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Strategies for Reducing Protests Resulting From Insufficient Contract Proposals

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Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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Lakisha Aldridge-Anthony

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2019

Abstract

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by

Lakisha Aldridge-Anthony

MS, Walden University, 2015

BS, The University of Alabama, 2010

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

October 2019

Abstract

Federal agencies spend over \$400 billion annually on contracts for goods and services to support the mission and vision of their organizations. The purpose of this multiple case study was to determine what strategies federal government contract managers use to prepare effective contract proposals to help ensure business viability. The conceptual framework for this study was the objective theory of contracts. The population for this study was 9 federal contract managers employed by a contracting office located in Alabama, South Carolina, and Georgia. Data were collected from interviews, observation, and document review. Data were analyzed using a cross-case study to explore themes, similarities, and differences across cases. Data analyses revealed 4 key themes: market research, statement of work, independent government cost estimate, and price reasonableness. The findings from this study may help improve government procurement processes by identifying strategies used to prepare efficient contract proposals to increase competition among various contractors and reduce contract disputes. Results may be used by contracting officers and contracting industry to create positive social change by improving corporate social responsibility through accountability and transparent processes that could reduce protests and save taxpayer money.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Contract protests are detrimental to the success of contracting officers administering successful government contracts (Schwartz, Manuel, & Martinez, 2015). The Federal Acquisition Regulations (FAR) are regulations that provide guidelines used by contracting officers to procure supplies and services based on the need of the government (Berson, 2014). However, the inability to understand the FAR, the inability to submit successful contract proposals, and the lack of understanding to submit contract proposals are serious issues within government contracting and the Government Accountability Office (GAO; 2012). The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study is to determine what strategies federal government contract managers use to prepare effective contract proposals to help ensure business viability. Knowledge of successful strategies to understand and submit successful proposals is critical to effective contract proposals.

Background of the Problem

In 2017, the government spent billions of dollars to purchase supplies and services by using independent contractors and vendors (GAO, 2017). The government purchases supplies and services from outside vendors to support its mission and the vision for the organization. A contracting officer working for a government agency establishes a legal and binding contract with an independent contractor or vendor. Government agencies must use the FAR to establish contracts that support the type of contract and the type of product or service that the government needs (Warren, 2014).

When the government agency establishes contracts, many challenges may directly influence the procurement process. Unsuccessful contract proposals influence the timeliness of awarding contracts and may increase financial expenditure. I conducted research to identify barriers experienced by contractors. The results of this study may be critical to independent contractors or vendors who protest the contracting process. Protests are written oppositions from an interested party adversely affected by an agency's failure to properly administer a solicitation or cancel the solicitation (Schaengold, Guiffre, & Gill, 2012). Protests may also contribute to an agency's failure to award a proposed contract, the award of a contract, and the cancellation or termination of a contract (Schaengold et al., 2012). The results may also provide independent contractors or vendors knowledge for successfully competing with other independent contractors or vendors. Researchers could use the data and results of this proposed study to improve the government procurement process further.

Problem Statement

Contract bid protests and retroactive corrective actions are placing unnecessary costs on government agencies (Allen & Wyatt, 2017). Since 2016, contract disputes increased by 6% with a 46% effectiveness rate, which impedes the contract award process (Coggburn, 2017). The general business problem is that some contracting managers lack strategies needed to prepare effective contract proposals that reflect the needs of the government, resulting in contract protests. The specific business problem is that some federal government contract managers lack strategies to prepare effective contract proposals to help ensure business viability.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to determine what strategies federal government contract managers use to prepare effective contract proposals to help ensure business viability. The population for this study included nine federal contract managers employed with the contracting office located in Alabama, South Carolina, and Georgia. The completion of this study might affect business practices and promote social change by reducing the cost associated with contract protests, promoting effective and efficient use of taxpayer dollars, increasing viability, and identifying strategies used to develop effective contract proposals. Findings from this study may contribute to constructive social change by improving corporate social responsibility through accountability and transparent processes that will reduce protests and save taxpayer money.

Nature of the Study

In this study, I used a qualitative methodology. Barnham (2015) discussed qualitative research methods that contribute to the classification of the study based on the design of the research. Qualitative research can define life experiences based on the thoughts and feelings of research participants, which gives significance that aids in the understanding of the meaning that people attribute to their experiences (Lewis, 2015). In contrast, researchers use quantitative research to test hypotheses based on statistical data to examine theories and draw conclusions (Park & Park, 2016). Researchers use the mixed-method approach to combine both qualitative and quantitative research to identify and explore a transformative framework by including statistical data to reach conclusions

(McManamny, Sheen, Boyd, & Jennings, 2015). Using either a quantitative or a mixed-method research approach would not support the focus of this study. My goal is to identify and explore strategies that successful government contract managers use to prepare efficient contract proposals that do not lead to disputes.

In this proposed study, I used a multiple case study design. Case study research is a valuable paradigm due to its ability to allow researchers to describe the experience of a person, group, community, or institution through observation and interaction with subjects (Lewis, 2015). I focused on contextual details that will improve the readers' understanding of the phenomenon to learn something new. I assembled in-depth descriptions through interviews to understand the similarities and differences between cases (Stake, 2013). Using a multiple case study supported the focus of the proposed research by embracing similarities of real-life events by showing various sources of evidence through replication rather than sampling discretion (Herreid & Schiller, 2013).

In a single case study research design, a researcher's focused on the comparison between a single group or subject relies on continuous assessment, baseline assessment, and variability of data (Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013). In a single case study, researchers conduct interviews and control data analysis through research. A single case study is not appropriate for this study because of the focus on a single case and its effectiveness as an intervention. In ethnography, data is researched by engaging in the target population's environment to gain greater insight into goals, cultures, challenges, motivation, and themes (Barnham, 2015). Researchers use the phenomenological design to describe life's experiences based on reality, the interrelation of phenomena, and

subjective data for developing research questions (Barnham, 2015). In the narrative design, researchers outline events that occur based on at least one or two participants relating their stories about phenomena (King, 2013). Ethnography, narrative, and phenomenology are not appropriate for this study because these designs focus on culture sharing, the life of an individual, and similarities and differences of a person's perception.

Research Question

The research question guiding this study was:

RQ1: What strategies do successful government contract managers use to prepare effective contract proposals to help reduce protests and ensure business viability?

Interview Questions

The interview questions used to answer the research question are the following

1. What strategies does your organization use to establish sufficient solicitations that increase competition?
2. What strategies does your organization use to measure successful solicitations that you use that are more successful than others?
3. What strategies does your organization use to reduce frivolous protests?
4. What strategies do you use to reduce cost associated with contract protests?
5. What strategies does your organization utilize when evaluating proposals and aligning proposals with the needs of the government?
6. What recommendations have you made to correct proposals that do not accurately identify the need for the government?

7. What are some of the benefits and challenges of using a solicitation evaluation strategy?
8. What additional information that we have not already discussed might be pertinent to this study on how to prepare effective contract proposals?

Conceptual Framework

Barnes' (2008) objective theory of contracts formalized the conceptual framework for this study. The use of the objective theory of contracts may enable managers to communicate effectively, establish mutual agreements, and develop effective training initiatives and strategies for business (Barnes, 2008). Barnes focused on concepts that assimilate contract management into business strategies, which is of significance to the objective theory of contracts. The conceptual framework fused concepts linked with strategies that government contract officers, specialists, and managers may need to potentially reduce the number of government protests on an annual basis when managing government contracts. The conceptual framework may align theories that are strategic with the notion of successful contract proposals to reduce government protests and streamline proper training to implement standardized processes and procedures in the procurement process.

In the first concept of the objective theory of contracts, I explored the subjective intention of the parties involved. In the second concept of the objective theory of contracts, I focused on the knowledge barriers among government contract managers versus independent contractors. In the third concept of the objective theory of contracts, I focused on closing the gap between government contract managers' and independent

contractors' understanding of the FAR, solicitation of bids, and the contract award process. The disconnect between government contract managers and contractors can affect the government's right to hire qualified bidders to supply the government with products or services they need and delay the award of government contracts. Contract managers who work for government agencies must be able to use a process that is effective and efficient in allowing organizations to bid on contracts and influence the ethical and fair spending of taxpayer dollars. Government contract agencies can use the objective theory of contract law to control and manage government contracts to streamline practices and processes.

Operational Definitions

Acquisition: Acquiring an asset by purchasing goods and services that are arranged by subsections in the FAR based on the type of acquisition being procured (Trimble, 2016).

Contract: Legal binding contract between two or more parties such as contractors' and the government for a defined service or product (FAR, 2017).

Contracting officer: Individual in a federal government agency who can bind the government in a contract (FAR, 2017).

Contracting specialist: Contract professional who works in a government agency and acts as an advisor to assist with contract management when acquiring goods and services (FAR, 2017).

Procurement: Buying of goods and services (FAR, 2017).

Proposal: A written offer from a vendor or contractor to a prospective buyer (FAR, 2017).

Protest: Disagreement against the award of a contract from a prospective vendor or contractor. A protest halts the award or work process until the protest has been resolved (FAR, 2017).

Solicitation: A bid packet that outlines the requirements for responding to a proposal (FAR, 2017).

Contractor/vendor: Company or individual who provides goods and/or services to a government agency (FAR, 2017).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Qualitative research encompasses a variety of methods that include procedures, concepts, methods, themes, limitations, assumptions, and delimitations (Marshall et al., 2013). A qualitative research study allowed me to become aware of assumptions to control biased behaviors and attitudes that were detrimental to the research study. This section expands on assumptions, limitations, and delimitations of this study.

Assumptions

Assumptions deal with experience and knowledge that is unstated, which may or may not be verifiable (Thomas, 2016). Assumptions allowed me to observe or find data applicable to the uncertainty to determine whether something may happen. I broke down and analyzed all assumptions using critical thinking processes that helped me determine the validity of the assumption. Assumptions for this proposed study include: (a) knowledge barriers that exist among a government agency and prospective contractors;

(b) the accurate collection and transcription of the data based on the response of the participants; and (c) participants of the study explained their personal, professional experience, and knowledge barriers of this study phenomenon. The assumptions of this study place special emphasis on risk assessment and risk mitigation that controlled biased attitudes. I used a qualitative multiple case study to gain insight into the work experience of all participants and to understand the knowledge barriers that exist, which may impede the contracting process.

Limitations

Limitations consist of weaknesses of a study beyond the researcher's control (O'Brien, Harris, Beckman, Reed, & Cook, 2016). The first limitation to acknowledge was the choice of multiple case studies, which may not depict all information possible from studies with more subjects from the same industry. The second limitation was the experience of contract specialists or contract officers when dealing with multiple contract types and multiple proposals. I allowed all government contracting specialists and contracting officers, regardless of their grade level, to participate in this study because agency employees may have adequate knowledge or information to provide. Training is mandatory, and the requirements change regularly, which may allow business managers to implement fresh ideas from new employees versus seasoned employees. Incentives, social change, and economic change may allow business managers to implement fresh ideas. Old training requirements versus new training requirements may equip employees with specialized training and innovative ideas from a different point of view different

than their colleagues. The final limitation was the inability to find enough participants to participate in this study.

Delimitations

Delimitations are choices made by researchers that define boundaries that apply to their study (Snelson, 2016). Optimal sampling includes government contract specialists and contracting officers and contractors or vendors. Government contract employees, regardless of pay grade, working in a contracting office took part in this study.

Delimitations are appropriate in this study because it allowed me to determine knowledge barriers that exist among contracting professionals in an identified agency that inhibit successful contract award based on the proposals received. It would not be appropriate to interview government contract specialists or government contracting officers within any agency because this study focuses on one identified agency.

Significance of the Study

This study may be useful for contracting professionals given that contracting disputes increased by 6%, with a 46% effectiveness rate from 2015 to 2016, which impedes the contract award process (Coggburn, 2017). However, with an increase in protests filed each year, nearly 23% of protests were sustained. The protest rate of 2015 nearly doubled because of poorly written contract proposals and contract administration processes (Schwartz et al., 2015; Trimble, 2016). Research may help identify successful strategies that government contract managers use to prepare effective contract proposals to help reduce protests and ensure business viability.

The findings from this study may help improve the government procurement processes by identifying strategies used to prepare efficient contract proposals to increase competition among various contractors and reduce contract disputes. Findings from this study may contribute to effective and efficient business processes and practices that can streamline tools and initiatives for successful government contract administration.

Contributions to Business Practice

The study results may help government agencies and contractors develop strategies to streamline knowledge deficiencies, which may enable more competitive competition based on proposals received. A critical problem is an increase in the number of protests that halt the contracting process. The ability to streamline effective strategies can decrease contract protests surrounded by inadequate contract proposals, which will promote successful business strategies. This study may also increase the effective and efficient use of tax dollars and positive contractor performance. The ability to promote strategies to change current practices may potentially promote successful business practices and social change.

Implications for Social Change

The research problem in this study may be interesting to business leaders who strive to promote positive social change. Although government agencies are providing business opportunities to potential vendors and contractors, their constant failure rate impedes the contract award process, which hinders positive social change. Rendon (2016) proposed that effective contract management and practical contract proposals contribute to financial and social prosperity and environmental stability. If contracting managers can

improve their viability as a result of reducing convoluted processes and increasing transparency, social change may be realized by stimulating the local economy and improving overall quality of life. An increase in business opportunities for various vendors or contractors could increase tax revenue in local communities, which may provide positive social change by improving community programs, sponsorship opportunities, and proper expenditure of taxpayer dollars.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to determine what strategies federal government contract managers used to prepare effective contract proposals to help ensure business viability. The population for this study comprised nine federal contract managers employed with the contracting office located in Alabama, South Carolina, and Georgia. This study might affect business practices and promote social change by reducing the costs associated with contract protests, promoting effective and efficient utilization of taxpayer dollars, increasing viability, and identifying strategies to develop effective contract proposals. Findings from this study may contribute to constructive social change by improving corporate social responsibility through accountability and transparent processes that will reduce protests and save taxpayer money.

