

D-U-N-S Number (DUNS): Unique Identification of Business Partners Worldwide

The D-U-N-S number (DUNS) is a globally unique, nine-digit identification number for businesses, assigned and maintained by the data service provider Dun & Bradstreet. It serves to identify business partners beyond doubt across locations, corporate affiliations and life cycles. In strategic and operational procurement, the DUNS number is a proven key element for supplier master data, risk assessment and integration with global exchange platforms.

Key facts

- The DUNS number is a nine-digit, globally unique business identifier.
- It is assigned centrally by Dun & Bradstreet and continuously updated.
- Many international corporations and procurement platforms require a DUNS from suppliers.
- It forms the basis for supplier risk assessments, e.g. on payment behaviour and company size.
- A DUNS typically remains traceable across sales, renamings or site relocations.
- The application is generally free of charge for companies; extended data services are subject to charges.

Definition: D-U-N-S Number (DUNS)

The D-U-N-S number (Data Universal Numbering System) is a nine-digit combination of digits that assigns a unique identity to every economically active company worldwide. It functions as a common key for company data and is used by Dun & Bradstreet as the central reference point for master data, linkages and credit information.

Structure and assignment

A DUNS consists of nine digits without any content-based coding of industry or country. It is assigned per legal entity and location, so that branch offices may receive their own numbers. Assignment takes place upon application by the company itself or automatically, when Dun & Bradstreet identifies an organisation via public sources, commercial registers or business interactions.

- Nine digits, globally unique, permanently assigned.
- Assignment per legal entity or location, not per corporate group.
- No reuse after deletion: assigned numbers remain permanently associated with the identity.

Distinction from other identifiers

The DUNS is not an official number such as a VAT or commercial register number and does not replace national register identifiers. It complements them with a global, cross-industry and cross-country view. Compared with internal supplier numbers in the ERP system, its advantage is that it is uniformly understood by all parties across company boundaries.

Use in procurement: methods and approach

In the procurement process, the DUNS number serves as a uniform key for supplier identification — from the initial requirements analysis through supplier qualification to ongoing supplier management. It enables the matching of internal master data with external risk data and helps avoid duplicates in the supplier base.

Supplier qualification and onboarding

Many corporations require the provision of a DUNS number from new suppliers as early as onboarding, sometimes as a mandatory field in supplier portals or as part of a negotiation round prior to contract award. Buyers use it to check whether it is an independent legal entity or a branch of an existing partner. The number also facilitates clean maintenance of the Approved Vendor List (AVL), as each supplier can be referenced unambiguously.

Supplier risk and master data quality

Data classes linked to the DUNS — such as company structure, headcount benchmarks, payment behaviour or industry classification — help to identify supplier risks at an early stage. Anyone operating a supplier audit programme or structured quality management in procurement uses the number as a stable key for evaluations across locations and time periods. This reduces duplicates and incorrect linkages in the data inventory.

Key KPIs relating to the DUNS number

The DUNS itself is not a key figure, but it enables measurable quality and risk metrics in supplier management. Typical KPIs can be derived directly from the coverage and currency of DUNS-supported master data.

Coverage and data quality

A common target metric is the proportion of supplier master records with a valid DUNS number. In practice, corporate procurement organisations typically strive for values well above 90%, and often close to 100% for critical direct material suppliers. The duplicate rate in the supplier master is also frequently measured and reduced via DUNS matching.

Risk and credit assessments

Supplier ratings based on DUNS-linked data are often used as a score in supplier evaluations or as an input to a supplier feasibility review. Correct classification is important: such values are benchmarks and comparative figures, not guarantees. They do not replace the company's own verification of references, certificates or trial deliveries.

Risks and controls

The DUNS number is a useful tool, but not a quality or compliance guarantee. Buyers should assess its evidential value realistically and supplement it with their own controls, particularly for safety-critical or business-critical deliveries.

Limits of what it can tell you

A DUNS only confirms that a company has been identified and registered — not that it meets specific standards. Authorisations such as AEO status, quality certificates or evidence relating to a Restricted

Substances List (RSL) must be verified and documented separately. Delivery capability, process depth and capacities cannot be inferred from a number either.

Master data maintenance and governance

Without clear responsibilities, DUNS assignments become outdated, for example after renamings or site relocations. Clear governance in category management and defined processes for purchase order release help ensure that purchase orders consistently run against the correct legal entity. For cross-border deliveries, it must additionally be ensured that customs documents such as the commercial invoice correctly state the legal entity actually making the delivery — the DUNS alone does not replace this.

