



How to Find Your First DoD Contract

A practical guide for dual-use technology companies navigating defense procurement for the first time. No clearance required.

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WHO THIS IS FOR

This guide is for founders and executives at commercial technology companies considering defense as a market for the first time. It assumes no military background, no security clearance, no existing government relationships, and no dedicated business development team. Every database, process, and contact method described here is publicly available.

SECTION 01

The Landscape

The Department of Defense spends hundreds of billions of dollars annually on contracts. A significant portion of that spending now targets commercial technology companies — startups and mid-size firms building dual-use technology that serves both civilian and military markets. DoD has created multiple pathways specifically designed to bring non-traditional companies into the defense supply chain.

The challenge is not access. Every solicitation, every program office, every budget line, and every past award is publicly available. The challenge is navigation. The procurement system was designed for large defense contractors with dedicated capture teams, not for a 30-person robotics company whose CEO is also running sales, engineering, and fundraising.

This guide walks through each major pathway, explains how it works in plain language, and identifies the specific actions a commercial company can take to find and pursue relevant opportunities.

KEY CONCEPT – DUAL-USE

A dual-use technology is one that has both commercial and military applications. Autonomous vehicles, medical devices, cybersecurity software, advanced materials, robotics, AI/ML systems, communications hardware, and logistics platforms are all examples. If your technology solves a problem in the civilian market that also exists in defense, you are a dual-use company — whether you identify that way or not.

SECTION 02

SAM.gov

[SAM.gov](https://sam.gov) (System for Award Management) is the central federal database for government contracting activity. Every company that wants to do business with the federal government must register here. Registration is free and takes approximately one hour.

More importantly, [SAM.gov](https://sam.gov) is where DoD publishes the vast majority of publicly available solicitations, Sources Sought notices, Requests for Information, and contract awards. It is the primary source for identifying defense contract opportunities.

- 1 Register your company**

Obtain a UEI (Unique Entity Identifier) and complete your [SAM.gov](https://sam.gov) registration. This is required before you can respond to any federal solicitation. Allow several business days to several weeks for the registration to process.
- 2 Search for opportunities**

Use the Contract Opportunities search on [SAM.gov](https://sam.gov). Filter by agency (Department of Defense), notice type (Solicitation, Sources Sought, Special Notice), and keywords matching your technology. Set up saved searches with email alerts for new postings.
- 3 Read the solicitation carefully**

Every posting includes a description of the requirement, evaluation criteria, submission instructions, and a contracting officer contact. The contracting officer is a named individual — this is your point of contact for questions about the opportunity.

SIGNALCORDON TIP

Most founders search [SAM.gov](https://sam.gov) by keyword and stop there. The higher-value approach is to search by NAICS code (the industry classification system the government uses) and by specific program offices. A keyword search for "autonomous" returns thousands of results. A search filtered to your specific NAICS code and the program office most likely to buy your technology returns a manageable, targeted list.

SECTION 03

SBIR / STTR

The Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) and Small Business Technology Transfer (STTR) programs are the most accessible entry points for small companies pursuing defense contracts. Each military branch and defense agency publishes topics describing specific technology needs. Companies apply with a technical proposal. Awards are contracts, not grants — an important distinction that many founders miss.

PHASE	PURPOSE	TYPICAL AWARD	TIMELINE
Phase I	Feasibility study — can this technology work?	\$50,000 – \$250,000 (varies by service branch)	3–9 months to award
Phase II	Full R&D — does this technology work for military application?	\$750,000 – \$2,000,000 (varies by service branch)	Typically requires Phase I (Direct to Phase II available at some agencies)
Phase III	Commercialization — deploy into military or private market	No SBIR funding; private capital or direct DoD contract	Ongoing

COMMON MISTAKE

Most founders treat SBIR as a grant program. It is not. Every SBIR Phase I award is a contract with a government customer. That contract becomes past performance — a verifiable record of DoD engagement that opens doors to larger contracts and prime subcontract relationships. Build past performance early and deliberately.

SBIR topics are published on [sbir.gov](https://www.sbir.gov). Each topic includes a description of the requirement, the sponsoring agency, the submission deadline, and the technical point of contact. DoD agencies release topics multiple times per year through rolling solicitations.

