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The State of Supplier Readiness

Findings from the National Business League Conference

What a national room of contract-seeking businesses actually scored on readiness, where the gap sits, and the sequence that closes it.

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126th National Business League Annual Conference · National Buyer-Supplier Summit · Atlanta, Georgia

8

readiness dimensions scored at the Summit

21

lowest dimension score, out of 100

1

clear next step for every business in the room

SECTION 01

Executive summary

There were no shortages of capabilities for success. Only shortages of mechanisms for success.

The National Buyer-Supplier Summit, held at the 126th National Business League Annual Conference, advanced the National Business League's mission to eliminate the nation's \$240,000 median racial wealth gap. Research by the Summit's facilitators shows that closing this gap requires dramatically increasing Black suppliers' participation in Fortune 500 and government procurement, yet Deloitte and McKinsey find that over 80% of mid-market suppliers lacked the supplier readiness required for corporate onboarding, a challenge likely even more acute for Black suppliers. Supplier readiness was shown to function as a critical gatekeeper to Tier 1 and Tier 2 contracting and thus to meaningful progress on the wealth gap. The Summit's core purpose was to embed supplier-readiness awareness among Black businesses and begin mapping where suppliers currently stand along the Arc of Development.

Three terms anchor everything that follows. **Tier 1 and Tier 2 suppliers** sell directly to a large corporation or government agency, or to the companies that do; reaching either tier is what most Black-owned businesses in the room are working toward. **Supplier readiness** is the separate, provable standard a buyer checks before award: governance, compliance, cybersecurity, and financial documentation, not just the strength of the product or the price. **The Arc of Business Development**, introduced in Section 02, places supplier readiness on a six-stage path running from a newly launched business to one holding real market share, and the findings below describe where a national room of Black suppliers currently sits on that path.

At the National Buyer-Supplier Summit, attendees took a live readiness assessment built for the event and grounded in the Arc of Business Development framework. The instrument scored eight dimensions buyers actually check before an award: strategic fit, capacity, financial and pricing discipline, risk and resilience, cybersecurity, technology and AI, certifications and compliance, and procurement and solicitation readiness.

Seven of the eight dimensions landed in a fairly narrow band, between 53 and 70 out of 100. The eighth, certifications and compliance, came in at 21. That single dimension, more than any other, decided who qualified for government or corporate supplier certification and who did not. Three out of four attendees did not qualify. Not because their business was weak, but because the paperwork a buyer requires before award was not yet in place.

The pattern echoes what our companion research found earlier in the year across a broader, independently sampled group of businesses: capability is rarely the constraint. Evidence is. A buyer does not evaluate how good a business is. A buyer evaluates the folder that proves it.

This paper reports what the Summit room scored, the one gap that overrode everything else, three behavior patterns we observed beyond the numbers, and the specific, sequenced action plan that closes the gap. It closes with how any business, whether it attended the conference or not, can take the same assessment and start that plan today.

SECTION 02

The Summit's "Why"



Supplier Readiness is the Gatekeeper to Tier 1 or Tier 2 opportunities, which is the Gatekeeper to any chance of narrowing the racial wealth gap

The ultimate goal of this Summit, like all of the National Business League's endeavors, is the elimination of the \$240,000 wealth gap between median White and Black household incomes. The Federal Reserve's Survey of Consumer Finances (SCF) data from 2013 to 2022 indicates that the racial wealth gap grew by an average of roughly 4.7% per year in absolute dollar terms. Research by the Summit facilitators indicates that the magnitude of the gap is such that the only chance for it to be eliminated is for Black suppliers to significantly increase their share of Fortune 500 and government expenditures, which account for 62% to 67% of the country's gross domestic product. A Deloitte global procurement study, confirmed by a McKinsey study, found that over 80% of mid-market suppliers do not meet baseline enterprise requirements in areas such as cybersecurity controls, financial risk reporting, workflow automation, and API-based system integrations needed for corporate onboarding and compliance (Deloitte, *Closing the Supplier Readiness Gap*, 2022). One can reasonably surmise that this percentage would be even higher for Black suppliers.

These baseline enterprise requirements are captured by the concept of supplier readiness. **Supplier readiness refers to the competitively determined status of a company, based on its innovativeness, its value creation and risk mitigation capabilities, and a myriad of other factors beyond having a competitive product at a competitive price.** Thus, supplier readiness is a major gatekeeper limiting Black suppliers' success at achieving Tier 1 or Tier 2 contracts, and thus a major obstacle in reversing or stopping the growth in the racial wealth gap.

