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The New “Freshman Fifteen” 15 Pieces of Career Advice for the Acquisition Intern

By Gloria Frieson

For this Advisory, we asked several of our own members of the acquisition community, “If you could provide one piece of career advice to new acquisition interns, what would it be?” We share their advice with you here, as the new “freshman fifteen.”

The need to replenish the diminishing acquisition workforce is well known. Around the federal government, agencies are shoring up their acquisition staffs by implementing innovative and targeted recruitment efforts to attract college students, job changers, and second careerists to the acquisition workforce, using a myriad of defense and civilian intern programs.

In dealing with the reality of growing acquisition workforce issues, we’ve noticed that much of the guidance given to date has been to agency leaders, with a focus on formal strategic implementation of plans for recruitment and retention; there is little information circulating that specifically addresses and targets the success of the individual intern. In this *Advisory*, we shift our focus to the intern. Agencies are working hard to recruit aspiring acquisition professionals. Once on board, how can we ensure they thrive and prosper in their new careers? We’ll train them in the Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR), of course, but career management and personal skills are important, too. We interviewed several of our own members of the acquisition community—from senior-level former deputy assistant secretaries and senior procurement executives to our own budding interns—to ask the question, “If you could provide one piece of career advice to new acquisition interns, what would it be?”

We share their 15 pieces of advice with you here, as the new “freshman fifteen.” But first, let’s take a brief look at the challenges facing the current and future workforce.

What are the challenges facing the current and future workforce?

The challenges facing the incumbent acquisition workforce today, as noted in the Federal Acquisition Institute’s recent Annual Workforce Report, include:¹

- Increasing demands to support agency missions
- A greater number of contract actions
- Increasing contract dollar values and complexity of workload
- Broadening acquisition workforce responsibilities to meet agency needs
- A requirement for new skill sets to manage the workload
- An overall agency turnover rate of 9 percent for contracting personnel
- Growing retirement eligibility rates for federal employees
- Loss of the intermediate and advanced acquisition knowledge base, much of which becomes eligible for retirement over the next ten years²
- Increasing congressional oversight and mandates for greater accountability

However, we must remember that today's acquisition interns also are facing these challenges, but with fewer training hours, fewer years of experience, and greater pressure to "step up." Unlike incumbent acquisition professionals, acquisition interns are attempting to blossom in an environment with challenges for which they have little or no background knowledge. They have had no part in creating the compromised state of the acquisition workforce, yet as a whole, they are being called on to save the day. Simply, they are starting careers in a field in transition, in a less than optimal state, but with expectations for exceptional performance.

Can we interpret that to mean, "Within challenge lies opportunity?"

Absolutely! There is ample opportunity for today's acquisition interns to be tomorrow's leaders and success stories, if you bring the right attitude, initiative, and quest for learning to the table.

There is a call for acquisition interns to become agents of change. In recent years the terms change agent, business advisor, and strategic business advisor all have appeared, in an attempt to describe a professional workforce that requires comprehensive business and communication skills. Meeting this expectation is a tall order for the acquisition intern who in many cases will need to demonstrate advanced business skills *quickly*. There is a great potential for you to receive great responsibility and great rewards very early in your careers, if you are prepared.

The acquisition intern will need to have an understanding of market conditions, interface with an equally understaffed, sometimes undertrained contingent of program and project managers, learn rapidly from a shrinking pool of middle managers and overcome knowledge and skills gaps left by their absence, and quickly acquire an advanced skill set to tackle more complex contract actions, such as performance-based acquisitions.

With the stage set, let's turn our attention to our 15 pieces of career advice for budding acquisition interns.

15 Live Up to Your Title: Be a Specialist, Not a Generalist

With the increasingly complex nature of federal acquisitions and potential reductions in full-time employees due to the annual increase in retirement-eligible staff, acquisition personnel are learning to do more with less. Demographic data analysis by the Department of Labor examined the possible impact of retiring Baby Boom-

ers on the economy and certain occupations.³ The data suggest that organizations will have to change the way they do business if the smaller workforce that follows cannot realistically fill the employment gaps left by the Baby Boom generation. There will not be enough Gen-Xers and Gen-Yers to backfill the labor or knowledge gap left by their absence. What remains for the new acquisition professional is a workload of a variety that often will require advanced skills.

