

U.S. Federal Project Management: Understanding FAC-P/PM and Competency

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Introduction

The trend of giving increased attention to project management within the U.S. civilian federal government is continuing to intensify. Action by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) in 2007 resulted in the creation of the first-ever Federal Acquisition Certification for Program and Project Managers (FAC-P/PM).

This paper summarizes the results of a study to get a glimpse into the status of this unique program. This paper, and the study report upon which it is based, provide federal leaders and those associated with FAC-P/PM with an understanding of the program, its state of implementation, and an effective roadmap to further advance its implementation.

The study found that the program's goal of "well-trained and experienced program and project managers" remains intact, and that the pace of implementation across government agencies is accelerating. Implementation seems further along where positive project management and training attitudes exist; however, implementation is sporadic and hampered by a lack of a centralized or active inter-agency community. Implementation is also hindered by the relatively sizable effort required by each Agency to develop their own individual FAC-P/PM programs.

Specific recommendations are included in the study report for the government agencies implementing FAC-P/PM and for the management/oversight of FAC-P/PM by OMB, the Office of Federal Procurement Policy (OFPP), and the Federal Acquisition Institute (FAI).

Executive Summary

Mission success is often dependent on project success. The federal government has joined industry in a pattern of increased attention to project management that includes establishing certification and competency standards. The Federal Acquisition Certification for Program and Project Managers (FAC-P/PM), which was created April 2007, is a work in the early stages of progress. Its goal of "well-trained and experienced program and project managers" remains intact.

A study was conducted to get a glimpse into the status of FAC- P/PM; it is in the early stages of implementation and the pace is accelerating. Implementation seems further along where positive project management and training attitudes exist; however, implementation is sporadic and hampered by a lack of a centralized or active inter-agency community. Implementation is also hindered by the relatively sizable effort required by each Agency to develop their own individual FAC-P/PM programs; this is presenting a barrier for some. The Senior/Expert level of FAC-P/PM is receiving virtually all of the attention.

FAC-P/PM is a three level competency-based project and program management certification for federal government civilian employees. It includes skills specific to the government environment that are not well represented by industry or commercial certifications. The Office of Federal Procurement Policy (OFPP) within the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) controls the program, the Federal Acquisition Institute (FAI) oversees the program, and the individual agencies are responsible for exercising the wide latitude they have been given to develop and implement compliant FAC-P/PM programs.

Positive reports from adopters of FAC-P/PM have been received for the government-specific aspects, for the inclusion of life cycle system management, and for the inclusion of leadership. The impact of FAC- P/PM on the management and outcome of projects and programs has not been measured and is likely too early to tell; however, some project managers report signs of improvement. Study data indicate that higher levels of value are associated with FAC-P/PM where implementation was furthest along, where there is increased appreciation for project and program management, where certification is based more on competency and less on training, and where employees see FAC- P/PM as part of a systematic effort within their Agency to improve project and program results.

Project management is an emerging field across many civilian agencies, and, as in any emerging market, there are leaders and followers. OMB, OFPP, and FAI have a tremendous opportunity to harness the power of the early adopters lessons learned and knowledge base for the benefit of the next wave of FAC-P/PM adoptions.

Continuing the FAC-P/PM program and implementations is recommended; study data are suggestive of the program's value. Recommendations at the program level for OMB, OFPP, and FAI include assessing program performance using outcome-based measures, providing Agencies with additional implementation guidance, developing a collaborative inter-agency implementation community, enabling individual Agencies to leverage the experience of the early adopters, and increasing the awareness of FAC-P/PM within the program and project management workforce. Recommendations at the Agency level include improving outreach with the early adopters, stimulating Entry/Apprentice and Mid/Journeyman levels of certification, focusing more on competency and less on training, and using a framework to plan and guide FAC-P/PM implementations.

