

# Prepare a Readiness Assessment for a GSA Proposal

7 tips to get you started.

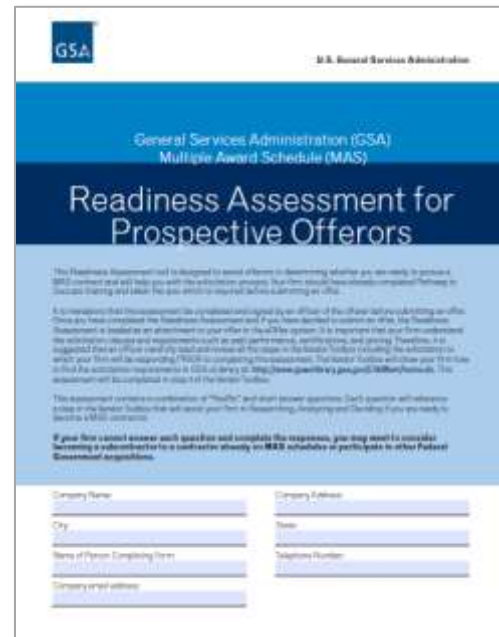
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Are you pursuing a GSA Schedule contract? You will have to prepare and submit a “Readiness Assessment”—a 7 page document that presents your answers to 33 questions regarding GSA contracts. Its stated purpose: to help you decide “if you are ready to become a (GSA) contractor.”

Preparing the Readiness Assessment can present two types of challenges:

- It can be difficult to efficiently sequence and coordinate the preparation of the Readiness Assessment with other parts of a GSA proposal.
- While most of the questions in the Readiness Assessment are easy to answer, 6 of them require you to retrieve, sort, and/or analyze quantitative data.

This article provides tips on how to address both of these challenges.



## Tip #1: Assign the right corporate officer.

The Readiness Assessment has to be prepared and signed by a **corporate officer**. Do yourself a favor: assign one who has sufficient time and interest.

When you are getting your GSA proposal process off the ground, assign the right person to the task of preparing and signing the Readiness Assessment.

The basic rule is simple: this document has to be prepared and signed by a corporate officer. But make sure that you assign the “right” officer—a person who has a genuine interest in your GSA initiative, *and* has time to invest in the Readiness Assessment.

Designating an officer who is too busy—or who is indifferent to the issue of whether your firm should obtain a GSA contract—will substantially slow down the proposal effort.

The assignment of roles can be confusing. For example:

- Does the officer who signs the Readiness Assessment also have to obtain a “Pathway to Success” certificate? (No.)

- Does the officer who signs the Readiness Assessment have to be the same as the person who signs the GSA proposal?  
(No.)

The following table provides a brief overview of the different requirements.

Proposal Step	Must be an officer?	Requires a Digital Certificate?	Must be an “authorized negotiator?”	Can be a consultant?
<b>Prepare &amp; sign the Readiness Assessment.</b>	<b>Yes.</b> Only a corporate officer can prepare and sign the Readiness Assessment.	<b>Yes.</b> The officer will need to have a digital certificate in order to sign the Readiness Assessment.	<b>Yes.</b> The officer should be designated as an “authorized negotiator.”	<b>No.</b> GSA does not allow you to submit a Readiness Assessment that was prepared or signed by a consultant.
<b>Obtain a “Pathway to Success” Certificate.</b>	<b>Optional.</b> Can be obtained by any “authorized negotiator.” Does not have to be an officer.	<b>No.</b> A person can obtain a “Pathway” certificate without having a digital certificate.	<b>Yes.</b> The person who obtains a “Pathway” certificate has to be an “authorized negotiator.”	<b>No.</b> An employee of the offeror who is also an “authorized negotiator” has to obtain a “Pathway” certificate.
<b>Sign the GSA proposal.</b>	<b>Optional.</b> The person who signs the proposal does not have to be an officer.	<b>Yes.</b> The person who signs the proposal must have a digital certificate.	<b>Yes.</b> The signer has to be an “authorized negotiator.”	<b>Optional.</b> You can designate a consultant as an “authorized negotiator” who is authorized to sign the proposal.

Exhibit 1. Who’s who?

