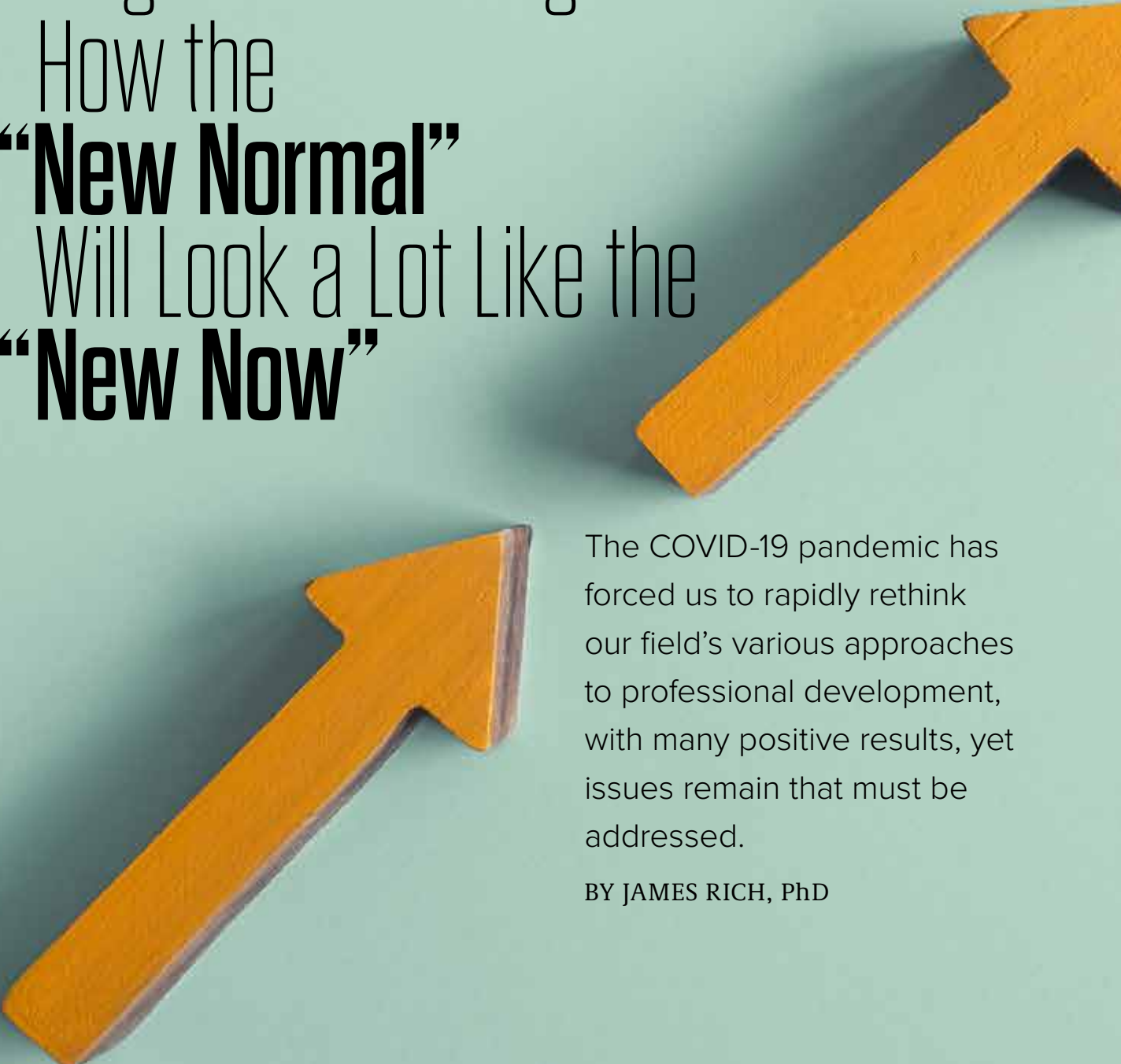



The Future of Contact Management Training: How the **“New Normal”** Will Look a Lot Like the **“New Now”**



The COVID-19 pandemic has forced us to rapidly rethink our field’s various approaches to professional development, with many positive results, yet issues remain that must be addressed.

