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The Evidence Layer

Why capable businesses fail qualification, what two independent instruments found when we measured the same market twice, and what actually closes the gap.

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AT A GLANCE

167 businesses scored on supplier readiness	8 dimensions measured at the NBL Summit assessment	501c3 the C3PI Institute is now an approved nonprofit

C3PI, Cultivating Capital Collective Partners, Inc. | Atlanta, Georgia | journey.c3pi.com

SECTION 01

Executive summary

Small businesses chasing government and corporate contracts hear the same advice constantly. You need better access. Meet the right buyer and the work follows. Almost every program built to help them runs on that idea, from matchmaking events to supplier fairs to networking breakfasts.

We decided to test it. Over five months we scored 167 businesses on a readiness assessment. Then, at the National Business League's Global Buyer-Supplier Summit, we gave a different room a second and deeper assessment, built on a different framework, asking different questions.

Two separate tests. Two separate groups. The same answer.

> **Capability is not the constraint. Evidence is.**
>
> In both tests, businesses did fine on questions about the work they actually do. Then they fell apart on questions about paperwork. Governance documents, compliance records, certifications, and the file a buyer reads before deciding anything. Here is the part people miss. A buyer never sees how good you are. A buyer sees a folder. If the folder is thin, the review stops there.

What the data shows

- Nine out of ten scored in the lowest of three levels, meaning they would not pass a buyer review today. The average score was 46.6 out of 100.
- Five specific things get a business rejected no matter how well it scores everywhere else. The typical business is missing three of the five at once. Only eleven percent are missing none.
- One business scored 104 out of 100 and still landed in the bottom group, because one of those five was missing.
- At the Summit, certifications and compliance scored 21 out of 100, worse than any of the other seven areas by more than thirty points. It also decided who got certified and who did not, every single time.
- Businesses going after government and corporate work at the same time score about eight points lower than businesses that picked one.

The rest of this paper covers how we tested it, what we found, what we saw that the scores do not capture, and what it takes to fix.

SECTION 02

Why we built two instruments

One test given to one group proves very little. Any test tells you as much about the person who wrote it as the person taking it, because someone chose the questions, decided what counted, and set the passing line. The result might say more about the test than about the market.

The only way to know the difference is to run a second test, written differently, given to different people, and see whether you get the same answer.

Instrument one: the C3PI Supplier Readiness Assessment

Eighteen questions across five areas, scored out of 100. Anyone can take it online in about seven minutes. Five of the questions are pass or fail rather than point based, meaning a wrong answer on any one of them caps the result regardless of everything else.

Who took it: 167 businesses between March and August 2026, reached through supplier development programs, chambers and associations, and contracting events.

Instrument two: the NBL Summit Assessment

Twenty five questions across eight areas, built with Dr. Forrest S. Carter for the National Business League Summit using his Arc of Business Development framework. It gives back four separate results rather than one score: how ready you are, what stage of growth you are in, whether you qualify for corporate supplier certification, and how much room you have to grow.

Who took it: people who attended the Summit at the NBL 126th Annual Conference in August 2026. This was a more experienced room. They paid to travel to a national conference specifically to get better at winning contracts.

These are not two versions of the same test.

One asks whether you would survive a buyer review right now. The other asks where you are on a growth path and what is blocking the next step. Different questions, different scoring, different thinking behind them. So when they agree, that agreement counts for something.

SECTION 03

What we measured, and why a buyer cares

The C3PI instrument: five dimensions

Each area is here because a buyer actually asks about it before awarding work. The point values reflect how much weight buyers give it, not what we find interesting. Higher points mean it matters more.

Business Identity and Market Position — 20 points

Can you explain what you do, who you do it for, and why someone should pick you? A buyer spends about ninety seconds on your capability statement before deciding whether to keep reading.

Executive Leadership and Decision Authority — 30 points

Who makes decisions here, and what happens if that person is out? A three year contract is a bet that the company keeps running, not that one person keeps showing up.

Governance, Compliance and Risk — 35 points

Are your rules written down somewhere an outsider could check? This section is worth the most points because it is where most businesses actually get stopped.

Digital Operating Discipline — 25 points

Do you have the systems to run the work if it gets bigger? Accounting, customer records, documentation, delivery.

AI Readiness and Innovation — 20 points

Did you adopt technology on purpose with rules around it, or did it just show up? Buyers now ask about this directly, usually in writing.

