contracts and recompetes: finding incumbents and end dates

A **recompete** is a new competition for work that is already being done under a contract that is ending. Recompetes are the most predictable opportunities in government: the need is proven, the budget exists and the end date is on record. Federal service contracts commonly run a base year plus option years, generally capped at five years in total unless agency rules allow longer, so a contract's start date tells you roughly when to expect its successor. State and city contracts vary more, often with renewal options, so check each contract's term.

RFP Detector's **contractor profiles** show the contracts organizations hold with New York State agencies: for each one, the agency, contract type, contract number, term, start and end dates, amount and how much has been spent, plus whether it is active. Each profile summarizes contracts on record, contracts active today, the latest end date and the agencies served, with a **Contractor Score**. Browse contractors by agency to see who holds that agency's work. On **issuer pages**, the recently closed and awarded RFPs from the last 12 months show what a buyer just bought, and, where available, federal agency pages add award history by NAICS code for the last three fiscal years. The tutorial section **how to research an incumbent before you bid** walks through these screens.

Recompete research checklist — CHECKLIST · 8 ITEMS

- [ ] Incumbent identified, with contract number, start date and end date
- [ ] Contract term and any remaining renewal or option periods understood
- [ ] Amount versus spent compared: ask whether an extension, amendment or early rebid is likely

- [ ] The previous solicitation found (search **Closed** RFPs for the issuer) to see scope and evaluation criteria
- [ ] Incumbent's other contracts with the same agency reviewed: one contract or a deep relationship?
- [ ] Agency's small business office or program contact introduced to you before the solicitation
- [ ] Your differentiator against the incumbent written in one sentence
- [ ] Teaming options considered, including the incumbent's subcontractors (see **how to find prime contractors**)

✕ COMMON MISTAKE **Common mistake: assuming the incumbent always wins**

Incumbents have an advantage, not a guarantee. Agencies rebid because they want options, and an incumbent with performance problems or a stale approach is beatable. Your job is to learn, legitimately and early, what the buyer wants to improve, then decide at the right **bid/no-bid gate** whether you can offer it.

SECTION 6.6

Building relationships within procurement rules

The window for conversation is widest before a solicitation exists. Once it is issued, most governments funnel all communication through a named contact.

In New York State, the procurement lobbying law (State Finance Law sections 139-j and 139-k) sets a **restricted period** that runs from the earliest written notice or solicitation of a procurement through final contract award and approval. During it, bidders may contact only the staff the agency designates; contacts are recorded, and impermissible contacts can lead to a finding that a bidder is not responsible and, for repeat violations, debarment. Submitting written questions through the designated process and attending official pre-bid conferences are generally allowed.

Federal procurement integrity rules, and the contact provisions in New York City, New Jersey and Connecticut solicitations, follow the same pattern: use the named contact, in writing, once a procurement is live.

Relationship building: do and don't

Do

- Meet small business specialists and attend agency outreach events
- Answer RFIs and sources sought notices with substance
- Attend industry days and pre-bid conferences, and ask questions on the record
- Send a capability statement before any solicitation is issued
- Deliver excellent work on current contracts; references are relationships
- Ask for a debrief after every award decision

Don't

- Call program staff about an open solicitation instead of the designated contact
- Offer gifts, meals or favors to public employees
- Ask for inside information on budgets or competitors' prices
- Ask someone else to make contact on your behalf during a restricted period
- Assume a friendly conversation before release entitles you to anything
- Ignore the contact rules printed in the solicitation

> **NOTE** **General information, not legal advice**
> Contact and lobbying rules differ by government, change over time and carry real penalties. Read the contact section of every solicitation, and confirm anything unclear with the procurement officer or a qualified advisor before you act.

SECTION 6.7

A 12-month capture calendar

Capture is the work of positioning to win a specific opportunity before the RFP is released. Use this calendar for any opportunity you spot early, counting backward from the expected release date. Deeper capture planning is covered in **what is capture planning?** and the **capture plan outline**.

Months before the expected RFP release

12 months — **Identify and log**
Spot it in a forecast, a contracting plan or a contract end date. Log it with the template below and set an alert for related notices.

11 months — **Research the history**
Find the incumbent, the previous solicitation and the buyer's recent awards. Draft a rough fit assessment.

10 months — **Introduce yourself**
Meet the small business office or program contact; send your capability statement while contact is unrestricted.

9 months — **Close your gaps**
Registrations, certifications, insurance and bonding capacity sorted; decide whether you need teammates.

8 to 6 months — **Shape the requirement**
Answer the RFI or sources sought notice, attend the industry day and comment on any draft RFP.

5 to 3 months — **Build the solution**
Sign teaming agreements, design your approach and staffing, build the pricing model and outline the proposal.

Release — **Confirm and respond**
Run a formal bid/no-bid, build the compliance matrix, attend the pre-bid conference and use the full response window to write.

After award — **Debrief and reset**
Ask for a debrief, record lessons and note the new contract's end date: the next recompete starts now.

TEMPLATE
Opportunity intelligence log

Copy-ready online

One record per early opportunity, kept in a shared document or spreadsheet and reviewed monthly.

WHEN TO USE — The day you spot an opportunity before its RFP is released, from a forecast, a contracting plan, an RFI or a contract end date.

OPPORTUNITY INTELLIGENCE LOG

Opportunity: [SHORT NAME]
Issuer: [AGENCY / OFFICE]
Where we spotted it: [FORECAST / CONTRACTING PLAN / RFI / SOURCES SOUGHT / CONTRACT END DATE]
Date logged: [DATE] Owner: [NAME]

Scope summary: **[ONE OR TWO SENTENCES]**
Codes: **[NAICS / CATEGORY]**
Estimated value: **[RANGE]** Contract type: **[IF KNOWN]**
Expected RFP release: **[MONTH / QUARTER]** Expected award: **[MONTH / QUARTER]**
Set-aside or eligibility: **[SET-ASIDE / FULL AND OPEN / UNKNOWN]**

Incumbent: **[COMPANY OR "NEW REQUIREMENT"]**
Current contract no.: **[NUMBER]** Start: **[DATE]** End: **[DATE]**
Amount / spent to date: **[AMOUNT]** / **[SPENT]**

Permitted contacts made: **[DATE - NAME - TOPIC]**
Events: **[INDUSTRY DAY / PRE-BID DATES]**
RFI or sources sought response sent: **[DATE / NOT YET]**

Our fit (1-5): **[SCORE]** Why: **[REASON]**
Gaps to close: **[REGISTRATION / CERTIFICATION / PAST PERFORMANCE / TEAMING]**
Possible teammates: **[NAMES]**