A literature review is critical in research because it provides theoretical and methodological contributions to a specific topic (Rahman, 2017). A literature review consists of primary sources from published academic journals that serve as a basis for research (Davis et al., 2013). A sound research question can stem from the literature

review that expands on a theoretical or conceptual framework that promotes new knowledge (Hamari, Koivisto, & Sarsa, 2014). The literature review serves as a precursor to a research study to include an in-depth evaluation of other academic journals. A literature review expands on the reason for conducting a research study (Goyal, Rahman, & Kazmi, 2013). The literature review provides readers with an overview of ideas and establishes the researcher's credibility as a scholar.

My review of the professional and academic literature included 168 total references: 137 peer-reviewed articles, three articles for an edited book, 19 government sources, four articles from conference proceedings, and 15 academic articles from non-peer-reviewed journals. In this review, 82% of the references were within 5 years of the expected graduation date. Of the 138 peer-reviewed references, 86% were published within 5 years of the expected graduation date.

I conducted a literature review through the Walden University library by reading journal and peer-reviewed articles to substantiate the premises of this study. I used ProQuest, Sage, Business source complete, EBSCO host, World Cat, Science Direct, and Worldwide Science. It was imperative to conduct keyword searches to find articles applicable to this study. Keyword searches consisted of defined terms listed under the key terms section of this study. Searching databases with notated key terms generated more than 200 articles for review with careful consideration of article dates.

Contract of Law Theory

The objective theory of contract law formalizes the conceptual framework for this study (Barnes, 2008). The objective theory of contract law focuses on the agreement

between two parties that exists if an unbiased person could judge the acts and behaviors of the party enough to objectively understand the agreement (Perillo, 2000). Barnes (2008) focused on communication versus the perception of an established contract between two parties. Determining the intent of the parties provides insight into whether a contract holds each party responsible for providing services or products. The objective theory of contract law provides a review of processes that government contract specialists may use to increase the award of contracts between the government and prospective vendors who submit proposals to win contracts. This theory aligns the objectives of the contract with the understanding required to prepare proposals that directly influence the solicitation for bids and future relationships among contractors and government agencies.

I used the literature review to explore theories to address the concept of securing government contracts. In the first objective theory of contract law, I explored the subjective intention of the parties involved. In the second concept of the objective theory of contract law, the focus was on knowledge barriers between government contract specialists and government agencies versus independent contractors and vendors. The third concept of the objective theory of law focuses on closing the gap between government contract specialists' and independent contractors' or vendors' understanding of the FAR, solicitation of bids, and the award process.

Government agencies and the disconnect between contract specialists and vendors affect the government's right to hire qualified bidders to supply the products or services it needs (FAR, 2017). Past performances may also directly influence the selection of qualified bidders. Contract specialists must streamline a process that is effective in

allowing organizations to bid on contracts that influence ethical and fair spending of taxpayer dollars. The government focuses on eliminating waste to control government spending by hiring contractors from the private sector to regulate economic activity, which directly influences growth, prosperity, and proper contract management (Dzhumashev, 2014). Government contract agencies can use the objective theory of contract law to control and manage government contracts to streamline practices and processes.

Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder theory is beneficial and a success factor in managing government contracts based on establishing positive and efficient stakeholder relationships and assisting with meeting the objectives identified by contract managers. Contract managers are a central part of managing government contracts and are responsible for identifying key stakeholders (Bridoux & Stoelhorst, 2016). The inability to identify stakeholders is detrimental to contract managers and the success of the project. Stakeholder theory promotes strategic management that promotes engagement, availability of resources, and conflict management among stakeholders and contract managers (Garcia-Castro & Francoeur, 2016; Markman & Krause, 2016). Contract managers must understand the importance of stakeholders and how to effectively manage their contract proposals, increase competition and opportunities, and balance the divergent interests among stakeholders.

Stakeholder theory is a conceptual framework related to business ethics and organizational management that discusses moral and ethical values in managing

businesses or organizations (Eskerod, Huemann, & Ringhofer, 2015). Stakeholder theory allows business managers or leaders to create strong value for stakeholders by considering customers, suppliers, employees, communities, and shareholders (Eskerod et al., 2015). Engaging and managing stakeholders is critical in establishing structure, strategic plans, and business strategies in organizations (Garcia-Castro & Francoeur, 2016). Positive and effective stakeholder relationships aid in adding value, sustainability, and alignment to ensure that everyone is going in the same direction (Susnienė & Purvinis, 2015). The objective is to align stakeholders with the organization to increase success, profitability, and competition among parties while decreasing tradeoffs (Bridoux & Stoelhorst, 2016). Stakeholder theory involves anyone directly connected to an organization.

Freeman, an American philosopher, outlined six principles used in stakeholder theory to direct relationships between stakeholders and organizations (Freeman & Reed, 1983). Principle 1 is the entry and exit of stakeholders (Harrison, Freeman, & de Abreu, 2015). This principle identifies the rules and regulations that outline how a potential stakeholder may enter and exit an arrangement with an organization (Pérez & Rodríguez del Bosque, 2016). Principle 2 is the principle of governance that outlines possible alterations and the affiliation between stakeholders and organizations (Boaventura, Barakat, Griffin, Mascena, & Monzoni-Neto, 2016). Principle 3 is the principle of externalities and gives a group of potential stakeholders the ability to bear the cost associated with identified stakeholders and organizations with the choice to become a stakeholder (Miles, 2017). Principle 4 on contracts costs suggests that costs should be

equal or fair among stakeholders and organizations or costs should be shared for the benefit of the organization (Harrison et al., 2015). Principle 5 is the principle of the agency that defines the agent is responsible for shareholders and all stakeholders (Miles, 2017). Principle 6 is limited immortality that acknowledges the success of an organization is dependent on the existence of the organization over time (Harrison et al., 2015). The fundamental principles of stakeholder theory influence organizations to recognize and value the interests of all stakeholders to avoid negative stakeholder relationships and to avoid damaging the structure of the organization.

Competition Types

There are many different types of contracts that are used in government contracting. The contracting officer will approach the bidding process and the type of contract that will be used based on the need of the government. Each of the contract types is unique and are used based on the challenges and opportunities of each contract, acquisition strategy, and the government's need. Understanding the types of contracts and the subcontracts within each competition promote a greater advantage for the government and create business opportunities for contractors or vendors.

The presolicitation phase of contract administration is the phase of the contracting process that allows the contracting officer to prepare a solicitation based on the need of the organization (Matthew, Patrick & Denise, 2013). During this phase of the acquisition process, the contracting officer determines the type of competition that would effectively procure the services or supplies needed. There are three types of competition types, which include full and open competition, full and open competition after

exclusions, and other than full and open competition (Shehane, 2013). Regulation of the competition types is in FAR Part 6, called competition requirements (FAR, 2017). FAR part 6 recommend the rules and actions used to promote competition among vendors (FAR, 2017). The presolicitation phase of contract administration is a critical stage in contract administration by emphasizing the importance in solicitations and justifying the needs of the government.

Full and open competition. Full and open competition allows contracting officers to determine how they solicit contractors and vendors to fulfill identified needs of the government. Full and open competition is found in FAR Part 6.1 (FAR, 2017). This type of competition allows the government to solicit from multiple sources and award contracts to those sources with full and open competition to ensure the government can meet their need in the most effective, economical, and timely manner (Courts et al., 2013). All vendors deemed a responsible party can compete. There are exceptions to this regulation that apply to ensure the government agencies can meet and satisfy their needs. Exceptions to the other than full and open competition are as follows: (a) there has to be at least two or more vendors who can satisfy the need for the competition type to be full and open; (b) unusual and compelling urgency such as an emergency to include fire, flood, explosion, or disaster; (c) industrial mobilization; (d) international agreement; (e) requirement by statute or authorized by statute; (f) national security; and (g) the best interest of the public (FAR, 2017). Full and open competition allow contracting officers to identify the best way to compete requirements to satisfy the need of the government. Once the best procurement route has been established the contracting officer can proceed

in creating a solicitation that allows contractors and vendors to bid on the requirement in hopes of winning the contract.

Full and open competition after exclusions. Full and open competition after exclusions is another competition type that allows contracting officers to satisfy the need of the government and increases competition among contractors and vendors. Full and open competition after exclusion is FAR Part 6.2 (FAR, 2017). Full and open competition after exclusions applies to competition among specific and/or limited types of businesses such as (a) alternative sources, (b) 8(a), HUBZone/SD-VOSB (Service Disabled Veteran Owned Business), (c) set-asides for economically disadvantaged women-owned small business concerns or women-owned small business concerns eligible under the Women Owned Small Business Program, (d) set-asides for local firms during a major disaster or emergency, and (e) small business set-asides (Defense Acquisition University, 2017). This type of competition method increases competition that may decrease the overall cost of the acquisition without needing justification and approval with an exclusion that requires a determination of findings (Warren, 2014). This type of competition may also limit competition with the notion to fulfill this acquisition based on the size of the business and social and economic concerns that are directly related to small businesses (Warren, 2014). Full and open competition after exclusions allows contracting officers to exclude sources from bidding process thus utilizing effective strategies to promote full and open competition among the sources not excluded.

Other than full and open competition. Other than full and open competition is a type of competition that promotes competition and satisfies the need of the government.

Other than full and open competition is FAR Part 6.3 (FAR, 2017). Other than full and open competition allows contracting officers to sole source acquisitions to only one source if that source is responsible and can satisfy the need of the agency (Arney, Yadav, Miller, & Wilkerson, 2014). Under this type of competition, the contracting officer must ensure the agency is not in violation by following exclusions that apply to this policy (Kumru & Kumru, 2013). Circumstances that permit agencies to sole source acquisitions are as follows: (a) only one responsible source that can satisfy the need of the agency; (b) rare and compelling urgency; (c) industrial mobilization to include engineering, developmental, or research capabilities or professional services; (d) international agreement; (e) authorized or mandated by statute; (f) national security; and (g) public interest (FAR, 2017). Before a contracting officer can begin negotiations for an acquisition that is other than full and open competition, J&A must be in writing to support the need that verifies the information on the J&A is accurate and complete per FAR 6.303-1 (FAR, 2017). To support other than full and open competition, the inclusion of appropriate information in the J&A such as sufficient facts and rationale to validate the use of this authority. Evidence that any supporting data that the technical or requirements personnel are responsible for the certification must be complete and accurate by the technical or requirements personnel (Arney et al., 2014). Any contract that is sole sourced for 8(a) over \$22 million must have additional documentation to support and justify the use of other than full and open competition (Arney et al., 2014). It is against the acquisition regulations for an agency to contract supplies and services from another agency avoiding the requirements of FAR Part 6.3 (Woods et al., 2014). Soliciting offers

from one or more sources ensure the government meets its needs in the most effective, economical, and timely manner.

Competition are critical in government contracting because it allows the contracting offer to determine the best way to meet and satisfy the need of the agency. Arney et al. (2014) and Woods et al. (2014) are beneficial to this study because the authors outline the necessary knowledge for successfully justifying the types of competition used by government contract managers and contracting officers. These opportunities will allow contractors to become competitive when submitting adequate contract proposals in hopes of winning government contracts. Understanding the different type of competition and how they acquire supplies and services promote competition as well as promote different opportunities for different types of businesses that fall under small business programs (FAR, 2017). The ability to successfully compete for government contracts provide maximum practicable opportunities for both the contractor and the government agency. Lastly, competition types allow contractors to find opportunities that contractors need to become a top competitor in government contracting.

Laws of Government Contracting

Government contracting is governed by statutes and regulations that support how funds are used and the government's need. The government contracting process is highly regulated which, dictates the contracting process. The following are examples of how the laws of government contracting dictate the procurement process: (a) method or process used to solicit a contract, (b) contract negotiating, (c) contract award, (d) cost/price

analysis, (e) market research, (f) technical evaluations, and (g) bidding process (Defense Acquisition University, 2017). Contracting officers legally bind the government through its contracts based on regulations and statutes by using laws below to streamline the contracting process.

Federal Acquisition Regulations. The FAR is a critical component of creating contract solicitations that are used to satisfy the need of the government. The FAR is a set of regulations that government agencies must follow when they engage in the procurement process (Berson, 2014). The regulations outline how government agencies must conduct market research to justify their need and to identify what parts of the FAR regulations are necessary for the proper procurement (Berson, 2014; Waugh 2015). The FAR states that agencies must solicit for proposals when the amount of the procurement exceeds \$75,000.00 on approved government sites such as FedBizOpps (FBO) or General Services Administration (GSA; Berson, 2014; Waugh, 2015). The FAR is significant to the study because it validates the process that government agencies must use to secure the necessary products and services. The FAR is also beneficial to this study because vendors and contractors must know the FAR to understand the procurement process to submit proposals that are equivalent to the need of the government and to gain insight on what government contract specialist must consider when looking through proposals before selecting a vendor or contractor. When vendors or contractors understand regulations such as the FAR, they understand what is necessary to submit successful proposals for winning bids to provide services or products for a government agency.

The procurement process allows contracting officers to acquire good and service from external sources through the competitive bidding process. Waugh (2015) outlined steps necessary for vendors or contractors to understand how the procurement process work based on the type of product or service the government needs. The FAR can be intense if you do not understand how to utilize it to support the need. The FAR has 53 parts that include subsections that relate to the acquisition regulations used to secure government contracts (Berson, 2014). Waugh (2015) found the following five steps in his article to acclimate people to the FAR:

1. Read the question
2. Identify the important key elements
3. Conduct market research
4. Evaluate the results of market research and key elements and
5. Document result from findings

The five steps allow users to navigate through the FAR based on questions that apply to the action, the subject of the request, and what parts of the FAR cover items for procurement. Berson (2014) and Waugh (2015) argued the benefits of this study might outline knowledge that is necessary to successfully understand the FAR, how to find what part of the FAR applies to the need of the government and the importance of the FAR as it relates to the need of the government. Contracting officers using the FAR effectively promotes successful solicitations that decrease protests and ensure that contractors and vendors are compliance.

