ALL THINGS FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT PODCAST

The Navy's Integrated Talent Management Approach

Featuring Pete Bowman, Human Capital Branch Head at the Office of the Secretary of the Navy, Financial Management and Comptroller

Welcome to the All Things Financial Management Podcast presented by Guidehouse and the Society of Defense Financial Management. I'm your host, Tom Rhoads. Join us as we discuss top of mind issues facing defense financial managers.

TOM RHOADS: Thanks for being with us this morning, Pete.

PETE BOWMAN: Absolutely. Very excited to be here and talk with you.

TOM RHOADS: I'd like to start with a question about your background and what brought you to your current position as the Navy's financial management human capital branch head. In other words, Pete, can you just share with us your story?

PETE BOWMAN: Yeah, sure thing, Tom, kind of a winding road. I've had lots of different jobs in different functional areas, so I'll start at the beginning and hopefully go quick enough to at least hit the salient points. So I started my career right out of college as a federal civilian. I joined what is now the Naval Supply Systems Command Weapons System Support Group in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, as an inventory management specialist. I came up through the Naval Acquisition Development Program, so a three-year training program where I was an intern. Super opportunity, got to rotate to several places, both inside NAVSUP and then outside. I worked at NAVAIR and their F-14 program office for a period of time, so just a great experience there. Then after the program, spent another two years in Philly working supply. Had the Navy pay for my MBA at Temple, which was awesome, and then I thanked them by quitting. I went to work for PricewaterhouseCoopers. Another great opportunity. I worked a data warehousing project that was specific for Navy as well. So it was the VAMOSC [Navy Visibility and Management of Operating Support Costs] program, so captures all operating support costs for Navy and Marine Corps weapons systems, and because of my aviation background, I got the opportunity to work as an aviation functional. Stayed with PWC Consulting and then they were bought by IBM. Stayed there another several years and moved up to be the project manager for that engagement. Also supported some other clients, supported OSD, AT&L and the Business Transformation Agency and then the NAVAIR Industrial Complex, I think, their depots. So I was there with IBM until about 2008, and then I got the call to come back to Department of Navy where my heart is. So I came back and worked for the Naval Center for Cost Analysis as their business operations director. It was a pretty exciting time for that organization. We were growing from about 16 folks to 65, and my role was kind of contracts, budget, HR, admin, workforce. So I got to shape how we were structured and built our training program and our trainee and associates program there. So really enjoyed my time at the Naval Center for Cost Analysis, there from about 2008 or so to two 17. Then I got an opportunity to move over to a newly developed organization inside of Comptroller, the Financial Management Policy and Systems group. This was a pretty cool opportunity. I got to work on several process improvement activities when I was there. Worked for John Graveen and Mr. Harker was the political at the time, but we were super aggressive in pursuing some initiatives, treasury direct disbursing, contract vendor pay. This was trying to move more of our business into Navy ERP from the external systems like OnePay and MOCAS, and then also was in the early stages of G-invoicing as well. So great opportunity, really enjoyed my time there. Probably the most interesting experience of my career. Got a little bit burned out there, so I left and went over to Air Force right in the middle of the pandemic. So I will question my own choices there. But I went over to Air Force and their cost organization inside SAF FMC where I got the chance to run the Air Force's similar version as the Navy's VAMOSC. So the Air Force has a similar system that tracks all operating and support costs for Air Force weapon systems. So I got to run that program as well as develop or lead the team that developed the Air Force's Flying Hour program factors. So super cool projects that I worked over there. Funny thing over there, and most of my friends know this, is I was a cost estimator without the ability to manipulate Excel very well. So a fun fact there.

Came back to Department of Navy in May of '22 where I got to be the human capital director inside of Navy Comptroller. So again, I had a prior relationship with Ms. Jenkins, who's the Principal Deputy, and Cassie Kinsey who's the admin division director. So I had a great opportunity to come back. I had done some workforce work before, but nothing to this scale. So it was like every job I've had, I'm completely unqualified for the position, but super excited to be here, really enjoy what we are doing. Our FM Strategy has prioritized workforce as the number one goal, and I'll say Mr. Rumbaugh and Ms. Jenkins have put their money where their mouth is here. We have a lot of resources to get after that. We also have a lot of pressure to go faster and just really have enjoyed getting into this position and trying to shape what we're doing for our nearly 10,000 strong FM workforce members.

