



PROFESSIONALISM IN THE ACQUISITION CONTRACTING WORKFORCE: *HAVE WE GONE TOO FAR?*

John Krieger

To professionalize the acquisition contracting workforce, the Department of Defense (DoD) currently requires a bachelor's degree and 24 hours of business-related courses as a threshold requirement for the contracting occupational series. In recent years, recruiting and retaining needed personnel has become increasingly problematic. It may be time to reconsider the hiring criteria used to select candidates for the acquisition workforce. Considering experience to be of equal importance to education, as is done in the private sector, and considering candidates with a wider variety of educational and professional backgrounds may enhance the pool of talented candidates available for the acquisition contracting field.

Between 15 and 20 years ago, the Department of Defense (DoD), with the assistance of legislation, continued its efforts to professionalize the acquisition contracting workforce by requiring a bachelor's degree and 24 hours of business-related courses as a threshold requirement for the contracting occupational series. Over the last five years, there has been a bombardment of statistics concerning the "graying" of the acquisition workforce and the number of civil servants eligible for retirement.

Although the tidal wave of retirements that were forewarned in some of the more dire predictions have not appeared, many agencies are feeling the stresses associated with trying to recruit needed personnel, including positions going vacant for long periods of time and the need to contract for advisory and assistance services to meet

contracting requirements. These stresses may be due to decisions that were made long ago in an effort to professionalize the acquisition contracting workforce and to stem the practice in some organizations of selecting insufficiently qualified personnel for acquisition contracting positions (i.e., GS-1102 contract specialists).

Although the motives may have been well-intentioned, we are now living with the result of unintended adverse consequences. It is now time to reassess these past decisions, specifically degree and course requirements, and determine whether a mistake in approach has been made. By selecting the wrong solution to solve a problem, has a more significant problem been created? The BLUF (bottom-line-up-front): I believe we have made a mistake.

My opinion is somewhat biased on this question. My father, my two brothers, and I have well over a century of combined federal government service. My two brothers and I have all been contracting officers for the federal government. One brother, while a member of the Senior Executive Service (SES), was the director of contracts for what is now called the National Reconnaissance Office (NRO). I am currently the director of the Contracting Center of the Defense Acquisition University's Curriculum Development Support Center. If my brothers and I were to graduate from college today with the same bachelor's degrees we obtained in the 1960s and 1970s, none of us could come to work for DoD in contracting. The ways we entered the contracting field (one through his secondary occupational code in the U.S. Air Force, one from the PACE [Professional and Administrative Career Examination], and one from his placement in the top ten percent of his class, not in business) are all unavailable under the current statutory and rule structure.

I do not want anyone to misunderstand anything written in this article; I am a strong believer in formal education, including education in business. My second and third master's degrees are in contract and acquisition management from the Florida Institute of Technology and national security management from the National Defense University's Industrial College of the Armed Forces, respectively. However, I believe even more strongly that we should hire the best and brightest, no matter their degree areas, and then train them to the specific knowledge, skills, and abilities that they need to do federal government contracting, which is not directly what they would have learned in most business degree programs.

CURRENT SITUATION: THE GRAYING WORKFORCE

There is little doubt that we have a graying acquisition workforce. I note that every morning when I look in the mirror. In point of fact, the entire federal workforce is aging. Although this paper will specifically address GS-1102 personnel, particularly those in the DoD, many other occupational series have larger percentages of retirement eligibles (e.g., GS-340 program management, GS-343 management and program analysis, GS-511 auditing). Figure 1, from GAO-01-509 (2001), provides more detailed information, albeit somewhat dated.

