



Procurement Alert Notice

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

The Online Classroom: Making Learning More Appealing

After delivering our second session of distance learning courses for the fall of 2003, BMRA held a one-day symposium to discuss the course and consider improvements for future offerings. By several measures, our online classes exceeded expectations. Relative to the spring 2003 session, our dropout rate decreased by half, and end-of-course evaluations indicated a lot of learning happened online. However, the online course (in the virtual world of distance learning, e-learning, online training, or Web-based training are all names that are used more or less interchangeably) did not always match student expectations.

During our brainstorming session, we explored several lessons learned from delivering our second round of BPO Online to determine how we might improve distance learning. Primarily we plan to focus the registration process; time and effort demands on course participants; evaluation of student performance and feedback regarding it; and standards of behavior in the classroom.

Registration Process

Some 135 students registered for the course initially, of which 100 students actually showed up for class. There was a variety of reasons for the pre-course shuffle. Some was attributable to administrative mix-ups (e.g., enrollment of students who had already taken the course or students who were scheduled for leave during the eight-week class). Hurricane Isabel effectively shut down government offices for several days, resulting in students coming on board 7 to 10

days into the class. But the predominant cause for the roster shakeout remained as before: students were not properly advised of the time demands of the course prior to class orientation and/or startup. Not having received enough information before course enrollment (e.g., a syllabus and class schedule), students only discovered during their first or second week of class that their job commitments conflicted with the course demands, compromising their ability to fully participate. Some elected, therefore, to drop out, planning either to enroll in a face-to-face class or a later session of the online course.

On the other hand, of the 100 students who were onboard at the startup of the instructor-led portion of the class, well over 80% successfully completed the course, many with honors. Since the national average for completing distance learning courses is

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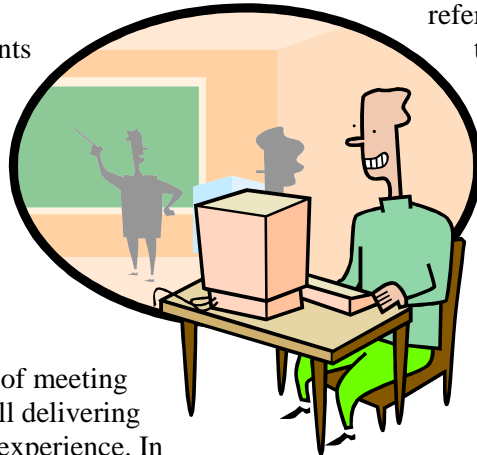


a little over 40%, we are, of course, delighted with these results. Nevertheless, the dropout rate is a concern and we believe an online enrollment process would help avoid a potential pitfall. Prior to signing up for a course, students would be required to preview detailed information about what is expected of students. Empowered to decide for themselves whether or not online learning is for them, we believe students will be more likely to commit to the necessary time and effort.

Time and Effort Demands

BMRA's web-based courses require students to work in small groups via email, ad hoc group chats online, or posts to an electronic bulletin board. In face-to-face classes, students typically collaborate from 30 to 90 minutes on an exercise. On the other hand such collaborative activities online extend over a 10 day period (to include two weekends), allowing more time for students to reflect on their assignment, prepare individual input, consider alternate approaches, and brainstorm to reach a group consensus. This affords students a greater opportunity for in-depth learning than in the face-to-face class; however, it demands far more time and effort than in the four-day class. Hence there were cries of "it's harder and that simply isn't fair!"

And so, we face the dilemma of meeting student expectations while still delivering a meaningful online learning experience. In contrast to the 8-week online class, the classroom course is only four days long. With approximately one day taken up by course administrative matters and testing, about three full days are available for instruction and case studies. Classroom instructors are limited to about one hour per exercise. The result is not and cannot be comparable to web-based training, where students have more time at their disposal to reflect—not to mention having a wealth of reference materials at their fingertips, just a click away, 24/7. But then, with a course stretched out over weeks, as opposed to days, how long should students be expected to engage before getting meaningful feedback regarding their performance? The question leads us to another key issue in online training...



Evaluation & Feedback

In a four-day face-to-face session, students know that 3 days of learning and doing will be followed by testing on day four. However, the online schedule consists of learning and doing for 7 weeks and demonstrating mastery in week eight. Understandably, online students expressed the need for more frequent feedback on how they were doing. The need is obvious, but doing it is easier said than done.