TOM RHOADS: Great. It's always interesting to hear people's backgrounds, and yours is so varied in terms of places where you've worked, but also in terms of the projects that you've led, and I think all of those coming together brought you to where you are now and as the financial management human capital branch head, I suspect you're deeply engaged in the Navy's human capital strategy. Can you give us an overview of that strategy for the financial management workforce?

PETE BOWMAN: Yeah, sure thing, and I'll take a couple of gratuitous shots at what we have done to date, even, in some cases, when I've been in the job. I think we are really good at buying training. I would say that we are super tactical and we have a lot of training. So what that's led us to is we have a saturated environment for training for our FM workforce. So this is not just true in Department of Navy FM, this is across all of DoD FM. But we have multiple learning management systems. So OSD has their FM Online. We have inside Department of Navy, we have FM Connect. We also have Waypoints. Some of us have LinkedIn Learning, some of us have Udemy. So we have lots of opportunities to obtain training, most of the times, for free. But we've done a poor job, in my opinion, of putting it together.

So what should I take, right? We're required to take all of the DoD FM certification training courses, but we've done a poor job about telling the staff what we value, what we think they should take, when they should take it, and getting it to them in a consumable fashion. So what we've attempted to do inside of here at Department of Navy FM is put together what we're calling an integrated talent management approach. So the four main pillars of our approach are: employee engagement, talent acquisition, workforce planning, and talent development. I'll talk a little bit about each one. Some are more mature than others, some we have a lot to do and some, I think, we have good plans and good initiatives in place to help us move forward.

So I'll talk about employee engagement first. I think that's where our organization has done a very good job here over the past two or three years about meeting the staff. So coming out of the pandemic, we've prioritized getting face-to-face engagements happening. So we've significantly invested in our participation in ASMC's PDI now SDFM PDI. So we used to send around 400 people to PDI. Last year we sent 1400, the year before that, we sent 1100 people. So significantly increased our footprint there. And then FM&C centrally funds all the registration. We also have been hosting two Comptroller seminars per year, East Coast, West Coast. So this is 400 staff across Department of Navy FM. So the intent is to get the Echelon 1, the Echelon 2, the Echelon, threes, fours, Comptroller, and Deputy Comptrollers together for two days for plenary programming, and then some workshop programming, to make sure that we're aligning on the tone from the top and the vision for the organization. We also do three FM Connect virtual programs per year. So this is two hours on a Tuesday afternoon when we provide training to all 10,000 staff.

Other things that we've done to get the voice of the customer engaged with the staff is we've done pulse surveys, so quarterly pulse surveys. Quick 10 question surveys to figure out what's going well, where we have work to do, and I'll talk a little bit about that here in a minute. But those are pretty eye-opening. And my boss, Ms. Jenkins, and I never focus on what's going well. I want to know what's not going well, and that's where we've centered a lot of our effort. We're also heavily invested in awards and recognition programs. So we have a Department of Navy FM Awards program that's about to kick off, and then we're also engaged with the DoD FM Awards program.

Again, the ways to measure success is how represented we are in the DoD FM Awards and we're making significant progress. When I arrived, I had heard about the DFAS and Air Force writing engines winning all the awards, and I will say they've done very well, and it's not because they have writing engines, just because they pay attention and care. So we've paid a little bit more attention and we're caring more. So the results are bearing fruit there too.

Talent acquisition, from our kind of place in the world is the Echelon 1. We don't acquire by recruit a lot of talent. A lot of that happens out in command land. Where we do influence that is in our FM career program. So this is about a 90 FTE program that our team runs for trainees and associates. And these are recent graduates in either finance, business, accounting. So we are the first face to the customer. So we're out there recruiting from colleges and universities. We work closely with the hiring managers in the commands that have the requirements. This program is one of the things I'm most proud of. I got out of the way and let the two folks that run this program really do the work and they provide a great structure to the program.

We've hosted now two in-person orientations here for the first time since COVID, with lots of programming and then the opportunity to go on what we're calling Fleet Visits where they get to see our toys. So we actually had one on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday. And

Wednesday, they got to go on the USS Frost down in Norfolk. So great opportunities to bring the freshest talent in Department of Navy together and let them see what we do and see why what they do as resource managers is important to the war fighter. So super excited about our FMCP program. We're also working closely with OSD on their recruiting pilot. So we spend a lot of time supporting those endeavors. So we had Ms. Jenkins over at her alma mater, George Mason, here a couple of weeks ago. I went out to University of Maryland. We've supported several of those events. Virginia Tech, Hampton, et cetera, just trying to get our name out there.