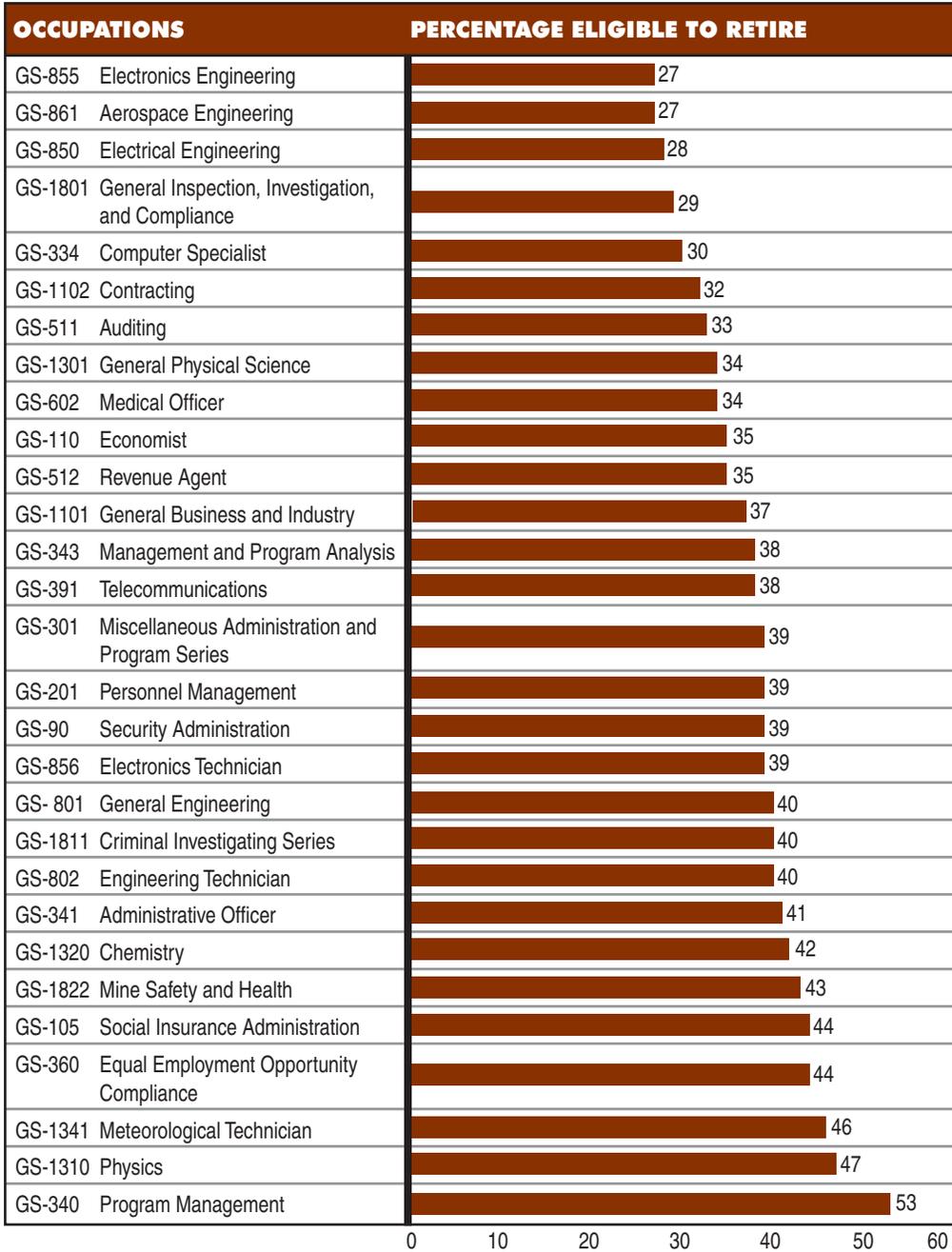


FIGURE 1. ESTIMATED PERCENTAGE OF SELECTED MISSION-CRITICAL OCCUPATION'S FISCAL YEAR 1998 WORKFORCE THAT WILL BE ELIGIBLE TO RETIRE AS OF THE END OF THE FISCAL YEAR 2006

In a recent article in the *Baltimore Sun* (2006), Melissa Harris updates this information. During his confirmation hearings to become the Administrator of the Office of Federal Procurement Policy, David Safavian also expressed his concerns about the aging acquisition workforce.

The wave of federal workers originally hired to spy on the Soviet Union, launch the Great Society, and regulate everyone from polluters to drug makers in the 1960s and 1970s is beginning to age out of the work force; an exodus that some officials say could drain expertise and diminish the quality of service.