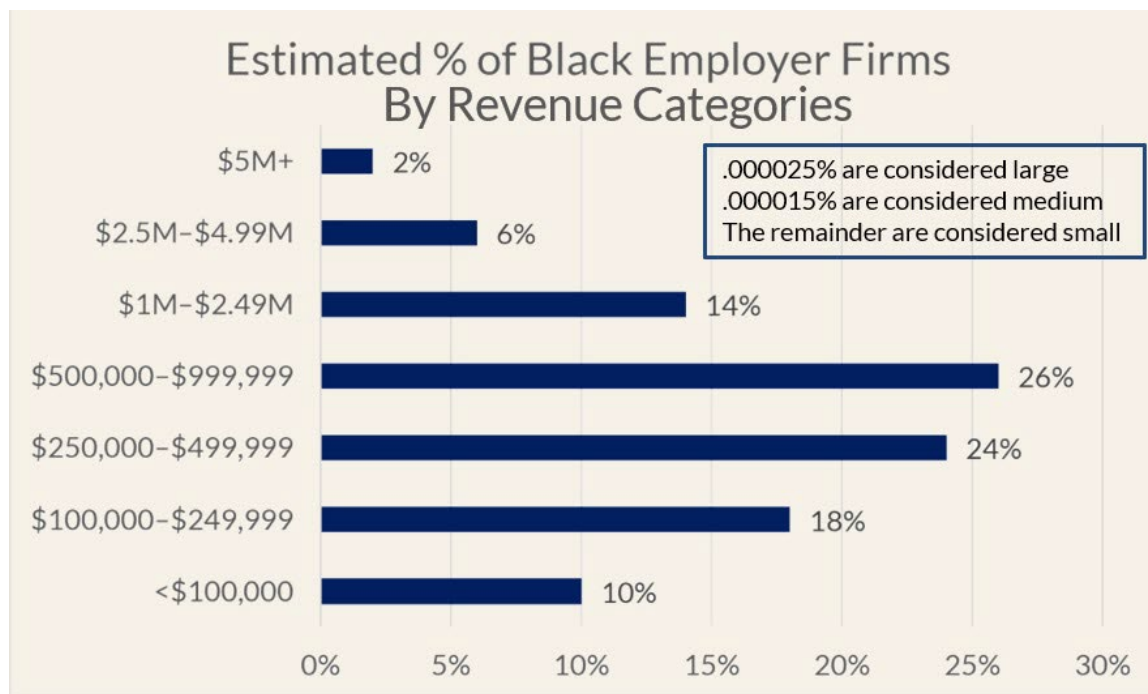
The goals of the Summit were to implant awareness of the concept of supplier readiness and its importance into the minds of Black suppliers, and gather some initial data on the number of Black suppliers at the various stages of the Arc of Development.

SECTION 03

Summit's Focus on Better

The vast majority of the literature on the development of Black business focuses on starting more Black businesses and strategies for existing Black businesses to achieve accelerated growth. While both are important pieces of the solution to eliminating the racial wealth gap, they are far from being the major contributors to the solution. Like a fish in an aquarium, a business's growth is bounded by the capacity and capabilities of its operating framework. Charting the revenues of Black suppliers supports this conclusion. Examining this chart against the framework that

