

DUNS number: global supplier identification for technical procurement

The DUNS number is a globally unique nine-digit identification number for companies, issued and managed by Dun & Bradstreet. In technical procurement, it serves as a reliable key for uniquely referencing suppliers, customers and locations across systems. Whether procuring internationally, planning audits or assessing payment risks – the DUNS number is frequently a prerequisite for registration on corporate platforms and with public authorities. It is therefore part of the fundamental toolkit of master data management and supplier evaluation.

Key facts

- The DUNS number is a nine-digit, globally unique company identifier that can typically be applied for free of charge, while extended reports are subject to a fee.
- It is issued by Dun & Bradstreet and maintained in the D&B Worldwide Network database; secondary numbers for branches are possible.
- In B2B procurement, it is the standard identifier in supplier portals, ERP and P2P systems and for registrations with public authorities, for example for US government contractors.
- It forms the basis for credit reports and risk indicators with which buyers can assess the financial and supply chain risks of their suppliers.
- As a rule, a separate number is issued per location – relevant for group structures with multiple plants.
- Quality depends on maintenance: without regular updates, outdated master data and duplicate records loom.

Definition: DUNS number

The DUNS number (Data Universal Numbering System) is a nine-digit sequence that uniquely identifies a company together with its legal entities and locations worldwide. It is issued by the business information company Dun & Bradstreet, remains permanently assigned and serves as a common reference key across system and country boundaries.

Origin and structure

The system was introduced in the USA in the 1960s and is now established in many procurement and compliance processes. The number consists of nine digits with check logic; together with the master fields such as company name, address, legal form and revenue band, it forms the so-called DUNS record. Industry codes and employee numbers complement the profile and enable evaluations across supplier groups.

Distinction from other identifiers

Unlike the VAT identification number or the commercial register, the DUNS number is not a tax or legal register attribute but a commercial identification. It does not replace these but complements them with a

globally consistent supplier chain. In practice, many buyers run both worlds in parallel: tax numbers for accounting and DUNS as an organisational and risk key. For international supply chains, the latter is frequently the only consistent reference.

Use in procurement and methods of application

In day-to-day operations, the DUNS number appears above all where suppliers must be uniquely identified across system boundaries: when registering on supplier portals, when applying for accreditations and when creating new supplier master records.

Supplier master data and prevention of duplicates

Without a binding identification key, duplicates quickly arise: the same company under slightly differing names, maintained twice in different plants. The DUNS number solves this problem because each legal entity carries exactly one number. Buyers should systematically check whether a DUNS record already exists when creating a new supplier master record. This also simplifies later tenders and the maintenance of evaluation criteria, as evaluations can be consistently attributed to the correct legal entity.

Credit checks and supplier risk

Based on the DUNS number, standardised credit and company reports can be retrieved, including risk scores and payment indicators. Buyers typically use this for initial credit checks and before larger framework agreements. These findings complement operational key figures such as the on-time payment rate from one's own perspective – naturally with different viewpoints. This creates a two-dimensional risk picture: financial health from an external perspective and reliability from one's own experience.

Compliance and registrations

Many corporations and public bodies require the DUNS number for registration as a supplier; a classic example is US government contracts, where it was historically mandatory. It also serves as a reliable key in certification and sustainability processes for uniquely assigning suppliers to locations. Anyone operating internationally as a supplier should therefore ensure at an early stage that all relevant legal entities are registered.

Procurement process with the DUNS number: everyday procedure

Practical handling can be divided into three phases: identification and application, integration into processes and ongoing maintenance. Those who define clear rules here avoid data chaos and later speed up tenders.

Application and validation

Companies apply for the number directly from the operator, usually online and free of charge; processing times vary and can extend to several weeks. Correct legal form, address and business description are important, as reports are generated from these later. Procurement departments typically check with new suppliers whether the details on the website, invoices and register extract match. Deviations are an early warning sign of inconsistent master data or even dubious offers.

Integration into ERP and procurement systems

In practice, the DUNS number is stored as a field in the supplier master data of the ERP system and optionally validated automatically against web services. It allows internal data such as material classes, quantity scales or framework agreements to be cleanly mapped to an external legal entity. For global multi-site structures, a delivery-unit hierarchy is recommended: group level, plant level and, where applicable, sales companies. This allows, for example, a material availability check (ATP) to be uniquely assigned to the correct plant.

Maintenance and data quality

Numbers and master data age: relocations, mergers and insolvencies change reality. An annual review cycle has proven its worth, ideally interlinked with supplier evaluation and upcoming framework agreement renewals. Contacts, addresses, legal structure and risk-relevant attributes are updated in the process. Those pursuing dynamic approaches such as agile procurement need up-to-date supplier data anyway – otherwise escalation and contingency planning processes come to nothing.

Key KPIs around the DUNS number

The DUNS number itself is not a key figure, but it is the key on which several measurable indicators are built. These relate above all to data quality, risk and process discipline.

Master data quality as a measurable quantity

Relevant indicators are the proportion of suppliers with a valid DUNS number, the duplicate rate in the supplier master data and the proportion of automatically validated records. In well-run procurement organisations, coverage of critical suppliers is often close to 100 per cent, while the long tail of smaller service providers typically shows a need to catch up. These metrics are well suited as targets for master data teams.

