



Why women lag in winning federal contracts



Getty Images

The Pentagon building is seen in this undated aerial photo. headquarters of the Department of Defense, in Washington, DC

by ***Ashley Milne-Tytle*** (</people/ashley-milne-tytle>)

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STORY



Courtesy of Denise Barreto

Denise Barreto, CEO of Relationships

It has been 20 years since the government set a goal of awarding five percent of federal contracts to women-owned small businesses – and not once has it met that goal.

A third of businesses are now owned by women, and being a federal contractor can give business a significant boost. Having that relationship with a federal agency can open a lot of doors. Your business grows faster than other businesses.

Still, Denise Barreto had another reason for signing up: "What motivated me to become a contractor on all levels for the government was the second I set foot inside of it and saw how it was run," she says.

Let's just say she knew the government could benefit from her business sense and efficiency. Barreto got her first close-up look

Matter Now



Courtesy of Lynne Beaman

Lynne Beaman, CEO of Highlands Environmental Solutions

at local government when she was elected to her village board in Illinois several years ago. Her company is called Relationships Matter Now and it does strategic planning. It has landed some government work, but a federal contract has proved elusive.

Barreto says she has been in the federal system since 2012, and she has bid on eight contracts. She hasn't won any.

It takes most people a while to get their first contract. An American Express OPEN study shows that in 2013 it took both men and women about two years and at least four bids before they succeeded. Lynne Beaman is CEO of North Carolina company Highlands Environmental Solutions. She bid for the first time this summer, and recently found out she didn't get the job.

Beaman says the whole process of certification and putting in a bid was byzantine. She thinks a lot of women prefer to take care of the business they already have rather than jump through a series of federal hoops to expand. But she plowed on.

"We also have three children, two biological and one adopted from Russia," she says. "So I feel if I could handle all the paperwork to get a foreign born orphan out of another country, then I can probably figure my way around this maze."

She's not discouraged by her rejection, and has other bids out right now.

Julie Weeks runs Womenable, an organization that supports female entrepreneurship. She says many government agencies are meeting their goal of giving five percent of contracts to women's businesses, but the Department of Defense is missing the target. That matters because, Weeks says, "about two-thirds of federal spending is done by the Department of Defense." So if the DOD misses its goal, the overall government goal won't be met.

Weeks says it's not that women-owned businesses don't meet the DOD's needs. Many make uniforms or do catering. I spoke to one woman who owns a company that bomb-proofs buildings. But Weeks says the DOD is a huge, complicated beast, and moving the needle is tough.

Denise Barreto says one reason few women get these government opportunities is they don't know enough about them. She says government outreach needs improvement. "I think having a real sexy website is good," she says, and "having an easy website that somebody can maneuver and understand is better. But nothing beats the opportunity for people to have face to face interactions with these decision makers."

She says women need more chances to meet representatives from Washington in the flesh, at events around the country. That's what finally landed Barreto her first small federal contract. Her path was

unusual, but direct: she didn't even have to put through another bid. Someone at a federal agency heard her speak at an event, introduced herself, and Barreto ended up with her first opportunity to streamline the government.

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About the author

Ashley Milne-Tyte is the host of a podcast about women in the workplace called The Broad Experience.

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I understand and agree that contracting with the DoD is an exercise in hoop jumping, but many of those hoops are the incremental result of problems, mostly real, some imagined, with the process of contracting with the government. Our friends at Lockheed-Martin (and Martin-Marietta before) and Boeing come to mind. Well, any big military contractor plus many smaller ones over time have engaged in dubious business relationships with the DoD. The "red tape" has only gotten worse for these unfortunate incidents. Aside from shades of corruption, the DoD, like businesses, would like to get the best solution for the best value. Some of the bars to entry tend to eliminate small businesses, which is a shame because often, once the hurdles are passed, small businesses can often provide a much better value to the government than

traditional, large military contractors. In many cases the small DoD contractor get subcontracts where one of the big mil contractors is the primary contractor to the gov't. These contracts are great for small businesses but still inefficient and doesn't avoid any of the red tape for the small business.

/Disclosure: I work for a small, woman owned business that has been doing work for the government for over 30 years. Contracts have been a mix of subcontract and direct contract with the government.

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