

Automated Commercial Environment (ACE) Vendor Survey

Background

The 13th Term COAC Trade Modernization Subcommittee established an ACE Working Group in the first quarter of 2013 that was assigned to develop an ACE software vendor survey to assess how the software community is using ACE and areas for improvement. It is anticipated that the Working Group will develop recommendations from the survey for the Trade Modernization Subcommittee to approve and officially present to CBP via the full COAC on May 22, 2013.

Current Status

COAC conducted the ACE vendor survey in April 2013, the purpose of which was to gather information from the ACE vendor industry that would inform them as to why the software providers may not have developed ACE software yet and to ask what ACE functionality would encourage them to develop interfaces with ACE. Between 16 and 46 software vendors responded to each question.

Of the ACE products that are currently offered, software vendors are using the following capabilities:

- 52 percent use ACE Entry Summary Entry Types 01, 03, and 11;
- 50 percent use Ocean and Rail Manifest;
- 33 percent use Truck Manifest; and
- 29 percent use other products such as in-bond, Periodic Monthly Statement, and Antidumping/Countervailing capabilities.

COAC wanted to determine the number of months that software vendors expect to complete ACE Entry Summary, if they had not done so already. Twenty-four vendors responded to the question with:

- 46 percent responding 3 months or less;
- 25 percent responding 6 to 12 months;
- 20 percent responding 12 to 24 months; and
- 8 percent responding 24 months or more.

For the software vendors that responded that they have not yet begun programming for ACE Entry Summary functionality, the following is a list of the capabilities they want completed before they begin programming (vendors were allowed to pick more than one response):

- 69 percent responded Entry Summary edits (that is, edits that were in the Automated Commercial System (ACS) but not in ACE);
- 44 percent responded Partner Government Agency (PGA) entry summary support for entry types 01, 03, and 11;
- 38 percent responded PGA entry summary support for entry types 01, 03, and other entry types;
- 25 percent responded Foreign Trade Zone entry type
- 25 percent responded other entry types;
- 19 percent responded reconciliation entry type and the ability to flag/file singled and consolidated reconciliation in ACE;
- 19 percent responded cargo release; and
- 13 percent responded critical fixes for deployed ACE functionality.

For those vendors that have begun programming in ACE, routine maintenance and release cycle runs between 2 and 8 weeks, with 40 percent reporting that the timeframe includes testing and 25 percent reporting that testing takes an additional 2-3 weeks.

COAC wanted to assess CBP communications mechanisms and the best way for software vendors to receive information about new or forthcoming changes to ACE functionality. 48 percent of the 46 respondents reported that the Cargo Systems Messaging Service (CSMS) and e-mail are the best way to receive information, followed by webinars (20 percent) and trade calls (13 percent). The least effective communications method was the CBP website (14 percent) and updates to the ACElopedia (57 percent).

COAC asked software vendors to rank the most effective ways CBP can communicate ACE technical requirements or programming changes. In order of most effective to least effective, respondents reported:

- CBP issuance of detailed guides outlining the changes;
- Via CSMS message;
- Via e-mail;
- Updates to the implementation guides;
- Via trade calls; and
- Updates to the CBP website.

Software vendors suggested that CBP hold more webinars, provide more project plans and conduct more status calls in order to improve the way in which CBP communicates to the technical community. When vendors do have an ACE development issue or concern, most e-mail or call their client representative (a combined total of 89 percent).

For the development of future capabilities, CBP has re-oriented its development team and processes to an Agile development methodology, that will produce smaller pieces of functionality more frequently, resulting in a more flexible, user-focused development process. Fifty-eight percent of survey respondents were aware of this change, with 68 percent responding that the switch to a 26 week software change schedule will not be difficult to keep up with.

There have been some challenges for software vendors in the transition to ACE. Vendors were allowed to select more than one response for this question, and the most often cited problem was customer interest (48 percent) followed by budget (43 percent) and documentation (36 percent). Comments indicate problems stem from the complexity of managing ACE and the Automated Broker Interface, integration with legacy systems, and that not all of the functionality needed by customers is available in ACE.

The COAC survey allowed vendors to provide additional comments and suggestions that they felt were important to ensure a smooth transition from ACS to ACE. Among the comments were for CBP to:

- Provide full edits in ACE and all entry types;
- Provide more education to the trade community on the transition from ACS to ACE, that is do not just issue specifications and documentation, more webinars should take place; and
- Provide financial incentive for brokers to use ACE; provide more information to the brokers about how to use fields, what is required, and when.