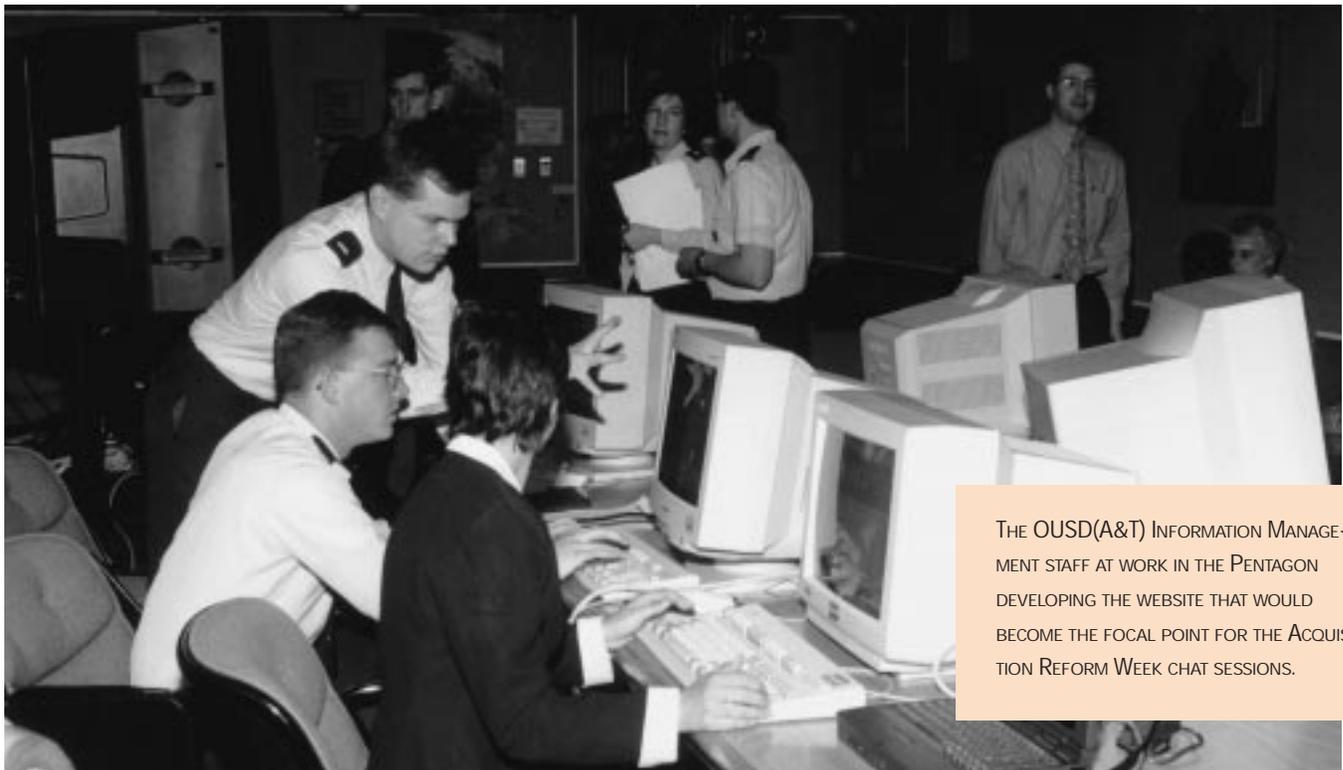


Kaminski Conducts Acquisition Reform Week Online Chat Sessions

A Better Way for Practitioners in the Field to Communicate with Senior Decision Makers

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THE OUSD(A&T) INFORMATION MANAGEMENT STAFF AT WORK IN THE PENTAGON DEVELOPING THE WEBSITE THAT WOULD BECOME THE FOCAL POINT FOR THE ACQUISITION REFORM WEEK CHAT SESSIONS.

Acquisition Reform Week posed several challenges for senior leaders of the Office of the Secretary of Defense staff. Foremost among these challenges was how to reach a vast and geographically diverse acquisition workforce without investing large amounts of time and money in travel. Given that the bulk of the acquisition community is able to connect to the Internet, one obvious solution to this problem was to leverage the global

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communications capability provided by this medium.

Acquisition Reform in Action

The decision to conduct a series of online chat sessions open to all members of the acquisition community was made roughly five weeks prior to the beginning of Acquisition Reform Week. Actual development and testing of the software that made the online chat sessions possible began approximately three weeks prior to the beginning of Acquisition Reform Week. Perhaps what is most notable about the development and implementation of this project is that, prior to the cultural change fos-

tered by acquisition reform, an effort like this would not have been possible. More simply stated, this project was not just *about* acquisition reform, it was acquisition reform *in action*.