Acknowledgements

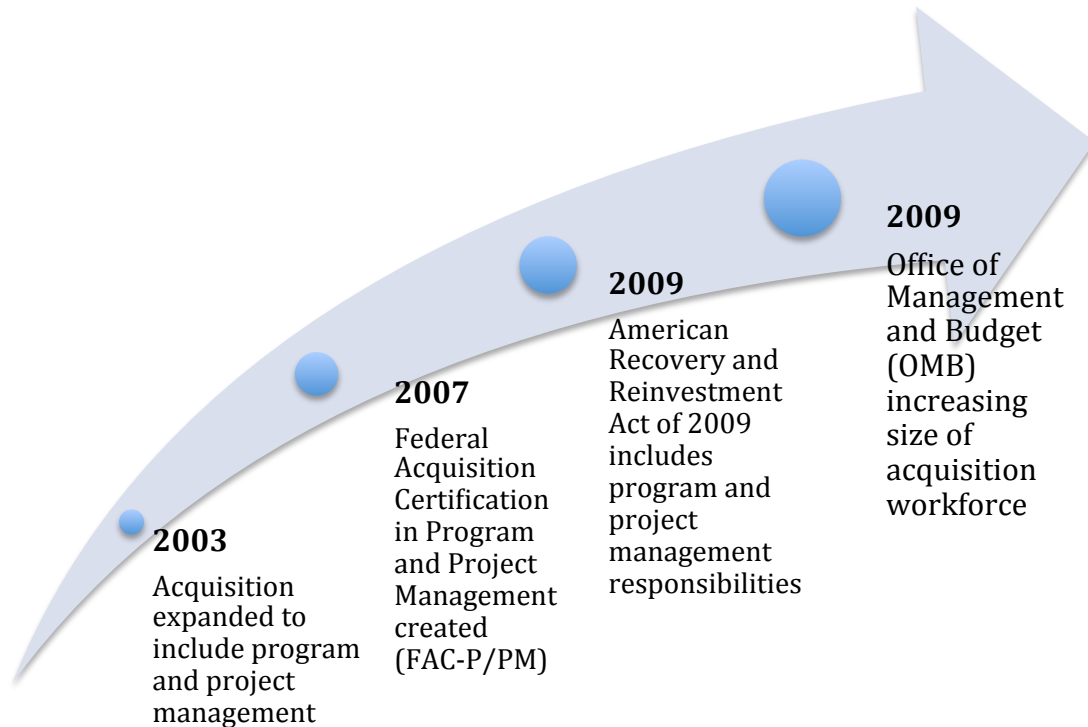
This FAC-P/PM study, which was conducted by Tim Jaques, Brent Hansen, Morgan Henrie, and the author of this paper, benefited enormously from their substantial levels of project management and government expertise.

The American Society for the Advancement of Project Management (asapm) and IBM Center for the Business of Government made notable commitments to advancing project management in the civilian federal government by sponsoring this FAC-P/PM study. This study was also supported with an important survey conducted with the Washington DC Chapter of the Project Management Institute (PMI).

Some Recent History

As a result of OMB's Office of Federal Procurement Policy Letter 05-01 dated April 15, 2005, the Federal Acquisition Institute (FAI) formed a cross-functional working group and developed recommendations for the "establishment of certification programs for program and project managers..." That policy letter, which provided the rationale for establishing a special government certification, stated that the action is being taken to build on "previous efforts to improve the development of the acquisition workforce" by addressing the broadened definition of acquisition contained in the Services Acquisition Reform Act of 2003 (SARA, P.L. 108-136). For the first time, the Acquisition role now includes "program and project managers." This is a significant expansion, and means that civilian federal government program and project managers are part of the acquisition workforce.

Following the adoption of the working group recommendations, FAC-P/PM was officially established on April 25, 2007. FAI was charged with administering the FAC-P/PM program in conjunction with individual agencies¹.



The FAC-P/PM program applies to all executive agencies within the federal government, except those subject to the Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act (DAWIA, 10 U.S.C. §§ 1741-46); it is recognized and accepted by, at a minimum, all civilian executive branch agencies. This certification is not mandatory for all program

¹ The OBM Policy memo may be found at:
http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/procurement/workforce/fed_acq_cert_042507.pdf

and project managers; however at a minimum, program and project managers assigned to programs considered major acquisitions must be FAC-P/PM certified at the Senior/Expert level unless the appropriate Agency official grants a waiver. Major acquisitions are defined in OMB Circular A-11, Part 7, Exhibit 300, and include projects with obligations greater than \$500,000 annually. The targeted completion date for this certification is one year from the date of assignment to the program or project.

