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Improved collaboration can revitalize acquisition
IPTs can deliver better efficiency, results

By **BILL DAMARÉ** | Last Updated: September 5, 2010

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Acquisition reform has been on the agendas of administrations for the last 30 years, yet government programs consistently run over budget, deliver past deadline and fall short of expectations.

Is better, faster, cheaper possible? Over the past 18 months, the administration has issued several mandates to reform acquisition across all federal agencies. These mandates provide agencies with directives to ramp up recruitment, training and retention efforts; reduce reliance on high-risk contracts and contractors; utilize performance-based management approaches; and ensure cost and schedule reporting is accurate and compliant through tools and technology.

To enact even one of these efforts, agencies must integrate and align their program, project, contract and business analysis activities with their people, processes and tools, and do so through integrated project teams (IPT). However, how and where should an agency begin a reformation effort?

The looming mass exodus of federal baby boomers is well-documented. The Office of Management and Budget now requires agencies to increase the size and capability of their acquisition work forces by 2014. The Defense Department plans to recruit 20,000 acquisition professionals by 2015.

Although learning and development initiatives figure into all agencies' human capital plans, those that adhere to best practices will measure the link between such initiatives and mission outcomes. It is therefore important to use metrics that can help agencies anticipate roadblocks and enablers to adoption.

Given the right training and adoption strategies, agencies can achieve better cost, time and performance results through IPTs where program and project staff have knowledge in relevant contracting disciplines; where contracting staff understand the requirements and risks of different contract types before releasing a solicitation; and where business sponsors appreciate the impact of decisions on project, program and contract performance.

While recruitment and training efforts are crucial, agencies will also need succession plans to smooth the transfer of knowledge and responsibilities between retirees and their successors, as well as coaching plans to close successors' skill gaps and set them on a path to success.

There are several life cycles at play in each acquisition: the capital planning life cycle, the project life cycle, the contract life cycle and the requirements management life cycle. Agencies that plan and manage programs using a framework that reinforces collaboration within the IPT are far more likely to achieve their intended outcomes than those that do not.

Such programs benefit from cross-functional decision-making carried out at smaller-spaced milestones than typically seen in large-ticket federal acquisitions. For these processes and structures to work, however, agencies will need to bridge any team member's skill gaps with strong business capabilities, such as leadership, teamwork, the use and analysis of key performance indicators, contingency planning and risk management.

Improving acquisition outcomes can often be supported with relevant job aids, such as:

- Quality assurance surveillance plan templates for contracting officers and contracting officers' technical representatives.
- Work breakdown structure checklists for project managers.
- Business requirements document templates for business analysts.

Providing IPTs with meaningful, relevant and easily accessible job aids will lay the foundation for consistent, repeatable and measurable workflow outputs. Best-practice tools and templates are maintained as "living" documents and support the appropriate life cycle. They work best when they are easy to access, share and update by team members, and provide valuable information to the leadership.

Over the past two years, social networking has been gaining ground within agency firewalls. These tools show promise in improving communication within IPTs and facilitating collaboration. Just as important, they can potentially close the gap between formal training and informal learning.

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Can the government deliver services that are better, faster and cheaper? Yes — by taking a holistic IPT approach that integrates program, project, contracts and business analysis activities.

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