

## So, You Want to Start an Acquisition Innovation Lab?

This document presents 20 key considerations for establishing an Acquisition Innovation Lab or similar initiative lab. The insights, recommendations, and resources included are based on the experiences of The Department of Commerce's Acquisition Innovation Lab (The LAB) and do not constitute an official position of the Department of Commerce (DoC). These considerations are drawn from The LAB and its personnel, providing informal support to many nascent labs throughout the federal government. Some of the key considerations are derived from the early framework of the Department of Homeland Security's Procurement Innovation Lab (PIL<sup>1</sup>), widely recognized as one of the first acquisition innovation labs detailed in the Office of Federal Procurement Policy's 2016 memorandum *Acquisition Innovation Labs & Pilot for Digital Acquisition Innovation Lab*<sup>2</sup>.

If any resources provided by The LAB in this document are unavailable, please visit the homepage at <https://www.commerce.gov/oam/lab>, where the most current files can be found, likely under the Resources section. Please note that the links may change in the future due to the ongoing website redesign efforts.

### Start Here!

1. **Go:** Just do it! The evidence overwhelmingly shows that waiting for the right time to start a movement can be futile—there's no such thing as the perfect moment. The best time to begin is now, leveraging the resources already available to you. Starting right away means you can get ahead of potential roadblocks, allowing time to identify and resolve issues. It builds momentum, often leading to increased organizational buy in. Plus, you can adapt and refine your approach as you go, ensuring the end result is of higher quality. The benefits are far reaching, and the ends will justify the means.
2. **Sponsor:** Gain buy in from the Chief Acquisition Officer (CAO) or Senior Procurement Executive (SPE) as not just an executive sponsor, but a champion for the movement. In the early years of the PIL, the DHS SPE Soraya Correa would do anything she could to support the movement<sup>3</sup>. Soraya created great partnerships with her fellow executive

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<sup>1</sup> The PIL's website, <https://www.dhs.gov/pil>

<sup>2</sup> Office of Federal Procurement Policy, Acquisition Innovation Labs & Pilot for Digital Acquisition Innovation Lab (March 2016), [https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/legacy\\_drupal\\_files/omb/procurement/memo/acquisition-innovation-labs-and-pilot-for-digital-acquisition-innovation-lab-memorandum.pdf](https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/legacy_drupal_files/omb/procurement/memo/acquisition-innovation-labs-and-pilot-for-digital-acquisition-innovation-lab-memorandum.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Review a Federal News Network interview with Soraya Correa about the upstart Procurement Innovation Lab from 2015, titled DHS procurement chief: 'Let's take some chances' to innovate (July 2015), <https://federalnewsnetwork.com/acquisition/2015/07/dhs-procurement-chief-lets-take-some-chances-to-innovate/>

counterparts focused on her lab's activities, especially the CIO and CFO, and eventually found great vocal champions in the upper echelon of DHS's Management (shoutout Chip Fulghum<sup>4</sup>). Soraya would create videos, refer teams to the PIL after review boards, speak at webinars, and kick off in person trainings so the students could feel that executive partnership.

3. **Start Small:** Think of your lab as a small startup company. The primary lead is likely working another job and trying to get things off the ground – but doesn't have a lot of resources or experience doing so. A start up starts small and focuses on *small wins*. Those small wins must be shared and championed to ensure recognition of the lab's role in fostering these accomplishments. This is a critical first step for labs to achieve documented success that paves the way for additional investments in resources or financial support.
  - Most labs start with nothing – no funding, and no dedicated resources. They start small and build. This was the case with the PIL. The PIL started with one part time leader, Eric Cho, who had a vision (shared and supported by the SPE [Soraya Correa](#)<sup>5</sup>) after spending years on Congressional and Senate committees. Eric did many of the things outlined in this document to grow the PIL and its capabilities. The team grew to one or two more members before Eric was focused full time on the PIL, replacing his Procurement Analyst duties. A detail or rotation of promising contracting officers was arranged to support and learn from him. To hear more from the leaders who fostered the PIL, the origin story, and its many accomplishments, then we recommend reaching out to the PIL team ([PIL@hq.dhs.gov](mailto:PIL@hq.dhs.gov)) and requesting a link to watch **Webinar #49: Five Years of Procurement Innovation: 07/23/2020.**
4. **Accept Challenges:** Like the previous point, many burgeoning labs got a jump start because they took on highly visible, political, or other unique challenges within their Agency/Department. By leveraging that initial story or challenge, openly sharing the lessons learned, and maintaining transparency, the lab comes center stage and into the spotlight. It may seem safer to start coaching support with small procurement projects that are less significant in the big picture of the Agency/Department's mission, but supporting something of much greater importance or complexity could pave the way for added recognition, resources, credibility, and more.

