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New acquisition training programs aim to improve growing work force

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The nonprofit Partnership for Public Service launched two programs last week to hire, retain and educate federal employees working in acquisition, one of the government's fastest-growing fields.

The partnership unveiled a new acquisition training module developed with the Federal Acquisition Institute and the General Services Administration. The Web-based training aims to offer best practices covering the life cycle of a contract, from the kickoff meeting to performance metrics and problem resolution. Max Stier, the partnership's president, also announced the "FedRecruit" initiative, which Stier hopes will improve hiring and retention in acquisition fields.

The programs come after more than two years of work with acquisitions employees at a dozen agencies.

"We canvassed the field [of acquisition professionals] to see what kinds of issues the partnership should work on," Stier said. "And better training was a priority."

The training module was developed by PerformTech, a Virginia-based company that develops training and educational software. It takes about three hours to complete, according to the company, which tried to liven up the material with quizzes and streaming videos.

"We heard [while developing the system] that it's a lot of important material that was very difficult to make interesting," said PerformTech's Martin Spitznagel.

In its most recent "Where the Jobs Are" report, the partnership estimated that more than 9,000 contracting jobs would be created between 2007 and 2009. More than two-thirds are at the Defense Department, which worked with the partnership on its training module. The partnership tested the module with more than a dozen acquisition professionals, ranging from GS-8s to GS-13s.

The training started last week, both to federal employees and private-sector contractors, on FAI's Web site, www.fai.gov. The institute's director, Karen Pica, also encouraged feds in other fields to use the system.

"The goal is to take this informa-

tion and [these] resources and make them available so people can access them anywhere," Pica said. "This isn't just a model for the contracting community. If we're supposed to work as a team, we need to start integrating that approach."

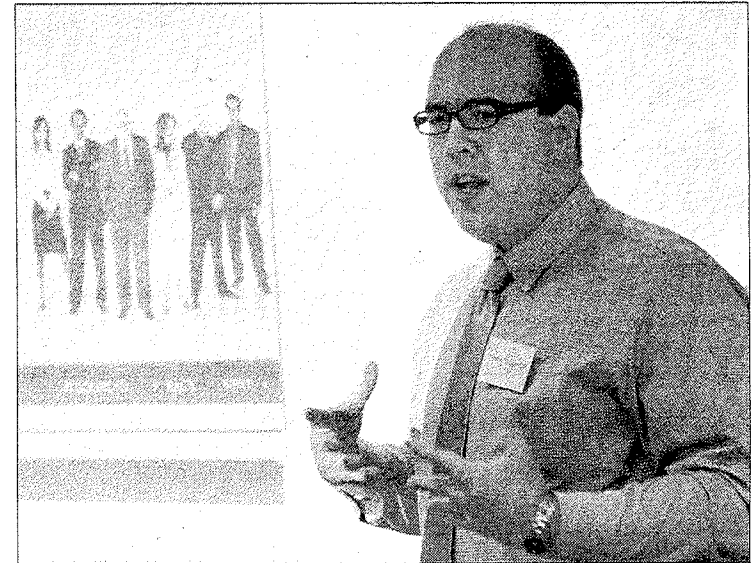
Feds who work in acquisition can receive continuous learning credit for the training.

The just-launched FedRecruit initiative has a wider audience — not just contracting personnel, but human resources managers as well. The partnership hopes to identify best practices for recruiting and retaining top talent, especially younger workers, and baby boomers leaving the private sector.

"We're trying to look for successful processes that can be repeated across the government," said Brad Golson, a staffer at the partnership who's working on FedRecruit.

The program will initially focus on the acquisition work force, but will expand to cover other fast-growth fields like information technology and nursing.

Several acquisition managers said a new approach is welcome; they faulted their agencies for failing to offer new opportunities to



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PerformTech's Martin Spitznagel says the company, in developing the training module, was challenged to work with the "important material that was very difficult to make interesting."

younger workers, particularly those who started in acquisition intern programs.

"We create these great intern programs and send people through them," said David Litman, former senior procurement executive at the Transportation Department. "But then after two years, we let them go off a cliff."

Litman recommended a voluntary rotation program that would cycle acquisition employees through different agency components; other managers recom-

mended temporary duty assignments that let acquisition managers see the results of their work.

At GSA's Public Buildings Service, for example, acquisition managers often travel to see the buildings whose construction they managed. But managers in GSA's Federal Acquisition Service don't often have similar opportunities.

Stier hopes FedRecruit will solicit these kinds of suggestions from managers and offer a new approach to recruiting civil servants.

"There's a dire need," he said. ■