Small Business Administration (SBA). The SBA does not provide direct oversight of how the government conducts business. But government agencies try to establish relationships with the SBA to promote small businesses' submission of proposals allowing them to provide services and products to government agencies. The SBA recommended a bill that would require government agencies to set-aside 23% of contracts awarded for small businesses (Cassar, Ittner, & Cavalluzzo, 2015; Fontana, 2014). FAR Part 19 provide guidelines that government contract specialist must follow that is directly related to small business programs (Federal Acquisition Regulation, 2017). FAR Part 19 established regulations that allow small businesses such as: (a) service disabled veterans; (b) HUBZone, economically disadvantaged women-owned small businesses; (c) women-owned small businesses; and (d) small businesses to participate in programs that enable them to submit proposals to potentially secure winning bids (Federal Acquisition Regulation, 2017). FAR Part19 also established the following: (a) applicable business size necessary for an organization to be considered a small business; (b) specific policies that encourage small business to participate in the bidding process; (c) locating potential small businesses who may be able to provide services to government agencies; (d) regulations of solicitations; (e) data collection and the process for reporting that data; (f) determining fair and price reasonableness; (g) protest rights of small businesses; and (h) determining the status of small businesses (Federal Acquisition Regulation, 2017). This research is critical to the proposed study because it emphasizes regulations that government agencies, contractors, and vendors must know when submitting proposals to win government contracts. Cassar et al. (2015)

and Fontana (2014) found that because of the magnitude of the FAR and the inability to easily understand it, there are knowledge barriers that inhibit the bidding process. The SBA offers many contracting opportunities for small business and increases competition among small businesses that may have a difficult time gaining business opportunities with government agencies.

Veteran Affairs Acquisition Regulations (VAAR). The VAAR is another critical aspect of creating solicitations that promote successful solicitations. The VAAR are guidelines established as an extension of the FAR to support the Department of Veteran Affairs procurements of supplies and services which include construction (FAR, 2017). The authority that supports the VAAR comes from the secretary of Veteran Affairs with authority 38 U.S.C. 501; 40 U.S.C. 121(c); and 48 CFR 1.301–1.304 (Waugh, 2015). The VAAR is only an extension of the FAR with regulations directly from the FAR (VAAR, 2017). The VAAR does not overrule the FAR (Waugh, 2017). When utilizing the VAAR for VA procurements, it is imperative for end users to know how to utilize the VAAR to find the appropriate information to support the procurement (Cassar et al., 2015). The VAAR and the FAR are used in conjunction with one another except for the following: the VAAR implements the FAR when additional information is needed that explicitly states the FAR or for regulations not covered in the FAR. The VAAR supplements the FAR when there are additional policies and procedures explicitly to the VA. The applicability of the VAAR and FAR applies to all VA acquisitions unless otherwise stated when making procurements with appropriated funds, supply funds, and

general post funds (VAAR, 2017). Contracting officers use the VAAR to implement policies and procedures for VA's acquisition of supplies and services.

The VAAR supports the premise of this study because it underlines the policies and procedures that directly impact the world of contract management and administration. If independent contractors do not know the rules and regulations that apply to the VA when preparing contract solicitations, it is difficult to efficiently award contracts and avoid protests. Becoming knowledgeable of the VAAR and the use of it in conjunction with the FAR will promote social change for businesses by focusing on educating contractors and vendors on proper preparation of government proposals from an issuing agencies solicitation (Waugh, 2015). Adequate preparation of government proposals may lead to a decrease in protests and an increase in successful proposal submissions (Cassar et al., 2015). This proposed study will also influence social change by promoting future government procurement processes that will streamline the antiquated methods to change the current procurement process effectively and by educating contractors and vendors on proper preparation of government proposals.

Proper usage of the VAAR promote successful procurement processes. The VAAR is the system that speaks directly to regulations that the VA must abide by when procuring services and products (Waugh, 2015). The regulations of the VAAR constitute policies for maintenance and administrative privileges of the VAAR, policies, practices, and procedures that allow agencies to deviate from the VAAR and the FAR (Cassar et al., 2015). The VAAR has subchapters within each chapter including the subparts, subsections, and sections (VAAR, 2017). The purpose of the VAAR is to provide

standard operating procedures and policies for securing supplies and services including construction with government funds such as supply fund monies and general post funds (VAAR, 2017). Fox and Morris (2015) and VAAR (2017) aided in providing valuable insight into government contract specialist, agencies, contractors, and vendors who are directly involved in the procurement process. The VAAR is a set of regulations that serve as a knowledge barrier if not correctly applied when securing government contracts. Understanding the VAAR allows end users to overcome barriers that inhibit the procurement process that lead to government protests.

Ethics in government contracting. Ethics in government contracting promotes successful contract administration and the ability to satisfy the need of the agency. Ethics are the moral principles that control an individual's behavior and the decisions that they make (Michaelson, 2016). In government contracting, there are several issues that may affect the decisions that government agency employees make when managing government contracts and the awarding of the contracts. Issues noted include: (a) conflict of interest; (b) fraud; unreasonable restrictions; (c) kickbacks; (d) receiving gifts from potential vendors; (e) antitrust violations; (f) employment opportunities; and (g) misuse of authority based on government position (Tribou, Lewellyn, Logsdon, 2015). Another issue noted as being unfair is unreasonable vendors tend to protest source selection thus halting the contract award process. Under Title 48 of the Code of Federal Regulations which is in FAR Part 3, discusses improper business practices and personal conflict of interests (Tribou et al., 2015). Government agencies utilize internal control mechanisms to decrease ethical issues or concerns related to procuring needs such as (a) training

opportunities; (b) monitoring; (c) auditing of government contracts; fraud hotline to report suspected abuse or ethical violations (d) and; (e) whistleblower protection to those who report such instances (Neu, Everett, Rahaman, 2015). FAR Part 52.203-13 through FAR Part 52.203-19 are critical components that allow government agencies to control ethics through laws that identify training, monitoring, and protection for those who report ethical issues or concerns (Tribou et al., 2015). It is crucial for government contracting officer and contractors to be vigilant in their adherence to all laws and regulations to avoid violations of the law. Training in business ethics are critical in demonstrating commitment to doing everything possible to avoid violations of the law.

Ethical training is critical and promotes compliance from both contracting officers and vendors. Training opportunities to identify potential fraud include ongoing business ethics awareness and ethics compliance programs (Delmas, 2015). Training teaches government employees how to recognize and report ethical issues and afford employees the opportunity to initiate corrective action that will eliminate ethical dilemmas (Lohier, 2011). It is beneficial for all government contracting staff to could identify ethical issues, which in turn will reduce protests and increase successful proposals. Policy mandates that government contracting employees conduct themselves with the highest degree of honesty and integrity reflected in FAR 3.1002[a] (Tribou et al., 2015). Ethics training occurs on an annual basis, with posted reminders to include the reporting hotline. Training opportunities promote positive ethical decisions and social change in government contracting. Social change includes value-based leadership, skill building, and innovative strategies to build and maintain professional ethics.

Integrity and compliance along annual auditing of government contracts may ensure ethical compliance. Effective monitoring and auditing of government contracts promote compliance and reduce ethical concerns. FAR 52.203-13 (c) (2) identifies internal control measures that government agencies utilize to reduce or eliminate violations (FAR, 2017). Control measures include: (a) establishing and implementing standards to control inappropriate conduct; (b) corrective measures; (c) criminal misconduct; (d) periodic assessment; and (e) due diligence (FAR, 2017). Contracting personnel must take all precautions to measure and control ethical issues that will portray government agencies negatively. The ability to monitor contracts and audit contracts reduce protests and increase competition among prospective vendors. Government agencies hire individuals to periodically audit contracts to see if ethical issues occurred. These individuals serve as a legal team that contracting personnel can utilize to reduce ethical issues thus reducing protests (Delmas, 2015). Efficient monitoring and auditing promote social change and effective business practices, for the development of strategies to streamline change in ethical violations, used to uncover convoluted processes to implement or change existing practices and standards.

Whistleblowing can save billions of taxpayers' dollars and protecting whistleblowers against retaliation is crucial. The whistleblower protection falls under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 that mandates employee rights and remedies for the protection of individuals who report: (a) ethical issues; (b) concerns; (c) violations; (d) fraud, waste; and (e) abuse (Berrios & McKinney, 2017; Delmas, 2015). It is mandatory for government agencies to display posters denoting hotline number(s) and

to maintain a website that displays an electronic version of the hotline information (Berrios & McKinney, 2017; Delmas, 2015). The hotline information should be visible to individuals who wish to report any fraudulent activity or ethical concerns to the appropriate personnel. Notifying government personnel, contractors or vendors, and subcontractors of whistleblower protection promotes an environment where individuals who chose to report will not become privy to adverse actions such as (a) reprimand, (b) discrimination, (c) job termination or lay off, (d) blacklisting, (e) failure to promote, (f) demoting, (g) loss of benefits, (h) intimidation, (i) harassment, (j) threats, and (k) reduction of pay (Berrios & McKinney, 2017; Delmas, 2015). The reporting hotline and whistleblower protection act promote social change by creating accountability and transparency. Accountability and transparency regarding ethical misconduct or ethical concerns also promote clarity when handling unwanted behavior according to policy, thus reducing protests, and ethical misconduct while promoting positive social change and better business practices.

Government Accountability Office

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) is an agency that audits government spending and operations. They focus on the use of taxpayer dollars, performance improvement, and accountability of the federal government (Curry, 2016). In government contracting, GAO is highly recognized for keeping the government compliant based on strict standards, policies, and regulations that directly impact how government contracting operates on a daily basis (Bunting, 2013). Employees within the GAO oversee protests and legal issues with contract solicitations through audits or

complaints. This process allows government contracting to operate responsibly and ethically.

Protests. Source selection is a critical process that government contracting specialists oversee to control vendors and contractors bidding on government contracts. GAO facilitates and handles all government contract award protests. Maser, Subbotin, and Thompson (2012) employed data that comes from the GAO, FBO, and FEDMINE to analyze the number of protests based on the type of contracts vendors and contractors bid on from 2001 to 2009. GAO researchers showed: (a) the number of protests from 2001 to 2009; (b) how many came from small business versus large businesses; (c) cost claims; (d) request for reconsideration; (e) the number of cases closed; and (f) percent of protests sustained based on opportunism and how protests may or may not affect third-party opportunism (Curry, 2016; Maser et al., 2012). GAO researchers tested two hypotheses dealing with GAO's protest disposition and protests that deal with the decision to file protests (Maser et al., 2012). This qualitative study is beneficial because I researched factors that contribute to government protests to identify possible knowledge barriers that exist when bidding on government contracts. The ability to identify those barriers, contribute to understanding how to bid on contracts, how to utilize the contracting system, and how to interpret the statement of work (SOW) or request for proposal makes it easier to win bids. I have identified that there is a gap in knowledge in the world of contracting but identifying why those barriers exist is critical in supporting this proposed research. Identifying barriers may help agencies implement a plan of action to assist contractors and vendors, which will reduce protests. One of the goals of this proposed

study is to find the cause of the increase in the government protest percentage on a yearly basis and what factors linger from 1 year to the next.

Contract solicitations postings. Contract solicitation postings are critical in government contracting because contracting officers post opportunities for potential contractors and vendors to bid on. General Services Administration (GSA) established in 1949 by President Harry Truman, restructured the administrative efforts of the federal government (Charles, 2014). GSA consolidated the following agencies into one federal agency: (a) National Archives Establishment, (b) the Federal Works Agency, (c) Public Buildings Administration, (d) the Bureau of Federal Supply and Office of Contract Settlement, and (e) the War Assets Administration (Regulations, 2014). Combining these agencies allowed one agency to control and manage supplies and offer workplaces for federal employees. GSA's mission is to provide goods, records management, ensure emergency preparedness, and stockpile supplies needed for wartime (Rules and Regulations: General Services Administration, 2014). GSA allows contracting officers to procure services and supplies that satisfy the need of the agency while increasing competition among vendors.

GSA help manage and support the basic functioning of federal agencies. GSA provides consolidated procurement practices for the federal government by offering products, services, and facilities that are necessary to serve the public (Charles 2014; Kelly, 2018). The top priorities of GSA are (a) to deliver value and savings through purchasing power; (b) serving their associates; (c) expansion of business opportunities for small businesses to include veteran, women, minority, and disadvantaged entrepreneurs;

(d) sustainability through green savings; (e) innovative practices and processes; and (f) constructing a sturdier GSA (Evans & Campos, 2013). GSA streamlines the contracting processes and systems through simplification and promotes outstanding customer service among vendors and contractors to meet the need of the government (Goldman, Rocholl & So, 2013). GSA also focuses on best practices and strategies used to eliminate or reduce the federal footprint by offering sustainable products and services at an affordable rate by innovation and partnering with other agencies and vendors (Kelly, 2018). GSA provides an abundance of procurement support that is beneficial to contracting officers and vendors.

GSA provides opportunities for contractors through framework agreements and e-procurement instruments in public procurement. Goldman et al. (2013) and Evans and Campos (2013) stated that GSA is beneficial to contractors for 12 important reasons to include the following:

1. Modernize acquisition processes
2. Not required to synopsise
3. Socioeconomic determinations determined at the contract level
4. Ability to utilize small business set-asides
5. Subcontracting plans are managed and controlled at the contract level
6. GSA executes the contractor responsibility determination
7. Cost price analysis is not a requirement for GSA orders based on FAR Subpart 15.4
8. Fair and reasonable prices with additional discounts

9. Debriefing, not applicable based on FAR part 15
10. Competitive range determination is not applicable
11. GSA schedules are a competitive procedure based on FAR 6.102 (d)(3)
12. Availability of millions of products and services

GSA has prequalification requirements that a vendor must meet in order to participate in GSA scheduled offerings. Prequalification standards for a GSA account are positive past performance, a minimum of 2 years since the establishment of the business, and earnings of a least \$25,000 per year (Charles 2014; Kelly, 2018). Contractors can decide if GSA is right for them through research, understanding how GSA works, attending training on GSA, and registering their business by getting a Data Universal Numbering System (DUNS), utilizing SBA to determine the size of the business, and past performance evaluation (Charles, 2014). Potential contractors should conduct market research on the government's market to determine if GSA is the right fit for their business. Resources that contractors should investigate are: (a) selling to GSA rather than other potential agencies, (b) forecasting opportunities for contractors, (c) FBO, (d) Federal Procurement Data Systems, (e) USA Spending, and (f) SmallBusiness.Data.gov (Rules and Regulations: General Services Administration, 2014). Contractors should also gain a greater understanding of the type of contracts and subcontracts maximized through GSA.