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<sup>4</sup> Chip Fulghum was the DHS CFO when the PIL started. Chip eventually held many senior leadership roles within DHS, however he remained a vocal champion for the PIL, often showing up at in person trainings to be the tone from the top, <https://www.dhs.gov/archive/person/chip-fulghum>

<sup>5</sup> Soraya Correa's archived biography from DHS, <https://www.dhs.gov/archive/person/soraya-correa>

5. **What's in A Name?** Spend some time with leadership to develop a name or acronym that highlights your agency or mission, here is a list below of others as an example, websites included where possible. This deserves some time and attention—have some fun with it. Engage the workforce by asking for their ideas or having them vote to get them involved early in the process. This is a way to lightly market the lab while attracting buy in from the workforce early in the process.

- i. VA
  - a. SAC SAIL – Strategic Acquisition Innovation Lab
  - b. TAC – IT Acquisition Innovation Lab
- ii. USDA PIE – Procurement Innovation Effort
- iii. DHS PIL – [Procurement Innovation Lab](#)<sup>6</sup>
- iv. DoC's The LAB – [Learn, Assess, Build](#)<sup>7</sup>
- v. EPA CECIL – [Cutting Edge Contracting Innovation Lab](#)<sup>8</sup>
- vi. NASA NAIL – [NASA's Acquisition Innovation Launch Pad](#)<sup>9</sup>
- vii. NRC iSquared – [Innovation Incubator](#)<sup>10</sup>
- viii. USAID A&A – [Global Acquisition & Assistance](#)<sup>11</sup>
- ix. GSA PIRC – [Procurement Innovation Resource Center](#)<sup>12</sup>
- x. All Agencies – [CAO Council's Report to Congress May 2024](#)<sup>13</sup>

6. **Charters:** You may need a charter or a business plan to start your lab. Even if your agency culture doesn't necessarily dictate a charter, collaborate with your executive sponsor to determine what they need to feel confident about moving forward. Some labs are created without formal business plans or charters. They start slow and build out and up over time. For The LAB, there was official documentation at DoC to govern: the charter, communications plan, innovation council, and more<sup>14</sup>. You can make it work either way,

<sup>6</sup> The PIL's website, <https://www.dhs.gov/pil>

<sup>7</sup> The LAB's website, <https://www.commerce.gov/oam/lab>

<sup>8</sup> EPA CECIL's website, <https://www.epa.gov/contracts/cutting-edge-contracting-innovation-lab-cecil>

<sup>9</sup> NASA NAIL's website; <https://www.nasa.gov/procurement-nail-framework/>

<sup>10</sup> A 2024 blog post by the Performance.gov Team where Nicole Stevenson from the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission discusses the Innovation Incubator, <https://www.performance.gov/blog/2024-nuclear-regulatory-commission-spotlight/>

<sup>11</sup> USAID's 2024 Acquisition and Assistance Strategy Implementation Plan Update, <https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2024-09/AA-Strategy-Implementation-Plan-09-25-24.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> General Service Administration's Procurement Innovation Resource Center, <https://www.gsa.gov/policy-regulations/policy/acquisition-policy/procurement-innovation-resource-center>

<sup>13</sup> Chief Acquisition Officers Council, *Acquisition Innovation & Small Business Participation in Federal Procurement* (May 2024). [https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/SIGNED-Report-to-Congress\\_Acquisition-Innovation-Small-Business-Participation-in-Federal-Procurement.pdf?cb=1715634435](https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/SIGNED-Report-to-Congress_Acquisition-Innovation-Small-Business-Participation-in-Federal-Procurement.pdf?cb=1715634435)

<sup>14</sup> To see an example of a lab's formal charter, see The LAB's redacted formal charter, [https://www.commerce.gov/sites/default/files/2024-11/The%20Lab%20Project%20Charter%20-%20redacted\\_Redacted.pdf](https://www.commerce.gov/sites/default/files/2024-11/The%20Lab%20Project%20Charter%20-%20redacted_Redacted.pdf)



some formal documentation may help with achieving buy-in from your agency culture in some areas, but it is not required by federal regulations and unlikely to be required by agency regulation.