Five answers are pass or fail, not point based.

No governance structure. No code of ethics. No succession plan. Using AI with no policy for it. Running the books on spreadsheets alone. Each one is a specific place a real buyer review stops. Missing any single one drops you to the bottom group no matter how well you did on everything else.

SECTION 04

The eight dimensions of the Summit instrument

The Summit assessment covers more ground. Where our first test asks whether you would survive a buyer review today, this one asks where you are on a growth path and what specifically is stopping you from moving up.

Strategic Fit

Does what you sell match what buyers in your market actually buy?

Scalability

If the work doubled, could you handle it? Staffing, capacity, and whether the process repeats.

Financial and Pricing

Are your books clean enough to show someone, and do you know your real costs when you price?

Risk and Resilience

What happens when something goes wrong? Backup plans, insurance, and how much depends on one client or one person.

Cybersecurity

Can you hold a buyer's data safely and meet the security rules attached to the contract?

Digital and AI

Is the business actually running on systems, and was the technology chosen deliberately?

Certifications and Compliance

Do you have the certifications, registrations, and paperwork a buyer requires before they can award you anything?

Procurement and Solicitation

Can you find a real bid opportunity, judge whether it is worth chasing, and get a good response in on time?

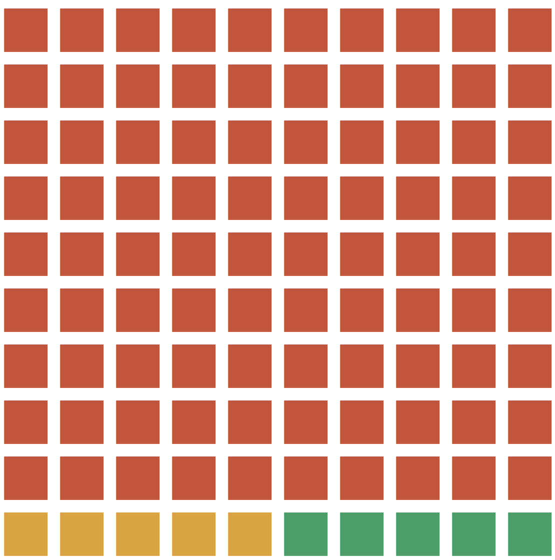
> **Why this list matters.**
>
> A buyer will ask about every one of these in some form before awarding work. Most small businesses have never seen the list written down anywhere. They just get a quiet no and never find out which item ended it. Once you can see the list, an unexplained rejection turns into a to-do list.

SECTION 05

What the first test found

We scored 167 businesses. The average came out to 46.6 out of 100. The lowest score was 3. The highest was 104.

The assessment sorts businesses into three groups based on that score. Here is how the 167 landed.



90% **Not ready**
Would not pass a buyer review today

5% **Almost there**
Close, with specific gaps to close

4% **Ready**
Could pass a review now. Seven businesses.

How to read this: each small square is one percent of the 167 businesses we scored.

Ninety percent is not a judgment on these businesses.

Being in the bottom group does not mean a business is bad at what it does. It means a buyer reviewing them today would stop before getting to the work. Most of the businesses in this group are running real operations with real customers.

SECTION 06

Where they were strong and where they were not

The assessment scores five separate areas. Each one is worth a different number of points, based on how much weight buyers give it.

How to read the scores on this page.

Each area is scored out of 100. A score of 100 would mean a business had everything a buyer looks for in that area, in place and written down. The number is not how many businesses have a problem. It is how much of what a buyer wants they actually had.

Digital systems and tools 65

Most have working software. Few have it connected, documented, or able to survive a buyer asking how it works.

Use of AI 62

AI is widely adopted and almost never governed. Nearly half use it daily with no written policy at all.

How they describe themselves 43

Most can say what they do. Far fewer can say why a buyer should choose them over the firm next to them.

Governance and compliance 34

Most have no written rules an outsider could check. Two thirds have no governance structure of any kind.

Leadership and decision making 30

The weakest area of the five. Who decides what, and what happens if that person leaves, is rarely defined anywhere.

You can buy a tool. You cannot buy a leadership structure.