SIGNALCORDON TIP

The companies that move fastest through defense procurement begin with SBIR Phase I, maintain continuity across phases, and use their SBIR awards as proof points in outreach to program offices outside the SBIR track. A Phase I award is not the end goal — it is the first piece of evidence that your technology has a government customer.

SECTION 04

Sources Sought & RFIs

Before DoD issues a formal solicitation, program offices often publish a Sources Sought notice or a Request for Information (RFI) on [SAM.gov](https://www.sam.gov). These are not contract opportunities — they are market research. The program office is asking: does a company exist that can solve this problem?

Responding to a Sources Sought notice is one of the highest-leverage actions a dual-use company can take. It costs nothing, requires no proposal, and puts your company directly in front of the program office that will eventually issue the contract. A well-written capability statement in response to a Sources Sought can result in an invitation to submit a proposal when the formal solicitation drops. In rare cases, it can lead to a sole-source award if the program office determines no other company matches the requirement.

WHAT TO SUBMIT

A Sources Sought response is not a proposal. It is a capability statement: what your company does, what relevant past performance you hold, how your technology matches the stated requirement, and your company's size and socioeconomic status. Keep it to 3-5 pages. Reference specific technical capabilities, not marketing language.

SECTION 05

Other Transaction Authorities (OTAs)

OTAs are contracting mechanisms that operate outside the traditional Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR). They were designed specifically to make it easier for non-traditional defense contractors — companies that do not currently hold DoD contracts or have not recently been awarded one — to work with the military. OTAs involve faster timelines, less paperwork, and more flexible terms than traditional contracts.

The three most active OTA organizations for dual-use companies are:

- ◆ **Defense Innovation Unit (DIU):** Based in Mountain View, CA. DIU solicits commercial solutions to specific military problems through open topic areas. Companies apply through diu.mil. Prototype agreements typically move from application to award in 60-90 days — dramatically faster than traditional procurement.
- ◆ **AFWERX:** The Air Force's innovation arm. Runs SBIR/STTR programs, challenge competitions, and the AFVentures investment program. AFWERX specifically targets small commercial companies and provides a streamlined path from prototype to production.
- ◆ **Army Futures Command:** Headquartered at Capital Factory in Austin, operates the Army Applications Laboratory for rapid prototyping of commercial technology for Army use cases. Accepts unsolicited proposals through its website.

SIGNALCORDON TIP

OTAs are the fastest path from zero to a DoD contract for companies with mature commercial technology (TRL 6+). If your product already works in the civilian market and has a clear defense application, an OTA prototype agreement can put you under contract in months rather than years. The trade-off: OTA prototype awards are typically smaller (\$500K-\$2M) than full production contracts.

SECTION 06

NDAA & Budget Lines

The National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) is the annual law that authorizes DoD spending. It is typically enacted in December and describes, in detail, what the military plans to buy over the next fiscal year. Major programs, dollar amounts, and priority areas are documented in the NDAA and its accompanying budget justification documents.

Reading the NDAA is how sophisticated defense BD teams identify opportunities 6-12 months before they appear on [SAM.gov](https://sam.gov). When the NDAA allocates \$19 million for autonomous medical resupply, that money will eventually become a solicitation. The company that identifies the budget line early can begin building relationships with the program office before the solicitation is published — and before competitors are aware the opportunity exists.

HOW TO READ THE NDAA

The full NDAA is thousands of pages. Focus on the sections relevant to your technology. Search for your capability keywords in the bill text (available at congress.gov) and in the budget justification documents (comptroller.war.gov). Each line item includes the program name, the requesting service branch, the dollar amount, and a description of what the money funds. This is the earliest public signal of where DoD spending is headed.

SECTION 07

Finding the Right Program Office

DoD is not one buyer. It is thousands of program offices, each responsible for a specific capability area. The program office that buys medical devices is different from the one that buys autonomous vehicles, which is different from the one that buys cybersecurity tools. Identifying the correct program office for your technology is the single most important step in defense BD.