In addition, the standard of many agencies is to provide a broad spectrum of training to the new acquisition professional that focuses on learning processes. Their hope is that new ranks can help diminish or at least stay on top of the workload by using strict processes to buy any and every product or service. However, Chip Mather, founding partner of Acquisition Solutions, suggests that while this may be the general rule of thumb, acquisition interns should seek to become specialists, not generalists. Chip's philosophy is, "The more you specialize, the better you grow to understand the business."

As a young military officer, Chip became a highly specialized buyer of information technology (IT) and was able to buy it with contract structures that were perfected over time, at fair and reasonable prices. He credits his knowledge of the intricacies of the IT market as contributing directly to his career success. Chip spent many years of his federal career specializing in information technology for which software was a major component. "One software company's fiscal year ended in May, so I negotiated with them in April for the best deal. Their sales people were commissioned. But if I was buying from another software company, that strategy did not work. Their sales people were compensated with stock."

Chip is adamant that had he not specialized in the acquisition of information technology, it would have been impossible for him to understand the business life cycle of those software providers and to negotiate the best deals for the government. He encourages interns to learn as much as possible about the acquisition of specific products and services, noting, "The more you know about the industry, or industries, you acquire goods and services from, the better acquisition specialist you will be."

14 But . . . Seek to Be More Than a Technical Expert

As procedure for our own young acquisition professionals and interns, Acquisition Solutions provides on day one of training a pocket-sized laminated card listing the "FAR Guiding Principles," found in part 1 of the

Federal Acquisition Regulation. Executive director of the Acquisition Solutions Training Institute and former deputy senior procurement executive Lisa Doyle explains that the reason for this is to get new interns to look at the FAR as a tool, not as a reason for *not* doing something. To truly grasp this point of view, you must go beyond the technical boundaries of your job. As interns you often are taught the technical aspects of acquisition, but seldom are you given opportunities to demonstrate sound business judgment or business acumen. However, today's business environment requires much more than the development of technical skills. Each individual must seek out opportunities to develop soft skills in communications and leadership. This will help prepare you to think creatively and "outside the box," a skill that will continue to increase in importance as you advance in your career.

13 Think Big Picture, Wear the Corporate Hat

Today's acquisition environment is more strategically focused than ever before. With the increasing complexity of acquisition actions and emphasis on performance outcomes, it is more important than ever for acquisition professionals to look beyond their daily tasking and workload and think "big picture." Shirl Nelson, a former deputy assistant secretary and current head of the Acquisition Solutions Research Institute, encourages interns to look for ways to contribute to the objectives of the programs they support. Learning to process procurement actions is necessary to get work done, but you'll be a more highly valued and respected member of the team if you seek to understand what your customers are trying to accomplish, then think and behave in ways that facilitate those objectives.

A good place to start appreciating the big picture is to read the strategic plans for your agency and the programs you support. Ann Costello, managing partner of Acquisition Solutions, spent 13 years at the General Services Administration, rising from intern to manager. During those years, Ann learned that you can't focus only on what is best for you as an individual, or even what is best for your program, but what is best for the organization. She also believes that thinking big picture requires that you be curious about the world that exists outside your "box." "When you go into an organization you'll learn first about how your office operates. But what you'll need to know moving forward is how your unit fits into your organization's mission at its highest level." By taking this approach, you build a sense of your place and value in the organization and

develop longer vision, which will help you build networks and set you apart from others. Lastly, Ann challenges interns to "Look farther down the road than next week . . . what will this mean to my program down the road?"

12 Be a Team Player

Acquisition Solutions currently is in the process of conducting performance-based acquisition (PBA) interviews with past and present clients to capture lessons learned from the PBA front lines. One of the most important pieces of feedback we have received to date is the importance of being a team player and contributor in the context of an integrated project team (IPT). As an acquisition specialist, it is important that you see yourself as a key player who is integral to the success of the entire program, not just responsible for executing paperwork. During our interviews, it has become clear that the failure or success of programs is linked directly to how well the contracting officer and program manager communicated during the acquisition process and after contract award. Those responsible for management of the Department of Homeland Security's Enterprise Acquisition Gateway for Leading-Edge Solutions (EAGLE) contract named this as the single most important contributing factor to the success of that acquisition and postaward performance.

Catherine Poole, executive director for Acquisition Solutions' Knowledge Resources and Tools organization, notes that being a team player means being accountable to your teammates—including both your peers and your customers—and not just to your manager. "It is about understanding the mission and objectives of the team and pitching in when and where you are needed to make the overall team and project successful." Focus on making the team successful, and you will be successful.

