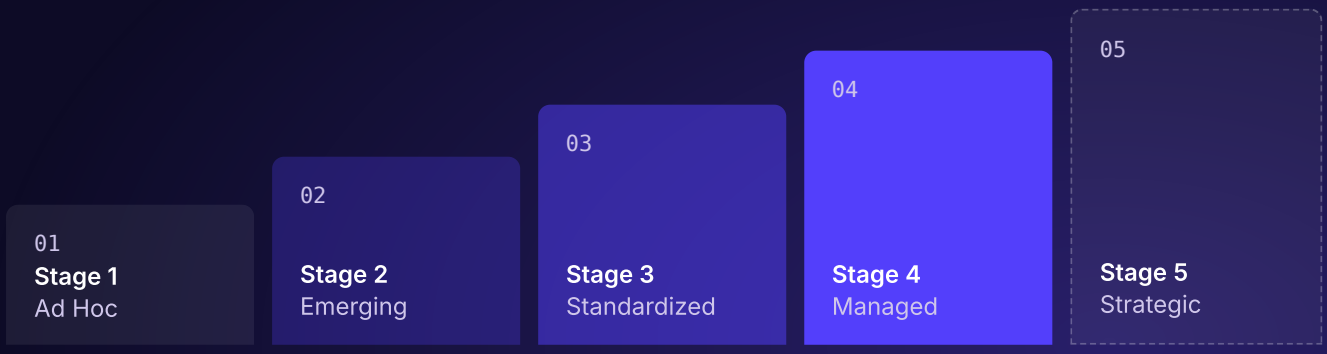
RFP LIFECYCLE MATURITY MODEL

BENCHMARK REPORT 2026

The RFP Lifecycle Benchmarks Guide

How proposal, capture and contracts teams compare, from strategy and review to contract redlines and win/loss.



Assessment results and live webinar polls

VisibleThread

HOW TO READ THIS GUIDE

A benchmark, not a scorecard

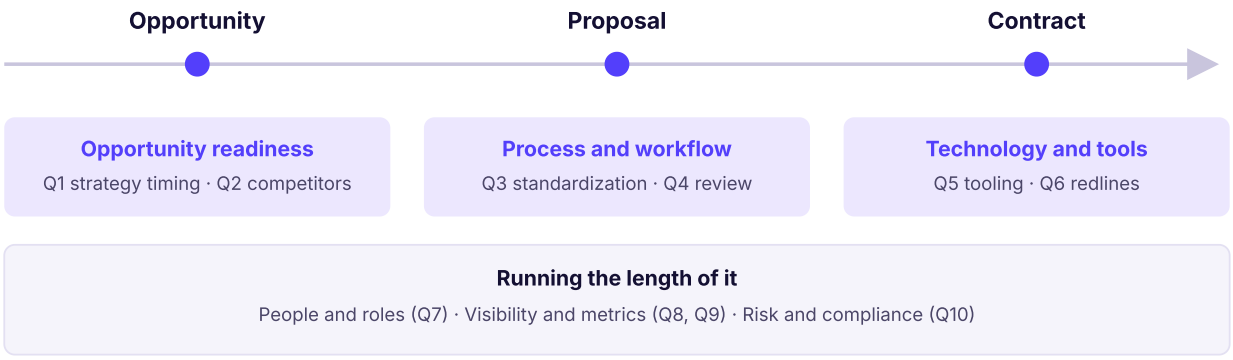
Where GovCon proposal, capture and contracts teams actually sit, based on organizations across the VisibleThread community.

The model has five stages and six dimensions. Ten questions, each scored 1 to 5, for a maximum of 50. Your total puts you in a stage. Kyle Peterson, VP of Strategic Accounts at VisibleThread, who built it, framed the point of it this way:

> Purposely using the word maturity model. Depending on where you score, not saying any kind of organization is bad or worse. It just gives people benchmarks and targets to drive to.
>
> Kyle Peterson, VP of Strategic Accounts, VisibleThread

That framing matters. A two-person shop and a large prime can both be well run. The model asks whether what you do is deliberate, repeatable, governed and proportionate to your scale, not whether you match one particular setup.

Each dimension below gives you four things: what the assessment found, what the live room said, what Kyle sees in the field, and the move that lifts that practice a stage.