Next action: **[ACTION]** Due: **[DATE]**
Decision gate: **[DATE OF NEXT BID / NO-BID REVIEW]**

FIELDS TO FILL IN · 6

[FORECAST / CONTRACTING PLAN / RFI / SOURCES SOUGHT / CONTRACT END DATE]	Where the signal came from, so you can judge how firm it is.
[COMPANY OR "NEW REQUIREMENT"]	The incumbent from the contractor profile or prior award; write NEW REQUIREMENT if there is none.
[AMOUNT] / [SPENT]	From the contract record. A big gap near the end date is a question to raise, not a conclusion.
[DATE - NAME - TOPIC]	Log every contact. If a restricted period begins, stop and use only the designated contact.
[SCORE]	Your quick 1-5 fit rating; revisit it at each decision gate.
[DATE OF NEXT BID / NO-BID REVIEW]	A fixed date to continue, pause or drop the pursuit.

Keep your log alongside RFP Detector: when the presolicitation notice or RFP appears, **Save** it to your pipeline so reminders and amendment notices take over (see **Finding RFPs with RFP Detector**).

Frequently asked questions

What is a procurement forecast?

A list an agency publishes of contracts it expects to award, usually with a description, industry code, estimated value, expected timing, intended set-aside and a contact. Federal agencies are required to publish forecasts of expected contract opportunities, typically through their small business office, and New York City publishes an annual contracting plan and schedule for each agency. Forecasts depend on funding and can change.

When does the government fiscal year start?

The federal fiscal year runs October 1 to September 30. New York State's runs April 1 to March 31. New York City, New Jersey and Connecticut run July 1 to June 30. Local governments vary: many New York and New Jersey counties and towns use the calendar year, while school districts and Connecticut towns generally use July 1.

What is an industry day, and should I attend?

An industry day is a briefing where an agency explains an upcoming requirement to potential bidders before the solicitation is issued, sometimes with one-on-one sessions. Attend if the work fits you: you hear the agency's priorities first-hand, can ask questions on the record and can see which companies are likely to prime, team or compete. Bring a one-page capability statement, and once the solicitation is issued, contact the agency only through its designated contact.

How do I find out when a government contract expires?

Look up the incumbent's contract record. For New York State agency contracts, RFP Detector's **contractor profiles** list each contract's start and end dates, term, amount and spending. Agency forecasts sometimes name the incumbent and current contract, and the previous solicitation usually states the contract term and option periods.

Can I talk to a government agency before an RFP is released?

Generally yes, and agencies encourage it through outreach events, RFIs, sources sought notices and industry days. Once a solicitation is issued, communication usually must go through the designated contact, in writing. In New York State a restricted period applies from the earliest written notice of a procurement until the contract is finally approved. Confirm the rules for each procurement.

How early should I start preparing for a recompete?

About a year before the expected RFP release is a practical target for a significant contract. That leaves time to research the incumbent, meet the buyer before contact is restricted, respond to market research, close registration or certification gaps and form a team.

→ KEEP GOING

Types of solicitations: RFP, RFQ, IFB and RFI
rfpdetector.com/guides/how-to-find-government-contracts/types-of-solicitations-rfp-rfq-ifb-rfi

Bid/no-bid decision framework
Decide which early opportunities to pursue
rfpdetector.com/guides/how-to-find-government-contracts/bid-no-bid-decision-framework

Subcontracting and teaming opportunities
rfpdetector.com/guides/how-to-find-government-contracts/subcontracting-and-teaming-opportunities

Capture planning and win themes
rfpdetector.com/guides/how-to-write-a-winning-proposal/capture-planning-and-win-themes

Tutorial: researching contractors and competitors
rfpdetector.com/guides/how-to-use-rfp-detector/researching-contractors-and-competitors

Browse contractor profiles
Incumbents, agencies and contract end dates
rfpdetector.com/contractors

Browse RFP issuers A–Z
rfpdetector.com/issuers

END OF CHAPTER 6

Next: 07 The Bid/No-Bid Decision: A Practical Framework

07

CHAPTER 7

The Bid/No-Bid Decision: A Practical Framework

A repeatable way to decide which RFPs deserve your time: knock-out questions, a weighted 100-point scorecard, a scored example, red flags and a checklist you can print.

16 min read · 10 sections · Updated November 13, 2026

Read this chapter online

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Bidding less but better beats bidding on everything: every proposal costs hours you could spend on a bid you can win.
- Run pass/fail knock-out questions first, then score only the RFPs that survive.
- Score eight weighted criteria to 100 points: 70+ bid, 55–69 bid only if named gaps get fixed, under 55 pass or team.
- The public RFP Detector Score rates how attractive and workable an RFP is; your private Fit score rates how well it matches you. Neither predicts a win.
- Record a reason every time you pass, and review those reasons each quarter.

IN THIS CHAPTER

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The **bid/no-bid decision** is the moment you decide whether an RFP is worth the days a compliant proposal takes. Make it on gut feel and you chase long shots while strong opportunities get rushed. This chapter gives you a practical bid/no-bid decision framework for any government, education, nonprofit or private RFP: ten-minute knock-out questions, a weighted eight-criterion scorecard, a scored example, the red flags that should stop you, and a printable checklist.

SECTION 7.1

Why a disciplined bid/no-bid decision raises your win rate

A proposal is an investment of reading, writing, pricing and chasing references, usually done while delivering paid work. In a small business that **bid and proposal (B&P) cost** comes out of the owner's evenings and the team's billable hours.

Your win rate is wins divided by bids. You can raise it by winning more of what you bid, or by no longer bidding on what you were never going to win. The second is faster and cheaper, and experienced capture leaders agree: spot likely losses early, walk away, and put the time into fewer, stronger proposals.

- **Better proposals.** Selective teams tailor every section to the evaluation criteria instead of copying and pasting.
- **Better reputation.** A rushed, generic response tells a buyer you don't understand its needs, and buyers remember.
- **Better data.** Scored, recorded decisions show which agencies, sizes and scopes you actually win.

> NOTE **Saying no is how you say yes**
> The aim is not to bid less for its own sake. It is to bid where your odds and margin justify the effort, so your best people work on your best chances.

Glossary

Bid/no-bid (go/no-go)	A structured decision on whether to respond to a solicitation, made before you invest in the proposal.
Pwin	Probability of win: your honest estimate of your chance of winning a specific bid.
Incumbent	The company performing the work under the current contract.
Recompete	A new solicitation for work already under contract, issued as that contract nears its end.

