



# Acquisition Workforce Growth Initiative

*A Report from the Field: U.S. Air Force  
Aeronautical Systems Center*

**Y**ears of downsizing coupled with a 3-year hiring freeze have led to a serious shortage of experienced workers across the Acquisition workforce. Compounding the problem is an aging workforce comprised primarily of “Baby Boomers” approaching retirement eligibility. As the acquisition community across the country struggles to overcome manpower shortfalls and the attendant knowledge gaps, Aeronautical Systems Center’s Contracting Directorate (ASC/PK) is well on its way to conquering both. Thanks to an infusion of Section 852 funding, an innova-



tive recruiting and training strategy, and the development of some key partnerships, ASC/PK is aggressively acting to address its acquisition mission needs.

### **A Depleted Workforce Reinvigorated**

Given the state of ASC's contracting workforce just 2 years ago, no one could have foreseen such a remarkable turnaround in such a short time. In its mid-1980s heyday, ASC/PK employed an average of 800+ contract specialists, but that number steadily declined as retirement-eligible workers left and the positions they occupied were cut. The 40 or so interns hired between 2000 and 2007 were not nearly enough to keep pace with an increasingly heavy workload and a fairly constant attrition rate of 50 per year. When ASC's new Director of Contracting Patsy Reeves arrived in July of 2008, she found herself at the helm of a severely depleted workforce with a 40 percent vacancy rate and no hiring budget.

Shortly thereafter, ASC learned about the potential to receive Section 852-funded intern positions through the Defense Acquisition Workforce Development Fund. Called "Section 852" because of its relationship to that section of the 2008 National Defense Authorization Act, its purpose was to beef up the Acquisition workforce through recruiting, hiring, and training. Over the next 4 months, new trainee positions dribbled in from a variety of funding sources, with the numbers fluctuating constantly. When the dust finally settled in December 2008, ASC/PK had 35 Section 852-funded positions, 63 Air Force

Personnel Center-funded Copper Cap slots, 15 locally funded positions, and 32 Student Career Experience Program (SCEP) slots for a total hiring picture of 142 trainee allocations to be filled by August 2009.

At the same time ASC/PK was receiving positions, so were the other four Air Force contracting organizations at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base (WPAFB). Historically, ASC/PK competed with Air Force Research Labs (Detachment 1 AFRL), Electronic Systems Center (ESC), Headquarters Air Force Materiel Command (HQ AFMC), and more recently the Enterprise Sourcing Group (ESG) for the same scarce resources, often finding themselves at odds over the hottest prospects at the local college fair or in a local bidding war for top talent. Foreseeing the possibility of a reinvigorated contracting workforce, Reeves encouraged and energized the group to think more strategically, resulting in a desire by all parties to pool resources and recruit, hire, and train together. Leadership from each of the five contracting organizations formalized a partnership with a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA), changing the atmosphere from competition to collaboration. ASC was given the lead since it was easily the largest contracting organization on base.

### **Recruiting Strategy: A Plan to Attract the Very Best**

ASC's 142 contracting allocations, plus 18 from across the other four contracting organizations, made for a combined



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total of 160 open trainee positions. Recognizing the need for quick execution and an organized approach to recruiting, Reeves challenged the recruiting team to formulate a hiring plan. The plan detailed the type of trainees to be recruited at each location, i.e., undergraduates from Miami University, master's of business administration (MBAs) from The Ohio State University, SCEPs from the University of Dayton, and so on. With over 100 stellar universities from which to choose and as many positions to fill, the team narrowed down its list by categorizing universities into four major areas: past successes at a particular university, quality of programs, student body make-up, and location. If a previous recruiting visit netted exceptional candidates, that same university would appear on the current schedule. Likewise, a top-notch business school with a first-class MBA program almost guarantees its graduates have strong business acumen, so that was a consideration. To ensure a diverse mix of available candidates, the minority and gender population at a school was relevant. Finally, just like in real estate, location is critical. Students recruited at schools inside a 200-mile radius of the base tend to stay more than a few years at WPAFB. As such, the team directed its recruiting efforts toward schools within a 3-hour driving distance of the base. With these factors in mind, ASC led the effort to schedule hiring trips to colleges and universities in Ohio, Kentucky, and Virginia.

