

Maximize Your Results



with Cross-Training

BY JOHN PETERSON

Discover how DAWIA and FAC-C certified contracting professionals can make the most of their continuing education requirements.



Working for the U.S. government requires a great deal of commitment. There's commitment to your country, commitment to the rule of law, commitment to the American taxpayer and, of course, commitment to...training?

Well, it's not the most glamorous thing on the list, but—at least practically speaking—your commitment to training needs to be just as strong. Consider this: what other organization, aside from maybe a professional sports team, requires its people to spend as much time honing skills as the government? From your very first day at an agency, professional development is not only encouraged—it is often required.

For civilian personnel to become warranted, there is the Federal Acquisition Certification in Contracting (FAC-C). For our colleagues at the Department of Defense (DOD), there's the Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act (DAWIA). As you know, neither of these represents a small feat by any means; receiving Level 3 Certification is likely to take several years of hard work and training. That's like getting a bachelor's degree all over again.

Maintaining Your Certification

Obtaining your certification is just the tip of the training iceberg. Once you reach your career certification level, you're faced with the day-to-day challenges of maintaining that certification. This requires government professionals to complete 80 hours of professional improvement training every two years. Break that down over the course of an additional 25-year career post certification and you're talking about 1,000 hours of hard work.

In the face of such a commitment of time and effort, government contracting personnel shouldn't simply be asking themselves how they can *fill* those hours. They should be asking how they can *maximize* those hours. That's because maintaining your certification gives you the unique opportunity to better yourself by expanding your knowledge and skills into previously uncharted territory. With some good training decisions, you can make yourself a more complete, more effective contracting professional.

And, for those of us who enjoy a good two-for-the-price-of-one deal, you can also apply these training hours to meet the maintenance requirements for National Contract Management Association (NCMA) certificates as well. NCMA currently offers three valuable certifications: Certified Federal Contracts Manager (CFCM), Certified Commercial Contracts Manager (CCCM) and Certified Professional Contracts Manager (CPCM).

Cross-Training

Once a contracting professional has earned certification, it's pretty safe to assume that he or she has spent a great deal of time honing the skills that are most closely related to his or her area of expertise. For example, someone involved in construction will have likely exhausted the available allotment of courses covering construction contracting or design-build fundamentals while addressing the electives requirements at the various certification levels. Therefore, in order to get the most out of the required maintenance training, agency career managers should encourage contract professionals to look beyond their area of expertise and take on a more cross-functional training strategy—or “cross-training.”

The case for contracting professionals needing a diverse set of skills is mounting—and it has been for years. The days of working in silos—both in the government and the private sector—are simply over. We are now living and working in the age of the integrated team, which requires team members to think beyond their own work stations and job functions. The result: increased efficiency and effectiveness while working for the government, and more opportunities for success after your government service is complete. And, perhaps the most important result of all—increased customer satisfaction.

When devising a cross-training schedule to maintain certification, contracting professionals should look to become well-rounded business managers by choosing courses within several key categories: project management, business, business analysis, and vendor management.

Project Management

The goal of project management is simple, at least in theory: to apply knowledge, skills, and tools toward meeting a pre-determined set of requirements on time, on budget, and according to specifications. Contract managers, who busy themselves with establishing, administering, and closing out contracts, do this virtually every day. Therefore, contracting professionals, regardless of their specific expertise or job description, could learn a lot from best practices in project management.

The Basics of Project Management

There are any number of training organizations around the country that offer classroom and online versions of an introductory project management course. For today's contracting professional, this is a must. You'll learn how to effectively link your individual project goals to the needs and expectations of your stakeholders, and you'll learn how to set clear, understandable goals and track your progress

toward achieving those goals. This information is particularly applicable to government personnel who are under more pressure than ever to find more efficient ways of working.

In addition, an introductory course will likely touch on the development of a work breakdown structure (WBS). A WBS, essentially, makes complex projects or contracts more manageable by breaking down each individual task required for success in a hierarchical structure. It is also the critical foundation underpinning any earned value management (EVM) system used to monitor performance, which is now required by the *Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR)*.

Budgets and Schedules

One key to successful project management—or, in this case, contract management—is determining your limits: limits on time, budget, materials, and specifications. When you have the knowledge and tools to control your projects and set realistic budgeting goals from the very start, you’ll dramatically increase the likelihood of a successful outcome for you, your agency, and your customers. It’s also important to understand the value of contingency plans and to be able to accept inevitable variations to your initial estimates.