Set-aside	A contract reserved for a class of bidders, such as small or certified minority-, women- or veteran-owned firms.
Wired	Slang for a solicitation written, deliberately or not, so that one vendor is the natural winner.

SECTION 7.2

When should you make the bid/no-bid decision? Three gates

Treat bid/no-bid as three short decisions, each with one question and a clear output.

The three decision gates

Gate 1 · Forecast or early notice

Pursue or ignore?

Is this our kind of work, for a buyer we want, at a size we can handle? If yes, watch it, talk to the buyer while you can and line up partners. See **procurement forecasts and early intelligence**.

Gate 2 · Within 2–3 business days of release

Bid or no-bid?

Read the whole package, run the knock-outs and score it. Output: bid, bid with conditions, or no-bid, with a named owner.

Gate 3 · After answers and amendments

Confirm the bid

Answers and amendments can change requirements, scope or the deadline. If a Gate 2 condition was not met, this is the cheapest moment to stop.

Any time · Material change

Re-open the decision

A lost key person, a partner who drops out or a new mandatory requirement can flip the answer. Re-score; don't let sunk hours decide.

> PRO TIP **Pro tip: decide fast**
>
> Make it a rule that no RFP sits undecided more than three business days after release. Indecision comes straight out of your writing time.

SECTION 7.3

Step 1: Knock-out questions to answer before you score

Some requirements are pass/fail, so check them first. The answers sit in the instructions, eligibility section and terms (see **how to read and shred an RFP**).

Knock-out questions (any "no" stops the bid or turns it into a teaming decision) CHECKLIST · 8 ITEMS

- [ ] **Eligibility:** For a set-aside or required certification (small business, MWBE, SDVOB, 8(a), HUBZone, WOSB), do you hold it by the date the solicitation requires?
- [ ] **Registrations:** Are you registered with this buyer, or can you be in time (for federal work, your entity registration and Unique Entity ID)?
- [ ] **Licenses:** Do you hold every required license, permit or key-staff credential, in the right state?
- [ ] **Bonding and insurance:** Can you get the bonds and insurance limits required?
- [ ] **Minimum experience:** Do you meet stated minimums for years in business or similar contracts?
- [ ] **Mandatory events:** Did you attend, or can you still attend, any mandatory pre-bid conference or site visit?
- [ ] **Time and terms:** Is there time for a compliant response, and can you accept the liability, penalty and payment terms?
- [ ] **Conflicts:** Are you free of conflicts of interest, such as having helped write the specifications?

A "no" does not always mean walking away. If a partner holds the missing certification, license or capacity, join a team instead: see **how to find prime contractors**.

⚠ WARNING **Before you start: certifications take time**

Certifications and some registrations take weeks or months, so "we'll get certified before the deadline" rarely works. Requirements vary by agency and change; confirm them with the issuer. Plan ahead with **small business and diversity certifications**. General information, not legal advice.

SECTION 7.4

Step 2: The weighted bid/no-bid scoring matrix

Score each of the eight criteria from 1 (weak) to 5 (strong). **Weighted points = weight × score ÷ 5**, so a criterion weighted 20 that scores 4 earns 16. Weights total 100, giving a score you can compare across opportunities. Score risk inversely: 5 means low risk.

TABLE **Bid/no-bid scorecard: criteria and default weights**

Criterion	Weight	Key question
Customer relationship	15	Do we know this buyer, its problems and its decision-makers?
Requirements fit	20	Can we do this work well, as written, without stretching?
Competition and incumbent	15	Who else will bid, and can we beat them?
Past performance	15	Can we prove we have done this, recently, at this size?
Price and margin	10	Can we price to win and still make money?
Resources and timeline	10	Do we have people to write it now and deliver it later?
Risk (inverse)	10	What could hurt us if we win?
Strategic value	5	Does winning move the business forward beyond this contract?

TABLE **Decision bands**

Total	Decision	Next step
70–100	**Bid**	Assign an owner and schedule; start the compliance matrix today.
55–69	**Bid with conditions**	Name the two or three gaps, each with an owner and deadline; stop if they are not fixed.
Below 55	**No-bid**	Pass or seek a subcontracting role; record why and note when the contract ends.

TIP **Pro tip: calibrate to how you win**

If you mostly win on lowest price, raise price to 20; if you compete on best value, raise relationship and past performance. Change weights yearly, never per opportunity, or the scorecard learns to say yes to whatever you wanted anyway.

> ✕ COMMON MISTAKE **Common mistake: scoring hope instead of evidence**
>
> A 5 for customer relationship needs proof: a meeting, a past contract, a real conversation. “They'll like us once they read it” is a 1. Write one line of evidence beside every score.

SECTION 7.5

How to score each criterion: what 1, 3 and 5 look like

Two people should give the same opportunity roughly the same score. Use these anchors and have two people score independently.

TABLE **Scoring anchors**

Criterion	1 = weak	3 = moderate	5 = strong
Customer relationship	Never met the buyer; first heard of it at release	Met at an event or answered its RFI	Worked for this office or had real pre-RFP talks
Requirements fit	Core tasks need new staff or a partner	One secondary gap a partner covers	Exactly what you do every week, at this scale
Competition and incumbent	Entrenched, well-regarded incumbent or specs written for one firm	Mixed incumbent record or many qualified bidders	No incumbent, or a set-aside that narrows the field to firms like you
Past performance	Nothing comparable	Similar but smaller or for another customer type	Several recent, similar projects with strong references
Price and margin	Must price below cost to compete	Competitive at a thin margin	Competitive with a healthy margin
Resources and timeline	No writer; under two weeks for a complex bid	Tight but workable with overtime	Team available; ample time
Risk (inverse)	Onerous terms, heavy penalties, slow payer	One or two concerns to raise in questions	Standard terms, clear scope, reliable payer
Strategic value	One-off work	Useful reference	Opens a new agency or sets up a larger recompete

- **Competition:** Check the incumbent's contract history, agencies and contract end dates on its contractor profile. Repeated renewals mean a hard target.

- **Price:** Check how price is evaluated. An invitation for bid usually goes to the lowest responsive, responsible bidder; a best-value RFP lets a stronger approach win (see **types of solicitations** and **pricing strategy**).

SECTION 7.6

Worked example: three opportunities, scored

A fictional 22-person IT managed-services firm on Long Island, certified as a New York State MWBE, with strong town and county references and no federal work, scores three RFPs found the same week. Each cell shows score, then weighted points.

