

The people factor

by Irene Gessler



HR issues impact procurement

TINKER, TAILOR, SOLDIER, sailor... procurement officer? Okay, so it didn't make the short list of desirable career options in that old familiar nursery rhyme, but maybe it's time for a rewrite. According to those who know best, a career as a

procurement officer can be a very desirable option indeed.

Bob Myers is one person who knows the profession well. He's the director of Materiel Management and Contracts for the Department of Canadian Heritage.

Myers says he "loves" his job. And, why wouldn't he? He gets to travel the world in service to his department that maintains a presence at high profile international expositions, sporting and cultural events.

But that's just a small part of the picture. It takes more than a love of international travel and the accompanying glitz and glamour of high profile events to make a good procurement officer. A good procurement person, Myers says, is someone who understands the complexities of the business process, which can include "everything from a simple handshake to a team of lawyers battling it out over 'Canadian content' clauses affecting the acquisition of aircraft parts."

A procurement specialist must be precise because mistakes can be costly. It also helps to be an extrovert and have a few "street smarts" thrown in for good measure.

So, how does someone go about becoming a procurement officer?

There are many ways. Traditionally, Myers says, the procurement community within the federal government has come out of the generalist administrative community, which counts among its members everyone from accountants to human resources specialists. While this informal route still serves as the entrée to public sector purchasing for many, things are beginning to change.

Treasury Board Secretariat (TBS) has taken the lead and is working full-time to develop a professional development and certification program. The program, which is for federal government employees only, is still under development although a number of the program's components are in the final stages of development. The target date for completion is June 2004.

David Swift is the managing director of RFP Solutions, a private sector firm that assists government with its larger, more complex Requests for Proposals (RFPs). He's spent many years in the procurement field, which he describes as interesting and challenging largely because "no two deals are the same."

Unfortunately, Swift says, the profession is not well understood and suffers from a general lack of awareness and misconceptions. It can also be a risky business. The three main risks to government in procurements are delays, cost overruns and bad press, Swift explains.

What's his reaction when he sees yet another newspaper article about alleged government contracting improprieties?

"Oh no, here we go again... getting tarred with the same brush."

According to Swift, the two main issues facing the public sector purchasing community are the need for enhanced recruitment efforts and the need for some form of professional development program such as the one that TBS is working towards establishing.

Two departments, Public Works and Government Services Canada (PWGSC) and the Department of National Defence (DND), have recently undertaken huge recruitment drives for the PG occupational group, which is the classification for procurement personnel working within the federal government.

A demographic profile of procurement personnel working within the federal government unearthed some interesting observations. While the study is several years old and its precise statistical data is out of date, some general trends are still worth noting. Peter Elias is the man who commissioned the study. One of the more interesting trends, he says, is the shift in the profession from one that was "male-dominated, but with the older folks retiring there are now more females [than males]."

Whether male or female, a procurement person's career can be greatly enhanced by education and professional development. Complementing the efforts of Treasury Board and existing private sector courses, Algonquin College in Ottawa has just initiated a four-year applied degree program in e-supply chain management or procurement.

The program's coordinator, Professor Jeff Mace, says the first semester started this fall with an enrolment of 40 students, 17 of whom are fresh from high school. The other 23 have been out of school for at least a year and there are several international students in the group, too. The four-year laptop and co-op program consists of eight academic terms and three, paid co-op work terms.

Students enrolled in the program won't have much free time on their hands. Their course of study, which can best be described as "eclectic", includes among their many classes: operations and supply chain management; financial accounting; computer applications; business fundamentals; macroeconomics; microeconomics;

law; communications; marketing; database management; interpersonal communications; speaking and presentations, and workplace health and safety.

Several Canadian universities and colleges also offer courses in the discipline. But, Mace says, the program at Algonquin College is unique because of its depth and intensity.

This emergence of post-secondary courses in procurement is obviously good news for recruiters, but it could still be a matter of too little, too late.

As is the case with other occupational groups within the public service, the "greying" of the workforce and looming retirements *en masse* of the baby boom generation is an acute challenge facing the procurement community.

Steve Johnston, director of Administrative Services for the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), estimates that between 50 and 60 percent of managers and senior executives within government will be retiring within the next five to eight years. This mirrors the situation in the procurement community as well, Johnston adds.

That's a lot of people whose departures will leave a huge hole to be filled. The difficulty, Johnston says, is that you can't easily hire people ahead of time until the hole actually exists.

In a situation like this what is needed is a large pool of talent upon which to draw quickly and easily. But attracting that talent pool isn't easy. According to Johnston, it is difficult to attract people into this sector because it is competing within a labour market that needs an overall injection of new people.

So, what's the answer? How can you attract new people into the procurement field? How can you get them to recognize it as a desirable career option?

Johnston has two suggestions: inject professionalism into the field and raise its profile.

And, maybe just talk to a few procurement officers. They already recognize a desirable career when they have it. *mm*

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