



How to Evaluate a Diverse-Owned Cloud Partner

A Buyer's Checklist

A Pandora Cloud Buyer's Resource

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Pandora Cloud LLC

Women-Owned Small Business (WOSB) | AWS Advanced Partner

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Secret Facility Clearance | pandoracloud.net

About This Checklist

Diversity-spend programs are real. The metrics are tracked, the targets are reported up to executive leadership, and the consequences of missing them are measurable. Procurement officers running these programs operate under genuine pressure to find diverse-owned firms that can actually do the work.

Not every firm that claims a diversity status meets it. Not every firm that meets it can perform the work at the scope and quality your contract requires. The gap between "certified diverse" and "operationally capable diverse partner" is wider than most procurement frameworks acknowledge, and the cost of getting it wrong falls on you.

This checklist gives you a working evaluation framework. Fifteen questions across four categories, with red flags, green flags, and a scoring rubric you can apply consistently across multiple candidate firms. It is built for a real procurement reality: limited diligence time, multiple firms in the funnel, and the need to defend your selection to leadership and auditors.

Who this is for

- Procurement officers at primes (defense, healthcare, financial services) running diversity-spend metrics.
- Federal contracting officers evaluating Women-Owned Small Business (WOSB), Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Business (SDVOSB), HUBZone, Small Disadvantaged Business (SDB), or Minority Business Enterprise (MBE) set-aside candidates.
- Corporate compliance officers with supplier-diversity targets, especially in regulated industries.
- Tier-2 supplier diversity managers at regulated SMBs running their own pass-through diversity programs.
- In-house counsel and compliance leads vetting subcontractors.

Reading time: 25 minutes. Print it. Mark it up. Use it across multiple evaluations and refine your scoring patterns over time. The first three uses calibrate your eye; from the fourth onward, the framework saves you weeks per cycle.

The State of Supplier Diversity in 2026

Three shifts in the last twenty-four months are worth naming because they change how this evaluation should be run.

1. Diversity certifications are tightening, not loosening. The Small Business Administration has pulled back on self-certification programs and increased third-party verification requirements. State and corporate buyers have followed. A certification from 2022 may not hold in 2026 without renewal documentation. Always verify currency, not just status.

2. Pretender vendors are common and getting more sophisticated. Firms that obtain a certification but route the actual work through non-diverse subcontractors. Firms that meet ownership thresholds on paper but fail control thresholds. Firms whose diversity status is genuine but whose technical capability is not. The diligence burden has shifted to the buyer.

3. Diverse partners with operational maturity are the differentiator. A WOSB-certified firm with a Secret Facility Clearance, an Authority to Operate history, and named past performance against named primes is a different procurement outcome than a paper-only WOSB. Buyers who can articulate the difference get better outcomes; buyers who cannot get audits.

This checklist is built around that third shift. Use it to find the operationally mature firms that match both your diversity targets and your performance requirements.

How to Use This Checklist

For each candidate firm, score the fifteen questions on a scale of 0 to 3:

- 0: No clear answer or refusal to provide.
- 1: Vague answer; significant follow-up needed.
- 2: Clear answer with documentation; minor gaps.
- 3: Strong, documented answer; no follow-up needed.

Total possible: 45 points. Use the tier bands at the end of this checklist to rank candidates.

Save the completed scoring sheet. When the procurement decision is later questioned (by leadership, by an auditor, by a competitor's protest), the documented evaluation framework is your defense.

A note on calibration

A firm scoring 38 or higher will not be common. That is intentional. The framework is calibrated to identify the operationally mature diverse partners worth committing to, not to clear a wide field of candidates. If your funnel is producing many 38-plus candidates, your sourcing is strong; if it is producing few, the framework is doing its filtering job.

Category 1: Ownership and Control Verification

The foundation of any diversity-status claim. If these answers do not hold, nothing downstream matters.

1. Is the firm currently registered and certified on SAM.gov for the diversity status they claim, and what is the current certification expiration date?