Six dimensions, ten questions. Three sit at a point in the lifecycle, three run across all of it.

WHAT THE DATA SAYS

The headline numbers

AVERAGE SCORE	MEDIAN STAGE	MOST COMMON	SCORE RANGE
30.2	**Stage 3**	**Stage 4**	**18 to 42**
out of 50	Standardized	Managed	out of 50

Five findings

1. **Review is the strongest practice. Contract redlines are the weakest.** Over half of teams run a structured compliance check or better before submission, and around 60% of the live room run Pink and Red team stages. Contract redlines score lowest of all ten questions by a clear margin.

2. **Strategy starts late, and more often it just does not travel.** Nearly half build the win strategy after the RFP drops. Kyle's view is that the thinking often does happen early, it simply never reaches the people writing.

3. **Contracts are still manual.** More than half email Word redlines back and forth, and 37% of the live room check contract terms by manual read-through and Ctrl+F. Most teams who say they catch risk proactively are in that group too.

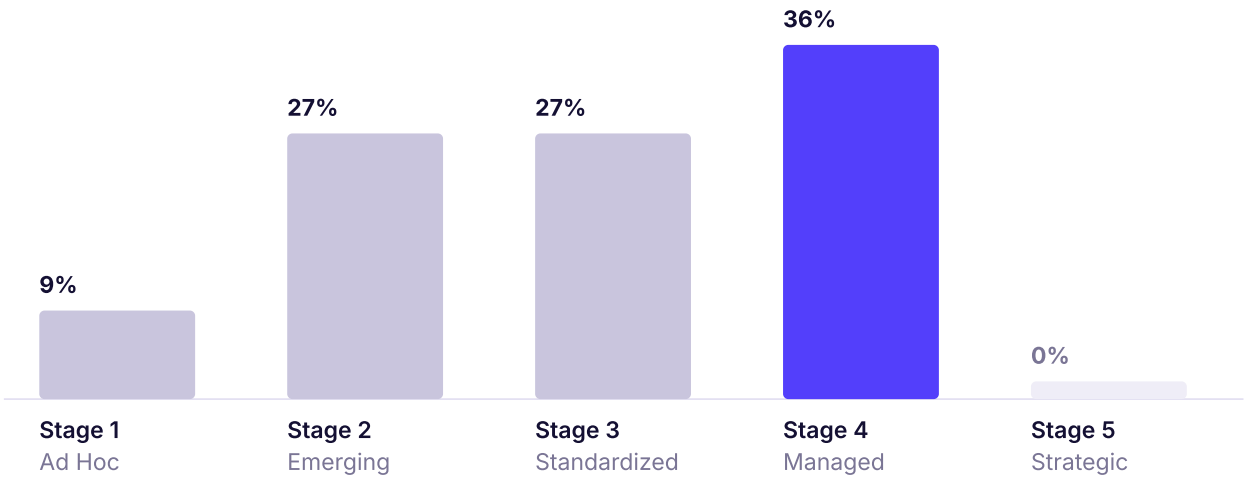
4. **Teams debrief. Almost nobody closes the loop.** Over half log a debrief after major pursuits, but only 9% feed win/loss data back into Go/No-Go criteria. Nearly half track win rates anecdotally.

5. **The spread is wide and the middle is crowded.** 9% at Stage 1, 27% at Stage 2, 27% at Stage 3 and 36% at Stage 4. Nobody has reached Stage 5.

WHERE TEAMS ARE LANDING

Nearly two thirds sit at Stage 3 or Stage 4

Share of teams at each stage of the RFP Lifecycle Maturity Model.



RFP Lifecycle Readiness Assessment, completed responses, October 2026.