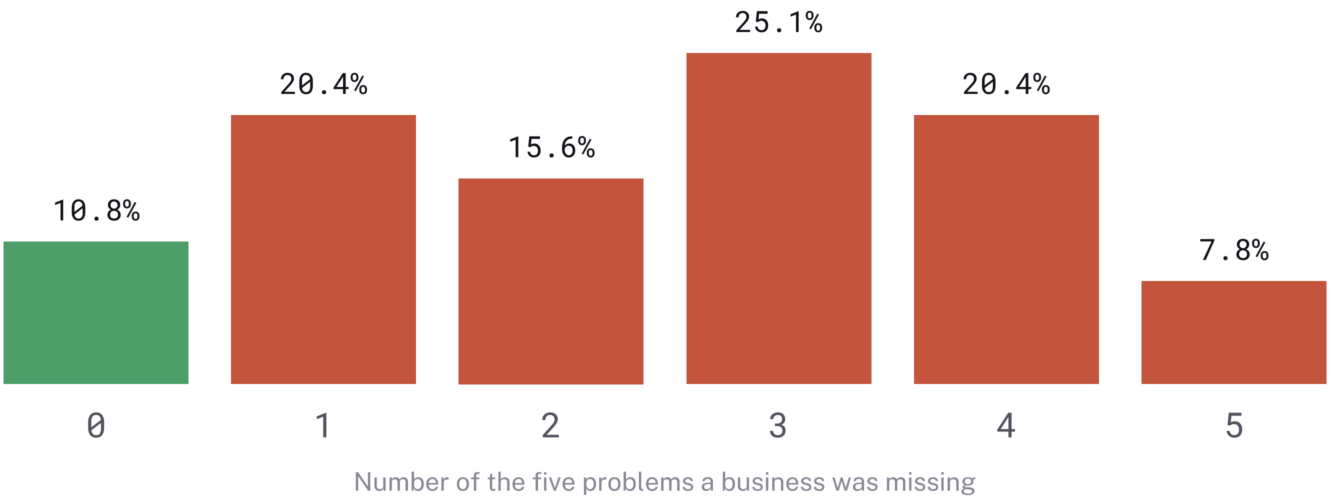
Look at the top two and the bottom two. The things they scored highest on are the things you can order online with a credit card. The things they scored lowest on require sitting down, deciding who is in charge of what, and writing it down. Nobody sells that, so almost nobody does it.

S E C T I O N 07

Why fixing one thing does not help

Listing those five problems one at a time makes them sound manageable. They are not, because they show up together.

This chart counts how many of the five each business was missing.



Reading it left to right: only 11 percent of businesses had all five in place. The single most common result was missing three of the five.

How common each problem was

Each bar shows the share of the 167 businesses missing that item.

> **A business with four problems that fixes one still has three.**
>
> And it still gets stopped at the first one a buyer checks. Nothing visible changes, nobody explains why, and the owner starts to think the problem is them. It usually is not. It is the order the work was done in.

SECTION 08

What the second test found

The Summit room scored higher overall, which we expected. These were people who paid to travel to a national conference to get better at this. The pattern underneath was the same.

> **How to read the scores on this page.**
>
> Each of the eight areas is scored out of 100. A score of 100 would mean a business had everything a buyer looks for in that area, fully in place and documented. Nothing in this room scored above 70, and one area scored 21. The percentage is not how many businesses have a problem. It is how much of what a buyer wants they actually had.

Fit with what buyers want — 70
Highest of the eight. Most know what they sell and who buys it.

Ability to handle more work — 63
Could take on somewhat more, but most would strain at real contract volume.

Data security — 62
Basic protections exist. Few could pass a formal security review from a buyer.

Financials and pricing — 60
Books exist and are mostly current. Pricing is often a guess rather than costed.

Responding to bid requests — 57
Can put a response together, usually late and without a repeatable process.

Handling disruption — 57
Little written continuity planning. Heavy dependence on one or two people.

Technology and AI — 53
Tools have been adopted. Rules for using them have almost never been written.

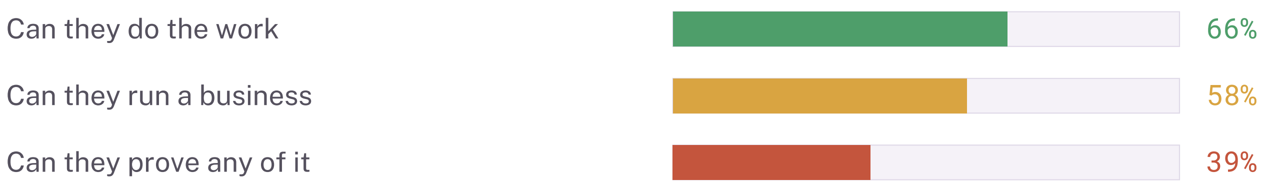
Certifications and compliance — 21
Almost nobody had the certifications and paperwork a buyer requires before award.