The numbers point to what some call a *retirement tsunami*: 60 percent of federal workers are older than 45, and many could retire now if they wanted to, compared with 31 percent in the private sector, according to one think tank.

Experts say that the next five years could see a mass exit of experienced—and loyal—employees at a time when some younger workers see public service as a steppingstone to lucrative private-sector jobs (Harris, 2006).

During his Senate confirmation hearing less than a year ago, federal procurement chief David Safavian said shaping a workforce of top-notch acquisition professionals was one of his top priorities. Recruitment is especially critical because roughly 40 percent of senior contracting officers are eligible to retire in less than five years. “We seem to be losing more folks than we are bringing in right now, and that’s a grave concern,” he said. (Gruber, 2005).

The Federal Acquisition Institute (FAI) provides us with data specific to the GS-1102 occupational series: “Retirement eligibility in the Contracting Series (GS-1102) rose from 10 percent in FY 2002 to 12 percent in 2004. However, retirement eligibility for full retirement climbs to 30 percent in 2009 and 51 percent in 2014” (2005, p. vii).

The potential problem may be much worse than just trying to backfill for retirees. In commenting on this kind of information, particularly that presented by Mr. Safavian, Professor Steven L. Schooner (2005), Co-Director of the Government Procurement Law Program at the George Washington University Law School, commented:

Yet even that stark language undersold the extent of the problem. Safavian failed to acknowledge that (a) the acquisition workforce was insufficient before Sept. 11, 2001, and (b) although Government procurement spending has increased dramatically since then, neither the Office of Federal Procurement Policy (OFPP) nor Congress has expressed any interest in commencing a meaningful dialogue on

TABLE 1.
BACHELOR'S DEGREES EARNED BY FIELD: 1980 TO 2003
 (The new Classification of Instructional Programs was introduced in 2002–2003. Data for previous years has been reclassified where necessary to conform to the new classifications. Based on survey.)

FIELD OF STUDY	1980	1990	2000	2001	2002	2003
Total	929,427	1,051,344	1,237,875	1,244,171	1,291,900	1,348,503
Agriculture and Natural Resources	22,802	12,900	24,238	23,370	23,331	23,294
Architecture and Related Services	9,132	9,364	8,462	8,480	8,808	9,054
Area, Ethnic, Cultural, and Gender Studies	2,840	4,447	6,212	6,160	6,390	6,629
Biological and Biomedical Sciences	46,190	37,204	63,005	59,865	59,415	60,072
Business	186,264	248,568	256,070	262,515	278,217	293,545
Communication, Journalism, and Related Programs ¹	28,616	51,572	57,058	59,191	64,036	69,792
Computer and Information Sciences	11,154	27,347	37,788	44,142	50,265	57,439
Education	118,038	105,112	108,034	105,458	106,295	105,790
Engineering and Engineering Technologies	69,387	82,480	73,419	72,975	74,679	77,267
English Language and Literature/Letters	32,187	46,803	50,106	50,569	52,375	53,670
Family and Consumer Sciences/Human Sciences	18,411	13,514	16,321	16,421	16,938	18,166
Foreign Languages, Literatures, and Linguistics	12,480	13,133	15,886	16,128	16,258	16,901
Health Professions and Related Clinical Sciences	63,848	58,983	80,863	75,933	72,887	71,223
Legal Professions and Studies	683	1,632	1,969	1,991	2,003	2,466
Liberal Arts and Sciences, General Studies, and Humanities	23,196	27,985	36,104	37,962	39,333	40,221
Mathematics and Statistics	11,378	14,276	11,418	11,171	11,950	12,493
Multi/Interdisciplinary Studies	11,457	16,557	28,561	27,189	28,943	28,757
Parks, Recreation, Leisure and Fitness Studies	5,753	4,582	17,571	17,948	18,885	21,428
Philosophy and Religious Studies	7,069	7,034	8,535	8,717	9,473	10,344
Physical Sciences and Science Technologies	23,407	16,056	18,331	17,919	17,799	17,940
Psychology	42,093	53,952	74,194	73,645	76,775	78,613
Public Administration and Social Services	16,644	13,908	20,185	19,447	19,392	19,878
Security and Protective Services	15,015	15,354	24,877	25,211	25,536	26,189
Social Sciences and History	103,662	118,083	127,101	128,036	132,874	143,218
Theology and Religious Vocations	6,170	5,185	6,789	6,945	7,762	7,926
Transportation and Materials Moving	213	2,387	3,395	3,748	4,020	4,567
Visual and Performing Arts	40,892	39,934	58,791	61,148	66,773	71,474
Other and Unclassified	436	2,992	2,592	887	388	147

¹ Includes technologies
 Source: U.S. National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Educational Statistics*, annual; and unpublished data.