TABLE **Illustrative bid/no-bid scoring (fictional company and opportunities)**

Criterion (weight)	A: County help desk, 3 years + 2 options	B: City agency security assessment, 1 year	C: Statewide IT staffing, 5 years
Customer relationship (15)	2 → 6.0	4 → 12.0	1 → 3.0
Requirements fit (20)	4 → 16.0	5 → 20.0	2 → 8.0
Competition and incumbent (15)	2 → 6.0	4 → 12.0	2 → 6.0
Past performance (15)	4 → 12.0	4 → 12.0	1 → 3.0
Price and margin (10)	3 → 6.0	4 → 8.0	2 → 4.0
Resources and timeline (10)	3 → 6.0	4 → 8.0	1 → 2.0
Risk, inverse (10)	3 → 6.0	4 → 8.0	2 → 4.0
Strategic value (5)	4 → 4.0	3 → 3.0	4 → 4.0
Total	**62: bid with conditions**	**83: bid**	**34: no-bid as prime**

WORKED EXAMPLE

Strong decision record: Opportunity A (62)

✓ STRONG

> **Evidence:** No pre-RFP contact (relationship 2). Incumbent of six years, renewed twice per its contractor profile (competition 2). Scope fits except after-hours on-site coverage (fit 4). Four-hour on-site response backed by liquidated damages (risk 3).
>
> **Conditions:** (1) Ask whether "four hours" means business hours (Dana, by the questions deadline). (2) Confirm the after-hours partner in writing (Luis, five days). (3) Price at target rates above our margin floor (Priya, before pricing review). **If any condition fails, we record a no-bid.**

WORKED EXAMPLE

Weak decision record: the same opportunity

✕ WEAK

> "Big county contract. The incumbent's been there forever, but we're better. Let's bid." No scores, evidence, conditions or owner, so nothing tells the team when to stop.

B is the easy yes and gets the best writer first. **C** fails as a prime bid, but it has strategic value, so the firm offers its MWBE certification and Long Island coverage to the staffing companies likely to prime it: a no-bid turned into a teaming play (see how to approach a prime contractor).

SECTION 7.7

Red flags: when to walk away from an RFP

Two or more of these and the team should have to argue its way back to a bid.

Green lights versus red flags

Green lights

- ✓ You spoke with the buyer before release and the requirements reflect it
- ✓ Evaluation criteria reward strengths you can prove
- ✓ A budget or award history fits your price
- ✓ Three or more weeks for a complex scope
- ✓ Recent, similar, enthusiastic references

Red flags

- ✗ Specs name a brand or match one firm's product or résumé
- ✗ A very short window for a complex scope
- ✗ A long-serving incumbent with no known problems
- ✗ Price is everything and you are not the low-cost provider
- ✗ Unlimited liability, heavy penalties or payment terms you cannot finance
- ✗ Signs it is not openly competed, such as an intent to sole source
- ✗ Found late: questions closed, mandatory site visit missed

⚠ WARNING **Watch for “wired” requirements**

Oddly specific experience rules, brand-name-only specs or a scope copied from the incumbent's contract suggest a favored vendor. Ask whether an “or equal” product or equivalent experience is acceptable; if not, score competition low.

SECTION 7.8

Using the RFP Detector Score and Fit score as inputs

The **RFP Detector Score** (0–100, graded A to F) is the same for every visitor and answers one question: how attractive and workable is this RFP for a typical qualified bidder, today? Each RFP starts at 50 and six weighted factors move it, each shown with a reason. Your **Fit score** (0–100) is private to your organization and measures how well the RFP matches your matching profile: NAICS codes, keywords, certifications, service area and contract size. Details are in how the RFP Detector Score works.

TABLE **Where each signal feeds your scorecard**

RFP Detector signal	Scorecard input
Value factor (money on the table)	Price and margin; strategic value
Competition & access factor (set-asides, sole-source signals, market concentration)	Competition and incumbent
Issuer & market factor (does the issuer buy this work?)	Customer relationship; strategic value
Time & stage and Freshness factors	Resources and timeline
Clarity & completeness factor	Risk: vague scopes are harder to price
Fit: NAICS and keywords	Requirements fit
Fit: eligibility (capped at 25 if a required certification is missing from your profile)	Knock-out questions
Fit: geography and contract size	Resources; risk

NOTE **What the numbers are not**

Neither score is a probability of winning or advice to bid; the Score knows nothing about your relationships or references. Notices not openly competed are capped at 30 and labeled “Not competed”.

A 15-minute triage routine in RFP Detector

1. **Filter**

   On search, filter by NAICS codes and keywords, then set a **Minimum score** or **Minimum grade** and a **Minimum Fit**.

   Tip: A Minimum Fit of 60, the starting value suggested for alerts, is a sensible first setting.

2. **Read the breakdown**

   Factor contributions and Fit reasons on the RFP page tell you which knock-out to check first.

3. **Track the decision**

   Save the RFP, move it to **Qualifying** on your pipeline board, set an owner and record estimated value and win probability. Download the RFP report (PDF) for the go/no-go meeting.

4

Close it out

Move it to **Preparing** to bid, or to **No bid** with a reason such as “strong incumbent” or “bonding limit”. Then set an alert so similar RFPs arrive instantly, daily or weekly.

Screen-by-screen help: **tracking bids, pipeline and alerts**.

SECTION 7.9

Printable bid/no-bid checklist

Before the meeting

CHECKLIST · 6 ITEMS

- [ ] Full solicitation, attachments and amendments downloaded
- [ ] Evaluation criteria and key dates noted
- [ ] Knock-outs answered with evidence
- [ ] Incumbent and competitors researched
- [ ] Budget or award history found
- [ ] Writer, reviewer and pricing owner available

In and after the meeting

CHECKLIST · 5 ITEMS

- [ ] Each criterion scored with one line of evidence
- [ ] Decision band agreed; conditions given owners and deadlines
- [ ] Teaming needs and buyer questions listed
- [ ] Decision and reason recorded in the pipeline
- [ ] If no-bid: contract end date noted for the recompete

TEMPLATE

Bid/no-bid decision record (one page)

Copy-ready online

The scorecard and decision on one sheet, kept with the opportunity.

WHEN TO USE At Gate 2, within three business days of release, and again at Gate 3 after answers and amendments.

