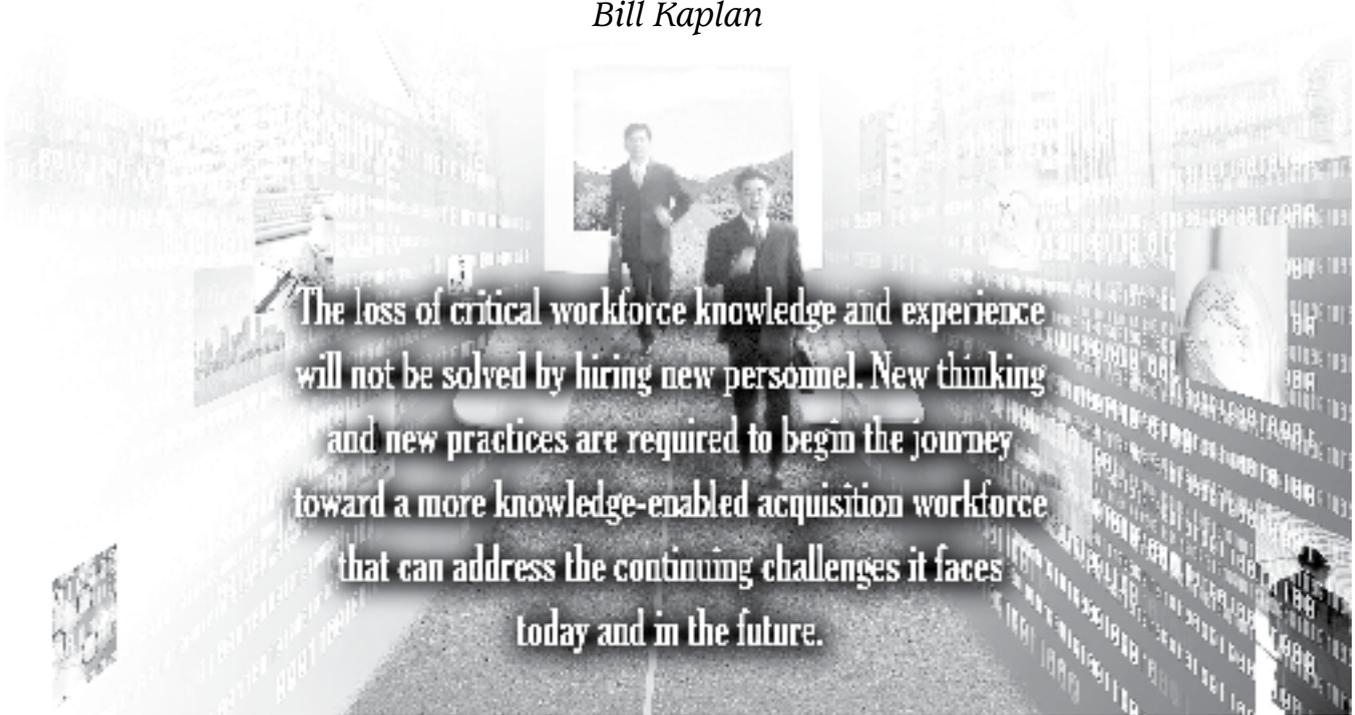


Leveraging Our Critical Acquisition Knowledge

Addressing the Challenges of Workforce Attrition and Knowledge Loss

Bill Kaplan



The loss of critical workforce knowledge and experience will not be solved by hiring new personnel. New thinking and new practices are required to begin the journey toward a more knowledge-enabled acquisition workforce that can address the continuing challenges it faces today and in the future.

Acquisition organizations across the government are facing imminent mission and performance challenges resulting from an anticipated and unprecedented loss of their knowledgeable and experienced acquisition professionals, and this problem must be addressed now. There is a lack of a substantial, knowledgeable pool of successors to replace them. The situation is serious.

Let's examine both why this challenge is occurring and ways to ensure that relevant and critical acquisition knowledge is not only retained, but is transferred to the next generation of acquisition professionals.