**Tip #2: Get a digital certificate sooner rather than later.**

The officer who prepares the Readiness Assessment will need to obtain a **digital certificate**. Get this step out of the way ASAP.

The corporate officer who prepares the Readiness Assessment (a fillable PDF document) also will be required to sign it—by affixing a digital signature.

If that officer happens to already have a Department of Defense ECA certificate on his or her computer, or can obtain and install one soon, that’s great. He or she can use this type of certificate to sign the Readiness Assessment.

Otherwise, the corporate officer will have to obtain an “ACES Business Representative Business Certificate” and install it on his or her computer. This can usually be accomplished within two weeks.

But complications can arise that will cause delays. For example, perhaps the designated officer (or your company as a whole) is not U.S. based—the process of obtaining a digital certificate requires a few more steps, including a trip to a U.S. consulate. Or, after obtaining and installing a digital certificate, the officer might lose his password, which will take time to re-establish.

The proposal preparation process can be harried, and it can be hard to keep to planned schedules. Get the digital certificate out of the way as soon as possible, and give yourself as much time as possible to recover from any problems with this process. Why risk delaying the submission of your GSA proposal for want of a digital certificate?

**Tip #3: Communicate and align.**

The Readiness Assessment has to resonate well with the rest of the proposal. Do not submit a proposal that contains either of the following disconnects:

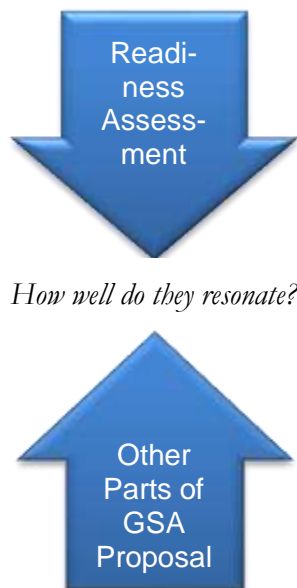
**Problem Type #1:** The Readiness Assessment contains answers for one or more SINs that are *not* in the proposal.

**Problem Type #2:** The Readiness Assessment *does not* contain answers for one or more SINs that *are* in the proposal.

The occurrence of either type of problem might cause the reviewer to form a bad impression of your firm. Then, he or she might decide against you when making judgment calls about other aspects of your proposal.

Of the two types of problems listed above, the second is potentially more problematic. If it occurs, your GSA reviewer probably will require your firm to re-do or adjust the Readiness Assessment. This will inevitably cause delays in the final review of your proposal and the award of your contract. And as the proposal manager, you will have the unenviable job of asking the corporate officer who prepared the Readiness Assessment to re-do it.

The problems outlined above can occur fairly easily on a GSA proposal unless you have excellent communications throughout the proposal preparation phase, especially when either of the following occurs: partway through the preparation of the proposal, you change



the selection of SINs included in the proposal; or you switch to a different GSA Schedule.

Except in small firms, the corporate officer who will prepare and sign the Readiness Assessment probably will *not* be a day-to-day participant in the preparation of the proposal. It will be very important for the proposal manager to keep the corporate officer apprised of changes, and to advise the corporate officer as to when the best time will be to finalize various aspects of the Readiness Assessment.

**Tip #4:** For 5 of the 6 quantitative questions: retrieve one report from GSA's database, and analyze it using simple spreadsheet tools.

The hardest questions to answer in the Readiness Assessment are numbers 4 through 8. To answer each of these questions, you will need to retrieve data on each SIN that you include in your proposal; analyze the data; and display the results of the analysis.

The key to answering these questions is to learn how to retrieve data from GSA's Schedule Sales Query (SSQ) system (<http://ssq.gsa.gov>). It contains all of the data you will need.

#### Retrieve data from SSQ.

This online system contains more than a dozen pre-defined, easy to use data retrieval routines, each of which is called an SSQ "Report." Good news: for Questions 4 through 8 of the Readiness Assessment, you will need to use only one of these data retrieval routines, called "SSQ Report #11." You can learn how to use this SSQ Report and begin downloading data in 5 minutes.

For each SIN to be included in your GSA proposal, your goal will be to retrieve two versions of Report #11. One Report #11 should be for the most recently completed federal fiscal year; and the second Report #11 should be for the fiscal year before that.

