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Ariz. assembles project experts  
By Brian Robinson

Arizona recently started requiring state agencies to have certified program managers to manage certain major or critical information technology projects. This is the beginning of what the state government expects will be a new era of on-time and on-budget technology projects.

That has not been the pattern in the past. The Arizona Department of Administration is involved in managing multimillion-dollar projects that break down into thousands of tasks. Before its chief information officer, Patrick Quain, joined the department several years ago, "very few of them were on time or on budget," he said.

Much has changed since the state began its project-management certification program about a year ago. During that time, Quain has sent 22 of his managers to be trained, and now he's seeing projects starting to move on track, on time and, if possible, under budget.

"In the past, there was sloppy coordination between tasks, and we would do things such as order equipment and have it sit around until the [program management] team decided what was needed," he said. "Now, there's no wasted time, equipment is received and deployed almost in the next moment."

The need for a better way to manage government projects was first determined by the state's CIO Council and then handed to the Government Information Technology Agency (GITA) to find an appropriate solution. After researching various possibilities and interviewing other states to find out what their experiences had been, GITA officials settled on the certification program as the best course.

It's something that is having an effect now but will be sorely needed in the future, said D.J. Harper, GITA's communications manager.

"We have lots of legacy systems that need to be replaced and there will be some huge projects that will be going through in the next decade," he said. "We will need qualified program managers to be working on those."

Gaining a state program management certification is a three-step process:

Candidates take a weeklong class followed by an instructor certified by the Project Management Institute (PMI), topped by a comprehensive exam to measure project management aptitude.

They then take a half-day class given by GITA that emphasizes state requirements for security, privacy, enterprise architecture, policies and standards and oversight and project investment justification.

An agency CIO or director then must attest whether the candidate has at least two years of project management experience.

The certification program is one of the cornerstone initiatives at GITA, Harper said. It will ensure that agencies deploy sound technologies and can take advantage of all the options that are available, such as whether to build or buy systems, what features can be traded off for others and so on.

But more than that, it will ensure that agencies make the best business case they can about the projects they are involved in – something that will be critical given Arizona's budget deficit of more than \$1 billion in 2007, with a similar shortfall projected for 2008.

"We need to make sure that dollars are not spent on something that is bad technology and that it is compatible with the technology used in other agencies," he said.

That's important in Arizona's decentralized IT infrastructure, where most agencies have their own IT staffs and CIOs. Agencies typically make technology decisions to suit their local needs rather than try to fit them into a prescribed environment. However, GITA must approve projects to make sure they meet certain broad standards.

Arizona's program is a prime example of what Herb Strauss, chief strategy and marketing officer at consulting firm Robbins-Gioia LLC, said he sees as a growing trend in government.

The growth of in-house program management expertise gained steam in the 1990s in private industry, but government lagged. Also, few IT programs had a huge impact on the enterprise, so government agencies were content to have contractors come in and do the work for them, he said.

"But the Internet changed that," he said. "Now the pace is changing very dramatically."

The need now is for program managers to understand and manage a broad slate of risks associated with these large technology programs, Strauss said. There's a better understanding of the controls that can be used if there's a common criteria applied across both state and local governments.

It's no longer enough to put trustworthy managers in charge of these programs if they don't have the knowledge and expertise that certification programs provide, he said.

According to PMI officials, a certification program helps put project participants on the same page.

"A large part of failure on projects come from miscommunication," a PMI representative said in a written response. "People not knowing how to talk to each other or understand language, tools or requirements that a specific organization uses in managing projects."

Many organizations now focus also on developing soft skills, such as leadership and teamwork skills, in addition to the hard, technical skills associated with project management, PMI said.

Arizona joins a growing number of states, such as Kansas, Michigan, Virginia, South Carolina and Minnesota, that are developing similar state certification programs, according to PMI.

Norm Lorentz, vice president of the Council for Excellence in Government, said he thinks certified program manager should be a revered position.

"In the private sector, if you look at the big organizations that apply large-scale program managements, they all have a cadre of program managers and those that are certified make some \$25,000 more a year than those that aren't," he said.

These certification programs will probably become ubiquitous in government as budget pressures increase and will only become more necessary with the growing transparency of government because of the spread of the Internet, he said.

Reverence is probably an idea that's still far off for the program managers who go through Arizona's certified program. Agencies still don't have a clear idea of even how to pay for this. The program costs \$2,050.

The Arizona Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), which now has four certified program managers, has no budget to pay for people to go through the program, said Ron Hardin, the department's CIO.

"We currently rely on grants or, if people see this as a good career track, perhaps they'll be willing to pay for it themselves," he said. "So far, they haven't had to do that."

It's not necessarily an easy sell, he said. The people he has recruited into DEQ from outside of government have been familiar with project management and what it entails, he said, whereas those from inside government know the term but aren't familiar with it as a practice.

Also, government employees need to be assured that project management is not the latest fad that will soon go away, Hardin said.

However, judging from the early results of the Arizona certification program, that might not be a problem for much longer. In just the first year, more than 200 people graduated from the program.

"That was well beyond our expectations," Harper said. "We thought it would just be a small pilot program during that time."

Demand for certified managers is on the rise even in agencies that are too small to have the time or resources to get their managers certified. The state is opening its certification program to local government, Harper said. In part, it is a simple courtesy, but it is also an effort to boost the level of expertise available for any cross-collaboration projects between state and local agencies.

"There's not a ton of those," Harper said. "But it would be nice to know that locals also have certified managers they can assign to those cross-collaboration projects when they happen."