BY JAMES RICH, PhD



“You know there is a problem with the education system when you realize that out of the 3 Rs only 1 begins with an R.”

– Dennis Miller

For the past four decades, the contracting profession has been critical of the state of professional education while making positive, if incremental, changes to training at the margins. This has been particularly true in the federal sector.

The solution to any observable gap in contract manager performance is to send the employee to a training course – despite a substantial body of evidence, both empirical and anecdotal, that more training does not produce results unless the training is timely, relevant, and focused on the specific skill gap the employee exhibited and there is formal follow-up measurement of the employee’s subsequent performance. Still, we have an enduring faith in the goodness of training and professional development that we are not likely to abandon.

Can we successfully address issues we see in the

contracting profession by simply overhauling our training model? I think the answer is a qualified “yes, but” – with the “but” requiring strong leadership and the willingness of managers to take risks that may have previously been evaluated and rejected. If asked a year ago what changes I would make to the education and training of contract managers, I would have likely provided a list of recommendations that addressed measurable efficiencies – how can we leverage technology to do what we are currently doing better, faster, and cheaper. Today, I am thinking a hard reset may be the better solution.

The Impact of COVID-19

Typically, suggesting change on a large scale will be met with resistance from both those who outright oppose the change and those who may be sympathetic to the initiative but are steadfast in their belief that all progress is incremental.¹ However, the COVID-19 pandemic has shifted the boundaries of risk aversion; we are suddenly more open to seriously considering untested solutions, challenging doctrines, and making bold decisions. So, what is going on?

The futurist Steve Brown writes on the positive correlation between hardship and innovation, citing the incredible scientific and industrial response of the United States to World War II. Brown characterizes the phenomenon as “an innovation hyperdrive that’s

frequently spawned by challenging circumstances.”² People adapt and innovate in the face of crisis because survival is the dominant human instinct.

Achieving something you once considered unobtainable (e.g., running a marathon) is both enabling and empowering. In the current environment, people are more open to dramatic adaptations because they are doing things daily they didn’t think possible a year ago. Ask the thousands of workers who are productively working online from home and learning to love a technology that now spares them from a brutal commute and allows them to use an avatar on bad hair days. (If they are homeschooling young children while they are working online, probably better not to ask.)

Contract managers are experiencing the effect of bold training decisions, some occasioned by public health threats and mitigation measures, but more the result of a fundamental pivot in determining how to train and educate the acquisition workforce coupled with a technological explosion of collaborative software platforms that allow us to orchestrate seamless virtual communication – and it is scalable. NCMA’s delivery of large national conferences in a virtual format is an example of a creative response to the pandemic. The Defense Acquisition University (DAU)’s systemwide transformation and development of the “DOD Adaptive Acquisition Framework”³ represents decisive, systemic change resulting from a

range of external factors including, but not limited to, COVID-19.

All of which is to say we are seeing exciting and powerful changes in the content and platforms used to train contracting professionals. In this article, I try to identify initiatives that reflect trends and suggest what the future of contract management training looks like in the near term. I also comment on a few topics I would like to see addressed as we develop contract management training models and curricula moving forward.

In times of great change there is great opportunity. As such, now is the time to advocate for solutions – large and small.

A Training Reset

“[The] Defense Acquisition University was a school for training. DAU is a platform for knowledge. The logo is more than a redesign...it represents DAU both in terms of our transformation right now and the platform we are developing that is our future.” -Jim Woolsey, President, DAU

When you make the assertion that big things are happening in education, you immediately start to look for examples that support your position. I did not have to look far. The actions taken by DAU and the thoughts of its president make the case that a reset of

our thinking about how to train contract managers is here and now. Whenever the leader of an educational institution talks about transformational change, you know that the backstory involves a good deal of rigorous evaluation and reflection. DAU is initiating transformation starting with the redesign of its learning platform.