There are mandatory training requirements for all contractors who want to become part of the GSA community. Contractors must participate in the pathway to success and readiness assessment (Regulations, 2014). Proof of the completion of

training requirements occurs before a vendor can respond to a solicitation (Kelly, 2018). Lastly, a completed registration is necessary by a contractor's business before the award of the contract. Becoming a legal known entity is critical to the registration of the contractor's business because it verifies that the contractor's business is legit.

FBO is a great way for vendors to compete for business opportunities with government agencies. FBO is a federal government web-based system utilized for solicitation purposes over \$25,000 (Bunting, 2013). The web-based portal allows vendors to search for business opportunities with different government agencies. To take advantage of the portal, vendors must establish an account based on the vendors DUNS and Bradstreet, Commercial and Government Entity Code, and Marketing Partner Identification Number (Ferris & Houston, 2016). Once a vendor establishes their account, they can (a) set up search agents to highlight potential business opportunities; (b) add solicitations to a watch list; (c) add their business to the potential vendor list; (d) review other potential vendors interested in the same opportunity; and (e) review documents that needs submitting as a packet to establish potential business opportunities and competitive opportunities among other potential vendors who may be competing for the same opportunities (Haim Faridian, 2015). FBO allow government agencies to post opportunities for vendors to promote competition and establishes effective contract solicitation based on successful proposals.

FBO allows for vendor to create and establish different ways track solicitations they may be of interest to their company. When a vendor establishes their account, they must maintain an efficient buyer profile; vendors can create, modify, amend, or cancel

opportunity notice, manage package contents, and accessibility to package documents to support business opportunities and establish an award (Sniderman, 2017). Exploring opportunities on FedBizOpps.gov allow vendors to gain valuable insight into products and services needed by government agencies (Wyld, 2013). The vendor must keep in mind that the FBO portal contains solicitations that are over \$25,000 and does not include state and local opportunities (Bunting, 2013). Understanding how FBO work and how to use it to your advantage promotes a competitive advantage that may increase the chance of vendors responding to solicitations timely and successfully.

Vendors can use FBO to determine if a solicitation is worth responding to by evaluating the solicitation document that is attached to the announcement. One of the greatest advantages of the FBO portal is the ability to see bid documents, which vendors can utilize to determine if a solicitation is worth bidding on (Winchell, 2014). Vendors can search based on different criteria such as the following:

1. Solicitation number
2. Keyword search
3. Procurement type
4. Date solicitation posted
5. Date of last modification
6. Deadline for solicitation response
7. Award date of the contract
8. Place of performance based on state and zip code
9. Code of set-aside

10. Classification code
11. North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) code
12. Location of agency or office
13. Recovery and Reinvestment Act Action
14. Active solicitations
15. Justification and approval authority (Shehade, 2013)

Searching for possible business adventures with a government agency is critical to contractors and vendors. The ability to understand how to search promotes success in finding opportunities. Bunting (2013) and Winchell (2014) focused on finding solicitations as well as increasing competition among others, which allow all potential vendors to get a fair chance to compete for business opportunities. FBO is a wonderful way to find business opportunities. These articles support the solicitation process based on documents uploaded with the solicitation. Posting solicitations allow vendors and contractors to submit a valuable response along with documentation to increase the likelihood of establishing positive business relationships with government agencies.

Contract Proposals

Contract proposals are critical in government contracting. Proposals are written requests that are used by government agencies to buy something based on the need of the government. There are many components to a proposal, but the scope or objectives need to be clearly defined to support the need of the government. Many companies aspire to do business with the government, but there are many reasons why some are more successful than others. Proposals are unique, and it is best to understand how to write successful

proposals based on the government's need. Performance work statements, statement of objectives, SOW, past performance, and technical evaluations can be used for building winning proposals based on the need and how organizations can satisfy the government's need.

Performance work statement (PWS). A PWS is a document created in support of a performance based acquisition. The document details the specifics of the government's needs, objectives, and measurable outcomes of the acquisition (Decarolis, 2014; Eesley, 2013). A PWS describes the present and past performance of a vendor. Government agencies utilize a PWS to determine if the contractor can successfully fulfill the need of the government (Decarolis, 2014). One of the greatest attributes of a PWS is the ability to eliminate proposals based on the contractor's submission of how they can get the work done versus how the work will be completed (Eesley, 2013). A PWS also creates competition among different contractors that can streamline successful contract award and administration (Eesley, 2013). The requirements of an effective and efficient PWS should include the following: clear and explicit performance of the contractor, an analysis of the desired outcome, and an analytical process that will control the performance from start to finish (Decarolis, 2014). A PWS as a legal binding document that supports the government agency ensures prompt completion of the contractors' work and the issuance of timely payments on behalf of the government agency.

Statement of work. An SOW is a component of the solicitation that provides critical information to potential vendors and contractors. The SOW is part of a contract document that creates and defines requirements that a contractor can utilize to determine

the need of the government (Master, 2012). The information required in the SOW is specific to the need of the government based on the scope of the product or service that necessary, relevant documents, and requirements of the product or service based on the scope (Salmeri, Easley, & Wilson, 2015). The SOW is specific to the need of the government thus facilitating well-written proposals utilized to streamline the contract award and contract administration process (Master, 2013; Moschler & Weitzner, 2012). The SOW aligns with the milestones and phases of the contract to ensure successful contract completion (Moschler & Weitzner, 2012). Master (2013) and Salmeri et al. (2015) postulated the SOW must specifically state in detail the requirements of the work performed by the contractor. The SOW is a legal document that allows the contracting officer to control performance, rights, and obligations related to the services or products being procured.

Statement of objectives (SOO). A statement of objectives (SOO) is a component of the solicitation that provides critical information to potential vendors and contractors. The SOO prepared by the government agency procuring products or services measures the overall performance of the contractor inserted into the solicitation (FAR, 2017). The SOO is a broad statement of the performance objectives necessary to support the need of the government through an innovative approach or technology (Vitasek & Nyden, 2012). A professionally written SOO includes a technical approach, performance standards, and a quality assurance surveillance plan based on business practices of commercial industries (Vitasek & Nyden, 2012). Efficient SOOs are created based on market

research, risk assessment analysis, appropriate government regulations such as the FAR depending on the agency and required documents that support the procurement.

Past performance. The past performance of potential vendors is accessed by contracting officers to ensure contractors or vendors can perform the job and to check to ensure their history is satisfactory. Hefetz and Warner (2004) focus on the lack of past performance history and knowledge of the government procurement process as a barrier to securing government contracts. Schaengold et al. (2009) expand on properly preparing proposals for solicitation of bids, which will help increase knowledge in preparing proposals and reduce protests. Both Hefetz and Warner and Schaengold et al. focused on different barriers that inhibited the procurement process. However, the outcome of government contracting unsuccessful procurement processes are interlinked (Hefetz & Warner, 2004; Schaengold et al., 2009). Past performance must be properly accessed before the award of the contract to ensure the contractor or vendor are reliable enough to perform the identified need of the solicitation.

Evaluation factors/technical evaluations. Evaluation factors are created to ensure the vendor or contractor are capable of performing the need of the agency. Evaluation factors and technical factors are critical components of a proposal and solicitations utilized to evaluate the experience, procedural approach, corporate and human resources, quality control and past performance factors, and cost/price factors of an organization (Oke, 2018). Technical Factors are significantly more important than the cost or price in some instances (Guo, Chang-Richards, Wilkinson, & Li, 2014). Hayward et al. (2014) and Oke (2018) highlighted the main goal of the technical factors is to award contracts to

organizations that provide the best overall value to the government. Therefore, evaluating the performance and capability of the organization is sometimes more important than cost or price evaluation alone.

Price is a factor when awarding contracts and understanding how to evaluate what is technical acceptable along with price helps contracting officers award contracts to the successful vendor. In some cases, the government may award contracts to organizations whose price is higher to achieve higher performance standards that benefit the government (Hunter & Nielsen, 2013). Technical Evaluation Criteria are as follows:

Factor 1: Key personnel and personnel management

Factor 2: Transition plan

Factor 3: Corporate experience and capabilities

Factor 4: General technical approach

Factor 5: Quality assurance (Hunter & Nielsen, 2013)

Technical evaluation criteria allow contracting officers to determine if the vendor is capable of doing the job and the extent of their capabilities. The government uses the above technical factors submitted in their proposal with the ratings of exceptional, good, acceptable, marginal, or unacceptable (Sochon, 2015). Exceptional means the organization significantly exceeded the minimum requirements with a prominent level of success with no noted weaknesses or deficiencies (Sochon, 2015). Good means the organization exceeds all minimum criteria with an above average rate of success with no significant weaknesses, minor weaknesses, or deficiencies (Sochon, 2015). Acceptable means that the organization meets the minimum requirements with an average rate of

success with no significant weaknesses or deficiencies that cannot be corrected (Sochon, 2015). Marginal means the organization failed to meet at least one or more minimum requirements with a low rate of success with major weaknesses and a considerable number of deficiencies (Sochon, 2015). Unacceptable means the organization failed to meet any minimum requirements with major revisions needed in the organizations' proposal and the organization has a low rate of success (Sochon, 2015). Understanding how to rate proposals will help contracting offer determine what vendors are technical acceptable and what vendor are not technical unacceptable in hopes of satisfying the need of the agency.

Evaluation factors are used to ensure the vendor understands the need and can support the need of the agency. Iossa and Rey (2014) and Sochon (2015) suggested past performance evaluation factors will assess the ability of the organization to perform and the quality of work that the organization has performed in the past. The government is pursuing that ability to determine if the organization's experience will improve its technical capability to perform and if the organization can deliver quality goods or services that are corresponding to time and cost. Past performance accessed through government databases and trade literature gives contracting officers and managers the ability to determine if the organization is worthy of doing business with the government and can satisfy the need of the government in its entirety. Past performance evaluation factors are as follows: neutral, outstanding, good, acceptable, and unsatisfactory. Neutral means there is no past performance available to evaluate; while outstanding means there were no identified issues, concerns, or risk that will inhibit the government from

receiving timely service and contract performance (Manuel, 2015). Good means there may be minor risk associated with the organizations' past performance that will inhibit the government from receiving products or services promptly and full performance of the contract (Manuel, 2015). Acceptable means there is a potential risk where the government may not receive products or services on time or at full contract performance (Manuel, 2015). Unsatisfactory performance is a clear indication that the organization will not be able to perform according to government requirements (Manuel, 2015). The evaluation of technical factors and past performance allows an organization to demonstrate if their organization can satisfy the requirements of the government outlined in the request for proposal (Manuel, 2015; Selviaridis & Wynstra, 2015). A careful evaluation of all factors as well as following the FAR to determine which organization can best perform the services or deliverables associated with the need for the government.

Technical evaluations factors are critical in proposal evaluation. Manuel (2015) and Selviaridis and Wynstra (2015) postulated technical evaluation factors that identify acceptable and unacceptable performance ratings. If there are technical aspects identified in the solicitation by the government, organizations can address these factors in their proposals to show the government how they can meet and exceed expectations. The ability to meet both past performance and technical criteria allow organizations to become competitive when submitting adequate contract proposals in hopes of winning government contracts, establishing a positive performance history, the facilitation of positive communication among stakeholders, and the ability to satisfy the scope, cost, and schedule associated with full contract performance.

Contract award. The award of a contract is critical in the award administration process. Price reasonableness is an assessment and evaluation by government contracting officers utilized to determine if the proposed offer is fair and reasonable (Choi, 2015). The purpose of price reasonableness is to determine a competitive range based on current market conditions and knowledge of the current market (Oberdalhoff, 2016). Price reasonableness should be determined before the award of a contract and before placing an order (Chukhray, Melnikov, & Smyrczynski, 2014). Fair and reasonable pricing can be utilized to evaluate quotes, bids, and proposals for source selection as well as a negotiation tactic to increase the competitiveness of pricing (Ipsaro, 2011). The Federal Acquisition Streamlining Act of 1994 sets the precedence of what information is necessary and what information is utilized to assess and evaluate price reasonableness (Coviello, Guglielmo, & Spagnolo, 2017). Coviello et al. (2017) and Ipsaro (2011) suggested the goal of the Federal Acquisition Streamlining Act was to eliminate or reduce barriers as it pertains to procurement and fixed pricing. Price reasonableness is critical in the contract award phase which ensures the agency is able to satisfy its need with fair pricing expectations.

The following techniques are useful in determining if pricing is fair and reasonable based on FAR 15.404-1(b)(2) including (a) comparison of proposed prices received in response to the solicitation, (b) comparison of previously proposed prices and previous government and commercial contract prices with current proposed prices for like items, (c) use of parametric estimating methods/application of rough yardsticks to highlight significant inconsistencies that warrant additional pricing inquiry, (d)

comparison with competitive published price lists, (e) published market prices of commodities, (f) similar indexes and discount or rebate arrangements, (g) comparison of proposed prices with independent government cost estimates, (h) comparison of proposed prices with prices obtained through market research for the same or similar items, and (i) analysis of pricing information provided by the offeror (Wang, Shen, Zhang & Lei, 2016). Fair and reasonable pricing is critical in the government because of the scrutiny of Congress and the public watching the spending of taxpayer's money (Moye, 2016). Understanding how to determine fair pricing and how it impacts the award of contracts will help vendors prepare successful contract proposals.

The FAR outline factors that contribute to price reasonableness that the government use to promote competition. According to the FAR, there are two methods recommended when determining price reasonableness such as comparison of proposed prices received in response to the solicitation and comparison of previously proposed prices, and previous government and commercial contract prices with current proposed prices for like items (Moye, 2014). The two techniques help government contract officers streamline fair pricing and competition among contractors. Moye (2014) and Wang et al. (2016) discussed how government agencies review contract proposals and how the price is effective in determining the competitive range of pricing that directly impacts the solicitation. The importance of conducting a thorough price analysis from a contracting officer's standpoint increases integrity in the contract administration process, increase better judgment in analyzing contract solicitations along with pricing, and promotes buying power when using taxpayers' dollars.