The other piece with respect to talent acquisition is brand management. Two years ago, we finally had an appropriate public-facing webpage put together. I think if you're googling Department of Defense or other DoD Fourth Estate agencies and you're looking for what do people do inside of those organizations, it's hard to find from the public side because it's either CAC-enabled or it's a horrible looking SharePoint site. We've invested heavily in our Human Capital website, and it's kind of our first face both externally and internally. So we're proud of that. And other things we're trying to do is increase our channels for how we expose the broader world to what we do here at Department of Navy FM.

Talent development, this is where I would say we have spent a lot of time prior. So we have bought a lot of training, now we're trying to put it together. So we have virtual instructor-led content that we pay for via our FM Connect portal. We've developed a Department of Navy custom content that we offer through that. We have web-based training through that portal as well. We've also purchased licenses through Udemy, so this is asynchronous on-demand training. We've started building micro-learning. This was at one of our seminars we had a solutioning workshop where we asked the staff across Department of Navy what are the things that we think would resonate with the staff, and got YouTube shorts on how to do a funding document or how to navigate through the FM LMS system, those are things that we're starting to build out for micro-learning. We have a couple of these micro-learning videos for things like data literacy out there as well. So that's a place that we are starting to invest and starting to make some progress.

We've also invested heavily with the Naval Postgraduate School here in talent development window. So we support annually a cohort through the Naval Postgraduate School's Masters of Science and Financial Management. So two-year program. It's virtual. It's a great investment in the staff. So the staff will get six hours per week to be in class. So that's work time where we're taking them out of their daily job so that they can focus on their coursework. So they have two classes on a Wednesday afternoon. We pay for all of that, and it's a two-year program. So again, great program for the staff, great program for us, heard nothing but super positives out of folks that have gone through the Naval Postgraduate Financial Management program.

Two years ago, we actually started a program with NPS on data analytics. So similar to the master's program. This is a one-year virtual program. It's a three-hour course, Wednesday afternoons, four classes in total. I will say the first cohort we pushed through was a little bit lumpy. The math was harder than anticipated, and in some cases we weren't teaching with the tools that we use every day. So think Advana Jupiter. So we worked with our FMS team, our systems team, and we developed some sandbox materials so we could walk through Jupiter and have the curriculum be much more focused to what our staff uses and needs. So happy with where we are with the Data Analytics Graduate Certificate Program.

Internal to Department of Navy, we also piloted a rotational assignment here last year. So this was 90 to 120 days. You got to move amongst BSOs, our budget submitting offices, MAJCOMs to all you non-Navy folks, and spend 90 to 120 days working with a different organization just to see how they operate. So we did a pilot last year with several folks. We're going to do that in full this year, starting probably in the February, March timeframes for that rotational program. It's similar to the DoD FM Stars program, but just inside Department of Navy.

The workforce planning piece, I will say this is an opportunity that we have to improve the workforce planning. We have great visibility into what we look like now. So the Jupiter team has done a great job in pulling the metrics. So down to the UIC level, I know age, EEO category, grade, education, tenure, job series. So we've built out Echelon 2 details. So 160 some pages of data that help us understand what we look like. So you can use that for things like attrition analysis, hiring, what we look like as far as retirement eligibility, et cetera. So we have the data, now we've got to put some analysis and put it to use. We also did a pilot skill assessment here last year where we looked at three different types of organizations. So we've looked at Fleet Forces Command, Naval Air Systems Command, and BSO-12, just those three very different organizations to understand what they look like from a job readiness perspective. Do they have the resources that they need to inform the requirement that we are now calling our FM Academy?

And that's where we are working to figure out how do we build the workforce of the future there. So hope that tells you a little bit about what our integrated talent management strategy looks like.

TOM RHOADS: Pete, it sounds thorough and robust, and it sounds like it covers a wide breadth of topics, but also formats. And one of the things I always wrestle with respect to trainings and learnings is how does an organization assess the workforce needs or any gaps and skills? So at the Navy, how are you doing this? How are you addressing any gaps or skill needs? And then baking that into this curriculum of trainings and learnings that you've developed.

