Evaluate Your Readiness to Use AI Tools for Federal Responses and Proposals

If you didn't witness my LinkedIn post awhile back about AI and proposal writing where I (innocently) asked the question, "How do we make AI tools affordable so small businesses can be early adopters?" you missed a doozy! There were debates about the validity of AI proposal writing tools and whether small businesses should even use AI for their proposal writing efforts (along with accusations, name-calling, and "trolls"). It all culminated with me making apologies for simply asking a question that went off the rails because of the passion on this subject between independent proposal writers and the "new cool kids on the block", the AI tool developers.

While it was a crazy social media experience I don't want to relive, I've spent my time since talking candidly to the dozen or so wonderful people who have reached out to me about their role in AI tools, AI policy, cybersecurity, how they saw (and now see) the messaging around its uses and limitations, and their concerns about the unintentional sharing of information by businesses who don't fully understand the technology but are fearful they are missing out on a competitive edge. I want to thank those people for educating me about this subject in the simple terms. What you see below is the output from those conversations.

So, you want to use an AI tool in your business process. Why?
Do you know why, or is it because you don't want to get left behind?
Don't jump in with two feet and your wallet, start dumping your proprietary data and project information into a system, and hope for an advantage over your competitors until you **DO, KNOW, and ASK!**

What you need to DO FIRST -- Establish Your 3Ds:

- ✓ **DEVELOP** use cases for AI tools within your current business processes.
  Do you need to cut the time it takes to shred a solicitation, policy, or technical document, collect data from existing documents, remove writing blocks, word flow, or editing documents?

- ✓ **DEFINE** the type of output(s) needed.
  Do you need an outline, pink draft, suggested language, organizing existing data, or draft plans/documents?

- ✓ **DETERMINE** the required Return on Investment (ROI) to implement.

If you can't come up with the 3Ds, you don't need an AI tool for response or proposal writing. Period. Full Stop.

Once you've established your 3Ds, don't go into your search for an AI tool without understanding…

What you need to KNOW:

➢ AI is not a silver bullet to writing dozens of perfect proposals in a matter of hours.

➢ Outputs require human tailoring to create quality final products. It's a tool, not a substitution.

➢ Over-reliance on AI tools can lead to a lack of human oversight and accountability.

➢ Reliability of the data returned is only as good as the data used in the generation of the response.

➢ Outdated or inaccurate sources will produce outdated or inaccurate results. This is why the sources used in developing the returns are very important.

➢ There is a difference between your data being secure and it being private. You want and need both.

➢ Some tools prioritize data security and privacy through encryption, access controls, and compliance with regulations like GDPR or CCPA, while others may have weaker protections.

➢ AI tools may pose security risks, such as vulnerabilities to hacking or unauthorized access to sensitive data.

➢ AI tools can raise privacy concerns, especially when they involve the collection and processing of personal data.

➢ Prompting conventions, often detailed and lengthy, must be developed to get what you want (the way you want it) from an AI tool.

➢ AI algorithms may exhibit bias, leading to unfair outcomes or discriminatory practices.

➢ Implementing and maintaining AI tools can be costly, especially for small businesses with limited resources.

You don't buy a car without kicking the tires and looking under the hood. Buying a subscription to an AI tool is no different. Before you start picturing piles of Government money thrown at you for all the winning proposals you'll have after getting that flashy (and likely very costly) subscription, here's…

What you need to ASK:

Technology:
___ What AI technology is the tool wrapped in (i.e., OpenAI, ChatGPT, Google Gemini, Microsoft Copilot, Claude by Anthropic, etc., none of these or a combination)?

Data Security Measures:
___ What measures does the AI tool provider have in place to ensure the security of user data?
___ Is data encrypted during storage and transmission?

Privacy Policies:
___ How does the AI tool provider handle user data?
___ Are they transparent about data collection, processing, and sharing practices?

Compliance:
___ Does the AI tool comply with relevant regulations and standards, such as GDPR, HIPAA, or industry-specific requirements?

Bias Mitigation:
___ What steps does the AI tool provider take to address bias and ensure fairness in algorithms and decision-making processes?

Data Ownership and Terms of Data Use:
___ What data sources are tapped to generate responses?
___ Who owns the data generated or processed by the AI tool?
___ Can businesses retain ownership and control over their data?
___ Who can access my data?
___ Who can see my data?

User Access Controls:
___ Does the AI tool offer robust access controls to prevent unauthorized access to sensitive data?

Data Retention Policies:
___ How long does the AI tool retain user data, and what mechanisms are in place for data deletion or anonymization?

___ Is my data being used to inform the AI tool itself? If so, can I opt out?
___ Is my data being used to inform output for other users? If so, can I opt out?

Security Incident Response:
___ How does the AI tool provider respond to security incidents or data breaches?
___ Do they have protocols in place for timely notification of all parties and remediation?

Third-Party Audits:
___ Has the AI tool undergone independent security and privacy audits? If so, by whom?
___ Can the provider provide certifications or attestations of compliance, or are they posted/available to view?

Functionality:
___ Does the logic provide suggestions for technical requirements and, if so, how are suggestions annotated?
___ Does the AI tool have features we need AND will use?

Customer Support:
___ What support does the AI tool provider offer regarding security and privacy concerns?
___ Is there a dedicated team available to address these issues promptly?

Costs:
___ What does it cost and how often do I pay?
___ What is the subscription duration?
___ What are the cancellation policies? (See also Data Ownership and Terms of Data Use)

Don't let FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) push you into using an AI tool for response and proposal generation before you need it. Also, don't invest in a tool with features you don't need or will never use.

With your 3Ds established as your guide, a healthy and realistic understanding of what AI tools can (and can't do), and answers to your questions from AI tool demonstrations, you should have all the information you need to evaluate if an AI tool is right for your business needs.

My recommendation? It is a business decision; it's not about your business size. It's about educating yourself about your own business needs and finding the right tools (AI tools included) to be more efficient and effective while realizing a return on your investment as you pursue opportunities in the Federal marketplace. And you'll know when an AI tool is a good fit.