

Wanted: Agencies scramble to find qualified project managers

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By September 2004, agencies must have a full-time project manager, with commercial certification and significant experience, for each IT project worth more than \$5 million.

So over the next year, agencies will scramble to find these employees to fulfill the Office of Management and Budget's mandate.

With funding for new hires flat or decreasing across civilian agencies, many CIOs and agency officials said they are looking inward to find employees with enough experience and then get them certified through private programs.

Others said they might try to hire qualified project managers from private firms.

But no matter how agencies carry out the decree, it is obvious project management has evolved into its own discipline over the past two years. "More and more organizations are developing an appreciation that project management is more than just technology," said Therese Pardo, deputy director for the Center for Technology in Government at the State University of New York at Albany. "They are recognizing that there is more to project management than just cost and schedule. It takes soft skills like administration and negotiation."

To that end, the Office of Personnel Management has been working since last year on a new definition for project managers, and might create a new job classification under the General Schedule for project managers.

Ira Hobbs, the deputy CIO at the Agriculture Department and co-chairman of the CIO Council's Workforce and IT Human Capital Committee, said defining project management as its own job classification will codify the work as a full-time position.

"Historically, project management has been a collateral part of one's responsibilities," Hobbs said. "Many people out there are experienced, but not certified. The crux for me is we are starting to identify people on a full-time basis to play these roles and there is a level of capacity in government that will grow."

And that capacity must increase for IT projects to find success, according to administration officials. In the fiscal 2004 budget request, OMB said it reviewed more than 1,000 IT business cases and found "a significant shortage of skilled personnel."

Survey results hopeful

A recent CIO Council survey actually found the situation is not as grim as OMB thinks. The council's IT Work Force Committee surveyed 1,329 major IT projects across 30 agencies and found that 66 percent of the project leaders met OMB's minimum criteria, which includes a commercial certification and an established record of success at running major projects.

"We were pleasantly surprised by the results," Hobbs said. "There were more qualified people than we anticipated. We have since seen a surge in training for project managers."

Of those who did not meet the minimum criteria, 79 percent are receiving training. But the lack of training courses, the survey found, is a significant obstacle.

One training course is GSA's Strategic and Tactical Advocates for Results (STAR) program. Will Brimberry, STAR's program manager, said there was a waiting list for the June class, and he expects the November class to fill up quickly.

The STAR program, which started in 1999, is a six-day program covering six IT management topics, including capital planning and investment control, and project management.

"Both program and project managers are taking classes because it helps them understand OMB's requirements better," Brimberry said. "OMB has raised the interest in project management and other management initiatives. In 2001, we didn't have a waiting list at all."

Other agencies, such as the Environmental Protection Agency, are hiring outside contractors to train their project managers.

Mark Luttner, director of EPA's Office of Information Collection, said he must hire 10 project managers by next summer to meet OMB's requirement. Luttner said the agency hired Management Concepts Inc. of Vienna, Va., to provide agencywide project management training. "We really don't have a choice but to look within to find qualified people," he said. "For the past five years, our personnel ceiling has been flat. We have plenty of people who are interested, but finding experienced ones is most difficult."

Luttner said OMB's mandate makes sense, but that many agencies likely will have troubling meeting it.

Major obstacle

One of the biggest obstacles is dedicating someone full-time to a project, Luttner said; many employees fill multiple roles in an agency.

For his 10 positions, Luttner wants people who are certified, but experience is most important.

“We need someone who knows where the land mines in projects are and how to avoid them,” he said. “We need people who can be aggressive with contractors when they need to be and have no fear of the technology.”

Even though OPM has yet to publish a definition of a project manager, most agency officials seem to agree on the qualities a person must have.

Janet Barnes, OPM’s CIO, expanded upon Luttner’s qualifications. She described a qualified project manager as someone who brings attention to detail in following a project plan to the end, has an analytical mind for solving the variety of challenges that arise, and the ability to communicate to all parties involved.

OPM, however, takes a different approach to finding project managers for IT initiatives than many agencies. Barnes said project leaders come from the program office and she assigns a technical director to the project to work alongside the manager.

She said that, because contractors also make up about 50 percent of her staff, the technical director often is a vendor.

“Sometimes there is a bias that people without a strong IT background cannot manage IT projects, but I disagree with that,” Barnes said. “If they realize their shortcomings and bring that technical expertise to the table, then there is no reason they will not be successful.”

Fred Thompson, a former Treasury official and now an e-government practice director for Unisys Corp., echoed Barnes’ belief that the private sector can play a significant project management role for agencies.

Thompson, who left government last November, said the overall project manager must be a government employee, but that project managers on lower tiers can be from the private sector.

“There is a value in having a partnership situation between government and industry,” he said. “Large IT projects are never managed by just one person, so having contractors involved brings additional disciplines to the team.”

Thompson said he supports OMB's push for having qualified project managers for each IT initiative, but said that for too long good project managers have been promoted out of project management in agencies.

"Very few people made a career out of project management," he said.

That is changing, government officials said.

Hobbs said the fact that agencies are realizing a project manager must be full time is another piece to the huge culture change e-government is imposing on agencies.

"We are seeing more people taking training courses and getting experience, which is allowing them to rise in the field," Hobbs said. "There is a unified effort across government to close the project management gap."