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**Contract Management Competency in the USMC:
An Assessment of
MCSC, ECP/RCOs, and LOGCOM**

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Contract Management Competency in the USMC: An Assessment of MCSC, ECP/RCOs, and LOGCOM

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Abstract

In April 2020, the DoD senior procurement executives established a new contracting competency model and a single, entry-level certification program for the DoD contracting workforce. The new competency model is based on the National Contract Management Association (NCMA) Contract Management Standard (CMS). This new DoD contracting competency model serves as the basis for training the contracting workforce in the new DAWIA Back-to-Basics certification. The competency model can also be used as the basis for assessing the contracting workforce's contract management competency. The purpose of this research is to present the findings of three competency assessments using the new DoD contracting competency framework. The competency assessments were conducted on the contracting workforce at the Marine Corps Systems Command (MCSC), the Marine Corps Expeditionary Contracting Platoons and Regional Contracting Offices (ECP/RCO), and the Marine Corps Logistics Command (LOGCOM). The research seeks to identify any gaps in contract management proficiency and knowledge, and to provide the USMC contracting leadership with recommendations to fill these gaps. This research will answer the question: How do the competency assessment results compare across the MCSC, the ECP/RCOs, and the LOGCOM? Based on the competency assessment results, recommendations for competency development are provided to the assessed organization.

Introduction

In the 2020 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA; 2019), Congress directed the secretary of defense to implement a professional certification program for all members of the acquisition workforce that is based on standards developed by a third-party accredited program based on nationally or internationally recognized standards (NDAA, 2019). In September 2020, the undersecretary of defense for acquisition and sustainment (USD A&S) implemented the Back-to-Basics (BtB) talent management program to be fully deployed by October 1, 2021 (OUSD[A&S], 2020). This would be a major change to the acquisition certification program established by the Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act (DAWIA) and enacted by Congress in 1990.

In February 2021, the office of the undersecretary of defense (OUSD) principal director for defense pricing and contracting (DPC) published a memorandum restructuring the DoD Contracting Professional Certification Program and Contracting Competency Model. The new contracting competency model would be based on the American National Standards Institute (ANSI)/National Contract Management Association (NCMA) accredited Contract Management Standard (CMS; OUSD[A&S], 2021). This new contracting workforce competency model complies with the 2020 NDAA (2019) requirement to base a professional certification on standards developed by a third-party accredited program (OUSD[A&S], 2021).



Purpose of Research

Given the backdrop of the congressional legislation and the establishment of the new contracting workforce competency model, the purpose of this research is to present the findings of three competency assessments using the new DoD contracting competency framework. Competency assessments were conducted on the contracting workforce at the Marine Corps Systems Command (MCSC), the Marine Corps Expeditionary Contracting Platoons and Regional Contracting Offices (ECP/RCO), and the Marine Corps Logistics Command (LOGCOM). The research seeks to compare the results of the competency assessments and identify any consistencies and patterns in contract management competency across the three organizations. This research will also identify gaps in contract management proficiency and knowledge across these organizations, and provide the USMC contracting leadership with recommendations to fill these proficiency and knowledge gaps. This research will answer the following question: How do the competency assessment results compare across the MCSC, the ECP/RCOs, and the LOGCOM? Across these three organizations, in which contract management competencies are the assessed workforce less proficient and less knowledgeable? Based on the competency assessment results, recommendations for competency development are provided to the USMC contracting leadership.

Methodology

The methodology for this research consists of comparing the results of three previous competency assessments. The three competency assessments were conducted by Hayashi and Pfannenstiel on the MCSC (2021), Hoover on the ECP/RCOs (2021), and Bute on the LOGCOM (2024). These assessments were conducted using the Contract Management Competency Assessment instrument developed by Rendon (2021). This assessment instrument has also been used on Army and Air Force contracting organizations (for example, see Davies et al., 2021; Moyer et al., 2020; Powell, 2021).

DoD Contract Management Workforce Competency Model

The new DoD contracting workforce competency model, based on the NCMA CMS, is significantly different from the legacy DoD contracting competency model in both structure and scope, and thus provides an innovative approach for talent and competency management (Rendon, 2019; Rendon & Winn, 2017). The top-level structure of the NCMA CMS is reflected in Figure 1 (NCMA, 2019b). The CMS domains (e.g., Develop Solicitation, Develop Offer, ...) and processes (e.g., Plan Solicitation, Plan Sales, ...) are the foundation for the competency assessment instrument.

The CMS's concise and detailed contract life cycle and greater emphasis and granularity in each of the life-cycle phases and job tasks may help develop and fortify the DoD's contracting processes and practices, as well as the training of its contracting workforce on these competencies. Providing greater emphasis on each of the contract life-cycle phases and also structuring the competencies using a hierarchical approach that aligns each competency with processes, tasks, and subtasks will support the development of a professional contracting career path that associates contracting technical competencies and key work experiences (Rendon, 2019). The CMS also has an overarching narrative of guiding principles aligned with professional competencies that apply across all phases of the contracting life cycle.