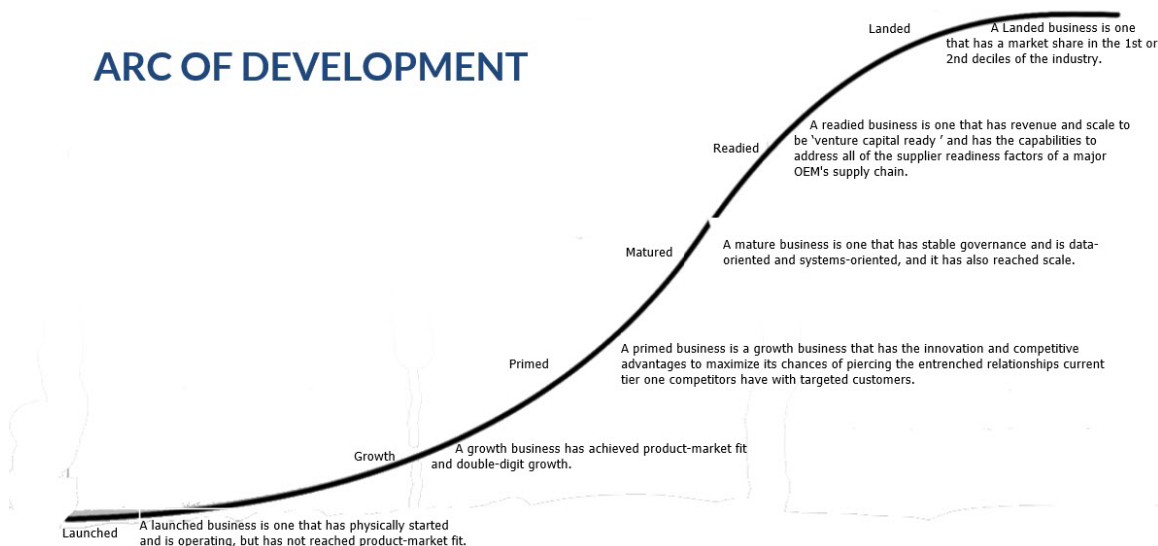
the Small Business Administration and most private venture capital firms define a small business as one having revenues between \$2.5 million and \$47 million, a medium-sized business having revenues between \$50 million and \$1 billion, and a large business having revenues above \$1 billion shows that Black suppliers must get much, much bigger.



Just as with the fish and aquarium analogy, getting much, much bigger will require Black suppliers to get much, much better. That is, significant increases in capacity and capabilities must significantly precede targeted increases in size and revenue. For this reason, it is advocated that Black business economic development strategies and programs be formed within the context of the Arc of Development Framework shown below. The idea is that fish (Black businesses) would be categorized not in terms of their current size (revenues), but in terms of the size of the aquarium (business capabilities, readiness, and capacity) they exist in, which determines the size they can be.

As one might expect, supplier readiness is towards the top of the development arc. This framework brings supplier readiness and infrastructure development to the C-suite "top of mind" in its strategic planning activities, since both must be achieved in advance of market performance goals and objectives. There is currently no direct data showing the distribution of Black suppliers across the Arc of Development stages, which, as stated, was one of the goals of the Summit. Section 06 offers a first, tentative estimate built from the Summit's results.

ARC OF DEVELOPMENT



Arc stage	What the stage means
Launched	A launched business has physically started and is operating, but has not yet reached product-market fit.
Growth	A growth business has achieved product-market fit and double-digit growth.
Primed	A primed business is a growth business with the innovation and competitive advantages to maximize its chances of piercing the entrenched relationships current tier-1 competitors have with targeted customers.
Matured	A matured business has stable governance, is data-oriented and systems-oriented, and has also reached scale.
Readied	A readied business has the revenue and scale to be venture-capital ready and has the capabilities to address all of the supplier-readiness factors of a major OEM's supply chain.
Landed	A landed business has a market share in the first or second deciles of its industry.

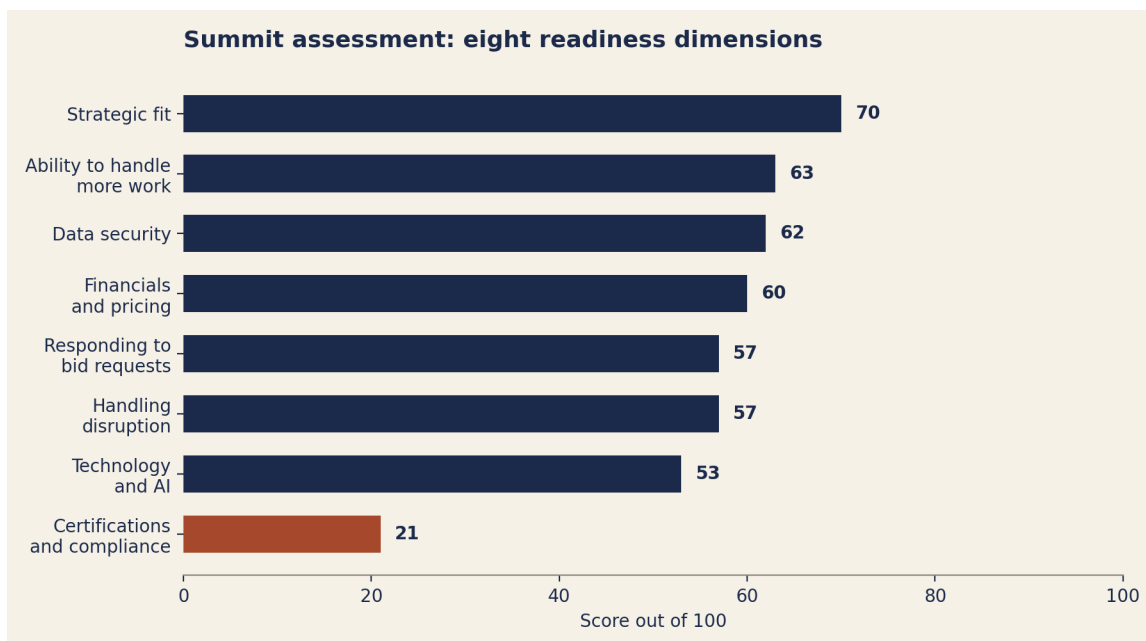
The six stages of the Arc of Development Framework, as defined by Dr. Forrest S. Carter.