SECTION 09

The one area that decided everything

Seven of the eight areas clustered between 53 and 70. The eighth, certifications and compliance, came in at 21. That is more than thirty points below anything else, and it is not a rounding issue. Three businesses scored zero on it and nobody in the room scored above 56.

Group the eight areas by the question behind each one and the reason becomes obvious.



Each bar averages the areas in that group, scored out of 100, same scale as the page before.

Why that one area mattered more than the rest

The Summit assessment does two things. It scores the eight areas, and separately it decides whether a business qualifies for corporate supplier certification. Those two results tracked each other exactly.

Scored 0 to 22	**Did not qualify** Three quarters of the room landed here
Scored 44	**Qualified with conditions** Admitted, with required fixes documented
Scored 56	**Fully approved** One business. The highest score in the room.

Being good at the work moved nobody up a tier.

Strong fit with what buyers want did not help. Neither did healthy financials or the ability to scale. The only thing that changed a business's certification outcome was whether the paperwork existed. That is not a scoring quirk. That is how corporate supplier certification actually works.

SECTION 10

What we observed beyond the scores

A score tells you where someone is. It does not tell you how they got there. The Summit assessment also flags behavior patterns, and three kept showing up.

Capacity stretch

67% of the room

They can win more work than they can actually handle. This was the most common pattern and the most dangerous one, because the prize for selling well is failing in front of a buyer. It usually gets treated as a growth problem when it is really a systems problem.

Silent Specialist

50% of the room

They are genuinely good and nobody can tell. Buyers cannot find them, verify them, or compare them to anyone else. These businesses often spend money getting better at work they are already good at, because the real gap is how they present themselves.

Analog Achiever

25% of the room

They get real results by doing everything by hand. It works right now. It does not survive a buyer asking how that result gets repeated next quarter, and next year, without that one person.

None of this is about being bad at the job.

Every one of these describes someone good at their job being held back by how the business is set up. That distinction decides what actually helps. More training for someone already capable just frustrates them. Building the structure underneath them wins contracts.

SECTION 11

The convergence

Two tests. Different questions, different scoring, different groups, months apart. Here is what each one found.

C3PI READINESS ASSESSMENT

167 businesses, five dimensions

Governance, Compliance and Risk scores 34.1 percent of maximum

74 percent score below half on it

No governance structure is the most common automatic disqualifier at 67.7%

Digital and AI score highest

NBL SUMMIT ASSESSMENT

Summit population, eight dimensions

Certifications and Compliance scores 21.2 out of 100

92 percent score below half on it

Certification status maps directly onto program eligibility

Strategic Fit scores highest

In both tests, the things you can buy scored highest and the things you have to build scored lowest. The gap was large both times, and the reason was identical. Buyers require a paper trail that this market has not built.

When two separate tests point at the same thing, it stops being a theory.

One study gives you a hunch. Two separate studies of different groups, asking different questions and landing in the same place, give you something much closer to a fact about the market. That is what this paper is for.

SECTION 12

What this means, by audience

FOR A SMALL BUSINESS

Nobody is going to tell you why you lost. A buyer review does not owe you an explanation and almost never gives one. So you keep bidding, keep getting quiet nos, and eventually decide the problem is you. It usually is not. Fix the five things first. Every one can be done inside ninety days and none of them cost much.

FOR A COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY

You can count who showed up. You cannot show what changed, and that is increasingly what funders and provosts are asking for. The same readiness applies to all four groups a campus serves: student ventures, faculty going after SBIR and STTR grants, alumni founders, and regional businesses. Score them going in, score them again coming out, and you have a number instead of a headcount.

FOR A CORPORATION OR PRIME CONTRACTOR

Every one of those five problems is on your own supplier questionnaire. Signing up more suppliers who fail it just gives you a longer list of suppliers who fail it. The issue is not how many are in the pool, it is how many can pass, and that is fixable on a schedule. Score them, sort them, and work with the group closest to passing.

FOR A CHAMBER, COUNCIL OR ASSOCIATION

The members most likely to quit are the ones who never come to anything, which means events cannot reach them by definition. Send every member a scored report and a plan with your name on it and they get something real without walking through the door. At renewal, each one can point to it.