BID/NO-BID DECISION RECORD

Opportunity: [RFP_TITLE] Solicitation no.: [SOLICITATION_NUMBER]
Issuer: [ISSUER] Proposal due: [DUE_DATE]
Estimated value: [ESTIMATED_VALUE] Score / Fit: [SCORE_AND_FIT]
All knock-outs passed? [YES_OR_GAPS]

SCORECARD (score 1-5; points = weight x score / 5)

Criterion	Weight	Score	Points	Evidence
Customer relationship	15	[S]	[P]	[EVIDENCE]
Requirements fit	20	[S]	[P]	[EVIDENCE]
Competition and incumbent	15	[S]	[P]	[EVIDENCE]
Past performance	15	[S]	[P]	[EVIDENCE]
Price and margin	10	[S]	[P]	[EVIDENCE]
Resources and timeline	10	[S]	[P]	[EVIDENCE]
Risk (5 = low risk)	10	[S]	[P]	[EVIDENCE]
Strategic value	5	[S]	[P]	[EVIDENCE]
TOTAL	100		[TOTAL]	

DECISION: [BID / BID WITH CONDITIONS / NO-BID]
Conditions (owner, due date): [CONDITIONS]
Teaming needs: [TEAMING_NEEDS]
No-bid reason: [NO_BID_REASON]
Recompete watch date: [CONTRACT_END_DATE]
Decided by: [APPROVER_NAME] Date: [DATE]

FIELDS TO FILL IN · 5

[SCORE_AND_FIT]	RFP Detector Score and grade plus your Fit, for example “71 B / Fit 78”.
[YES_OR_GAPS]	“Yes”, or the failed knock-outs and how a partner could cover them.
[S] / [P] / [EVIDENCE]	Score 1–5, points = weight × score ÷ 5, and one line of proof.
[CONDITIONS]	For “bid with conditions”: each gap, one owner, one date.
[NO_BID_REASON]	Short and specific, such as “bonding limit” or “found too late”.

SECTION 7.10

Common bid/no-bid mistakes, and how to say no well

- **Bidding because it is there.** Your scorecard is the reason to bid, not the RFP's existence.
- **Letting sunk cost decide.** Score what winning takes from here.
- **Deciding too late.** Late decisions leave no time to write, ask questions or find partners.
- **Ignoring price until the end.** Discovering you can't compete at pricing review wastes the whole effort.
- **Not recording no-bids.** Without reasons you miss fixable patterns, like a missing certification.

Saying no well keeps doors open. If you have been talking with the buyer, send a short thank-you explaining that this round is not a fit. Some agencies ask listed vendors to return a “no bid” response, so read the instructions. Then note when the contract ends: today's no-bid can start your recompete capture (see capture planning and win themes).

Frequently asked questions

Q **What is a bid/no-bid decision?**

A bid/no-bid (or go/no-go) decision is a structured choice about whether to respond to a specific RFP, made before you invest in a proposal. It weighs whether you are eligible, can win, can deliver profitably and gain strategically. A weighted scorecard keeps the decision consistent across opportunities and people.

Q **What criteria should a bid/no-bid decision include?**

First, pass/fail knock-outs: eligibility, registrations, licenses, bonding and insurance, minimum experience, mandatory events, time and terms. Then score customer relationship, requirements fit, competition and incumbent, past performance, price and margin, resources and timeline, risk and strategic value, weighted to how you win work.

What is a good bid/no-bid score?

There is no universal number. On a 100-point weighted scorecard, start with 70+ to bid, 55–69 to bid only if named gaps are fixed, and under 55 to pass or team. After a few months, compare scores with results and move the cut-offs.

When should you make the bid/no-bid decision?

In stages, as early as you can: decide whether to pursue when you first see a forecast or early notice, whether to bid within two or three business days of release, and confirm after questions are answered and amendments issued. Re-open the decision whenever a material fact changes.

Should I bid on an RFP I found late?

Only if the scope is exactly what you already do, the remaining time allows a compliant, tailored response, and no mandatory conference or site visit has passed. Missing the questions deadline leaves ambiguities you cannot clarify. Alerts that deliver new matches the day they are posted prevent late discoveries.

Should a small business bid against an incumbent?

Sometimes. Incumbents usually start ahead, but bidding makes sense when the incumbent has performance problems, the requirement has changed, the work has moved to a set-aside you qualify for, or you have a real relationship and a better approach. Research the incumbent's contract history first.

Does a high RFP Detector Score mean I should bid?

No. The RFP Detector Score rates how attractive and workable an RFP is for a typical qualified bidder. It is the same for everyone and is neither a probability of winning nor advice to bid. Combine it with your private Fit score to decide what to read first, then decide with your own scorecard.

→ KEEP GOING

Subcontracting and teaming
Turn a no-bid into a teaming role
rfpdetector.com/guides/how-to-find-government-contracts/subcontracting-and-teaming-opportunities

Procurement forecasts
Reach Gate 1 months earlier
rfpdetector.com/guides/how-to-find-government-contracts/procurement-forecasts-and-early-intelligence

Capture planning and win themes
After you decide to bid
rfpdetector.com/guides/how-to-write-a-winning-proposal/capture-planning-and-win-themes

Bid management templates
Schedules and trackers
rfpdetector.com/guides/proposal-templates/bid-management-templates-and-checklists

How the RFP Detector Score works
Factors, grades and Fit
rfpdetector.com/methodology/score

Search open RFPs
Filter by score and Fit
rfpdetector.com/search

END OF CHAPTER 7

Next: 08 Subcontracting and Teaming: Winning Work Through Partners

08

CHAPTER 8

Subcontracting and Teaming: Winning Work Through Partners

How small businesses win public-sector work as subcontractors and teaming partners: why primes need you, how to find them, which structure fits, what to sign and how to get paid.

16 min read · 8 sections · Updated November 13, 2026

Read this chapter online

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Primes need subcontractors for capability, capacity and geography, and many must meet subcontracting plans or MWBE, SDVOB, SBE or DBE goals.
- Find primes by working backward from the work: contractor profiles show who holds contracts with your target agencies and when they end.
- Teaming agreements, joint ventures and mentor-protégé relationships solve different problems and carry different rules.
- Pitch a prime on one specific opportunity and the exact gap you fill.
- Get scope, exclusivity, exit terms and payment terms in writing, and have an attorney review before you sign.

IN THIS CHAPTER

8.1 Prime vs subcontractor: how government subcontracting works 104

8.2 Why primes need subcontractors: gaps, goals and plans 105

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8.6 How to protect yourself: scope, exclusivity and terms 111

8.7 Getting paid as a subcontractor 112

8.8 From subcontractor to prime: a realistic path 113

Government subcontracting is often the fastest way into public-sector work. Instead of competing head-on for a prime contract, you join the team of a company bidding for or holding one and deliver a defined part of the work. This chapter covers why primes need partners, how to find the ones that need *you*, teaming agreements versus joint ventures and mentor-protégé relationships, how to approach a prime, how to protect yourself and how to get paid.