SECTION 04

What we measured at the Summit

The Summit assessment gives back four things rather than one score: how ready a business is across each dimension, what stage of growth it is in, whether it qualifies for government or corporate supplier certification, and how much room it has to grow. It is built to sort a room the way a real buyer review would, not the way a workshop would.

The eight dimensions, in the room's own numbers



Each dimension is scored out of 100. A score of 100 means the room had everything a buyer looks for in that area, in place and documented.

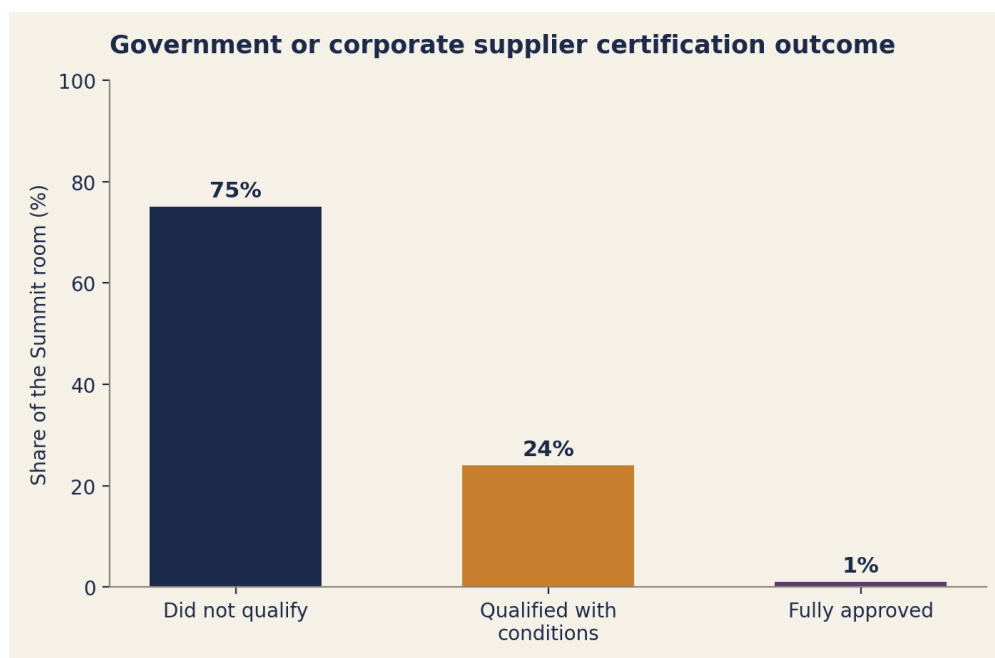
Strategic fit scored highest. Attendees generally understand what they sell and who buys it, which tracked with a room that had traveled and paid to be at a national conference specifically focused on winning larger contracts. Capacity, data security, and financial and pricing discipline clustered just behind it: real, but not yet buyer-tested at scale. Technology and AI adoption was present almost everywhere and governed almost nowhere, the same pattern our broader research documented earlier in the year.

Then the drop. Certifications and compliance scored 21, more than thirty points below the next lowest dimension. Nobody in the room scored above 56 on it, and several scored zero.

SECTION 05

The one gap that decided everything

The Summit assessment does two things at once. It scores the eight dimensions, and separately it determines whether a business qualifies for government or corporate supplier certification. Those two results tracked each other almost exactly, and certifications and compliance was the dimension that explained the difference.