Pricing is a major factor in the contracting process because contracting officers can competitively award contracts based on price. There are many pricing factors evaluated during the contracting award process also known as contract types, which are part of FAR Part 16. The major factors utilized to determine what contract type is most appropriate for the contract are as follows: (a) price competition, (b) price analysis, (c) cost analysis, (d) complexity and type of contract, (e) combining contract types, (f) urgency of the requirement, (g) period of performance or length of production run, (h) contractors' technical capabilities and financial responsibility, (i) adequacy of the contractor's accounting system, (j) concurrent contracts, (k) extent and nature of proposed subcontracting, and (l) acquisition history (FAR, 2017). Upon establishing what type of contract is most appropriate, the contracting officer must insert FAR Part 52.216-1, type of contract, in the solicitation (FAR, 2017). There are many different types of contracts that allow contracting officers to satisfy the need of the agency that promote competition among vendors.

The types of contracts included under FAR 16

1. Fixed-price contracts
2. Cost reimbursement contracts
3. Incentive contracts
4. Indefinite-delivery contracts
5. Time-and-materials, labor-hour, and letter contracts (FAR, 2017).

The type of contract and cost are critical components of contracting. Moye (2014) and Wang et al. (2016) posited that cost is always a factor in contracting and knowing

and understanding the advantages of the different types of contracts can ultimately reduce cost, saving taxpayer's money, and utilizing taxpayer's dollars to the government agencies advantage. Understanding the different types of contracts can also be an advantage to vendors. If they understand the types of contracts, they can better develop a response to the solicitation with the goal of winning that specific contract. Depending on the type of contract, a vendor can incorporate different information in support of winning that bid that others vendor may not be aware of, or other vendors may not be able to satisfy certain requirements of the contract thus increasing competition. Vendors can also use this time to improve the agencies understanding of what could be necessary depending on the type of contract to satisfy the need of the agency at a reduced cost or through innovation. Understanding the contracting process creates competitive advantages that vendors can use to avoid common mistakes when competing for federal government contracts and the ability to compete for future contracts.

Post Award

The post-award phase of government contracting is critical and can serve as a competitive advantage to contractors or vendors. The post-award phase occurs after the contract has been awarded to a vendor or contractor (Oyegoke, 2016). During this phase, the vendor or contractor can request a debriefing. Contracting officer use debriefings to talk with the vendors or contractors to gain a better understanding of why their organization did not win the contract (FAR, 2017). Through this phase of contracting, vendors or contractors can learn from the experience, so they are more knowledgeable in the future.

Debriefing. Debriefings are critical in the post-award phase of contract administration. Contracting officers can use debriefings as a training opportunity for contractors or vendors. Debriefings are part of FAR 15.506 and utilized in the contract award process to explain to unsuccessful offerors the basis of the selection and contract award (Davis, 2016). A debriefing in the post-award phase of contracting must occur only by written request received within 3 days after the offeror received notification of contract award and the location of the debriefing is at the discretion of the contracting officer (Davis, 2016; Defense FAR Supplement, 2017). Feldman (2015) and Oyegoke (2016) suggested that debriefings shall occur no later than 5 days after written notification of a debriefing request, and the offeror notified of the date, time, and location of the debriefing by electronic means with a follow-up written notification of the debriefing to the offeror (Feldman, 2015). Requests not received promptly may not extend past the deadline for filing a protest and debriefing (Oyegoke, 2016). Debriefings conducted by one of the following three ways: orally, in writing, and by any other method deemed adequate to the contracting officer (FAR, 2017). The chairperson of the debriefing session will be the contracting officer, and any individual who participated in evaluations shall provide documentation to support their findings (Defense FAR Supplement, 2017). All information discussed in the debriefing becomes part of the contract file (Defense FAR Supplement, 2017; FAR, 2017).

Debriefing afford vendors the opportunity to get clarification as to why their contract proposals were unsuccessful. Debriefings must contain pertinent information that

will help vendors learn what they did right and wrong in hopes of winning future contracts based on successful contract proposals.

Debriefings shall include:

1. Evaluation of weaknesses and deficiencies in the proposal received from the offeror, if applicable
2. Technical rating, past performance information, and overall cost of price analysis, if applicable
3. Raking of the offeror, if applicable
4. A summary of the basis of the award
5. The make and model of item(s) for commercial items to be delivered by the successful offeror, if applicable
6. Responses to questions regarding source selection procedures contained in the solicitation, applicable regulations, and applicable authorities.

Debriefing shall not include:

1. A point-by-point comparison of all offers received
2. Trade secrets
3. Privileged or confidential information as it pertains to manufacturing and techniques
4. Commercial information and financial information that is confidential to include cost breakdown, profit, indirect cost rates, and similar information
5. Names of individuals who provided past performance information.

Requesting a formal debriefing can be critical to the future success of potential vendors. Feldman (2015) and Oyegoke (2016) outlined the importance of requesting a debriefing after the award of the contract as well as the requirements and timeline for requesting a debriefing. Vendors should request a debriefing regardless of them winning or losing the contract because it expands the vendor's knowledge of the agencies expectations and how they were not able to satisfy that need. Understanding the need will help with future solicitations by increasing the competitiveness of vendors, and the ability for vendors to learn more about the contracting process with hopes of doing business with agencies. Debriefings also allow the offeror to gain insight into the vendor's strengths and weaknesses, past performance history, cost, technical ratings, deliverables, overall ranking, and summary of rationale (FAR, 2017). This proposed study will give the vendor an abundance of information that may help them submit better responses to solicitations in the future. The information from the debriefing will allow the vendor to make an informed decision as to filing a protest or not.

Transition

Section 1 included the following topics: (a) background of the problem, (b) problem statement, (c) purpose statement, (d) nature of the study, (e) research question, (f) interview questions, (g) conceptual framework, (h) operational definitions, (i) assumptions, limitations, and delimitations of the study, (j) significance of the study, and (k) a review of the professional and academic literature. The literature review provided an in-depth background in government contracting. The review of professional and academic literature covered the following topics: (a) the objective theory of contract law,

(b) stakeholder theory, (c) competition types, (d) laws of government contracting, (e) ethics in government contracting, (f) Government Accountability Office, (g) contract solicitation postings, (h) contract proposals, (i) past performance, (j) evaluation factors/technical evaluations, (k) contract award, and (l) debriefings.

Section 2 will focus on the project. Section 2 will cover: (a) the purpose statement, (b) the role of the researcher, (c) participants, (d) research method and design, (e) population and sampling, (f) ethical research, (g) data collection instruments and techniques, (h) data organization technique, (i) data analysis, (j) reliability and validity, and (k) a summary and transition. The presentation of findings, applications to professional practice, implications for social change, recommendations for actions and future research, the researcher's reflections, and a conclusion will be included in section 3.

Section 2: The Project

For this project, I explored strategies that successful government contract managers use to prepare effective contract proposals to help reduce protests and ensure business viability. Section 2 begins with the purpose statement and the role of the researcher. In this section, I explain the participants in this study, research method and design, population, and sampling of research. Following these sections will be ethical research, data collection instruments, data collection technique, data organization technique, data analysis, and finally a discussion of reliability and validity of the research process.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to determine what strategies federal government contract managers use to prepare effective contract proposals to help ensure business viability. The population for this study comprised of nine federal contract managers, including government contract specialists, contracting officers, and supervisors employed with the contracting office located in Alabama, South Carolina, and Georgia. The completion of this study might affect business practices and promote social change by reducing the costs associated with contract protests, promoting effective and efficient utilization of taxpayer dollars, increasing positive contractor performance, and identifying strategies used to develop practical contract proposals. Findings from this study may contribute to constructive social change by improving corporate social responsibility through accountability and transparent processes that will reduce protest and facilitate proper contract management.

Role of the Researcher

I am the primary data collection instrument in this study because I collected data and ensured the data collected from the participants depicted their truth and that I delivered the participants' information accurately. It is appropriate for a human instrument to facilitate data collection rather than using inventories, questionnaires, or machines, which may not depict truth and accuracy (Khan, 2014). As the researcher of this study, I used a qualitative multiple case study to develop a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. The role of the researcher includes data collection and analysis (Collins & Cooper, 2014). In this study, my role was to use a flexible, multifaceted data analysis approach based on McCormack's lenses (Fusch & Ness, 2015). The use of McCormack's lenses provides a flexible framework for this study through the analysis of complex narratives (Fusch & Ness, 2015). I used the interview protocol to help prepare for the interviews. Preparing for the interviews beforehand helped streamline the interviews and adhering to a semistructured interview protocol ensures reliability. Using the protocol ensured I relayed valuable information to the interviewee, such as the purpose of the interview, confidentiality, and what I planned to do with the information obtained during the interview.

To successfully conduct research for this study, I identified related biases, assumptions, perceived expectations, and life experiences (Sanjari, Bahramnezhad, Fomani, Shoghi, & Cheraghi, 2014). One of my roles was to mitigate bias through an objective lens by upholding an impartial role and observing ethical procedures outlined in The Belmont Report (Sanjari et al., 2014). In this qualitative research study, I predicted

challenges that the research participants may encounter before conducting the research (Darawsheh, 2014). Once challenges were identified, I reduced or eliminated those challenges by focusing on the research question and interview questions, choosing the appropriate study participants, and analyzing data accurately. To mitigate bias during data collection, categorization was critical (Yin, 2018). Due to my limited knowledge and experience in contracting, I used an interview protocol (see Appendix A) to help mitigate bias in this study. Member checking was another tool that I used to reduce bias. Harvey (2015) posited that researchers use member checking to ensure they interpret the participants' information correctly and accurately. For this study, I used categorizing and member checking to mitigate bias by using in-depth semistructured interviews, transcription of participants' interview answers, and member checking, which allowed me to interpret the participants' responses and verify accuracy.

Sanjari et al. (2014) noted that protection of participants' personal information is necessary based on The Belmont Report principles. Informed consent from participants, mitigating risk, maximizing the benefits of this study, and protecting the research participants safety and confidentiality, was included in the ethical guidelines of this study. I requested approval from Walden University institutional review board and complete training from the National Institutes of Health.

Participants

The participants of this study included contracting officers located in Alabama, South Carolina, and Georgia who have been productive in their use of contracting tools as part of their overall acquisition strategy. Successful and effective contract proposals

were measured by contracting officers active in evaluating contract proposals. An active contracting officer is defined by effectively evaluating at least three contract proposals per month that produced communication and collaboration.

I used purposeful sampling to enlist participants who met participation requirements. Malterud, Siersma, and Guassora (2016) noted that qualitative researchers may use an in-depth understanding of each participant's experience that is not available from random sampling. Participants' experiences could be used to understand strategies successful government contracting managers use to prepare efficient contract proposals that do not lead to contract disputes. I reviewed my personal list of contracting officers to identify potential participants for this study. I looked for participants who are knowledgeable and experienced in the phenomenon of interest. I looked for characteristics in participants such as availability and willingness to participate in this study and their ability to communicate experience in an articulate and reflective manner (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). Purposeful sampling allowed me to focus on characteristics of a population of interest, which helped me answer the research question.

Experience determined who could participate in this study. I also used my research question to ensure that the participants' qualities aligned. I actively recruited participants through e-mail and telephone. I confirmed the location of participants because they needed to be located in Alabama, South Carolina, or Georgia. I approached the contracting officer via e-mail or telephone to ensure they had been with the contracting office for at least 3 years and had experience in effectively evaluating contract proposals.

Research Method and Design

The mixed-method approach combines both qualitative and quantitative research by exploration and analysis (McManamny et al., 2015). For this study, I used a qualitative method and a multiple case study design. Stake (2013) discussed how multiple case studies assemble in-depth descriptions through interviews and questionnaires and to understand the similarities and differences between cases. Using a multiple case study supported the focus of this proposed study by embracing similarities of real-life events that show various sources of evidence through replication rather than sampling discretion (Herreid & Schiller, 2013).

Research Method

I used a qualitative method to explore strategies that successful government contract managers use to prepare effective contract proposals to help reduce protests and ensure business viability. Barnham (2015) discussed qualitative research methods that contribute to the classification of a study based on the design of the research. Life experiences may define qualitative research based on the thoughts and feelings of research participants, which gives significance that aids in the understanding of the meaning that people attribute to their experiences (Lewis, 2015). In contrast, quantitative studies are used for the development of hypotheses based on statistical data to test theories to draw conclusions (Park & Park, 2016). If the focus of this study was to measure the frequency of various views and opinions in a chosen sample, a quantitative study may have been appropriate. Because the focus was on an in-depth understanding of strategies successful government contract managers use to prepare effective contract

proposals to help reduce protests, which does not include quantifiable variables, a quantitative approach or mixed-method approach was not appropriate for this study.

The use of quantitative research data allows participants to identify and classify their perceptions and allows researchers to evaluate trends associated with numerical data. Quantitative research allows researchers to compare data associated with identified problems over a known period (Samejima, Negoro, Mitsukuni, & Akiyoshi, 2012). Quantitative data is objective, independent, unbiased, structured, accurate, and reliable based on validity testing, and it allows researchers to test theories (Park & Park, 2016). The quantitative research method was not appropriate for this study because statistical data analysis was not essential (Dwork et al., 2015). Qualitative research is an evidence-based approach that allows research participants to share their insight based on their perspectives (Munn, Porritt, Lockwood, Aromataris, & Pearson, 2014). Mixed-method research allows for the combination of both quantitative and qualitative research, which was not appropriate for this study (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Research Design

Qualitative case study research can be the preferred method for researchers who focus on social, organizational, and institutional problems that affect an individual's perception of the organization that promotes change or to improve current practices or processes (Tetnowski, 2015). It is important to understand the phenomenon of why some federal government contracting managers lack the strategies required to prepare efficient contract proposals that do not lead to contract disputes. There are five different methods of qualitative research: (a) ethnography, (b) narrative, (c) phenomenological, (d)

grounded theory, and (e) case study (Lewis, 2015). The research question molds the research design (Green et al., 2015). Selecting the right research design may affect the outcome of a research study. Case study research allows for in-depth exploration using multiple forms of data collection to gather information (Crooke & Olswang, 2015). For this research study, the multiple case study design was the most appropriate design. Case study research is valuable due to its ability to allow researchers to describe the experiences of a person, group, community, or institution through observation and interaction with subjects (Lewis, 2015). Finding information to answer the research question is critical to the success of a study by choosing the appropriate research design.