The new platform focuses on –

- ▶ Easy access to training and resources at the moment of need;
- ▶ World-class content that is of high quality, current, and relevant; and
- ▶ A dynamic network that connects people who need information to people who have the information.⁴

DAU’s actions make the case that a reset of our thinking about how to train contract management professionals is here, now.

The trend is clear: We are going to start training contract management professionals the way they actually work and learn. The days of imparting information that is not linked to a student’s current work process or required competency are numbered. What’s more, ready access to information that is timely and relevant ensures that operating in a virtual environment will be the norm moving forward.

Irrespective of whose training platform is being reworked, the trend is clear: We are going to start training contract managers the way they actually work and learn. The days of imparting information that is not linked to a student’s current work process or required competency are numbered. New training models will

not rely on learning that compels the student to provide the context for the content (think “wax on, wax off”). And ready access to information that is timely and relevant ensures that operating in a virtual environment will be the norm moving forward.

The Basics

“Champions are brilliant at the basics.”

– John Wooden, UCLA Bruins men’s basketball head coach (1948–1975)

When I started my career in federal contract management, one of the buzz phrases I learned was the necessity of being “brilliant at the basics,” because the basics were the foundation of the profession. Somewhere along the line, that emphasis on fundamentals was lost, replaced by a training and certification process that created a sense among the Department of Defense (DOD) acquisition workforce that professional development occurs in a finite period at the beginning of members’ careers, rather than being a continuing process.

The Section 809 Panel called for a revision of the Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act (DAWIA) to focus on building a professional acquisition workforce, qualified to tackle the challenges of the 21st Century and beyond. Such a refocus would comprise substantiating qualifications and a modernization of the certification process.⁵ DOD chose to boldly blow up the model.

The DOD “Back-to-Basics” Initiative

On September 2, 2020, Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment Ellen Lord announced the “Back-to-Basics” (BtB) initiative⁶: the most substantial reform of the defense acquisition workforce management framework since the early 1990s. The BtB initiative shifts the focus from enterprise-required training to job-specific point-of-need training and credentials that both support mission readiness and can be refreshed over the course of the employee’s acquisition career. According to Lord, workforce development must emphasize skillset and job-specific qualifications. The transition to a more competency-based contract management training model is certainly consistent with the call to modernize the certification process.

The BtB approach addresses those individuals who, early in their career, achieved DAWIA Level III status and were then “done” with required enterprise training. It also confronts an uncomfortable truth: Many frontline managers have never actually done the work their direct reports do daily. This is neither rare nor unexpected when we consider how we’ve trained managers historically.

Leadership programs, unsurprisingly, focus on developing leadership skills: thinking critically and acting strategically. The individual’s training experience may or may not include mastering basic skillsets, such as how to execute a simplified acquisition buy or entering data on procurement transactions into the activity’s contract writing system. Moreover,

if the employee frequently changes jobs and organizations, he or she is even less likely to be well grounded in the basics.

The BtB solution promises ready access to continuous learning opportunities that afford the acquisition workforce the resources required to learn the job-relevant skills they need to be effective in the positions they occupy. Training programs need to emphasize relevancy: How is the training going to better prepare the student to perform as a contract manager *today*? Employees will likely spend more time in on-the-job training and less time off in a classroom. As schools like DAU expand access to online learning, the physical footprint of education will get smaller.

One aspect of developing a training model that envisions career-long learning is keeping an eye on employee engagement. Training is a tool that has historically been employed to both increase worker productivity and encourage employee commitment to the organization and mission. Because commitments require an investment of time as well as mental and emotional energy, most people make them with the expectation of reciprocation – that is, people assume that in exchange for their commitment, they will get something of value in return. (Refer to **FIGURE 1** on page 30.) Generally, the value for the employee is the opportunity for career advancement, job security, etc. The data on the effect of training on employee commitment is mixed; some research suggests that training actually encourages job turnover

as well-trained employees are more marketable,⁸ but most research indicates positive correlations between training, employee commitment, and job satisfaction. As there is no credible “no training” alternative, developing smarter, timelier, more focused, and job-relevant training will continue to be the path most organizations take.

