

POLICY ARENA

Navigating the certification maze

by Anna-Carolle Bougie

For public sector procurement professionals, training and certification are the issues.

A shortage of resources, downsizing's impacts on middle management and corporate memory, high attrition, a centralized system with low levels of delegation, a dysfunctional career structure and increasing demands to redistribute the workload between Public Works and Government Services Canada (PWGSC) and other federal departments have put a strain on the federal system. For public service managers being driven to search for a better way to do business, a better-trained, prepared and motivated workforce offers several workable solutions. What has been accomplished, what still needs to be done and how do we get there?

The Materiel and Supply Management Committee (MSMSC), created in June 1998, oversaw an interdepartmental professional development program to develop a standardized professional certification and seminar delivery program for the federal government. They developed a thorough knowledge and skills profile, a list of definitions to support the profile, a seminar program and a survey to identify the scope of the community and its training needs. The results offer a range of opportunities and could resolve long-standing problems and issues, such as decentralization and delegation, throughout the materiel and supply management world. The launch of the new certification program is expected in fall 2000.

But not all the questions have been answered. Is the public service describing a profession that is similar in both the public and the private sectors, or are public servants really different? Are criteria available for transferability of skills and experience between the two sectors?

A number of departments, including PWGSC, developed internal programs dedicated and adapted to their own case studies and reflecting their particular needs for certification prior to delegation of contracting authorities. However, where the need for a customized program is less cost effective, departments take advantage of programs available from inside or outside the public service. PWGSC espouses the benefits of association with outside groups – the Purchasing Management Association of Canada, geared to private sector contracting, the National Institute of Governmental Purchasing, geared to American public sector contracting practices, and the Canadian Professional Logistics Institute, concentrating on the logistics of materiel management.

However, the department believed that these early initiatives and programs were not specific enough for contracting concentration. The development of PWGSC's program led to the limitation of what could have been a logical career path for Purchasing Group employees (PGs) from other departments. PWGSC, the common service organization for procurement in the public service, is the largest user of PG employees.

Where is the pool of resources for future recruitment being groomed? The new certification program focuses on the middle management level, or PG 4 level. There are very few employees at this level within departments, except at PWGSC where this level is considered a senior working level, not middle management. As well as specializing in contract management, some employees have acquired subject-matter expertise. Will each specialty require its own certification? Is this level of expertise achievable at other departments or only within PWGSC or the private sector, where commodities are their business? If the latter is more probable, how do you reconcile the ambitions of departmental public servants wishing to progress in their careers against a closed environment such as that in PWGSC? Are we looking to certify departmental PGs, aspiring to senior opportunities, or creating opportunities for external recruitment at the expense of internal career paths?

The fact that the MSMSC study was done and training and development initiatives were identified has resulted in the equal recognition of the value of the PG occupational group to the public service, like the finance officer (FI) occupational group, and the visible support of senior management.

However, PG 1, 2 and 3 level employees do not have a focused program to acquire and enhance the skills necessary to effectively carry out the functions at their existing levels. Not everyone wants to or can become a PG 4 or higher. Also, the qualifications required for employees to enter at the lowest PG level have not been identified and tied to the higher level requirements in a logical continuum.

And despite the support for the MSMSC's work, there will not be a central "pot of money" for departments draw on and departmental budgets will not be increased to pay for the training. It has been suggested that funding be re-aligned or reassigned to this initiative. As well, access to the training required for certification cannot be universally available to all who wish to participate, thus affecting job and promotion opportunities for some but not equally for all.

Next time let's examine how we can get to where we want to go.

This is the first of a two-part article. Readers are invited to email the author their reactions to part 1 at acbougie@quickemail.com so that the views of the community can be included in part 2.

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