

INNOVATE TO WIN

OVERCOMING DOD'S INNOVATION SCALING PROBLEM

by **MARINA THEODOTOU, ED.D.**

The DoD no longer has an innovation adoption problem. Today, the department has an innovation scaling problem. While the volume, velocity, and complexity of change in this era of great power competition make innovation an imperative need for national security, the DoD is unable to leverage its innovation capabilities with speed at scale.

Over 200 active DoD innovation cells are implementing innovation and driving change; but they operate largely in silos, and each defines its own innovation skills and frameworks. The DoD lacks a department-wide baseline for an innovation competencies and skills model for codifying which skills are needed. Nor does DoD have a metric for the innovation readiness of its personnel. As a result, many DoD innovation cells define and develop their own innovation skills curriculum and send their people to various innovation learning experiences within and outside the

department, a practice that often is costly, duplicative, and misaligned with actual innovation skill needs. DoD innovation readiness is vital to national security.

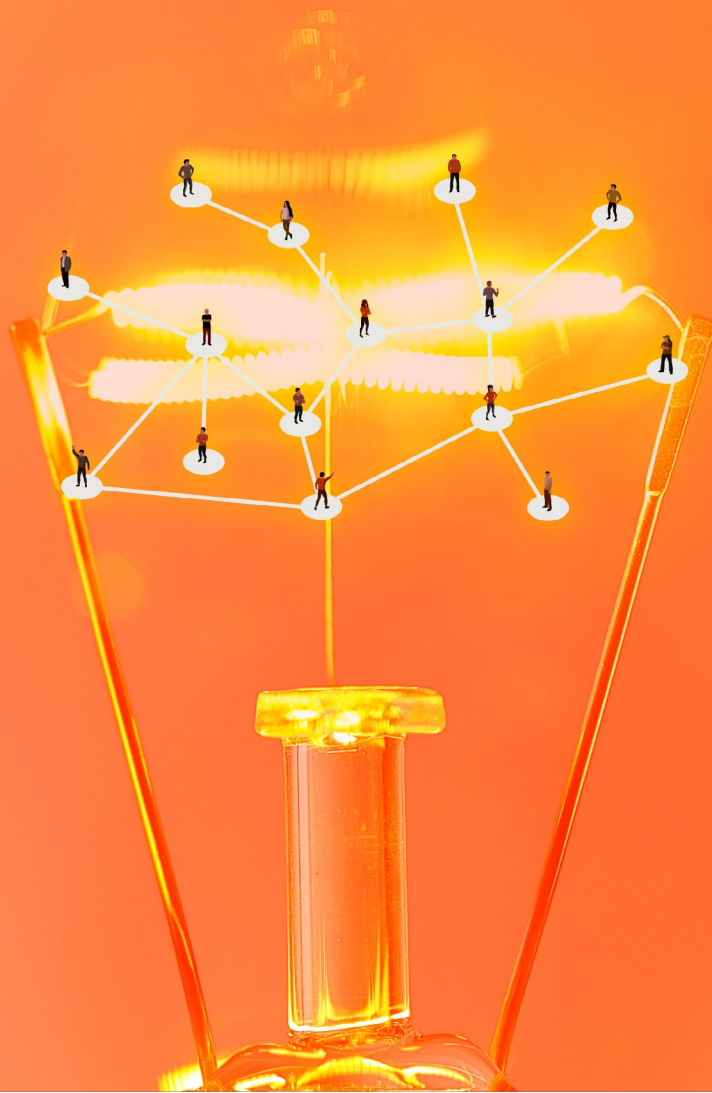
Both the National Defense Strategy of 2022 and the National Defense Authorization Act of 2023 focus on people and innovation. Deputy Secretary of Defense Dr. Kathleen Hicks emphasized that investing in our most critical asset, our people, is critical to building the workforce we need to win the global innovation contest.

In support of Dr. Hicks' efforts to improve the innovation ecosys-

tem across DoD, DAU President Jim Woolsey tasked DAU to answer two key questions: "What are the baseline innovation skills our workforce needs to out-innovate the adversary?" and "What is our people innovation readiness metric?"