Additionally, the CMS uses contract management terms that are relevant and applicable across the DoD, federal agencies, and industry.

In terms of scope, the CMS differs from the legacy DoD contracting competency model in that the CMS also includes the industry (seller) competencies, processes, and job tasks. Expanding the DoD's contracting workforce knowledge to include industry's side of contracting (e.g., industry operations and processes) as reflected in the CMS will help in developing



technical and professional skills that can transfer across government and industry, as well as improve communication and collaboration between government and industry. Including the industry side of contracting would also result in strengthening systems thinking within the DoD contracting workforce (Carlson, 2017). Contracting officers applying systems thinking to contract management will know that “problems can have hidden, indirect causes” and it is the “relationships among the parts that matter the most” (Carlson, 2017). Using systems thinking, contracting officers will be able to “see the gaps where complications or opportunities can arise” within the acquisition process and understand how their contracting decisions may impact contractors and subcontractors (Carlson, 2017).

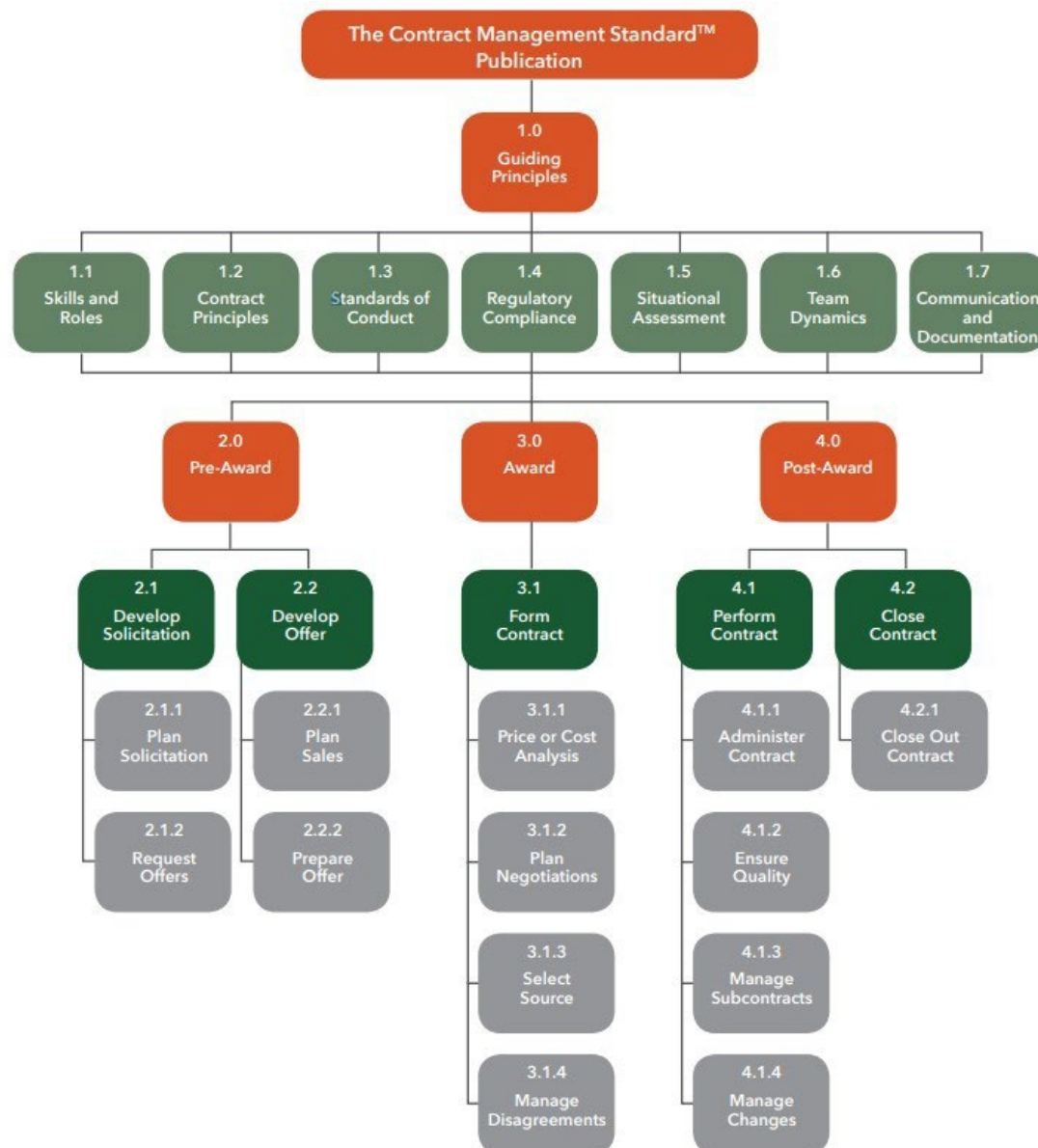


Figure 1. NCMA Contract Management Standard. NCMA (2019b).