Recently, U.S. official actions have highlighted the recognition of the importance of project and program management. On February 18, 2009, as part of the national approach to addressing the economy, the Director of OMB issued “Initial Implementing Guidance for the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009.” This sixty-two-page document contains many dozens of very specific actions and responsibilities associated with project and program management to insure that “specific program outcomes and improved results” are achieved. To help agencies develop plans to increase the size of the acquisition workforce, Congress enacted section 869 of the Duncan Hunter National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2009. This provision directs OMB to prepare an Acquisition Workforce Development Strategic Plan for federal agencies other than the Department of Defense to develop a specific and actionable 5-year plan to increase the size of the acquisition workforce and operate a government-wide acquisition intern program. Section 869 outlined a number of matters that the plan was to include, such as the development of a sustainable funding model to support efforts to hire, retain, and train an appropriately sized and skilled acquisition workforce.

In response, OMB issued its plan for civilian agencies on October 27, 2009. The plan, according to OMB, provides a structured approach for these agencies to augment and improve the skills of their acquisition workforce, which includes contract specialists, contracting officer’s technical representatives (COTR), and program and project managers. According to an April 23, 2010 General Accounting Office (GAO) report to congressional committees titled “The Office of Management and Budget’s Acquisition Workforce Development Strategic Plan for Civilian Agencies” OMB officials acknowledge that the plan does not explicitly address all of the required matters. However, according to the report, they believe that it nevertheless provides, for the first time, a government-wide framework for civilian agencies to conduct agency-specific acquisition workforce planning.

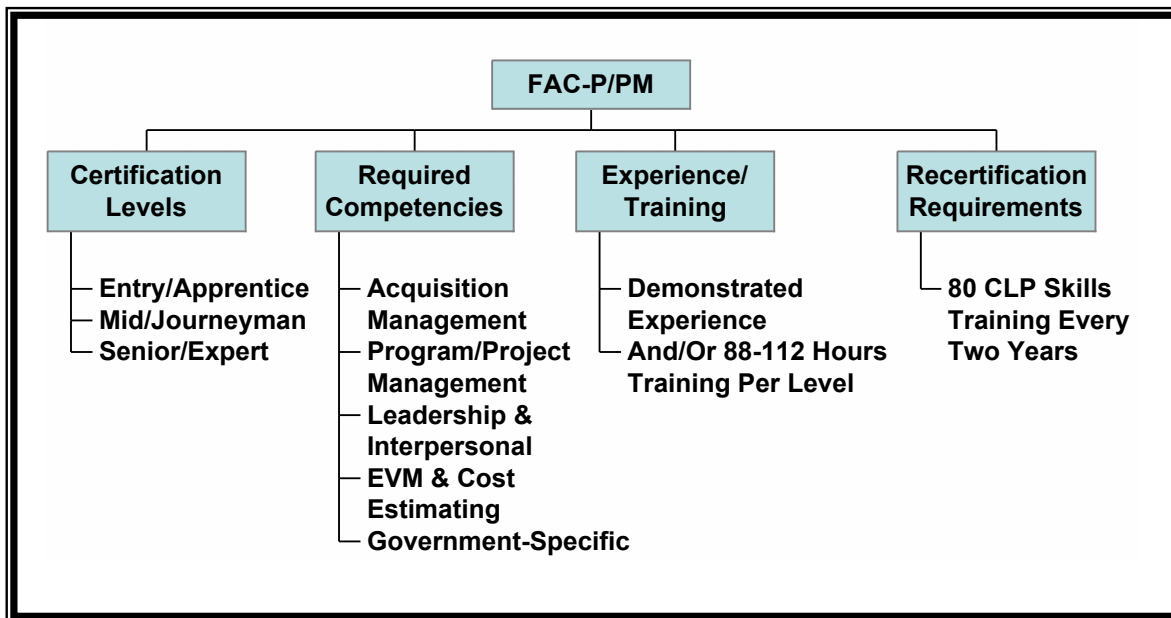
About FAC-P/PM Certification

FAC-P/PM is located within and managed by elements within the federal acquisition structure. The Federal Acquisition Institute (FAI) has the responsibility for oversight for the FAC-P/PM program. As such they are responsible for developing and reviewing FAC-P/PM competency and training standards, reviewing the FAC-P/PM implementation programs within the various government agencies, recommending FAC-P/PM program changes to OMB, and developing training blueprints for agencies, vendors, or other agencies to use to assess their courses against the FAC-P/PM standards. FAI also has responsibility for developing and making available to government employees training courses that specifically satisfy one of the five FAC-P/PM competency areas, the government-specific competency area. OFPP within OMB has

responsibility for overseeing the FAC-P/PM program within FAI and for enacting changes to the program.

