

Acquisition certification programs and improved recruitment and retention efforts are important, but a formal, mandatory, funded, job-focused learning program is key to improving the acquisition workforce's performance on the job. If we can improve that performance, we can improve government acquisitions.

STRENGTHEN

**THE ACQUISITION
WORKFORCE
Focus**





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ORKFORCE:

us on the Task at Hand

By DENEAN MACHIS



During my deployed assignment as the principal assistant responsible for contracting (PARC) in Afghanistan in 2007, I was constantly searching for the right people with the right knowledge and experience to do the job at hand.

It wasn't a matter of those assigned not being good people—they were the best. It wasn't a matter of them not being trained—they had to be at least Level I Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act (DAWIA) certified, and many were Level II. It was that, more often than not, they didn't possess the skills or experience in the specific kinds of acquisitions we were doing. The few appropriately trained and experienced people we had were too busy to train or even oversee others' work since they had their own 24/7 workload. The wartime acquisition environment is especially challenging, but agencies with peacetime missions also struggle to find the right person with the right skills and experience to do the job at hand.

Providing the person assigned to do the job with the specific skills and experiences required for the job would result in a major strengthening of the acquisition workforce. Certification and continuous learning programs aimed at workforce development are not focused on performing the job at hand. A formal, mandatory, funded, job-

focused learning program is the solution to improving the acquisition workforce's performance on the job. If we can improve that performance, we can improve government acquisitions.

DECADES OF WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS

Efforts to develop the acquisition workforce began long before I became a part of it, have continued to this day, and—I expect—will continue well into the future. It's not that nothing's been done. Quite the contrary. Statute and policy have brought about major changes.

In 1990, DAWIA introduced a professional certification program for the defense acquisition workforce. In 2008, Department of Defense (DOD) efforts to improve the

recruitment, retention, and training of its acquisition workforce were greatly aided by Section 852 of the National Defense Authorization Act providing for defense acquisition workforce development funds.

On the civilian agency side, the Office of Federal Procurement Policy (OFPP) has largely followed DOD's lead regarding certification in accordance with the requirements of the Clinger-Cohen Act of 1996. In 2003, the Services Acquisition Reform Act provided an acquisition workforce training fund.

As a result, both DOD and civilian agencies have made great strides toward achieving the standard of competency required by their professional certification programs. Yet, there are still calls to improve the acquisition workforce and the training it receives. A recent report¹ to Congress on the subject of defense acquisition reform was rife with recommendations to improve the acquisition workforce in order to improve acquisition outcomes. The

in tracking fulfillment of their continuous learning requirements. The certification programs are absolutely necessary to ensure a foundational level of learning for each acquisition career field, but certification programs are not a complete solution. Neither improved workforce hiring and retention nor increased certification numbers are making enough of a difference; agencies continue to struggle in performing their acquisition missions, primarily because their workforce is smaller and less experienced than it was in the past, and has fewer mentors available to support on-the-job-training and guide performance. I propose that the piece of the equation that has been largely missing in action is job-focused learning. But, first let's examine the drawbacks of relying on hiring, retention, and certification programs alone to improve workforce performance.

and manning models seldom provide the granularity or flexibility to adjust accordingly.

I recently met with representatives from an agency that was established by merging several disparate large organizations. The director shared with us that he received only half the number of positions that were determined by a manpower model and, unable to quickly fill all of those positions, had to hire contractors to get the work done. (And, by the way, found himself in the position of having to train those hired contractors.) Undermanned, challenged with the need to integrate organizational cultures, and faced with current and upcoming



Professional Services Council's 2014 Acquisition Policy Survey found that acquisition leaders continue to regard the acquisition workforce as "an issue of real concern."

Congress and the agencies themselves have focused on strategic reforms—trying to change policies and apply funding in an effort to improve workforce recruitment and retention, and increase the number of certified acquisition workforce members. Recruitment and retention efforts have been stymied by reduced budgets, the notoriously lethargic government hiring process, and the great retirement bathtub effect.² Agencies have increased the number of certified personnel, and have made progress

WORKFORCE HIRING AND RETENTION

An agency's ability to hire and retain needed personnel is always subject to the availability of funds, which never seem to be sufficient, especially today, with the fiscal challenges facing government. Having been the Air Force contracting career field manager, I always question the validity of manning models. Who can say how many are enough? Does the "right size"—according to the model—vary if your workforce is highly motivated? Does it matter if you're working a large, complex acquisition versus working repetitive task orders? Does it matter if you're conducting a major source selection based on poorly defined requirements? I believe the "right size" can vary greatly depending on these and other factors,

challenges (including several protested large acquisitions), this agency needed a fully trained acquisition workforce from day one. Instead, it is struggling to piece together a patchwork of solutions to solve its acquisition problems.