Additionally, adopting the CMS competency framework may provide the DoD contracting workforce with a stronger foundational understanding of not only the complete contract life cycle, but also the different perspectives in contract relationships (e.g., buyer, seller, subcontractor, supplier, end users, etc.). This understanding of different perspectives may enable DoD contracting officers to introduce innovation and process change into the DoD contracting processes.

Finally, providing training on the seller-side competencies to the DoD contracting workforce may also strengthen “communication, collaboration, problem-solving, and adaptability” skills (Carlson, 2017). A recent RAND study found that within the defense acquisition workforce, knowledge gaps in business acumen, industry operations, and industry motivation exist (Werber et al., 2019). The RAND report also found that the lack of standardized definitions and competency model formats obscures the need for knowledge related to business acumen, industry operations, and industry motivation (Werber et al., 2019).

Structure of Competency Assessment Instrument

The structure of the contracting competency assessment instrument consists of contracting competency statements for each of the contract management phases (pre-award, award, post-award), as well as from both buyer and seller contracting perspectives. More specifically, the contracting competency statements reflect the contracting competencies and the specific job tasks for each contract management phase and for each perspective as reflected in the CMS. The competency statements will be rated by the contracting workforce members using a Likert scale reflecting different levels of proficiency for performing the buyer job tasks and a different Likert scale reflecting the different levels of knowledge of the seller job tasks. The proficiency rating levels for performing buyer job tasks are identified and defined as follows:

1. Aware: Applies the competency in the simplest situations and requires close and extensive guidance.
2. Basic: Applies the competency in somewhat difficult situations and requires frequent guidance.
3. Intermediate: Applies the competency in difficult situations and requires little or no guidance.
4. Advanced: Applies the competency in considerably difficult situations and generally requires no guidance.
5. Expert: Applies the competency in exceptionally difficult situations, serves as a key resource, and advises others.
6. N/A: Not applicable/not needed in my job.

The knowledge rating levels for understanding seller job tasks are identified and defined as follows:

1. None: I am not aware of this Contractor competency.
2. Aware: I am aware but have no knowledge of this Contractor competency.
3. Basic: I have some basic-level knowledge of this Contractor competency.
4. Intermediate: I have intermediate-level knowledge of this Contractor competency.
5. Advanced: I have advanced-level knowledge of this Contractor competency.



Deployment of Competency Assessment Instrument

The competency assessment instrument link was deployed to the Marine Corps Systems Command in 2020, the Marine Corps Expeditionary Contracting Platoons (ECPs) and the co-located Regional Contracting Offices (RCOs) in 2021, and the Marine Corps Logistics Command in 2024. For additional and specific information about those assessments, please refer to Hayashi and Pfannenstiel (2020), Hoover (2021), and Bute (2024).

The competency assessment instrument was deployed using the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) Qualtrics survey tool. The web-based survey tool allows participants to respond anonymously to the self-assessment items.

Findings

Our assessment findings are presented in terms of demographics, proficiency in performing buyer tasks, and knowledge of seller tasks. Tables 1, 2, and 3 provide the demographic data for each of the assessed organizations.

Table 1. MCSC Workforce Competency Assessment Demographics

| DAWIA Level | | CM Years of Experience | |
|-----------------------------|----|------------------------|----|
| None | 1 | 3 or Less | 5 |
| Level I | 3 | 4 to 8 | 5 |
| Level II | 5 | 9 to 13 | 21 |
| Level III | 41 | 14 to 18 | 4 |
| | | 19 or more | 17 |
| PCO | 21 | | |
| | | Years in Organization | |
| Professional Certifications | | 3 or Less | 20 |
| CFCM | 2 | 4 to 8 | 10 |
| CCCM | 0 | 9 to 13 | 13 |
| CPCM | 1 | 14 to 18 | 4 |
| Other | 7 | 19 or more | 4 |

Table 2. ECP/RCO Workforce Competency Assessment Demographics

| CM Years of Experience | | Years in Organization | |
|---------------------------|----|-----------------------------------|----|
| 3 or Less | 15 | 1 or Less | 15 |
| 4 to 8 | 19 | 1 to 2 | 6 |
| 9 to 13 | 5 | 2 to 3 | 6 |
| 14 to 18 | 2 | 3 or More | 12 |
| 19 or More | 0 | | |
| | | PCO | 22 |
| | | | |
| DAWIA Level Certification | | Other Professional Certifications | |
| None | 8 | CFCM | 0 |
| Level I | 11 | CCCM | 0 |
| Level II | 16 | CPCM | 0 |
| Level III | 6 | Other | 0 |