Each Report #11—i.e., each combination of a SIN and a fiscal year—will take a total of about 1 or 2 minutes to obtain. This takes into account the time it will take you to pick the SIN and fiscal year from drop down menus; submit the request; wait for the SSQ system to retrieve the data; and download the data (see the next step).

#### Save the data to Excel®.

After you submit a request for a Report #11, SSQ will display a window that lets you know that the Report (i.e., the requested data)

### Schedule Sales Query

To prepare the Readiness Assessment, you will need to **retrieve data from a GSA database**, with an easy-to-use data query routine. The GSA database is the Schedule Sales Query system:  
<http://ssq.gsa.gov>

Company Name	Contract	Total Sales
BROOKS RANGE CONTRACT	G506P0013P	\$3,314,807
EATON CORPORATION	G500P0023P	\$2,089,326
RV ENTERPRISES, INC.	G504P0066P	\$1,034,640

After accessing SSQ and downloading data, **save the data as an Excel file**, and use simple spreadsheet tools to analyze it. Rudimentary Excel skills are all that you will need.

is ready to be displayed or downloaded.

- You will have the option of opening and viewing the file; saving it; or printing it. Choose “save as.”
- You will have the option of saving the data as an Excel file or a text file. Choose the former.

Save each file into a single folder. (In my view, the easiest way to do this is to create a folder on your desktop, and to save each Report #11 files into that folder.)

#### Use simple Excel tools to find the answers.

After you have retrieved the Report #11’s as described above, you will have all of the data you will need to answer Readiness Assessment Questions 4 through 9.

For each question, you will need to perform one or two relatively simple operations in Excel to analyze the data and generate the answer.

#### Readiness Assessment Question #4 (No. of contractors):

This question asks how many contractors there are for each SIN in your proposal. For the sake of this example, let’s assume that your first SIN is 871-207; and the most recently completed federal fiscal year is 2012.

*Step A.* **Open.** Open the Excel file for Report #11 for SIN 871-207 for federal fiscal year 2012. That report will list each GSA contractor in that SIN, one per row.

*Step B.* **Scroll.** Scroll down to the bottom of the Excel file; take note of the final row number.

*Step C.* **Perform a simple subtraction.** Subtract 1 from the final row number.<sup>1</sup> There’s your answer to Question #4 for SIN 871-207.

Repeat these steps for each SIN in your proposal. Then, type the answers (from Step C) into the Readiness Assessment.

#### Readiness Assessment Question #5 (Zero sales):

This question asks how many contractors in each SIN had 0

<sup>1</sup> Why subtract 1 from the final row number? The first row will contain the column headings. The first contractor will be listed on row #2; the second contractor will be listed on row #3; and so forth. The final row number minus 1, therefore, is the total number of contractors listed in the report.

sales in the most recently completed fiscal year.

*Step A.* **Open.** Open the Excel file for Report #11 for SIN 871-207 for federal fiscal year 2012. That report will list each GSA contractor in that SIN, one per row. On each row, the first column shows the contractor's name; the second column shows the GSA contract number; and the third column shows the contractor's GSA sales in FY 2012 under SIN 871-207.

*Step B.* **Sort.** Sort the contractors by total sales, largest to smallest.

*Step C.* **Count.** Count the rows showing 0 sales. This is your answer for Question #5.

#### Readiness Assessment Question #6 (Top contractors):

Question #6 focuses on the top 3 contractors for each SIN. All of the data you will need for each SIN is in the Report #11 for that SIN. Here's one easy method for getting the answer—again, using SIN 871-207 as an example.

*Step A.* **Open and sort.** Open the Excel file for Report #11 for SIN 871-207 for federal fiscal year 2012. Sort it the same way that you did for Question #5, as described above. (In other words, repeat Steps A and B from Question #5.)

*Step B.* **Look at the top 3 rows.** The top 3 rows contain the top selling contractors for SIN 871-207 for federal fiscal year 2012. This is your answer for Question #6.

#### Readiness Assessment Question #7 (Average sales):

Question #7 asks for the average sales per contract for each SIN. All of the data you will need for each SIN is in the Report #11 for that SIN. Here's one very easy method for calculating average sales per contract—again, using SIN 871-207 as an example.