The System for Award Management (SAM.gov) is the federal source of truth for diversity certifications. WOSB, EDWOSB (Economically Disadvantaged WOSB), HUBZone, SDVOSB, and Small Disadvantaged Business statuses are all visible in SAM.gov entity records, with explicit expiration dates.

What to ask for: SAM.gov entity record screenshot or printout, dated within 30 days of evaluation. Verify the Unique Entity Identifier (UEI) and Commercial and Government Entity (CAGE) code match the firm's other materials.

Red flag: Firm provides a certification letter but cannot or will not show the SAM.gov record.

2. Is the firm certified by an independent third-party certifying body, and what is the renewal date?

For private-sector diversity programs, third-party certifying bodies provide additional verification beyond self-attestation. Common bodies include Women's Business Enterprise National Council (WBENC), National Women Business Owners Corporation (NWBOC), National Minority Supplier Development Council (NMSDC), National Veteran-Owned Business Association (NaVOBA), and Disability:IN.

What to ask for: Current certification letter from the issuing body, with the renewal date visible. Confirm the certifying body matches the diversity claim (a WBENC certification does not satisfy an NMSDC requirement).

Red flag: Certification letter is more than 24 months old without a renewal in process.

3. Does the firm meet the size standard for their primary North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) code?

Diversity certifications are tied to specific NAICS codes and corresponding size standards (employee count or annual revenue). A firm certified as a small business under NAICS 541512 (Computer Systems Design Services) may not qualify under NAICS 518210 (Computing Infrastructure Providers) or vice versa.

What to ask for: Primary NAICS code(s), most recent three years of revenue, and current employee count. Cross-reference against the SBA size standards table for the codes relevant to your contract.

Red flag: Firm's primary NAICS code does not align with the work scope you are sourcing.

4. What is the ownership concentration, and is operational control aligned with ownership?

Diversity certifications require both ownership (typically 51 percent or more held by the qualifying group) and operational control. Ownership without control is one of the most common pretender patterns.

What to ask for: Ownership distribution by percentage and category. Names and roles of the controlling owners. Names of the firm's officers and directors with their reporting lines. Confirmation that the qualifying owner(s) hold the highest officer position AND the day-to-day operational authority.

Red flag: Qualifying owner is listed as Chief Executive Officer but a non-qualifying party holds Chief Operating Officer or General Manager with apparent operational authority.

Category 2: Technical Capability and Credentials

Diversity status is a procurement filter. Technical capability is what determines whether the work actually gets done.

5. What technical certifications does the firm hold relevant to the work in scope?

The right certifications depend on the work. For cloud and managed services: AWS Partner Tier (Select, Advanced, Premier), Microsoft Partner Network competencies, Google Cloud Partner status, FedRAMP authorization (Low, Moderate, High), StateRAMP, Cybersecurity Maturity Model Certification (CMMC) Level 2 or 3, ISO 27001, SOC 2 Type II, HITRUST CSF.

What to ask for: A list of current certifications with issuing body, date issued, and expiration. For AWS, ask whether the firm holds Advanced or Premier Tier (not just Select), which signals real implementation experience.

Red flag: Firm names cloud platforms by brand but cannot produce specific tier or competency documentation.

6. Does the firm hold a Facility Clearance (FCL) at the level the work requires?

For defense and federal civilian work involving classified or controlled unclassified information, the firm must hold an FCL at or above the work level. FCL levels are Confidential, Secret, and Top Secret. The Defense Counterintelligence and Security Agency (DCSA) maintains the National Industrial Security System (NISS) record.

What to ask for: FCL level and issue date. Sponsor agency. Whether the firm has held the FCL for at least 24 months (a fresh FCL is technically valid but operationally unproven).

Red flag: Firm claims an FCL but cannot name the sponsoring agency or provide the issue date.

7. What compliance frameworks has the firm operated under, and at what depth?

There is a difference between "we have read the framework" and "we have operated under the framework with audited evidence." Real operational experience under HIPAA, SOC 2, PCI DSS, FedRAMP, NIST 800-53, and CMMC shows up in the firm's actual documentation, not their marketing materials.