Government or corporate supplier certification outcome by share of the Summit room.



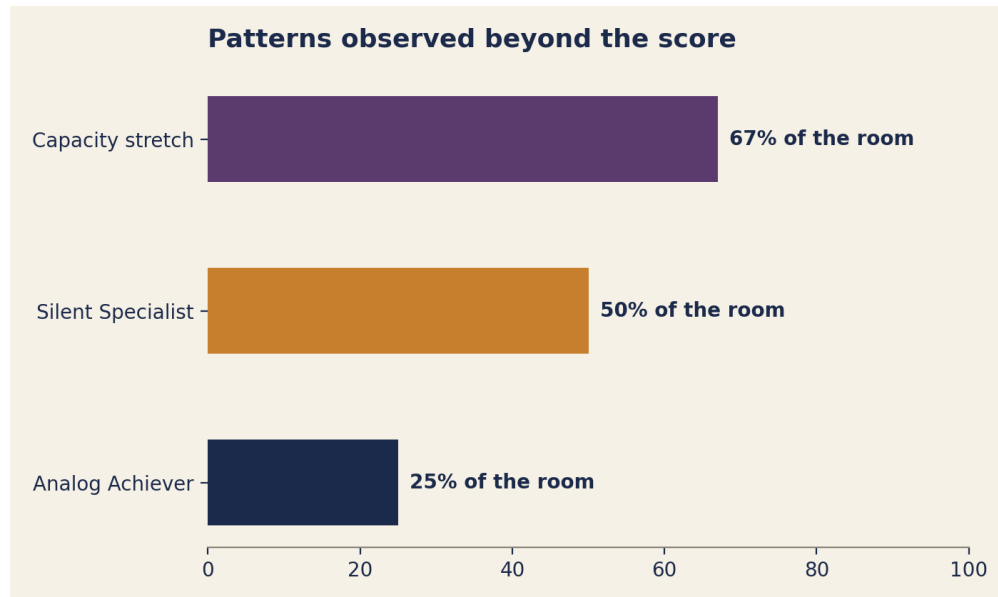
Grouping the eight dimensions by the question behind each one makes the pattern easier to see. Businesses in the room could largely answer “can we do the work” and “can we run a business.” Where the room struggled was “can we prove any of it,” the certifications and compliance question, which averaged well under half of what a buyer expects.

Being strong on strategic fit did not move a business up a certification tier. Neither did healthy financials or the capacity to scale. The only thing that changed a business's certification outcome was whether the paperwork existed. That is not a flaw in the scoring. That is how government or corporate supplier certification actually works, and it is why the gap is worth naming plainly rather than folding it into a general readiness score where it disappears.

SECTION 06

What we observed beyond the score

A score shows where a business stands. It does not show how it got there. Alongside the eight dimension scores, the assessment flags behavior patterns, and three showed up consistently across the room.



Pattern	What it looks like
Capacity stretch	The business could win more work than it can currently handle. This was the most common pattern in the room and the most dangerous, because the reward for selling well is failing in front of a buyer. It is usually treated as a growth problem when it is really a systems problem.
Silent Specialist	The business is genuinely strong and no buyer can tell. A buyer cannot find it, verify it, or compare it to alternatives. These businesses often invest in getting better at work they already do well, when the real gap is how they present and document themselves.
Analog Achiever	The business delivers real results by hand, and it works right now. It does not survive a buyer asking how that result repeats next quarter without the one person currently holding it together.

Where the room likely sits on the Arc of Development

The three patterns above are useful, but they are not yet tied to the Arc of Development framework. No attendee was asked to self-identify an Arc stage, so the table below is a tentative, reasoned estimate, not a direct measurement. It was built by crosswalking the certification-outcome split, the eight-dimension scores, and the behavior patterns onto the six stages. A future assessment that asks Arc placement directly would replace this estimate with a measured one.

Arc stage	Tentative share	Closest measured proxy	How it was estimated
Launched	~6%	Smallest band in the room	Summit attendees were already operating businesses with real customers, so few sit before product-market fit. Estimated from the lower tail of the certification did-not-qualify group, where strategic fit and capacity sub-scores were also weakest.
Growth	~38%	The largest single band	Matches most of the did-not-qualify group. Strategic fit (70) and capacity (63) scored well above certifications and compliance (21), consistent with businesses that have found product-market fit but have not yet built buyer-facing readiness infrastructure.
Primed	~31%	The next-largest band	Corresponds to the portion of the room flagged with the capacity-stretch pattern (67% of attendees), positioned to compete for larger work but not yet certified.
Matured	~20%	Close to the certification line	Maps closely to the qualified-with-conditions certification band (24% of the room), businesses with governance and documentation solid enough to be admitted pending required fixes.



