



The COTR Handbook

A Five-Step Process for Stronger Organizational Performance

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A message from the authors...

The critical role of the COTR

In recent years, the dollar value of contracting has increased and the types of contracts have changed. In addition, there have been changes in the number of Federal employees who are involved in contracting.

The work of the Government has changed over time as technology has become a critical part of its everyday work and as we have shifted from an industrial- to a knowledge-based economy. These changes have caused agencies to procure an increasingly complex and costly array of products and services from contractors.

Along with tremendous growth in the amount of contracting is an increase in the proportion of contracts being used to purchase more complex products and services, and in the proportion of contracts for services. The Government no longer contracts for just office supplies, facility support, and production of ships, planes and other major weapon systems. Now the Government uses contractors to provide complex management consulting (such as technology support and financial system development), and highly complex research and development services (such as for new defense and security systems based on advanced and yet to be developed technologies). Indeed, in some contracts, the Government works in partnership with the contractor to develop cutting edge solutions to rapidly developing problems.

Ensuring that the Government meets the public's interests in achieving successful contract outcomes requires that agencies have enough Federal employees with the right skills and competencies to design and oversee contracts. The Federal employees who work on contracts constitute a critical part of the Government workforce responsible for billions of dollars of Government resources. It is important, therefore, to assess the degree to which these employees are being effectively and efficiently managed to carry out their contracting work.

Two groups of Federal employees bear the primary responsibility for developing and managing contracts. One group consists of the contracting professionals (such as contracting officers, contracting specialists, and purchasing agents) who are involved in the business aspects of contracting. They ensure that the Government selects a contracting approach that is appropriate for a specific purchasing need, that the contracting process ensures sufficient fair and open competition, and that the process operates ethically and according to law and regulation.

The other group of Federal employees who have a critical role in contracting consists of the program and technical employees who provide the technical expertise to ensure that contracts meet the requirements of the Government. While contracting officers (COs) handle the business aspects of contracting, COTRs develop the contract's technical requirements and determine if a contractor meets them. For example, the engineers and scientists who serve as COTRs develop and oversee the work of contractors working on major weapons, cleaning up nuclear sites, and applying environmental regulations.

Well formulated contracting rules and procedures and superior COs alone are not sufficient to ensure that contracts meet the Government's technical and programmatic needs. After all, the best managed contract from a business point of view won't be successful if it does not result in products and services that meet the Government's needs. Indeed, the complexity of the contracting process and the variety and complexity of the products and services being purchased mean that it is unlikely and unreasonable that one person can possess the technical expertise and the contracting expertise to effectively design and oversee successful contracts. COTRs and COs work—or will work—hand in hand to develop and manage contracts that meet Federal requirements for quality, timeliness, completeness, and cost.

Most of the work done assessing the employees involved in contracting has been focused on contracting officers and other employees working on the business aspects of contracting. Unfortunately, while contracting has become more costly and more complex, the number of contracting officers available to work on contracts has remained essentially the same. In response to this situation, various approaches have been proposed to improve the ability of the acquisition workforce to handle this increasing contracting workload. These approaches have focused on the strategic management and skill development primarily of contracting officers.

Surprisingly little attention has been paid to COTRs who provide the technical and program expertise for developing the technical aspects of contracts and for overseeing the technical work of the contractor. These employees are critical to ensuring positive contract outcomes, and the technical aspects of their contracting work have become increasingly more complex. In addition, COTRs may have added pressure to take on more responsibility for managing contracts because there are relatively fewer COs available to work on current contracts.

Our goal is to provide newly assigned or seasoned COTRs with a guide and desk reference that will facilitate success in this highly important career position.

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