

Doing it our way

by David Newman



Public Works and Governments Services Canada recruits and trains

We all understand economies of scale and how important they are in developing and negotiating contracts for both purchasers and suppliers. Not surprisingly, the same holds true in acquiring and developing human resources. As a commodity, trained staff is a renewable resource that appreciates in value if maintained correctly.

The federal government does hire existing experienced procurement specialists from the marketplace, but federal requirements are specialized enough that Public Works and Government Services Canada has long taken the approach of developing and training right from the get-go. As Richard Cole, Director, Resource Management and Professional Development Directorate puts it: “while our focus is primarily on developing our talent through our recruitment and training programs, we do transfer talent from other professions in the federal public service or hire from the private sector or particularly other levels of government where we have to fill a specific gap or requirement, often at a more senior level.”

The scope of federal operations and its immense human resource need are factors in this approach, but there is a clear policy approach at PWGSC towards self-development.

“The primary vehicle we are using now is the apprenticeship approach,” says Desmond Gray, A/Director, Professional Development and Change Management, Acquisition Program Branch. “Every year we visit major campuses to establish a group of qualified candidates. We then go through an evaluative process including interviews to select successful intern officers. The complexity of procurement regulations, policies, international trade agreements and other considerations at the federal level means that a great deal of training has to be undertaken for anyone new, no matter their level of purchasing experience. So it is a solid investment for us to develop and train our own talent in a career progression approach.” Added to that says Gray, “is the changing nature of the regulatory landscape,

the level of transparency and accountability, the need for continuous learning and the consequences of errors or omissions that completely justifies the level of sophistication in our professional development and training program.”

PWGSC’s home-grown training and career progression system is undergoing a major overhaul, but its principles and approach will remain. The Treasury Board Professional Development and Certification Program and Procurement Reform also have major impacts on the program, but these are more evolutionary than revolutionary in nature and are already being integrated by PWGSC.

The federal government’s well-established staffing and hiring process is conducted through the Public Service Commission of Canada (PSC). This is about to change radically when and if the new Public Service Management Act passes through Parliament so that departments will do their own recruiting, however the program is likely to remain stable for the near future.

Important aspects of the process are recruiting sessions and job fairs, particularly through educational institutions. For the procurement profession there is a well-established apprenticeship program for university recruits. One of the recruitment categories is ‘Supply Officer Trainee.’ PWGSC refers to them as ‘intern officers’ or ‘IOs.’ For 2002/03, 25 recruits were sought in various locations throughout Canada. Starting salary is somewhere between \$38,000 and \$47,000 with further salary progression for trainees successful in completing the Standards of Competence.

The IO program is 24 months long and is truly on-the-job training. In fact, after two 6-month assignments, an IO gets promoted without competition. Not bad! Let’s become one and see what happens.

The PSC publishes a recruitment poster, essentially a job ad, which we hear about at the university job fair. We get our resumé together along with a list of courses we have

followed. With that in hand, what do the feds want so we can become IOs?

Recruitment through the intern program is somewhat different from overall PWGSC hiring standards. Gray says “...the department is hiring candidates with university degrees but we don’t restrict it to a degree. For specific jobs we may require particular expertise, for example in a given commodity. Depending on the level, we may also require a form of certification or a background directly relevant to the function.”

To get in the IO program, we need a Bachelor’s degree in specific areas of study and knowledge of English or French; to pass two tests: the Graduate Recruitment Test and the Written Communication Proficiency Test; to obtain an “Enhanced Reliability” security clearance; and be prepared to relocate.

We’re in! To progress through our career, we are now looking at PWGSC’s “Procurement Continuum,” a comprehensive series of some 40 courses developed over the past 45 years to make sure the basic (and not so basic) knowledge is well imbued.

The Continuum covers three levels of career progression through the federal Public Service Procurement Group or PG classification: Entry, Intermediate and Advanced.

The Entry level (PG1, PG2) category – most germane to IOs – has six courses ranging in duration from a half-day to five days, including Introduction to the Procurement Process, Fraud Awareness and Conflict of Interest, Cost/Price Analysis, Financial Analysis, the Canadian Commercial Corporation and the CITT. Gray stresses the demanding nature of the program. “At the core it is just a very challenging apprenticeship program – [challenging] to determine the proper, current, up-to-date material, to deliver it at the appropriate level and at the appropriate time.”

Cole observes that the IO program is getting the work done as well as developing

→ pg 21

← pg 12

further skills. "An important aspect of training and professional development is delivery of learning on the job in an operational context so trainees not only learn the information but how to successfully apply it to work situations."

The Continuum is not only about apprenticeship. It provides a career and professional development path for a holistic approach to training, the importance of which, says Cole, goes well beyond straight training benefits, especially at a time when the Baby Boomer exit presents us with lop-sided staffing needs. "With the present demographic demands, this is prime time to develop and maintain as sophisticated and complete a training and professional development program as we can. It is also a key component in maintaining corporate memory and exercising effective knowledge management."

The Intermediate level (PG4, PG5) contains the bulk of the Continuum course activity. Eight basic courses, from 1-4 days, cover Negotiation Skills, Legal Framework, Green Procurement, Risk Management in Contracting and Indemnification, Bid Evaluation and Contract Selection Methodologies, Security in Contracting, Intellectual Property, and Professional Services Contracting. The Operations Branch of PWGSC offers six specialized 1-10 day intermediate courses and the Canadian Commercial Corporation offers two 5-7 day courses. Intermediate level IOs are also offered a Canadian Risk Management Certificate, following a 10-week, one-night-a-week, three course program at the Carleton University Professional Development Centre.

Advanced level (PG6), public procurement specialists are offered a Project Management Professional Preparation course – a series of

one-day workshops through the Professional Management Institute – and a PG6 Management Skills Program at Algonquin College consisting of 10 days, 2 days-a-week over three months.

During working hours, the Procurement Continuum also offers on-site courses for PMAC and NIGP CPPB accreditation.

All of this is not cheap, but clearly it's worth it. As Des Gray says: "in the end, the program is crucial to our capacity to deliver the goods and services that our client departments need in a timely way and best value to the Crown, as well as the overall public interest." ❧

David Newman is an Ottawa-based contributing editor to Summit magazine and a freelance writer. He is also president of Newman Communications, which specializes in coalition and alliance building and reputation management.