Table 3. LOGCOM Contracting Workforce Competency Assessment Demographics

| CM Years of Experience | | Years in Organization | |
|--------------------------|----|-----------------------------|----|
| 3 or less | 5 | 3 or less | 7 |
| 4 to 8 | 1 | 4 to 8 | 3 |
| 9 to 13 | 1 | 9 to 13 | 1 |
| 14 to 18 | 3 | 14 to 18 | 1 |
| 19 or more | 5 | 19 or more | 3 |
| | | | |
| | | PCO | 6 |
| | | | |
| DAWIA BtB Certification | | Professional Certifications | |
| None | 5 | None | 13 |
| Contracting Professional | 10 | CFCM | 0 |
| | | CCCM | 0 |
| | | CCPM | 0 |
| | | Other | 2 |

As reflected in Table 1, approximately 51 of the 220 MCSC potential participants responded to the demographic questions, resulting in a response rate of 23%. The demographics for the MCSC contracting workforce indicate a highly educated, trained and experienced workforce with 41 respondents reported being DAWIA Level III Contracting. Additionally, 21 respondents indicated that they are Procuring Contracting Officers (PCO), meaning that they hold warrants from MCSC to award contracts on behalf of the United States government.

As reflected in Table 2, approximately 41 of the 100 ECP/RCO potential participants responded to the demographic questions, resulting in a response rate of 41%. The demographics for the ECP/RCO contracting workforce indicate a less educated, trained and experienced workforce. Almost half of the respondents either had no DAWIA certification or



were certified at Level 1. Additionally, the majority of the respondents (83%) had between 0 and 8 years of contracting experience.

As reflected in Table 3, approximately 15 of the 28 LOGCOM potential participants responded to the demographic questions, resulting in a response rate of 54%. The demographics for the LOGCOM contracting workforce indicate a mid-level educated, trained and experienced workforce with 10 respondents reported being DAWIA Back-to Basics certified as a Contracting Professional, and the remainder of the respondents were not certified. Additionally, about half of the respondents (60%) had 9 years or more contracting experience, with 6 respondents indicated that they are Procuring Contracting Officers (PCO).

Buyer Proficiency Levels

Figures 1, 2, and 3 reflect the assessment results of the Buyer Proficiency component of the competency assessment for each organization. The figures reflect the buyer competencies (e.g., Plan Solicitation, Request Offer, etc.) that include buyer associated job tasks, as reflected in the NCMA CMS. Also reflected in these figures are the average proficiency ratings for each competency, based on the buyer proficiency rating scales discussed earlier.