Each government Agency is responsible for developing and implementing FAC-P/PM programs that satisfy the competency and training standards, for managing those programs, and for issuing FAC-P/PM certifications to their employees who meet the criteria. The government agencies have the responsibility to develop and implement FAC-P/PM programs matched to the specific mission needs of their Agency; beyond insuring compliance with the FAC-P/PM competencies and standards, consistency or compatibility with other Agencies is not required.

FAC-P/PM certification is based on attaining competencies and experience associated with each of three levels and ensuring 80 hours of continuous learning is achieved every two years. There are three levels of certification; Entry, Mid, and Senior. Certification at a lower level is not a prerequisite for a higher level of certification. An applicant can satisfy the competency requirements through successful completion of suggested training, completion of comparable education or certification programs, or demonstration of knowledge, skills, and abilities².



At the FAC-P/PM Entry level the project manager should have: knowledge and skills to perform as a project team member, the ability to manage low-risk and relatively simple projects or to manage more complex projects under direct supervision of a more experienced manager, an overall understanding of project management practices including performance-based acquisition, a recognition of an agency’s requirements development processes, the ability to define and construct various project documents, under supervision, and an understanding of and involvement in the definition, initiation,

² The full set of FAC-P/PM competencies can be found on the Federal Acquisition Institute (FAI) website at: www.fai.gov/certification/management.asp

conceptualization or design of project requirements. They should possess at least one year of project management experience within the last five years; project management experience includes experience constructing a work breakdown structure; preparing project analysis documents; tailoring acquisition documents to ensure that quality, effective, efficient systems or products are delivered; analyzing and/or developing requirements; monitoring performance; assisting with quality assurance; and budget development. A minimum of 112 hours of training in specific subjects is required.

At the FAC-P/PM Mid level the project/program manager should have: knowledge and skills to manage projects or program segments of low to moderate risks with little or no supervision, the ability to apply management processes, including requirements development processes and performance-based acquisition principles, to support the agency's mission to develop an acquisition program baseline from schedule requirements, plan technology developments and demonstrations and apply agency policy on interoperability, the ability to identify and track actions to initiate an acquisition program or project using cost/benefit analysis, the ability to understand and apply the process to prepare information for a baseline review, and can assist in development of Total Ownership Cost (TOC) estimates, and the ability to manage projects as well as program segments and distinguish between program and project work. They should possess at least two years of program or project management experience within the last five years that includes experience at the entry level as well as experience performing market research, developing documents for risk and opportunity management, developing and applying technical processes and technical management processes, performing or participating in source selection, preparing acquisition strategies, managing performance based service agreements, developing and managing a project budget, writing a business case, and strategic planning. A minimum of 88 hours of training in specific subjects is required.

At the FAC-P/PM Senior level the program manager should have: knowledge and skills to manage moderate to high-risk programs or projects that require significant acquisition investment and agency knowledge and experience, the ability to manage and evaluate a program and create an environment for program success, the ability to manage the requirements development process, overseeing junior-level team members in creation, development, and implementation, the expert ability to use, manage, and evaluate management processes, including performance-based management techniques, and the expert ability to manage and evaluate the use of earned value management as it relates to acquisition investments. They should possess at least four years of program and project management experience on federal projects and/or programs, including managing and evaluating agency acquisition investment performance, developing and managing a program budget, building and presenting a successful business case, reporting program results, strategic planning, and high-level communication with internal and external stakeholders. A minimum of 112 hours of training in specific subjects is required.

