

The Federal Acquisition Work Force: Certified or Qualified?

In recent years, the federal acquisition work force's size and skills have fallen far behind the surge in spending, contract action rates and procurement complexity. With more than half of the U.S. federal work force reaching retirement age in less than a decade, the challenges of growing its size and skills will continue to mount.

In 2009, the federal government identified strengthening the work force as a priority investment. The Office of Federal Procurement Policy has developed a five-year plan to grow the capacity and capability of the civilian acquisition work force. Similarly, the Department of Defense has drawn up its own strategic plans to improve the quality and readiness of its acquisition work force. Federal agencies across the board are making efforts to restore the work force-workload balance through aggressive recruitment and insourcing while upskilling the existing work force through training and certification programs. The question is, which initiatives will have the most near- and long-term impact on acquisition outcomes, eliminate waste and protect taxpayer investments?

The 20 Percent That Drives 80 Percent of Results

Some argue that the capacity of the work force is not even an issue; it is the capabilities of the work force that truly matter. While recruitment will no doubt grow the acquisition work force's size and certification will contribute to skill development, either will likely produce only limited results as they often focus on:

- Specific layers or functions in an organization rather than the entire organization.
- The means—such as number of new hires and certified professionals—rather than the desired end results.
- The training phase at the expense of the front-end analysis and adoption methods that will ensure the relevance and applicability of what will be learned.

Successful learning programs are those that pay as much attention to assessment and adoption as to implementation—the 20 percent that will drive 80 percent of the results.

Assessment

Many learning and development initiatives fail, not because of troubles along the way, but because of inadequate due diligence and planning at the individual, group and organizational level. What are the needs and objectives of the acquisition organization and its larger agency? What does success look like and what are its benchmarks? How will we measure them? What are the hard measures for much-needed soft skills, often easy to recognize but hard to explain?

Across government agencies, strategic human capital plans for the acquisition work force highlight strategies to increase headcount and certification. Will these strategies improve the federal acquisition process, performance and results?

Initiatives that use high-quality adult learning methodologies and post-learning resources, with periodic assessments to measure the impact of these initiatives, have a better chance of delivering immediate and lasting results.



For achievement to be meaningful, it will need to be measured against the structure of the organization, the ability of internal processes to meet strategic objectives and long-term performance improvement goals. Robust assessments are, therefore, indispensable. They offer a good view of the organization's current state and employee skill gaps and provide a framework for matching needs with the appropriate solutions. Individual assessments provide the baselines for developing systematic learning paths, which can be used by managers to set learning expectations with employees and by acquisition career managers to identify those professionals who can move to the next certification level. Organizational assessments that focus on best practices, methodologies, governance, management buy-in, unique challenges and departmental goals enable chief acquisition officers to demonstrate improved results and a learning program's return on investment. Learning initiatives that overlook these individual and organizational assessments and, instead, use sheer headcount and number of certificates to determine the skill gap, are doomed to worsen existing dysfunctions, create new ones or both.

Implementation

As Ashton Carter, Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics, has said, "Work force size is important but quality is paramount." Certification is one way to gauge a person's ability to perform highly complex tasks. However, this predictive marker is based on the completion of hourly in-class participation requirements and a knowledge attainment test. And when those hours are abbreviated to expedite certification, the link between certification and higher performance becomes even more tenuous. Short, "intensive" courses are often a contradiction in terms, as they are likely to sacrifice immersive activities that facilitate retention and on-the-job application. Course programs that provide enough time and space for learners to absorb and apply new skills, before diving into more coursework, increase the likelihood of post-course adoption.

Training and work force development need to build on current strengths in the organization and pave the way for true adoption of knowledge and skills on the job. Any training must make acquisition professionals subject matter experts in their own right, as well as enable them

to transfer skills, concepts and tools to foster learning and development within the organization. A comprehensive training program will ensure teams work in alignment and can perform aspects of each other's job functions the way integrated project teams do.

So, what should be measured at the implementation stage? Most training programs evaluate courseware and instructor quality. But, while courseware and instructors contribute to impact on the job and business results, research shows management buy-in can produce even more impact than either of the two. Evaluations should therefore capture whether resources and opportunities to apply the new learning will be available once learners return to work.

Adoption

If assessments are given little focus, adoption tactics are often neglected. Since the goal of learning is to improve results and not merely raise headcount or the number of certificates, structures, processes and resources will need to be in place for newly minted acquisition professionals to put their training to work. Acquisition executives should, therefore, have been sufficiently engaged throughout the learning initiative, as they can make sure the organization offers informal learning opportunities and resources for acquisition teams to retain their skills and build up their mastery. This combination is important because 70 percent of workplace learning is informal and should, therefore, be leveraged and resourced with the appropriate people, processes and tools. Best practice examples are work assignments, coaching and mentoring, tools for just-in-time learning and collaboration and job aids. By supplementing formal learning, these resources will not only fast-track mastery, but set new acquisition professionals and their organizations on a path to success.

The impact of these informal learning resources will also need to be captured through assessments that can identify new and existing gaps which, in turn, will need to be addressed by future learning initiatives. This virtual circle of assessment, implementation and adoption will facilitate knowledge retention, leading to improved performance impact.



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