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GOVCON FOUNDATIONS

Your Starter Guide to Government Contracting

UPDATED MAY 2026 • VERSION 2.0

Government contracting (GovCon) has its own vocabulary, its own rhythm, and its own rules. **This guide is a plain-English baseline** covering how the industry actually works, what contract types look like in practice, the realities of job stability on a contract, and how to break in even if you don't have direct experience or a clearance yet.

WHAT YOU'LL FIND IN THIS GUIDE

- **How GovCon Actually Works** The terms, the players, and the contract structures that shape every cleared role in the industry.
- **Job Stability Realities** The myths, the truths, and what happens when contracts recompetes or change hands.
- **Breaking In Without Experience** How to position yourself, what entry points exist, and how clearance sponsorship actually works.
- **Smart Questions Before You Sign** The recruiter questions that protect you from surprises after you've accepted.

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01 • HOW GOVCON ACTUALLY WORKS

Government contracting is the system by which federal agencies buy services and products from private companies. Two layers of companies usually do the work: the prime contractor (who holds the contract directly with the government) and one or more subcontractors (who support the prime). Understanding this structure — and the vocabulary around it — is essential to navigating any cleared role.

Key Terms You'll Hear Constantly

- **GOVCON** Government Contracting. The broad industry where private companies deliver services or products to federal agencies under contract.
- **PRIME CONTRACTOR** The company holding the main contract with the government. Examples: Leidos, Booz Allen Hamilton, CACI, ManTech, SAIC, Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman.
- **SUBCONTRACTOR (SUB)** A company that supports the prime by filling specific roles or delivering specific work. Subs are chosen by the prime based on capabilities, set-aside status, or past relationships.
- **CUSTOMER / CLIENT** The government agency that owns and oversees the contract — e.g., DoD, NSA, NGA, DIA, CIA, DHS, NIH.
- **IDIQ** Indefinite Delivery / Indefinite Quantity. A flexible contract structure where the government commits to a ceiling value but issues specific work over time as needs change.
- **TASK ORDER (TO)** A specific assignment issued under an IDIQ contract — the actual scope of work, timeline, and budget for a discrete project.
- **OPTION YEAR (OY)** An additional year the government can extend a contract beyond its base period. Most contracts have a base year plus 3–4 option years.
- **GWAC** Government-Wide Acquisition Contract. Multi-agency IDIQ vehicles like OASIS+, GSA Alliant 3, NASA SEWP VI, and others, used by federal agencies to buy services efficiently.
- **DISS** Defense Information System for Security — the DoD system that tracks clearance eligibility and access. Being phased out in favor of NBIS (National Background Investigation Services).

02 • THE CONTRACT LIFECYCLE

Most cleared roles tie directly to a specific contract — your job exists because the work exists on the contract. Understanding where a contract sits in its lifecycle tells you a lot about role stability and growth potential.

The Three Phases

- **AWARD** After a competitive bid, a contract is awarded to one or more contractors. When a company wins, hiring typically accelerates rapidly to staff the contract before performance begins.
- **PERFORMANCE** The base year and any option years where the contractor delivers against the contract scope. This is where most cleared work happens — typically 3 to 5 years total.
- **RENEWAL or RECOMPETE** Toward the end of the contract, the agency decides whether to extend (option year) or recompete (open bidding for a new contract). If a different contractor wins the recompete, they typically absorb most existing cleared staff — the work needs the people who already do it.

03 • JOB STABILITY REALITIES

GovCon careers look different from private-sector ones — in ways that often turn out to be more stable, not less. The same five or ten years of work might involve two or three different employers on the same physical seat at the same customer site. Here are the most common misconceptions, with the actual reality.

MYTH *Contracts can end at any time, leaving you stranded.*

REALITY Federal contracts have defined terms (base year plus option years) and aren't typically cut short without cause. Contractors actively work to deliver well so option years are exercised and recompetes are won.

MYTH *If the contract changes hands, you lose your job.*

REALITY Most cleared staff are retained by the incoming contractor when contracts change hands — your clearance, customer relationships, and institutional knowledge are too valuable to lose. You may change badges; the work usually stays.

MYTH *Government shutdowns automatically furlough contractors.*

REALITY Funded contracts continue during shutdowns. Many cleared roles — especially in defense and intelligence — are funded through multi-year appropriations and continue largely unaffected.

