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Contractors, the Army's Neglected Stepchildren

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A war zone is no place for on-the-job training, but that's the way it is for many **Army** contracting personnel deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan.

They are a mix of **Army** officers, enlisted personnel and civil service employees. Many shipped out without proper training and into the chaotic world of combat operations. They often work double shifts and cannot depend on speedy help from Washington, given the difference in time zones.

That lack of support for contracting professionals is not new. Contracting has become a **neglected** career path at many federal agencies, including the Defense Department, for several years, in part because of deep staffing cuts in the 1990s.

But the neglect has become an urgent problem for the **Army**, which relies on large-scale contracts for food service, interpreters, computers and other troop-support services in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The **Army's** contracting staff in the war theater is "under-trained, under-supported and, I would argue, most important, undervalued," said Jacques S. Gansler, an acquisitions expert who was chairman of an independent commission on **Army** contracting.

The commission last week released a report recommending that the **Army** overhaul its procurement system and add at least 1,400 military and civil service contracting personnel.

The attitude that contracting is a back-office operation exists across government and often translates into acquisition offices that are not properly staffed and trained, as the **Army** discovered.

"You could safely say it is a problem that needs to be investigated across other agencies," said Gansler, a University of Maryland professor who was an undersecretary of defense in the Clinton administration.

Many contracting officers agree that they need assistance or more training in such areas as project management, negotiation, pricing and fees, subcontracting and identifying fraud. That was one of the findings of a survey conducted this year by the Office of Management and Budget and the Federal Acquisition Institute.

Paul A. Denett, the OMB official in charge of government-wide procurement policy, said agencies have been asked to develop plans to close competency gaps in their acquisition workforces by Dec. 15 and turn them into the Office of Personnel Management for analysis.

The data should tell the government how many additional contracting officers need to be hired and what kind of training to provide, he said. "We're putting all the right priorities on this," he said.

The government has about 1,000 job openings for contracting officers and specialists, known as 1102s in federal jargon. The contracting jobs can often be difficult to fill, especially in the Washington area, where agencies compete for skilled procurement professionals.

Denett said the administration is pushing an intern program, designed to pull in young people with business degrees, because "we are keenly aware that we have to compete for the new talent pool."

Nine departments have recruited about 1,200 interns, and other agencies are joining the program. He hopes the program will add about 500 to 600 interns a year.

The program may be critical to offsetting a wave of retirements in the acquisition workforce. Of contracting officers eligible to retire, 52 percent said they would leave in the next 10 years, the survey found.

According to the OMB, the number of contracting officers in the government, not counting military contracting officers, was 27,621 in June.

To improve training, the OMB has developed certification programs for contracting officers and program managers for all non-defense agencies. It is the first time that the agencies have started to provide common training, education and development standards, the OMB said.

There's little argument that training is increasingly crucial for contracting officers. Procurements are more complex and require more management oversight for longer periods.

The study by the Gansler commission found that a lack of training probably contributed to contract fraud and abuse in Iraq, Afghanistan and Kuwait. The report also pointed out that only 38 percent of the **Army** acquisition and contracting workforce in the combat theater are certified for the positions they hold.

Like many agencies, some of the **Army's** contracting problems have been caused by downsizing. In 1990, the **Army** had about 10,000 people in contracting. Today, it has 5,821. Most are civil service employees -- 5,563, according to the report.

Relatively few are on the ground in or near the war zone. According to the commission's report, the **Army** has 58 military personnel and 20 civilians serving in contracting positions in Iraq, Afghanistan and Kuwait.

The civil service employees, in particular, appear to be underappreciated, the report indicated. They volunteer for deployment, but, unlike military personnel, they do not get favored tax treatment on their salaries and they lack long-term medical benefits comparable to the military.

The commission repeatedly heard that there are no general officers responsible for **Army** contracting and recommended that two major generals and three brigadier generals be named to head contracting commands to strengthen leadership and create accountability.

Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates said he was dismayed by the report's findings, but said "one of the things that clearly is going to have to be addressed in all the services is whether they have enough uniformed officers in contracting."

He added that "one of the lessons that I took away from the report is the need for all of the services, but especially the **Army**, to focus on rebuilding contracting as an attractive career path."

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