11 Ask Questions

As simple as this may sound, the power in this key piece of advice often is overlooked. Lisa Doyle, executive director of the Acquisition Solutions Training Institute and a former deputy senior procurement executive, says about acquisition interns: "At this stage in their careers it is all about learning. There is no such thing as a bad question." As an acquisition intern, you will need to ask questions of your customers, superiors, and peers to effectively execute your job. This will allow you to build on best practices and put aside reinvention of the wheel. In author Stephen Covey's words, "Seek first to understand."

Beth Yowell, an acquisition analyst with Acquisition Solutions, adds to this idea, “I’ve found there is no such thing as a bad question, but it is important to have a well prepared question.” With more than four years of rapid learning in the acquisition field, Beth has learned that “a better prepared question gets a better response. Do your homework and your research before you present a question. It’s appreciated by others when you do and it shows initiative.”

10 Don’t Just Do What You Are Asked to Do, Do More—and Stretch Yourself

The current acquisition workforce has no shortage of tasks. Many contracting officers and specialists are carrying a Herculean workload, and just the thought of adding more day-to-day responsibilities can seem too great a feat. However, even in today’s environment, do more than what is required. By doing more than you are asked to do, you show initiative, as well as gain more opportunities to learn. Shana Gabler, acquisition specialist with Acquisition Solutions, recommends taking on more responsibility by volunteering to do more. In her two years, Shana has had several opportunities presented to her that increased her responsibility level and exposure, just through the simple act of volunteering. “Take advantage of opportunities presented to you. The demand for the workforce to grow will allow you to have these opportunities at a younger age.”

Catherine Poole still recalls a piece of advice she received early in her federal career: “Stretch yourself. Don’t be afraid to take risks. Don’t be afraid to fail. If you have never failed at anything, you are playing it too safe.” There *will be* challenges at which you won’t excel on the first try. *When* that happens, view it as a learning experience; take responsibility, then look for the lessons learned. You will learn far more from a few failed attempts than from having nothing but successes throughout your career.

Gregory A. Garrett, chief operating officer for Acquisition Solutions, best-selling author, and former professor of contracting management, advises, “Dare to be great! Life and business are full of challenges, so view each challenge as an opportunity for success. Be willing to volunteer for the tough jobs, which will really stretch your skills and allow you to grow in ways you never imagined possible.”

Bob Welch offered a simple but powerful suggestion. “No matter how busy you are, always ask your boss if there is anything you can do to help him or her. Most of the time, they say no, but all of the time they remember that you asked.”

9 Look for Opportunities to Differentiate Yourself from the Pack

According to a 2007 report by the Partnership for Public Service, federal agencies estimate that more than 193,000 mission-critical positions will need to be filled over the next two years.⁴ Of these, 21,248 are expected to be in the field of accounting, budgeting, and business, including new acquisition-related positions. This means that the acquisition profession will be saturated with newcomers, setting the stage for stiff competition among this group. In addition, there has been a buzz around potential changes in the General Services (GS) pay system. For many years, government employment has been cloaked in a seemingly invincible shield, relatively free of firings, and with a promise of long, relatively foolproof job stability. However, with increasing discussions of moving toward a pay-for-performance system, the threat of competition among new acquisition professionals may further intensify. Therefore, it is important that as an acquisition intern, you look for opportunities to distinguish yourself from the thousands of other newcomers to the acquisition field.

There are many ways to stand out. One way is to be flexible and willing to accept new challenges and embrace change. Richard Hopf, an account executive with Acquisition Solutions and former senior procurement executive, stresses the importance of flexibility and adaptability. “Many young professionals dig holes for themselves that are, in later life, difficult to get out of.” The acquisition environment is in a constant state of flux, making it imperative that you train your thinking so that you are able to adapt to new situations, people, and cultures. Richard warns that “many contracting professionals become rule-bound in the government environment. Although this is the fault of the federal political culture, not the individual, an inability to retain intellectual flexibility and creativity, as well as an inability and unwillingness to adapt rapidly to changing directions, policies, and expectations, can be fatal to a career.”

In addition, Richard suggests that you be creative in honing your skills. This may mean seeking other avenues for training beyond the standard technical training. Consider your skill areas that require attention. If you are not strong in oral communication, consider taking public speaking courses or joining and actively participating in professional associations. Just as important for you to consider are skill areas in which you are exceptional. Using those skills and seeking opportunities to share your talents can set you apart from others.

