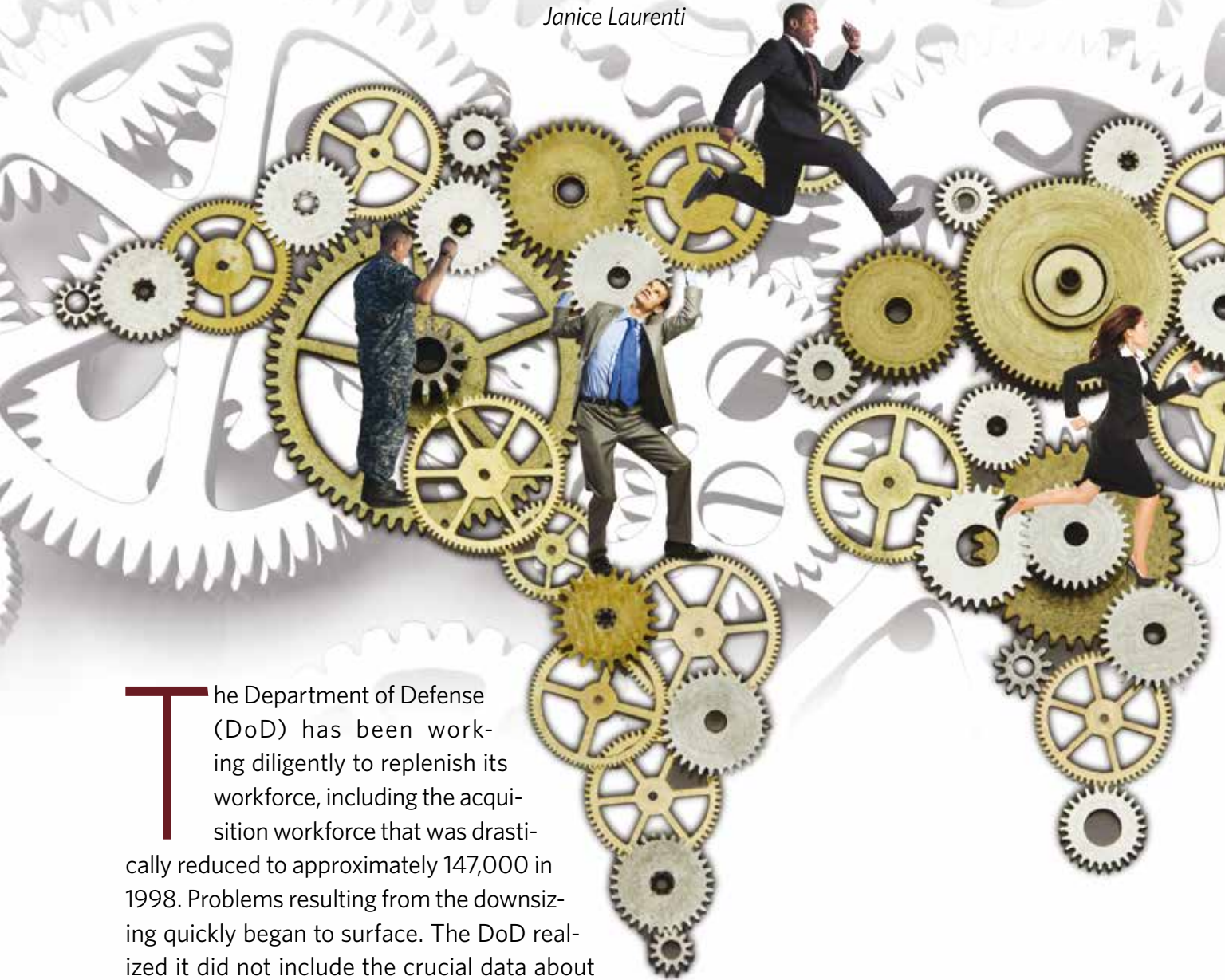


Acquisition Pros Keep the Gears Moving

Janice Laurenti



The Department of Defense (DoD) has been working diligently to replenish its workforce, including the acquisition workforce that was drastically reduced to approximately 147,000 in 1998. Problems resulting from the downsizing quickly began to surface. The DoD realized it did not include the crucial data about the number of soon-to-retire employees in the total workforce reduction. The cutback therefore turned out greater than had been estimated.

Poor planning and the use of incomplete data and analytics were documented as causes for the failure. The decision to downsize later was found to have failed to increase efficiency. But there is light at the end of the tunnel.

