

## Acquisition Workforce Performance Improvement

*Learn, Practice, Do*

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### Introduction

Faced with major acquisition challenges, public scrutiny, and robust oversight, acquisition leaders need acquisition teams with knowledge, skills and abilities to succeed on the job. Whether developing an acquisition plan, writing a statement of work, conducting a source selection, or managing a contract, acquisition practitioners and teams struggle to attain and retain the expertise needed for the job at hand. Certification programs are designed to result in consistent training in foundational acquisition subjects, so there's no question they have an important role in workforce development. However, their ability to address job performance is limited for two primary reasons:

1. Due to the need to address the full spectrum of acquisition subjects, the structure of the programs often results in time lags between taking training and applying that training on the job. In training evaluations, students often comment very positively about the training but also note that they will not have an opportunity to use what they've learned when they get back to work. To combat this, training providers work hard to provide hands-on exercises to improve retention, but no matter how good the training there's no replacement for immediate application on the job. In the past, more senior "experts" were

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available to bridge this gap by overseeing and advising. Unfortunately today, those experts who are still on the job are typically busy managing their own full-time workload. No one should be surprised to find the workforce making mistakes as they struggle to develop solid job skills.

2. Further aggravating the situation is the workforce's drive (with supervisor complicity) to attain certification as quickly as possible. This results in individuals taking training far in advance of their experience level. For example, we see students taking CON 360 (Contracting for Decision Makers), a Level III course, with only a few years of contracting experience. Yet, CON 360 is designed for students to deliberate on tough contracting problems. Without experience, students have little to contribute or gain and their learning is limited.

To compensate for lack of expertise and a smaller workforce, leaders typically will expand their workforce temporarily via contractor staff augmentation in order to keep pace with the volume of work or new acquisition challenges. Yet this approach seldom results in improved performance—for two reasons. First, staff augmentees typically have limited practical government acquisition experience or specific experience related to the acquisition at hand. Second, staff augmentation does little to engage and develop the organic workforce—that is not their job. Ultimately the organization becomes long-term dependent on outside contractors in order to meet its mission and the organic workforce fails to gain the required expertise. But, there is a solution.

This whitepaper will focus on a Management Concepts Workforce Performance Improvement approach *within an acquisition organization*.

## Workforce Performance Improvement

Management Concepts Acquisition Workforce Performance Improvement service is targeted to increase learning retention while contributing to mission success—and leave your workforce able to do the job themselves next time. To accomplish this, we create a supportive learning environment, where and when the work is being done.

Our methodology combines four primary elements to improve workforce performance:



**Point of Performance Learning**— Experts in the field of adult learning agree that adults learn best by doing. Applying training through workshops in specific task areas provides an intensive hands-on learning experience for students. Students are encouraged to bring their work from the job to help provide context and support a hands-on learning experience. Learning retention is further increased by focusing on major parts of a process just before they occur, rather than covering the entire process weeks or months prior. For example, a team challenged with a source selection would learn and practice how to evaluate proposals just as proposals are received, applying that learning immediately. This is a simple model of *learn, practice, do*.

**Acquisition Team Development**— Teams often come together from different parts of an organization, with different priorities and skill sets. Therefore opportunities to develop communication, negotiation, and conflict management skills in addition to acquisition skills will improve the team’s ability to work together efficiently and effectively and will result in better outcomes. This approach focuses on all members of the acquisition team because successful acquisition is a team effort.

**Expert Policy and Process Coaching**— With a *learn, practice, do* approach, it’s essential to provide expert support for the *doing* in order to ensure the job is done right. Support from a pool of acquisition experts who currently teach and consult is made available to provide advice and insight to the team. These experts are prior government acquisition leaders, level III certified in contracting and/or program management, and highly experienced in defining requirements, developing acquisition strategies, leading source selections, and managing contracts. They have been there, done that—successfully. These experts will coach your acquisition teams by answering follow-up questions after workshops, advising at key decision points throughout the process, and reviewing and commenting on key work products. You will have the flexibility to decide what level of expert support fits your needs. And, best of all, we’ll leave your team with the ability to do the job without coaching the next time.