8 Seek Good Mentors

The Federal Acquisition Institute in its sample acquisition workforce human capital plan model identifies formal mentoring/executive coaching programs as one of five leadership development and succession planning action strategies necessary for agencies to address the needs of the acquisition workforce. Efforts are being made by many agencies to implement and maintain successful mentoring programs. A senior government executive commented to us recently that not having teams that consist of a senior contracting officer and junior specialists “is a lot of what is missing today.”

There is little doubt that the formal implementation of mentoring programs is important. However, in the absence of formal programs, take the initiative to seek good mentors. When you find someone to be your mentor, you benefit by learning from another’s experience. Bob Ransom, practice area manager for Acquisition Solutions and former director of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s Satellite Acquisition Division, noted, “A good mentor will help you see beyond the immediate and guide you into new thoughts and directions. Good mentors have a positive outlook and an inherent willingness to take the time to provide professional guidance and honest feedback. Since these special people are often in short supply, don’t be afraid to look beyond your immediate organization to find them.”

Bob Welch, Acquisition Solutions partner, highly recommends the craftsman/apprentice model that existed in the Navy, where he started his career. “When we worked for the Navy as interns at the beginning of our careers we were assigned to journeymen contract negotiators. We followed them around every day and observed their activities. We watched them deal with customers, helped prepare solicitations, sat in on negotiations, and participated in every aspect of the procurement process as an apprentice to a skilled craftsman. It is amazing how much knowledge can be absorbed from closely observing those who are highly skilled.”

With regard to seeking this type of relationship, Bob suggests that you seek mentors with specific characteristics. Find a mentor who will “devote sufficient time, involve you in most of his or her day to day work, and who has a personality compatible with yours.”

Bill Kaplan, chief knowledge officer for Acquisition Solutions, stresses the value to interns of learning lessons, both from their own experiences and from their observations of the experiences of others. “My advice to interns would be would be to ensure that they focus on develop-

ing an ability to ‘learn lessons’ as they execute and as they grow in their chosen field of expertise. This requires that they begin to inculcate the concept of continuous learning based not only on what they can find or search for (information), but also on what they can adapt from the experiences of others. This is quite different from the concept of ‘lessons learned,’ which can imply a more static approach to performance. ‘Learning lessons’ really speaks to the ability and capability to make this part of the way they work, which in turn will provide an intern, especially in the evolving stages of his or her subject matter area, with the necessary agility to continually adapt to the environment based on the most current knowledge in that environment. This will provide them with a competitive advantage in the workplace. As I always say, ‘Knowledge that does not move has no value.’”

A Good Mentor Is Someone Who—

- Is patient, consistent, honest, and supportive
- Is willing to share knowledge and expertise and who wants to see you succeed
- Is accessible and approachable
- Is committed to helping you
- Is capable of providing constructive feedback
- Has guiding principles, strong career aspirations, and solid values
- Has real working knowledge of the work you are doing
- Will be there for you if you need them
- Can help you professionally network
- You can build a personal relationship with, not just a technical business relationship

7 Observe Leaders Around You and Emulate Them

Leaders are found at all levels. Look for role models who can teach you what success looks like. You may find these leaders in mentors, supervisors, or peers. In speaking about good leaders, Beth Yowell, acquisition analyst, encourages you to “pick up on the way they do everything; beyond technical experience you can learn good business skills from them, as well.” She recognizes good leadership skills in her manager by watching the way she manages young professionals, her communication with clients, peers, and superiors, and her ability to deal with conflict resolution.

When you are in a challenging situation and you aren't sure how to handle it, think to yourself, "What would [my leader] do?"

6 Take Time to Help Others

Although the acquisition intern may be a fresh college graduate or someone who is embarking on a second career, many will be among the large number of Gen-Y workers exploding into the workforce.⁵ This generation has a sense of self-worth like no other generation past. They also have grown up with technological tools that taught them to multitask, but which limited opportunities for them to learn the social etiquette often required in business. In the fast-paced acquisition work environment, remember to take time to help others. Helping others is sometimes overlooked, but is characteristic of many great leaders. Take time from your busy schedules and technology tools to focus on service, not only to self, but also to others. There are great personal rewards.