Arc stage	Tentative share	Closest measured proxy	How it was estimated
Readied	~4%	Near the top of the room	Maps to businesses scoring near the top of the distribution, approaching or matching the fully-approved result.
Landed	~1%	The outer edge of the data	Maps to the single business that was fully approved, the top score in the room. Landed sets a higher bar (first or second decile market share) than certification alone confirms, so this is the outer edge of what the data can support.

Tentative distribution of Summit attendees across the Arc of Development stages, estimated from the eight-dimension scores, the certification outcome, and the behavior patterns observed. Not a direct measurement.

None of this describes a room that is bad at its work. It describes businesses that are good at their work being held back by how the business is documented and structured around them. That distinction should drive what help actually gets offered next. More training for someone already capable is frustrating. Building the structure and the paper trail underneath them is what moves a certification tier.

SECTION 07

The action plan: closing the gap in order

The Summit findings point to a specific sequence, and the order matters more than any single step in it. Working on the wrong layer first is the most common way this work stalls.

1	Measure before you plan Take the full readiness assessment and get the eight-dimension score, the certification determination, and a sequenced starting point. Ten minutes, confidential, no obligation.
2	Close the certifications and compliance gap first This is the dimension that overrides every other score. Build the documented certification, registration, and compliance package a buyer's due-diligence review actually asks for, before spending further time or budget elsewhere.
3	Write down governance and succession Decide, on paper, who has authority to pursue and sign enterprise or government contracts, and what happens if that person is unavailable. A three-year contract is a bet that the business keeps running, not that one person keeps showing up.
4	Govern the technology already in use Most of the room had adopted digital tools and AI already. Almost none had a written policy for either. Put a short, documented policy behind the tools already in daily use rather than adding new ones.
5	Enroll in a structured readiness cohort The NBL Buyer-Supplier Hub's Business Readiness and Supplier Readiness tracks turn the gap map into a sequenced ninety-day roadmap, with facilitated stations for pipeline and CRM, capability statement, registration and certification, and pricing built through a buyer's lens.
6	Measure again on the same instrument The second score is what turns effort into a documented record, and it is what a certification, a chapter, or a corporate partner can point to when deciding what happens next.

SECTION 08

Take the assessment and activate the plan

Attended the Summit and already have a score, or did not attend and want a starting point either way, the same assessment is open to any business.

NBL Supplier Readiness Assessment

A guided, ten-minute conversation that ends with a personalized report, a readiness score across the eight dimensions, and a certification determination. Confidential and free.

buyersupplier.nationalbusinessleague.org

1

Tell us about you

Name, company, and how to reach you.

2

Have the conversation

Nine short sections, one question at a time.

3

Get your report

Personalized, on screen and as a PDF.



Scan to take the assessment

Businesses who complete the assessment and want to activate the plan in Section 07 can enroll in the NBL Buyer-Supplier Hub's Business Readiness and Supplier Readiness cohorts, or connect with the National Buyer-Supplier Program for the certification track that matches their score, as new plans are rolled out for 2027 and beyond.

APPENDIX A

What each assessment section measures

The eight dimensions charted in Sections 04 through 06 map to eight scored sections in the underlying instrument. The table below gives the full definition behind each plain-language label used in this paper's charts.