PETE BOWMAN: Fair question, Tom. And I'll be flip, and hopefully this comes across, but the farther away you get from the Pentagon, the smarter people get. So we have a very good understanding at the Echelon 1 about our own organization. We think we understand what the Echelons 2 look like, and then beyond that, it's obvious that there's not a whole lot of understanding of what happens. I say this because I've worked at several different echelons, but to really understand what's happening, you have to leave the Echelon 1 to do that. So I mentioned earlier we had done pulse surveys. So some of the feedback we got, again, Ms. Jenkins and I focus on the things that we're not doing well, one of the big ones was, would you recommend DON FM as a place to work? And the results were less than you had hoped. So that and a couple others led us to say, "Jeesh, I wonder how we can get the ground truth on that."

So what we did is we took her out of the Pentagon down to the Echelon threes and fours across the country. So we did a couple in the DC area, we did a couple down in Norfolk, we went to Pax River, and then we went to San Diego. And at each of these stops, we talked to several different organizations. So kicked the leadership out, put the barriers down, and then let the staff talk. So we're talking Echelon threes and fours, and we had the sevens through elevens and twelves in the room and not the leaders, and really tried to elicit what's going well. And the feedback was not always what we anticipated it to be, I will say.

So in some places, I think we could guess we would hear what we heard. So as an example, as down in the Norfolk area, we have a large Department of Navy presence down there. Most of the organizations down there are using our legacy accounting systems. The grades in some cases are lower. We have lots of lower echelons. So things that happen are we don't have the supply of qualified people at some of the lower grades. So the lower echelons turn into training grounds. If you have a qualified person that starts at an echelon four and starts to move up, they get plucked and moved up to a higher echelon. And then because they're using some of the legacy systems and the turnover rate is higher, the SOPs start to get stale. So some of the things we learned down in that area is how do we recruit and retain? How do we find the talent at the lower levels? How do we keep them? How do we grow them? Standard operating procedures are stale. How do we make sure we have those together?

And then other places we're observing that there's a lack of understanding of the end-to-end business process. So ERP, Navy ERP is what we use in most of our organizations here in Department of Navy, notwithstanding the Marine Corps and DAI. Because of the challenges of how complex ERP is we've created tremendous buttonologists. So folks know how to take 'a' and attach things to create purchase requests as an example. So I'll just use that as my example. Say you're a PR creator, you know how to do your process, you know how to start the process and get it moved from you over to the contracting office shop. What we found is in a lot of cases, the folks that are the PR creators don't understand where the requirement was generated, what they're buying, what happens when they pass a PR in ERP over to the contract shop, how the vendor performs, how the invoice comes back.

So again, this lack of detailed understanding of the end-to-end and how what you do impacts others is another gap that we saw. So again, getting out to the lower echelons and actually hearing from them was a big, big benefit to us as we start to develop this requirement for what we're calling "The Academy". We also had some other pieces that we were aware of. The ERP support model includes super specific skill sets in our command business offices.

So these are the folks that make sure that when we have troubled transactions or we need complex things done, these are the people that understand how to get them done. Super talented people that perform the functions in these command business offices, but we don't have a great way to develop a pipeline there or train for the type of skills that are there. So these are folks that are across all different specialties. So think logistics, finance, contracts, supply. So you need a broad understanding of both ERP, but a broader understanding of these different business processes. So recognize need there for how do we grow talent in the command business offices, but also how do we provide them with training since they're the number one spot to fix our troubled transactions.

So if we're looking at our FM Academy in three different buckets, the requirement number one is to provide readiness training so folks are capable of doing their job, understand federal financial management and can do it inside of ERP. So that's lane one. Lane two is an understanding of the end-to-end business processes inside of Department of Navy FM. So understanding that from a financial management perspective and then how each of the modules in ERP work together, and then all the actors and stakeholders in there as well. And then the last lane is our command business office. We're trying to build these ERP ninjas.

So back to the original question, the ability to elicit and listen is super important, and getting that feedback from the people that are performing the work is the best way to do it. I used to joke and still joke with several, and it's not always appreciated, but I've mentioned before, we don't do real work in the Pentagon. We work hard, but the real work happens at the echelon threes and fours where we're putting the dollars in the hands of the war fighters. So we need to make sure that we are listening to what they think they need and not coming up with what we think they should do, via memos, et cetera.

TOM RHOADS: No, that's great. And I suspect it was eye-opening to get out to the lower echelons and sit down and have conversations with the folks who are performing the work. And you're seeing needs and you're seeing skills, and you're seeing skill gaps, and you're defining courses and different learning methods to address those. And in my mind, a lot of this all comes back together in trying to create a culture of learning. And we think about the same thing. Always have an inquisitive mind and always be willing to continuously learn. How are you taking all this information that you've gathered and all the tools that you've created, and pulled that all together to create a culture of learning. And what are the barriers do you see in the DON from that happening?