5 Vocalize Your Interests

Each of us owns his or her own career, and is responsible for making things happen. As an intern, you may be unaware that you do have a voice, and emphasis often is placed on doing what you are told. However, this can lead to circumstances where your career hits a plateau. Chandi Krohl, senior human resources business partner at Acquisition Solutions, recommends that interns "be proactive and not rely on others to do things for you." In other words, make your interests known to your managers. In expressing your interests, be confident and prepared. Shana Gabler, acquisition specialist, noted of her own experience, "Since acknowledging that [interest], I've focused on observing more and taking on more responsibilities in that area."

Although vocalizing your interest is key, Bob Ransom has this advice, "Always try to listen and understand first, then talk. Strive for ways to really 'understand' what another person is saying. Don't march in with a series of demands without first knowing the other person's perspective."

4 Change Jobs or Shift Responsibilities Every Two to Three Years

U.S. Department of Labor statistics show that a worker between the ages of 18 and 38 changes jobs an average of ten times throughout their career.⁶ Chip Mather, Acqui-

sition Solutions founding partner, also has a piece of advice for interns on this matter. He recommends that early in your career, you find a new job—or at least take on new or different responsibilities—every two to three years. This will allow you to gain a wide variety of exposure, experiences, and access to new people. In general, the more you move around, the more valuable you become, wherever you go. (But don't change jobs so frequently that you become known as a job hopper. That can quickly sour your reputation.)

Changing jobs does not necessarily mean that you need to move to another agency or organization. There are a wealth of opportunities within every agency, and even within your existing organization. Pay attention and keep your ears and eyes open for new opportunities and new projects. Alison Dillon, acquisition specialist with Acquisition Solutions, recommends that interns "act as a sponge; have a lot of different experiences and soak it all up."

3 Don't Gripe About the Grunt Work

As an acquisition intern, you are at the bottom of the ladder and may encounter work you find highly task "centric" that seemingly has no value to you. However, this kind of work also provides opportunities to learn. Julie Logan, human capital specialist at Acquisition Solutions, says, "I think everything has a purpose, so learning how the small tasks fit into the bigger picture is important." Chandi Krohl, senior human resources business partner, adds, "No position comes without the bad stuff, but do whatever task you're thrown well, or you'll never be given larger challenges." Even the smallest tasks can prepare you for greater responsibility.

2 Bring a Solution

Problems come up on a regular basis, no matter the job you are in or the project you are working on. Catherine Poole, executive director of Acquisition Solutions' Knowledge Resources and Tools, provides this piece of advice to employees: "Don't bring your manager a problem; bring him or her a solution." In other words, "when a problem comes your way, I'd like to see that before you bring the problem directly to me to resolve, that you've thought carefully about the issue and how we might be able to solve it. That doesn't mean you have to bring a single or complete solution; it might be an array of potential options, but what I'm looking for is demonstration that you've considered the problem, you've put it in context, and given thought as to how to solve it." Addressing

challenges in this manner will give you the experience and confidence to think through and resolve larger challenges over time.

1 Put Blinders on to Negativism: Be Mindful of—and Mind—Your Mind-set

Choose to be positive. Ann Costello, Acquisition Solutions managing partner, advises that you “be guided by your values and keep them positive.” If you can, avoid organizations that have a negative or an unsupportive culture. However, if you find yourself faced with trying to execute work and thrive in such an environment, focus on aligning yourself with positive people. Just as every organization has people who focus on the negative, there are also those, though there may be few, who have a positive attitude and outlook about the work and who generate a contagious energy and productivity.

Conclusion

We shared our interest in this initiative with Paul Denett, Office of Federal Procurement Policy (OFPP) administrator, who offered this piece of advice to interns: “Show up

every day, listen, work hard, learn acquisition, stay ethical, make friends with program managers, and volunteer for tough acquisitions. This will take you as far as you want to go.” We think this sums up the “freshman fifteen” nicely.

The current conversation in the acquisition community still is focused on increasing the numbers of the acquisition workforce by taking the strategic actions necessary to recruit, hire, and retain acquisition professionals. As acquisition interns move into the workforce, it is important that they be provided with sound advice and guidance on “how to show up” in the workplace. As acquisition professionals, it is our responsibility as a community to share with this new group what we have learned through years of experience by sharing with them advice that has resulted in our own successes.

The new acquisition professional will need to be equipped with more than a desk guide to the FAR. Business savvy, business judgment, business etiquette, and communication skills are not easily taught from the pages of a textbook. These necessary soft skills require more personal intervention and giving of your time. We owe it to our profession to become open books, storytellers eager to share the stories of our successes, as well as failures, in support of the next generation of acquisition professionals. ♦

Endnotes

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