Today's up-and-coming acquisition professionals have an opportunity to make a difference in their chosen endeavors—to contribute ideas and synergy to the big picture we call acquisition reform. Federal acquisition is not a one-size-fits-all endeavor. This is not a boilerplate profession. There are several types of acquisitions with just as many if not more acquisition processes, regulatory statutes and policy guides to learn and understand. The most valuable asset the federal government lost from downsizing was its intangible asset—the years of experience and

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the diverse knowledge of the seasoned workforce that we failed to capture or retain for the next generation of acquisition professionals.

Do More With Less

Adding salt to the wound, the unthinkable happened: the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001. We found ourselves in a time of increased military spending supporting the deployed troops and the war on terror. The imbalance of the acquisition demands far exceeded available workforce knowledge and skills. The supply was low; the demand high. Civil service employees who remained to man the workforce had to learn to do more with less but lacked the necessary experience, confidence and guidance. No one was prepared for the massive downsizing, and no one had any foresight into the sudden acquisition demands.

Downsizing the federal workforce was the means of achieving efficiency. That was the plan. However, DoD

sorely missed its mark. Ironically, the reasons stated for the failure—poor planning and use of incomplete data—are the same factors DoD blames today for its failed acquisition executions. Doesn't that tell us something?

And the increased supply and service acquisitions supporting the military were more complex for the inexperienced workforce. Timely execution of acquisitions was jeopardized greatly. DoD began outsourcing to contractors to fill the gap.

Although the federal government has made great strides toward increasing the acquisition workforce, acquisition leadership continues to focus on the objective of acquisition reform—identifying areas of deficiency and establishing initiatives for their correction. The reform has included promoting the Copper Cap and Pathways internships embedded within the programs, as well as mentoring and career development initiatives. The reform also includes identifying additional DoD-wide areas of training for the acquisition workforce.

Three Critical Components

Acquisitions are as diverse as the specialists who work them. Remember when I said you can make a difference in this career field? It all begins here. An acquisition professional is considered a high commodity, especially in the federal civil service. Good ones are rare and are hard to find. Ask any of the DoD's contractors; they usually are quick to grab a retired military Service member with acquisition experience. Today's new entrants are trained to be outstanding acquisition professionals and do great things. Getting there requires a lot of work and dedication on the individual's part in professional developing and growth. The key components to becoming a well-rounded acquisition professional are personal qualities, knowledge and development of the skills and competencies to do the job well.

Personal Qualities: The acquisition field is a demanding field and can be both very challenging and very rewarding. This field is not for the timid or for those who are quick to surrender. Acquisition professionals must conduct themselves according to a moral and ethical code. This job can be very stressful. Members of this career field must be secure in their positions and in doing the right things ... always, even under pressure and with their viewpoints challenged. They must be confident and remain true to their integrity and moral compasses.

Integrity can never be negotiated.

Unbiased Liaison: The acquisition objective is to support the warfighter. However, contractors have a different goal: to earn a profit. The acquisition professional is the intermediary and should be fair and impartial toward all concerned parties to achieve a result in which

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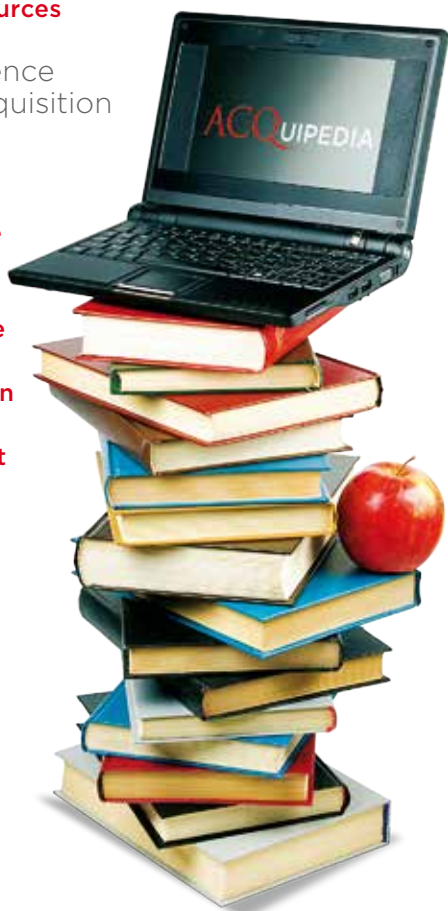
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both sides win. Although the acquisition professional is a civil service employee, it does not mean the government is always right and the contractor is always at fault. There are times when the acquisition professional will be the referee who will send the government and the contractor to their respective corners.

The Inquisitive Nature: Another fine quality for an acquisition professional is to be curious, to take the initiative to investigate what he or she doesn't know, to learn and to become better informed. The more informed you are about the subject matter, any subject matter, the better your position will be to provide sound logical business advice to the customer and leadership. It is human nature to sometimes have tunnel vision—seeing things from just one perspective. The acquisition professional must see things holistically, from all points of view.