What to ask for: For each framework named: customer types and industries the firm has supported under it; whether the firm has produced an evidence package, audit response, or ATO under it; named third-party assessors the firm has worked with.

Red flag: Firm lists six framework logos on their website but cannot produce a sample evidence package or describe a specific assessor engagement under any of them.

8. What is the firm's actual technical staff composition?

For federal and defense work, technical staff composition matters. US-person status (citizenship or lawful permanent residence), security clearances held by individuals (not just the company FCL), and US-based work locations are gating factors for many contracts.

What to ask for: Total employee headcount; percentage of staff that are US persons; number of cleared employees by clearance level; number of staff in cleared facilities; whether any staff are foreign nationals working under International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR) controls. For cloud workloads, confirm operational support is US-based and not offshore.

Red flag: Firm lists a high cleared-employee count but those employees are spread across multiple unrelated programs and not available to your contract.

Category 3: Contract Performance and Past Performance

The single best predictor of how a firm will perform on your contract is how the firm performed on similar contracts in the recent past.

9. Can the firm name three past performance customers in the same scope and size class as your need, with contact information for verification?

Past performance citations are only useful if you can verify them. A firm with strong past performance offers the names willingly; a firm without it gives generic examples or claims confidentiality.

What to ask for: Three named past performance customers with contract scope, contract value, period of performance, named contracting officer (or buyer-side technical lead), and current contact information. Call at least one. Real past performance customers will speak to the firm's strengths and gaps without being prompted.

Red flag: Firm offers past performance citations only as logos on a website, with no named buyer-side contact. The reference customer call is the highest-signal step in this entire evaluation.

10. What is the firm's prime and subcontractor track record?

For federal-facing work, the firm's role on prior contracts (prime contractor or subcontractor) and the named primes the firm has worked under tell you about their operational reach and partner credibility.

What to ask for: Named primes the firm has held subcontracts under in the past 24 months. Named contracts where the firm was the prime, with contract numbers if available. Length of relationships with named primes (a four-year relationship signals real performance; a three-month relationship signals an opportunistic teaming arrangement).

Red flag: Firm lists prime relationships on their website but cannot provide contract numbers or named program managers when asked directly.

11. What is the firm's Authorization to Operate (ATO) history if federal work is in scope?

For federal cloud and system work, the firm's ATO history is a direct measure of operational maturity. Firms that have successfully shepherded systems through ATO understand the documentation, monitoring, and Authorizing Official (AO) interaction discipline that determines contract performance.

What to ask for: Named systems the firm has supported through ATO; named AOs (or AO offices); ATO type (full Authority to Operate, Authority to Test, continuous Authority to Operate); whether any of those ATOs have been re-authorized successfully. For commercial work, the equivalent question is around named SOC 2 Type II report cycles or recurring HIPAA assessments.

Red flag: Firm has a clearance and a SAM.gov record but no named ATO experience. They may be a viable diversity partner but not yet a viable performance partner for ATO-required scope.

12. What is the firm's revenue and headcount trajectory over the past three years?

A firm growing 30 to 100 percent year over year is in a different operational state than a firm at flat revenue or shrinking. Growth signals demand validation and scaling capacity; flat or shrinking signals other concerns. Either can be acceptable depending on what you are buying, but the buyer should know which they are buying.

What to ask for: Three years of revenue and employee count. Does not need to be precise to the dollar; rough trajectory is enough. Also ask about funding events (Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) Phase II awards, growth equity rounds, Indefinite Delivery / Indefinite Quantity (IDIQ) awards) that would explain step changes.

Red flag: Firm declines to provide any revenue or headcount trajectory information. Reasonable ranges are sufficient; outright refusal is a signal.

Category 4: Cultural Fit and Operating Maturity

The final three questions are the soft factors that often determine whether a contract succeeds or stalls. They are harder to measure, but the questions themselves are not.

13. Who is the named compliance owner at the firm, and what is their tenure and clearance level?

Every firm performing regulated work needs a named compliance owner. The role's existence signals operational maturity; the role's tenure signals continuity; the role's clearance level signals fit with classified or controlled work.