Sec	Chart label used here	Full name	What is evaluated	Questions
A	Strategic fit	Strategic Fit	How well the supplier creates shared value beyond the transaction: customer engagement depth, documented co-innovation or cost-reduction examples, and participation in buyers' strategic planning conversations.	A1 to A3
B	Ability to handle more work	Scalability and Capacity	The firm's ability to absorb and execute large contracts without breaking operations. Evaluates current capacity relative to the largest targeted contract, revenue concentration, surge demand response, and redundancy in staffing, equipment, and suppliers.	B1 to B4
C	Financials and pricing	Financial and Pricing	Financial transparency, resilience, and pricing discipline. Evaluates availability of buyer-ready financial documents, customer concentration risk, reporting practices, and pricing practices such as cost-volume analysis and price-to-win support.	C1 to C4
D	Handling disruption	Risk and Resilience	Preparedness for supply disruption and operational continuity. Evaluates documented contingency plans, geographic and source diversification of inputs, and supply-base mapping through tiers.	D1 to D3
E	Data security	Cybersecurity	Maturity of information-security posture. Evaluates use of multi-factor authentication, data governance and breach-response plans, and ability to produce cybersecurity evidence for buyer due diligence.	E1 to E3
F	Technology and AI	Digital and AI	Digital backbone and interoperability. Evaluates systems used for core operations such as forecasting, quality, and scheduling, ability to exchange structured data through EDI or APIs, and use of AI or predictive tools.	F1 to F3
G	Certifications and compliance	Certifications and Compliance	Quality, management, and corporate-responsibility credentials. Evaluates certifications held, such as ISO 9001, IATF 16949, and Six Sigma, alignment with buyer supply-chain standards, and verifiable compliance documentation.	G1 to G3

Sec	Chart label used here	Full name	What is evaluated	Questions
H	Responding to bid requests	Procurement and Solicitation	Enterprise selling and bidding capability. Evaluates internal governance and executive authority for large contracts, fluency with buyer procurement platforms, and solicitation-response capability, including RFI, RFP, RFQ, and IFB, with bid and no-bid discipline.	H1 to H3

A ninth, unscored routing section (buyer target, industry, revenue tier, and international readiness) personalizes the report and cohort recommendation without affecting the score, which is why the assessment is described on the intake page as nine short sections.

APPENDIX B

Correlations in the report-outs

The eight sections are not scored in isolation. The instrument's underlying logic also checks specific combinations of low scores against each other, because in practice these gaps tend to show up together and point to the same underlying cause. The table below lists the correlated patterns the report out is built to flag.

Flagged pattern	Sections correlated	What triggers it	What it signals
Silent Specialist	A with H	A low Strategic Fit score together with low procurement-platform fluency in Section H	The business is capable but cannot be found, verified, or compared by a buyer
Analog Achiever	F	Digital and AI score below 40 percent of maximum	Manual, non-repeatable operations with no structured data exchange
Vulnerable Performer	E	No multi-factor authentication in place	Caps the certification result at Tier 2 regardless of the total score
Disloyal Messenger	C	More than 70 percent of revenue from a single customer	Revenue concentration a buyer reads as continuity risk
Attractive Lightweight	B with revenue tier	Low scalability paired with annual revenue well below the target contract size	Capacity to win the work exceeds capacity to deliver it
Transactional Performer	A	Customer engagement limited to delivering exactly to spec	No evidence of the co-value creation a preferred partner needs to show
Margin Mirage	C	Strong reported profit paired with weak operating ratios or no defensible pricing logic	Profit that a buyer's own cost analysis would not confirm
Governance gate	H	No defined executive authority for pursuing or signing enterprise contracts	A hard gate that blocks Tier 1 certification independent of every other score

Rows shaded above mark the two hard gates in the instrument: no multi-factor authentication and no defined governance authority. Both cap the certification result regardless of total score. Section G, certifications and compliance, does not correlate with any single pattern above. It functions as its own override, which is consistent with why it is the one dimension in Section 05 that decided the certification outcome on its own.

A note on method. This paper reports findings from the live Summit assessment administered at the 126th National Business League Annual Conference. Results describe the businesses in that room at that conference and are reported as findings from that group, not as a claim about every small business nationally. Individuals chose to take the assessment, which skews the sample toward businesses already pursuing contract readiness, a bias that makes these results more conservative, not less. The instrument is scored by fixed point values, not by discretionary judgment, and the same scoring applies to every respondent.

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Cazzie Williams brings more than 30 years of experience in high-tech and global supply chain to C3PI, which she co-founded to help small businesses prove contract readiness to Fortune 500 companies and federal agencies. She is also Founder and CEO of DUBLE Ventures, a veteran-owned multi-sector advisory and ventures firm based in Charlotte, North Carolina, with a portfolio spanning advisory, capital, and ventures interests including blockchain and e-commerce.

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Dr. Kenneth L. Harris, Ph.D., is President and CEO of the National Business League, which convened the National Alliance for Black Business, the National Black Chamber of Commerce, and the World Conference of Mayors for the 126th National Business League Annual Conference. Under his leadership, NBL launched Project 2035, the National Economic Sovereignty Think Tank, of which the Summit and this paper's findings are a part.