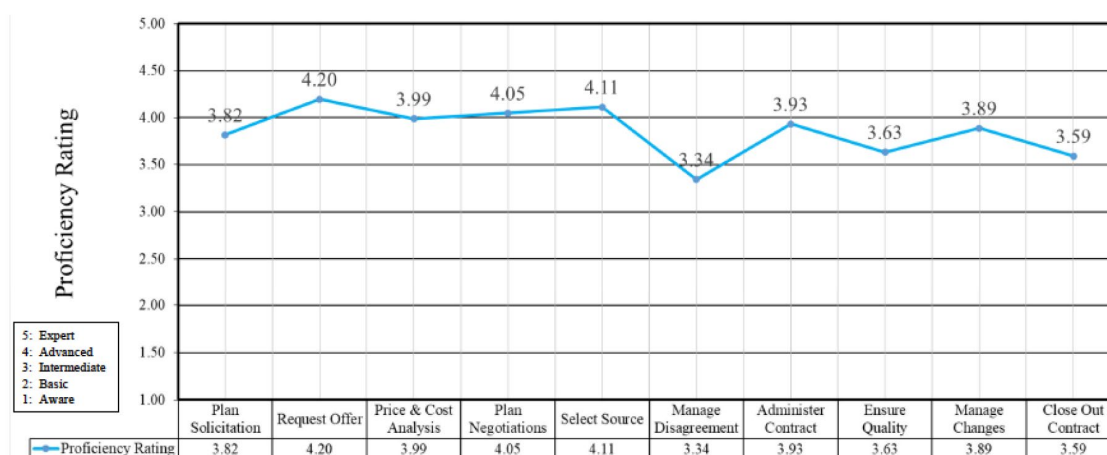


Figure 1. MCSC Contracting Workforce Competency Assessment: Buyer Proficiency

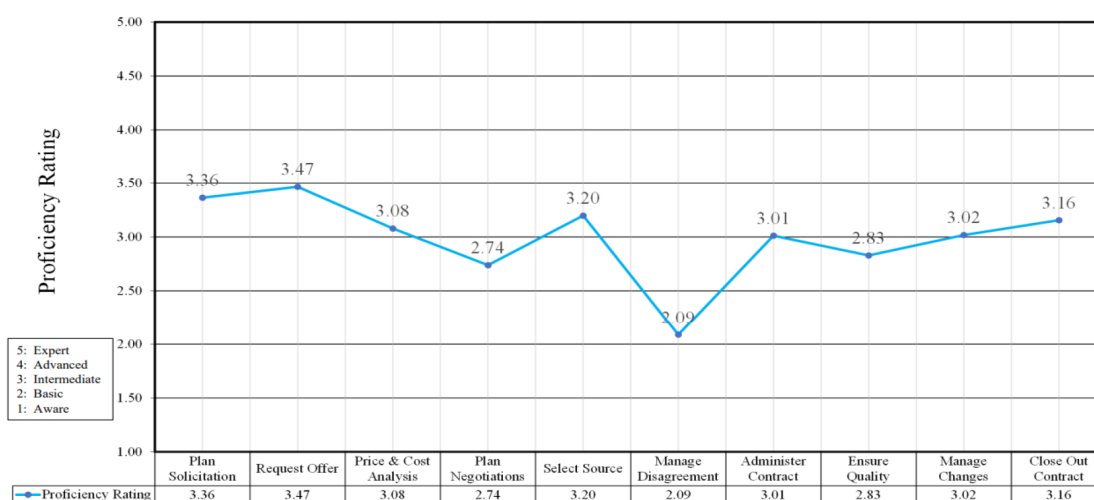


Figure 2. ECP/RCO Contracting Workforce Competency Assessment: Buyer Proficiency



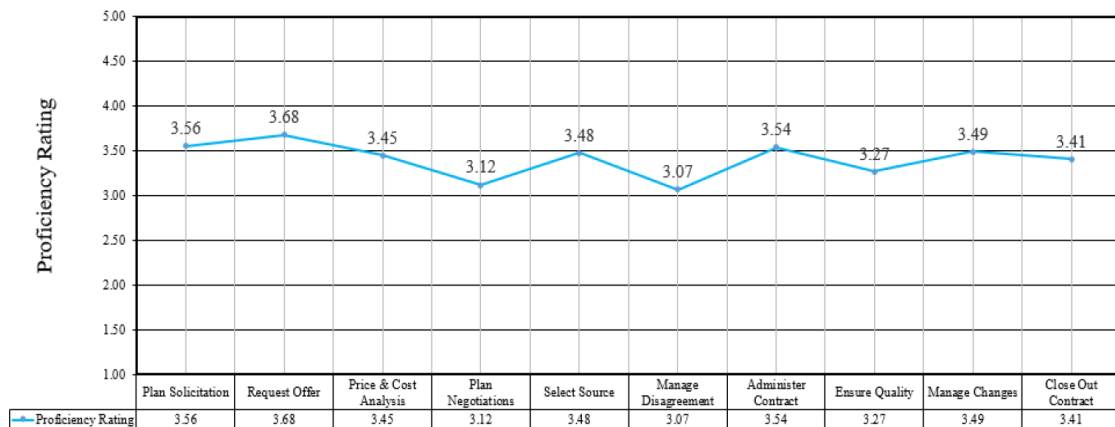


Figure 3. LOGCOM Contracting Workforce Competency Assessment: Buyer Proficiency

As can be seen in Figure 1, for MCSC, the average buyer proficiency ratings ranged from Intermediate to Advanced proficiency levels. Specifically, the lowest average proficiency rating was 3.34 (Intermediate) for Manage Disagreement, and the highest average proficiency rating was 4.2 (Advanced) for Request Offer.

As can be seen in Figure 2, for ECP/RCO, the average buyer proficiency ratings ranged from Basic to Intermediate proficiency levels. Specifically, the lowest average proficiency rating was 2.09 (Basic) for Manage Disagreement, and the highest average proficiency rating was 3.47 (Intermediate) for Request Offer.

As can be seen in Figure 3, for LOGCOM, the average buyer proficiency ratings ranged within the Intermediate proficiency level. Specifically, the lowest average proficiency rating was 3.07 (Intermediate) for Manage Disagreement, and the highest average proficiency rating was 3.68 (Intermediate) for Request Offer.

Seller Knowledge Levels

Figures 4, 5, and 6 reflect the assessment results of the Seller Knowledge component of the competency assessment for each organization. The figures reflect the seller competencies (e.g., Plan Sales, Prepare Offer, etc.) that include seller associated job tasks, as reflected in the NCMA CMS. Also reflected in these figures are the average knowledge ratings for each competency, based on the seller knowledge rating scales discussed earlier.