SECTION 13

The C3PI Institute

Readiness work is not free to deliver, and the organizations best positioned to fund it are frequently not the ones holding a procurement budget. That mismatch stops more programs than any disagreement about whether the work is needed.

The C3PI Institute is now an approved 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. It exists so that readiness programming can be funded as charitable and philanthropic activity rather than as a procurement line item.

Same program. Same instrument. Same reporting. A different budget.

Nothing about delivery changes. What changes is which pocket the money comes from, who approves it, and how fast it can move. Often that is the difference between a program this cycle and a program in two years.

What this opens, by vertical

COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Foundation grants, corporate giving, and workforce development funding restricted to nonprofit recipients now become viable channels. An institution that cannot find departmental budget can pursue a sponsored cohort funded philanthropically, and can report a measured readiness delta back to the funder.

CORPORATIONS AND PRIME CONTRACTORS

Supplier development budgets freeze. Corporate giving and community investment budgets often do not, and they are typically larger and controlled by a different approver. A company can fund readiness for its own supplier base as a charitable contribution, sponsor a named cohort, and receive the same tiered reporting either way.

CHAMBERS, COUNCILS AND ASSOCIATIONS

Corporate sponsors increasingly want a measurable outcome attached to their name rather than a logo on a banner. Sponsoring member seats through the Institute gives them a documented readiness delta across a named group of firms, which is a materially better sponsorship product than event visibility.

Direct purchase through C3PI remains available and unchanged for organizations that prefer it. The Institute is an additional route, not a replacement, and the choice belongs to whoever is funding the work.

SECTION 14

What closes the gap

The findings point to a specific sequence, and the sequence matters more than any individual component. Working on the wrong layer first is the most common failure we observe.

01

Measure before you plan

You cannot tell whether something worked if you never measured where you started. The assessment gives you a score, the specific problems you have, and a ninety day plan in the order that actually unblocks things. Free, seven minutes, no obligation.

02

Clear the gates before optimizing the score

Five things override everything else. A governance structure, a code of ethics, a succession plan, an AI policy, and real accounting. None of them require money, market position, or size. All of them require making a decision and writing it down.

03

Build the structure that cannot be purchased

The twelve week cohort covers what no software can give you: who decides what, the governance documents, the compliance binder, the certification path, and how you present to buyers. Self paced, start whenever you are ready, because one fixed schedule cannot serve a group this varied.

04

Install the operating layer underneath it

Learning something with nowhere to put it just produces notes. A CRM, a pipeline, automation, and payment tools give every session somewhere to land the same day. This is also what lifts the ceiling two thirds of the Summit room was hitting.

05

Measure again on the same instrument

The second score is what turns a claim into a record. For a university or a chamber it is the difference between reporting who showed up and reporting what changed, and it is what renews a budget.

Get ready first. Then get access.

Introducing a business that is missing three of the five wastes everyone's time and produces nothing. Getting ready before getting access is not the slow way to the same place. Based on this data it is the only way there.

SECTION 15

How we did this, and what it does not prove

Method

Both assessments are taken online and scored by code, not by a person or an AI making a judgment call. Every answer has a fixed point value and the math is the same for everyone. The written report gets generated afterward around those numbers and cannot change them.

What this does not prove

Nobody was randomly selected. People chose to take these assessments, which means both groups skew toward businesses already trying to win contracts. That makes the results worse news, not better. These are the ones already putting in the effort.

The 167 figure covers completed and scored assessments between March and August 2026. One result came back above the 100 point maximum and we kept it rather than quietly dropping it. Removing it changes nothing in this paper by more than a tenth of a percent. Our own test submissions were removed before any of this was calculated.

The Summit numbers describe the people in that room at that conference. We report them as findings from that group, not as a claim about every small business in the country. Both datasets are still growing.

Run the instrument on your own population

All four are free and open. Each one gives you a score and a plan, and each one is built to tell you no when no is the honest answer.

A small business	c3pi.com
A college or university	college.c3pi.com
A corporation or prime contractor	vendorpool.c3pi.com
A chamber, council or association	members.c3pi.com

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C3PI, Cultivating Capital Collective Partners, Inc., Atlanta, Georgia. Oscar Frazier also founded nDemand Consulting Services, Inc., which has contributed to more than $1.8 billion in federal contract awards within the last three years alone.