**Job Aides and Tools**— In order to save time and contribute to a repeatable process that enables an accurate, consistent, and complete output, tools and job aides are developed or incorporated from the organization’s tool set. As an example, one tool that is currently incorporated in the Performance Work Statement (PWS) course is the Defense Acquisition University’s (DAU) Acquisition Requirements Roadmap Tool (ARRT). This tool facilitates, rather than replaces, the critical thinking required for requirements definition. Job aides and tools are an integral part of our performance improvement approach.

**The SOW is the cornerstone of an acquisition.** When poorly written, it can result in poor proposals, less or no competition, contract changes, increased costs, disputes, and claims. So, why not go to great efforts to make sure it’s done well?

**But how?**

1. Hands-on workshops to learn and practice defining the requirement and writing the SOW
2. Immediately write the work product
3. Expert coaching to advise and comment on work
4. Use job aides such as ARRT to help work through a standard process

## Implementation

### Phase 1: Rapid Discovery and Analysis

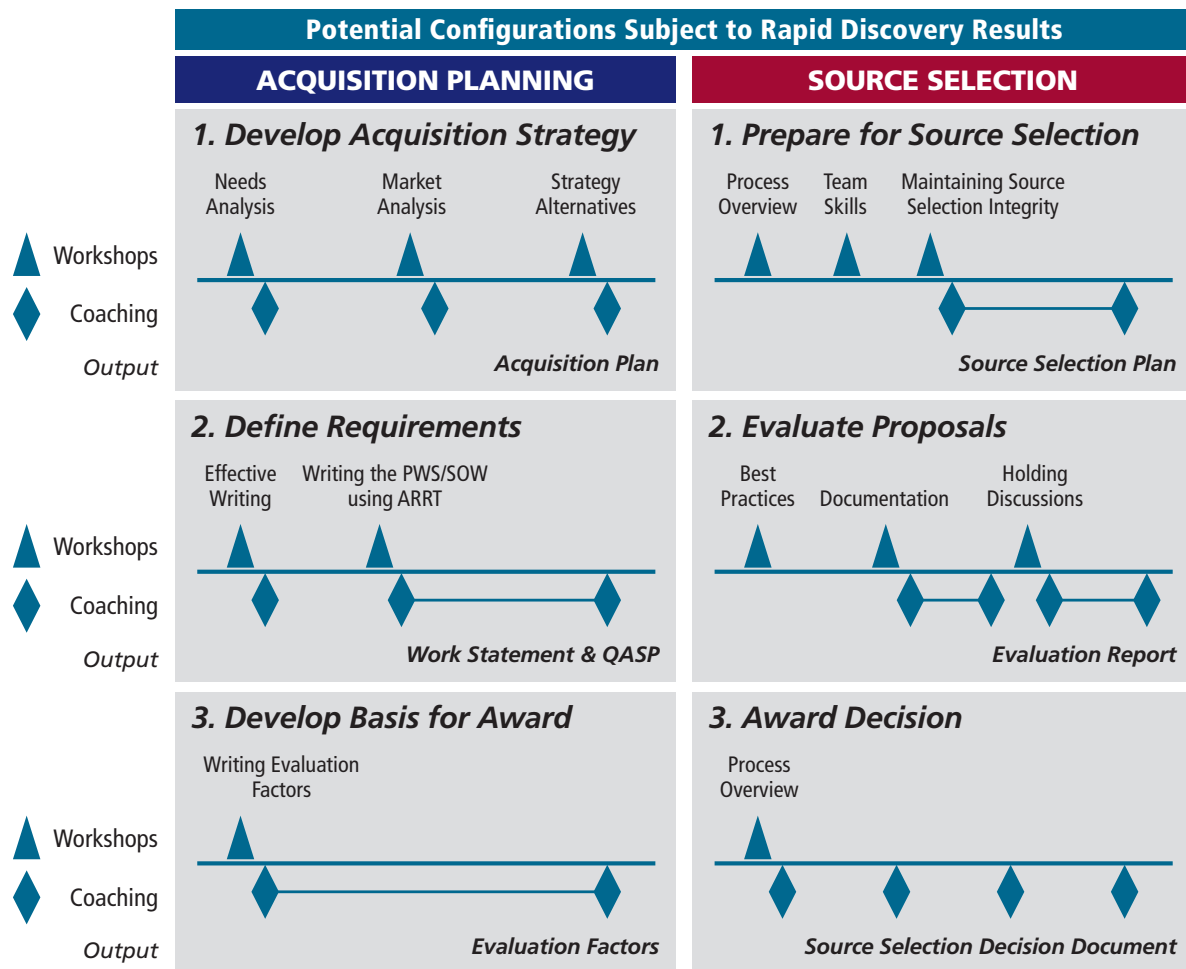
Point of performance training requires an understanding of the depth, breadth, and details of the acquisition challenge facing the organization. A short discovery phase, anticipated to last from one to three weeks, is required to determine the topic areas for which workshops are required as well as estimated coaching support needed. Relevant documents such as policy guidance and documents already produced for the acquisition assist in the development of point of performance training workshops. Phase 1 includes discussions with leadership in order to learn their specific concerns regarding the acquisition and the acquisition team.