Acquisition Knowledge Loss

Why are we facing the challenge of critical acquisition knowledge loss? A summary answer is there is no established process within the federal acquisition community to capture, adapt, and transfer for reuse—on a consistent or disciplined basis—the workforce's relevant knowledge,

information, and most important, experience and insight. There are several factors contributing not only to the loss of knowledge but also to the challenge of mitigating this loss:

- The increasing size and complexity of the acquisition workload
- The widely recognized decline in the number of professionals in the acquisition workforce
- The lack of organizations with a disciplined knowledge capture-and-reuse framework that is an integral part of the acquisition or business process.

Understanding the Problem

Effectively addressing this challenge, especially within the context of an ever-evolving acquisition workforce that is tasked to deliver increasingly complex and time-sensitive agency solutions, requires understanding two underlying concepts. Firstly, the federal acquisition community is an experienced-based profession in which the skills and insight necessary for success are learned primarily through

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Figure 1. Desired Workforce/Knowledge Relationship



hands-on efforts and through mentorships. Therefore, providing professionals with a combination of technology, training, and education alone will not suffice. There must be a deliberate and structured means to capture and transfer the requisite know-how and know-why that comprise the experiential side of this multidimensional profession. Secondly, acquisition experience and insight are heavily weighted in the senior levels and not the middle or junior levels of the workforce, who are the next generation of acquisition leaders and innovators.

The desired proportion of acquisition experience and insight is conceptualized in Figure 1. However, over the past 30 years, the federal acquisition workforce has evolved so that a greater number of senior-level professionals rather than mid- and junior-level professionals have the greater share of knowledge and experience. This is mostly due to the sheer size of the senior pool relative to the rest of the workforce. This current proportion, represented in Figure 2, is a distortion from the ideal. The consequence is that knowledge can rapidly disappear when large numbers of the senior workforce depart within a fairly short time period. Re-establishing the desired relationship, as shown in Figure 3, requires that we transfer knowledge and insight from the soon-to-be-departing senior-level personnel to mid- and junior-level personnel.

Actions to Take Now

While the distribution of the federal acquisition workforce cannot be reshaped overnight, there are actions that can be taken to correct the imbalance. These actions require us to think differently about how knowledge and experience must be leveraged for success.

At the Agency Level

- Create a common approach for knowledge capture and reuse that embeds a collaborative approach to knowledge sharing within a profession.
- Identify critical and relevant knowledge areas; identify the mid- and junior-level personnel who will be trained to capture this knowledge; and begin to trans-

fer the necessary knowledge, experience, and insight to where it's needed.

- Establish mentorship and internship opportunities for the next generation of federal acquisition professionals.
- Establish a continuing dialogue that will keep retired acquisition professionals involved, thus retaining their expertise.
- Use carefully chosen pilot projects to demonstrate successes. Enterprise-wide or system-wide change rarely succeeds without proof and without an answer to the "what's in it for me?" question.
- Develop an agency acquisition capture, adapt, transfer, and reuse framework for knowledge transfer that will deliver measurable results that are tied to mission outcomes.

At the Government-Wide Level

- Create a dialogue between the various levels of the federal acquisition workforce and those that support it (e.g., industry and academia) so that all can explore ways to enable critical knowledge to surface for use at every level.
- Identify the practical and critical challenges and needs of the next generation federal acquisition professional, and capture for reuse the current workforce's experiential knowledge in those critical subject areas.
- Develop an archive of critical knowledge that can be used in all subject areas.
- Obtain broad stakeholder buy-in and support by identifying and addressing some of the most difficult problems facing the federal acquisition leadership over the next three to five years.

Successful Knowledge-Sharing Organizations

Organizations that can move knowledge effectively across the organization, thus improving their performance, share the following attributes:

- They have created a framework for sharing experience and insight that enables people at all levels in their organization to improve their performance.
- They recognize and understand that helping people and teams to learn before, during, and after the work they do is the single most effective way to improve performance in the short term and establish the value of capturing, adapting, and transferring knowledge in the long term.
- They ensure experience and learning is captured, stored, and made accessible in a format designed to meet the needs of the reuser of the knowledge.
- They have defined responsibilities for maintaining all knowledge processes and activities.
- They maintain facilitated networks or communities of practice through active participation within the organization in all areas that drive organizational performance.