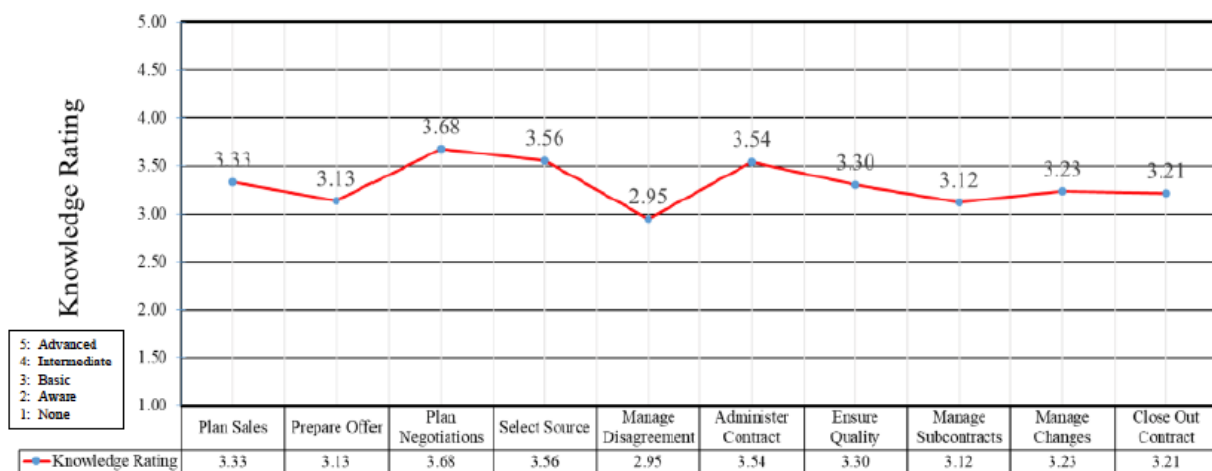


Figure 4. MCSC Contracting Workforce Competency Assessment: Seller Knowledge

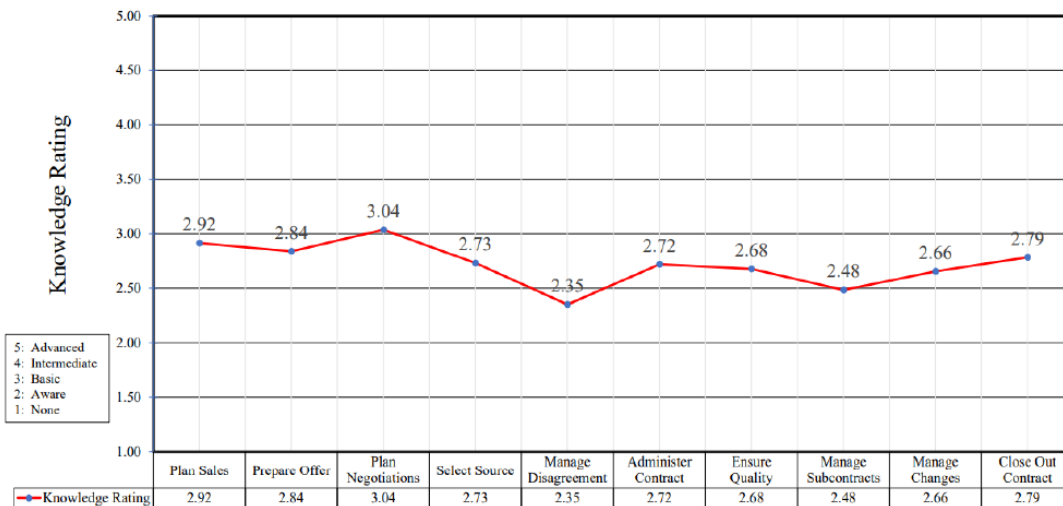


Figure 5. ECP/RCO Contracting Workforce Competency Assessment: Seller Knowledge

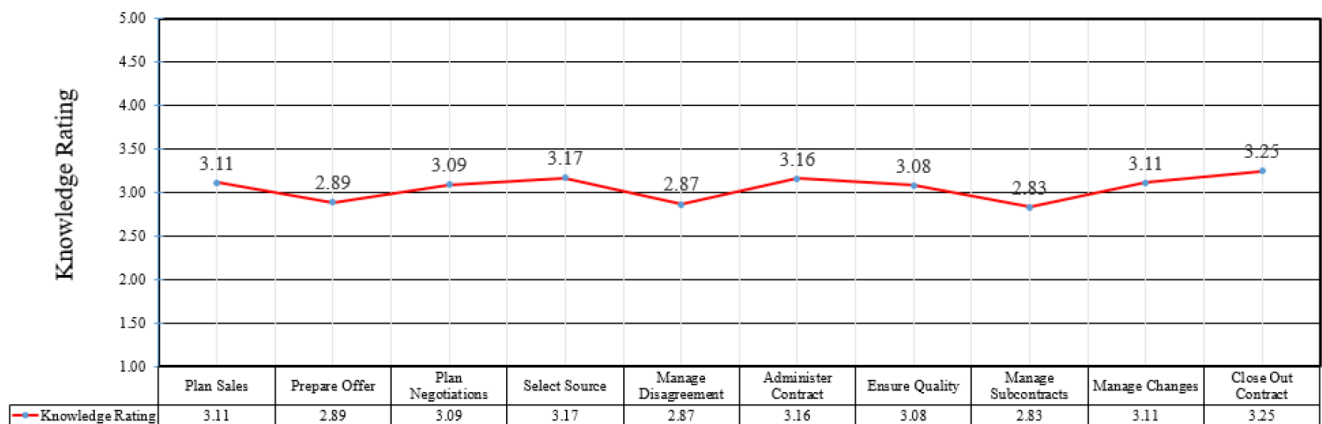


Figure 6. LOGCOM Contracting Workforce Competency Assessment: Seller Knowledge

As can be seen in Figure 4, for MCSC, the average seller knowledge ratings ranged from Aware to Basic knowledge levels. Specifically, the lowest average knowledge rating was 2.95 (Aware) for Manage Disagreement, and the highest average knowledge rating was 3.68 (Basic) for Plan Negotiations.

As can be seen in Figure 5, for ECP/RCO, the average seller knowledge ratings ranged from Aware to Basic knowledge levels. Specifically, the lowest average knowledge rating was 2.35 (Aware) for Manage Disagreement, and the highest average knowledge rating was 3.04 (Basic) for Plan Negotiations.

As can be seen in Figure 6, for LOGCOM, the average seller knowledge ratings ranged from Aware to Basic knowledge levels. Specifically, the lowest average knowledge rating was 2.83 (Aware) for Manage Subcontracts, and the highest average knowledge rating was 3.25 (Basic) for Close Out Contract.

Discussion of Findings

Buyer Proficiency Competencies

The findings from the comparison of the three Marine Corps contracting workforce competency assessments indicate that the organizations' average competency levels for the buyer proficiency tasks are rated higher than the organizations' average knowledge levels of seller tasks.

Specifically, based on the competency assessments across all of the organizations, the majority of the buyer proficiency competency ratings are at the Intermediate level. Only three competencies were rated at the Advanced level (Request Offer, Plan Negotiations and Select Source, all at MCSC) and only three competencies were rated at the Basic level (Plan Negotiations, Manage Disagreement and Ensure Quality, all at ECP/RCO). All other buyer proficiency competencies were rated at the Intermediate level.

Additionally, across all three organizations, the Request Offer competency was consistently the highest rated buyer proficiency, whereas the Manage Disagreement competency was consistently the lowest rated buyer proficiency competency.

Finally, in terms of the contracting life cycle, for MCSC and ECP/RCO, the pre-award buyer proficiency competency ratings are higher than the award and post award buyer proficiency competency ratings. The buyer proficiency competency ratings for LOGCOM seem to be consistent throughout the contract life cycle.