As BtB is not scheduled for full implementation until later this year, it’s difficult to predict how the initiative will affect the acquisition workforce or private-sector contract managers who work on federal contracts. However, the stated goals of the initiative, which will likely resonate with the workforce, support a philosophy that favors meaningful training over more training. The DAWIA three-tiered certification system will be replaced by a single-tier certification that requires passing an exam. This move is estimated to reduce certification training from 650 hours to 250, freeing up bandwidth for the contracting professional to spend on job-relevant training and on-the-job experience.⁹

Most training for credentialing will almost certainly be online. How else do you ensure instant access to learning materials for learners around the world?

The Pandemic

“A pessimist sees difficulty in every opportunity, an optimist sees opportunity in every difficulty.” – Unknown

While there is plenty of speculation about what the “new normal” will look like post-COVID-19, the evidence suggests that the new normal will probably look more like the current environment than the old normal – let’s call it the “new now.”

As educators, trainers, mentors, etc., we need to accept that and get on about our business by focusing on the opportunities that have been created by these very difficult times. The disruption associated with COVID-19 is causing people to challenge their basic assumptions about careers, the workplace, technology, and many related issues.¹⁰ The fact is, we will not be working the same way in the future, even if we return to a centralized workplace. AI, robotics, 5G, and the general creep of technology insertion will see to that. “Education as a service” (EaaS) is poised to become the dominant training model for contracting professionals who insist on immediate access to skill-based courses that can be delivered on-demand electronically. The increasingly “learner-centric” evolution of education parallels the rapid changes in technology, so the agility of EaaS supports the need to deliver customized learning opportunities for students.¹¹ Using EaaS, career managers can order customized curriculum packages to reskill or upskill incumbent employees. (Note also the alignment of EaaS products with the previously discussed BtB initiative.)

When you consider the thousands of training vendors (including colleges and universities) that were able to rapidly shift to online

learning in a short, if stressful, period of time, you can appreciate the transformative potential of virtual learning management systems and cloud-based services. This trend was well established prior to COVID-19; the pandemic was disruptive of an education system that was already losing its relevance.¹²

The Hard Skill/Soft Skill Balance

“People may spend their whole lives climbing the ladder of success only to find, once they reach the top, that the ladder is leaning against the wrong wall.”

–Thomas Merton

There is no lack of content arguing the importance of contracting professionals having a soft skillset – and that advocacy has become something akin to settled law. I am a huge fan of the power of positive relationships and how to develop them. When I was a chief of contracting in various offices, I always kept a bowl of tasty but unhealthy candy at my desk. I am not a big candy fan, but I had learned that nothing calmed a frustrated, complaining customer like offering them chocolate. Take Covey to the next level. Seek first to understand, but feed them too.

While there might be disagreement on the exact boundaries of the skillsets, we generally think of soft skills as character traits and

interpersonal skills that characterize a person's relationships with other people in the workplace. Hard skills refer to a person's knowledge of his or her occupation and the skills needed to perform his or her job.¹³ Interestingly, hard skills are easier to teach and test and they generate most of the "how to" questions in our community. Want an example? Look at the postings to the *NCMA Collaborate* online forum.¹⁴ Given the current emphasis on the importance of soft skills in acquisition, you might expect to find a significant number of postings about soft skills in the *Collaborate* forum. However, a review of conversation threads reveals that most postings are of a technical nature; they ask very specific questions about such things as applications of the *Federal Acquisition Regulation*, aspects of the Uniform Commercial Code, or implementation of new federal acquisition policy.