Risk key figures based on DUNS

Risk scores and financial indicators can be derived from credit reports, making them comparable across suppliers. Buyers combine them with operational metrics such as the on-time payment rate (from the supplier's perspective or in one's own payment runs) and delivery reliability key figures. This makes it possible to determine whether a financially weak supplier actually poses a real delivery risk or performs stably. Crucial is the regular evaluation, for example as part of a plan-actual comparison of inventory or quarterly reviews.

Risks, limitations and controls

Despite its widespread use, the DUNS number is not a panacea. Its informative value depends on data maintenance, process integration and sensible combination with further controls.

Typical sources of error

The most common problems are outdated entries after restructurings, incorrectly assigned numbers (e.g. group parent instead of the operating plant) and duplicates caused by multiple registrations. Payment information can also lag behind for a while. Anyone using DUNS numbers unchecked as the sole source of truth overlooks such inconsistencies. A simple check: compare the number against the invoicing address, register extract and website at every major conclusion of contract.

No substitute for one's own checks

Credit reports provide a snapshot from a third party; they replace neither an audit nor one's own experience from collaboration, complaints or punctuality. A multi-level picture makes sense: DUNS-based financial assessment, technical evaluation (e.g. according to one's own evaluation criteria) and operational KPIs. For critical single sources, a contingency plan defining alternative supply sources and transition strategies should also be in place.

Data protection and contract design

Since these are company data containing partly sensitive information, transmission channels and the recipient group should be clearly regulated. In framework agreements, it is advisable to separately record legally binding details (company name, registered office, registration court) and to keep the DUNS number only as a reference. This is not legal advice; in individual cases the design should be reviewed by a lawyer.

Current developments and outlook

Several trends are increasing the importance of unique company identifiers: the digitalisation of procurement, sustainability reporting and rising demands for supply chain transparency.

Supply chain transparency and sustainability

Sustainability and reporting obligations increasingly demand that companies be able to trace their value chain down to the raw material level. Unique identifiers are a fundamental prerequisite for this: only those who can reliably distinguish supplier locations can meaningfully locate emissions, certifications or SBTi targets. DUNS numbers or comparable IDs are thereby turning from an administrative detail into strategic infrastructure.

Automation and data space integration

Modern P2P and source-to-pay solutions validate supplier data automatically via interfaces, including checksum checks and risk matching. This reduces manual maintenance and makes processes such as the price deviation workflow or approval loops more robust. Looking ahead, standardised identifiers are likely to play a role in industry data spaces and digital product passports as well. Buyers are well advised to build master data processes now in such a way that they can accommodate such developments without major restructuring.

Typical metrics

DUNS coverage of critical suppliers: > 95%

Proportion of suppliers with a valid, verified number; in practice, often close to 100% for A-suppliers

Duplicate rate in supplier master data: < 2%

Proportion of duplicate or fragmented records; target as close to zero as possible

Automated validation rate: > 80%

Proportion of DUNS records checked automatically via an interface

Master data currency: <= 12 months

Maximum age since the last review of the supplier master data

Practical example

A medium-sized mechanical engineering company with around 350 active suppliers discovered that several duplicate records of the same manufacturer existed in its ERP system – some with differing payment terms and prices. During an international tender, this led to confused offers and queries. The company subsequently introduced the DUNS number as a mandatory field in its supplier master data.

- For every new record and every contract renewal, the DUNS number becomes mandatory and is automatically validated against the external database.
- Existing records were cleansed within one quarter; duplicates were merged and historical purchase orders reallocated to the correct legal entity.
- Credit reports are now retrieved via the DUNS key before every framework agreement exceeding EUR 50,000 and updated annually.
- In addition, the process was incorporated into the procurement policy and master data maintenance was centralised in one place.

Conclusion

The DUNS number is a small building block with a big impact: it creates globally unique supplier identification, prevents duplicates and makes credit and risk information machine-usable. However, its value only emerges through consistent maintenance and sensible combination with operational key figures and one's own audit results. For technically oriented buyers, it is a standard tool of master data hygiene. Those who establish it as a mandatory field at an early stage save time later on tenders, registrations and supply chain transparency.

Frequently asked questions

What is a DUNS number?

A DUNS number is a nine-digit, globally unique company identifier issued by Dun & Bradstreet. It uniquely identifies each company and its locations. In procurement, it serves as a common key for master data, credit checks and supplier portals.

How do I get a DUNS number for my company?

You apply for the number directly from the operator, usually via an online form, providing the company name, legal form, address and main area of business. The basic number is typically free of charge; processing can take several weeks. Separate numbers are usually issued for branches and subsidiaries.

What does a DUNS number cost?

The basic number is usually free of charge. Costs often arise for extended services, such as detailed credit reports, monitoring or expedited processing. For buyers who wish to pull reports on their suppliers, licence or subscription models are typically available.

Why do I need a DUNS number as a supplier?

As a supplier, you will frequently need it for registration on the procurement portals of major corporations, for public-sector contracts (particularly in the USA) and for credit checks by your customers. It considerably speeds up your onboarding as a new supplier. Without it, your registration often ends up in manual follow-up or in the rejection process.

Is the DUNS number the same as the VAT ID?

No. The VAT identification number is a tax attribute within the EU, whereas the DUNS number is a commercial, worldwide company identification. Both should be maintained in parallel: the VAT ID for invoicing and tax matters, the DUNS number for master data, risk and portals.

How long does it take to be assigned a DUNS number?

Processing times vary; in practice, a few days to several weeks is common, depending on region and the completeness of the information provided. A paid expedited service is frequently available. Therefore plan the application well in advance, for example before taking part in tenders.