SECTION 8.1

Prime vs subcontractor: how government subcontracting works

The **prime contractor** signs the contract with the agency and answers for all of the work, including what it hands to others. A **subcontractor** signs with the prime, not the agency, and answers to the prime. That matters most when something goes wrong or payment is late: your claim is against the prime.

TABLE **Prime contractor vs subcontractor**

Topic	Prime contractor	Subcontractor
Contract with	The agency or buyer	The prime
Responsible for	All work, including subcontracted parts	Its own scope in the subcontract
Paid by	The agency	The prime, usually after the agency pays it
Registration	Full vendor registration with the buyer	Often lighter; primes may need your UEI, and goal programs need your certification
Proposal role	Writes and owns the proposal	Supplies scope, pricing, résumés and past performance
Upside and risk	Higher margin, owns the customer relationship, carries all contract risk	Lower margin, less customer contact; carries its scope plus payment risk

Many contractors do both: prime small contracts in their specialty and subcontract on larger ones. On federal work, primes report first-tier subcontracts of $40,000 or more (as of 2026) with the subcontractor's Unique Entity ID (UEI), so expect to be asked for one; see **federal vendor registration and the UEI**. Keep a record of every subcontract's scope, value, dates and agency contact: it becomes the past performance you cite when you prime (see **past performance and references**).

Glossary

Teaming agreement	A pre-award contract in which a prime agrees to propose a subcontractor and, if it wins, subcontract part of the work.
Joint venture (JV)	Two or more firms bidding and performing together as one offeror, often through a new entity.
Subcontracting plan	A large federal prime's written goals for subcontracting to small and other socioeconomic-category businesses.
Utilization plan	A state or city form naming the certified firms a bidder will use to meet participation goals.
Flow-down clause	A prime-contract requirement the prime passes on to its subcontractors.

SECTION 8.2

Why primes need subcontractors: gaps, goals and plans

1. **Capability:** the scope includes work the prime doesn't do, such as a specialty trade or niche technology.
2. **Capacity:** the prime can't staff the volume or speed alone.
3. **Geography:** the work is where the prime has no people.
4. **Goals:** the contract requires or rewards using small or certified firms.

Federal subcontracting plans

On federal contracts expected to exceed **$900,000 ($2 million for construction)** as of 2026, a prime that is not a small business generally must submit a subcontracting plan when subcontracting opportunities exist. The plan sets goals for small businesses and for small disadvantaged, women-owned, HUBZone, veteran-owned and service-disabled veteran-owned small businesses, and the prime reports against them. Those primes are a natural audience for qualified small firms.

Participation goals in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut

TABLE Common tri-state programs (as of 2026; check each solicitation)

Program	How it reaches subcontractors
New York State MWBE	Agencies set contract goals toward a 30% statewide target; bidders file a utilization plan naming certified firms and make good faith efforts to meet it.
New York State SDVOB	A 6% statewide goal for service-disabled veteran-owned businesses, applied through contract goals and utilization plans.
New York City M/WBE	Solicitations with participation goals include an M/WBE utilization plan showing how the bidder will meet them.
New Jersey SBE	A goal of awarding 25% of state contract dollars to certified small businesses, through set-asides and subcontracting goals.
Connecticut Supplier Diversity Program	Agencies aim to set aside 25% of eligible purchasing for certified small businesses, with 6.25% for minority-, women- and disability-owned firms; some contracts require certified subcontractors.
DBE (federally funded transportation)	Race- and sex-based presumptions were removed in October 2025 (final rule September 2026), and every certified firm is being reevaluated. Until a state finishes (deadline December 24, 2026), agencies there can't set DBE goals; confirm the status with the agency.

NOTE **General information, not legal advice**

Goals, counting rules and accepted certifications vary by agency and change. Confirm them with the issuing agency, and see **small business and diversity certifications** to get certified.

PRO TIP **Pro tip: a goal opens the door; it doesn't sign the contract**

Primes choose among certified firms, and agencies can accept documented good faith efforts. Win the slot by being the certified firm with fast quotes, clean paperwork and a clear scope.

Limitations on subcontracting

The rules also cap what small primes can pass on. On federal set-asides, a small prime may not pay subcontractors that are not similarly situated (firms without the same small business status) more than **50% for services, 50% for supplies, 85% for general construction or 75% for special trade construction**, the last three excluding materials, as of 2026. Partners with matching status don't count against the cap, so small primes often prefer them.

SECTION 8.3

How to find prime contractors who need you

The best prime already wins your kind of work with the agencies you want and has a bid coming up, so work backward from the work. New to searching? Start with **finding RFPs with RFP Detector**.

Five ways to find primes and partners

1. **Start from large open RFPs**
   On **search**, find big contracts in your category that you would never bid alone. Each one names a job that future primes need partners for; note the scope you could cover.

   > **Tip:** Your teaming deadline comes weeks before the proposal due date, so save these to your pipeline now.

2. **Research incumbents and frequent winners**
   Contractor profiles show each organization's contract history, agencies served, active contracts and latest end date, and you can browse by agency, category and state. A prime with contracts ending in 6 to 18 months is building recompete teams.

3. **Search the vendor directory**
   The free **vendor directory** filters companies by service category, NAICS code, state, sectors and self-reported certifications, which makes it ideal for finding complementary partners. **List your own company** so primes can find you.

4. **Work the pre-bid events**
   Pre-proposal conferences, site visits and industry days are where teams form. Bring a one-page capability statement, and use attendee lists when agencies publish them.

5. **Reach small business liaisons**
   Large primes employ small business or supplier diversity managers to find qualified partners; they can route you to the capture lead. Free counseling from an APEX Accelerator can help you prepare.

TABLE **Signals that a prime needs a partner like you**

Signal	What to do
A scope broader than one firm covers	Pitch your slice to the likely primes
An incumbent contract ending within 6–18 months	Approach the incumbent and its rivals before teams lock
MWBE, SDVOB, SBE or DBE goals in the RFP	Lead with your certification and the scope it covers
Work located where the prime has no staff	Offer local people and faster response
A prime new to the agency, per its contractor profile	Offer your agency relationship and past performance

✕ COMMON MISTAKE **Common mistake: pitching with no opportunity in mind**

"We'd love to partner on future work" gets filed. "We cover after-hours field support on Long Island and hold NYS MWBE certification, for the county help desk RFP due March 14" gets a call.