Figure 2. Actual Workforce/Knowledge Relationship



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Developing Knowledge Frameworks

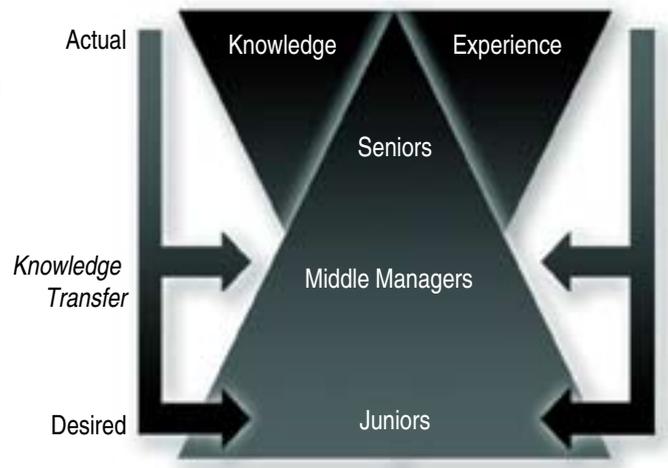
To effectively develop and implement a successful knowledge framework, an organization must understand the following key concepts:

- Senior leadership needs to advocate the strategy and subsequent efforts to develop a framework that transcends the organization.
- Transformational change requires experienced change agents willing to make the journey.
- Delivering specific, tangible, business-driven performance improvements must be a goal.
- The most difficult task lies in maintaining and sustaining the strategy and framework being executed, not just establishing it.
- Embedding and integrating a simple set of core capture, transfer, and reuse practices that are easily understood, supported, and performed on the job is necessary to embed a sustainable way of working.
- Existing investment in the organization’s technology base should be leveraged.

With the right leadership and strategy, it doesn’t have to take a long time to do all this, but organizations need to start now. The first step is to recognize the value of long-term knowledge capture and sharing. Start with the recognition that it is too late to wait until people have announced their retirement, transfer, or promotion to begin to capture their relevant knowledge and experience. Ideally, capturing knowledge so it can be reused must begin as soon as people enter the workforce, and it must become part of an ongoing discipline within the organization’s operational and business processes. The value of sharing knowledge must be endorsed and encouraged by leadership, and it must also be ingrained as part of an organization’s day-to-day processes and long-term culture.

The second step is to evaluate how you currently capture what you know and reuse it. Before you can make plans to develop or improve a knowledge framework, answer the following questions:

Figure 3. Moving From Actual to Desired



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- What is critical knowledge, and where does it reside within or outside our acquisition workforce?
- What information has been captured and made available?
- Does the workforce know where to find the necessary information that will help with current and future projects?
- What is being done to ensure the critical knowledge possessed by skilled and experienced acquisition professionals can be transferred to the next generation?
- What is being done to engage the workforce and those they support to ensure workers share critical information that should be transferred?
- What is being done to minimize the impact of this knowledge loss, knowing that it normally takes a long time to gain and mature this experience?

If the answer to some of these questions is “little” or “nothing” or “I don’t know,” then the development of an action plan is essential.

The third step is to choose a place to start developing a knowledge framework. After evaluating your current framework, pick two or three of the most critical areas that you must address now—from high-level strategic issues to tactical-level, get-it-done issues. The key to capturing and reusing knowledge lies in establishing and implementing a knowledge-transfer framework that makes performing and learning part of the way your organization operates. Know that the real value in transferring knowledge, especially the knowledge you should focus on, lies in the experiential knowledge—the lessons learned that often reside only in individuals’ heads.

Realistic Expectations

When developing a knowledge framework, consideration must be given to ensuring the most relevant and critical knowledge and experience is transferred and to deciding

