

Boosting Defense Acquisition Workforce Could be Tricky

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Defense Secretary Robert Gates' plan to significantly increase the size of his department's acquisition workforce could face steep logistical and practical challenges, industry officials and observers said Tuesday.

On Monday, [Gates announced](#) his long-awaited fiscal 2010 Defense budget proposal. Among the secretary's recommendations were **converting 11,000 acquisition support positions into full-time Pentagon employees** and hiring an additional 9,000 Defense procurement professionals by 2015.

But, with hundreds of vacant acquisition positions already unfilled throughout the federal bureaucracy -- and with stiff competition guaranteed from the private sector -- some fear that Defense might find it difficult to attract the best and brightest.

Stan Soloway, president of the Professional Services Council, a contractor trade association, said that for Defense to attract a high caliber of acquisition professionals, it might have to become more competitive in terms of salaries, benefits and professional development.

"There is already a shortfall of acquisition professionals across the government," Soloway said. "DoD is going to face a number of challenges in terms of competition. ... **Simply creating and funding a position does not necessarily mean that the position will be filled.**"

On Tuesday, PSC sent Gates a [letter](#) offering its recommendations and suggestions on the reform plan.

In total, Gates called for Defense to reduce the number of support service contractors from its current level of 39 percent of the workforce to its pre-2001 level of 26 percent.

The Pentagon would replace those contractors during the next five years with 39,000 new full-time government employees, 20,000 of which would be acquisition professionals. At least 13,000 new civil servants, including 4,100 acquisition officers, would be added next year.

Altogether, the Defense acquisition workforce would grow 15 percent over the next five years, from 127,000 to 147,000--a level not reached since 1998, said Chris Isleib, a Pentagon spokesman.

Details were less clear, however, about the process the department will use to reduce the number of contractors that support the government acquisition process.

Soloway urged Defense to follow a strategic approach focusing first on core positions that are either inherently governmental or for which transitioning the work back into government would provide a measurable benefit -- either in cost or by performance.

"If it is not strategic, it is not going to work," he said.

Isleib said Defense would use a phased approach, expected to last five years, to transition contract positions that are "inherently governmental" back to the civil service. The department, he said, would wait until support contracts end to make changes and then open the positions for competition with the public.

Among the positions that will be brought back in-house are 2,500 contract overseers at the Defense Contract Management Agency, 800 pricing and cost estimating specialists, 250 attorneys and 600 auditors at the Defense Contract Audit Agency.

One problem is that Defense has never fully outlined a policy regarding how many contract support professionals it needs as compared to government acquisition staffers, said Dave Patterson, executive director of the National Defense Business Institute at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. The institute is focused on helping the department, other federal agencies and the defense industry improve their acquisition and business management programs.

"The most important thing is that Defense is going to have to establish what constitutes a government employee and what constitutes a contractor support employee," Patterson said. "They are going to have to take a disciplined, measured approach about what needs to be done."

An official at the American Federation of Government Employees, a labor union that represents Defense workers, said the organization backs Gates' plan, but also has concerns about how the conversion of 11,000 contractor support staff would be implemented.

"You don't just wave a magic wand and turn 11,000 contractors into government employees," said Mark Gibson, an AFGE labor relations specialist. "There will be some process hoops they have to jump through."

Despite the host of unanswered questions -- some of which will be worked out as the plan moves through the congressional appropriations cycle -- observers said Gates' proposal puts Defense on the right footing and reverses some controversial personnel decisions dating back to the Clinton administration.

"This plan should not come as any surprise to anyone," Patterson said. "This is the consequences of the less-than-thoughtful plan in the 1990s to decrease the size of government."