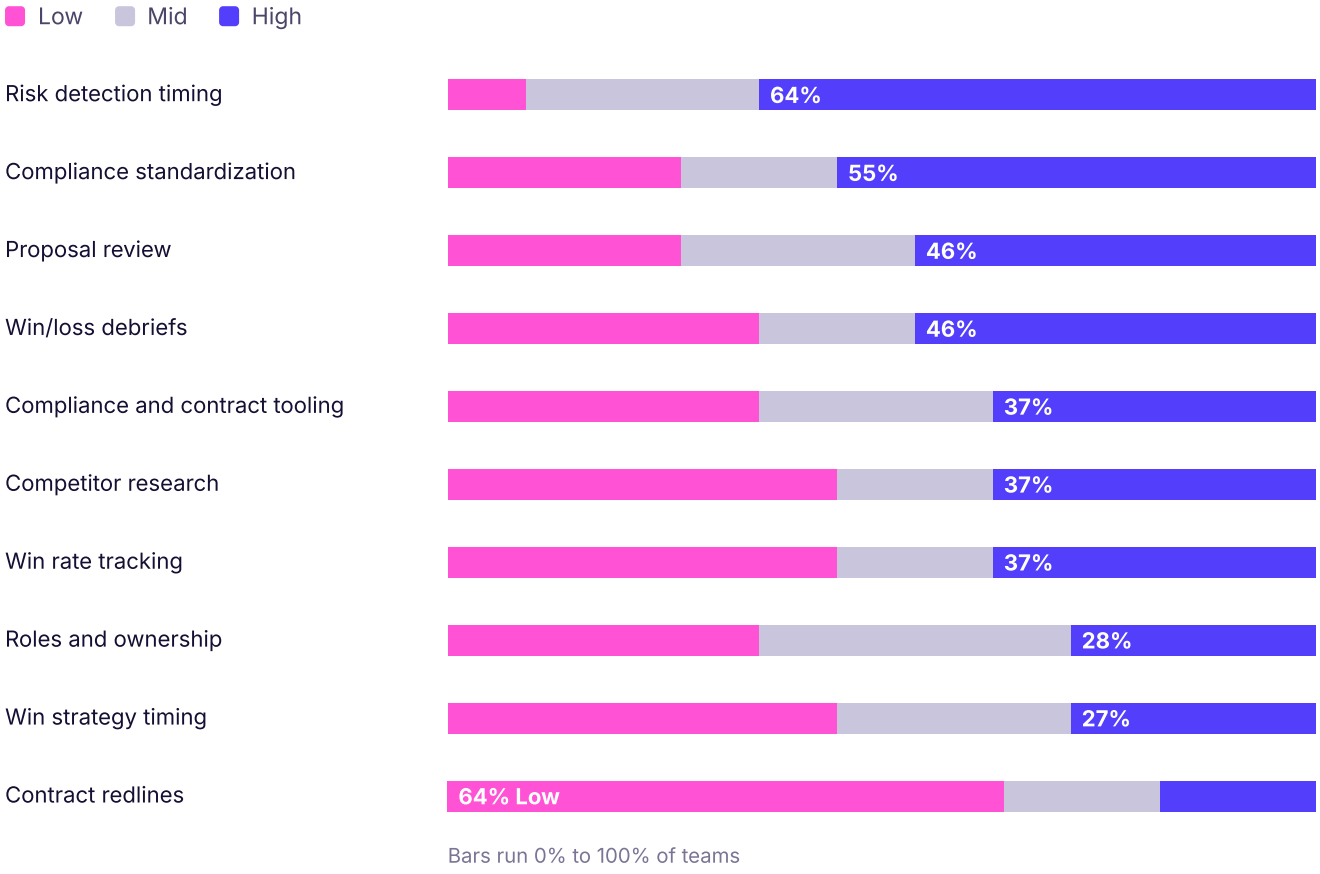
The cluster at Stages 3 and 4 fits the pattern in the findings: documented, structured review and compliance processes, with noticeably less maturity in capture strategy, metrics and contract tooling.

Stage 5 being empty is worth sitting with. It is not a gap in ambition. Shaping an opportunity before the RFP exists costs real bid and proposal money ahead of any revenue, and most organisations will not release that budget until they can prove which capture investment moves win rate. Which is the Stage 4 problem.

PRACTICE BY PRACTICE

Maturity by question

Each answer grouped as Low (reactive or informal), Mid (documented or partly tooled) or High (governed, measured or connected).



RFP Lifecycle Readiness Assessment, completed responses, October 2026. Ordered by share at High.

Risk detection and compliance standardization lead. Contract redlines trail everything else, and they are the only practice where most teams sit at Low.