Innovate to Win—Phase I

Innovate to Win is a DAU-led initiative intended to help the DoD codify and measure the innovation readiness of the Defense Acquisition Workforce and, by extension, that of the whole DoD workforce. The Innovate to Win effort includes building a minimum vi-



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able product with three key elements: an innovation competencies and skills model, a self-assessment and resulting innovation readiness metric, and curated learning recommendations for each workforce member.

Innovation Competencies and Skills

Innovate to Win Phase I developed and tested an innovation competencies and skills model. This effort involved a team of more than 10 DAU professionals, matrixed across six

business units and led by this author in partnership with DAU's Information Technology and Communications and Public Affairs departments. The model we developed codifies and presents a baseline of the competencies and skills that workforce members need to out-innovate the adversary.

The DAU team triangulated academic research, industry practice, and workforce insights to construct the model, which includes three domains and 15 competency skills. The model was vetted by an advisory

team of innovation thought leaders from the DoD and other federal agencies, including the Office of Personnel Management, the Defense Civilian Personnel Advisory Service, the General Services Administration, and the Office of Management and Budget, as well as members from industry and academia. The model in its current version was examined in detail more than three times by focus groups.

The three domains in the model are thinking innovatively, collaborating innovatively, and cultivating innovation. A workforce member developing an innovation mindset needs to do all these things within their team and organization. The model includes, across these three domains, a total of 15 competency skills, each of which is defined by three to five behavioral descriptors. The descriptors explain which behavior the



workforce member must demonstrate to cultivate and deepen the particular innovation competency.

The thinking domain includes five innovation mindset competency skills: growth mindset, risk taking, creativity, critical thinking, and future thinking. The collaborating domain includes four innovation competency skills: collaborating, communicating, forming alliances, and networking. Finally, the cultivating innovation domain includes six competency skills: observing, experimenting, using a holistic approach, driving change, integrating, and lifelong learning. These innovation mindset skills are foundational in cultivating and expanding an innovation mindset.

No workforce member is expected to excel in all three domains. In fact, the most innovative teams have members whose skills complement one another across thinking, collaborating, and cultivating. While these skills individually may be considered universal and present in other competency models, their combination enables innovators to succeed. Several of these competency skills are present in broader leadership skills, the Senior Executive Service executive core qualifications, and the 2022 Civilian Leadership competencies at the DoD.

Self-Assessment

For each workforce member to gauge their current innovation competencies and skills and define their

innovation skills gap and readiness metric, the model as its second element includes a self-assessment component.

Workforce members can address 48 statements to self-assess their innovation readiness on a five-point Likert scale across each of the 15 competency skills. The self-assessment also includes two open test questions for respondents to provide their own insights, without attribution, about the innovation culture in their workplaces.

Upon completing the self-assessment, the respondent receives a personalized report describing their innovation readiness metric and outlining their innovation mindset strengths and opportunities for improvement. The self-assessment takes less than 10 minutes to complete.

Curated Learning Recommendations

The third element of the innovation competencies and skills model is a curated learning pathway that helps workforce members close their innovation skillset gaps through world-class learning, including short online microlearning courses, videos, articles, books, and tools. The learning content is aligned to the innovation mindset domains, competency skills, and behavioral descriptors defined by the model.

DAU leveraged learning and development research as well as DoD workforce member time availability and learning needs to construct a

learning pathway rubric that guides the curation process. Each workforce member who completes the self-assessment receives an individual innovation readiness metric across thinking, collaborating, and cultivating innovation as well as a curated, personalized learning pathway based on their responses. The learning asset duration ranges from nine minutes to less than an hour, and the maximum learning duration is about two hours each month for three months. Supervisors can receive a report of all the workforce members' innovation readiness and can make data-driven decisions to optimize resource allocation and ultimately scale innovation. Workforce members can measure the improvement in their innovation skills by retaking the self-assessment 12 months later. Supervisors and command leadership can baseline their command innovation readiness and set goals for improvement year over year.