With data limitation, the use of a case study allows researchers to gather information that can be useful to support a study (Cho & Lee, 2014). Using the multiple case study research design is necessary to achieve a deep understanding of a specific phenomenon that a single case study could not provide. The research question driving a study will give better understanding to how the target audience thinks and feels and why they make certain choices while aligning with the methodology and design (Choy, 2014). The population of this study was contracting managers and officers. The outcome and holistic view of issues surrounding the study may offer results that depict an analysis of the processes used to prepare efficient contract proposals versus focusing on secluded issues (Hyett, Kenny, & Dickson-Swift, 2014).

In ethnography, researchers research data by engaging in the targeted population's environment to gain greater insight into goals, cultures, challenges, motivation, and themes (Barnham, 2015). Researchers use phenomenology to describe life's experiences

based on reality, the interrelation of phenomena, and subjective data for developing research questions (Barnham, 2015). In narrative theory, researchers outline events that occur based on at least one or two participants relating their stories about phenomena (King, 2013). Grounded theory cannot reduce errors but may increase assumptions when too much data is present that inhibits a researcher's ability to control, analyze, and interpret data (Hussein, Hirst, Salyers, & Osukji, 2014). Grounded theory does not support the premises of this doctoral study. Case study research is valuable in its ability to allow researchers to use current situations in a complex environment to offer answers to multifaceted problems (Wamba, Akter, Edwards, Chopin, & Gnanzou, 2015).

Using a multiple case study design ensured data saturation by providing significant data that allowed for comprehensive analysis and repetition. Data saturation occurs when no new information becomes known (Cleary, Horsfall, & Hayter, 2014). Achieving the appropriate sample size for a study occurs based on data saturation (Finfgeld-Connett, 2014). Data saturation occurs when no additional sampling is useful and when the data becomes repetitive. I ensured data saturation through member checking.

Population and Sampling

The population of this research study consisted of government contracting managers and government contracting officers currently employed with contracting office 7 in Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina. Having an adequate sample size can increase the in-depth information received from participants and the richness of information (Gentles, Charles, Ploeg, & McKibbon, 2015). A multiple case study design

was used for this study with nine contracting officers who successfully evaluate contract proposals.

Purposeful sampling was used to identify contracting officers who (a) currently work in government contracting; (b) are located in Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina; and (c) have experience in evaluating proposals. Purposeful sampling was useful to gain insight from subject matter experts and the selection of participants based on identified criteria (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). A multiple case study supported the focus of this study versus a single case study based on rich data analysis from multiple participants. I ensured data saturation by the continuous collection of data until there was no new information revealed and data became repetitive (Finfgeld-Connett, 2014).

Ethical Research

Research started after I receive approval from Walden University's institutional review board. The IRB approval number for this study is 05-20-19-0471701. Research participants received an invitation to participate in this study and they must sign a consent form. The consent form stated that participation is voluntary, participant can withdraw from participation at any time, and no participant received any compensation (Speer & Stokoe, 2014). Each participant reviewed the consent form and ask questions before signing it. Signing the consent form means that each participant understands all guidelines as it pertains to this study. In the consent form, I outlined the process for withdrawing from this study. If a participant decided to withdraw from the study, they emailed or called me and stated that they wish to withdraw from the study. After I receive

the participants request to withdraw, I deleted any information that I have already received from the participant. No participants withdrew from this study.

I ensured confidentiality by not including any personal identifiable information on interview documentation to include name of participants or any other information deemed confidential. Each research participant received a unique identifier such as PAR1 to PAR7. Unique identifiers were used to protect the individuals participating in this study. I stored all data directly related to this study on an online file that is password protected and in a locked file cabinet at my home labeling each file with the participants unique identifier. I am required by Walden University to securely maintain data for this study and destroy any data related to this study after the 5-year mark (Walden University, 2017).

Data Collection Instruments

I am the primary researcher in this qualitative research study (Salganik & Levy, 2015). Analyzing and including data from multiple sources may strengthen the understanding of strategies successful government contracting managers use to prepare efficient contract proposals that do not lead to contract disputes. Data collection came from interviews, observation, and document review from research participants that opted to participate in this study. To ensure reliability and validity, I used member checking by documenting the participants' responses to ensure that the intended response was properly portrayed (Park & Park, 2016).

I used the interview protocol (see Appendix A) to help facilitate interviews. The interview protocol is an instrument of inquiry used to ask questions for specific

information related to the research question. Conducting interviews for this study will provide rich and detailed data for understanding the experience of each research participant. I asked questions that would stimulate conversation based on the experience of each interviewee. In the interview protocol, I did the following: (a) ensured interview questions align with research questions, (b) constructed an inquiry-based conversation, (c) received feedback on interview protocols, and (d) piloted the interview protocol.

Data Collection Technique

The methods for collecting data are semistructured interviews and review of previous documentation, using eight interview questions during the interview process. Government contracting managers and contracting officers are experts in acquisition of goods and services for the betterment of the government, entities, customers, and community. Qualitative researchers should prepare and plan for the interview process before conducting interviews (Chowdhury, 2015). I allowed the participants to disclose any information while focusing on the interviewee (Katz, 2015). The location of the interview was a joint agreement between the participant and me (Chowdhury, 2015).

Advantages of data collection techniques are in-depth information and allowing participants to discuss information in detail that they would not disclose on a survey or discuss in a focus group. Interviewing each candidate guided the interview and engaged each participant to get detailed information that was used for my study. Interviewing my participants in the right setting increased their comfortability in disclosing information that they may feel uncomfortable disclosing in another setting. Disadvantages are time, consistency across interviews, interview skills, and interpretation of participants

responses. During each interview, I need to manage the time it takes to conduct each interview and utilize great interview skills to engage the participant. Keeping each participant engaged and focused during the interview will increase information disclosed and my ability to accurately interpret the responses.

Member checking is another process to ensure accuracy in understanding the research participants' data and information (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016). Harvey (2015) suggested that the researcher use member checking as a validation technique to ensure the qualitative researcher allow research participants to check data or results of interview for accuracy. To ensure accuracy of the data collection process, research participants received appropriate segments of the research report to check for errors thus increasing accuracy (Birt et al., 2016). Member checking allowed me to concentrate on the experience of each research participants' content, the request for review, and comment based on the review from each participant (Grossoehme, 2014). I confirmed validity using data dictation and member checking by confirming what each research participant intended to say (Onwuegbuzie & Byers, 2014). Data organization will also increase the validity of this study by managing files appropriately.

I coded data based on responses gathered during each participant's interview. I used an electronic software to organize and store the participant's responses. I used Microsoft Word and Ethnography V6 (qualitative data analysis software) to transcribe data. To manage, develop, and maintain a sufficient audit path, researchers are encouraged to use a case study research database (Yazan, 2015). To report the findings of this study, a data path started with data collection and end with the analysis of data.

I used semistructured interviews during data collection that may provide substance within this study (Paine, 2015). Taking adequate notes during face-to-face interviews are based on direct observation. Open-ended interview questions may be useful to gain in-depth information to the interview questions and may help with honesty during the interview process (Owen, 2014). The benefit of semistructured interviews is the ability to guide the interview based on open-ended interview questions, which allowed me to ask additional questions based on the experiences shared by the research participant during the interview. Case study researchers recommend researchers to take detailed notes during the interview process to create a reflective journal (Brooks & Normore, 2015).

I used an audio recording device to record the interview and transcribed interviews verbatim using software to reduce bias during the interview and data collection process (Bannon, 2015). Audio recordings captured the participants' responses while I take detailed notes during the interview process to create a reflective journal (Brooks & Normore, 2015). Google voice software was useful for voice recognition to help with data analysis and case study research efforts (Bower, Howe, McCredie, Robinson & Grover, 2014). I used voice recognition software to transcribe interviews, which promoted data integrity based on case study research experts (Brooks & Normore, 2015).

To increase and ensure privacy for each participant, I used unique identifiers such as PAR1, PAR2, PAR3, PAR4, etc. (Neale & West, 2015). Harvey (2015) posited that research participants use member checking to ensure the qualitative researcher transcribes

the participant's information correctly and accurately. I confirmed validity through member checking with each research participant.

Data Organization Technique

Data organization can be done by organizing data into themes or groups (Yin, 2018). I organized data into groups and themes that was collected from interviews and reports from government agencies using Microsoft (MS) Excel based on participants unique identifier. I coded the name of the participants using a unique identifier to protect the confidentiality of the participants. I stored data in MS Excel spreadsheets and Ethnography V6 as well as maintain paper notes as a form of backup. I stored all data directly related to this study in an online file that is password protected and in a locked file cabinet at my home labeling each file with the participants unique identifier. I am required by Walden University to securely maintain data for this study and destroy any data related to this study after the 5-year mark (Walden University, 2017).

Data Analysis

Methodological triangulation was useful to compare both case studies and cross-case study research to support, reinforce, and develop conclusions, which led to effective theory rather than using one type of case study research (Møller & Skaaning, 2017). Case studies was useful to assemble in-depth descriptions through interviews to understand the similarities and differences between cases which was used to analyze and display data results (Stake, 2013). Case study research is valuable in its ability to allow researchers to utilize current and prior situations in a complex environment to offer answers to multifaceted problems through data analysis (Wamba et al., 2015). I displayed analytical

techniques in conjunction with case study research separately from the interpretations to effectively display the analysis of data (Zhang et al., 2016). Qualitative case researchers recommend aligning applied analytic techniques during data analysis to data sets and linked discoveries (Bengtsson, 2016). Data Analysis transforms and remodel data to reach a certain conclusion. Data analysis begins with data manipulation.

The initial analysis of data begins with data manipulation, which I used to find direct correlations, trends, indexing, categories, themes, and codes based on information received during interviews (Yazan, 2015). A cross-case study analysis was used to examine themes, similarities, and differences across cases (Møller & Skaaning, 2017). Matching patterns is the most desired technique in case study research (Yin, 2018). The primary approach to data analysis is elemental methods, which include descriptive, topic, and analytical (Calo, Efendiev, Galvis, & Li, 2016). The descriptive approach allowed me to summarize the basic topic of qualitative data using a word or noun. Topic coding allowed me to label parts of the text according to data collected for data analysis. Analytical coding allowed me to focus on data interpretation and conceptualizing data. I applied descriptive coding, topic coding, and analytical coding during data analysis.

GAO uses the observing, thinking, testing, and revising model that is essential in case study data analysis, which is what I used during the data coding process.

Researchers use this model to reflect on implied data and the connotation of data collected during and after observation, which may give additional insight on types of data and understanding (Bansal, Smith & Vaara, 2018; Yin, 2018). The additional collection of data may lead to further clarification that may create advantages and disadvantages

based on the interpretation of the data (Dasgupta, 2015). Data saturation occurs when there is no new information revealed and when data becomes repetitious (Elo et al., 2014). I continued to collect data until no new data was available to strengthen the validity of this study thus reaching data saturation.

I continued to compare and discover differences in data given by research participants, which promoted the development of themes, categories, and patterns during data analysis. Data analysis tools make it easier to identify patterns, trends, relationships, correlations, and anomalies that would otherwise be difficult to detect (Reddy, 2015). Comparison is a critical data analysis tool that was used to develop themes that are apparent in qualitative research data analysis (Houghton, Murphy, Shaw, & Casey, 2015). The objective of qualitative research data analysis is to gain insight on human behaviors, what causes those behaviors, as well as the understanding of the data's phenomena and what the data means (Hussein, 2015).

Member checking is important when I compared my understanding to what the interview participants said, ensuring accurate interpretation (Grossoehme, 2014). Upon the completion of member checking and clarification, data analysis began. Minimizing data into themes or categories occurs when using appropriate qualitative data analysis techniques (Birt et al., 2016). I used Ethnograph V6 computer software to code data files, develop a codebook, develop linked or unique codes with documents, segment texts, and to write memos (Cincotta, 2015). Ethnograph V6 enables me to provide a rich source of data, easy to understand visualization of data, reveal the inherent need, and an understanding of the data evaluated (Roncarolo, Adam, Bisset, & Potvin, 2015). I used

Ethnograph V6 as a tool to evolve and discover new and emergent themes (Cincotta, 2015). Applications within Ethnograph V6 allowed me to copy Popup Text with attached footnotes for easy data analysis (Roncarolo et al., 2015). The focus of this study is to identify themes and linkage among themes based on qualitative case study research, data triangulation, review of academic literature, and the conceptual framework.

The conceptual framework contributed to data analysis, findings, and conclusion of data that may be useful to explain the study findings and the significance of the findings as they are related to the study. Data triangulation may provide sustenance to the validity of this study (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe, & Neville, 2014). The purpose of this proposed study is to determine what strategies federal government contract managers use to prepare effective contract proposals to help ensure business viability.

Reliability and Validity

Quality research studies are measured by their reliability and validity (Bengtsson, 2016). The quality of a qualitative study is established by trustworthiness. Reliability and validity were used to explain the quality of quantitative studies. Dependability, credibility, confirmability, and transferability are principles used to evaluate the thoroughness of qualitative research (Garside, 2014). Reliability and validity are common principles that are used in both quantitative and qualitative research; however, qualitative and quantitative cannot be judged comparatively (Fletcher, 2017). To demonstrate the trustworthiness of this proposed research study, multiple case study techniques were used.

Reliability

Reliability refers to the stability of research data in quantitative studies. Presenting data in its raw form promotes reliability (Leung, 2015). Dependability in qualitative research is often compared to the concept of reliability. Data reliability and dependability encompass data stability over a period of time based on altering conditions (Garside, 2014). Consistency during each interview using the interview protocol ensures dependability in this qualitative study. Documenting all aspects of the assessment increases reliability and credibility (Bengtsson, 2016). Introduction of study, recording, asking interview questions, and member checking are components of the interview protocol (see Appendix A) that allow procedural replications (Cornelissen, 2017).