7. **Online Presence:** It is vital to have a presence of the lab online, either intranet or publicly accessible to ensure ease of access. If possible, try to share as much as you can so other agencies can learn from your experience while enabling your vendor community to participate. Your Agency/Department may have rules or processes related with creating a social media account, but consider creating a LinkedIn profile or [YouTube account](#)<sup>15</sup> as a good way of spreading the word and sharing updates! The LAB has been enhancing its online presence with the goal of promoting transparency and sharing as much as possible beyond its internal firewall. While certain artifacts may need to remain within the Agency/Department, make a concerted effort to share as much as possible externally.
8. **Marketing:** Building on the name and online presence, there are key opportunities to market and promote the lab. Make it fun and catchy to get people excited and onboard to be part of the movement. Many labs effectively use routine newsletters, blogs, or other written materials to reach a broader audience within the Agency/Department. Another opportunity is to thoughtfully consider the elements of the lab's official logo and involve other stakeholders in its creation. Reflect on the colors, their connection to the mission, and how the design could evolve, starting early in the process.
9. **External Resources:** When it comes to starting small, do your best to leverage existing resources to fuel your start up. For example, when starting out at DoC, The LAB did not aim to replicate or create new training that is already covered in the three main PIL courses (two Boot Camps and the Coaching Clinic<sup>16</sup>), rather it urged its workforce to attend these important training courses each time they were offered. You can then see who from your Agency/Department is eligible to take the more advanced courses, or ones that have prerequisites, and tailor messaging to them to advocate for the training to receive some continuous learning points (CLPs). This is also a great way to find the early adopters in your agency. If another lab has done something useful, and you can reuse it in some way, then leverage it before using your limited resources on work duplication.
10. **Influence:** A goal of these labs is to transform how their organization operates, achieving more with less to ensure successful mission outcomes. It has been demonstrated that organizations can accomplish this goal faster, more efficiently, and cost-effectively,

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<sup>15</sup> The PIL team has grown a robust YouTube page with webinars and videocasts, <https://www.youtube.com/@dhspil5416>

<sup>16</sup> Find the latest versions of the PIL workbooks for these courses on its website, <https://www.dhs.gov/publication/pil>

aligning with the principles of the *Promoting Rigorous and Innovative Cost Efficiencies for Federal Procurement and Acquisition Act of 2021* ([PRICE Act](#)<sup>17</sup>). The goal of innovation labs is not to blindly adopt techniques from the *Periodic Table of Acquisition Innovations* ([PTAI](#)<sup>18</sup>), to replicate another lab, or to follow a specific coaching model. These could serve as strong starting or ending points, each representing a key pillar of a lab's foundation, but remember to leave room to address your organization's unique needs. Ensuring the value proposition is understood by all stakeholders of the acquisition innovation movement is a great approach for programs. Use the power of persuasion to encourage people to try new things and offer to join them in the process.

11. **ACM Support:** Partner with your Acquisition Career Managers (ACM); they can pull training reports from the *Federal Acquisition Institute's Cornerstone OnDemand* (FAI CSOD<sup>19</sup>) on who has attended which type of training. This is a great way to gauge what percentage of your workforce has taken any of the various innovative training courses. For example, you will be able to figure out who took a PIL Boot Camp but has not yet taken a PIL Coaching Clinic. You can identify who has taken which innovative training, aside from the PIL courses, and then inquire directly what they are doing to implement them.
12. **Training:** In its early years, The LAB did not aim to develop formal training programs. Instead, it leveraged previous stories and examples from other innovative projects to highlight new approaches to contracting. These narratives, along with insights gained from [PIL Webinars](#)<sup>20</sup> and [PILCasts](#)<sup>21</sup>, helped illustrate the effectiveness of these new approaches or techniques. There shouldn't be an expectation for the lab to begin coaching or offering training immediately. If training or coaching becomes necessary, they might develop over time, but this should not be an initial burden on the lab.
  - The LAB offers a list of training courses centered on acquisition innovation each fiscal year. These courses, which are typically free, are accessible to federal government employees. The [FY25 training list](#) is now available for anyone to explore<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> The PRICE Act of 2021, Public Law No: 117-88, February 02, 2022, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-bill/583/text>

<sup>18</sup> *Periodic Table of Acquisition Innovations* homepage. <https://acquisitiongateway.gov/periodic-table>.