Exams associated with the current certification options for DOD and NCMA require the ability to know, recall, and apply existing contract law, regulation, or policy. If, however, we consider nontechnical skills just as important as qualifications, experience, and knowledge, then why do we still treat them as an afterthought? In fact, unless we're hiring with workplace culture in mind, assessing a candidate's soft skills usually amounts to a few questions at the end of an interview. This approach reflects our belief that soft skills are intangible and hard to assess.¹⁵

Then there is the leadership conundrum: You can teach leadership, but even when exposed to the same curriculum, individuals

will differ significantly in their ability to operationalize what they learn, and this largely depends on the culture of their organization. This suggests that leadership is more cultivated than learned; those that have interpersonal skills (e.g., emotional intelligence) that complement leadership tend to respond "better" to training than those without them.

Notwithstanding the spotty track record, contracting professionals will receive more rather than less leadership training in the future. As Dr. John Wilkinson emphatically noted:

Leadership is often described as a "soft skill." This might imply that leadership is an optional, "feel-good" type of competency. But leadership is not optional; it is absolutely, positively, completely, totally, utterly, entirely, thoroughly, and unreservedly mandatory.¹⁶

The acquisition community is not going to back off on leadership development and that will be reflected in contract management training across the board.

While I would strongly encourage incorporating soft skill training into the contract management curriculum of the future, I think it important to make the case for specific hard skills that, like the intangible soft skills, are not always taught or tested in contract management training. Specifically, I am concerned about the contracting professional's ability to communicate in writing. You may not write a lot as a buyer in the simplified acquisition office, but you are going to get plenty of practice as a procurement

analyst writing proposals, developing acquisition strategy plans, or preparing white papers for leadership. And you do not want to work your way up the career ladder only to find that next rung requires a skill you do not have – or worse yet, that the ladder is leaning against the wrong wall.

Our colleague Don Shannon wrote, "We learn by exploring that which we think we know and explain it to others."¹⁷ Good insight, and one of the reasons writing can seem so hard. Things we can readily verbalize represent a real challenge when we are forced to explain the concept in writing, which is deliberate and requires a different effort than verbalization – what Kahneman would describe as "System 2" thinking.¹⁸ Writing down your thoughts and opinions forces you to reflect on your positions in ways that argumentation and declamation do not. That is the power and the beauty of writing.

The Ability to Tell the Story

"Stories constitute the single most powerful weapon in a leader's arsenal."

– Dr. Howard Gardner, professor, Harvard University.

Effective training shares important information in a way that's memorable and to which we can relate. Telling stories provides context and inspires action. The literature on the role of context in learning is understandably complex, but

FIGURE 1. Increasing Engagement & Commitment Via Training & Development

To Increase Engagement—

- ▶ PROVIDE EMPLOYEE ORIENTATION TO ESTABLISH:
 - The employer-employee exchange relationship.
 - Understanding of how the job contributes to the organization’s mission.

- ▶ OFFER SKILL DEVELOPMENT TO ENHANCE:
 - Performance.
 - Satisfaction.
 - Self-efficacy.

- ▶ PROVIDE TRAINING TO ENCOURAGE PRESCRIBED AND VOLUNTARY PERFORMANCE.

To Enhance Commitment—

- ▶ SIGNAL COMMITMENT RECIPROCITY BY:
 - Your investment in training.
 - Modes of training that accommodate employees’ other commitments.



there is agreement on a functional feature commonly attributed to context: It provides understanding of a phenomenon that would not have been accurately understood in isolation.¹⁹ Put more simply, context frames information in a way that allows us to better characterize the information and appreciate how it might be used – the process of data becoming knowledge.

Contracting professionals need to tell stories that are factual, relatable, accurate, and informative. Writing a requirements document that is readable and understandable by someone other than yourself is a critical skill in short supply. The contract file in a federal acquisition (indeed any public expenditure of appropriated dollars) must “tell the story” about the judgment and rationale used to arrive at those conclusions.²⁰ Requests for proposals

that are confusing to industry as to what is required or how proposals will be evaluated serve no one well. The ability to communicate effectively in writing is key to good storytelling and should be in every contracting professional’s skillset.