Online, as in the classroom, the bulk of the grade is earned toward the end of the session (in the last two weeks of the class), when students are assigned individual "signature projects"—a 200 word essay demonstrating their understanding of the key points raised in the case study—and a final exam is administered. Students are given a feel for how they are doing by weekly non-graded "self-evaluation" quizzes throughout the self-paced portion of the course and quizzes throughout the reference materials that support and are linked to the individual case study scenarios.

However, since grades for these "review and understanding" quizzes are not recorded in the Gradebook, students in past online course sessions were not clear as to their standing mid-way through the course. Therefore, we plan to divide the single final exam into six weekly graded exams. We hope this will meet students' "need to know" as they progress through the eight-week course.

Standards of Behavior in the Classroom

From time to time instructors are challenged by individual students or even groups of students in the classroom. Students might be restive, rebellious, and reluctant; or they might be interested and eager to learn, participate, and contribute. Negative student behavior can be contagious and can explode into a run-away class, not only compromising the value of the course for other students, but also imposing additional time demands on the instructor. Over the years we have had a few instances of negative behavior in the traditional classroom, but nothing as serious as some incidents in online courses. One online

student flat out refused to accept the instructor's direction. The student argued and repeatedly used much precious time to criticize the instructor and "the contractor" (i.e., BMRA). His complaints were completely unfounded, and the time people spent writing, posting, and (perhaps most importantly) reading them was largely wasted.

When rudeness disrupted other students' learning, it became more than a matter of etiquette; it became an ethical concern. Dealing with problematic behavior online is quite complex. I wondered, "Is this a unique problem faced only by BMRA? Or is this a problem confronting others in our education system?" I researched the subject and found that standards of behavior and ethics in the classroom is a growing concern among all educators.

A recently published book titled *Ethics Across the Curriculum* published by Lexington Books focuses on guiding college and university professors to raise student awareness of ethics in their fields and to develop the "whole" student. While adult education courses are somewhat different, there is a common thread that identifies the aspirations of all teachers—that being, "teaching, service, and scholarship." It is extremely frustrating for a teacher to have her or his class disrupted by students who interfere with other students' learning.

There isn't much we can do to force proper conduct in the classroom, short of dropping a student(s) from the course (not usually practicable), but we can discourage disruptiveness by observing students' behavior and responding directly to it. Online, it's harder to either observe or respond effectively. Sometimes peer pressure helps in the classroom, but online, disruptive students are not susceptible to sighs of exasperation or frowns of disapproval. In cyberspace, if it isn't in writing it truly does not exist.

Instructors play an important role in setting the stage for proper conduct in the classroom. Knowing the students and the material being taught and encouraging student participation are critical in the traditional classroom, both to discipline and successful teaching. These same considerations are important in the distance learning environment. Setting the stage early goes a long way toward ensuring a better, more harmonious relationship between the instructor and the students.

The Challenge: Making distance learning appealing to students

"Learning is not compulsory...neither is survival!"—

W. Edwards Deming (1900–1993)

Quite possibly our most difficult challenge in distance learning will not be dealing with disruptive behavior, but encouraging and motivating the students. How can we keep those enrolled in a distance learning course interested enough to "turn on" to the learning and successfully complete the course? Too little information is available on this question.

Adult education "best practices" in the virtual world of distance learning are still in the developmental stage. It will take several years before educational technologists, psychologists, and administrators gain enough information on how to satisfy adult needs and individual learning styles with this system of education. In the meantime, those of us involved in this new training environment will have to experiment to find the best ways of producing, promoting and delivering Web-based training.

In a recent article published in the T&D magazine, Jennifer Hofmann stated that keeping students continuously engaged in a virtual environment over an extended period of time is like trying to teach class right after lunch. Face to face classroom instructors can see if they are losing students' attention, and have learned various techniques to bring the class back. It is said that in the traditional classroom body language accounts for at least 70 per cent of the communication. In the virtual training arena, we can't rely on physical eye contact and/or body language. So, how do we "wake them up" online?

At BMRA we assign our faculty members to courses according to their knowledge and "hands on" experience of the arts and techniques of teaching, as well as the topic. But in cyberspace, since we're all getting our feet wet, we are pioneering new approaches and techniques to develop a successful "hands on" workshop environment online, where students remain engaged and enthused over an extended period of time.

As in the traditional classroom, we encourage online instructors to take charge immediately and letting students know who their instructor is. We suggest acquainting students with your teaching methods and techniques, along with your background and credentials. Then have students tell you about their experience and their credentials, why they are in the course, and what they expect to achieve from it. Instructors should acknowledge that students are in the course for different reasons. We must encourage them to share with the class their unique experiences and job-related questions. This is essential to developing a learner-centric experience online. If we want greater class participation, we need to “relate” with the class and create a “safe environment”, one in which the instructor gains student confidence by serving as a “guide at their side”. A safe environment is the stage for an open (non-attribution) exchange where there are no “wrong” answers, only better solutions to the task at hand! Emphasizing that whatever is said in the class stays within the classroom will encourage positive attitudes and go a long way towards creating the safe environment prerequisite to engaging students online.