PETE BOWMAN: Yeah, fair question. And I will say my two years at Air Force was eye-opening to help me kind of understand this a little bit. The Air Force values education and training. They incentivize it both for civilian and military. I will say my perception on the Department of Navy side is, it's mission first, and that's kind of borne out. So as we capture feedback like how come you don't go to a week long training? The answer is, "Well, I'm too busy, one. And then if I go, I'm going to be making my co-workers jobs and lives even harder than they currently are." So again, this goes back to we've got to find ways to incent the behavior. So the supervisors and everybody from the top to the bottom need to recognize that this is not just a nice to have, this is something we have to have and we have to incent that behavior.

So when we talk about putting together our academy, sometimes getting out of the office is essential and required for the training to stick. So I will raise my hand and admit, when I did my DoD FM certification, I did the video-based training and I paid almost no attention as it was going on in the background. I think that's true for a lot of our virtual instructor-led stuff too, is that's on-screen on your screen on the right, on your screen on your left, you're checking email, you're playing in Excel. So one of the things we've learned also is not everyone learns the same way. So when we deliver and develop training, we need to make sure that we're meeting our staff where they are. So in some cases, short bursts of information make great sense. So we talked a little bit about micro learning earlier.

In some cases, they're video-based where I just need to take it and get it knocked out. In some cases, getting the people out of their office into a classroom or other makes great sense for it to stick. And then we have to be careful with how we measure and survey our staff. If my joke is, if you were to take all the training that my team or any team's offer, if you scale it up to five, five being great, everybody scales between 4.5 to five, how was the training if you take the survey right after the class. And then if you ask them three months later, "Hey, how was that training?" The results are dramatically different. "What did you take out of that training?" "Well, I don't really remember."

So how do we make sure that we meet the customer where they are? How do we make sure that the training we're delivering has value in that moment and then continues to have value after they've left? So those are the things that we're working on. And then back to the barriers, the model we're right now considering heavily for the academy is prerequisites online, some in-residence training. And then after you're back in your desk, periodicity, having some video-based and instructor-led training after, so that we don't lose, we don't go to training, enjoy it, and then come back to our jobs and forget what we've learned. So those are a couple of the things that we're working towards as far as creating the culture of learning. The barriers, we find time to do things like take annual leave, folks take parental leave to have babies, they get sick. So we need to make sure we're investing in our training as well.

TOM RHOADS: Pete, this has been really insightful and appreciate you sharing this with us. We usually like to wrap up each one of our podcast episodes with this question. And the question is, knowing what you know now, what advice would you share with those who are just starting out their careers?

PETE BOWMAN: Yeah, I mean, this is a good question. I mean, I will say having been part of a lot of interviews and hiring actions in my time, the most important thing for new folks is control what you can control. So having an inquisitive mind, being a great teammate, having a positive attitude, those are the things that really set people apart. The other thing I would say is try not to be shy. I know that's hard early, but smiling, acknowledging everybody when you come into the office, those are things that you can control, having energy when you're around. Another thing I will say, and this is just new to the past five or six years, is there's no penalty to come into the office. I know there's great benefits to the telework model and the hybrid model, and there absolutely are. Again, a lot of cases, depending on the type of work, you can probably be much more productive at home.

But there's so much that can be learned in the office, and particularly for new folks. So old dinosaurs like me, not you Tom, but dinosaurs like me. When you're in an office setting, it's one thing to have your supervisor lean over and show you how to do a pivot table or whatnot. But it's another thing to hear your peers on the telephone talking about something, or somebody comes by and you're struggling. You say, "Hey, do you know how to do this?" So all the ... And it's not water cooler. I'm not talking about the water cooler talk. I'm talking about the overhearing what's happening, after meetings walking back and somebody's talking about a topic that's not exactly in your lane, but is tangentially related, and then you just start to understand more about how the organization operates. So those are just a couple of things.

Looking back, I wish I had been a little bit more outgoing when I started. But yeah, those are just a couple of things that I think early careerists should try to do. Like I said, we're looking for great teammates to join high performing organizations to the extent that you bring the energy for that, that to me is a huge win for both sides.

TOM RHOADS: Such great advice and great feedback, and I know how busy you are, Pete, I just want to thank you for taking in, carving out some time to be a guest on the SDFM All Things Financial Management podcast. And thank you again so much for your time.

PETE BOWMAN: I've loved being here. Thank you, Tom.

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