An example of a timely acknowledgement of the importance of stories is the DAU “Powerful Examples Initiative.” DAU defines *powerful examples* as real-world acquisition stories of best practices and lessons learned that highlight a success or other outcome that may be useful to other organizations. These stories are then packaged into meaningful learning assets that focus on a specific topic. The stories selected share common elements:

- ▶ They tell a background story that provides context and the need for a particular course of action,
- ▶ They describe the actions taken to

overcome the challenge, and

- ▶ They assess the outcomes (realized or potential) and capture any lessons learned that others could benefit from.²¹

Because professional development training is trending toward a focus on workforce readiness, I would expect increased use of powerful examples and case studies, which are easily tailored to teach highly specific skills in a format that is relevant and memorable.

Critical Thinking

“Read not to contradict and confute; nor to believe and take for granted; nor to find talk and discourse; but to weigh and consider.” —Francis Bacon

I am concerned that so much has been written about the importance of critical thinking to the contracting professional that it may have become cliché and easily dismissed. The Procurement and Contract Management curriculum we teach at the University of Virginia focuses on encouraging students to think critically. To that end, I teach a course that is case study-based and requires the student to analyze a case and suggest a solution posted in an online discussion forum. I emphasize that there are no right or wrong answers in this exercise; responses are graded on the quality of the proposed solution – does it provide a logical/coherent argument for why it is correct, is it readily understood, is it well supported with facts, etc.

While I came late to advocating for online learning, I must admit that the quality of student postings in the forum far exceeds that of the discussions I recall from my days in the traditional classroom. Yes, students have more time to prepare a written response, and they have Google, but the structure of the forum itself encourages research and critical thinking.

When designing models for training contracting professionals, there will necessarily be important questions about what you are trying to accomplish (learning objectives), whether progress is measurable, and whether you will recognize success when you see it. Applying a metric to the achievement of critical thinking might be elusive, but it should not deter us from making every effort to ensure that contracting professionals can think about a topic or issue in

an objective and critical way and analyze facts to form a judgement.

Problem Solving

“Economists who have studied the relationship between education and economic growth confirm what common sense suggests: The number of college degrees is not nearly as important as how well students develop cognitive skills, such as critical thinking and problem-solving ability.”

– Derek Bok, former president of Harvard University

In my opinion, there is no skill a contracting professional can possess that is more important than a commitment to being a problem solver. Whether it be characterized as a hard skill or an attitude, professionals who are perceived to be problem solvers stand out.

Contract management training should emphasize the importance of professionals having a problem-solving mindset – one that sees a problem as an opportunity to grow and is motivated to find solutions.²² Mindsets are a little different than skillsets and are valued highly by employers. The adage that “employers hire for attitude and train for skill” is supported by the research. I don’t think attitudes are immutable, but many in talent management believe you walk in the door with the attitude you have, but not the skills

you need to perform at a high level. If you have the right attitude, there is a plethora of training that can help you develop and hone your problem-solving skills.

One of the most attractive features of problem solving is the near limitless opportunities one finds to apply the skill. While it sometimes requires significant knowledge and authority to assert yourself as a problem solver, it can also be as simple as making sure the markers are not dried out when the boss is going to make a presentation on the whiteboard. Problem solvers just think that way.

Industry Is Not the Enemy

“[P]roductive interactions between federal agencies and our industry partners should be encouraged to ensure that the government clearly understands the marketplace and can award a contract or order for an effective solution at a reasonable price.”

—Daniel I. Gordon,
Administrator for Federal
Procurement Policy²³

One of the first rules federal contracting employees learn is the importance of maintaining an arms-length relationship with industry counterparts. That guidance has merits and failings. Certainly, there are ethical boundaries that must be respected and observed

by all parties in a highly regulated business environment, but there is a critical need to strengthen effective communication methods with acquisition industry partners by removing preconceived myths and replacing them with the facts of how the actual systems, strategies, and procedures work.

