

Transparency in Contracting

By Sterling Whitehead

Transparency is young, but contracts transparency is an infant. This gives us the opportunity to set the agenda of what it really means and will look like for years to come. This piece covers:

1. **Confidence & Documentation**
2. **Personal Privacy**
3. **External Transparency**
4. **Internal Transparency**

After those, we'll briefly look at the **early results** of and **potential projects** for contracts transparency.

Confidence & Documentation

To be able to effectively operate in the open, you've got to be confident in your decisions. If you're confident then you're able to stand by your choices in public scrutiny. This isn't such a big deal when you consider our training already pushes the *Three Ds* - Document, Document, Document. Strong documentation is central to confidence in our decision-making.

So here's the great thing: Contract transparency is just another form of documentation, except you don't have to actively manage it. Rather, it is passively managed by your actions being open to the public. This means transparency isn't the normal form of oversight that adds another layer of bureaucracy, demoralizes, and exhausts. Rather, regular citizens can observe a procurement unfold, suggest improvements and spot errors. In the end, it will put a more human face to federal acquisitions and improve the process. Contract transparency should have the positive results of government oversight (money saved and improved efficiency) without the negative side effects (slower decisions and dragged-out processes).

Personal Privacy

A part of contract transparency is reduced personal privacy at work. But don't freak out. It's been this way for a while, you just may not have really thought about it this way. You probably post more information about yourself on LinkedIn and Facebook than contract transparency gives away. Contract transparency is just openness applied in a work setting.

Privacy sacrifice is just a side effect of purposefully drawing public attention to your acquisition. People will get to know you. You will be criticized. You may even get someone thanking you. But deal with it. We're professionals. We do multi-million dollars negotiations - we're supposed to have thick skin.

By creating this spotlight, you will improve the acquisition in the long run. The public and outside contractors probably have good ideas about how to improve the acquisition. As smart as your engineers and you are, you don't know everything. Simple suggestions from the outside can help...but expect information about your work to be spotlighted in the process.

External Transparency

External transparency is letting the general public see and participate in the acquisitions process. It is also the type that people often fight against the most because it is viewed as a threat.

Those who view it as a threat from a security perspective have a valid point -- there are legit issues with acquisitions being in the public, usually fitting under two categories:

- The Executive Branch of the United States has the Constitutional power and necessity to conduct some acquisitions in secret. We don't want possible enemies (and even some allies) to know our secrets that protect this great country.
- Companies don't want competitors to find out their propriety information that is shared in proposals sent to the federal government. Propriety info is often the lifeblood of companies and a lot of money has been spent developing it. If someone comes in, hijacks that info, and the feds won't do anything about it, companies will stop contracting with the federal government. Then we all lose. That sucks.

But transparency is also viewed as a threat to those who are (a) not doing a good job, and (b) the corrupt. It's pretty easy to see why - they don't want to lose their job and/or go to jail. This is who transparency aims to get, and external transparency will increase our chances of getting these people out of federal acquisitions.

Current examples of external transparency are:

- External wikis
 - [Acquipedia](#): acquisition-only wiki focusing on business, cost estimating, and financial management; contracting; engineering and technology; life cycle logistics; and program management.
- Twitter for contracts

- [GSA FEDSIM](#): GSA FEDSIM provides acquisition, financial, and project management expertise for the Federal Government. FEDSIM is part of GSA's Federal Acquisition Service.
- [DoD ESI Compass](#): Handled by Daniel McMullen, PCO for the DoD COTS Software Systems Integration. This is primarily used for follow-on contracts.

Internal Transparency

For acquisitions that do fall into the two categories for excluding external transparency, internal transparency can be applied. By internal transparency, I mean sharing information with your coworkers, contractors, the usual federal agencies, and federal agencies you may not have thought about. However, internal transparency is not open to the general public.

Don't believe that internal transparency is important? Tell that to two of America's most famous military leaders, General Chrystal and Admiral Mike Mullen. They are big advocates of information sharing because they believe there is much more to be gained from sharing information than there is to be lost by keeping information just within your team. And let's be honest - information sharing IS internal transparency. Same thing, different name.

Here are current examples of internal transparency:

- Internal government social networking sites
 - [Fedspace](#) (coming soon for the entire federal government)
 - [Spacebook](#) - Think internal Facebook for NASA
 - [milBook](#) - Army's version of Facebook and part of the larger [milSuite](#)
- Internal wikis
 - [Intellipedia](#) - Highly successful wiki for the 16 agencies of the US Intelligence Community.
 - [milWiki](#) - Wikified knowledge management for the Army and part of the larger milSuite
- Internal [microblogging](#)
 - [Yammer](#) - Broadcasts messages within an organization. Means less email.
- Shared calendars
 - Microsoft Outlook
 - Google Calendar

Early Results

Experiments are being conducted right now. Still, the early results look promising. BetterBuy is one of the early examples of contract transparency. Here are [two quotes](#) from [Kevin Merritt](#), CEO of [Socrata](#), examining the early results of the BetterBuy experiment:

"The BetterBuy pilot project was novel in that it asked industry and interested individuals to submit their responses to the RFI, through a publicly editable wiki. It was the most transparent and collaborative RFI conducted by the federal government to date".

"In general, the BetterBuy wiki pilot was a success. Quite a few people participated and the discourse was civil. I believe the GSA data.gov team received valuable feedback, which will shape and influence the detailed requirements of the RFP. As importantly, I believe industry received some valuable feedback from the GSA [data.gov](#) team".

In short, the early results look good.

Potential Projects

Three projects come to mind right now.

1. *Trackable Defense Contracts*: Right now, DoD publishes online its contracts over \$5 million. This is done [daily](#), and there is an [archive](#) going back to October 1994 with this data. The data is there. It just needs to be put into a format that people will look at. Two things can be done with this data - make it [resemble](#) the Federal IT Dashboard and put the information on data.gov.
2. *Twitter in Synopses*: Just have a Twitter handle for a multiple contracts. Just print out all the tweets you get related to that contract. Boom. There's your documentation. Just make sure proprietary, classified or otherwise sensitive information isn't tweeted. Put a warning in the synopsis or in your Twitter account description about this.
3. *[Stickk.com](#) for Contracting Professionals*: You place part of your paycheck into an account. If you meet your objectives (negotiation objectives, meeting the timeline, etc.) for the acquisition, the money goes back to you. If you don't meet your acquisition goals, the money goes to a charity of your choice. If this isn't enough motivation for you, you talk about the procurement online. If you meet your goals, it's posted on the website. If you don't meet your goals...it's still posted on the website.