

# 20 QUESTIONS Every Product Support Manager Should Be Prepared to Answer

Bill Kobren



*While the majority of operating and support costs are incurred after a weapon system has been produced and fielded, they result in part from program decisions made earlier in the acquisition process—during system development—and are generally set before production begins. In 2009, as part of legislation aimed at improving the life-cycle management of major weapon systems, Congress required DOD to assign a product support manager (PSM) to each major weapon system program. The principal responsibility of the PSM is to develop and implement support strategies for weapon systems that maintain readiness and control life-cycle costs.*

— Government Accountability Office Report  
GAO-17-744R *Weapon Systems Management:  
Product Support Managers' Perspectives on Factors  
Critical to Influencing Sustainment Related  
Decisions*

IN THE DECADE SINCE CONGRESS ENACTED, AND the president signed into law, the requirement that “each major weapon system be supported by a product support manager,” the Department of Defense (DoD) has made major strides in implementing the life cycle management and product support requirements outlined in what is today Title 10 United States Code (U.S.C.) Section 2337. This includes perhaps the most critical requirement of all: developing and implementing a comprehensive, effective and affordable product support strategy for the weapon system.

This is no easy feat considering the complexity, ambiguity, and challenges of the task that DoD product support managers (PSMs) face every day. Not to mention the myriad factors that lie outside of the PSM’s control, including evolving service life requirements, rapidly changing operational and environments and threats, emerging technologies, aging systems, wide variances in operational tempos and funding profiles, industrial

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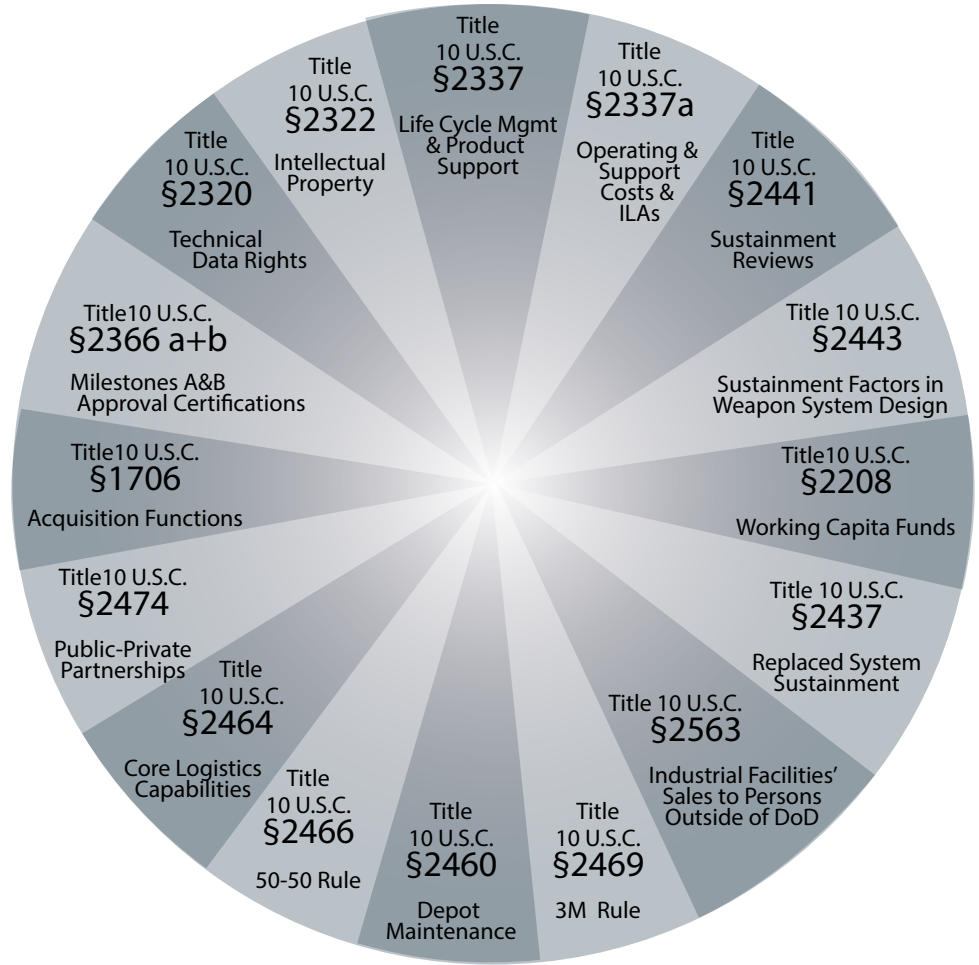
base, obsolescence and diminishing manufacturing sources and material shortages, structural and corrosion issues, physical and corrosion issues, physical and cybersecurity supply chain risks, among a range of others.