## Phase 2: Program Configuration

The documents and discussions from Phase 1 are used to configure a full program plan tailored for the acquisition and the development of the workforce. The plan will address, as required:

- A statement of the Rapid Discovery Phase results and how those results affect the proposed; approach
- A list of workshops integrated with the acquisition process and schedule;
- Descriptions of each COTS or tailored COTS workshop proposed;
- A recommendation for coaching support integrated with the acquisition process and schedule;
- Resumes for workshop facilitators and coaches;
- A list of job aides and tools to be provided during workshops;
- Pricing for each workshop; and
- Pricing for proposed coaching support.

A notional program configuration for an organization requiring support for acquisition planning and source selection could look like this, depending upon the organization's needs.



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## Phase 3: Implementation

Once the configuration is approved by the customer, a program schedule is developed that details the workshop schedule, expectations for coaching support, a kickoff meeting with the acquisition team, and regular program reviews. The program schedule becomes the basis for implementing the program.

## Results

This hands-on, real-time approach improves learning and retention by connecting it to the job-at-hand. Our highly experienced acquisition SMEs are the safety net to ensure the job is done well, while learning takes place.

The focus on your organization's acquisition challenges when they occur will result in lasting workforce performance improvement in the skills needed to perform the job. When completed, this 3-phased approach will leave your workforce ready and able to do the work themselves next time.

## *About the Author*

Denean Machis is a retired Air Force Colonel with thirty years' experience in government acquisitions. Her Air Force career included assignments as the Air Force Contracting Career Field Manager and human capital strategist for 6,000+ officers and civilians, Principal Assistant Responsible for Contracts (PARC)—Afghanistan, Chief of Air Force Contracting Policy, and various contracting and program management positions. She is currently a Subject Matter Expert for Management Concepts, where she develops and teaches acquisition courses for government students. Ms. Machis is Level III DAWIA certified in Contracting and Program Management and has held unlimited contracting warrants in past positions.

## About Management Concepts

Management Concepts is the nation's premier provider of professional development, performance improvement, and talent management solutions for the public sector. Since 1973, we have collaborated with and supported every major agency in the Federal government and thousands of state and local government offices, unleashing the potential of more than one million individuals and enhancing the performance of teams and organizations. For more information, visit [www.ManagementConcepts.com](http://www.ManagementConcepts.com) and follow us on twitter @mgmt\_concepts.