MYTH *Subcontractors are less stable than primes.*

REALITY Subs are often more stable in the day-to-day. They're hired for specific Task Orders and tend to keep those positions through the life of the TO. Primes can shift personnel around more aggressively.

What Actually Drives GovCon Stability

- Your clearance — active, current, and aligned to the customer's needs.
- Your role on the contract — mission-critical positions are recompile-safe.
- Your customer relationship — government program managers vote with their voice when contracts recompile.
- The agency's mission posture — IC, DoD, and cybersecurity-coded work is on a long-term growth trajectory.

04 • BREAKING IN WITHOUT EXPERIENCE

If you're new to GovCon — no clearance, no defense background, no contract experience — it can feel like a closed system. It's not. It's a system with specific entry points that reward persistence and the right positioning.

Step 1 • Speak the Language

Recruiters and hiring managers are scanning for industry vocabulary. Reframe your existing experience using GovCon terms: “program support,” “compliance documentation,” “contract deliverables,” “stakeholder coordination,” “technical writing for federal customers.” The work you've done probably maps; the language just needs to align.

Step 2 • Identify Transferable Skills

- Project management, scheduling, deliverables tracking
- Administrative skills, document management, compliance records
- Technical aptitude (IT support, networking, software, data)
- Military service, federal civilian experience, public-sector roles — directly transferable

Step 3 • Earn a Foundational Certification

- CompTIA Security+ — the single most useful cert for breaking into cleared IT/cyber
- PMP or CAPM — strong signal for program coordination and management-track roles
- ITIL Foundation — useful for IT service management roles
- Industry-specific (acquisition, compliance, cyber) certifications relevant to your target work

05 • ENTRY POINTS & CLEARANCE SPONSORSHIP

Not every cleared role requires you to walk in already cleared. Some categories of work are entry-level by design, and some companies are actively in the business of investing in talent and sponsoring clearances. Knowing where to aim makes the difference.

Best Entry-Level Roles

- **Help Desk / IT Support** Often does not require clearance to start; ideal for clearance sponsorship after 6–12 months of solid performance.
- **Administrative Assistant / Program Coordinator** Support contract teams with scheduling, documentation, deliverables tracking. Strong gateway role.
- **Junior Data / Financial / Operations Analyst** Analyst-track positions on large contracts. Companies often invest in clearance after onboarding.
- **SOC Tier 1 / Cyber Defense Analyst** Entry into cleared cyber work; often requires Security+ and a willingness to start at night-shift or rotating schedule.
- **Military to Federal Transition Programs** DoD SkillBridge, Hiring Our Heroes Corporate Fellowship, MSSA, FourBlock — high-leverage paths for transitioning service members.

How Clearance Sponsorship Actually Works

Companies are reluctant to sponsor clearances cold — it's expensive and uncertain. The realistic path: take a role that doesn't require a clearance, perform exceptionally for 6–18 months, and then request to be sponsored for work that does. Clearance sponsorship is a reward for proven employees, not an entry-level perk.

06 • SMART QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE YOU SIGN

The single biggest source of GovCon regret is accepting a role without understanding the structure underneath it. These are the questions a confident candidate asks — not pushy, just informed.

About the Role & Contract

- Is the company a prime or a sub on this contract?
- What contract is this role tied to, and what option year is it in?
- Who is the customer agency, and which program office?
- What's the work location? Onsite / hybrid / remote, and are there travel or deployment expectations?

About Compensation & Schedule

- Is the position exempt or non-exempt? Salaried or hourly?
- What's the work schedule — standard 80-hour biweekly, 84-hour shift, or rotating?
- Are there shift differentials for nights, weekends, or holidays?
- What's the full compensation picture — base, bonuses, relocation, retirement match, PTO?

About Clearance & Commitment

- How is the clearance process handled, and does the company sponsor upgrades?
- Is there a non-compete clause tied to this contract or program?
- How long has the company held this contract, and when does the next recompetes happen?

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Informational baseline only. Specific terms, vehicles, and clearance requirements vary by contract and customer — always verify with your recruiter or hiring company.

Related guides: Security Clearances, DoD Cyber Workforce, Career Toolkit.

QUESTIONS? REACH OUT.

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