The Bottom Line: The classroom in general, and the virtual classroom in particular, is a difficult and challenging environment when a student or group of students does not want to be there in the first place. The beauty and challenge of teaching is to bring a heterogeneous group together. Your reward is to ensure a successful learning experience for everyone.

FSS GROUP 70 OPENS TO STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

Section 211 of the E-Government Act of 2002 (Public Law 107-347) amended the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act to allow for “cooperative purchasing,” where the Administrator of GSA provides State and localities access to certain items offered through GSA’s supply schedules. Section 211 allows a State or local government to use Federal Supply Schedules (FSS) for automated data processing equipment (ADPE—including firmware), software, supplies, support equipment and services.

GSA has issued a proposed rule but there is no date for the final rule. The proposed rule establishes a new GSAR subpart 538.70 and associated clauses to address cooperative purchasing from supply

schedules by eligible non-federal supply organizations.

FISCAL YEAR 2004 PER DIEM RATE UPDATE

In our last edition, we advised that, the per diem rate for the area to which you will be traveling is given on your assignment sheet. These rates changed recently and this has had an impact on our policy. The major changes are summarized below.

Mileage

January 1, 2004 the mileage rate for travel was increased to \$0.375. You should use this for all travel for BMRA.

Hotels

Please note the hotel rate is that given to you by Robin. If you cannot find hotel accommodations equal to that rate, please let Robin, Nancy, or Edna know and we will try to help you. Of course, if you can find a room **below** the given rate, that would be grrrrreat!

Meals & Incidentals (M&I)

The Meals & Incidentals rate is given in your letter also. The rules for that have changed somewhat.

The following 75% rule will apply:

Regardless of hour of departure), Travel Day to the class site is 75% of the total.

Example: A rate of \$43 would translate into \$32.25 (43 x .75).

Days you teach will be the total per diem, including the last day. If you have to stay overnight on the last day because you would get home after midnight, you will receive 75% of the per diem for that travel day.

Telephone Calls

You are allowed two telephone calls to your home when you travel. If you need to call BMRA while you are away, please use **888-248-2672**, since that is much less expensive than calling 703-691-0868, especially from the hotel. If you use your cell phone to call, you may charge the minute rate that you pay for your calls.



If you have a question about our travel policy, please review your Instructor Manual. If you haven't been given one, please let Edna know and she will see that you get one.

Details are provided in the instructor materials packet and are also available on line at <http://policyworks.gov/org/main/mt/homepage/mtt/perdiem/perd04d.html> (no spaces or breaks). If you would like to receive these by email, please let Robin or Edna know. If you would like to complete your expense report on the computer, you will need to install MS Excel on your computer—Edna can give you step-by-step directions. Other forms can be completed on the computer, and we will be glad to email you the forms if that is your preference.

It's extremely important to have the correct mileage, M&I, and hotel rates when you fill out your Expense Report. We won't have to change your report and you won't have to wonder what your actual reimbursement amount will be, and that's worthwhile!

FACs 01-17 THROUGH 01-23 RELEASED

Updates to the FAR are released so often that it's hard to keep current. Be sure to consult the official FAR Home Page at <http://www.arnet.gov/far/> frequently. Following is a summary of FACs issued since the last PAN.

FAC 01-17, October 20, 2003

Contract Bundling. This final rule (1) revises the definition of bundling to expressly include multiple award contract vehicles and task and delivery orders under such contracts; (2) requires procuring activities to coordinate with their small business specialist (SBS) proposed acquisition strategies or plans contemplating awards above specified dollar thresholds and require the SBS to notify the agency Office of Small and Disadvantaged Utilization (OSDBU) when those strategies include unnecessary and unjustified contract bundling; (3) reduces the threshold and revise the documentation required for substantial bundling; and (4) requires agency OSDBUs to perform periodic oversight reviews of agency bundling activities. It amends FAR Subparts 2.1, 7.1, 8.4, 10.0, 16.5, 19.2, and 42.15.

FAC 01-18, December 11, 2003

Item I—New Consolidated Form for Selection of Architect-Engine Contractors. This final rule amends the FAR to replace SF 254, Architect-Engine and Related Services Questionnaire, and SF 255, Architect-Engine and Related Services Questionnaire for Specific Projects, with SF 330, Architect-Engine Qualifications. It affects FAR 1.1, 36.6, and 36.7; Part 53 TOC; 53.2; and SF 330.

