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**Creating Roadmaps for Career Development**

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**Background and Purpose**

The Department of Defense (DoD) has traditionally placed greater emphasis on the training and career development of its military personnel than on its civilian employees. During the past three years, however, at least one DoD organization, the Defense Finance and Accounting Service (DFAS), initiated an ambitious competency-based program to develop the skills and careers of its civilian employees to prepare them for the 21st Century. The career plans serve as roadmaps for competency and career development for employees and provide the foundation to establish DFAS as a high performance learning organization. This paper (1) describes why focusing on career development will have an important impact on a work organization, (2) outlines the key elements and process of career development, and (3) details the development and implementation of career development plans.

DFAS was established in 1991 as DoD's accounting and financial management arm. It consists of some 20,000 employees located at installations throughout the nation. Its major activities include processing payments to DoD personnel, commercial invoices, travel vouchers, transportation bills of lading, and issuing savings bonds. Among its largest occupations are accountants, financial managers, and accounting technicians.

**Career Development**

In a time when human resources are being reduced and workloads are increasing at DFAS and other work organizations, the flexibility of the workforce becomes the key for ensuring quality service and production and the means to build a high performance learning organization. Career development is one way for creating the most employee value to an organization. It is a program of long-term training and development that:

- fits the work being done to the performance requirements of the organization;
- creates a well-rounded workforce, where all individuals can develop a broader set of competencies;
- encourages self-initiative; and
- encourages supervisor and employee discussions for self and organizational

improvement.

Most organizations know that ignorance has a cost; that employees who don't know, don't perform; and that low performance does not generate income or return on investment. Through career development, DFAS is working to increase learning and ensure return on investment of training and development dollars. Many large organizations facing the same challenges as DFAS are seeing the retooling of the workforce as one of the most significant investments they can make to ensure stability and long-life of the organization.

Investing in training and career development has several benefits:

- It provides employees with a method for initiating self-improvement through training and development.
- A broader set of competencies is created throughout the workforce; competencies that have a direct relationship to organizational mission and objectives.
- It shows that the organization is committed to its employees, and by doing so, it helps foster loyalty.
- It creates consistency of planning and thought about training and development that allows for a more disciplined expenditure of training dollars. Career development is a method for ensuring Return on Investment (ROI) with informed and knowledgeable workers.

The foundation of the Career Development Program is the Career Development Plans. The Plans are the basis for fundamental change in training, education, and development at DFAS. By detailing all the competencies that are necessary for the employee's current job as well as job that he or she may aspire to in the future, they serve as blueprints that provide both the motivation and direction for learning and skill acquisition. The Plans specify the learning objectives for the competencies at each career level and the training and development activities needed to acquire the competencies.

The following 14 career development plans were prepared for the DFAS workforce:

Administrative Financial Management Support\*

Administrative Support\*

Contracting

Equal Employment Opportunity

Financial Management\*

Human Resources

Information Management Technology\*

Leadership

Legal

Personnel Clerical and Assistance

Professional Management Support\*

Program Management

Public Affairs

Small Specialties\*

The asterisked plans cover a group of similar occupations. Two of the plans, Leadership and Program Management, apply to all occupations, while each of the other plans apply to a single occupation.

## Competencies

DFAS Career Development Plans are based on competencies that were found through research to be required for all of the major occupations represented in DFAS. Competencies are observable, measurable patterns of skills, knowledge, abilities, behaviors, and other characteristics needed for successful job performance. Each Career Development Plan details three types of competencies -- technical, professional, and leadership. Technical competencies, such as *accounting policies and procedures*, are specific knowledge and skills related to the subject-matter of one or more occupations. Professional competencies, such as *problem solving*, are skills and characteristics required for success in many occupations. Leadership competencies, such as *managing human resources*, are common to supervisors, managers, and executives in all jobs.

