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Purchasing technology:
Change is one thing to count on

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Drones and unmanned aircraft are the fastest growing commodity purchases for government agencies, with police and fire departments finding them invaluable during real-time events. (Photo provided)

THE TRIED-AND-TRUE METHOD OF TRADITIONAL GOVERNment bidding does not always keep up with the times — particularly with technology purchases. Beyond the IT commodities of computers, tablets, and phones, technology has encroached into most everything that is purchased — crossing all department lines. Since a typical government contract is often awarded for multiple years, these long-term contracts may miss out on newly introduced technologies or lock an agency into long-term pricing for items that may become less expensive over time.

GovSpend, a software as a service company, aggregates purchasing data from government agencies to enable them to research vendors, identify the best prices, evaluate various purchasing options and collaborate with other agencies. According to Jack Siney, GovSpend co-founder, "Government agencies can experience up to 100% variance in pricing for technology products across the country."

A key technology, adopted by many organizations over the past decade, consolidates print capabilities through shared devices by handling multiple tasks — copying, faxing, scanning and printing. According to Konica-Minolta, the trend to use multi-function devices allows government employees the ability to scan directly into an enterprise content management system to increase storage, security and compliance, while digitizing paperwork to ultimately streamline processes and serve the public with greater speed, accuracy and efficiency.

In their own research, Konica-Minolta stated, "60% of the workforce is driven by paper processes, and more significantly, 90% of organizations do not fully understand what they are spending on print." Many agencies may not know how many devices they own, what is being printed on those devices or how much is being spent per device.

Strategic agencies are learning to combine consulting, hardware, software implementation and workflow management to gain a unique solution. For example, by using automation technology, toner can be delivered automatically rather than ordering online or making a run to the store. IT personnel savings can result as printers are proactively monitored and serviced by trained technicians, freeing up agency IT staff. Use of technology can track user behavior, reroute jobs to cost-efficient devices and increase security by a user allowing the document's release at the device.

Safeware, a company with a public safety and homeland security cooperative contract with OMNIA Partners, acknowledges that public safety procurement is particularly challenging for municipalities, with ever-increasing requests by police and fire for new technologies. For instance, recent national events have prompted increased demands on products such as opioid and metal detection in schools and public office environments. It is quite common for a government purchasing professional to find the police chief or a fire captain entering their office, waving a picture of a product that they need purchased right way. Sometimes, it's a product so new to the market that no existing agency contract is already in place to meet the request.

Drones and unmanned aircraft are the fastest growing commodity purchases for government agencies, becoming a major requirement for many public safety departments. Consider the case of Cobb County, Ga., with 50-60 certified drone pilots, with every fire chief hosting a drone on their vehicle. Cobb Fire can use the drone during a fire incident to determine smoke conditions, where to attack the fire and to view all sides of the emergency to facilitate better decisions.

During a flood situation where a river rescue is necessary, communication with a victim can be difficult. Cobb County Fire can fly a drone with a two-way radio to the person requiring a rescue and then drop the radio to communicate directly with the rescue team.

Cobb County Fire also partners with its law enforcement teams to address any potential active shooter scenarios to respond to real-time events as they unfold. And it can protect government workers by becoming the first responder in a hazmat situation. If there is a chemical spill from a tanker on I-75, a drone can be deployed to view the hazardous material stickers on the tanker and the spread of damage. The hazmat personnel can better understand what they are dealing

with and what they need to wear and bring to enter the "hot zone."

Fleet operations can be affected as well by fast-changing technology. In the past, a typical government fleet warehouse may keep a certain number of items on the shelves — windshield wipers, oil filters, belts, etc. — for routine fleet maintenance. However, as those vehicles are changed out or upgraded, older model parts and supplies remain on the shelves, eventually collecting dust. These soon to be obsolete products represent real dollars in the budget and continue to be inventoried and managed, even if no longer viable to the organization.

A new trend is to have the fleet parts warehouse managed by an outside company, ordering whatever is needed for the organization, and only being charged for a product when it is dispatched to the agency. A key advantage of entering a public-private partnership like one offered by NAPA's Integrated Business Solutions program, allows municipal fleet operations access to the latest technology resources in their facilities.

"Government facilities are always striving for efficiency," said Jett Kuntz, vice president of NAPA IBS. "As an industry-leading technology partner, IBS has found success with government fleets by marrying their existing technology investments with supplemental systems, resulting in a more economical tool to help them streamline their operations." By integrating current technologies with the latest IBS tools and systems, municipal leaders gain access to real-time inventory data, automated invoice reconciliation and on-demand reporting. The result is government technicians are more productive working from their bays with reduced administrative time and a seamless, auditable procurement trail.

"Gap filling" is a growing need for many governments as change develops so rapidly. For example, an agency puts out a bid and receives responses. After an agency contract is awarded, over time, there may be new items identified not originally included with the specifications. In this case, "piggybacking" on an already competitively bid solicitation with a greater range of commodities and services, may be an option. Known as cooperative procurement, this contracting methodology can reduce the time and leverage greater pricing for local governments and school districts to spot buy, fill commodity gaps and avoid the lengthy process of going out to bid again.

Even cooperative organizations face the challenge of changing technology. Keystone Purchasing Network, a national purchasing cooperative, has incorporated changes in their own contracting methodology.

Jeff Kimball, director of Cooperative Purchasing Services, stated, "To respond more proactively to changing technology, our team listens

Recent data demonstrates the pricing for a typical computer screen can range from $75 to $250. (Source: www.govspend.com/agencies/)

Entering into a public-private partnership, like one offered by NAPA's Integrated Business Solutions program, allows municipal fleet operations access to the latest technology resources in their facilities. (Photo provided)

to the concerns of government clients while also talking to suppliers on the latest advances as we prepare solicitations. The resulting contracts are more encompassing and forward thinking to reflect the changing marketplace and latest technologies." M

Tammy Rimes, MPA, is a keynote speaker, procurement consultant and executive director of the National Cooperative Procurement Partners, or NCPP. She served as former purchasing agent for the city of San Diego and implemented its first environmentally preferred purchasing program. She served during one of Southern California's largest emergencies — the 2007 Witch Creek Fires, which raged for 17 days and destroyed over 2,000 homes and structures. Free educational materials on emergency preparedness, cooperative contracts and a free webinar series are available at www.NCPPAssociation.org.