Item II—Depreciation Cost Principle. This final rule revises the depreciation cost principle (FAR 31.205-11) by improving clarity and structure and removing unnecessary and duplicative language. The rule does not change the allowability of depreciation costs. However, changes have been made that may affect the determination of depreciable costs for tangible personal property; for example, only residual values in excess of 10 percent need be used and residual values need not be recognized when certain depreciation methods are used. This rule is of particular interest to contractors and contracting officers who use cost analysis to price contracts and modifications, and who determine or negotiate reasonable costs in accordance with a clause of a contract, e.g., price revision of fixed-price incentive contracts, terminated contracts, or indirect cost rates. It revises FAR 2.1 and 31.2.

Item III—Federal Procurement Data System. This final rule amends the FAR to—

- Reflect that the information in FPDS-NG is available to the general public;
- Provide the website for FPDS-NG, which must be entered as <https://www.fpds.gov>;
- Delete the physical address for the Federal Procurement Data Center;
- Allow agencies to report all transactions between \$2,500 and \$25,000 to FPDS-NG as either individual contract actions or summary contract actions until September 30, 2004;
- Require all contract actions over \$2,500 be reported to FPDS-NG as individual contract actions after September 30, 2004;
- Require agencies to insert the provision at 52.204-6, Data Universal Numbering System

(DUNS) Number, in solicitations when the expected award amount will result in the generation of an individual contract action report and the contract does not include FAR clause 52.204-7, Central Contractor Registration; and

- Eliminate the use of the SF 279, Federal Procurement Data System (FPDS)—Individual Contract Action Report, and the SF 281, Federal Procurement Data System (FPDS)—Summary Contract Action Report (\$25,000 or Less).

It revises 4.6, Part 53 TOC, 53.2 and 53.3.

Item IV—Increased Federal Prison Industries, Inc. Waiver Threshold. This rule adopts as final an interim rule (FAC 01-14) that amended the FAR to increase the Federal Prison Industries, Inc.'s (FPI) clearance exception threshold at FAR 8.606(e) from \$25 to \$2,500, and deleted the criterion that delivery is required within 10 days. Federal agencies are not required to make purchases from FPI of products on FPI's Schedule that are at or below this threshold. Federal agencies, however, may continue to consider and purchase products from FPI that are at or below \$2,500.

Item V—Debarment and Suspension—Order Placement and Option Exercise. This final rule addresses the placement of orders under existing contracts and agreements with contractors that have been debarred, suspended, or proposed for debarment. It amends FAR 9.4.

Item VI—Insurance and Pension Costs. This final rule amends the FAR to revise the Insurance and Indemnification cost principle, and the portion of the Compensation for Personal Services cost principle relating to pension costs. The rule revises both cost principles by improving clarity and structure, and removing unnecessary and duplicative language. This rule is of particular interest to contractors and contracting officers who use cost analysis to price contracts and modifications, and who determine or negotiate reasonable costs in accordance with a clause of a contract, e.g., price revision of fixed-price incentive contracts, terminated contracts, or indirect cost rates. It revises parts 31.2 and 52.2.

Item VII—Debriefing—Competitive Acquisition. This final rule amends the FAR to include requirements for debriefing unsuccessful offerors under competitive proposals. Specifically, each solicitation for

competitive proposals must include a statement that prescribes minimal information that shall be disclosed in postaward debriefings. This rule amends FAR 52.2.

Item VIII—Technical Amendments.

FAC 01-19, January 7, 2004

Item I—New Consolidated Form for Selection of Architect-Engineer Contractors. This amendment to a final rule (see Item I, FAC 01-18) changes the effective date to June 8, 2004. It amends FAR parts 1.1, 36.6, 36.7, 53 TOC, and 53.2.

Item II—Free Trade Agreements—Chile and Singapore, and Trade Agreements Thresholds. This interim rule amends new Free Trade Agreements with Chile and Singapore, as approved by Congress (Public Laws 108-77 and 108-78). Contracting officers must review the new thresholds in order to select the appropriate clauses to implement the Buy American Act, trade agreements, and sanctions of European Union country end products and services. Amends FAR parts 5.2, 12.2, 13.3, 14.4, 17.2, 19.11, 19.13, 22.15, 25 and 52.2.