The technical competencies were identified through a comprehensive review of previous studies, position descriptions, classification and qualification standards, job analysis studies, and by DFAS subject-matter experts. DFAS subject-matter experts developed learning objectives and identified developmental activities for the competencies. The

professional and leadership competencies were identified by means of governmentwide occupational studies conducted by the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM). Thus, the competencies included in the career plans are those skills and behaviors that support both professional work behavior and DFAS' mission. In other words, the acquisition of the competencies is expected to translate into improved performance for the employee and for DFAS.

### **Learning Objectives and Developmental Activities**

Learning objectives or performance levels were specified for each competency at five career levels: entry, intermediate, journey, senior/managerial, and executive. These objectives recognize the progression of skill and knowledge as individuals move up the career ladder. Three types of developmental activities were specified for each competency and learning objective: formal courses, work experiences, and other activities such as independent study, conferences and seminars. The plans indicate the career level at which each developmental activity is appropriate as well as the priority of the activity. The following definitions apply to the priorities:

Priority 1 - Highest level for training resources mandated (by law, OPM, DFAS, or higher authority) or essential for optimal performance.

Priority 2 - Training optional, dependent upon the job assignment and employee background/skill level. Training would increase employee's level of proficiency or assignment flexibilities within current occupation.

Priority 3 - Lowest level for training resources to enhance employee's knowledge for current or future assignments.

The table below presents an example of a technical competency for accountants that is part of the financial management Career Development Plan. Note that for this particular competency different learning objectives or performance levels are appropriate at the entry, intermediate, and journey career levels.

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CORE COMPETENCIES	LEARNING OBJECTIVES (PERFORMANCE LEVELS)	DEVELOPMENTAL ACTIVITIES					
(Knowledge of, Ability to Use, or Skill in Using)	E = Entry GS - 5/7 I = Intermediate GS - 9/11 J = Journey GS - 12/13 S = Senior/Managerial GS - 14/15 Ex = Executive SES	Priority 1 = 1 Priority 2 = 2 Priority 3 = 3 (see text for the definition)					
	<table border="1" style="width: 100%; text-align: center;"> <tr> <td style="width: 10%;">E</td> <td style="width: 10%;">I</td> <td style="width: 10%;">J</td> <td style="width: 10%;">S</td> <td style="width: 10%;">E</td> </tr> </table>	E	I	J	S	E	
E	I	J	S	E			

<p>Knowledge of finance, accounting, budget, and auditing concepts that support the programs and mission of the agency and their impact on program achievement.</p>	X	X				<p>1. Learn applicable statutory and regulatory requirements.</p> <p>2. Use and apply appropriate financial principles, procedures, and statutory and regulatory requirements.</p> <p>3. Analyze data and develop recommendations crossing comptroller disciplines.</p>	<p><b>Courses/Subject Areas:</b></p> <p>E1 - Budget concepts</p> <p>I1 - Accounting concepts (specific college courses: beginning, cost, governmental; government courses: general and Working Capital Fund accounting)</p> <p>I2 - Appropriations law</p> <p>I2 - Auditing concepts</p> <p>E2 - Finance concepts Electronic Commerce/Electronic Data Interchange disbursing (EC/EDI), Treasury operations, tour of Federal Reserve Bank)</p> <p>J1 - Current finance and accounting related initiatives</p> <p>J3 - Fundamentals of government procurement</p> <p>J3 - Federal asset management</p> <p>S3 - Managerial accounting</p> <p><b>Work Experience:</b></p> <p>J2 - Rotational career-broadening task force or organizational assignments.</p>
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The codes shown to the left of each of the developmental activities in the above table refer to the career level and priority of the activity. For example *E1* means that the

activity is appropriate at the entry level and has the highest priority. The *courses/subject areas* listed under developmental activities designate the subject names, rather than course titles, since there are many courses that are appropriate to a given subject area.

The opportunities for learning are not limited to classroom training but also include self-development and organizational assignments. DFAS has formed a network of learning centers with resources to assist employees in self-development. Managers and employees work together across DFAS to identify and implement rotational assignments and on-the-job-training to meet identified developmental needs.