Agencies have expended a lot of energy trying to increase workforce numbers and expertise. Incentives, such as special promotion tracks, civilian professional classification, and special acquisition corps pay are talked about but not implemented. They're just too hard to do. I'm not suggesting it's pointless to pursue hiring and retention incentives, but it is difficult to make and sustain progress in this area. Certainly, there's been only limited success from decades of trying.

Core Plus Development Guide (desired training, education, and experience)		Type of Assignment			
Training	Wpn Sys	Services	Bus Mgt/IT	Intern Acq	
ACQ 315 Understanding Industry (Business Acumen) (R)	✓	✓	✓	✓	
BCF 215 Operating and Support Cost Analysis (R)	✓	✓	✓		
CLE 004 Introduction to Lean Enterprise Concepts	✓	✓	✓		
CLE 006 Enterprise Integration Overview			✓		
CLE 022 Program Manager Introduction to Anti-Tamper	✓				
CLL 002 Defense Logistics Agency Support to the PM	✓	✓			
CLL 006 Depot Maintenance Partnering	✓	✓			
CLM 025 Commercial-Off-The-Shelf (COTS) Acquisition for Program Managers	✓	✓	✓		
CLM 031 Improved Statement of Work	✓	✓			
LOG 102 Fundamentals of System Sustainment Management	✓	✓			
PQM 101 Production, Quality, and Manufacturing Fundamentals	✓	✓			

FIGURE 1.

CERTIFICATION PROGRAMS

The DOD and civilian agency certification programs are worthy efforts and agencies have succeeded in reaching high rates of certification across the workforce. According to the Federal Acquisition Institute website: “Federal certification programs are designed to establish consistent competencies and standards for those performing acquisition-related work.”³ Certification programs result in consistent training to meet identified standards 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.

The first reason is 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 course evaluations, students often comment very positively about the course 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, trying to achieve learning and improve retention, work hard to provide robust, hands-on exercises,

but no matter how good the training there’s no replacement for immediate application on the job. In the past, more senior “experts” were available to bridge this gap by overseeing and advising. Unfortunately, today those experts who are not retired 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 skills for the job they are in. It’s like (as we say in the Air Force) building the airplane while flying it.

Further aggravating the situation is the second reason, which is the workforce’s drive 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. These students do themselves and their organizations a disservice by taking courses too soon in their careers.

DOD and OFPP Core Plus programs have the potential to address the need for job-focused

learning. DOD’s Core Plus program is intended to encourage learning beyond that required for certification for specific types of job assignments in a particular acquisition.⁴ DOD’s Core Plus leans in the direction I am advocating—but stops short of providing training for the job at hand, primarily because unlike the certification programs, it is an entirely voluntary program. Individuals and their supervisors are simply *encouraged* to include suggested training in their individual development plans. According to the DAU website:

You and your supervisor should consider the training activities listed in the Core Plus Development Guide for your career field and level as well as the lower levels if you have not completed those activities. You should next consider higher-level guides as well as the guides of other career fields as opportunities to broaden your development.⁵

A further shortcoming of Core Plus is apparent when you browse the various career field Core Plus Development Guides. The suggested training is less a list of courses addressing skills needed for specific types of acquisition job assignments than it is a collection of online courses that could be of interest to any members of the career field.



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MANAGEMENT
CONCEPTS

Take a look at the Core Plus level 2 Development Guide for Program Management, as pictured in **FIGURE 1** on page 32.

Of the 10 courses suggested for program managers, only one course (CLE 022) differs

between weapons systems and services assignments, yet these two types of acquisitions are fundamentally different; with distinct policies, processes, and issues for each. Where is a course for developing quality assurance surveillance plans for the services

program managers? Does a manager of services really need PQM 101? Wouldn't a weapons system program manager take a course on statements of work, while a services program manager would take a course in performance work statements? Shouldn't the basic question be: "What knowledge does someone need to know to be successful in a certain position and what development opportunity will provide this knowledge?"