Current developments

The importance of uniform business identifiers grows with the digitalisation of procurement. Several international industry and data exchange initiatives use the DUNS as a reference to keep supplier data consistent across system boundaries.

DUNS in digital procurement platforms

Many global data exchange formats and supplier portals require or recommend the DUNS as a unique key. It facilitates the consolidation of supplier information from different sources — such as ERP master data, certificate databases and risk assessments — into a central data storage structure, up to and including a data lake. Suppliers with an international footprint should actively maintain and keep their DUNS details up to date.

Outlook: standardisation and verification processes

The trend is towards more highly automated verification processes: new suppliers are automatically matched against register and risk data during onboarding before being added to the AVL. The DUNS frequently remains the connecting key in this process. In addition, national and EU-wide register and identification systems are gaining in relevance; buyers should examine on a case-by-case basis which identifier is decisive for which purpose (risk, compliance, customs, payment transactions).

Typical metrics

DUNS coverage in the supplier master: typically > 90%

Proportion of active suppliers with a valid DUNS number; often close to 100% for critical direct suppliers.

Duplicate rate in the supplier master: typically < 5% after cleansing

DUNS matching allows duplicates to be identified and merged systematically.

Onboarding turnaround time: a few days to a few weeks

Period for DUNS assignment or verification during supplier onboarding; measured as a process KPI by lead time.

Practical example

A mid-sized mechanical engineering company with several European plants had accumulated supplier duplicates over the years: the same supplier was recorded in the ERP under separate numbers depending on the plant, sometimes under the wrong legal form. When introducing centralised supplier management, a DUNS number was researched for all active suppliers and stored as a unique key.

- Data cleansing: matching the entire supplier master via the DUNS and merging duplicates.
- Onboarding rule: no addition to the Approved Vendor List (AVL) without a valid DUNS.
- Risk monitoring: DUNS-linked company and payment information as an input to the supplier audit programme.
- Documentation: stating the DUNS in tender documents and framework agreements for unambiguous legal entity reference.

Conclusion

The D-U-N-S number is a simple yet powerful instrument for identifying business partners unambiguously across locations and system boundaries. For buyers, it pays off above all in master data quality, supplier risk assessment and the onboarding of new suppliers. However, it does not replace the company's own verification of qualifications, certificates or compliance requirements. Anyone who consistently uses the DUNS as a key in the supplier master and in evaluations reduces duplicates and improves the data basis and confidence in decision-making. Supplemented by the company's own control processes, it remains a proven building block of professional procurement.

Frequently asked questions

What is a D-U-N-S number?

The D-U-N-S number is a nine-digit, globally unique identification number for businesses, assigned by Dun & Bradstreet. It uniquely identifies legal entities and locations and remains permanently associated with the business identity. In procurement, it serves as a common key for supplier master data and risk assessments.

How do I obtain a DUNS number for my company?

A DUNS number is assigned by Dun & Bradstreet; companies can usually apply for it free of charge from the issuing authority. After verification of the information, allocation takes place, which in practical experience can take from a few working days to several weeks. Charges may apply for external data services or expedited processes; the terms and conditions should be reviewed on a case-by-case basis.

What does a DUNS number cost?

The basic assignment of a DUNS number to one's own company is typically free of charge. Charges apply, however, for extended services such as detailed company profiles, risk scores or real-time enquiries on business partners. For buyers, it is worth reviewing which evaluations are genuinely required, as a variety of pricing models exist in practice.

Why do suppliers need a DUNS number?

Many international corporations and procurement platforms require suppliers to provide a DUNS number in order to identify them unambiguously and integrate them into their systems. It is frequently a mandatory field in supplier onboarding or on registration portals. Without a DUNS, participation in certain tenders or supplier programmes may be blocked.

How long does it take to apply for a DUNS number?

The duration depends on the route of assignment: with a direct application by the company, it is typically a few days to a few weeks in practical experience, depending on the completeness of the information and the verification effort required. Existing records on one's own legal entity can accelerate the

allocation. Where customer requirements are time-critical, the application should be initiated early.

Is the DUNS number the same as a VAT or commercial register number?

No. The DUNS number is a private-sector, global identification number and not an official registration. It does not replace tax or commercial register identifiers required for invoices, customs declarations or contracts. Buyers should maintain both identification levels separately and verify the details on a case-by-case basis in legal or tax matters.