Developing Knowledge and Skills

There are many moving parts in an acquisition program and this ultimately can prove quite overwhelming for some workforce members. At times, you will feel pulled in every direction. Fear of failure will begin to set in, reducing your confidence in your own ability to do the job. Trust me. I know. I've been there. I have worked acquisitions in both the public and private sectors. Both demand that the individual accept the experience with tenacity and an appetite for a challenge. The career field can be very perplexing; hence, the importance of the personal qualities previously mentioned. The technical how-to knowledge and skills will be learned over time.

The acquisition profession also is very rewarding—program folks, subject-matter experts (SMEs) and military leaders working together to support the mission and the warfighter. I cannot emphasize enough the importance of promoting a synergistic and collaborative effort with your program folks and team members throughout the entire acquisition process.

Acquisition Reform

Part of acquisition reform includes resupplying the acquisition workforce with new hires. Funding for the new workforce comes from various sources. The Copper Cap and Pathways internships are popular acquisition workforce programs. Increasing the workforce and revising the training sources are focuses throughout the acquisitions communities.

The Copper Cap and Pathways programs are embedded with detailed training and mentoring, including mandatory rotations throughout the life of a program until the candidate graduates from that program. Others who enter the acquisition workforce arrive under different circumstances and funding sources. I came into the civil service under a Direct Hire Authority and did not know at the time that this meant my position was temporary. I was what is called, in an imperfect system, an “over hire.” Fortunately, I ultimately was given a permanent slot, but I was surprised to learn that participants in the intern program are “groomed” and “mentored” while


other types of employees did not have access to that kind of career development.

Let us not be part of the problem but rather part of the solution. As flawed as the system seems to be, how the workforce gets here isn't important. What matters is, now that the workforce is here, what is it going to do? How will it make a difference?

Acquisition is a demanding field and sometimes tests one's integrity and character. Acquisition is not solely transactional: There is more involved than paperwork and peer reviews. Acquisition is about being cognizant of all the moving parts: What is the program manager (PM) doing? What is the contractor doing? What are the provisions of the Federal

all, they are the conduits to the warfighter. What better way could there be to serve the customers than to meet with them, one on one and as often as possible, to keep open the lines of communication? Early involvement and open dialogue with the customer and other members of the acquisition team increase the chances for an execution success because the working unit is made cohesive through this direct contact. The more informed the acquisition professional is with the requirement, the better able he or she will be to provide sound logical business advice to the customer.

Today's acquisition professionals need to be proactive and inquisitive, to be eager to learn and to be informed—to become as invested in the acquisition as the PMs who write the



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Acquisition Regulation or the Defense Federal Acquisition Regulation Supplement? You need not know how to do everyone's job but you do need to know that everyone is doing his job.

Acquisition is about reading. There is a great deal of information, and many individuals publish and share their experiences and knowledge. Take advantage of the information now instantly available through today's technology. When workforce members left in the 1990s, so did all their knowledge and experiences. Today we have this information at our fingertips. It is only a computer click away. Be proactive and learn more than just what is required. The career field of acquisitions is multifaceted. It is not one dimensional as some might think. It never is satisfactory to simply say, "I don't have to know that because that is not my job." Become informed—knowledge and information are sources of power.

Know the Requirement

The key is to know and understand the acquisition. What is the purpose of the acquisition? Who are the stakeholders? To answer these and many other questions that will surface throughout the acquisition's process, it is recommended that the acquisition professional meet early and as often as necessary with the PM. Be engaged with the PM and the requirement. Acquisition requires us to be critical thinkers (remember to be inquisitive) and to be self-motivated professionals.

All customers want to feel they are most important customers. In my book, they all are of the greatest importance. After

Statement of Work or Performance Work Statement. That support starts by becoming as informed as possible with the specifics of the requirement, the needs of the customer and the risks involved.

Acquisition is a team effort. The team needs members who contribute as the SMEs for the requirement. Program management, contracting, legal and policy all have important roles in ensuring that the data used for decision making are complete and accurate. Therefore, it is important to develop rapport with the PM early in the planning stage, working collaboratively toward execution.

Lessons Learned

If we were to take anything away from the 1990s downsizing, it would be the erroneous presumption that only the workforce members were removed. In fact, it was the failure to capture the knowledge, experiences and the diverse perspectives of the workforce that exacerbated the situation. The government should have taken advantage of its human capital and collaborated with those who have seen the worst of the worst and the best of the best—our seasoned and experienced workforce. Lessons learned? Acquisitions do not get executed on assumptions. We need the workforce to become informed, learn the business of acquisitions and take the initiative to gain as much knowledgeable as possible. Become the SME for every acquisition you put your name on. &

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