FAC 01-20, February 23, 2004

Special Emergency Procurement Authority. This interim rule increases the amount of the micro-purchase threshold and the simplified acquisition threshold for procurements of supplies and services to support a contingency operation or to facilitate defense against or recovery from nuclear, biological, chemical, or radiological attack. Also, the head of the contracting activity carrying out a procurement of supplies or services to facilitate defense against or recovery from nuclear, biological, chemical, or radiological attack may treat such supplies or services as a commercial item. Amends 2.1, 10.0, 12.1, 12.2, 13.1, 13.2, 13.3, 13.5, 15.4, 19.5, 19.8, 19.9, 19.13, and 25.11.

FAC 01-21, March 26, 2004

Purchases from Federal Prison Industries—Requirement for Market Research. This interim rule provides that no fiscal year 2004 funds shall be expended for purchase of a product or service offered by Federal Prison Industries, Inc., unless the agency making the purchase determines that the offered product or service provides the best value

to the buying agency. Amends FAR parts 8.6, 8.7, 19.5, 42.15, and 52.2.

FAC 01-22, April 5, 2004

Item I—Government Property Disposal. This final rule amends the FAR to simplify procedures, reduce recordkeeping, and eliminate requirements related to the disposition of Government property in the possession of contractors. It amends 1.1, 2.1, 8.1, 45.1, 45.5, 45.6, 49.1, 49.2, 49.3, 49.6, 52.2, and 53.3.

Item II—General Provisions of the Cost Principles. This final rule amends the FAR to revise certain general provisions of the cost principles contained at FAR 31.201-1, Composition of total cost; FAR 31.201-2, Determining allowability; FAR 31.202, Direct costs; and FAR 31.203, Indirect costs. The rule revises the cost principles by improving clarity and structure, and removing unnecessary and duplicative language. The final rule also adds the definition of “direct cost” and revises the definition of “indirect cost” at FAR 2.101, Definitions, to be consistent with the terminology used in the cost accounting standards (CAS). This rule is of particular interest to contractors and contracting officers who use cost analysis to price contracts and modifications, and who determine or negotiate reasonable costs in accordance with a clause of a contract, e.g., price revision of fixed-price incentive contracts, terminated contracts, or indirect cost rates. It revises 2.1, 31.1, and 31.2.

Item III—Unique Contract and Order Identifier Numbers. The interim rule is converted to a final rule, without change, to require each reporting agency to assign a unique procurement instrument identifier (PIID) for every contract, purchase order, BOA, Basic Agreement, and BPA reported to the Federal Procurement Data System; and to have in place a process that will ensure that each PIID reported to FPDS is unique, Governmentwide, and will remain so for at least 20 years from the date of contract award.

Item IV—Unsolicited Proposals. This final rule adds new considerations concerning the submission, receipt, evaluation, and acceptance or rejection of unsolicited proposals. The rule will require that a valid unsolicited proposal not address a previously published agency requirement. It also requires that, before initiating a comprehensive evaluation, the agency must determine that the proposal contains sufficient cost related or price related information for

evaluation, and that it has overall scientific, technical, or socioeconomic merit. It affects FAR 15.6.

Item V—New Mexico Tax—United States Missile Defense Agency. This final rule incorporates the Defense Missile Agency as a participating agency within the terms and conditions stipulated in FAR 29.401-4, New Mexico Gross Receipts and Compensating Tax. This provision aims to eliminate the double taxation of Government cost reimbursement contracts when contractors and their subcontractors purchase tangible personal property to be used in performing services in the State of New Mexico and for which such property will pass to the United States. It affects FAR 29.4.

Item VI—Technical Amendments. Makes editorial changes at FAR 52.2.

FAC 01-23, May 5, 2004

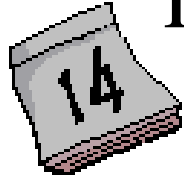
Procurement Program for Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Business Concerns. This interim rule provides for set-aside and sole source procurement authority for service-disabled veteran-owned small business (SDVOSB) concerns. It is published in conjunction with the interim rule proposed by the Small Business Administration. Amends FAR Parts 2.1, 5.2, 6.1, 6.2, 6.3, 13.1, 14.5, 15.5, 19.1, 19.2, 19.3, 19.5, 19.8, 19.10, 19.11, 19.12, 33.1, 33.1, 36.5, and 52.2.



June 4, 2004

2:00 PM to 5:00 PM





12th Annual Inservice Training Program

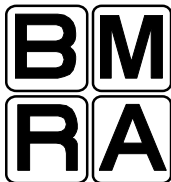
Mark your calendars now!

*BMRA's 12th In-service Training
Program is scheduled for*

Saturday, August 14th.

Watch for further announcements and information.

Don't miss it!!!!!!!



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