The good news is that DoD PSMs have ample resources at their disposal to craft and execute successful product support strategies. Whether they be statutory requirements such as 10 U.S.C. 2337 Life-Cycle Management and Product Support, 10 U.S.C. 2443 Sustainment Factors in Weapon System Design, or others (Figure 1), Congress has given PSMs the authorities they need to successfully execute this vitally important mission. The DoD and the Services have, in turn, implemented a range of product support policies to further facilitate that success.

The DoD also has crafted comprehensive guidance to provide powerful insights into how to successfully develop, test, implement, execute, refine, and modify successful product support strategies. A “baker’s dozen” of the most impactful can be found in the *DoD Product Support Guidance Suite* at <https://www.dau.mil/tools/p/integrated-Product-Support-Guidebook-Suite>, including the *Defense Acquisition Guidebook*, the *DoD Product Support Manager’s Guidebook*, *DoD Public-Private Partnering Guidebook*, *DoD Performance Based Logistics Guidebook*, and *DoD Operating and Support Cost Management Guidebook*, among a range of others (Figure 2). And, of course, the military Services provide ample supporting policies and guidance of their own to backstop and reinforce.

At each level, the focus is consistently on crafting and executing well-thought out, affordable product support strategies to achieve warfighter readiness and cost requirements. Common themes at all levels include early sustain-

**Figure 1. Product Support Statutory Framework**

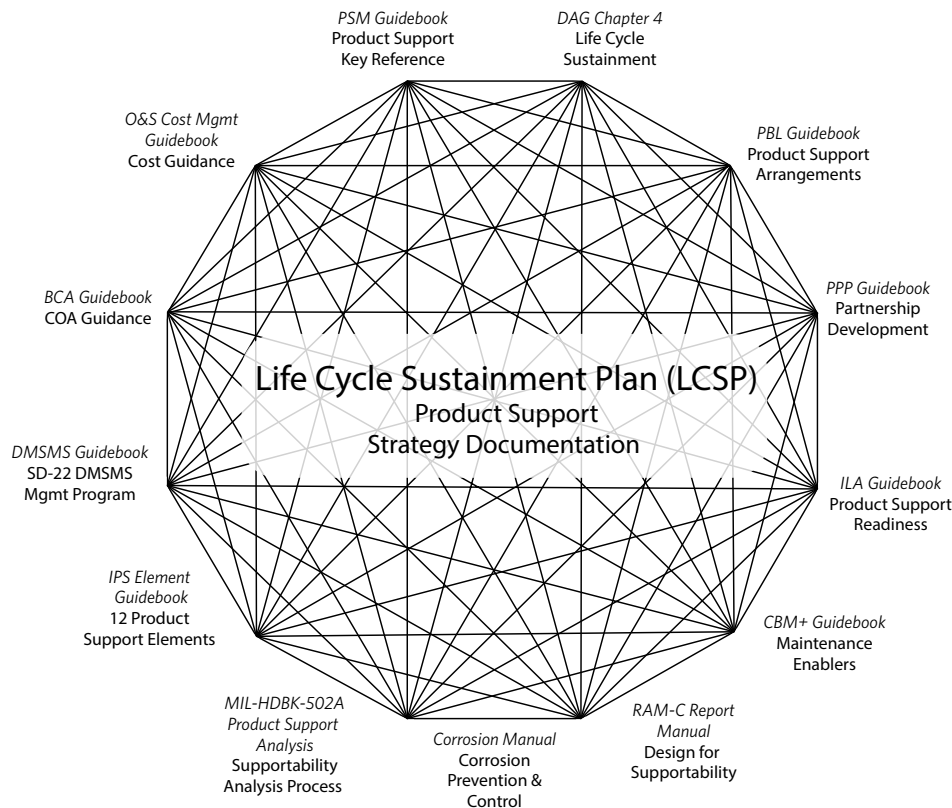


Source: Defense Acquisition University (DAU) (for additional details, see <https://www.dau.edu/acquikipedia/pages/articledetails.aspx#!622>).

ment planning, system availability, readiness, supportability, reliability, maintainability, cross-functional integration, and ultimately affordable combat capability across the system life cycle.

That said, zeroing in on our cadre of highly skilled, highly trained DoD PSMs, we have to ask ourselves a few pointed questions: Are you doing everything you can to achieve these requirements for your program? How have you and your team influenced system design for affordability and supportability? Does your program manager view you as a highly valued thought-leader during requirements determination, design trade discussions, configuration control boards, technical reviews, and independent logistics assessments? How about when conducting program-level market research, Analysis of Alternatives, crafting the program acquisition strategy, or making source-selection decisions?