DIMENSION ONE

Opportunity readiness

When the win strategy gets built, and who you are up against

Q1. When does your team build its win strategy and discriminators?

#	Answer	Teams	Tier
1	After the RFP drops, under deadline pressure	45%	LOW
2	Sometimes early, depending on who is running the pursuit	27%	MID
3	We are shaping requirements pre-RFP through RFIs and industry days	27%	HIGH
4	We use a capture plan template for our bigger pursuits	0%	MID
5	PWin scoring and capture plans are standard for every qualified pursuit	0%	HIGH

In the live room: about a quarter said after the RFP drops, and just under half said it depends who is running the pursuit.

The hollow middle is the interesting part. Teams either shape early or scramble late, with almost nobody using a capture plan template as the halfway house.

> The issue isn't that we're not thinking about win themes, discriminators, differentiators early on. Where I see organizations fall down is we're not weaving it. We're not sharing it with our proposal, with our SMEs, with our writing teams.
>
> Kyle Peterson

HOW TO IMPROVE THIS

If you are in the bottom two options, the fix is not more thinking, it is transport. Put whatever win themes exist in BD's head onto one page that reaches the writers at kickoff, with the evidence attached. Then check at Pink team whether the draft actually carries them. A win theme that never leaves the capture lead is indistinguishable from no win theme at all.

Q2. How do you research competitors before deciding to pursue?

#	Answer	Teams	Tier
1	Informal guesses based on who we have competed against before	36%	LOW
2	Competitive intelligence is gathered continuously and informs capture strategy	36%	HIGH
3	We research known competitors once we have already decided to bid	18%	MID
4	We do not. We focus only on our own solution	9%	LOW

In the live room: fairly evenly split, with formal competitive reviews such as Black Hat edging ahead.

This question splits the field more sharply than any other. A third run continuous competitive intelligence. A third are guessing.

> When I was back in the space pre VisibleThread, I think I maybe sat in two formal Black Hat reviews my entire career.
>
> Kyle Peterson

HOW TO IMPROVE THIS

Watch the 18% who research competitors after deciding to bid. That is reporting, not intelligence, because nothing it finds can change the decision. Moving the same work to before Go/No-Go costs nothing and is the cheapest step on this dimension.

DIMENSION TWO

Process and workflow

How consistent your compliance review is, pursuit to pursuit

Q3. How standardized is your compliance review process?

#	Answer	Teams	Tier
1	Governed, measured, and continuously improved using review findings	36%	HIGH
2	No standard process. It varies by who is assigned	27%	LOW
3	Compliance review is embedded end-to-end in the pursuit lifecycle	18%	HIGH
4	We have documented playbooks and SOPs	18%	MID

In the live room: 27% said a few people keep their own checklists, and over half had documented playbooks or embedded review.

This is the question teams score themselves most generously on. Treat the 36% at the top with some caution and read it against Q8, where nearly half admit they track win rates anecdotally. A process you cannot measure is a described process, not a governed one.

HOW TO IMPROVE THIS

The test Kyle uses is simple. Show me the last pursuit where a review finding changed the process, not just the proposal document. If you cannot name one, you are at Stage 3 describing Stage 5.

Q4. How does your team review a proposal before it goes out?

#	Answer	Teams	Tier
1	Multiple structured review stages such as Pink and Red team	27%	HIGH
2	A structured compliance check before submission	27%	MID
3	One informal read-through, if there is time	18%	LOW
4	A governed review cadence with defined gates, measured over time	18%	HIGH
5	Whoever has time skims it right before it is due	9%	LOW

In the live room: around 60% run structured stages such as Pink and Red team. Nobody chose the governed cadence.

> We're doing our pink teams. But are we taking learnings, and are we weaving them back into new pursuits that then lead to better pink and red teams over time?
>
> Kyle Peterson

HOW TO IMPROVE THIS

Ask your team which review gate is first to get cut when a deadline slips. The answer separates a gate that is scheduled from a gate that is governed. If it is "Pink team, usually", you are at option 4 on paper and option 2 in practice.

DIMENSION THREE

Technology and tools

What checks compliance, and how redlines are handled

Q5. What do you use to check compliance and contract terms?