Study Methodology

The study involved interviewing federal civilian employees with knowledge about how project and program management is practiced within their Agencies, surveying

federal civilian employees and contractors involved in federal civilian projects and programs, examining available literature, drawing upon commonly accepted practices, and drawing upon available FAC-P/PM expertise. Interviews were conducted with: Central Intelligence Agency, Department of Commerce, Department of Energy, Department of Homeland Security, Department of Treasury, Federal Acquisition Institute, Federal Bureau of Investigation, General Services Administration, Office of Federal Procurement Policy, Office of Management and Budget. A survey was released to the membership of the Washington D.C. chapter of the Project Management Institute; responses received from 57 employees directly involved with federal civilian project management were equally split between federal and contractor employees.

Summary of Findings

FAC-P/PM is a work in the early stages of progress. Since it was enacted in 2007 awareness about and adoption of FAC-P/PM by civilian government agencies is sporadic, some federal agencies have developed and are following FAC-P/PM implementation plans, and some may not be. Insight and understanding about the reasons for this degree of variation is limited.

The count of the number of FAC-P/PM certified employees has not been identified. Implementation of FAC-P/PM is hampered by the relatively sizable effort required by each Agency to develop their own individual FAC-P/PM programs; this is presenting a barrier for some. Greater attention is being paid to the FAC-P/PM Senior/Expert level of certification than the Entry/Apprentice and Mid/Journeyman levels; for major programs, each completed OMB Circular A-11 Exhibit 300 Business Case now list the name of the FAC-P/PM Senior/Expert level program manager assigned. The industry response to FAC-P/PM has followed; some training providers now offer FAC-P/PM compliant curriculums. The Federal Acquisition Institute (FAI) also offers some FAC-P/PM training, and it maintains an awareness of some of the FAC-P/PM activities within the government agencies and industry. The demand for the FAC-P/PM training has been modest, with catalog offerings outpacing student enrollment.

Finding 1: Program Design and Implementation

The FAC-P/PM program is being implemented as intended in many agencies. Nearly all departments interviewed have complied with OMB requirements for senior level program managers on Exhibit 300 represented programs. Fewer departments are taking real steps to implement Mid- and Entry-level competency programs. FAC-P/PM does not have a unified, government-wide definition of implementation success. There is no overarching adoption strategy.

Finding 2: Reconciling Project Management and Acquisition Lifecycles

In the federal environment, the acquisition lifecycle is dominant in project management. The roles and phases are oriented around the contracting and procurement of goods and services, rather than around the development of a project and its intended outcomes. Project tasks tend to fall into the larger acquisition phases. This approach can be summed up in the phrase “An acquisition may result in one or more projects.” This acquisition-centric approach

is in stark contrast to the private sector and non-federal government entities, where project management tends to be the more dominant set of activities. In these environments, the program or project manager oversees the acquisition of goods and services in support of achieving project objectives. This approach can be summed up in the phrase “A project may result in one or more acquisitions.”

Finding 3: Lack of Clear Program Metrics

FAC-P/PM has nearly no discernable measures of success. Unlike many federal programs, FAC-P/PM lacks a dashboard to quickly understand the health of the program. There is no clear source of data for reporting the effectiveness or basic results of FAC-P/PM. The current system used to capture certification information does not appear to capture dashboard ready measures. Unless quantifiable metrics exist, it is difficult to fully know how the program is performing, develop continuous improvement plans, or achieve increased benefits or returns.

Finding 4: Program Awareness

Awareness of FAC-P/PM is limited both across the Federal government, within individual agencies, and even among program and project managers. FAC-P/PM does not have an active community to drive knowledge sharing. There are no conferences, regular meetings, or widespread cross-agency platforms for sharing. There appears to be limited FAC-P/PM outreach and communication both internal and external to the program. Even project managers within the identified agency groups are not aware of the FAC-P/PM requirements. Anecdotally, many of the interview targets were marginally aware of the program itself, even if their bosses or co-workers knew of the program. Even within agencies, FAC-P/PM appears to be under communicated. This is highlighted when the research identified multiple instances of FAC-P/PM programs appear to be occurring within the same agency, often without the knowledge of the staff involved, with different success criteria if it exists at all.

Finding 5: Implementation Guidance

There is no common reference guide for implementing FAC-P/PM. Every agency in the study had struggled with developing an individual, custom program born out of their understanding of the requirements. The FAC-P/PM program delegates the ‘program how to’ implementation process to each agency. There is merit in this approach as it does allow each agency to implement a tailored specific program within its unique environment. Unfortunately, this ‘hands’ off approach provides a significant agency level challenge on how to implement the program and what does a successful implementation look like. Since a baseline of best practices has not been clearly established or routinely shared across agencies, each agency is left to their own devices to figure out what ‘may’ work for them. This approach increases the overall program cost, as each agency must learn on their own.

