

UAS

SHADOW

## Expedited Hiring Authority (EHA) Helps Manage Human Capital Needs

Dana R. Osborne

**A** year ago, the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) directed the insourcing of existing contracted personnel positions to civilian positions. OSD further delegated EHA for acquisition positions, a move that is allowing organizations to quickly fill shortages in specific category positions with highly qualified individuals. The following is a conversation with the Army Unmanned Aircraft Systems Project Office (UAS PO), which did not immediately embrace the new hiring process; once it did, however, the office leadership changed its perspective on EHA.

Tim Owings, DPM, UAS PO, briefs new employees about the UAS office operations and products. (U.S. Army photo by Marianne Higgins, CAS Inc., a wholly owned subsidiary of ITT Corp. (CAS/ITT) contractor supporting the UAS PO.)

## From Skeptic to Supporter

The Army UAS PO, part of Program Executive Office (PEO) Aviation, Redstone Arsenal, AL, has a clear mission: to acquire and deliver world-class interoperable, affordable systems through excellence in program management. There is one part of the mission, however, that has always been difficult: acquiring the best talent available. The EHA delegated by OSD on Dec. 23, 2008, and granted by the Department of the Army on Feb. 4, 2009, did not see rapid adoption last spring. As the UAS leadership states, that is not because of problems, but because it is such a radically different hiring process.

“We absolutely were skeptical,” said Tim Owings, Deputy Project Manager (DPM), UAS PO. “Frankly, we were concerned that we might not have all the flexibility the hiring authority appeared to offer and that we might be creating more problems than we were solving. We were very concerned about creating anarchy in the workforce. I admit our skepticism led to some complacency on our part. Eventually,

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the possibility of being able to reshape the human capital side of our organization in ways that have not previously existed proved too great to pass up. We finally decided to dip our toe in the water and see what would happen, and we are very glad that we did.”

As a growth organization, UAS PO is challenged to find and rapidly field advanced technologies and to give warfighters the tools they need to react decisively. To meet the demand, the PO insourced 44 positions during the last 4 months of 2009 and is working to fill 30 additional positions by March. These new positions, as well as additional matrixed positions, will result in growing the organization from 323 to 467 employees in less than 18 months. “Looking back, with our rapid growth needs, we should have jumped

into the EHA process much faster,” stated Owings.

Kathy Roe, Civilian Personnel Advisory Center (CPAC) Human Resources (HR) Specialist who serves PEO Aviation, is thankful the UAS PO eventually did jump in. She has worked with Owings to implement EHA since the insourcing announcement was made. “At first, we just couldn’t seem to get PEO Aviation interested,” said Roe. “It was difficult for managers to accept different hiring rules, but once they understood the flexibility of EHA, they were ready to push ahead quickly.”

## Communication With the Workforce

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Tim Owings, DPM, UAS PO, discusses hiring issues and an upcoming job fair with Sofia Beldsoe, PEO Aviation Public Affairs (PA) Specialist (left), and Kathy Roe, CPAC HR Specialist serving PEO Aviation (right). (U.S. Army photo by Marianne Higgins, CAS/ITT contractor supporting the UAS PO.)



Tim Owings, DPM, UAS PO, encourages others to use EHA for their hiring needs. (U.S. Army photo by Marianne Higgins, CAS/ITT contractor supporting the UAS PO.)

lifetime to secure the subject matter experts [SMEs] we needed and wanted,” said Owings. The trick, he added, was communication. “We had to let our employees and contractor partners know exactly what we were doing. Every step along the way, we did what we could to educate the workforce so members wouldn’t worry that the positions we wanted to convert from contractor to government would result in job losses. That fear did exist and we learned that we were a little late in putting the fear to rest.”

“The biggest challenge, from my perspective, was educating the workforce,” stated Roe. “We’ve never done this before and people feared for their livelihood, so we had to expedite the education component.”

Because a few rumors surfaced, the Public Affairs Office (PAO) expedited the strategic communications plan designed to address all major audiences: management, employees, prospective

employees, contractors, and congressional representatives. “In designing the plan, we put ourselves in the employees’ place, because that’s who we are affecting,” said Sofia Bledsoe, PEO Aviation PA Specialist. “A Web site with details that included a mechanism for asking questions was launched to make EHA implementation as transparent as possible. We still see questions trickle in, so we know people are seeking information when it is relevant for them to do so.”