TABLE 2.
COLLEGE FRESHMEN—SUMMARY CHARACTERISTICS: 1970 TO 2004
 (In percent, except as indicated [12.8 represents \$12,800]. As of fall
 for first-time full-time freshmen in 4-year colleges and universities.
 Based on sample survey and subject to sampling error; see source.)

CHARACTERISTIC	1970	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2002	2003	2004
Probable field of study:									
Arts and Humanities	(n/a)	10.5	10.1	10.5	11.2	12.1	12.6	12.3	12.0
Biological Sciences	(n/a)	4.5	4.5	4.9	8.3	6.6	7.2	7.3	7.7
Business	(n/a)	21.2	24.6	21.1	15.4	16.7	16.2	15.9	16.0
Education	(n/a)	8.4	6.9	10.3	10.1	11.0	10.6	10.1	9.6
Engineering	(n/a)	11.2	11.0	9.7	8.1	8.7	9.5	9.3	9.6
Physical Science	(n/a)	3.2	3.2	2.8	3.1	2.6	2.7	2.7	3.0
Social Science	(n/a)	8.2	9.4	11.0	9.9	10.0	10.4	10.5	10.3
Professional	(n/a)	15.5	13.1	13.0	16.5	11.6	12.3	14.3	15.1
Technical	(n/a)	3.1	2.4	1.1	1.2	2.1	1.4	1.5	1.5
Data Processing/ Computer Programming	(n/a)	1.7	1.7	0.7	0.8	1.5	0.9	0.7	0.6
Other ¹	(n/a)	14.0	15.1	15.8	16.0	17.9	16.9	16.0	15.0
Communications	(n/a)	2.4	2.8	2.9	1.8	2.7	2.5	2.4	1.9
Computer Science	(n/a)	2.6	2.4	1.7	2.2	3.7	2.2	1.7	1.4
(n/a) – Not available									
¹ Includes other fields, not shown separately									
Source: The Higher Education Research Institute, University of California, Los Angeles, CA. <i>The American Freshman: National Norms</i> , annual.									

this problem. Thus, despite a clear need for additional resources, Safavian, like many of his predecessors at OFPP, steadfastly refuses to call for increasing the size of the acquisition workforce.

ASSESSING THE CANDIDATE POOL

Given this huge potential for retirements and potential need for even more contracting personnel, we must now look at the sources for those candidates. This becomes particularly important if we assume that the federal government will want to continue to maintain an organic capability for performing acquisition contracting, notwithstanding that there will probably be a need to supplement that organic capability with contractor support. Because of the inherently governmental functions associated with the acquisition contracting process, this should be a safe assumption.

The FAI (2005) reports that in both 2003 and 2004, the last years for which statistics are available currently, about twice the number of contracting occupational