Finding 6: Impact of Program

The impact of FAC-P/PM on the performance of project managers is uncertain. The impact of FAC-P/PM on project outcomes and success is unclear. However,

agencies that strive to establish and maintain project management as a core competency tend to utilize FAC-P/PM as a means to improve their staff. As with industry project management certifications, a perception exists that FAC-P/PM certification will increasingly be required for assignments, and that it will contribute toward career advancement. Some study interviews indicated that a correlation exists between the implementation of FAC-P/PM and improved project outcomes and is suggestive of the value of FAC-P/PM. Efforts to develop success criteria for FAC-P/PM, and activities to correlate project and program success with FAC-P/PM certification are yet to be undertaken.

Summary of Recommendations

Recommendations in the study report are targeted at those interested in building upon the momentum to accelerate FAC-P/PM implementation by leveraging the experiences of the early adopters. The recommendations were grouped into two parts, those focused on the OMB, OFPP, and FAI leadership, management, and support of the overall FAC-P/PM program, and those focused on the individual federal agencies who are implementing the program.

OMB, OFPP, and FAI:

Recommendation 1: Maintain and Evolve the FAC-P/PM Program

The promise of a competent project and program workforce must be realized across the Federal government to ensure that projects and programs achieve the value and return on investment that must be undertaken. The study found no other federal or private sector program with the same or similar purpose as the FAC-P/PM program. With many billions riding on the success of a project framework within the federal civilian government, the FAC-P/PM program simply must endure. FAC-P/PM leadership at the program and agency level have an opportunity to reevaluate the challenges and opportunities that this program offers to the federal environment. The leadership agenda for FAC-P/PM should focus on driving a culture of performance and competence, in addition to adherence to the certification requirements. The early adopting agencies, pioneers, have a different set of needs than those agencies that just lately coming to understanding the full implications of FAC-P/PM. Pioneers, having spent considerable energy early on creating the program, must now turn their focus to making real advances in performance improvement and competency. The late adopting agencies, settlers, are still mired in the mechanics of the program.

Recommendation 2: Measure the Results

The study revealed little measurement of the basic parameters or effectiveness of the FAC-P/PM program as a whole. The program design is deliberately distributed such that agencies retain the authority and responsibility for their individual results. Yet, if the original objective of the FAC-P/PM program was to “align a base of essential competencies across the federal government’s acquisition workforce,” then the program should strive to measure the results associated with project and program performance. To achieve the vision and

promise of a competent workforce, the FAC-P/PM program requires an integrated approach for measuring, monitoring and managing the results of the program. Program measures should be established for program status to indicate the scale and scope of FAC-P/PM adoption by agencies, and program outcomes to indicate the impact on project and mission performance. Key performance indicators are suggested in the study report.

Recommendation 3: Provide Implementation Guidance

The study revealed very little implementation guidance on the FAC-P/PM program. Many agencies struggle with implementing the basic processes and methods of project management, let alone building a competency development program. For an agency to be successful in FAC-P/PM, there must be a solid project management foundation from which to build. While the program design suggested that FAI would develop implementation guidance for agencies, no evidence was found of official documentation to this effect. FAI does provide a host of resources via its website on coursework and the structure of the program. This information, while quite useful, does not provide guidance on how to actually implement FAC-P/PM. The study recommended that FAI develop an Implementation Guide for agencies. The guide should describe best practices, additional resources, core ideas and concepts behind FAC-P/PM, and any requirements. The guidance should also describe the specific steps required to implement FAC-P/PM and key alternative that can be tailored by each agency. A gap analysis tool could be developed to help agencies quickly identify areas of weakness and more. The implementation roadmap should be periodically updated to satisfy the needs of the community of practice.

