

The Acquisition Workforce: GROWING Numerically, Reducing Fiscally

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Continued education and training are essential to maintaining a healthy acquisition workforce. Here, employees at Aberdeen Proving Ground, Md., attend the Civilian Education System Basic Course, Oct. 27, 2010, taught by the Army Management Staff College. (U.S. Army photo by Tom Faulkner, U.S. Army Research, Development and Engineering Command)

Personnel are defense acquisition's most valuable asset, Department of Defense senior leaders affirmed

at the Program Executive Officers/System Command Commanders' Conference, Nov. 2–3, 2010. Acquisition personnel work tirelessly to provide the nation's warfighters with cutting-edge capabilities. Additionally, the acquisition workforce plays a very significant role in the execution of DoD policies, strategy and initiatives.

Defense senior leaders stressed the importance of the workforce in implementing DoD's Efficiency Initiatives, the department's strategy to reduce fiscal waste, eliminate redundancy and

ultimately generate internal cost savings of \$100 billion in five years. An essential part of achieving that is ensuring that the DoD acquisition workforce is healthy, they said.

Growing the Workforce

The acquisition workforce is going through a period of immense growth and transformation. After personnel numbers declined in the 1990s, the workforce faced a crisis when the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq began and the workload skyrocketed. The workforce was overextended and under-trained to handle the ever-increasing workload and responsibility bestowed upon it.

DoD leadership has now reversed that trend and is working to grow the workforce

both numerically and through education and training. Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, advised the audience at Fort Belvoir, Va., that Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates and DoD leadership support this initiative with no intention of moving away from it. Their commitment to hiring the right people in sufficient numbers while strengthening the workforce through education and training is imperative, he said.

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William J. Lynn III, deputy secretary of defense, described the current health of the acquisition workforce as not quite 100 percent but definitely on the path to success. “We have the direction right. We oversteered in the 1990s when we eliminated too much of the government’s internal acquisition force,” Lynn said. “It made us not as smart buyers and smart overseers as we needed to be. We’ve pulled that back. For hiring, we’re pretty much hitting the targets that we’ve been looking for. We’re actually quite pleased with the quality (of people).”

“Those are all positives. That said, I think there’s inevitably a transition when you make this kind of change. There are certainly going to be some bumps But I think the direction we’ve set out on is right, and in the course of a year or two, we’ll be able to work out the rough spots, and we’ll be in a better place.”

Attracting new members to the workforce is an important part of growing and sustaining it. As the Baby Boomer generation retires, members of the younger generation must replace them. Mullen advised the audience to “make careers exciting” for potential employees and that a great attraction for the younger workforce is knowing that they are making a difference. Leader development is also a crucial aspect of this.

Mullen advised, “We (need to) develop the people we need now and in the future in this time of change.”

How Leaders Will Achieve Efficiency

Meeting a cost savings of \$100 billion in five years is a challenge. Lynn stressed

that leaders throughout DoD — program managers, system commanders and others — need to understand what the secretary of defense is asking of them with the Efficiency Initiatives. To achieve these, DoD will use incremental approaches, forgoing full development of capabilities to get needed items and systems fielded sooner and cheaper and then upgrade them later.

“Leadership needs to be focused on what’s going on economically, what’s going on financially,” said Mullen. “We all have to be in tune with that to look at, ‘What are the best decisions given the time that I’m in right now?’ and then, ‘How do I get to the future with the right capabilities?’”

Lynn acknowledged that the task at hand is not easy and that making tradeoffs between technology or greater capability and cost is challenging. “We’re not only asking you to do business differently,” he said. “We’re asking you to do things that are inherently difficult. But as the secretary said, ‘Difficult is not impossible.’” He also advised that changes in DoD’s business operations will most likely be met with opposition, which is another challenge. “Not everyone will be happy, but (senior leadership) will,” Lynn said. “You’ll be doing exactly what we asked you to do.”