Program offices can be identified through several public sources:

- ◆ **SAM.gov contract awards:** Search for contracts awarded to companies with similar technology. The awarding office listed on each contract is the program office you want.
- ◆ **SBIR awards:** Search [sbir.gov](https://www.sbir.gov) for past awards in your technology area. Each award lists the sponsoring agency and program.
- ◆ **USASpending.gov:** The government's public spending database. Search by keyword, agency, or contractor to identify which offices spend money on capabilities like yours.
- ◆ **NDA budget justification documents:** Each line item names the responsible program and office.
- ◆ **Defense organizational charts:** Each service branch publishes its organizational structure. Map your technology to the office responsible for that capability area.

SECTION 08

The Outreach

Cold outreach to a program office is not the same as cold outreach in the commercial market. Program offices are staffed by acquisition professionals who evaluate hundreds of capability pitches annually. Standing out requires specificity — reference a specific solicitation, a specific budget line, or a specific capability gap you can address.

The most effective outreach follows this structure:

- 1 Reference a specific signal**
Open with the solicitation number, Sources Sought notice, or SBIR topic that matches your capability. This immediately signals that you have done your research and are responding to a real requirement.
- 2 State your match in two sentences**
Describe what your technology does and why it matches the stated requirement. Use technical language appropriate to the domain. Do not use marketing language, buzzwords, or superlatives.
- 3 Request a specific next step**
Ask for a 15-minute call to discuss the requirement, or request permission to submit a capability statement. Do not ask open-ended questions. Do not ask the program office to visit your website.

WHAT NOT TO DO

Do not send a generic company overview to a program office. Do not begin with "I'd love to tell you about our company." Do not reference capabilities you cannot demonstrate. Do not claim your technology is "the best" or "revolutionary." Every unsupported claim reduces your credibility. Let specific past performance and technical data speak for you.

SECTION 09

The Vehicle Comparison

Choosing the right contracting vehicle depends on your company's maturity, technology readiness, and timeline. This table compares the five primary pathways available to dual-use companies.

VEHICLE	BEST FOR	TYPICAL AWARD	TIMELINE	COMPLEXITY
SBIR Phase I	Early-stage companies, TRL 2-5	\$50K – \$250K	3-9 months	Low
SBIR Phase II	Phase I awardees, TRL 4-7	\$750K – \$2M	12-24 months	Medium
OTA Prototype	Mature commercial tech, TRL 6+	\$500K – \$5M	60-120 days	Low-Medium
Sources Sought → RFP	Companies matching stated requirement	\$1M – \$50M+	6-18 months	High
Prime subcontract	Companies with niche tech, any stage	Varies widely	Variable	Medium

SIGNALCORDON TIP

Most dual-use companies should pursue SBIR Phase I and OTA prototypes simultaneously. SBIR builds past performance and provides non-dilutive funding. OTAs provide faster access to operational end users. The two pathways are complementary, not competing — and pursuing both increases the probability that at least one produces a contract within 12 months.

SECTION 10

Monday Morning Action

If you have read this entire guide and want to take one concrete step this week, here it is:

- 1 Register on [SAM.gov](https://sam.gov) if you have not already**
 This is the prerequisite for everything else. It takes one hour and costs nothing. Obtain your UEI and complete the entity registration process on [SAM.gov](https://sam.gov).
- 2 Search [SBIR.gov](https://sbir.gov) for open topics matching your technology**
 Go to sbir.gov, filter by DoD, and read every open topic in your technology area. Identify the one closest to your current capability. Read the full topic description and note the deadline.
- 3 Search [SAM.gov](https://sam.gov) for Sources Sought in your domain**
 Filter by "Sources Sought" notice type and your relevant NAICS codes. If you find one that matches, draft a 3-page capability statement and submit it before the deadline.

These three steps — registration, SBIR topic identification, and Sources Sought response — are the foundation of every successful dual-use company's defense market entry. They cost nothing, require no relationships, and can be completed in a single week.

SignalCordon does this research automatically.

One input — your company name. Output — three verified contract paths with specific program offices, named solicitations, confidence scores, and ready-to-send outreach.

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FIND THE SIGNAL. DRAW THE LINE.