<sup>19</sup> FAI Cornerstone OnDemand (FAI CSOD): <https://www.dau.edu/topic/fai-csod-support/faq-category>

<sup>20</sup> Access the PIL YouTube playlist of webinars, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DQ6wT1jj3RM&list=PLhvbmbmbnveQw2znUVmyX5OnTpnxvJTWB>

<sup>21</sup> Access the PIL playlist of PILCasts, <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLhvbmbmbnveR2TrrV1cE3iRgQE8NDGMqe>

<sup>22</sup> Review the list of available acquisition innovation trainings on The LAB's website, <https://www.commerce.gov/sites/default/files/2024-12/The%20LAB%20List%20of%20Innovative%20Training%20Courses%20for%20FY25.pdf>



**13. Stories:** Using the training lists provided by your ACM or other areas within your agency or department, gather stories showcasing the implementation of new approaches or the use of multiple techniques from the PTAI. Make sure these stories are collected and shared widely. The PIL team, among other forms of sharing, creates vignettes for its procurement teams and highlights them in its [yearbooks](#)<sup>23</sup>. Below is a table that references the data points included in each PIN. For example, The LAB collects Procurement Innovation Narratives (PINs) from its acquisition workforce<sup>24</sup>. The PINs are for acquisition teams or individuals who have used some of the PTAI techniques, or other new approaches, to complete and share with the innovation lab.

#### PIN Data Points

Project Title	Solicitation No.	Department/Bureau	IGCE
Award Amount	Solicitation Date	Award Date	Vendor Size
Requirements Summary (1000-character limit)			
Innovation Interest (1000-character limit)			
Innovation Summary (100-character limit)			
Set-Aside Status	Related URL	Phases	PTAI Techniques

**14. Strategic Partnerships:** The lab's lead doesn't need to own anything but can focus on fostering partnerships across the agency. Some common lines of business to align with are Policy, Small Business, the Contracting Officer Representatives (COR) community, the Program Management (PM) community, and the Office of General Counsel (OGC). Each line of business has the potential to be accelerators of procurement innovation rather than impediments. Failing to establish a strategic partnership with these lines of business could hinder overall momentum. If your organization already has an acquisition training office, make the most of it. While many standalone agencies or smaller departments may not have one, it's worth investigating. Additionally, ensure you have program personnel invested, such as the Program Management Improvement Officer<sup>25</sup>.

**15. Collaborate:** The more established labs have typically been open to sharing best practices or engaging in conversations about setting up a lab, whether with individuals or other agencies. This network values communication and collaboration, recognizing the positive impact labs bring to their organizations, especially in the early stages. Feel free to reach out—whether by call, email, or chat—whatever works best for you.

<sup>23</sup> Find these stories starting on page 12 of the latest PIL Yearbook, [https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/2024-01/24\\_0123\\_cpo\\_procurement-innovation-lab-yearbook-for-fiscal-year-2023.pdf](https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/2024-01/24_0123_cpo_procurement-innovation-lab-yearbook-for-fiscal-year-2023.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> See The LAB's first PIN on page 5 of its FY 2023 Yearly Digest, [https://www.commerce.gov/sites/default/files/2024-07/TheLab\\_YearlyDigest\\_FY2023.pdf](https://www.commerce.gov/sites/default/files/2024-07/TheLab_YearlyDigest_FY2023.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> Each Chief Financial Officer Act (CFO Act) agency was required to appoint a Program Management Improvement Officer as part of the Program Management Improvement Accountability Act, <https://www.congress.gov/114/plaws/publ264/PLAW-114publ264.pdf>



- Consider using Microsoft Teams to connect with colleagues. Many agencies can locate and chat with each other through Microsoft's global database. For example, The LAB frequently chats with individuals from DHS, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, and others. While the DoC license cannot initiate chat threads with some of these individuals, it can accept them, and once accepted, the chat remains accessible. This is a much faster and more efficient way for many of us to connect!

**16. Data:** When a lab does work with teams or collect stories, it is important to start collecting data points on those efforts early in the process so they can monitor trends and use the data to make decisions in the future. By tracking key metrics, agencies can assess the effectiveness of new procurement strategies. Data collection promotes transparency by providing a clear record of procurement activities and strategy outcome to take swift action to course correct. Data can be used to communicate the benefits and progress of procurement innovations to stakeholders, including vendors, policymakers, and the public. This helps in gaining support and buy-in for new initiatives and helps create a positive new culture around its implementation. The LAB presented to the Governmentwide Acquisition Innovation Advocate (AIA) Council in May 2024, illustrating how The LAB has evolved with capturing data and using that data to start better informing decisions<sup>26</sup>.

**17. Survey:** A great practice for a new lab to consider when starting up is to release a workforce survey so it can gauge the readiness of the culture to adopt and foster acquisition innovation. You can use an internal resource, such as Microsoft Forms<sup>27</sup>, to create the survey. Simply create it, and issue it to your workforce to have a baseline to monitor growth year over year. The survey can focus on PTAI techniques but should really capture cultural aspects like barriers to innovation, if the workforce feels empowered, and more.