Innovate to Win Phase I has created a credible, reliable, tried, and tested process that enables the workforce members to own their innovation skills journey and the DoD to answer the two key questions about people innovation readiness.

The Three Levers of Scaling Innovation

While innovation skills and innovation readiness are foundational, they are insufficient in scaling innovation within the DoD. Two additional levers need to be pulled concurrently. These are (1) culture and motivation, and (2) organizational infrastructure.

While the DoD can have the best innovation-trained workforce, it also needs each organization within the department to cultivate and foster a culture of innovation. This culture provides people with the top cover they need to experiment, the psychological safety to fail, and the rewards and recognition to motivate and sustain their efforts when the innovation journey becomes long and difficult. However, innovation skills and culture

are still not enough by themselves to scale innovation.

A third lever to engage involves organizational infrastructure. This means that each DoD agency, command, organization, and team needs the budget, billets, technologies, and tools to enable innovators to learn, experiment, build, drive, and scale innovation.

Innovate to Win Phase II —Scale and Sustain

As DoD workforce members continue exploring their innovation readiness and closing their innovation skills gaps, DAU has launched Innovate to Win—Phase II to address the culture and motivation elements and consider how to scale and sustain the Innovate to Win capability across the acquisition workforce. DAU again is leveraging and triangulating the winning tactics of academic research, industry practice, and innovation cells to define the key elements of a culture of innovation, create a playbook, and, in conjunction with the innovation framework from Phase I, empower DoD organizations to foster a culture of innovation widely and ultimately scale it across the DoD.

Conclusion

Scaling innovation is not easy. Innovation is accomplished by people.

TO SUCCESSFULLY SCALE INNOVATION AT THE DOD, OUR DEFENSE ACQUISITION WORKFORCE MEMBERS ALSO NEED TO WORK AND OPERATE IN ENVIRONMENTS THAT FOSTER PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY, EMBRACE CALCULATED RISK, LEVERAGE LEARNINGS FROM FAILURE, AND REWARD AND RECOGNIZE INNOVATORS.

Therefore, workforce members need the skills to think, collaborate, and cultivate innovation within their teams and commands.

To successfully scale innovation at the DoD, our defense acquisition workforce members also need to work and operate in environments that foster psychological safety, embrace calculated risk, leverage learnings from failure, and recognize and reward innovators. Our workforce also must have the flexibility to move across innovation teams to cross-pollinate their learning; they need the tools and technologies that allow them to collaborate, share, and learn together during their innovation journeys.

DAU is committed to collaborating with any agency within the DoD and across the federal government to build further upon the Innovate to Win effort, support the Deputy Secretary of Defense's innovation initiatives, and empower the workforce to innovate and win.

THEODOTOU is a DAU learning faculty member leading cross-functional teams at DAU and the DoD to solve problems at the intersection of learning, defense, and innovation. She is an expert in organizational change, leadership development, data analysis, and business growth. Theodotou holds an Ed.D. in Organizational Change and Leadership from the University of Southern California; and B.A. and M.A. degrees in Economics from the University of South Carolina.

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DAU RESOURCES

- [DAU's Innovate to Win initiative](#)
- [Innovate to Win web event series](#)
- [Competing to Win episode](#)

MDAP PROGRAM MANAGER CHANGES

With the assistance of the Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Defense Acquisition* magazine publishes the names of incoming and outgoing program managers for major defense acquisition programs (MDAPs). This announcement lists such changes of leadership for both civilian and military program managers for the months of April through May 2023.

ARMY

None

NAVY/MARINE CORPS

Capt. Cecily E. Walsh relieved **Capt. Thomas H. Hoover** as the Program Manager of the Advanced Sensor Technologies Office (ASTO) on March 1, 2023.

Capt. Robert (Andy) Gold relieved **Capt. Kevin R. Smith** as the Program Manager of Guided Missile Frigate (PMS 515) on May 1, 2023.

AIR FORCE

None

FOURTH ESTATE

None