In previous recruiting events, the recruiting team located, interviewed, and selected candidates prior to any staffing office involvement. Afterward, the staffing specialist ensured the selectees met minimum qualifications before official job offers were made. When a new staffing specialist came on board, the recruiting team invited the specialist to travel to one recruiting event to offer a first-hand look at the process. This grew to a game-changing initiative as the specialist was able to review a candidate's resume and transcripts while the interview was

being conducted. Additionally, when more information was needed, candidates were there to provide it. At that recruiting event and every one thereafter, the staffing specialist traveled with the team, qualifying (or disqualifying) candidates on the spot, enabling selections to be made by day's end and offers extended within 24 hours.

### **The Numbers at a Glance**

The impact of employing these new strategies was significant, as supported by the number of applicants interviewed and hired for Wright-Patterson's contracting workforce between January and August 2009.

- Candidates interviewed: 382
- Offers made: 183
- Offers declined: 23 (or 12.5 percent)
- Positions filled: 160 trainees
  - 112 with MBAs, Juris Doctorates (JDs), or both
  - 16 with Bachelor of Science (BS) degrees
  - 32 SCEPs (7 pursuing BS; 25 pursuing MBAs)

### **Sharing the Wealth**

Word spread of the recruiting team's success in filling positions quickly with exceptional candidates. As more Section 852 funding was released by DoD, calls began coming in from bases around the country and from other functional offices at Wright-Patterson seeking hiring assistance. Encouraged by contracting leadership to support their acquisition brethren, the recruiting team partnered with others in three ways. For the smaller contracting shops around the country with no recruiting teams and very few slots to fill, at their request the Wright-Patterson team made selections on their behalf from the pool of top candidates who expressed a desire to relocate. For others, it was a matter of someone from the contracting recruiting team traveling to another base and coaching them step-by-step through a real recruiting event. Those in closer proximity who solicited help, such as Wright-Patterson's program management team, accepted the contracting team's invitation to recruit as a cooperative. They held information sessions and interviews together at the universities, deciding each day which candidates were best suited for each profession. Consequently, the program management team filled all of its 852-funded intern positions with highly qualified MBAs.

### **A New Approach to On-Boarding**

In the midst of the flurry of interviews and hiring, the contracting team reengineered the on-boarding process and created excitement and camaraderie along the way. Instead of scheduling 6 months' worth of individual in-processing appointments with personnel, the creative vision of the personnel department facilitated the in-processing of 160 new hires as a group on one of three prescheduled dates in June, July, or August 2009. The new process included being welcomed and sworn into government service by senior leaders like AFMC Commander Gen. Donald J. Hoffman, ASC Commander Lt. Gen. Thomas J. Owen, or HQ AFMC Director of Contracting Michael A. Gill. Following the swearing-in ceremony, the new hires attended a new employee orientation course, where

contract specialists, along with recent hires from many other career fields on base, were instructed on matters related to the base and the Air Force at large. The culmination of this week-long class was graduation and issuance of a CAC (Common Access Card). At the start of Week 2, the contract specialists progressed into *Jumpstart*, the newly developed 10-week contracting-specific course.

### The Intensive Training Begins

The precursor to *Jumpstart* was a 2-week course that provided an overview of contracting-related topics. During the years when hiring was scarce and there was an abundance of experienced workers to provide on-the-job training, the quality of the up-front training mattered less. With the new wave of hiring, a different training model was necessary. It was unrealistic for the already constrained workforce to train 160 new employees. Instead, a comprehensive program similar to one developed at Robins AFB was needed, but building such a program takes money and experienced personnel. The stars aligned as both became available, the latter coming from an unlikely source. Two retired senior ASC/PK managers, both known and respected leaders, expressed interest in developing and teaching the new program. Both agreed to become rehired annuitants, build the new training program, and serve as instructors. Salaries were paid by Section 852 funding, and the new instructors began work immediately.

The two instructors borrowed and expanded curriculum generously provided by WR-ALC, Defense Acquisition University (DAU), and others. They formed a partnership with DAU that enabled students to take DAU online classes at night to achieve Level I certificates, and come to *Jumpstart* the following day for the instructors' real-world application of those lessons. A second partnership was formed with Wright State University, a well-respected local college that offered use of its new facilities to accommodate the first *Jumpstart* class at no charge. When all was said and done, *Jumpstart* was up and running in mid-June 2009 when the first 50 of the 160 new hires reported to work. The instructors ran two training sessions of 25 students in parallel for a total of 12 weeks, including lecture, projects, field trips, and case studies. One full week was set aside for a pricing scenario, including mock negotiations. Time was also spent on important subjects like contract law, integrity, the Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR), and learning the contract writing system known as ConWrite. Guest speakers like Reeves and other Senior Executive Service members from the base, as well as outside organizations like the National Contract Management Association (NCMA) and the Small Business Office were used to spark interest. For their last 2 weeks of class, the students attended CON 120 at the local DAU campus—a capstone course for Level I Acquisition Professional Development Program certification.