#	Answer	Teams	Tier
1	Connected workflows and consistent data across teams	27%	HIGH
2	Dedicated software for at least one part of the process	27%	MID
3	Manual read-throughs and Ctrl+F in Word	18%	LOW
4	A few informal templates, no dedicated software	18%	LOW
5	Connected, governed tools across the full lifecycle, with AI where it helps	9%	HIGH

In the live room: 37% rely on manual read-throughs and Ctrl+F, and almost 15% have connected, governed tools across the lifecycle.

The live room skewed more manual than the assessment did, which is worth remembering when you benchmark yourself. People who complete a survey about process maturity are a self-selecting group.

HOW TO IMPROVE THIS

The honest line between option 3 and option 4 is not how much software you own, it is whether data moves between teams or gets re-keyed. One dedicated tool doing one job well is a legitimate option 3, whoever built it. Three tools that do not talk to each other is still option 3.

Q6. How do you manage contract terms and redlines?

#	Answer	Teams	Tier
1	Tracked changes in Word, emailed back and forth	55%	LOW
2	A defined process for tracking changes, with one source of truth	18%	MID
3	A shared folder, but no consistent version control	9%	LOW
4	Contract review software flags risk clauses automatically	9%	HIGH
5	Connected tools link contract terms back to proposal commitments	9%	HIGH

In the live room: around 30% use Word redlines by email, and just over 40% have a defined process with one source of truth.

This is the weakest practice in the model, and it is not close. It is also where the lifecycle argument earns its keep: teams scoring Stage 4 overall are sitting in that top row. Proposal-side discipline matures first, and the audit trail stops at submission.

> Contracts management, contractual structure can and should be a differentiator that we weave into the process earlier on, earlier on, earlier on, especially with the way the government's restructuring.
>
> Kyle Peterson

HOW TO IMPROVE THIS

The question behind the question is whether anyone can trace a signed clause back to what the proposal promised. Most teams cannot, including well run ones. Start by extending the review discipline you already have on the proposal side past submission, into award and modifications. You are not building something new, you are running an existing process over a longer stretch of the lifecycle.

DIMENSION FOUR

People and roles

Clear ownership, writing responsibilities and SME assignments

Q7. How clearly defined are capture, proposal and review roles?

#	Answer	Teams	Tier
1	Clearly defined capture and proposal accountabilities, even if one person holds both	36%	MID
2	No clear ownership. It is whoever is available	18%	LOW
3	There is an informal go-to person, but no official role	18%	LOW
4	A defined governance model, centralized or federated, sets standards org-wide	18%	HIGH
5	Capture intelligence has a seat in pursuit strategy at leadership level	9%	HIGH

In the live room: two thirds have clearly defined capture and proposal accountabilities.

More than a third of teams still have no official owner, which is the dependency risk Stage 2 is named for. Headcount is not the test. Option 3 is written so a one-person shop can reach it, because what matters is whether the two accountabilities are distinct, not whether two people hold them.

> How am I weaving and working my SMEs into the equation thoughtfully? Do we know which SMEs we need to pull on, and does that SME even know they're going to be pulled?
>
> Kyle Peterson

HOW TO IMPROVE THIS

Before the next pursuit, write down which sections need an SME, who that SME is, and whether they know. Most teams discover at that point that the list lives in one person's memory, and that at least one named SME has no idea they are on the hook.

DIMENSION FIVE

Visibility and metrics

Pursuit status and win rate, by business unit and product line

Q8. How do you track win rates and pursuit health?

#	Answer	Teams	Tier
1	Anecdotal. We have a sense of what is working, nothing documented	45%	LOW
2	Real-time dashboards tying capture investment to win rates	18%	HIGH
3	Historical data informs decisions, with predictive analytics where supported	18%	HIGH
4	Manually compiled reports on turnaround time and compliance pass rates	18%	MID

In the live room: about half sit in the first three answers, with manual reporting the most common.

Hold this against your answer to Q3. Nearly half track win rates anecdotally, while 36% describe their compliance process as governed, measured and continuously improved. Both cannot be true of the same organisation.

HOW TO IMPROVE THIS

Manual reporting is not a failure. It is the point where a spreadsheet stops scaling, and it is the honest field answer for most teams. Pick four to six metrics and keep them in one place: cycle time, compliance findings, rework, win/loss. A spreadsheet is fine to start.

