

# Blow Your Own Horn

Strategic Communications:  
Not Just “Nice to Have”—It’s Critical  
to Program Survival

*Linda Hillmer*

*If you’re a program manager in charge of a large information technology program at DoD, ensuring your program’s survival means you must effectively communicate its value to stakeholders.*





As the Department of Defense (DoD) budgets tighten, information technology (IT) programs will be increasingly scrutinized. In today's environment, running a program well simply isn't enough. Program managers must successfully communicate their program's value to survive and evolve into the joint programs serving America's defense now and into the future.

**“Programmatic communications isn’t for the faint of heart. It’s best done by a professional who has experience in IT program communications. It’s political, it’s tactical, it’s strategic, and it’s got to be executed flawlessly with simultaneous events and products aimed at disparate audiences—and at a quality and speed that frankly isn’t easy to find.”**

**—Jacob Haynes, Acting CIO  
Defense Contract Management Agency**

I have been involved in DoD IT program communications for more than 20 years and have witnessed firsthand that technology programs often fall short not due to failures in technology, but because of failures in communication. Poor information sharing with stakeholders, a lack of meaningful interaction with user communities, and an absence of clarity around business objectives and benefits—these are common communications pitfalls that can derail even the most technically sound programs.

Strategic communication is key to ensuring a program’s success, according to Jacob Haynes, currently the acting chief information officer for the Defense Contract Management Agency and a former program manager of a DoD joint IT program. “I knew that all the changes that we had to make to how our program operated—to include requirements prioritizing, testing, spiral development, and training tied to deployment—all of those things, even if they were done perfectly to a ‘T,’ wouldn’t matter if we couldn’t communicate about them to the right people at the right time. That’s the difference communications makes to a program.”

Too often communication is looked upon as a “soft” skill, a “nice to have” resource relegated to anyone on staff as “other duties as assigned.” Perhaps because communication efforts

are not as easily measured by traditional quantitative standards, program management professionals may overlook the value of a dedicated program communications effort. Yet the very success of a program, especially a highly visible program, hinges on a PM’s ability to communicate with customers, stakeholders, and team members.

Lessons can be learned by examining two IT programs: the Defense Contract Management Agency’s Standard Procurement System (SPS) and the Army’s Logistics Modernization Program (LMP). Both were worthy of survival, yet each was on the brink of cancellation. With the help of effective program communications, both programs survived strategic pauses and are today supporting America’s men and women on the frontlines.

### **Users Can Make or Break a Program**

The SPS is a joint program conceptualized in 1996 to automate and standardize basic procurement functions across the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and 13 DoD agencies. It would terminate 76 legacy systems, saving an estimated \$403.3 million. On top of that, SPS would finally achieve integration among and insight into DoD’s acquisition, financial management, and logistics systems, allowing DoD to use business intelligence to affect strategic purchasing patterns and identify logistics needs earlier.

As SPS was the first DoD-wide enterprise business solution to use commercial-off-the-shelf (COTS) software, it was simultaneously a test case and a target.

Did SPS dedicate enough time and resources to communicate to users the department’s vision, SPS’s role, and the changes users would have to make to their business processes? Looking back with the clarity of 20/20 hindsight, probably not. Even though the program was considered “valuable” in DoD’s larger vision—the under secretary of Defense for acquisition, technology and logistics said at the time that SPS was at the top of his priority list because it had such wide-reaching potential to make a positive difference—in 2001 he put SPS on “strategic pause,” largely in response to the strong dissatisfaction voiced by SPS users and future users to DoD leadership, Congress, and the media.

It was into this firestorm that Haynes, at the time a U.S. Army colonel, entered SPS. He had the right pedigree: He had run two successful joint IT programs. He was a dedicated PM, passionate about whatever cause he stood behind.

The communications for the program were going to be especially challenging, Haynes realized, because, “When you have a homogenous environment, things are pretty easy. But when you start talking joint—and you’re talking every post, camp, and station in the country and some overseas—you have a different set of problems.” While SPS users (21,000 strong) were widely dispersed (700+ locations), they seemed to be cohesive in their disappointment with the program.

"We had to wrestle back control of the message," explained Haynes. "It's imperative that a PM own the message—especially in today's environment of instant communication. It was challenging ten years ago when all we had to deal with was GAO, print publications, television, and the Internet. Now you have social media and bloggers and Twitter. I can't imagine being a PM today and trying to handle all of those without a professional communications strategist by my side."

Haynes brought in a strategic communications firm [full disclosure: I own the firm that handled both SPS and the other program in this article] that worked hand-in-glove with the public affairs offices (PAOs). The team set up three strategic communications campaigns that ran simultaneously, each with three distinct audiences, which meant, in essence, nine communications campaigns—all operating toward a strategic vision for the program's success.

Haynes explained, "We had a campaign that targeted the immediate needs. That was highly tactical. Then we had one that put us six weeks out, and another that was a year or two out. This meant that we could deal defensively with the challenges right in front of us while also playing offense to ensure we achieved our vision for the program. And it worked faster and better than we had imagined."

Haynes' dedication to the program meant he personally owned communications, stating, "The PM absolutely must own communications. The PM is the most agile person in the organization. He or she can make decisions without layers of bureaucratic red tape."