Without the cooperation and leadership of program managers and senior managers in acquisition, Gates’ Efficiency Initiatives and \$100 billion cost savings will never be realized, Lynn said. “Success or failure is going to turn on the ability that you have to implement the reforms that have been laid out that cut to the heart of the hardest aspects of managing acquisition,” he said.

“In the end, you are the program change of command in

the defense acquisition community,” he continued. “You must help us avoid zero for five as we experience this fifth inflection point (in defense spending). You must help us ensure that the department is a good steward of the industrial base, the taxpayers’ dollars and the trust of our warfighters.”

Frank Kendall, principal deputy under secretary of defense for acquisition, technology and logistics, reiterated the importance of acquisition personnel in this period of budget constraint.

“We can do initiatives and policies and have meetings, but at the end of the day it’s the people in the program offices who are running the programs and the

William J. Lynn III, deputy secretary of defense, said that the cooperation and leadership of acquisition program managers and senior managers is essential to realizing the \$100 billion cost savings required by the Efficiency Initiatives. (U.S. Army photo by Erica Kobren, Defense Acquisition University)





Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, emphasized that Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates and Department of Defense leadership support growing the acquisition workforce both numerically and through education and training. (U.S. Army photo by Erica Kobren, Defense Acquisition University)

chief engineers and their staffs in the contracting offices who are really going to make a difference in all this,” he said. Fortunately, Kendall said, in DoD, “the voice of affordability is stronger now than it’s ever been before.”

Mullen instructed the PEO/SYSCOM conference attendees to lead in ways that make a difference and advance the military’s capabilities. “Make the hard decisions and prioritize,” he said. He also explained that working through a strategic partnership of military, acquisition, industry and Congress is the only way to ensure that the Efficiency Initiatives succeed while still getting capabilities to the warfighter. Mullen explained that those several institutions must come together to make this work, and he stressed that acquisition leaders need to have clarity and engagement with Congress early and often.

Program Managers’ Changing Role

In some regards, program managers have an added responsibility in the achievement of the Efficiency Initiatives. Mullen explained that the mentality of “if you go early, you are seen as a failure” needs to change in DoD. If a program manager steps forward advising that the program won’t make it, he or she needs to be rewarded instead of rebuffed. Leadership has asked program managers to

be fiscally responsible and make the hard decisions early, and Mullen stressed that program managers need to know they will be supported in those actions.

Dr. Malcolm Ross O’Neill, assistant secretary of the army for acquisition, logistics and technology, explained that program managers are in a position to question their programs through every step of the acquisition process to achieve the needed results, both in cost savings and capabilities. When asked if program managers have a greater ability to reduce program requirements in the current environment of decreasing acquisition timelines and cost, O’Neill advised, “A few years ago the answer was ‘no.’ ... You could not question it, you could not push back. You were nothing but an acquisition person. ... The answer today is you can push back anytime you want. You can question the requirements. You can tell the warfighter that you’re going to give them an 80-percent (solution).” He called this “a brilliant change in strategy.”

Regarding process changes, O’Neill recommended that program managers find the advocate for the troublesome process. O’Neill advised program managers, along with their program executive officers and subject-matter experts, to meet with that

advocate to present their case of how and why the process should be changed. “As far as processes that get in the way, let us know what those processes are,” he said. “We have an open invitation to reduce nonproductive processes and bureaucracy.”

Conclusion

As our warfighters engage in overseas contingency operations around the world, the defense acquisition workforce is required to be trained, educated, knowledgeable and numerically healthy to support them. The fiscal changes in DoD policy and strategy also require the workforce to be economically savvy. Acquisition leaders must strike the proper balance among these demands to ensure the health of DoD and achieve the secretary of defense’s Efficiency Initiatives. As Lynn told the conference attendees, “Without question, you’re serving at a moment when institutional performance matters. We vested in you — our senior managers — enormous responsibility to oversee the programs, manage the human capital and keep the department on the right track.” 

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