In the afternoon of their last day of training, the students learned the office where they would begin their Air Force careers. Their new supervisors, in attendance at the celebration, welcomed them, provided reporting instructions for their first



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day on the job, and joined them in an offsite celebration afterward.

### **Managing the Training Program Today**

It is important to provide new hires with a solid foundation through excellent up-front training. It is even more critical to manage their "care and feeding" throughout their training program to ensure we retain the new employees we've worked so hard to recruit and train.

At Wright-Patterson, managing an intern program of 225 trainees takes a village. A trainee's "care and feeding" team is the same collaborative group that recruits them, and consequently, they are vested in every person's success. Supervisors also play an integral part in the trainee's further development. Prior to a trainee reporting, each supervisor receives a letter identifying the employee's hiring program, the grade at which they were hired, the date of their next rotation, their education level, and any prior experience. With this information in hand, supervisors are better able to plan appropriate workload for each new employee.

Further, the team monitors progress through quarterly and semiannual evaluations from the supervisors and the interns. The team provides an individual training plan for each intern to follow; arranges and tracks training and development, including DAU certification classes and leadership opportunities; organizes social events that promote camaraderie; and manages trainee rotations.

Rotations allow the trainee to develop a breadth of contracting knowledge through a variety of on-the-job experiences and to observe distinctive management styles. To ensure they receive unique rotation opportunities, the intern meets with a Senior Advisory Board comprising of members from senior contracting leadership prior to each 18-month rotation. They meet again with the board prior to their outplacement from the training program.

### **Enticing them to Stay**

People who develop relationship connections at work tend to stay in the workplace. Therefore, providing opportunities for

intern interaction is just as essential as rotations and training. While bowling, sand volleyball, picnics, and paintball are part of the equation, the more meaningful involvement comes from their participation in two all-trainee committees: CARE (Community Action Reaches Everyone) and ACTIVE (Association for the Camaraderie of Trainees Incorporating Value-Added Entertainment). With an average of 15 participants per event, CARE members have judged science fairs at local schools; provided spring cleanup at WPAFB's Fisher House and Child Development Center; collected over 4,000 miniature toiletries for the Veterans Administration Center; and provided school supplies for the Crayons to Classrooms program.

"Being part of and connected to like-minded trainees who want to do something extra and over-the-top for people, groups, and our communities is what makes the CARE committee tick," says Megan Rosenbeck, CARE co-chair. "Our servicemen and women give their all—the least we can do as government servants is to give our all to make every place we serve better."

Likewise, ACTIVE hosted an ASC/PK bowling event attended by 350 contracting employees, an all-trainee summer picnic for 120, and an offsite at a local Party Barn with 160 trainees. Amanda Thompson is one of ACTIVE's co-chairs.

"We work very hard to plan events and coordinate opportunities that allow each and every trainee to be involved, get to know peers, and to share experiences that will hopefully be beneficial to the workforce as a whole," she says.

### **Going Forward**

Much has changed since that first *Jumpstart* class in June 2009. Thanks in large part to the continued availability of Section 852 funding, another 143 contract specialists were added to the WPAFB workforce in FY 2010, and FY 2011 recruiting efforts are well underway.

In recognition of the success achieved by the collaborative recruiting team, in June 2010, Gill expanded the focus of the WPAFB contracting alliance to include force development and human resources, and facilitated the signing of a second MOA. He instituted single announcements for similar jobs across base to be posted each quarter. As a result, all rotations, promotions, and lateral vacancy fills are done cooperatively with input from each of the five contracting organizations, which now meet on a regular basis.

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*The Aeronautical Systems Center Contracting Directorate supports ASC's mission to deliver affordable, sustainable capabilities to the nation's warfighters—Air Force, Joint Service, allied, and coalition partners—on time and on cost; and to work the priorities of the Secretary of the Air Force, Chief of Staff of the Air Force, Air Force Materiel Commander, and the Service Acquisition Executive. The directorate welcomes comments and questions. Contact Selwa "Stel" Kirbabas at [Selwa.Kirbabas@wpafb.af.mil](mailto:Selwa.Kirbabas@wpafb.af.mil) or Elizabeth "Jeana" Adducchio at [Elizabeth.Adducchio@wpafb.af.mil](mailto:Elizabeth.Adducchio@wpafb.af.mil).*