In March 2014, the Office of Federal Procurement Policy (OFPP) introduced its own Core Plus specialization in IT for program/project managers. This approach seems promising in that the Core Plus certification requires a mid- to senior-level FAC-P/PM foundation and is required for program managers

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“assigned to those programs within an established FAC-P/PM core-plus area.”⁶ Beyond that foundation are training, experience, continuous learning competencies, and requirements in the Core Plus specialty. It’s unclear whether, or when, more FAC-P/PM Core Plus specialties, or other career field Core Plus specialties, may be added. One hopes that plans are in place to continue developing specialties to improve performance on the job at hand and that those specialties will be required—as they are for IT program managers. But then it begs the question: Will these requirements be enforced, and how?

A COMPELLING CASE FOR JOB-FOCUSED LEARNING

Job-focused learning can ensure the workforce learns while on the job. I define *job-focused learning* as a formalized, mandatory, and funded requirement to train individuals and teams in the job at hand—and propose that it should be just as important as hiring/retention initiatives and certification requirements. Why? Because government acquisition organizations are often insufficiently manned and the workforce they do have is inadequately prepared for the jobs they are asked to do. Training time is a precious commodity. Let’s aim a portion of it at the target with, arguably, the highest payoff for mission success—the job at hand.

Let’s look at a notional case to support this contention. Suppose you are leading an organization faced with a major IT services acquisition. Among your very limited workforce, you have a program manager with 15 years of experience, but she has never worked on an IT acquisition. Other members of your workforce who may need to be on the evaluation team, for the most part, do not have either IT or source selection experience. You have a contracting officer who is level III certified, has five years of contracting experience, and took CON 280 (“Source Selection and Administration of Service Contracts”) three years ago but hasn’t worked on a formal source selection since then. You recognize the training and experience gaps of your workforce. Your options today are to 1) hire contractors to supplement this team, or 2) go with what you have and hope for the best. With job-focused learning in place, you would

have a team that has already been trained in how to execute a major IT acquisition.

Here’s how that could have happened. Because part of your organizational mission is to acquire IT services, over the past year, your program manager took courses focused on agile acquisitions, software as a service, IT project risks, IT requirements definition, and IT program management. Your workforce members headed for the IT technical evaluation team took some of those same courses as well as a course in performing technical evaluations. Your contracting officer completed training in three contracting courses focused on IT acquisitions. And, best of all, your entire source selection team is already scheduled to take source selection training next week.

Connecting the training to the job at hand will result in greater interest, better comprehension and increased retention over time—“Learning is not a spectator sport...students must talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate it to past experiences, and apply it to their daily lives.”⁷ The best training course in the world won’t overcome delays between training and application. Leadership needs to work hard to create and enforce a strong connection between training and the work being done. Hands-on practice will lead to learning and immediate use of that learning will lead to increased understanding and retention. Make job-focused learning mandatory, and fund it, because the cost of conducting poor acquisitions is much higher than the cost of the training.

This approach relies on a foundational certification program to ensure that through training and experience members of the workforce establish a basic level of knowledge in their career field. But there are tradeoffs that can and should occur. Let’s not try to make an omniscient acquisition workforce through the certification program. That’s unrealistic and it squanders scarce resources that could be better applied making members experts in their particular area of business. Required and funded job-focused learning would be an acquisition workforce improvement that helps achieve successful mission outcomes and makes a difference day in and day out—on the job.

Speaking to our acquisition leaders, I can do no better than to quote the great Vince Lombardi, who said: “The price of success is hard work, dedication to the job at hand, and the determination that whether we win or lose, we have applied the best of ourselves to the task at hand.” **CM**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ENDNOTES

1. U.S. Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, “Defense Acquisition Reform: Where Do We Go From Here? A Compendium of Views by Leading Experts.”
2. The retirement bathtub effect is a term that is often used to graphically illustrate the potential loss of acquisition expertise due to retirement of baby boomers and the lack of experienced people to fill the vacancies, much like how if you try to fill a bathtub with the drain open, the tub will never fill.
3. www.fai.gov/drupal/certification/certification-and-career-development-programs.
4. See dap.dau.mil/workforce/Pages/CorePlusOverview.aspx.
5. *Ibid.*
6. “Revisions to the Federal Acquisition Certification for Program and Project Managers (FAC-P/PM),” OMB Memorandum for Chief Acquisition Officers (December 16, 2013).
7. A.W. Chickering and Z.F. Gamson, “Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education,” *AAHE Bulletin* (1987): 3-7.