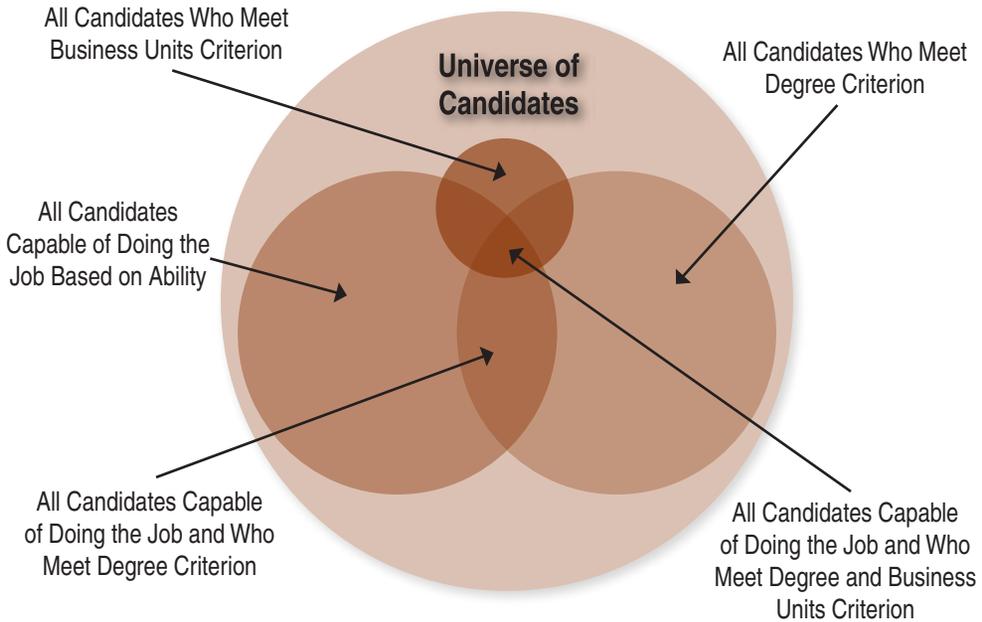


FIGURE 2. THE DIMINISHING POOL OF HIRABLE CANDIDATES

series hires came from internal hires and employees changing agencies than came from external hires. This “robbing Peter to pay Paul” approach to recruitment is not a long-term solution, and it may only exacerbate problems in the long run by obscuring the true significance of the problem. The only viable long-term solution to developing and maintaining an organic acquisition contracting workforce is through external hires.

Let’s look at the potential pool of future candidates. For DoD, that means college graduates with a minimum of a bachelor’s degree and at least 24 hours in business or business-related courses. The preceding two tables from the *Statistical Abstract of the United States* (2006) delineate that future pool. Recognize, however, that the DoD candidate pool (i.e., college graduates with a minimum of a bachelor’s degree and at least 24 hours in business or business-related courses) is not necessarily reflective of those potential candidates that are actually capable of performing the job based on ability. Additionally, recognize that the DoD candidate pool contains people who meet the two criteria, but are not capable of performing the job based on ability.

Although Table 1 shows the absolute number of business graduates has been growing, in Table 2, it is important to note the decline of the percentage of college freshmen opting for business degrees, a decline of five percentage points over the last 25 years.

As a result of the narrow criteria used, the DoD has a limited pool of candidates from which to select. Figure 2 reflects a number of overlapping and intersecting

pools, representing the Universe of Candidates, All Candidates Capable of Doing the Job Based on Ability, All Candidates Who Meet Degree Criterion, All Candidates Who Meet Business Units Criterion, All Candidates Capable of Doing the Job and Who Meet Degree Criterion, and, finally, All Candidates Capable of Doing the Job and Who Meet Degree and Business Units Criteria. Although the size of the circles is notional and strictly arbitrary, the important fact to remember is that the pool of candidates from which DoD may select contracting personnel becomes very limited in comparison to the total number of candidates that may be able to do the job effectively and efficiently.

LIMITING DIVERSITY

Another unintended adverse consequence of limiting the pool by establishing degree and course requirements is the narrowing of diversity in the acquisition contracting workforce. Although we may have a tendency to think of diversity in terms such as age, disability, economics, gender, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation, diversity also includes other areas, such as education. In discussing diversity, R. McInnes (2006) writes:

As we enter the 21st century, workforce diversity has become an essential business concern. In the so-called information age, the greatest assets of most companies are now on two feet (or a set of wheels). Undeniably, there is a talent war raging. No company can afford to unnecessarily restrict its ability to attract and retain the very best employees available.

Generally speaking, the term *Workforce Diversity* refers to policies and practices that seek to include people within a workforce who are considered to be, in some way, different from those in the prevailing constituency.

McInnes (2000) continues:

Tumultuous change is the norm in the business climate of the 21st century. Companies that prosper have the capacity to effectively solve problems, rapidly adapt to new situations, readily identify new opportunities and quickly capitalize on them. This capacity can be measured by the range of talent, experience, knowledge, insight, and imagination available in their workforces. In recruiting employees, successful companies recognize conformity to the status quo as a distinct disadvantage. In addition to their job-specific abilities, employees are increasingly valued for the unique qualities and perspectives that they can also bring to the table.