**Figure 2. DoD Product Support Guidance**



Source: DoD Product Support Guidebook Suite (for additional details, see <https://www.dau.mil/tools/p/integrated-Product-Support-Guidebook-Suite>).

In a question that may hit close to home, do your program executive officer, program manager, functional community peers, life-cycle logistics staff, and supporting sustainment organizations implicitly trust you as an integral part of the program team? Or are you—and, by extension, product support writ large—generally an afterthought? The time to be concerned, I would contend, is not when the phone is ringing too often but rather when it stops ringing entirely.

Now to “get down to brass tacks,” I would encourage you to ask yourself a few tough questions, starting with: How well do you know the details of this extremely complex product support business? Are you a master of your craft? Do you intuitively understand the big picture across your program? Are you the program office go-to product support expert? Are you viewed by your peers as a trusted teammate? Are you perceived as being able to put the needs of your program above your own? Have you established a reputation for positive leadership, trust, rapport, and successfully delivering results? Is “can-do” your byword? Is “yes if,” rather than “no because,” your credo? Is mission-focused “servant leadership” your approach? Are character, collaboration, communication, and integ-

riety your watchwords? And perhaps most important: If not you, who? If not now, when?

If after careful consideration your answers are “no,” “not entirely,” “they’re not quite where they need to be,” or “I honestly don’t know,” permit me to encourage you to begin by taking stock and undertaking a concerted effort to hone your acquisition, life-cycle logistics, and product support skills. I might suggest reviewing the myriad resources, training, and references available through the DAU Life Cycle Logistics Functional Gateway at <https://www.dau.edu/training/career-development/logistics/>. In addition to online, instructor-led, and virtual instructor-led logistics training courses and modules, communities of practices, job support tools, ACQuipedia articles, videos, podcasts, blogs, and even a comprehensive Life Cycle Logistics Professional Reading List, you will find easy access to a range of key DoD product support statutes, policies, and guidance documents.

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Next, I would recommend taking the time to build trust, rapport, and communication with your internal and external stakeholders, particularly your program office peers and functional community counterparts in the Systems Engineering, Business and Financial Management, Cost Estimating, Contracting, Test and Evaluation, and, of course, Program Management arenas. Take time to learn about their business, and appreciate the issues they face. Seek to expand your understanding of the challenges they’re dealing with, as well as to understand how they align with—and impact—programmatic life-cycle logistics considerations. To paraphrase a longtime colleague, “If you don’t have someone from another defense acquisition workforce functional community as a best friend, go get one”!

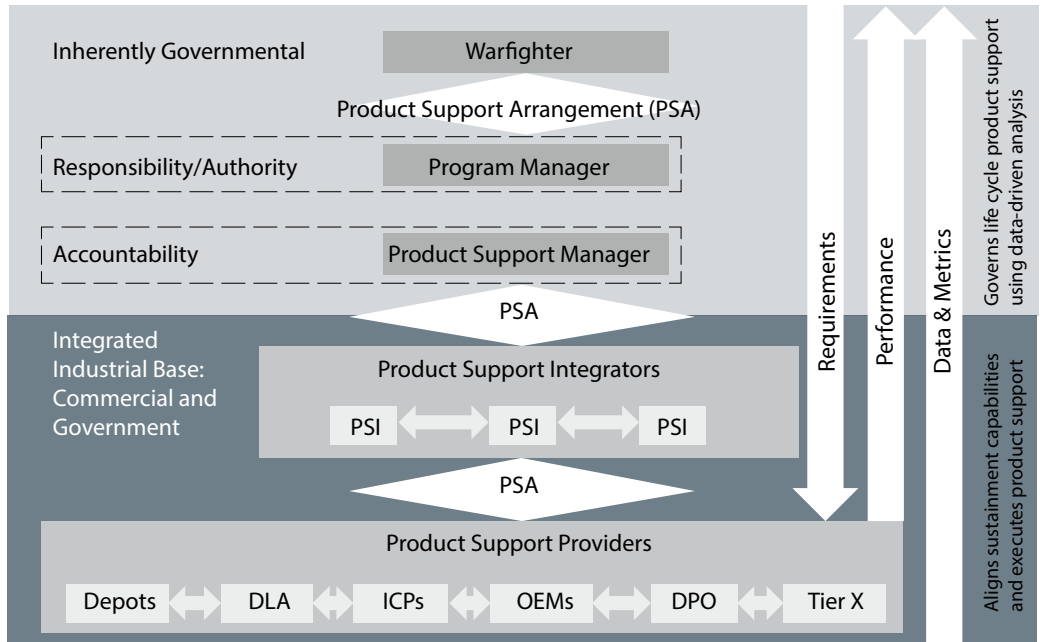
In addition, I encourage you to invest what I somewhat sardonically call “your copious spare time” and energy into becoming your program’s go-to subject-matter expert for all things product support. No matter how good we are (or might think we are), each of us can always be better. To assist in this endeavor, think back to the parlor game called “20 Questions.” This game is designed to encourage