As a result of the operational changes to the program *and* the strategic plan to communicate the changes, in early 2003 SPS was lifted from strategic pause. The program was deemed fully operational, and more than 65 percent of DoD purchases were flowing through SPS. The program, which was on solid ground, was then moved under the Army's Program Executive Office for Enterprise Information Systems (PEO EIS) to give SPS the program management discipline that a PEO environment provides.

Kevin Carroll, who had been the PEO since 1999 [when PEO EIS was PEO Standard Army Management Information Systems (STAMIS); the program changed in 2002], saw firsthand the difference that strategic communications made to SPS.

"Professionally managed strategic communications saved SPS. Not singlehandedly of course, but in conjunction with real programmatic changes. Without effective communications, SPS couldn't have survived. How else are you going to know what users and customers are saying if you don't manage feedback?"

### **Pentagon Gossip Can Kill a Program**

The Army's Logistics Modernization Program (LMP) was conceived in 1999 and is one of the world's largest, fully integrated

supply chain maintenance, repair, and operations (MRO) planning and execution solutions.

LMP was still in development when it was pushed into use ahead of schedule to answer the needs of logisticians on the front lines in Afghanistan and Iraq. In July 2003, it was deployed to 4,000 users, most of whom didn't understand the changes the system would require them to make in their processes. Training and deployment were simultaneous. By its very nature, LMP asked users to subscribe to a standard set of business processes in order to make the system work and to provide DoD with the ultimate payoff of the enterprise resource planning (ERP) system: to deliver total situational awareness of Army assets and improve readiness while reducing inventory and theater footprint. However, changing their daily work processes to accommodate a new IT system was not something most LMP users understood was expected, and yet suddenly their everyday business processes, like the processes of SPS users before them, were turned upside down by an IT system that they were now expected to use.

Damaging rumors about LMP swirled around the Pentagon and in the media. LMP was put on strategic pause by the Army in 2006, and the program moved under PEO EIS, which had experience in managing large-scale systems implementations. To determine if the rumors about LMP were true, Carroll appointed as acting PM David Coker, at the time a U.S. Army colonel and an experienced PM who had run the Army Logistics Information Systems.

"It turns out the rumors weren't true," said Coker. "In fact, they were 180 degrees from the truth. So here we had a program that was successful yet was on the chopping block because of rumors," recalls Carroll. "Clearly LMP needed strategic communications. You can bury your head in the sand, but eventually Pentagon gossip will kill a program."

Coker brought in the strategic communications team that had helped SPS a few years earlier.

"Programmatic communications isn't for the faint of heart," warns Haynes. "It's best done by a professional who has experience in IT program communications. It's political, it's tactical, it's strategic, and it's got to be executed flawlessly with simultaneous events and products aimed at disparate audiences—and at a quality and speed that frankly isn't easy to find."

Coker oversaw the development of a strategic communications campaign for LMP that focused on users and Army leaders. "I joked that it was like being a rock star on tour, in that my team and I were constantly on the road, having meetings, giving briefings, and doing conferences. At one point, we had hit 30 key decision makers in 45 days! We gave people enough information—the good and the bad—to allow them to make their own judgments about the program. One of the things you don't want to do is exaggerate. You want to be passion-

## Where Are They Now?

- SPS is fully deployed, has 27,000 users in 750 locations worldwide, and has processed more than 902,000 contract actions worth \$173.5 billion in FY 2009.
- LMP is in its final deployment and will have 17,000 users in 2011; the system handles 1.3 million transactions daily.
- Kevin Carroll retired from the federal government in 2007 after 30 years of service. He is now a consultant and owns The Kevin Carroll Group.
- David Coker left LMP in 2006 and retired from the U.S. Army in 2007. He is now a Senior Vice President for DoD Programs with Microtech.
- Jacob Haynes handed over command of SPS in 2005 and retired from the U.S. Army later that year. He is now the Acting Chief Information Officer for DCMA.

ate about the program but not emotional. When things aren't going as planned, you need to be honest and show a plan to address the issue and then allow stakeholders to buy into your solutions."

Within 6 whirlwind months, the Army lifted LMP from strategic pause, the GAO noted the program's changes, and LMP was given the green light to move into full deployment.

"For LMP, once we showed success, the program became even more successful," remembered Coker. "Success breeds success. Getting the word out was really the right thing to do for the program."

### Conclusion

The lessons from SPS and LMP can help astute program managers who genuinely believe their IT programs are crucial to our nation's defense. As DoD budgets tighten, IT programs will need strategic communications to survive and serve our nation's defense. The bigger the program is, the bigger the target it becomes and the more crucial strategic communications becomes to the program's success.

Carroll explains: "There is fear among PMs today about communications. 'I don't want anyone to know about my program; we'll get in trouble if they do.' Or 'We can't afford communications.' There's fault in that reasoning," says Carroll. "Because if you don't communicate about the program, then no one knows about it, and no one cares about it. And before you know it, the program is about to be cut. The fact is, strategic communications is imperative to an IT program's success."

*Hillmer, a former DoD contracting and public affairs professional, consults on program communications. She is founder and CEO of CorpComm Inc., which helped program managers for the Standard Procurement System and Logistics Modernization Program successfully communicate to stakeholders their program goals and strategies between the years 2001-2005 and 2006-2009, respectively. The author welcomes comments and questions and can be reached at [lhillmer@corpcomm-inc.com](mailto:lhillmer@corpcomm-inc.com).*



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