Q9. How do you use win/loss outcomes after a decision?

#	Answer	Teams	Tier
1	Informal conversation, nothing documented	36%	LOW
2	Debriefs are standard practice and reviewed by leadership regularly	36%	HIGH
3	A basic debrief is logged after major pursuits	18%	MID
4	Win/loss data is systematically fed back into Go/No-Go criteria	9%	HIGH

In the live room: around 40% run a basic or standard debrief, and about a quarter keep it informal and undocumented.

The 9% is the number to look at. Debriefs happen. Almost nothing changes because of them.

> A lot of organizations I talk to, they'll do debriefs. Push for verbal, push for oral debriefs to the greatest extent possible. To the extent you can hear your customer, quite literally hear them and maybe see them, that's always gonna be better than an email debrief.
>
> Kyle Peterson

HOW TO IMPROVE THIS

This is the loop between Stage 4 and Stage 5, and the cheapest gap in the model to close. Pull your last twenty losses. Find the two conditions that show up in most of them. Write those conditions into your Go/No-Go rubric. Half a day of work, and a decision rule rather than a platform.

DIMENSION SIX

Risk and compliance

Whether misses get caught before they leave the building

Q10. When do you typically catch compliance or contract risks?

#	Answer	Teams	Tier
1	It is institutionalized and used as a competitive strength, not only a control	36%	HIGH
2	Before submission or signature, for most deals	27%	MID
3	Proactively, with a systematic audit trail across capture and contracts	27%	HIGH
4	Sometimes, depending on who reviewed it	9%	LOW
5	After submission or signature, if we catch them at all	0%	LOW

In the live room: about 50% catch risks before submission, about 30% proactively or better, and about 20% sit at the bottom.

This is the highest-scoring question in the model, and the one most worth challenging. Most teams choosing the top option are also in the group emailing Word redlines back and forth on Q6. Both answers describe the same pursuit.

> On the compliance contractual governance side, I think too often organizations get caught. Even if we win the work, have we caught a falling sword for the sake of argument?
>
> Kyle Peterson

HOW TO IMPROVE THIS

If you picked the top two options, test them against a specific deal rather than the process as written down. Who caught the last contractual risk, at what point, and is there a record of it? If the answer rests on one person noticing, that is option 2, not option 5.

THE NEXT 90 DAYS

What to do next

One move per stage, and a test you can run in 90 days to see whether it landed.



One move per step. The hardest jump is the last one, which nobody in the sample has made yet.

If you are at	Do this one thing	You will know it worked when
Stage 1 Ad Hoc	Name one owner for compliance review, even part-time, and use one shared checklist on every pursuit	Every active pursuit uses the same baseline method, not one-off spreadsheets
Stage 2 Emerging	Write down what your go-to person already does, as a Go/No-Go rubric and a reusable capture plan template	Every major pursuit has a logged outcome, even if the process is still informal
Stage 3 Standardized	Apply PWin scoring and gate thresholds to every qualified pursuit, not only the strategic ones	Four in five pursuits have a documented outcome and lessons learned on file
Stage 4 Managed	Extend your review cadence past submission, into contract award and modifications	Contract-side reviews carry the same audit trail as proposal-side reviews
Stage 5 Strategic	Find the pursuit types or business units still working outside the governed process	Nothing is operating outside the connected toolset

If you only do one thing

For most teams reading this, the highest-return move is not on your weakest dimension. It is on the one where you are strong on the proposal side and absent on the contract side. That gap is invisible in a single score and obvious the moment you break the score out by dimension.

And a cheaper suggestion: have two people from the same team take the assessment separately, then compare. The disagreement between a capture lead and a proposal manager on the same ten questions usually tells you more than either score does on its own.

NEXT STEP

Find your stage

The guide shows the shape of the field. Your own result shows where you sit inside it, broken out by dimension.

Take the assessment

Ten questions, about three minutes, with a report written for your stage.

visiblethread.typeform.com/to/t5umuYIF

Watch the webinar

Kyle Peterson and Micheál McGrath walk through the model and the live results.

Most Proposal Teams Think They're Better Than They Are