*Step A.* **Open.** Open the Excel file for Report #11 for SIN 871-207 for federal fiscal year 2012. That report will list each GSA contractor in that SIN,

one per row. In each row, the contractor name is in the first column; the GSA contract number is in the second column; and the total sales are in the third column (i.e., the total sales in SIN 871-207 in federal fiscal year 2012).

*Step B* **Click/drag.** Click in the third column for the first listed contractor. While holding down the left mouse button, drag the cursor all the way down the third column to the very last row. At this point, the entire column should be highlighted in grey.

*Step C.* **See the answer.** Take a look at the bottom of the Excel window, on the right-hand side. You will see three numbers in a row, each preceded by a label. The first number is labeled “average.” That number is your answer: it is the average sales per contractor to Question #7 for SIN 871-207.

#### Readiness Assessment Question #8 (GSA sales trends):

Question #8 asks whether the market for the Schedule and SIN(s) you are pursuing is growing or shrinking. For each SIN, simply compare total sales in FY 2012 and 2011.

Here’s one easy method—again, using SIN 871-207 as an example.

*Step A.* **Open.** Open the Excel file for Report #11 for SIN 871-207 for federal fiscal year 2012. Use Excel’s “sum” tool to find the total sales for SIN 871-207 for fiscal year 2012. Repeat this for Report #11 for SIN 871-207 for fiscal year 2011.

*Step B* **See the answer.** Compare the two sums (i.e., sales in SIN 871-207 in fiscal year 2012 compared to fiscal year 2011). If the former is larger, the answer for that SIN is “growing sales.” If the former is smaller, the answer for that SIN is “shrinking sales.”

Do you need to compare fiscal years 2012 and 2011? No. You can always compare sales for fiscal year 2012 to sales for an earlier fiscal year. Just be sure to be consistent for each

SIN that you address; and when you write the answer into the text field for Question #8, explain which years are being compared.



What **prices are approved for existing GSA contractors** in the Special Item Number(s) of interest to your firm? You can retrieve this pricing information from GSA eLibrary: [www.GSAeLibrary.gsa.gov](http://www.GSAeLibrary.gsa.gov)

**Tip #5: For final quantitative question, retrieve information from GSA eLibrary or GSA Advantage.**

Question #10 of the Readiness Assessment asks: “Is your pricing for your products and services competitive with the top 3 contracts?” You simply have to check a “yes” or “no” box. But to decide which box to check, you’ll need to retrieve and examine prices in a handful of GSA contracts held by other firms.

Here’s a good way to approach this question.

**Readiness Assessment Question #10 (Prices):**

*Step A.* **Identify the “top 3 contracts.”** This part of the Readiness Assessment asks you to answer a question about the “top 3 contracts” for SINs in your proposal. Does Question #10 refer to the top 3 contracts for *each* SIN in your proposal, or the top 3 contracts *overall*? GSA is not clear on this point. My recommendation is to assume the former is correct.

*Step B.* **Retrieve pricing information for the “top 3 contracts.”** You already will have identified the relevant contracts as part of your research for Question #6 (see above), in which you identified the top 3 contracts for each relevant SIN. To answer Question #10, you will need to examine pricing data for those contracts. For any given GSA contract, you usually can retrieve that contract’s pricing information from GSA eLibrary ([www.GSAelibrary.gsa.gov](http://www.GSAelibrary.gsa.gov)) or GSA Advantage ([www.GSAadvantage.gsa.gov](http://www.GSAadvantage.gsa.gov)).

For contracts for professional services, your best bet is to obtain the contract’s “catalog” from GSA eLibrary (the catalog typically is a downloadable PDF or Word file). Pricing by labor category (and SIN) is typically included in these catalogs.



For pricing of products, first check the contract's catalog on GSA eLibrary. In some cases, the catalog will include pricing, by product and SIN. If not, then go to GSA Advantage, and see whether the pricing is listed there, on an item-by-item basis. The GSA Advantage search function is complicated, but with a bit of trial-and-error, you can learn how to use it.

*Step C.* **Compare prices.** As a final step, take a look at the pricing in the “top 3 contracts.” In general, are your firm's prices higher or lower? You do not need to make this comparison for each labor category or each product that you might include in your GSA proposal. Make the comparison for a sampling of labor categories at various levels of seniority, and in different disciplines, or for a sampling of the products that will be in your proposal.