SECTION 8.4

Teaming agreement vs joint venture vs mentor-protégé

Federal rules recognize two kinds of contractor team arrangements: firms forming a partnership or joint venture to act as the prime, and a prime agreeing that others will be its subcontractors. Agencies respect arrangements disclosed in the offer but hold the prime fully responsible for performance, and teaming must never break antitrust law.

TABLE **Three ways to partner (federal rules as of 2026)**

Feature	Teaming agreement	Joint venture	SBA mentor-protégé
What it is	Prime agrees to propose you and subcontract if it wins	Firms bid and perform together as one offeror	An SBA-approved development relationship between a small firm and a mentor
Who holds the contract	The prime	The JV, with its own UEI and CAGE code	Either firm, or a JV the two form

Feature	Teaming agreement	Joint venture	SBA mentor-protégé
Key rules	Disclosed in the offer; prime fully responsible	Written JV agreement; on SBA set-asides each partner generally must be small, the small partner performs at least 40% of the work, and SBA limits how long a JV may keep winning new awards	Approved before you bid; up to six years; protégé performs at least 40% of any JV work; annual reviews
Setup effort	Low: days or weeks	Medium to high	High: SBA cites about 105 days to process
Main risk to you	Getting less work than promised	Shared liability and control disputes	Over-reliance on the mentor

- **Teaming agreement:** you cover a defined slice and let the prime own the customer. Most small firms start here.
- **Joint venture:** two firms bring comparable value and neither can win alone. Budget for legal work.
- **Mentor-protégé:** a multi-year relationship with a larger firm that invests in your growth. SBA does not match you, so find the mentor first. Some tri-state agencies run their own mentoring programs for certified firms; ask their supplier diversity offices.

> ⚠ **WARNING** **Watch the ostensible subcontractor rule**
>
> If a small prime on a federal set-aside relies on a large subcontractor for the primary and vital work, SBA can treat the two as affiliated, and the prime can lose small status for that contract. General information, not legal advice; get qualified advice before structuring a set-aside bid.

SECTION 8.5

How to approach a prime contractor

1. **Do your homework**
   Read the prime's contractor profile and the target RFP, and find the exact scope section you would cover.
2. **Tailor your capability statement**
   One page for this pursuit: competencies mapped to the scope, two or three relevant projects, certifications, NAICS codes, UEI and a contact. See capability statement templates.

3 **Reach the right person**

The capture or business development lead for the pursuit; otherwise the small business liaison.

4 **Send a specific email, then follow up**

Use the template below, and follow up once after three to five business days.

5 **Protect, then commit**

Sign a mutual NDA before sharing pricing, and a teaming agreement before the proposal goes in.

TEMPLATE

Outreach email to a prime contractor

Copy-ready online

A short first-contact email that ties your pitch to one pursuit.

WHEN TO USE Once you have a specific RFP or recompete and a likely prime, ideally before release or in its first week.

Subject: [YOUR_COMPANY] for [RFP_TITLE]: [SCOPE_AREA] partner

Dear [CONTACT_NAME],

I'm [YOUR_NAME], [YOUR_TITLE] at [YOUR_COMPANY]. [PRIME_COMPANY] looks well positioned for [RFP_TITLE] from [AGENCY], due [DUE_DATE], and we would like to support your team on [SCOPE_AREA].

Why us:
- Relevant work: [PROJECT_1] for [CUSTOMER_1] and [PROJECT_2] for [CUSTOMER_2], each [VALUE_AND_YEAR].
- Coverage: [GEOGRAPHY_OR_CAPACITY], matching [RFP_REQUIREMENT].
- Certifications: [CERTIFICATIONS], which can count toward the solicitation's [GOAL_TYPE] goal.
- Ready to go: [REGISTRATIONS_AND_IDS].

My one-page capability statement for this opportunity is attached. Could we talk for 20 minutes on [DATE_OPTION_1] or [DATE_OPTION_2]?

Thank you,
[YOUR_NAME]
[YOUR_TITLE], [YOUR_COMPANY]
[PHONE] | [EMAIL]

FIELDS TO FILL IN · 5

[SCOPE_AREA]	The specific slice you will cover, in the RFP's own words.
[PROJECT_1] / [PROJECT_2]	Recent, similar work with customer type and value; public-sector work first.
[CERTIFICATIONS] / [GOAL_TYPE]	Only certifications you hold today that this solicitation counts, such as NYS MWBE or SDVOB.
[REGISTRATIONS_AND_IDS]	UEI, CAGE code, state or city vendor registrations and NAICS codes.
[DATE_OPTION_1] / [DATE_OPTION_2]	Two specific times this week or next.

SECTION 8.6

How to protect yourself: scope, exclusivity and terms

Teaming agreements are signed before anyone knows who will win, which is when small firms get burned. Courts in some states have refused to enforce vague ones as mere “agreements to agree”. Enforceability depends on the governing state law and the wording, so be specific.

Clauses to negotiate before you sign

CHECKLIST · 8 ITEMS

- [ ] **Scope and workshare:** named tasks or a minimum share of the work, with your priced statement of work attached.
- [ ] **Subcontract on award:** the prime issues a subcontract on attached terms unless the agency objects.
- [ ] **Narrow exclusivity:** this solicitation and your scope only; broad exclusivity can also raise antitrust issues.
- [ ] **Termination triggers:** no award, cancellation, the prime deciding not to bid, or an outside date.
- [ ] **Proposal support:** what you provide, by when, and who bears which costs.
- [ ] **Confidentiality, intellectual property and non-solicitation** of key staff.
- [ ] **Payment and flow-downs:** invoice timing, payment period and which prime-contract clauses apply to you.
- [ ] **Governing law and disputes.**

Teaming terms: protected vs exposed

Protected

- ✓ "Tasks 3.2 and 3.4, at least 25% of labor hours"
- ✓ Exclusive for this solicitation and scope only
- ✓ Subcontract terms attached as an exhibit
- ✓ Payment 30 days after an approved invoice

Exposed

- ✗ "A meaningful role"
- ✗ No other teams with this agency, ever
- ✗ Subcontract to be negotiated after award
- ✗ Payment only if and when the prime is paid

> **NOTE** **Have an attorney review**
>
> Teaming, subcontract and JV agreements are binding contracts. Use this list to know what to ask for, then have a government contracts attorney review before you sign. For later paperwork, see **the teaming and subcontract term sheet outline**.

SECTION 8.7

Getting paid as a subcontractor

How money reaches a subcontractor

STEP 01
You invoice the prime
On its cycle, with required backup such as timesheets or certified payroll.