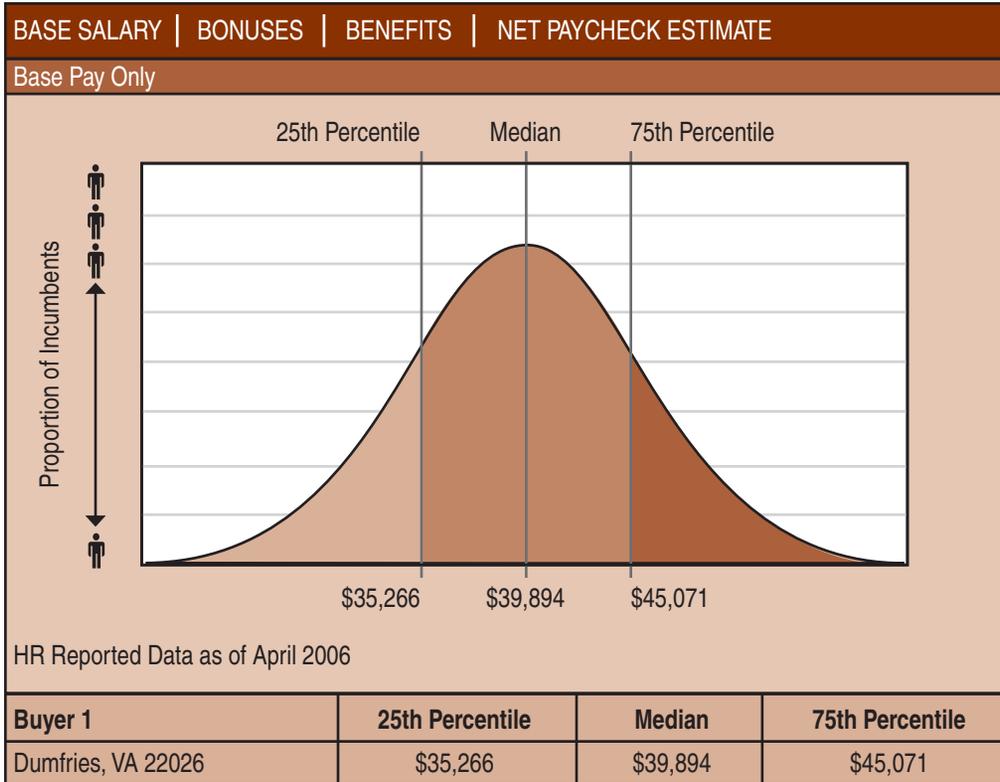


FIGURE 3. AVERAGE INCOME INFORMATION FOR A NORTHERN VIRGINIA RESIDENT

What does this mean for DoD? McInnes’s description echoes the needs that we have in DoD’s acquisition contracting workforce. Psychologist Abraham Maslow (1966) wrote, “If the only tool you have is a hammer, it is tempting to treat everything as if it were a nail.” Over time, we are reducing and limiting the intellectual diversity of the DoD acquisition contracting workforce. This is of critical concern at a time when we are asking our workforce to be more flexible, innovative, and creative. In years past, we would have leveraged the diverse thinking and analytical skills and tools of people with various backgrounds (e.g., business, history, communication, political science, chemistry, and theology¹). In the future, we will bring the thinking and analytical skills and tools of a less diverse group: business, business, business, and business.

LAGGING COMPENSATION

Yet another unintended adverse consequence is that it is more difficult to compete for qualified candidates. In addition to fishing in a smaller pool for candidates,

some of the bait being used by the federal government does not compare well to the lures being used in the private sector. We will discuss one, salary, although there are certainly other inducements for joining federal service (e.g., public service).