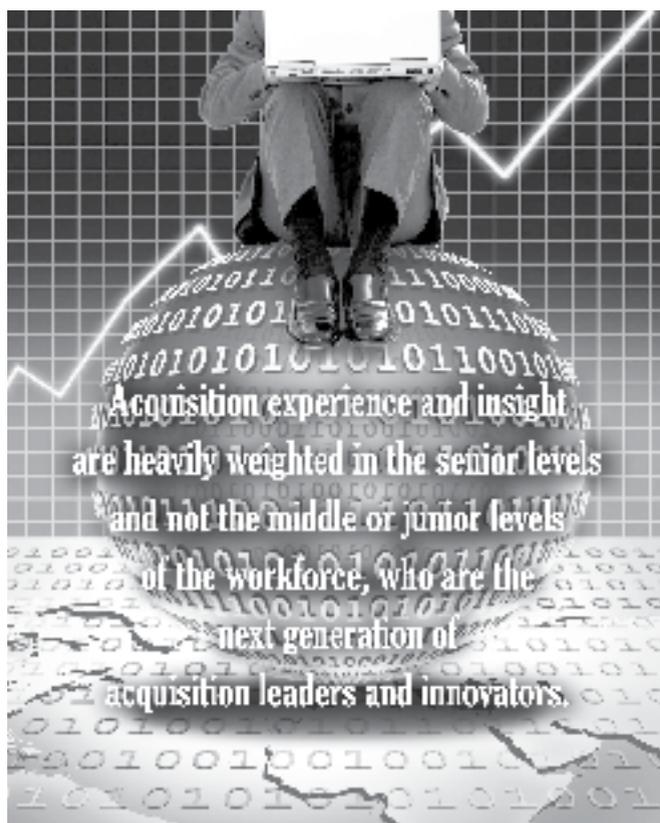
exactly what this knowledge and experience constitutes. In doing so, be realistic. You cannot possibly capture or create an encyclopedia of everything everybody knows. Thus, it is critical to focus knowledge collection and transfer efforts on the knowledge that is most valuable to the continuity and mission of the organization.

Consider also that the framework should focus on the concept of connection, collection, and collaboration. It is critical to connect people then nurture the culture that will get them talking and sharing across the workforce.

And consider that technology is not always the answer. Technology and information management alone cannot address the challenges described for two reasons. Firstly, individuals typically just want to get their work done, and they may not go through the extra steps required to learn how to use what is provided as technology or tools. Secondly, there must be a well-thought-out process for defining, capturing, and reusing the relevant knowledge in the organization that allows efficient and effective execution of acquisition processes.

Fast-Learning Processes

How can we enable people and teams to learn before, during, and after their work as part of the way they operate, and how can we make this learning accessible to others? Organizations that can successfully move knowledge enterprise-wide to improve their performance apply very effective, facilitated processes—or fast-learning processes—fat each of these stages of work.



Learning before doing is supported through the peer-assist process, which targets a specific business or operational challenge, imports knowledge from peers outside the team, identifies new approaches and lines of inquiry, and promotes sharing of learning with each other through established networks or communities.

Learning while doing is supported through the action-review process. This is a team-focused tool that allows people to learn in the moment so that new learning can be immediately applied to the process or activity—maybe even the same day. Evolved from the U.S. Army’s process for after-action reviews, it asks four questions: What was supposed to happen? What actually happened? If different, why are they different? What can we learn from this and do right now?

Learning after doing is supported through the retrospect process, a facilitated process that takes place immediately after a team completes a major project/process or phase of activity. This process of inquiry—not inquisition—seeks to understand what was learned that can be applied by other teams in the future, based on the experience of the previous team. It makes learning conscious and explicit and provides closure for the performing team.

The experience and learning should be archived after each project or event in a Web-based knowledge repository that is easily accessible, provides information in real time, and meets the needs of the reuser of the knowledge. Communities of practice for a specific subject matter often develop as a result of these fast-learning processes. The collaboration resulting from a context-specific community or network creates an environment that allows professionals to grow, allowing real learning to occur. It can institutionalize critical knowledge in hours and days instead of years.

Connect, Collect, and Collaborate

The loss of critical workforce knowledge and experience will not be solved by hiring new personnel. New thinking and new practices are required to begin the journey toward a more knowledge-enabled acquisition workforce that can address the continuing challenges it faces today and in the future. Techniques such as peer assists and retrospects have evolved among knowledge management practitioners to create continual learning and sharing environments that get to the core of the know-how and know-why of what they do. To stay ahead of this change, you have to be able to operate faster than change itself. You need to connect, collect, and collaborate, and you need to start now.

The author welcomes comments and questions and can be contacted at Bill.Kaplan@acqsolinc.com.