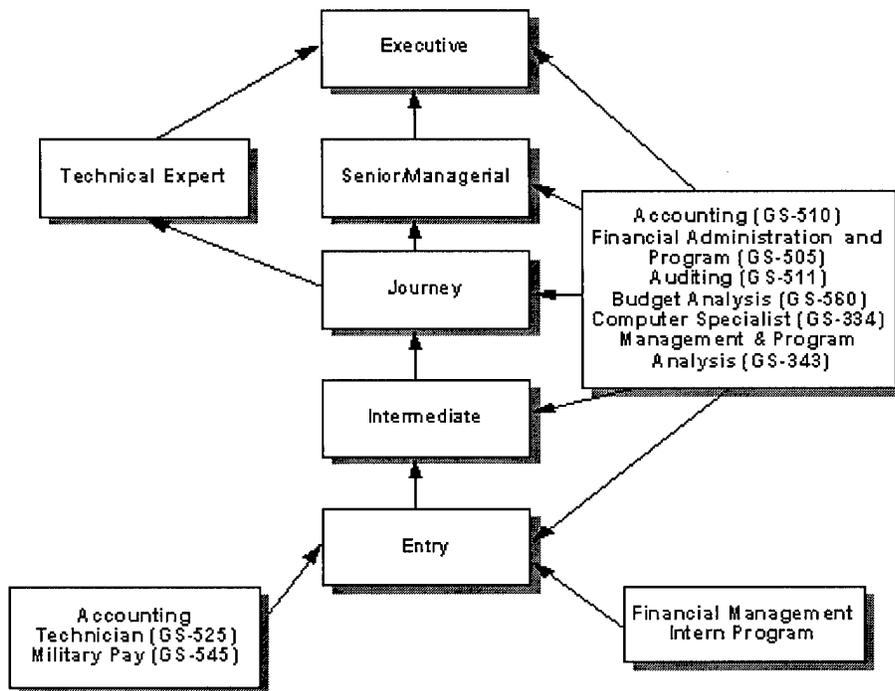
It should not be assumed that employees need to take all the training specified in the plans. Most employees are likely to have already acquired most of the learning objectives appropriate to their career level by virtue of being in their jobs and having prior training. Employees will need additional training only in areas that they have not mastered. They are expected to have proficiency (rather than training) in the specified subject areas regardless of how they acquired the proficiency. Proficiency can be assessed by means of a discussion between employee and supervisor or by more formal assessment methods such as 360 degree assessments.

### **Career paths**

In addition to the competencies and their associated learning objectives, the Career Development Plans also depicts the typical career paths and key positions within a given occupation. Key positions and career paths show employees target leadership positions in their own and related career fields and the path they can follow to attain those positions.

The figure below is an example that depicts the career path for financial managers at DFAS and its feeder occupations.

TYPICAL CAREER PATH FOR FINANCIAL ADMINISTRATION AND PROGRAM (GS-501)



**Implementation**

The Career Development Plans are accessible to all DFAS employees via the Internet. In addition, a fully automated system dedicated to the career development program is being developed in conjunction with the career plans. Designed to make the plans usable and useful, it will allow every individual at DFAS to create and track an individual development plan (IDP) on-line by using the information from the Plans. The system will facilitate discussions between supervisors and employees about employee's career development progress and needs. It will also provide a database with all information relative to the use of funds, the value of the learning, and the improvement of DFAS.

Leadership commitment and understanding are the driving force behind successful implementation of career development. An individual's learning will be most effective if supported and encouraged by management. To this end, DFAS is creating systems and an environment that supports a range of career opportunities. Managers are being

trained to provide useful feedback, coaching, and fostering growth opportunities. Individual employees, however, are responsible for defining their career direction, honing their skills, and taking career initiative.

One of the strengths and challenges of the Career Development Program is that it provides an array of career development opportunities for all individuals. Some opportunities may lead to promotion or vertical moves. Others may lead to improved satisfaction with work by allowing for job enrichment, relocation, or exploration. All career opportunities are likely to result in a more flexible, professional, and proficient workforce for DFAS.

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