The ability of the federal government to compete with the private sector is hampered by the low initial salaries offered. Unfortunately, no additional money for salaries, bonuses, or pay differential came with the higher entry requirements into the contracting occupational series. Figure 3, from *Salary.com* (2006), provides salary information for a Buyer I in the Northern Virginia area. According to the *Statistical Abstract of the United States* (2004),

The average beginning salaries for accounting and business administration/management graduates in 2003 were \$36,012 and \$40,647, respectively. By comparison, the 2005 Federal General Schedule salaries for entry level personnel at the GS-5 and GS-7 levels are \$24,677 and \$30,567, respectively.

CRITICALITY OF DEGREE AND BUSINESS UNITS

This article has said a good deal about the unintended adverse impacts of requiring a bachelor's degree and 24 units of business-related courses. However, an assessment is necessary to see whether there may be a critical importance to these requirements that outweighs the unintended adverse impacts. In his testimony before the Acquisition Advisory Panel, Robert M. Cooper (2005) stated:

Career Entry Standards should be reviewed. The loss of the Federal Service Entrance Examination (FSEE) and subsequent PACE exams is a handicap in the hiring process. Intern Programs should be examined for adequacy, currency, and potential expansion. Most importantly, the 24 hours of business course requirements should be revisited. Although a background in business education is helpful, in itself it is not a strong indicator of the full range of capacities required to meet the challenges of risk management and decision making called for in the expanded acquisition role of Business Manager imposed by recent Reform.

Analytical skill and ability to clearly articulate and execute resulting weighed risks must be developed, identified, and verified before the complex and demanding responsibilities of acquisition personnel against the scope and pace of their environment will be reliably, efficiently, and effectively performed. Demonstrated education/training/performance in case study, logical analysis, and English composition are equally as important as finance, accounting, and logistics for professional level performance of acquisition duties.

Interestingly enough, his words echo both the theme of this article and the results of the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board's (MSPB) 1992 report to the President and the Congress, *Workforce Quality and Federal Procurement: An Assessment*. The report dealt with many issues, including trying to determine whether there were indicators that could be used to determine success on the job as a contract specialist. During the MSPB study, senior procurement officials provided the researchers with suggestions for improving the quality of the contracting workforce, including limiting hiring for entry-level positions in the GS-1102 series to college graduates or persons who have completed at least 24 hours of college courses in related subjects (p. 18). This reflects the current situation in DoD.

The MSPB researchers attempted to isolate the relative importance of a college degree and business-related courses. In relation to the business courses, the MSPB found (1992):

An analysis of the relationship between the completion of these courses and work performance revealed that there is only a minimal relationship between the number of these courses the person has completed and the various assessments of his or her performance. In a way this finding is not surprising. According to supervisors responding to our survey, the performance of contract specialists often depends upon *their ability to think analytically and write clearly*. Competence in these abilities may be demonstrated in a variety of courses, from science to English, and not just in those that would appear to be directly related to procurement work (pp. 18–19).

In point of fact, the MSPB researchers found that the correlation to contracting training courses indicated a stronger relationship to job success:

Presumably, the more training completed the better prepared employees should be to perform their jobs well. In fact, analysis using the various ratings of performance that were discussed earlier in this study showed that there was indeed a statistically significant relationship between the number of training courses completed and each of the ratings of performance (pp. 19–20).

In relation to the college degree, the MSPB researchers did find a correlation. However, they noted a significant caveat regarding whether a college degree requirement should be established:

The single best [quality] indicator is the education level of the workforce. In general, the more education completed by a worker the higher the quality of his or her work. This is not to say, however, that a person must possess a college degree in order to be a high-

TABLE 3.
AVERAGE PERFORMANCE RATINGS AND SOURCE OF ENTRY INTO THE
GS-1102 SERIES

SOURCE	Supervisory Rating (Abilities)	Supervisory Rating (Tasks)	Annual Performance Rating	Research Rating	Self-Rating (Abilities)	Self-Rating (Tasks)
Intern Program	3.19	3.76	4.11	3.88	3.37	3.98
PACE/FSEE	3.22	3.85	4.14	3.90	3.38	3.99
Cooperative Program	3.16	3.69	4.06	3.88	3.36	3.89
Schedule B	3.14	3.68	4.10	3.76	3.32	3.86
Work Study	2.96	3.35	4.16	3.8	3.10	3.70
Other Special Program	3.09	3.60	4.03	3.75	3.26	3.76
No Special Program	3.08	3.65	4.09	3.81	3.27	3.80
AVERAGE	3.12	3.69	4.10	3.82	3.30	3.85

quality contract specialist. The relationship between education and performance is not large enough to indicate that possession of a college degree should be a minimum qualification for admission to the field (p. 49).