participants to leverage innovation, logic, initiative, deductive reasoning, and creative thinking. Running through this game in your own mind affords you a microcosm of more broadly based product support considerations.

If I may be so bold, permit me also to suggest a list of “20 Questions” you should consider asking yourself—and readily be prepared to answer if you’re ever asked by your program manager or Service leadership. When you can easily and candidly answer all 20—along with being prepared to provide supporting data, compelling fact-based rationale and context—you will be well on your way to becoming that trusted, highly successful product support subject-matter expert that Congress envisioned, your leadership demands, your colleagues expect, and your team members require.

- 1** What is our product support strategy? Are we certain it is the right approach? How do we know?
- 2** How are we leveraging system test and evaluation and demonstrations to assess and affirm the veracity of our product support strategy?
- 3** What are our key program product support metrics? Why were they selected? How well do they align with Sustainment Key Performance Parameter, availability, reliability, maintainability, and affordability requirements?
- 4** When was our Life Cycle Sustainment Plan last updated? What has changed since? When will it next be revised?
- 5** How effective is your interface, alignment, and integration with the Systems Engineering community? How do you know? Does the product support team have a seat at the table during program technical reviews, configuration control boards, and material improvement program review boards?

**Figure 3. DoD Product Support Business Model (PSBM)**



Key: DLA=Defense Logistics Agency; DPO=Distribution Process Owner; ICPs=Inventory Control Points; OEMs=Original Equipment Manufacturers; PSA=Product Support Arrangement; PSI=Product Support Integrators

Source: *DoD PSM Guidebook* (for more details, see [https://www.dau.edu/tools/t/Product-Support-Manager-\(PSM\)-Guidebook](https://www.dau.edu/tools/t/Product-Support-Manager-(PSM)-Guidebook), Para 2.1).

- 6** What is our intellectual property strategy? How was it determined? Can we afford it?
- 7** What are our primary product support risks—and what are our mitigation plan(s)?
- 8** What product support should-cost initiatives have we implemented? What were the results? How do we know?
- 9** When was our most recent Independent Logistics Assessment (or for fielded systems, post-initial operational capability sustainment reviews)? What were the results? What are we doing to resolve shortfalls? When is the next one scheduled?
- 10** When was our Product Support Business Case Analysis last updated? Results?
- 11** Who are our product support integrators (PSI) and product support providers (PSP)? Why and how were they selected?
- 12** What kind of product support arrangements do we have with our PSIs and PSPs? How are we incentivizing desired outcomes? How are we flowing down program-level metrics requirements to the PSIs and each PSP?

**13** How do we mitigate risks in instances where we decide to transition sustainment workloads to a new PSI and/or PSPs?

**14** What is our depot source of repair strategy? What are the core logistics assessment results? Where applicable, do we have an executable, statutorily compliant plan to maintain and repair our system within 4 years after initial operational capability?

**15** Does our maintenance planning include public-private partnerships? Why or why not?

**16** Are we leveraging an affordable and effective performance-based logistics product support strategy to meet user performance requirements? Why or why not?

**17** What is our Diminishing Manufacturing Sources and Material Shortages and obsolescence mitigation strategy? Is it effective? If not, why not?

**18** What is our Supply Chain Risk Management strategy? Does it include—but also extend beyond—cyber threats? Is the entire program team on board?

**19** What is our product support funding profile? Does it meet projected support requirements over the Future Years Defense Program?

**20** What are our dependencies on—and working relationships with—key stakeholders, including in particular, DoD, Service, international, industry, and (where applicable) interagency sustainment organizations?

Permit me to also add an additional bonus question for your consideration; and perhaps it just might be the most important of all: How satisfied are our Warfighter customers with our product support strategy, planning, and execution?

As the DoD stated in its response to the GAO report cited earlier, "... the establishment of this leadership position and its responsibilities within the program offices has strengthened the planning for and consideration of sustainment in defense acquisition programs." To ensure this is reality and take this to the next level, I would encourage you to join your fellow product support managers across the department in playing (and replaying) this game of 20 Questions!

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