What to ask for: Name and title of the compliance owner. Tenure in role. Clearance level if applicable. Reporting line (does the compliance owner report to the Chief Executive Officer, or to a Vice President of something else). Time allocation (full-time or fractional).

Red flag: "Everyone owns compliance" is the answer. This is the most common compliance failure mode in our practice. A firm without a named compliance owner cannot run the program reliably under contract pressure.

14. What is the firm's response cadence on a Request for Information (RFI), and does that cadence change post-award?

Pre-award responsiveness is the strongest leading indicator of post-award responsiveness. Firms that respond to RFIs in 24 to 48 hours typically maintain that cadence after the contract starts. Firms that miss RFI deadlines or send incomplete responses typically continue that pattern.

What to ask for: A 48-hour test RFI on a non-trivial question (for example, "describe your incident response coordination for a hypothetical Severity 1 outage on a Friday at 6 PM Eastern"). Quality and speed of response is your data point.

Red flag: Firm escalates the RFI to a sales lead instead of a technical lead, or response stretches beyond 72 hours without acknowledgment.

15. How does the firm communicate gaps or risks during a project: transparent escalation, or surface only at close-out?

Every project hits gaps. The difference between firms that perform and firms that struggle is when and how the gaps surface. Strong firms escalate early, document the gap with a Plan of Action and Milestones (POA&M), and propose remediation alongside the disclosure. Weak firms surface gaps at the project close or during audit.

What to ask for: A recent project (under non-disclosure agreement (NDA) if needed) where a gap or risk emerged mid-project. How was it identified? Who was notified? When? What did the remediation look like? Listen for specifics: dates, decision-maker names, document artifacts. Generic answers signal a firm that does not actually run this discipline; specific answers signal one that does.

Red flag: "We have not had any gaps" is the answer. Every firm has had gaps. The answer reveals whether they recognize and manage them.

Red Flags and Green Flags

Pattern-matching across multiple evaluations.

Red flags




- Firm cannot or will not produce a current SAM.gov entity record matching their diversity claim.
- Third-party certification is more than 24 months old with no renewal in process.
- Firm's primary NAICS code does not align with your contract scope.
- Qualifying owner is officer in title only; operational control sits elsewhere.
- Cloud certifications are named but tier or competency documentation is unavailable.
- FCL is claimed but sponsoring agency or issue date cannot be produced.
- Compliance frameworks are listed as logos but no sample evidence package exists.
- Past performance citations are website logos only, with no named buyer-side contacts.
- No named ATO history if federal work is in scope.
- Firm refuses to disclose any revenue or headcount trajectory.
- "Everyone owns compliance" is the answer to question 13.
- RFI response stretches beyond 72 hours without acknowledgment.
- "We have not had any gaps" is the answer to question 15.

Green flags

- SAM.gov record, third-party certification, and SBA size-standard verification all align cleanly with the firm's claim.
- Qualifying owner holds Chief Executive Officer or equivalent role AND day-to-day operational authority.
- AWS Advanced or Premier Tier (or equivalent at Microsoft, Google) signals real implementation depth.
- FCL has been held for 24 months or more with named sponsoring agency.
- Firm produces a sample compliance evidence package on request, with redacted customer details.
- Past performance customers are named with current contact information; references take a 30-minute call willingly.
- Named ATOs with named AOs, including at least one re-authorization or continuous-ATO milestone.
- Three-year revenue and headcount trajectory provided in ranges.
- Named compliance owner with named tenure and clearance level; the role does not change post-award.
- 48-hour test RFI returns with substance, in 24 hours, addressed by a technical lead.
- Specific past-project gap is disclosed with names, dates, and resolution artifacts.

Scoring Rubric

Total possible: 45 points (15 questions x 3 points each).