Validity

Validity is used by quantitative researchers in comparison to qualitative research to promote credibility (Teusner, 2016). I used data saturation, data triangulation, rich descriptions, and member checking to validate research findings. I promoted legitimacy and fidelity. I used a combination of techniques to promote validity and credibility (Yates & Leggett, 2016). I ensured credibility by ensuring the results of the research is accurate to ensure results are believable. I ensured data collected is rich and use methodological triangulation and member checking to promote credibility in this study.

Member checking and validation from research participants may provide validity (Varpio, Ajjawi, Monrouxe, O'Brien, & Rees, 2017). To ensure accuracy and validation, member checking may allow participants to verify discoveries, offer feedback, and provide additional understanding that may be beneficial to this study (Harvey, 2015). To

provide clarity in data analysis, summarization is essential in acquiring feedback for participants, modifications, and added insight. Each research participant will be able to validate their responses to the interview questions which adds validity and credibility to this study through assertion, comment, analysis, and support (Grossoehme, 2014).

To mitigate bias in the validation phase of this research study, methodological triangulation is necessary (Bannon, 2015). I used the methodological triangulation approach to provide confirmation of findings based on comprehensive data, increase of validity, and greater understanding of the phenomena (Bureau & Andersen, 2014). The methodological triangulation approach may enhance the validity of this study (Carter et al., 2014). Interviews and documentation from this study may offer similarities and differences based on present and past responses and observation using methodological triangulation.

There are limitations in qualitative research (Fletcher, De Massis, & Nordqvist, 2016). The inability to interview all government contracting managers and contracting officers is an identifiable limitation in this study. The analysis of research data, the review of documentation, and the interview process enabled me to gather information that may be transferable to other members of government contracting.

Transition and Summary

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study is to determine what strategies federal government contract managers use to prepare effective contract proposals to ensure business viability. In this study, Section 2 covered the following: (a) purpose statement, (b) role of the researcher, (c) participants, (d) research method and design, (e)

population and sampling, (f) ethical research, (g) data collection instruments, (h) collection technique, (i) organization technique, (j) data analysis, (k) reliability and validity, and (l) summary and transition.

In Section 3 of this study, I provide an overview and analysis of my research findings, applications of professional practices, implications of social change, recommendations for actions and future research, the reflections of the researchers, and the conclusion.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to determine what strategies federal government contract managers use to prepare effective contract proposals to help ensure business viability. The study participants were identified as PAR1, PAR2, PAR3, PAR4, PAR5, PAR6, PAR7, PAR8, and PAR9. In Section 3, I begin with a presentation of the major findings, which includes contract proposal strategies, the types of proposals used, proposal content and rationale, and the benefits and challenges of the use of proposals. Next, I explain the results of this study on strategies for preventing protests that stem from insufficient contract proposals strategy and how these apply to business practice. I also discuss the findings' applicability to social change and offer recommendations for action. Finally, I offer recommendations for future research and provide final reflections on the study.

Presentation of the Findings

The research participants came from a group of government contracting officers and managers at the contracting office located in Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina. Nine participants were interviewed using the interview protocol and interview questions. Each participant had been a contracting officer or manager for at least 5 years and had worked with the services team, the commodities team, or both. All participants have an extensive background in contracting and their Level II certification and warrant. The participants also assist with training new employees, and they mostly work with larger contracts for the agency. To protect participants' privacy, I replaced the participants'

names with codes, such as PAR1 through PAR9. I analyzed participants' responses from face-to-face interviews using Ethnograph v6 software to assist in organizing findings.

The study participants' characteristics are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Contracting officer/manager	Location	Experience
PAR1	Tuscaloosa, Alabama	More than 5 years
PAR2	Montgomery, Alabama	More than 10 years
PAR3	Tuskegee, Alabama	More than 15 years
PAR4	Birmingham, Alabama	More than 5 years
PAR5	Birmingham, Alabama	More than 10 years
PAR6	Tuscaloosa, Alabama	More than 5 years
PAR7	Tucker, Georgia	More than 10 years
PAR8	Atlanta, Georgia	More than 10 years
PAR9	Fayetteville, South Carolina	More than 20 years

The central research question guiding this study was: What strategies do successful government contract managers use to prepare effective contract proposals to help reduce protests and ensure business viability? Data analysis revealed several key themes. Theme 1 was market research use as part of developing contract proposals, Theme 2 was the SOW being clear and concise, Theme 3 was the independent government cost estimate, and Theme 4 was the use of price reasonableness. In the following sections, I describe the major themes and subthemes and explain how they relate to theory, effective business practice, and social change.

Theme 1: Market Research

Conducting adequate market research may help contracting officers and managers identify the need of the agency, evaluate past and historical pricing, and identify other techniques that may be used to satisfy the need. Government agencies must conduct market research to justify their need and to identify what parts of the FAR are necessary for the proper procurement (Berson, 2014; Waugh 2015). As noted by seven participants, market research plays a vital role in ensuring that contracting officers and managers conduct market research to promote competition among vendors, develop an IGCE, and document findings.

The results of an examination of protests stemming from insufficient contract proposals revealed three subthemes related to market research. The first subtheme, and focus of this project, was the request for information (RFI). Other major market research strategies used by government agencies in this study and expressed in the analysis encompassed a secondary subtheme of Google, as well as a third subtheme that captured

market research, such as price catalog and GSA. While the second and third subthemes were not the focus of this study, the findings were worth revealing.

Subtheme: Request for information. Government agencies use RFIs in some form as part of their overall market research strategy. Contracting officers used RFIs to connect with vendors and contractors to collect written information about their business capabilities to compare and develop the best strategy to satisfy the needs of the government, expand the SOW, and as a decision-making tool. For example, PAR1 noted the RFI is used for “obtaining potential vendors and increasing competition among potential vendors.” PAR2 primarily relied on market research done through the RFI and noted “conducting market research, before putting out for bid, is the only way to know if there will be competition.” RFIs occurred both through telephone and e-mail as well as through FBO. PAR1 also noted the importance of the RFI as “the best way to meet the need of the agency.” An RFI is a valuable tool that contracting managers use to gain additional insight from vendors to help ensure the need of the agency can be satisfied and to gain insight as to how vendors can satisfy the requirement.

Subtheme: Google. While Google use varied among participants, there was consistency in the fact that all study participants used and noted the importance of Google. Participants used Google to help find competition and to prepare proposals that identified the need of the agency. PAR4 said, “The amount of information and insight that a Google search provides helps tremendously with market research.” PAR4’s statement emphasized the importance of Google as it pertains to market research and its influences on decision-making and increase in competition. Similarly, PAR5 indicated

that Google allowed her to “ask additional questions from the customer to ensure the need of the government was met based on market research obtained from Google.” Efficient proposals and competition were significant factors in terms of Google as it linked market research and need.

Subtheme: GSA/pricing catalog. All participants used GSA and pricing catalogs to evaluate pricing trends and fixed pricing options for government agencies. PAR1, PAR2, and PAR5 used GSA to research pricing options like a market research tool to determine competition and proposal requirements. GSA is an excellent tool for contracting officers because vendors or contractors who have done business with government agencies regularly list their pricing, thus increasing competition.

PAR1 used GSA to identify potential vendors and expressed “the lack of vendors or contractors and no pricing data.” PAR2 stated, “GSA could be a dead-end road that leads to no additional insight that can be used to support or strengthen your proposal.” PAR5 revealed, “GSA is not always the best option for market research because most vendors or contractors listed pricing fluctuated with no happy medium.” PAR1, PAR2, and PAR5 noted both the pros and cons of GSA as it pertains to successful market research and its impact on efficient contract proposals. PAR2 used other sites for market research, such as the procurement manual and SBA with modest success and stated, “Conducting market research, before putting a solicitation out for bid, is the only way to know if there will be competition.” All participants stated the importance of market research and how it contributes to successful business practices; little can be measured

because contracting officers do not have an opportunity to work with contractors and vendors before proposals are received.

Marketing research themes and effective business practice. Market research results in this study aligned with Wang et al.'s (2016) findings on the importance of market research to help write efficient contract proposals and to reduce protests. Conducting market research before developing contract proposals is imperative to creating stronger relationships with vendors and contractors when trying to satisfy the need of the government and decreasing protests (Delmas, 2015). Participants in this study emphasized the importance of collaborative exchange as a way to accentuate factual market research as well as other advantages to creating successful contract proposals.

In the context of the objective theory of contracts, researchers have recommended that objective theory for added value will impact contract proposals, market research, and closing the gap between government contract specialist and independent contractors or vendors; understanding of the FAR, solicitation of bids, and the award process (Coviello et al., 2017). During the analysis of the participants' experiences with market research, I noticed a direct alignment among the objective theory of contracts and successful contract proposals to reduce government protest and streamline proper training to implement standardized processes and procedures in the procurement process. The differences outlined in the literature between market research and successful contract proposals highlighted one of the unique facets of market research, which includes collaborative communication between contracting officers, vendors, or contractors. Market research represents a change in communication and analysis of pricing, enabling

an effective business practice of more contract proposals that are successful and competitive, thus reducing contract protests (Wang et al., 2016).

Theme 2: Statement of Work

The second major theme included the primary need for the SOW, which is divided into two subthemes. The first subtheme was the SOW justifying the need of the government clearly and concisely. All participants used their work experience and training as a contracting officer as the initial SOW tool. The second subtheme included the essential elements of an SOW, such as general requirements, the scope of the work, performance objectives, deliverables, period of performance, place of performance, hours of work if applicable, and contracting officer overseeing the project.

A thought-provoking finding regarding the SOW used was that despite a SOW template being the primary tool, many contracting officers and internal customers used other tools and templates as well, either presently or previously. PAR4 noted, “Collaboration with the program offices to have a clear understanding of the requirement and thorough, concise creation of SOWs promote efficient contract proposals.” Although training officers within the organization developed a sample template used to create an SOW, contracting officers failed to mention that other templates and tools are used to develop an SOW. PAR1 stated, “The statement of work should be clear and concise and not full of ambiguity.” PAR2 noted,

Inadequate contract proposals mainly come from the agency, and the need not clearly described in the statement of work. The organization implemented yearly acquisition training with customers to ensure they understand the acquisition

process and the essential elements that should be included in the statement of work to support the need of the government.

Subtheme: Need of the government. All participants noted the SOW came from the procuring agency. PAR8 noted, “Inadequate contract proposals mainly come from the agency and the need not clearly described in the statement of work.” PAR9 has used the sample template developed in the organization as well as collaborated with the procuring agency contract officer representative and market research to identify the need before developing a final SOW. PAR5 stated, “The statement of work should be clear and concise and should be fully developed properly to the bidding process to reduce confusion.” Participants appreciated the simplicity of using multiple tools and templates to create a SOW. PAR7 noted, “Protests stemmed from the need of the government not being clearly stated, which created confusion with the responses received from contractors or vendors.” PAR6 emphasized, “The importance of collaborating with the program team to ensure the statement of work clearly defines the need and critical information is notated in the SOW as well as to ensure the procuring agency understands the need.” All participants stated the importance of the SOW and the impact that has on the organization when the need is not clearly stated to reduce confusion and protests.

Subtheme: Essential elements of the statement of work. Despite the use of the SOW template, all participants noted that they did use other templates and guidance to develop or expand SOWs to justify the need of the government by using essential elements that were part of the SOW. PAR7 noted, “Contracting officers would ask the

procuring office additional questions to add information to the SOW to ensure the essential elements spoke to the need of the government.” PAR8 stated,

I often collaborate with the program office/service line to make sure the SOW clearly and accurately reflects the need of the service line and the “need” stated in a way in which vendors can accurately estimate what will be required for them to accomplish the work.

PAR5 noted, “My recommendation to correct proposal is to return the proposal to the originator and request that the essential elements are clearly stated to define the need of the government.”

Although all participants used the provided template, PAR1–PAR5 used other templates and tools as well to ensure the need of the government clearly and concisely stated to avoid confusion or protests. PAR5 noted, “I have not had any luck with using only the provided template to ensure the need of the government was met by potential vendors or contractors.” Nonetheless, the provided template serves as a baseline tool to develop efficient SOWs; all participants noted other tools and guidance such as Google, historical data, past proposals, and collaborative efforts of the procuring office to justify and satisfy the need of the government.

SOWs align with theory and effective business practices. SOWs have altered the way government agencies identify and state the need of the agency (Master, 2012). Based on study participants, SOWs written created a dialogue among contracting officers in the contracting world. Previous research noted the importance of market research, SOWs,

and the ability to identify the need of the agency through collaborative efforts (Salmeri et al., 2015).

Even though there are several critical elements of an SOW, certain aspects delay or slow down the development process (Wilson, 2015). In the current study, SOWs used by contracting officers became the prime feature in successful contract proposals. Effective business practices have become a juggling act to control the most effective way to develop SOW templates offered and frequently used by contracting officers. For example, Google was more effective in its use for developing successful SOWs because Google is a well-known site with credible search results.

Theme 3: Price Reasonableness

The third major theme encompassed the primary tools used to evaluate price reasonableness. Price reasonableness fell into two common subthemes for all participants. The first subtheme was the use of historical pricing. All participants relied on pricing based on market research used to determine price reasonableness for contract proposals. The second subtheme included price lists and quotes.

A thought-provoking finding concerning the primary tools of price reasonableness used was that despite independent government cost estimate (IGCE) from the procuring office, all contracting officers used market research to evaluate historical pricing data and price lists and quotes, either presently or previously. PAR5 noted, "Price reasonableness is critical documentation that is used to support accepting or rejecting proposals."

Although contracting officers within the organization received an IGCE from the procuring office, contracting officers failed to mention other tools used to determine price

reasonableness. PAR2 stated, “Price reasonableness was conducted by evaluating pricing through, GSA, RFQs, RFIS, Google, and price catalogs.”

Subtheme: Historical pricing. Historical pricing is vital in establishing a range to determine fair pricing. During the interviews, each participant explicitly stated historical pricing as a critical strategy of ineffective contract proposals. PAR1 has used historical pricing as the best way to reduce the cost associated with contract proposals. PAR1 noted the IGCE, historical price, or competition among vendors reflect price reasonableness. Identifying an adequate price range is imperative in reducing the cost associated with contract proposals and the strategies previously notated is the best strategy used in determining historical pricing that is reasonable.