Consistent with Mr. Cooper's testimony to the Acquisition Advisory Panel, the MSPB research would appear to indicate that the loss of the PACE and FSEE exams eliminated a good indicator of job performance. As shown in Table 3, PACE/FSEE was the leading source for career field entrants across five of the six indicators used, and it was the second highest in the only category it was not first (MSPB, 1992, p. 28).

PRIVATE SECTOR APPROACH

The DoD and the civilian agencies are constantly being told they should run our acquisition business more like the private sector. So, what does private industry do? Are bachelor's degrees and 24 hours of business-related courses the threshold requirement for business?

A look at *Salary.com* is helpful. The hiring criteria results of three searches for contractor-type jobs in the private sector were: Buyer I—May require a bachelor's degree; Buyer II—May require a bachelor's degree; and, Buyer III—May require a bachelor's degree. Additional searches for positions in contracts, contract administration, subcontracts, and price analysis sometimes contained a degree requirement, but in many cases this was only listed as a preference.

Anecdotally, this author discussed hiring criteria with a number of sources for background purposes off-the-record, including a source from one of DoD's top 10

contractors. Generally, experience, including diversity of experience, appeared to be the most significant criteria, with a degree being a *want*, not a *must*. All things being equal, a degree would be preferred. However, even when there was a desire for a degree, that desire would be trumped by experience. Rarely were a degree and 24 hours of business-related courses required.

Robert C. Marshall, Chairman, Department of Economics, Pennsylvania State University, in his testimony before the Acquisition Advisory Panel (2005), echoed the above when he was asked a follow-up question by one of the panelists. The following interchange occurred:

MR. SCHWARTZ: And I have the greatest respect for our wonderful Federal procurement work force, but I feel that they're overmatched. We're taking folks in some cases with high school degrees and some on the job training, many other cases with college degrees, and they're trying to do what the MacKenzie guys are doing, and it seems to me that that's not a formula for success. I wonder if you have any thoughts about that.

MR. MARSHALL: Well, some of the most impressive people I've talked to in private industry, just to add another category to the list you've mentioned are people who—running top level procurement people in private companies came up through a community college system and have just, you know, ground out their expertise through running procurements and understanding procurements and understanding the vendor community in that market. I mean, they have just made deep investments to understand what's going on to deliver best surplus to their company.

The other idea to keep in mind is that the private sector emphasizes “Hire for Attitude, Train for Skill.” DoD should do the same. This is important, as the time spent in formal and on-the-job training of a member of the acquisition contracting workforce is significantly more than in 24 units of business courses.

CONCLUSION

The BLUF discussed previously is the conclusion of this article. Although it may go against conventional wisdom, the data and analysis indicate that we need to reassess past decisions associated with professionalizing the acquisition contracting workforce. Those decisions were well motivated, but required additional analysis. Standards have been established that have not achieved what they were intended to do and have created unintentional adverse consequences. There are many examples general and flag officers and SESs, and of men and women in the ranks of leadership

and senior management, who would not meet the current criteria to believe that they are just exceptions to the rule. The rules must be revisited.

Specifically, DoD should seek to, at a minimum, eliminate the business-related course requirements, and possibly eliminate the bachelor's degree requirement as thresholds for entry into the GS-1102 occupational series. The DoD approach should become that in addition to the training currently provided, there is also an emphasis on seeking a business degree in addition to the education that a candidate has already received as part of the early development of the new contract specialist or contract administrator.

Additionally, an examination conceptually similar to the PACE must be developed. Although the PACE was eliminated because of biases that effected diversity in the workforce, the MSPB study demonstrated that it was the best indicator of job performance of any of the entry sources studied.



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ENDNOTE

1. For those who may be mentally scoffing at the inclusion of theology, don't forget that the scientific method used for complex problem solving came from a Franciscan friar.