

The Blended Workforce

By Richard J. Bednar and Gary P. Quigley

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In 1961, as government's reliance on contractors grew, President Eisenhower cautioned against the concentration of power in the hands of "the military-industrial complex." The warning against blending government and private interests remains valid.

Federal workers frequently are co-located with contractor personnel in the same government offices, virtually indistinguishable, and often doing the same or similar work.

The emergence of this blended workforce is the result of choice and necessity, outsourcing and privatization policy, and ad hoc acquisition decision-making. Because of efforts to downsize the federal workforce without similarly reducing its functions, a greater reliance on the private sector became inevitable.

Nowhere are the potential problems more evident than in acquisition, where the number of federal workers has declined by nearly 50 percent since the mid-1990s and the workload has increased in dollar value and complexity. Recent contracting problems could be due in part to scarce acquisition officials and oversight.

Government must develop an experienced, skilled and balanced workforce in order to improve acquisition practices and integrity. In a recent study, "Strategic Plan, 2007-2012" ([GAO-07-1SP](#)), the Government Accountability Office observed: "Greater reliance on third parties . . . calls for an acquisition process based on realistic and well-defined requirements and contract terms that reflect a careful balancing of risks between the government and its contractors, as well as a skilled acquisition workforce capable of planning, negotiating and managing increasingly complex contracts."

It's not that contractor personnel are less aware of ethical obligations than are government personnel. But close mixing of the workforces raises concerns about the integrity of government decision-making, the protection of personal information and intellectual property, potential conflicts of interest and overall performance.

Government and contractor personnel should not be melded or conjoined. Rather, they should interface and work cooperatively, each responsible to a different authority.

The congressionally mandated Acquisition Advisory Panel has recommended that the Office of Federal Procurement Policy and the Federal Acquisition Regulation Council develop policies and procedures to ensure that the growing use of contractors does not undermine the acquisition process. The nonprofit

Procurement Round Table, dedicated to improving the federal acquisition system, recommends that policy-makers consider the following:

- OFPP should provide clear guidance on the appropriate roles and responsibilities of government personnel. Mutual respect for distinct obligations is a bulwark against conflicts of interest.
- Agencies should make conscious and transparent decisions about the use of contractors and their roles in carrying out contractually specified duties. They should take into account the means -- especially staffing and compensation -- to provide sufficient government personnel with the right skills to perform acquisition planning and to award and administer the contract.
- Contracts should include clear terms requiring the avoidance or mitigation of conflicts of interest and the protection of personal information and intellectual property to which contractors will have access.
- Federal acquisition personnel must be trained to protect the government's interests without telling contractors how to do their work or improperly interfering with their performance.
- Both government and contractor personnel should receive special awareness training about the unique professional and personal challenges posed by a blended workforce, avoiding conflicts of interest and staying within the boundaries of appropriate relationships.

The blended workforce is woven into the government's fabric for the foreseeable future. The challenge for the acquisition community is to recognize this extraordinary transfer of responsibilities and make it work in the public interest.

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