Earned Value Management

Speaking of budget, a solid understanding of EVM is critical in your integrated team’s work with the Office of Management and Budget

(OMB). As you know, securing funding for government programs is a detailed process that is good for only one calendar year and not necessarily the life of your program. EVM will help you not only manage the all-important triple constraints—time, budget, and scope—but it will help you demonstrate performance against a baseline and prove the value and worth of your programs and contracts. As you know, the most well-managed program will invariably garner the most favor at OMB in the budget process.

Risk Management

So often, on both projects and contracts, people don’t discuss risk management until things have seriously gone wrong. The sooner professionals begin thinking about the myriad of pitfalls and roadblocks that are standing in the way of even their “easiest” tasks, the better off they’ll be in the long term. Most risk management courses will help you identify threat and opportunities against your end goals and will teach you how you can turn risks into opportunities.

Business

President Calvin Coolidge once said, “The business of America is business.” He was right then, and he’s certainly right now—in both the public and private sector. If you’ve been working in the government for any amount of time, you’re well aware of the recent push in agencies around the country for employees to seek business training. Business acumen represents the government contract profes-



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sional's move once and for all away from the title of "clerk." Here are some essential "soft" skills you'll be able to add to your résumé with some cross-training in business.

Leadership and Communication

As a member of your integrated team, you're often required to take the lead on initiatives that fall within your area of expertise and to be able to communicate complex ideas to your colleagues, superiors, and even customers. Seems easy enough; however, based on research—and my own experience—communication difficulties are often the root of many project and contract failures. The ability to lead effectively and to speak clearly and persuasively will ensure that everyone on your team is on the same page at all times and operating with the same expectations.

Mentoring

In sports, business, government, and life in general, the people with the most knowledge and, if I dare say, wisdom, are those who have been around the longest. The problem with veteran players, however, is that they are much closer to retirement than their younger counterparts. Each year, contracting professionals walk out of the door of their agencies for the last time to either take on a life of leisure or move on to new ventures. Unfortunately, more often than not, their years of experience and knowledge go right out of the door with them.

Business courses often teach professionals how to develop mentoring initiatives within their organizations. This can help an agency document successful processes and best practices, which is paramount in filling the knowledge gaps that are so often left behind by turnover. And, mentoring is also an excellent way for more senior professionals to give back to those who are just beginning their careers.

Business Analysis

In your current position, if you spend any amount of time with requirements, whether gathering them, documenting them, or communicating them to others, then, regardless of your title, congratulations—you're a business analyst as well as a contracting professional. Learning now to become a better business analyst is in the best interest of you and your agency.

Mastering Requirements

Incomplete requirements are often cited as the number-one reason for project or systems failure. By learning to identify requirements and documenting them thoroughly, and by learning to document your project or contract's overall vision and scope, you'll be able to build a blueprint for success. With a little luck, this blueprint will be strong enough to fend off one of any contract or project manager's greatest adversaries—scope creep.

Use-Case Modeling

A facet of business analysis that has proven vital for today's analysts is use-case modeling. This is a technique used in systems and software engineering to document the functional requirements of a system by the actions of specific users. To put it simply, a use case describes, in detail, exactly how an individual will interact with a system to achieve a specific goal. From the business analyst's perspective, use cases are advantageous because they allow the analyst to model the entire business process, providing the necessary documentation to identify the system's interactions with the business goals, rules, and business-level decisions.

Vendor Management

As the government, like the private sector, has begun relying more and more on the outsourcing of key functions, the ability to successfully manage vendor relationships has become a vital skill. At the heart of any contract lies the statement of work (SOW). If your responsibilities include properly identifying your agency's needs and then turning those needs into quality contracts, understanding the finer details of writing, negotiating, awarding, and administering SOWs will help you manage your vendor relationships more effectively and productively than ever. Positive vendor relationships will yield annual cost savings for your agency—and hero status for you.

Start Your Cross-Training Today

You had better get started; this should keep you busy for the next 25 years or so. In the meantime, as I've said, don't fear the courses that fall outside of your specific area of expertise. The government, in its infinite wisdom, has given you a unique opportunity to add essential new cross-functional skills to your résumé and create all-new areas of expertise for yourself. Agency career managers should recognize this wisdom and encourage their staff to cross-train in diverse, business-related disciplines. After all, a more knowledgeable, more skilled government workforce will benefit individual employees, their agencies, and ultimately, their customers. **CM**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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