Seller Knowledge Competencies

As previously stated, the findings from the comparison of the three Marine Corps contracting workforce competency assessments indicate that the organizations' levels for the seller knowledge competencies are rated lower than the organizations' buyer proficiency tasks.

Specifically, based on the competency assessments across all of the organizations, all of the seller knowledge competency ratings are at the Aware or Basic levels. At ECP/RCO, all of the seller knowledge ratings are at the Aware level except for one, Plan Negotiations, which is rated at the Basic level. At MCSC, all of the seller knowledge competencies are at the Basic level, except for one, Manage Disagreement, which is rated at the Aware level. At LOGCOM, three of the seller knowledge competencies (Prepare Offer, Manage Disagreement, and Manage Subcontracts) were rated at the Aware level, with the remainder competencies rated at the Basic level.

Additionally, for MCSC and ECP/RCO, the Plan Negotiations competency was the highest rated seller knowledge competency, with Close Out Contract the highest for LOGCOM. The Manage Disagreement competency was the lowest rated seller knowledge competency for MCSC and ECP/RCO, with Manage Subcontracts the lowest seller knowledge competency for LOGCOM.

Finally, in terms of the contracting life cycle, across the organizations a distinct pattern did not appear in terms of which life-cycle phases were the highest or lowest in terms of average seller knowledge ratings. For MCSC and ECP/RCO, the findings generally indicate that within each contract life-cycle phase, the seller knowledge ratings start high for the first competency in that phase (e.g., Plan Sales, Plan Negotiations, Administer Contract) and then decrease in the later competencies within that phase. The findings indicate that the seller knowledge competency ratings for LOGCOM are generally consistent throughout the contract life cycle.

The higher buyer proficiency competency ratings for MCSC may be related to the demographics of the MCSC contracting workforce. As reflected in Table 1, the demographics for



the MCSC contracting workforce indicate a highly educated, trained, and experienced workforce with 41 respondents reported being DAWIA Level III Contracting and 21 respondents indicated that they are Procuring Contracting Officers (PCOs).