Recommendation 4: Develop the FAC-P/PM Community

The study revealed that there is little or no FAC-P/PM community of practice within the federal government. Individual agencies perform various activities in the context of training, however there is limited opportunity for FAC-P/PM practitioners and administrators to meet, share practices, and improve the program. OMB hosts' occasional forums designed to evaluate the program and define new parameters, but these events are usually focused on specific purposes. It is recommended that FAI invest in creating a community of practice focused on improving FAC-P/PM competency, sharing information across agencies on the design and implementation of FAC-P/PM. Establishing a FAC-P/PM community will enable FAI to host events, quickly disseminate new programs and provide a forum for information and knowledge sharing. The community might entail three distinct components: periodic conferences to enable the professional ranks of the federal workforce to network across organizational boundaries, a knowledge sharing database of best practices, implementation plans, training materials, and information for the FAC-P/PM certificate holders and associated agencies, and a community of practice to conduct regular meetings of interagency working groups designed to share information on a more regular basis.

Recommendation 5: Develop Vendor Workforce Certification

Since the federal government relies heavily upon the private sector in the completion of major acquisitions it is recommended that FAI provide a

mechanism for contractors who support government projects and programs to obtain the FAC-P/PM program competencies. The federal government would benefit through being able to ensure that private sector project managers on large-scale projects are certified as competent.

Recommendation 6: Align Project Management With Industry

This far-reaching recommendation calls for OMB to rethink their approach to project management and acquisitions. If project management is going to evolve within the federal government, it will benefit from being less attached to the acquisition function. This recommendation would involve develop formal guidance in the form of a federal project management methodology, aligning project management with core functions and life cycles, creating a formal project manager title series across the federal government, and providing significant incentives for FAC-P/PM certification, including pay raises and recognition.

Federal Agencies:

Recommendation 7: Focus on Competency, Not Just Training

The study found that some agencies tended to view the FAC-P/PM program as more of an exercise in training than as a process for improving project and program manager competency. To realize the full promise that FAC-P/PM is designed to deliver, FAC-P/PM project teams must approach FAC-P/PM as a competency development framework. To be successful, agency leadership needs to recognize that FAC-P/PM is competency based and can be satisfied by a variety of methods, per the program design. Agencies should seek to incorporate a variety of learning methods designed to mentoring and experiential components into the program, not just training. Agencies that approach FAC-P/PM as primarily a training initiative will not realize the full potential of the program.

Recommendation 8: Improve Outreach

The study found that FAC-P/PM program is not well publicized within and across agencies; knowledge about FAC-P/PM were found to exist in some pockets in agencies. The study recommends an increase the communication and awareness of FAC-P/PM across the agency workforce and leadership. It is recommended that agencies consider the use of channels associated with the Chief Information Officer (CIO), Chief Acquisition Officer (CAO), Chief Human Resource Officer (CHRO), and Project/Program Management Offices (PMOs) to penetrate deeper into and across those organizations.

Recommendation 9: Increase Level 1 and Level 2 Adoption

Agencies have focused almost exclusively on the Level 3 Senior FAC-P/PM certifications to satisfy the OMB requirements on the Exhibit 300. Level 3 drives accountability across agencies for major projects and programs, however he focus is often on getting level 3 resources into place at the expense of level 1 and 2. While this strategy can be useful early in the program to meet the letter of the regulation, agencies interested in building competent project management workforces must also plan to invest in Entry and Mid Level certifications to ensure that a steady supply of FAC-P/PM certified staff is available in the years

ahead. The study recommends that agencies should consider developing incentives for employees to obtain certification at the Entry and Mid-Level points.

Recommendation 10: Utilize a Framework for Implementation

The study recommends that agencies manage FAC-P/PM implementation as a project by following a lifecycle framework. The lifecycle framework would progress through key phases including discovery of key requirements and capabilities, design of certification standards and processes, development and acquisition of core program materials, deployment of program across the workforce and organization, and sustainment of the program through results measurement and continuous improvement.

Conclusion

The U.S. federal civilian government has made a remarkable commitment to mission by adopting FAC-P/PM. Positive reactions by early adopters and key experiences by early adopters point the way to accelerating the progress being made toward the program’s goal of “well-trained and experienced program and project managers.” The specific recommendations contained in the study report point the way for OMB, OFPP, FAI, and the individual Agencies as they continue to refine and implement FAC-P/PM.

A complete copy of the study is available for free download from asapm at:
http://www.asapm.org/asapmag/m_news.asp#FAC