

THE DEFENSE-READY SERIES · PART 1 OF 4

Are We Defense-Ready?

An Honest Self-Assessment for Michigan Manufacturers

By Jerold Hawkins — Founder & Principal Advisor, Summit Line Federal Solutions, LLC

A Michigan shop owner told me recently, “We hold tighter tolerances than anyone in our segment. We’ve supplied the Big Three for thirty years. Defense should be easy.”

Six months later he was staring at a prime contractor’s supplier questionnaire he couldn’t answer past page two.

He wasn’t wrong about his parts. His parts were excellent. He was wrong about what *defense-ready* actually means — and that misunderstanding is, right now, one of the most expensive in Michigan manufacturing.

“Defense-ready” is not a part-quality question

Here is the hard truth most suppliers learn the slow and costly way: when a prime contractor evaluates you, they assume you can make the part. That’s not the differentiator. That’s the price of admission.

What they’re actually evaluating is whether your *business* can survive a defense program — the cost accounting, the cybersecurity posture, the traceability, the schedule discipline, the flow-down compliance, the financial staying power. A defense program doesn’t fail because a Michigan supplier can’t machine to spec. It fails because the supplier couldn’t produce a compliant cost proposal, couldn’t pass a cybersecurity assessment, couldn’t trace a lot back through its supply chain, or ran out of working capital halfway through a long-cycle contract.

Michigan makes world-class parts. That was never the problem. Defense-readiness is a *business-systems* problem, and it lives almost entirely off the shop floor.

The door is open — but the program only gets you to it

There has never been a better moment for Michigan suppliers to look at defense. The newly launched Michigan Auto Supplier Transition Program (MAST-P) is putting real state and federal resources behind helping small auto suppliers diversify into adjacent industries — defense and aerospace chief among them. That’s a genuine opportunity, and suppliers should take it seriously.

But it’s worth being clear-eyed about what a program like that does. It opens the door. It does not carry you through it. The moment a supplier decides defense is a real path, a different and unforgiving set of questions starts coming — from primes, from auditors, from the regulations themselves. The suppliers who thrive are the ones who answered those questions *before* they bid, not after they’d already committed.

So before you chase your first defense opportunity, the most valuable thing you can do is sit down and honestly assess where you actually stand.

The honest self-assessment

In my work I assess supplier readiness across eight domains. You don't need my framework to start being honest with yourself — you just need to ask the right questions and resist the temptation to grade yourself on the one thing you're already good at. Here are the eight, framed as the questions a prime is quietly asking about you.

1. Cost Accounting & Proposal Readiness. Can you build a compliant, defensible cost proposal — not a commercial quote? Do you understand the difference between how you price an automotive PO and how the government expects costs to be accumulated and supported? *If a prime asked for a cost breakdown tomorrow, could you produce one that would survive scrutiny?*

2. CMMC / NIST Cybersecurity Preparedness. Can you demonstrate the cybersecurity controls now required to handle controlled information in the defense supply chain? *Do you know your current standing against NIST SP 800-171 — or is “we have antivirus and a firewall” your honest answer?*

3. Quality Management System Readiness. Your IATF 16949 or ISO 9001 system is a strong foundation, but defense and aerospace often expect AS9100, First Article Inspection, and a different documentation discipline. *Is your quality system built for the standards your target primes actually require?*

4. Traceability & Configuration Control. Can you trace material, process, and revision history with the rigor a defense program demands, and prove it on demand? *If a part were questioned two years from now, could you reconstruct exactly what you made, from what, and to which revision?*

5. Supplier Qualification & Purchasing System Readiness. Defense flows requirements down — what a prime owes the government, you will owe your own suppliers. *Is your purchasing system capable of flowing down and enforcing those requirements, or does it stop at “send PO, receive parts”?*

6. Program Execution & Schedule Discipline. Defense work is low-volume, high-mix, and long-cycle — the opposite of high-volume automotive rhythm. *Can you manage and report against a program schedule the way a prime expects, or is your planning built entirely around running parts?*

7. Financial Capacity & Working Capital Readiness. Defense contracts can mean long lead times between work performed and payment received. *Do you have the working capital and financial visibility to fund a program through that gap without putting the rest of your business at risk?*

8. Supply Chain Visibility & Supplier Readiness. Primes increasingly want to see through you to your supply base. *Do you actually know the risk, capacity, and readiness sitting beneath you — or only what your top-tier suppliers choose to tell you?*

Why most honest answers come out lower than expected

When suppliers run themselves through questions like these for the first time, the score almost always lands lower than they expected. There's a predictable reason: we grade ourselves on our strengths. The shop that makes superb parts assumes that excellence carries across every domain. It doesn't. Part quality and business-system maturity are two different muscles, and defense tests the one most commercial manufacturers have never had to build.

That's not a reason for discouragement. It's the opposite. Every one of these gaps is *knowable* and *fixable* — but only if you find it before a prime does. The difference between a supplier who breaks into defense and one who burns eighteen months and real money failing audits usually isn't capability. It's whether they understood the full picture before they started.

Know before you go

The reactive model — pursue the work, hit a wall you didn't see coming, and scramble to fix it under pressure — is how most auto suppliers experience defense. It's expensive, it's demoralizing, and it's avoidable.

The better model is simple: assess all eight domains honestly, get a clear picture of where you stand, prioritize the gaps that matter most, and walk into your first prime conversation already de-risked. Stop failing audits you could have passed. Get ready *before* you bid.

So the question isn't really "are we defense-ready?" It's "do we actually know how ready we are — across all eight domains, not just the one we're proud of?"

If you can't answer that with confidence, that's the place to start — and starting has never been faster. The good news is that readiness is measurable. An AI-powered readiness screener can now walk a supplier through all eight domains and generate a tailored, scored snapshot in minutes — a clear-eyed picture of where you stand and which gaps matter most, before you've spent a dollar pursuing the work. That kind of instant, intelligent first read is exactly what makes self-assessment practical instead of theoretical. Measuring your readiness costs a great deal less than discovering the gaps the hard way.

Jerold Hawkins is a U.S. Army veteran with 16 years of automotive industry experience, culminating as an Executive Director of Global Supply Chain Management before founding Summit Line Federal Solutions, LLC, a Michigan-based defense and aerospace industrial-base advisory firm where he serves as Principal Advisor. He developed the Defense Expansion Pathway™ (DXP™), an AI-powered, eight-domain supplier-readiness assessment built to help manufacturers honestly measure — and close — the gap between commercial and defense work. Its first phase pairs an automated AI screening engine with expert advisory to give suppliers an instant, scored readiness snapshot. He is completing MIT's executive program in AI Strategy and Leadership.

*Michigan manufacturers can take the complimentary DXP™ readiness screener and get an instant eight-domain snapshot at **summitlinefederal.com**.*