→

STEP 02
The prime bills the agency
Usually bundling your invoice into its own.

→

STEP 03
The agency approves and pays
Timing follows the contract and local prompt-payment rules.

→

STEP 04
The prime pays you
Within the period your subcontract sets.

TABLE **Payment terms to understand before you sign**

Term	What it means	What to ask for
Net 30 / net 45	Paid a set number of days after your invoice, regardless of the agency	The best term for you
Pay-when-paid	Paid within a set time after the prime is paid	A firm outside date so payment cannot stall

Term	What it means	What to ask for
Pay-if-paid	Paid only if the agency pays the prime	Avoid it. New York's highest court has treated such clauses as unenforceable on construction work covered by the state lien law; rules vary by state
Retainage	A share held back until completion, common in construction	No more than the prime's own retainage, released when your scope is accepted

Protections that may apply

- **Federal reporting:** if a prime pays a small business subcontractor less than agreed, or more than 90 days late, for work the government has paid for, it must tell the contracting officer in writing within 14 days.
- **Accelerated payments:** a federal prime that receives accelerated payments must, to the maximum extent practicable, pay small business subcontractors within 15 days of receiving them, once it has their proper invoice.
- **Payment bonds:** larger federal construction contracts require payment bonds that protect subs and suppliers (the Miller Act), and states have similar laws for public works; claims carry strict notice deadlines.
- **State prompt-payment laws:** New York, New Jersey and Connecticut set how quickly primes must pay subs after being paid on public work; deadlines differ, so check your subcontract and the prime contract.

If a payment is late

1. **Check your invoice**
   Was it complete, correctly addressed and actually past due?
2. **Ask in writing**
   Cite the invoice, amount, due date and clause, and ask whether the agency has paid the prime.
3. **Escalate inside the prime**
   Go to the program manager, then the small business liaison, who has goal reporting to protect.
4. **Get advice on formal options**
   These include the contracting officer, a bond claim, state prompt-payment remedies and lien rights. Check your subcontract before stopping work, and weigh slow payers in your next bid/no-bid decision.

SECTION 8.8

From subcontractor to prime: a realistic path

First subcontracts
Deliver a defined slice flawlessly
Take scopes you can over-deliver on, and record scope, value, dates and the agency staff who saw your work.

Next one to two years
Grow scope and relationships
Ask primes for larger roles on recompetes, reference letters and introductions to agency program staff.

With two or three strong references
Prime smaller contracts
Bid small contracts and set-asides in your specialty, bringing former primes or partners in as your subcontractors.

Ongoing
Do both
Keep teaming on large contracts while priming smaller ones, choosing the role per opportunity with the bid/no-bid scorecard.

Frequently asked questions

Q **How do I find subcontracting opportunities on government contracts?**

Work backward from the work. Search open RFPs for large contracts that will need partners, research incumbents and frequent winners at your target agencies through contractor profiles (contract history, agencies and end dates), attend pre-bid events, and contact primes' small business liaisons with a pitch tied to one pursuit. List your company in a free vendor directory so primes can find you.

Q **Do subcontractors need to register to work on government contracts?**

It depends on the buyer and contract. Federal subcontractors usually don't register the way primes do, but primes report first-tier subcontracts of $40,000 or more (as of 2026) with the subcontractor's Unique Entity ID, so expect to need one. State and city goal programs count your work only if you hold the relevant certification.

Q **What is the difference between a teaming agreement and a joint venture?**

A teaming agreement is a contract between a prime and a future subcontractor: the prime bids and, if it wins, subcontracts part of the work. A joint venture bids and holds the contract itself, with partners sharing control, work and profit. Joint ventures take more effort to set up and, on federal small business set-asides, must follow SBA rules.

Is a teaming agreement legally binding?

Parts usually are, such as confidentiality, but courts in some states have refused to enforce the promise to subcontract when key terms were left for later. It depends on governing law and wording, so attach specific scope, workshare and subcontract terms and have an attorney review.

How do subcontractors get paid on government contracts?

You invoice the prime, the prime bills the agency, the agency pays the prime and the prime pays you under your subcontract. Negotiate a fixed payment period with an outside date and avoid pay-if-paid terms where you can. On federal contracts, primes must report reduced or very late payments to small business subcontractors to the contracting officer.

How much of a set-aside contract can a small business subcontract?

On federal small business set-asides, as of 2026, a small prime may not pay subcontractors without the same small business status more than 50% for services, 50% for supplies, 85% for general construction or 75% for special trade construction, the last three excluding materials. State and local programs have their own rules.

Does an MWBE or SDVOB goal mean the prime has to hire me?

No. A goal requires the prime to plan for and make good faith efforts to use certified firms, but it usually chooses which ones, and agencies can accept documented efforts or grant waivers. Certification gets you considered; price, responsiveness and past performance get you chosen.

→ KEEP GOING

The bid/no-bid decision
Decide when to prime, team or pass

rfpdetector.com/guides/how-to-find-government-contracts/bid-no-bid-decision-framework

Procurement forecasts
Spot recompetes before teams form

rfpdetector.com/guides/how-to-find-government-contracts/procurement-forecasts-and-early-intelligence

Certifications
MWBE, SDVOB, SBE and more

rfpdetector.com/guides/how-to-register-for-government-contracts/small-business-and-diversity-certifications

Capability statement templates
rfpdetector.com/guides/proposal-templates/capability-statement-templates

Researching contractors and competitors
rfpdetector.com/guides/how-to-use-rfp-detector/researching-contractors-and-competitors

Building your vendor profile
rfpdetector.com/guides/how-to-use-rfp-detector/building-your-vendor-profile

Contractor profiles
rfpdetector.com/contractors

END OF CHAPTER 8

RFP Detector

Put this handbook to work. Find your next RFP.

RFP Detector brings government, education, nonprofit and private-sector RFPs into one place, so you spend less time hunting and more time writing proposals you can win.

- Search and filter open RFPs from public and private buyers
- See the RFP Detector Score on every RFP, plus a Fit score for your organization
- Save RFPs, track bids on your pipeline board and get alerts for new matches
- Download an RFP report (PDF) and list your business in the free vendor directory

Find RFPs at rfpdetector.com →



THE RFP DETECTOR HANDBOOKS

1. **How to Find Government Contracts and RFPs**
   You are reading this handbook
2. **How to Register and Get Certified for Government Contracts**
3. **How to Respond to an RFP and Write a Winning Proposal**
4. **RFP Response and Proposal Templates**
5. **How to Use RFP Detector: The Complete Tutorial**

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