Without attempting to sound grandiose, the Acquisition Reform Week chat sessions ushered in a new means of communication for the Department. Extending the real-time chat capability will help the Department more fully realize several key acquisition reform goals, including—

- reducing cycle time;
- improving accessibility;

- reducing workload; and
- saving money.

On a somewhat larger scale, real-time communication over the Internet will help flatten organizational hierarchies and allow for more collaboration among members of the acquisition community.

There are three questions that most people ask when they learn that senior Department of Defense officials conducted a series of chat sessions over the Internet for Acquisition Reform Week. First, how were these sessions made possible? Second, how did the sessions actually go? And finally, are there going to be more online sessions in the future?

What Made the Sessions Possible—Technology and Attitude

In order to conduct a chat session over the Internet, we needed to purchase a commercial-off-the-shelf software package that could be rapidly installed and tested. Once tasked, the Information Management staff within the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Acquisition and Technology), set out to find such a solution. After examining several alternatives, including a free solution that used the Java programming language, the decision was made to purchase a solution from *iChat*TM—a small, high-technology start-up firm in Austin, Texas, which also happens to be on the cutting edge of Internet-based chat software. With the chat software in hand, the OUSD(A&T) Information Management staff began to develop the website that would become the focal point for the Acquisition Reform Week chat sessions.

In addition to commercially developed, cutting-edge technology, attitude was also an important ingredient in making the Acquisition Reform Week chat sessions happen. Senior leaders within OUSD(A&T) “walked the walk” with respect to trust, empowerment, and risktaking. As evidence of this, a GS-12 and two Air

Force first lieutenants were given primary responsibility for the development and implementation of the project. Senior managers within OUSD(A&T) provided clear direction and guidance to keep the project on track and mitigate risk as much as possible.

How the Sessions Went—Real Time Dialogue with the Field

A total of 12 senior DoD leaders participated in the chat sessions. Most notable among the participants was the USD(A&T), Dr. Paul Kaminski. As an example of the appetite that members of the acquisition community have for this type of communication, the number of people attempting to participate in Dr. Kaminski’s chat session was overwhelming. At *any one time* that Dr. Kaminski was “on the air,” anywhere between 500 and 800 people were attempting to connect and dialogue with the Under Secretary. This is clear evidence that practitioners in the field are extremely interested in communicating with senior decision makers.

The chat sessions were a primary vehicle for broadening the reach of Acquisition Reform Week. In addition to senior members of the USD(A&T) staff, senior members from the financial management, requirements generation, operational test and evaluation, and legislative affairs communities hosted chat sessions during the week. What these 12 chat sessions amounted to was an opportunity for unprecedented direct access to the policy makers who are helping shape the Department’s acquisition reform initiatives.

Each chat session lasted for one hour and centered around a specific subject area. For example, John Phillips, the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (Logistics) hosted a session on Reengineering Logistics Business Practices. While the topics helped to focus the discussion during each chat session, members of the acquisition community were encouraged to ask about whatever was on their mind. Again, using

Phillips’ chat session as an example, he was queried about everything from privatization of depots to the condition of military housing.

In planning for the chat sessions, the OUSD(A&T) staff originally envisioned two virtual rooms. One room would be moderated (meaning that the questions would be screened) and thus used exclusively for formal question and answer. A second virtual room would be a place where participants could chat freely. After the initial chat session on March 17, hosted by Eleanor Spector, Director, Defense Procurement, members of the acquisition community quickly expressed a desire to *directly* interact with the host senior leader. As a result, the remaining chat sessions were held with no buffer between host and participant. The dialogue sometimes became a little tricky to follow, but both the hosts and the participants relished the opportunity to engage each other directly.

A complete transcript of each chat session is available on the OUSD(A&T) Website:

<http://www.acq.osd.mil/interact>

More Online Sessions—The Future

Positive response from both members of the acquisition community in the field and senior leaders within OUSD(A&T) will likely lead to more online chat sessions and an expansion of this capability. Using the Internet to link senior leaders with a vast and geographically diverse workforce fosters all three of the ways we communicate in the Department—top-down, bottom-up, and horizontally (peer to peer).

Members of the OUSD(A&T) staff are in the process of drafting a white paper on the strategic use of communications technology. This plan aims to build on the success of the Acquisition Reform Week chat sessions and to move toward multimedia solutions for communicating both intra-departmentally and extra-departmentally.