Additionally, PAR2 noted, “Competition to the maximum extent practicable, past purchases, IGCE, historical pricing, and market research are great strategies that contract managers use to control cost associated with contract proposals.” All participants appreciated the influence of historical pricing. PAR4 valued the ability for contract managers to use different cost strategies to reduce the cost associated with contract proposals. The best cost-saving method to avoid protests is to use the following strategies: proper documentation and communication with interested parties using historical pricing and IGCE. Using these strategies will help contract managers develop proposals that promote cost-saving strategies to promote success. Most participants noted that historical pricing influences contract proposals and is critical to the success of reducing protests.

Subtheme: Price list. All participants noted that the price list is a critical strategy in developing effective contract proposals that may help reduce protests. PAR1 and PAR2 have used price lists as a market research tool to reduce the cost associated with contract proposals protests (Personal Communication, May 22, 2019). PAR7 stated that using a price list helps gain insight as to pricing and how a price list impacted contract proposals if contracting officers do not have a general idea of pricing that is ultimately used to determine price reasonableness as it is directly impacting the need of the agency (Personal Communication, May 25, 2019). PAR4 noted, “A price list is an excellent asset that contracting officers or contracting managers use to effectively document findings and communicate with interested parties that may help prevent protests (Personal Communication, May 23, 2019). In all cases, contracting officers and contracting managers appreciated the use of a price list to understand pricing that may cause protests. Many participants noted that price lists are not always available, but when they are available, they are used to conduct market research that contracting officers and contracting managers use to gain insight in price reasonableness and what is considered fair and reasonable that may be used to reduce or prevent protests.

Subtheme: Independent government cost estimate. Despite conducting an IGCE, many reasonable tools that contracting officers and contracting managers may use to gain insight on price reasonableness may prevent or reduce protests. All contracting officers and contracting managers mentioned using the IGCE and how to use it with other tools to set the foundation for fair and reasonable pricing. PAR1, PAR2, PAR3, and PAR6 indicated that an IGCE is a great strategy that contracting officers and contracting

managers must use and how it may influence protests (PAR1, Personal Communication, May 22, 2019; PAR2, Personal Communication, May 22, 2019; PAR3, Personal Communication, May 24, 2019; PAR6, Personal Communication, May 25, 2019).

Participants noted that some agencies use one invoice to prepare an IGCE, and that strategy alone does not effectively show fair pricing. Participants also noted that preparing and an IGCE alone is not ideal market research that may not help reduce or prevent protests.

Although all contracting officers and contracting managers must use an IGCE as a tool to understand fair pricing based on the need of the agency, all contracting officers or managers conduct their own independent market research. All contracting officers and managers use IGCEs. All contracting officers and managers conducted market research to help them determine fair pricing, and they use it as documentation that may help with protests. PAR2 noted, "Competition to the maximum extent practicable, past purchases, IGCE, and market research are strategies that they used to reduce the cost associated with contract proposals (Personal Communication, May 22, 2019). Even though participants use IGCEs to help understand price reasonableness, all participants voiced their concern to inadequacy noted in the IGCE that were prepared by the acquiring agency, and how that affects their market research. Participants noted the need of the acquiring agency to conduct better market research that is used to gain insight of fair pricing that ultimately streamlines the market research that contracting officers and manager's conduct to provide solid documentation that may help reduce or prevent protests.

Price reasonableness aligns with theory and effective business practices. Price reasonableness has changed the way contracting officers and managers evaluate contract proposals and how their strategies help reduce protests. According to the current study participants, price reasonableness is a contributing factor to contract protests. The use of price reasonableness is one tool that may reduce protests if used effectively. A lack of insufficient practices or strategies impedes the contracting process, thus posing a risk of increasing protests rather than reducing protests.

Although there are several essential aspects to determine price reasonableness, certain factors hinder the contracting process, causing an increase in protests that impedes the award process. In this study, the types of strategies used to determine price reasonableness by contracting officers and managers are critical to helping ensure business viability. Contract bid protests and retroactive corrective actions are placing unnecessary costs on government agencies (Allen & Wyatt, 2017). Price is a factor when awarding contracts and understanding how to evaluate what is technically acceptable along with price helps contracting officer's award contracts to the successful vendor. In some cases, the government may award contracts to organizations whose price is higher to achieve higher performance standards that benefit the government (Hunter & Nielsen, 2013). Contracting officers and managers noted that pricing is a factor, but they must evaluate every component of pricing because pricing alone is not the deciding factor and is not the only thing that causes protests.

Application to Professional Practice

Increased use of effective contract proposal strategies federal government contract managers use may contribute to business practice in many ways. The specific business problem is that some federal government contract managers lack strategies to prepare effective contract proposals to help ensure business viability. As noted in the literature review and supported in this study, effective contract proposals enable effective business practices and promote social change by reducing the cost associated with contract protests, effective and efficient utilization of taxpayer's dollars, an increase in viability, and the identification of strategies used to develop effective contract proposals.

Findings from this study indicate that contract proposals, when aligned with market research, can be a valuable tool to aid in the overall contracting strategy. PAR4 noted market research is imperative, and conducting adequate market research is contingent on contracting officers and managers and the need of the agency along with proper documentation (Personal Communication, May 23, 2019). Market research was the most used contracting tool, so although some participants attempted to use a SOW, those attempts were often unsuccessful because it did not capture a true reflection of tools that contracting officers and managers were using. Thus, the findings from this study contribute to the effective practice of contracting to demonstrate which contracting tools are most effective for contracting officers and managers.

Additionally, contract bid protests and retroactive corrective actions are placing unnecessary costs on government agencies, provide an opportunity for contracting officers and managers to incorporate new and effective strategies to prepare effective

contract proposals to help ensure business viability. When sufficient market research, IGCE, and SOW take place, overall contracting award processes may offer visibility, effective contracting strategies that promote success. The concept of the RFI also came across not only in terms of the visibility of contracting strategies but also in terms of learning from interested parties through institutional knowledge or additional insight in what may better serve the need of the agency.

Fundamentals that delayed or relaxed the implementation process are documented in the literature (Berson, 2014). The opposition offered by each participant aligned with those found in literature, such as competition types, FAR, and protests (Warren, 2014). In this study, research participants were able to overcome these oppositions. However, as noted, not all contracting officers and managers have experience in using available resources to alleviate effective contracting strategies implementation challenges. Hence, contracting officers and managers who lack the skills and knowledge necessary to create and maintain an administration presence adequately might find these oppositions to be overwhelming to effective business practice. Regardless of the obstacles offered, given the opportunity for increased viability and effective contracting strategies that reduce protests, contracting officers and managers should attempt to include available resources to aid in the adoption of successful contracting strategies at a higher rate.

Implications of Social Change

The specific business problem is that some federal government contract managers lack strategies to prepare effective contract proposals to help ensure business viability. The research question in this study was appropriately significant to business practices

since statistics show that contract disputes increased by 6% with a 46% effectiveness rate from 2015 to 2016 (Coggburn, 2017). Successful business practices may promote positive social change by effective social programs and outcomes, additional tax dollars that could be spent on infrastructure, education, and community health programs. Improving corporate social responsibility through accountability and transparent processes may reduce protests and save taxpayers' money.

Researchers noted that effective contract proposals that create healthy competition among interested parties created financial advantages and positive social change (Allen & Wyatt, 2017). However, insufficient contract proposals protests have increased by 6% (Coggburn, 2017). While contracting officers and managers oversee contracting processes, the increase in protests impedes the contracting process prevented realizing the benefits of positive social change. If contracting officers and managers improve proposals, business viability may improve because of improving community programs, sponsorship opportunities, and proper expenditure of taxpayers' dollars.

Recommendations for Action

The research question introduced in this study regarding strategies successful government contract managers use to prepare effective contract proposals to help reduce protests and ensure business viability has been answered rather modestly by ensuring strategies contracting officers and managers use help promote successful contract proposals. The need is clear and concise in the SOW, market research, and fair and reasonable pricing through the encouragement of financial and social prosperity and

environmental stability (Rendon, 2016). An effective contract process is critical to the success of contract proposals and reduction of protests.

Therefore, acceptance of successful contract proposal strategies becomes an essential area that organizations such as the contracting office, contracting industry, and community should focus on from a training point perspective. Training efforts could include classes on how to develop SOWs that are clear and concise, marketing techniques, or strategies, fair and price reasonableness, and protests. Literature could also be made accessible at local contracting offices, sites that contracting officers and managers and interested parties use, such as GAO, SBA, FBO, local libraries, and community centers listing advantages of incorporating strategies for developing winning contract proposals strategies, alongside a list of when and where training is available.

Recommendations for Further Research

The limitations for this research study encompassed multiple case study, the experience of contract specialists or contract officers when dealing with multiple contract types and multiple proposals, and the inability to find enough participants to participate in this study. Further research could include how to overcome training challenges among contracting officers and managers through training initiatives they may equip contracting managers and interested parties with skills and strategies needed to become efficient in the contracting process. For example, a future research question could be: When a protestor is successful, how often is voluntary corrective action taken by the contracting agency? In a new study, addressing this research question will evaluate the impact of protests and the types of corrective action taken to prevent future occurrences.

Furthermore, other contracting regions across the United States could be explored to ascertain whether the findings of this study are specific to contracting officers and managers in other locations. For example, the region explored in this study included high volume contracting offices and various educational levels. It might be thought-provoking to see if low volume contracting offices and entry-level contracting officers and managers experience the same challenges when developing successful contract proposals.

The participants in this study were restricted to contracting officers located in Alabama, South Carolina, and Georgia, who have been productive in their use of contracting tools as part of their overall acquisition strategy. Future research could expand the study of effective contract proposals to other agencies within and outside the United States. Another research question could be: When bid protests were filed, what are the nature and value of these contracts and what is their share of total procurement contract dollars? Addressing this research question could evaluate if the value of the contract promotes protests and what other characteristics promotes protests.

In future studies, researchers could also expand the location to other states within the United States to include Wisconsin, California, Florida, and Washington, D.C. to see if the results will differ. It might be fascinating to see, for instance, whether contracting processes in Washington, D.C. vary in effective contract proposals that reduce protest and promote business viability. It also might be intriguing to expand the study to include more states in the United States on their use of specific strategies that contracting managers and officers use to reduce protests using a quantitative approach.

Reflections

As I think about my experience with the DBA doctoral study process, I have obtained knowledge not only about the contracting processes as a whole, but I have become well educated in writing scholarly data collection and analysis. While I had already achieved a master's degree with Walden University before enrolling in the DBA program, the doctoral study was eccentric because we explored business problems that were relevant today. My assumption about writing a dissertation was overwhelming since I have never written in this capacity before. Nevertheless, I was surprised at the amount of time, structure, attention to detail, and mental compass needed to accomplish this milestone. Walden provided an abundance of online resources and residences that increased my understanding of the components of conducting academic research while considering the impact of my academic world and social change.

As I ponder on the results of this study, I was amazed that something that may pose difficulties to others could be so simple to some, such as writing successful contract proposals. As we advance in society in contracting processes, it is imperative to stay abreast with changes and successful strategies to stay relevant in the contracting market. The question of where responsibility resides is a balance among personal accountability and the availability of resources.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to determine what strategies federal government contract managers use to prepare effective contract proposals to help ensure business viability. Government contracting is a billion-dollar

industry; however, researchers indicated that contract disputes increased by 6% with a 46% effectiveness rate, which impedes the contract award process since 2016 (Coggburn, 2017). In spite of training, contracting officers and managers continue to see a rise in protests due to underutilized contracting strategies, training initiatives, and resources (Allen & Wyatt, 2017). Additionally, the use of contracting strategies best practices in government contracting continues to be deficient.

The analysis of data in this study revealed numerous significant findings, including market research used as a contracting strategy, SOW, and price reasonableness, as well as benefits and challenges of the contracting processes. Previous researchers emphasized the notable aspects of contract management as the promotion of kick-off meetings between contracting officers and managers and interested parties (Coviello et al., 2017). Market research, as well as kick-off meetings, were critical tools used in contracting to streamline and produce effective contract proposals. A lack of knowledge in government contracting noted by participants aligned with previous research that highlighted the importance of market research to ensure the need the agency is met.

The challenge to contracting officers and managers is to determine the most effective contracting strategies available and regularly used by contracting officers and managers. In this study, market research was most successful in writing effective contract proposal tool across all participants. Nevertheless, in future research, other contracting tools might be more effective, depending on the need of the agency and fair and reasonable pricing.

Past researchers also noted the lack of implementation was due to several factors, including training, knowledge, and experience with contracting processes (Kelly, 2018). The challenges existing in each case in this study aligned with challenges presented in the literature, but were also ones that these particular participants were able to control. As noted, not all government agencies had the ability to learn to mitigate these challenges. Although an effective business practice might be to adopt effective contracting processes, the obstacles might be overwhelming to some who lack contracting experience or resources to acceptably create and maintain sufficient contract proposals.

Whereas contracting officers and managers continue to provide the most contracting opportunities within the United States economy, their repeated failure rate has stalled full benefits of social change that could develop with an improved local economy and improved quality of life factors. An advantageous social change could exist through increased use of taxpayers' dollars that could be recognized in a situation where an increased number of available contracting opportunities exist. Therefore, the selection of effective contracting strategies becomes an essential section that organizations such as the Network Contracting Office, other government agencies, and interested parties should focus on training initiatives.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

- I. Introduction
- II. Review and sign consent form
- III. Review interview questions
- IV. Use recording device to record interview
- V. Ask interview questions and any follow-up questions necessary for the interview
- VI. Discuss member checking and how the process will work
- VII. Turn off recording device
- VIII. Thank the participant for his/her participation in this study
- IX. End protocol

Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. What strategies does your organization use to establish sufficient solicitations that increase competition?
2. What strategies does your organization use to measure successful solicitations that you use that are more successful than others?
3. What strategies does your organization use to reduce frivolous protests?
4. What strategies do you use to reduce cost associated with contract protests?
5. What strategies does your organization utilize when evaluating proposals and aligning proposals with the needs of the government?
6. What recommendations have you made to correct proposals that do not accurately identify the need for the government?
7. What are some of the benefits and challenges of using a solicitation evaluation strategy?
8. What additional information that we have not already discussed might be pertinent to this study on how to prepare effective contract proposals?