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|---|------------------------|---|
|  | 38 to 45 points | Strong partner. Proceed to contract negotiation. |
|  | 30 to 37 points | Viable partner. Clarify gaps before commitment; consider conditional award with diligence milestones. |
|  | Below 30 points | Not a fit for this contract. Keep looking. The cost of choosing the wrong partner exceeds the cost of any additional diligence cycle. |

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A Note on Pandora Cloud

Pandora Cloud is a Women-Owned Small Business and an AWS Advanced Tier Partner with Secret Facility Clearance. Founded by Kim Howell (Chief Executive Officer) and Isi Lawson (Chief Technology Officer); both founders hold Top Secret / Sensitive Compartmented Information (TS/SCI) clearances. Isi is a former AWS engineer with deep cloud architecture experience.

Federal credentials

- Women-Owned Small Business (WOSB)
- AWS Advanced Tier Partner
- Secret Facility Clearance
- GSA Multiple Award Schedule (MAS): 47QTCA24D00D3
- Commercial and Government Entity (CAGE) Code: 9JSG7
- Unique Entity Identifier (UEI): R36GQ3N4XT63

Active federal work

- Subcontractor to Amentum on the Space Force Range Contract (SFRC), supporting Space Launch Delta 30 and Space Launch Delta 45.
- Subcontractor to Monkton on the 45th Weather Squadron contract.

What we do

Compliance-first managed cloud for regulated SMBs and federal-facing teams. AWS GovCloud at IL2, IL4, and IL5. Continuous monitoring, ATO support, and inheritance from pre-authorized landing zones (the Pandora Cloud Bridge platform).

If you are using this checklist to evaluate Pandora Cloud, we welcome the diligence. Every question above is one we can answer with documentation, named contacts, and specific past performance. If you are using it to evaluate other firms and want a second set of eyes on your evaluation results, we are happy to provide an independent review.

Want a second set of eyes on your evaluation?

Schedule a free 30-minute consultation. We will review your candidate scoring or walk through Pandora Cloud's responses to every question above.

pandoracloud.net/#schedule-consultation

Glossary of Diversity Certifications

For procurement officers running multi-category diversity programs, this glossary names the most common certifications referenced in this checklist.

WOSB (Women-Owned Small Business)

SBA certification for small businesses at least 51 percent owned and controlled by one or more women who are US citizens. SAM.gov registered.

EDWOSB (Economically Disadvantaged Women-Owned Small Business)

A subset of WOSB where the owner(s) also meet personal net worth and income thresholds defined by the Small Business Administration. Eligible for additional set-aside contracts.

SDVOSB (Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Business)

SBA certification for small businesses at least 51 percent owned and controlled by one or more service-disabled veterans. Verified by the Department of Veterans Affairs through the Vets First Verification Program.

HUBZone

Historically Underutilized Business Zone certification for small businesses operating in historically underutilized geographic areas. SBA certified.

SDB (Small Disadvantaged Business)

SBA certification for small businesses at least 51 percent owned and controlled by socially and economically disadvantaged individuals.

MBE (Minority Business Enterprise)

Private-sector certification for businesses at least 51 percent owned, operated, and controlled by minority group members. Most commonly certified by the National Minority Supplier Development Council (NMSDC).

WBE (Women's Business Enterprise)

Private-sector certification analogous to WOSB but for non-federal procurement programs. Most commonly certified by the Women's Business Enterprise National Council (WBENC) or the National Women Business Owners Corporation (NWBOC).

DOBE (Disability-Owned Business Enterprise)

Private-sector certification for businesses at least 51 percent owned, controlled, and operated by individuals with disabilities. Certified by Disability:IN.

LGBTBE (LGBT Business Enterprise)

Private-sector certification for businesses at least 51 percent owned, controlled, and operated by lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender individuals. Certified by the National LGBT Chamber of Commerce.

8(a) Business Development Program

SBA program for small businesses owned and controlled by socially and economically disadvantaged individuals. Provides nine-year program participation including sole-source contracting eligibility up to specified thresholds.

The right certification for a given contract depends on the buyer's diversity-spend program structure and the contract's set-aside designation. Always verify the specific certification required by your procurement program before evaluating against it.