



The great certification debate

As many of you know, in the public procurement world, professional certification is an issue that is important to “get right,” and it was very much under discussion at the May Materiel Management National Workshop in Ottawa.

This time around, we’d like to try a little different kind of chat. Regular readers of this column (you know who you are even if you won’t admit it) will notice we don’t have any names or pictures attached to this particular chat as we usually do. That doesn’t mean it didn’t happen. Your correspondent/compiler had a recent chat with a senior federal public servant that ended up incorporating truly spontaneous and heated, though friendly, debate over the whole subject of public sector certification. The opinions expressed were frank, controversial and intriguing. Needless to say, our lively conversation would have been more careful and guarded and much less illuminating on both our parts had it been an on-the-record, official, formal chat.

So your thoughtful observer came up with the idea of “inventing” three “fictional” individuals to share with *Summit* readers some of the views that are, in fact, often pondered, if not often expressed, on the subject of certification in public sector professions. We hope it will provide you with a little entertainment, a lot of food for thought and, perhaps, the motivation to tell us what you really think. So here goes.

Sit down, take a deep breath, sip a beverage, open your mind and stay awhile while we chat with:



Jean Keene
An active, skilled, imaginary public sector procurement specialist



Sam Skeptik
A senior, long in the tooth, imaginary public service manager



P.D. Trainor
A respected, expert imaginary academic and writer

Methinks thou doth profess too much

Keane: Public sector procurement is a highly specialized profession that requires extensive knowledge of complex legislation, regulations, trade agreements and tribunal rulings. Private sector purchasers are often required to have certification through PMAC [Purchasing Management Association of Canada] or PLog [Professional Logistician] or other professional courses. Certification will provide a level of professionalism that will enhance the reputation of the profession among procurement specialists and with other professional groups in the public service.

Trainor: I’m not so sure I would elevate procurement to the same professional level

as doctors, lawyers, accountants and others. While public sector procurement certainly requires sophisticated skills and knowledge, it doesn’t entail the training or qualifications those professions do. Procurement is more like a trade than a profession. Like a mechanic or a programmer, you need the right training, and either qualifications or the equivalent, but mandatory certification takes it to an unnecessary level. Peer respect comes from doing the job well, not from a piece of paper.

Skeptik: Certification provides a progression of training. Matched with clear, defined standards and qualifications, a series of incremental training and experience activities provides a clear and definable career progression for public sector procurement specialists. Certification, or at the very least established benchmarks, also make staffing and promotion processes more effective and equitable.

Filling the gene pool

Trainor: This is a very challenging time frame for public sector employment with the aging Baby Boomer population outnumbering potential successors so substantially. Organizations will be severely tested to compete for the good people, maintain a corporate memory and implement better knowledge management in the next decade. A certification style program provides standards for recruitment and career progression and a rationale for more measurable and effective recruiting.

Skeptik: Certification programs have at their basis exclusion of those who don't meet obligatory and often arbitrary standards. Even if you grandfather existing procurement talent that either does not or does not want to meet the new standards, you eliminate immense potential talents that might not be good at tests and exams, but would still be excellent purchasers or asset managers. After all, Einstein didn't even pass high school. Where would we be now if he had been rejected and eliminated as a physicist?

Keane: Qualifying for a job or a promotion is a reasonable expectation in any staffing action. Measuring and evaluating who is best qualified, or as the Public Service Commission puts it, establishing a merit-based approach, is the best way to ensure you are placing someone who can do the job. A certification program is a reasonable and fair way to determine qualification. It also provides the public procurement specialist with a reward for learning and a way to measure their own career or peer progression. If the public sector is to compete with other sectors for the limited talent that may be available in the near future, clear standards and rewards will help.

Service, please

Skeptik: Mandatory certification is a bureaucratic approach that could result in rewarding mediocrity. The staffing process of a board and interviews should provide the best candidate and take into account equivalent experience, ability and, most important of all, judgement. A certification program may be able to inculcate knowledge and certain skills, but you still have to identify the personal qualities that get you the best candidate. We already have enough pre-qualifiers like bilingualism, employment equity and affirmative action. We don't need another.

Keane: The public interest requires that we recruit and promote people who have the knowledge and skills required to be sure they can do the job. In the public sector, the consequences of non-performance are simply too great to take chances. We need achievable measurable standards and recognition for achieving those standards to ensure we live up to the public trust. A certification program also helps to ensure greater efficiency and the assurance that incumbents have the knowledge needed to effectively serve the client.

Trainor: The level of visibility, transparency and accountability in public sector procurement is an important factor. Governments have to take every measure possible to avoid the risk of malfeasance or errors and omissions. The stakes are high – morally, ethically, financially and even legally. A certification program demonstrates that the government is making a reasonable effort to ensure personnel are trained and qualified to a given standard. It also provides a certain level of personal protection to the individual employee.

What do you think? Let us know at: info@summitconnects.com. ☞

Next Chatroom

Is there a role for elected officials in procurement?