

FACE TO FACE

Jane Billings: in the right place at the right time

by Catherine Morrison

As Assistant Deputy Minister for Supply Operations Service (SOS) at Public Works and Government Services Canada, Jane Billings oversees a branch which is responsible for providing supply-related common services to federal government departments and agencies, including requirements definition, acquisition of goods and services, development of standards and traffic management.

She manages procurement involving 63,000 transactions and \$8 billion worth of acquisitions in areas such as aerospace, informatics, scientific research and development, industrial and commercial products and contracting activities related to real property services. In addition, she oversees the acquisition and management aspects of Major Crown Projects and has responsibility for Crown Assets Distribution, Seized Property Management and the Canadian General Standards Board.

Billings took on this highly complex portfolio in September 1999, at a time when the challenges were, and still are, enormous. The e-government imperative looms especially large over SOS, given that every aspect of this initiative, like anything government does, has a procurement requirement behind it. But Billings is well prepared, in large part by virtue of a key assignment during one of her last jobs, as Assistant Deputy Minister, Corporate Implementation Group, responsible for portfolio and Crown Corporation issues as well as strategic projects. She undertook, well before the Government On-Line initiative, to position PWGSC within the government in terms of its electronic capacity. The exercise, dubbed Netvision, meant that, “when the requests went out for what the Government On-Line proposals would be,” says Billings, “we were well ahead of the curve. That enabled me to move into this job and be a few steps ahead of the game.”

She also recognizes that SOS will be a major element in determining whether the government as a whole will be able to meet its e-government objectives. “My personal goal,” says Billings, “is that the procurement system not impede the government in meeting its online services agenda.”

It’s a brave woman who makes that a personal goal, in view of the handicap she’s inherited with respect to staffing. Billings estimates that the loss of seasoned purchasing professionals during the down-sizing era has left her area under-staffed by 30 to 50 percent.

Because government contracting is so complex, it requires highly trained and skilled individuals who know their industries, know how to negotiate and how to put together a contract. Without an adequate complement of these practitioners “to work out robust contracts, enter into them and monitor them,” says Billings, the federal government puts itself at risk of not meeting its own wide-ranging procurement requirements. Among them is the need for transparency, encouraging competition, supporting industrial and regional development and complying with trade agreements, not to mention just getting the paper towels into department washrooms at the best price and on time.

All is not gloom and doom on this front, however. SOS has initiated a vigorous staffing intake program focusing on recent university graduates, which brings in some 30 to 35 new recruits a year. Billings feels particularly lucky that her department has been able to scoop up a number of highly qualified genXers, those young people who were sidelined by their demographic and the sluggish economy in the early ‘90s, who nonetheless have picked up some valuable life experiences in other fields.

SOS put them through a training program to make them “very skilled public servants, and very skilled procurement officers,” says Billings. “The challenge then becomes to keep them.”

Besides “renewal and rejuvenation” of the human resources capacity, and such challenges as Government On-Line, Billings finds herself in the thick of any number of sensitive and high-profile acquisitions, the helicopter negotiations being one hot-potato example. Another, less visible project, but clearly exciting to her, involves the government travel service, which SOS manages for the government on behalf of Treasury Board. The objective is to move into the next generation of travel administration through electronic integration of all aspects of the process, allowing employees to make all of their travel arrangements at their computer workstation, from departmental authorization to hotel and car reservations, to expense claims.

Jane Billings has worked for the federal government for 18 years, with stints in the Privy Council Office, the Department of Regional Industrial Expansion and the Office of the Auditor General. Her fascination with public policy grew out of her academic background in economics; she has a BA (Hons.) in Economics and Mathematics from Queens University in Kingston and a Master’s in Economics from McMaster University in Hamilton. Although she worked in the private sector for the Royal Bank, and for the Ontario government, she considers the federal government “the place to be” for someone with a passion for public policy.

That passion, that particular breadth of experience, together with the depth of her knowledge and experience of the federal government, is what gives Jane Billings her edge. And her grace and competence, along with her ability to tie it all together and make things work, is what makes her effective.

[Catherine Morrison](#) is a writer based in Chelsea, Quebec. She has been published in the *Ottawa Citizen* and the *Globe and Mail's* print and online editions, as well as in *Canadian Consumer*, *Asia Pacific Magazine*, the *Edmonton Journal* and *C.A.R.P. Magazine*. She was a full-time writer/broadcaster for CBC Network Television and CBC TV and Radio, Winnipeg, and a contributing editor and columnist for *Winnipeg Magazine*.