

Jobs as **learning platforms**

Oregon launches a certification process that leverages on-the-job performance.

By Greg Hopkins



Warren Buffett once said, “Risk comes from not knowing what you’re doing.” The state of Oregon teaches procurement professionals what they should be doing by encouraging national procurement certification along with state-specific training. The combination is powerful. For example, the Certified Professional Public Buyer (CPPB) certificate provides instant recognition of professional commitment and knowledge. Oregon-specific training supports national certifications at the desktop level.

Recently, Oregon brought the learning game to a new level by developing an advanced certification that leverages on-the-job learning using a project-based methodology. “We had a tall order from our customers,” says Vicky Narkon, the team lead for the professional development unit. “They wanted advanced training. They didn’t want to be pulled away from their jobs. And they wanted something cost-effective.”

There also needed to be clear benefits to the participants, their agency and valuable lessons to share across agency lines. Using these guidelines, the professional development team realized that knowledge-based courses already provide a great foundation by teaching how things are supposed to be done. An

advanced certification should require candidates to actually apply these concepts in real situations. The result was the Oregon Procurement Advanced Certification (OPAC). It works like this:

- Candidates must have three years of contract-related experience, an Oregon-specific basic certification comprised of 75 hours of training and classes in contract administration. A national certification substitutes for 35 hours of elective classes.
- The OPAC candidate submits a project proposal to an assigned advisor from the professional development team. The advisor looks for advanced elements such as introducing new procedures as well as personal learning goals for the candidate.
- The candidate’s supervisor submits a letter of recommendation describing how the project will benefit both the procurement department and the candidate.
- Once a project is accepted, the candidate meets with the advisor over the life of the project and also submits regular progress reports. Besides facilitating good project management skills, these reports become a valuable project log for the procurement file.
- At the end of the project, which can take several months, the candidate submits a wrap-up report and makes a final presentation to a group of peers and managers. They are evaluated by the group on how well they met their personal and project objectives. After their presentations, the candidates debrief and receive feedback.

After two pilot tests and a formal launch, the process has revealed some very promising results.

Key decision points

Josh Rogers, CPPB, is the latest candidate to complete his OPAC. He faced a key decision point in his project when a bidder took exception to the terms, conditions and specifications in the Invitation to Bid. The bid had to be rejected. “The easiest route would have been to simply send them an e-mail with a form letter,” Rogers said. “I asked a co-worker what I should do, and he advised me to send the e-mail but also call them up and just talk with them.”

Rogers hit the “send” button as he dialed the phone. “I knew they were going to be mad as hornets. I didn’t want to face them, but I knew it was the right thing to do. The guy was upset. I let him vent and let him know I understood his frustration. I explained to him why we had our process in place.” In the end, Rogers’ actions saved a relationship –

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Rogers and other OPAC participants each faced distinct points in their projects when success, good relationships and personal growth all hinged on how they chose to respond. Tim Jenks, the first OPAC recipient, resurrected a Request for Proposals (RFP) that nobody was responding to by calling suppliers who had expressed interest and

asking what was wrong. He changed a requirement in the RFP that was creating an unnecessary block. Another OPAC candidate responded to an impossible deadline by using a pure RFP approach in which the suppliers pitched their solutions and plans to achieve stated goals rather than the agency having to craft detailed requirements.

These key decision points are what make or break an “advanced learner.” In their final presentations, these professionals reinforce their learning by teaching others how they effectively responded to challenges. In the end, everybody learns.

Dianne Lancaster, chief procurement officer for Oregon, adds this about the value of training: “Oregon has a highly decentralized state government with high levels of delegated purchasing authority. Training and certifications are important ways to mitigate this risk.” She also notes increased confidence and professionalism in the OPAC participants as well as important collaboration, mentoring and direct benefits to state agencies.

About the author

Greg Hopkins, M.Ed., is a training and development specialist at the Oregon State Procurement office. He is one of the principal designers of the advanced certification training as well as other procurement-related classes. Hopkins is also active in green purchasing.

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