- The LAB's initial survey focused heavily on usage of the PTAI techniques, however it transformed in FY23 into DoC's Innovation & Culture Assessment<sup>28</sup>, inviting feedback from its entire acquisition community to better understand its innovation readiness, application of innovative procurement techniques, barriers to innovation, innovation in program management, while also collecting the importance of four

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<sup>26</sup> The LAB's presentation on procurement project data, <https://www.commerce.gov/sites/default/files/2024-12/The%20LAB%20DATA%20-%20Govwide%20AIA%20Council%20-%202022May24.pptx>

<sup>27</sup> Learn more about Microsoft Forms from Microsoft, <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/microsoft-365/online-surveys-polls-quizzes>

<sup>28</sup> A PDF copy of The LAB's FY23 Innovation & Culture Assessment includes a background explanation, the email used to message the acquisition workforce, and the questions included in the assessment, <https://www.commerce.gov/sites/default/files/2024-11/DoC%27s%20Innovation%20and%20Culture%20Assessment%20-%20FY23.pdf>



values of both the Bureau and the Bureau's contracting organization: process control, innovation, human relations, and mission outcomes.

**18. Department Council:** If your department includes multiple bureaus or components, leverage the novelty of your lab to establish an internal innovation council. This same concept could apply to an agency, comprised of several branches or divisions within it. Running a lab on your own can feel isolating, so enlist your executive sponsor to help. Ask them to request that senior procurement officials at each component, Head of the Contracting Activity (HCA) or equivalent, appoint a component innovation advocate to join the Department level council. This approach ensures shared responsibility and active involvement in supporting the initiative. These representatives can contribute ideas and assist in developing the lab as needed. If the council only has monthly touchpoints, it still holds significant potential for growth and substantial accomplishments.

- The DoC established The Innovation Council at the same time The LAB was created. This council had a formal charter with each Senior Bureau Procurement Official appointing a Bureau Innovation Advocate (BIA), or two, to contribute. The council has grown over the years and continues to meet monthly at a minimum, while the BIAs continue to evolve their roles as internal resources to their bureaus. The council includes a small group of program managers and previously had an attorney serving as a direct liaison! To read more about The Innovation Council, visit The Lab's *About* page and scroll down<sup>29</sup>.

**19. Be Resourceful:** It was previously mentioned that labs should not feel the need to replicate foundational training offered by others, like the PIL courses. This is an example of resourcefulness. Another example follows a discussion on staying current on Government Accountability Office (GAO) or Court of Federal Claim (COFC) bid protest decisions, as those can serve as excellent agile learning tools. Other labs, including The LAB, try to stay up to date on all things protests, often collaborating with other labs. The LAB will have a tool on its new website that will have many of the latest and greatest protest decisions sorted by innovation topics, and other areas, so users can access it and find helpful resources. For now, users can still access its page for *GAO Cases on Innovative Approaches*<sup>30</sup>.

**20. Use Available Tools:** Many programs within labs can be challenging to create, track, or scale. Examples include course rosters, micro-credentials, success stories, and project

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<sup>29</sup> The LAB's website has an *About* page that discusses The Innovation Council, providing a name and email of each Bureau Innovation Advocate (BIA), <https://www.commerce.gov/oam/lab/about-the-lab>

<sup>30</sup> The LAB's page on GAO Cases on Innovative Approaches shares some protest decisions that touch on use of the innovative procurement techniques and process found on the PTAI, <https://www.commerce.gov/oam/lab/gao-cases>





trackers. If you have Microsoft 365, then you likely can use those tools for these purposes. SharePoint Lists, now called Microsoft Lists<sup>31</sup>, is a great tool for tracking some of these items. The LAB currently uses these Microsoft resources, including Power BI<sup>32</sup>, for its badge and procurement project tracking, protest decision tracker, and more. If you can figure out how to put some of these tools into Power Apps<sup>33</sup>, then they may become more seamless to manage. If you have Microsoft 365, then these tools should be available to you. If you have trouble getting started using them, try to find an advanced user within your Agency/Department. If your agency does not operate on Microsoft 365, then your suite of office tools likely has comparable products to leverage.

**Final Word.** This document may not cover every single consideration when starting a lab, and if you believe something is missing, please feel free to email us. These are some initial items to keep in mind when starting or growing a lab focused on acquisition innovation. We are a growing community, and we welcome your feedback to help improve this document in the future. We're all here to support each other.



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<sup>31</sup> Here is a helpful article on how to create a list, from Microsoft, <https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/office/create-a-list-0d397414-d95f-41eb-addd-5e6eff41b083>

<sup>32</sup> Learn more about Power BI from Microsoft, <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/power-platform/products/power-bi>

<sup>33</sup> Learn more about Power Apps from Microsoft, <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/power-platform/products/power-apps>