*Step D:* **Check “yes” or “no.”** To respond to Question #10, you will need to check “yes” or “no” in response to the following: “Is your pricing for your products and services competitive with the top 3 contracts?” What is meant by “competitive?” If your prices tend to be lower than the prices shown in the “top 3 contracts,” or almost the same, then it is certainly reasonable to answer “yes.”

But what if your prices tend to be higher than the prices in one or more of the “top 3 contracts?” You still might be able to answer “yes,” in response to Question #10—keep in mind that “competitive with” is not the same as “lower than.”

There might be many reasons why you can reasonably answer “yes” to Question #10 even if your hourly prices (for labor) or unit costs (for

products) tend to be higher. Do you believe that your personnel tend to have exceptionally strong skills? Have you been able to compete successfully against other, lower cost firms? Are your items of exceptionally high quality, and recognized as such in the market?

**Tip #6: Use common sense in answering non-quantitative questions.**


Most of the other questions in the Readiness Assessment are straightforward, and it should be relatively easy to answer them. Use common sense as your approach. Of particular note:

- *Be succinct.* For the questions that require text responses, use short phrases. Full sentences are typically not required.
- *Answer illustratively, not exhaustively.* For example, Question #9 asks you to list 3 reasons why you believe you can differentiate your services or products when competing against other GSA contract holders in the pursuit of sales under a GSA contract. List your answers briefly. For example, do you believe that you can differentiate on the basis of price? If so, consider typing in a succinct answer: “Lower prices.” Is one of your chief differentiators your ability to mobilize quickly? If so, consider typing in a response such as “Ability to mobilize project teams quickly in the highly specialized areas in which we provide services.”
- *Format text responses simply.* In response to the Readiness Assessment questions that require text responses, you will have to type the answers into a PDF fillable text area. Do not worry about formatting niceties. Just try to be as neat as you can, recognizing that wrestling with formatting within these PDF boxes is not easy, and your GSA reviewer will simply look for basic readability.
- *Do not provide text responses where they actually are not required.* Many of the Readiness Assessment questions that ask you to check a “yes” or “no” box also display an area where you can type in a text response to supplement the

“yes” or “no.” In most cases, these text fillable areas are irrelevant and you can ignore them. (They evidently were included by mistake.)

- *Round as appropriate.* In preparing the Readiness Assessment, avoid trivia. Round numbers off as appropriate. Absolute precision is not needed in order to tease out the lessons of what the numbers are telling you.
- *Avoid historical trivia.* GSA sometimes eliminates a SIN, merges one SIN into another, creates new SINs, or eliminates a SIN and distributes different parts of it to two or more other SINs. As a result, it can be difficult—if not conceptually impossible—to answer parts of some of the Readiness Assessment Questions. For example, if your proposal includes a brand new SIN for which there is no available sales data, for that SIN it can be impossible to answer Question #8 (changes in sales over time). Do not agonize over this. In answering Question #8, simply explain in a brief sentence why there is no answer for that SIN.

**Tip #7: Consider what you learned.**



The Readiness Assessment is a decision support tool. It can be tempting to view it as just one more document to insert into your GSA proposal, in a perfunctory manner. This attitude would be a mistake. Even if your firm has already made a reasoned decision to pursue a GSA Schedule contract, you can learn from the Readiness Assessment. It might lead you to re-consider which SINs to pursue or even might persuade you that a different GSA Schedule would be a more appropriate goal.

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The Readiness Assessment can be a moderately difficult document to prepare, and requires investment of time and effort by an officer of your firm. This article suggests some ways in which you can perform the required research and prepare the document in an efficient manner. But no matter how quickly you can prepare the document, do not treat it as a rote exercise or as an annoyance. If you are already convinced that a GSA Schedule contract makes sense

for your firm, use the Readiness Assessment to help you sharpen the focus of your proposal—and to give yourself renewed confidence of your ability to manage a GSA Schedule contract. And if you do not yet know much about such contracts, or if you are unsure about whether there is a strong business case to be made, the Readiness Assessment will provide you with useful insights as you make a decision about whether and how to proceed.

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