The lower buyer proficiency competency ratings for ECP/PCO may also be related to the demographics of this contracting workforce. As reflected in Table 2, the demographics for the ECP/RCO contracting workforce indicate a less educated, trained, and experienced workforce. Almost half of the respondents either had no DAWIA certification or were certified at Level 1. Additionally, the majority of the respondents (83%) had between 0 and 8 years of contracting experience. This level of training and experience may indicate a lower competency level in performing the buyer tasks reflected in the CMS.

The higher buyer proficiency competency ratings compared to the lower seller knowledge ratings may reflect the scope and focus of the contracts training received by the DoD acquisition workforce. The contracts training provided by the Defense Acquisition University (DAU) and based on the previous DoD contracting competency framework reflects only the buyer processes and related tasks, as reflected in the Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR). The legacy DAU contracts training courses do not cover the seller (industry) processes and related tasks. (See Rendon and Winn [2017] for a comparison of the previous DoD contracting competency model and the NCMA Contract Management Standard).

Finally, the general consistency in the lower buyer proficiency and seller knowledge ratings for the Manage Disagreement competency is indeed an interesting finding. This CMS competency specifically deals with the seller tasks of submitting protests and appeals and the buyer tasks of responding to protests and appeals. The low buyer proficiency and knowledge ratings from the assessed contracting workforce in this competency area may reflect a deficiency in the knowledge, skills, and abilities related to these contract management tasks.

Recommendations for Competency Development

Based on the comparison of these competency assessments across the MCSC, ECP/RCO, and LOGCOM, the following recommendations to the USMC for competency development are provided. These recommendations can be used by the USMC for developing a training roadmap for targeting buyer task proficiency and seller knowledge areas needed for improvement within the contracting workforce.

The first recommendation is to incorporate training to increase knowledge of the CMS seller competencies and related job tasks (NCMA, 2019b). The assessment results reflect that the knowledge ratings of the seller competencies are lower than the buyer proficiency ratings. The recommendation is to incorporate the seller competencies and job tasks from the CMS for all the contract life-cycle competencies (NCMA, 2019a) into the required training courses. Development of this training module could start by incorporating information from the Contract Management Body of Knowledge (CMBOK) sections 4.0, 5.0, and 6.0 (NCMA, 2019a).

The second recommendation is to emphasize training on the CMS buyer competencies and related job tasks that were rated at the Aware and Basic levels. The job tasks that were rated at the Aware level indicate that the workforce can apply the competency in the simplest situations and requires close and extensive guidance. Competencies rated at the Basic level indicate that the workforce can apply the competency in somewhat difficult situations and requires frequent guidance. Thus, the recommendation is for this training to emphasize buyer competencies and job tasks from the CMS for all of the contract life-cycle competencies that were rated at the Aware and Basic level (NCMA, 2019a).

The third recommendation for the assessed organizations is to develop and/or improve the contracting workforce training on the Manage Disagreement competency. The assessment



results reflect that the Manage Disagreement competency and related job tasks within the Award phase had the lowest scores for the buyer proficiency competencies and generally the seller knowledge competency. Development of this training module could start by providing training to improve skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, and decision-making related to managing contract disagreements, as well as resolving protests and appeals.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to present the findings of three competency assessments using the new DoD contracting competency framework. Competency assessments were conducted on the contracting workforce at the Marine Corps Systems Command (MCSC), the Marine Corps Expeditionary Contracting Platoons and Regional Contracting Offices (ECP/RCO), and the Marine Corps Logistics Command (LOGCOM). The research compared the results of the competency assessments and identified any consistencies and patterns in contract management competency across the three organizations. This research also identified gaps in contract management buyer proficiency and seller knowledge across these organizations and provided the USMC contracting leadership with recommendations to fill these proficiency and knowledge gaps. Based on the competency assessment results, recommendations for competency development were provided to the USMC contracting leadership. Based on the research findings, the USMC can develop a training roadmap for targeting competencies and knowledge areas needed for improvement within the contracting workforce.

Areas for Further Research

The primary area for further research is to conduct a follow-on competency assessment of the three Marine Corps organizations after the contracting workforce has received the recommended training based on the initial assessment. This follow-on assessment would measure any increased learning, in terms of buyer proficiency and seller knowledge of both the buyer and seller competencies as reflected in the CMS.

A second area for further research is to conduct workforce competency assessments on additional contracting organizations throughout the DoD. This would enable benchmarking workforce competency assessment data from DoD activities with diverse contracting mission sets. Conducting competency assessments at Air Force and Army contracting organizations may provide insight and patterns on buyer proficiency and seller knowledge levels that could further inform the DoD contract training programs for these organizations.

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