To add to the education component of the plan, the UAS PO held town hall meetings, published information in internal newsletters, and kept an open door policy for anyone who had questions. Following the advice of the Office of Public and Congressional Affairs, Owings said he followed the “one voice” message plan. “Job information is a subject that needs to be overcommunicated,” said Owings. “People worry and may listen to some negative voices that exist, so to counteract that you have to ensure everyone

in management is on the same page. A singular message has to go to employees as well as to contractors and their leadership. Individuals or companies may not agree with what you’re doing, but they will appreciate that you are honest and consistent in how you are keeping them informed.”

Congressional representatives for the Redstone Arsenal community are heavily involved with the many DOD organizations and federal contracting companies that make up the area’s economic base. “Because of the close relationships that people here have with members of Congress, a few began calling Washington, DC, worried that jobs might be cut, and we saw an uptick in congressional inquiries,” said Owings. “We learned that we could have been out in front of the education piece much earlier.”

“It is critical to make sure you have thought through everything, from the perspective of all key audiences, before moving ahead with any information publicly,” said Bledsoe. “The subject matter—jobs—is always a sensitive one, and there will always be issues no matter how well prepared you are.”

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“We didn’t do everything perfectly,” said Owings. “But overall, we believe we did well and are still doing a very good job of communicating and executing our plan, thanks to this new process.”

### EHA Process

According to Roe, the use of common job descriptions across the PEO enhanced the EHA process. Different program managers were able to quickly identify and agree on common Highly Qualified Criteria (HQC), resulting in one announcement and one referral to all managers with vacancies. This allowed candidates to be considered for multiple opportunities with one résumé and could result in multiple job offers.

When a job posts, the resulting pool of résumés is available for up to 90 days according to the EHA. Similarly, in traditional hiring processes, the résumés are available for up to 6 months. This allows hiring managers to consider any résumés already collected if another position opens up during that period. This practice has worked very well for PEO Aviation. “Creating common HQC for the vacancy announcements has been great for streamlining the hiring process,” said Owings.

“The HQC must be technical in nature,” added Roe. “Also, it should be generic enough to attract a good pool of candidates from within both government and industry, but specific enough to meet the needs of management.”

Once the announcement closes, the qualifications review process starts at CPAC. Engineering positions are designated by the Office of Personnel Management as professional positions and, as such, require an engineering degree. At management’s request, CPAC can review résumés received from the EHA announcement for this requirement and only refer to

management those résumés that meet this requirement. The hiring managers then screen all applicants against the HQC they developed.

“In our case, the HQC set the floor of the qualifications,” stated Owings. “Because we have a lot of specialized positions, we use a panel of SMEs to compare the résumés against the HQC and then we go a step further to compare them against our specific criteria. We like to determine if each screener is interpreting each résumé’s data similarly so that no position hinges on the opinion of just one person. Part of our screening criteria is that we look for escalating career responsibilities and sometimes that information doesn’t just jump off the résumé. That’s where the value of face-to-face interviews comes in, which we conduct by panels.”

Last fall, the UAS PO participated in a job fair hosted by PEO Aviation. “By combining both the job advertisements with the job fair, we felt we were casting the net as wide as possible to capture the best applicants available, and we will certainly repeat that process in the future,” said Owings.

“The EHA has been the enabler for us to accomplish what we need to do; it really has changed the dynamic for us in terms of hiring,” concluded Owings. “My recommendation to those who have not yet taken advantage of EHA is to take the plunge. The benefits are there. Otherwise, those highly qualified applicants will land in an organization that isn’t yours.”

**DANA R. OSBORNE** is the Acting Chief of the Resource Center, UAS PO, overseeing the new employee welcome process, events, and strategic communications. She holds a B.A. in business administration and has 18 years of government service, all within the UAS PO. Osborne is Level III certified in life-cycle logistics.

## FIVE KEY CONSIDERATIONS TO IMPLEMENTING EHA

*Kathy Roe and Tim Owings*

1. Consult with the PAO in advance of any announcements so a strategic communications plan is created that includes “one voice” messaging to minimize confusion and rumors.
2. Communicate frequently with employees and contractor partners so they understand exactly what you are trying to accomplish. Establish monthly all-hands meetings, send out a series of e-mails with information, and post articles and information in internal newsletters.
3. Provide a mechanism for employees to ask questions, even anonymously, to help ensure transparency with the workforce. Consider a Web page(s) with detailed information, links to relevant information, and a feedback/question form.
4. Maintain an open door policy for those employees who respond better to verbal information or who prefer a private setting to discuss their concerns.
5. Consider hosting a job fair to complement job advertisements to ensure you reach the best workforce that is available both from within the DOD community and industry.