In 2019, the Office of Federal Procurement Policy (OFPP) issued its fourth “Myth-Busting” memorandum.²⁴ The subject of the policy issuance, “Strengthening Engagement with Industry Partners through Innovative Business Practices,” spoke directly to improving the awareness of vendor engagement strategies that federal procurement thought leaders are using to create a more responsive buying process, modernize the acquisition culture, and deliver greater value to the taxpayer.

It’s hard to leverage the knowledge of industry if you are uncomfortable communicating with them. OFPP acknowledges that “[t]o keep up with the rapidly accelerating pace of technological change, a number of agencies have sought better ways to communicate with industry so they can better understand the commercial marketplace, attract new contractors, and encourage current partners to use new processes and develop, test, and offer more modern solutions.”²⁵ Nurturing this alliance of interests will necessarily have an impact on how contracting professionals are trained.

As with prior initiatives developed to shape the buyer-seller relationship, notably “partnering” in the early

1990s, there will be early adopters and those who withhold judgment and support until the effort is fully implemented and enjoys broad support in the community.²⁶

The movement by government to seek improved communications and build strategic relationships with industry has the top-down and bottom-up support necessary to survive and will be an area of emphasis in contracting professional development going forward.

The Role of Higher Education

“Education is what remains after one has forgotten what one has learned in school.”

Albert Einstein

Seeking to become a contracting professional is more intentional today than it has been historically.

I know a lot of contracting professionals, but I don’t know anyone whose dream growing up was to become a contracting professional. In fact, many didn’t discover the profession until after they had completed an undergraduate degree, which would explain why most academic contract management training is conducted at the graduate level.

My experience with adult learners has been that those who enroll in graduate-level contract management programs do so to get ahead, not get in. Students are typically working in positions in a contracting office or performing acquisition-related duties somewhere in the organization

and have decided they want to be a contract manager. They are going to school because they want to improve their ability to perform and to set themselves apart from the competition.

Adult learners tend to be very enthusiastic, bright, and busy with the other things going on in their life: family, personal, and community obligations. For many, online learning is a better fit for their lifestyle, notwithstanding pandemic-related requirements to work remotely. Our role as educators has not changed that much. We are trying to encourage critical thinking, an entrepreneurial spirit when it comes to the application of learned knowledge, and a mindfulness that allows the learner to be fully present but not overwhelmed by what is going on around him or her. That last one can come in handy as you navigate a society that is deeply divided.

Academic programs dedicated to the study of contract management strive to achieve value-added learning. Unfortunately, the sheer number of variables involved make that metric hard to measure. Still, academic programs do add value by providing a “safe” forum to present ideas, learn new skills, and apply knowledge that is constructively critiqued by instructors and peers. Many contract management students who complete an academic program speak about the experience giving them confidence that they can be a high-performing professional. Given the role confidence plays in leadership, that is no small achievement gain.

If the liberal arts teach you how to think, graduate programs teach you how to apply what you know, or are thinking about, to function effectively as a professional. To that end, contract management training provided by academics will likely mimic the trends set by industry and the federal sector: more emphasis on position- or functional area-specific training (e.g., pricing) and training that supports professional certification or credentialing. There will be an increase in university-sponsored noncredit courses that offer focused skill development and provide continuing education units.

As the various public and private sector training initiatives are rolled out, opportunities for collaboration will emerge. I expect to see learning events sponsored by cross-sector teaming arrangements. We will all be looking for signals from the market.

This is an exciting time to be in the contracting profession. But it will also be an unsettling time for rising professionals who have had little experience adapting to changes of this magnitude. But as Steven Wright reminds us: “Experience is something you don’t get until just after you need it.”

As I stated before, I believe the “new normal” going forward will look a lot like the “new now,” and I am very much looking forward to the opportunity to be part of something that I think will have the profession not just moving on from legacy education models but moving forward. **CM**

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