

A career perspective in a changing FM landscape

with Melissa Blakesly, Associate Deputy Assistant Secretary for Congressional Budget and Appropriations Liaison, SAF/FML



Welcome to the All Things Financial Management podcast presented by Guidehouse and the Society of Defense Financial Management. I'm your host, Tom Rhoads. Join us as we discuss top of mind issues facing defense financial managers.

TOM RHOADS: Thank you, Ms. Blakesly, for being with us today. We know you're busy and really appreciate your time this morning.

MELISSA BLAKESLY: It's an honor to be here and super excited to do this podcast with you.

TOM RHOADS: And we're super excited to hear it. I've been looking forward to this, and I'm really excited for our listeners to hear your story. Would you mind taking just a few minutes to tell us your background and what brought you to your current position at SAF/FML? Maybe in other words, Ms. Blakesly, just tell us your story.

MELISSA BLAKESLY: Yeah, so I came to civil service rather late in my life. I was 38 years old when I decided to take a position with the Air Force. I honestly, growing up in Dayton, Ohio, I did not think that I was ever going to work for the Air Force. I mean, Wright Patterson was in my backyard, but it always seemed like it seemed very difficult to get employment on the base. And I quite frankly was focused on being a music major. So, working for the Air Force wasn't really on my path to think about my life or my career. But I started playing a piano when I was young. And when you're good at something, you always just kind of think that's what you're supposed to focus on for your life. And so, I had a natural ability when it came to piano performance, and so I just pursued that.

And then when I went off to college, I felt like I needed to major in piano performance because that's what I had been known for. But I also had discovered by this point that I was not a lover of performing. And so even though I was doing piano performance, I knew that the likelihood of me ending up in Carnegie Hall or something like that was low. And so, I went ahead and did a business degree as well. So, I did piano performance and business administration at a small college out in Illinois. And so, as I was pursuing all of that and realized I went down the path of going for a master's degree and eventually a Ph.D. in music history, I just kind of came to the realization that music history, it really wasn't my passion. And I was working on my dissertation at the time, and I was writing the topic that I was writing on.

Someone published a book on, and it was at that point that I had a moment of self-realization that I don't have a passion for this. I'm not likely to write my dissertation. And when I looked at the salary that my retiring mentor professor looked at her salary, I realized, I said, "Well, you know what, I'm just going to switch gears." And so I think maybe in my late twenties, I decided I was going, or late twenties, early thirties, I decided I was going to switch lanes, give up trying to become a musicologist. And I was living back in Dayton, Ohio, and I just decided I'm going to go get my MBA and if music isn't going to be the career for me, then I may as well make some money. And so through that MBA program at Wright Patterson, I'm sorry, Wright State University, I did that to check a box, and I had no idea where that was going to take me.

And then once I graduated and they were looking for people to come be a part of their acquisition workforce, I just signed up, went and did an interview, had no thought that they were going to actually hire me. I just thought I would explore the opportunity and see how it played out. Next thing you know, they're like, "Hey, if we offered you a job, would you take it?" And again, I'm still not thinking that this was going to happen. I was like, sure. And then you know how hiring actions go. It was at least four months before I'd heard back from the Air Force. And then all of a sudden they were like, "You're hired and can you start next Tuesday?" And so that is how I got into the Air Force.

And honestly, I had no altruistic reasons for choosing to go to the Air Force. I was just kind of floundering around in life and I wasn't sure what path to take and this opportunity presented itself. And so off I went to Wright Patterson Air Force Base. And man, I mean, once I got into working for the federal government, I was amazed at the opportunities that were afforded to me throughout my career. Just simple things as when I first started being offered to go to a class for a week or to go take some leadership training. And I always volunteered for things like that because, I thought, I've just always enjoyed stuff. And I never thought the federal government was going to offer something like that. And so, as I got started in cost estimating at the time at Aeronautical Systems Center, now, the Air Force Lifecycle Management Center there at Wright Pat, I started slowly in the cost estimating team.

The new cost chief came on board, saw something in me and said, “Hey, I want you to go work on this business case analysis at the F-22 program office.” And so I was like, “Yeah, okay.” I had no idea. I knew what the F-22 was, but I’m still so fresh in my career and learning about the Air Force. But all of a sudden everybody kept pulling me aside and saying, “Hey, don’t do this. People go into the F-22 program office. They never come out. You’re going to get subsumed in there.” And everyone was just basically, except for the person who asked me to do it, was saying, don’t do it. And I came right up to the line where I was prepared to pull back, I’m not going to do it. And my gut was just like, no, go do this opportunity and just take it.

And that to me has been really kind of the theme throughout my career is there’s been an opportunity afforded me. I am in a position to take it, and it just seems to work out with each successive career move. So started at the F-22, I was doing the special project for cost estimating, traveled up to D.C., had never thought I would leave Dayton, Ohio. I had gone to school in Illinois and the like, but I was back. It hadn’t occurred to me. And then I went and I took a course, I came up to the Pentagon, took a course on how to write a business case analysis, and kind of looked around D.C. and I was like, “Well, this is interesting. I might like to work here.” And so, kind of in true fashion, I don’t think things through a hundred percent. And I was like, “Yeah, let’s just up and move to D.C.”

And so I figured out how to move to D.C. and I ended up on the F 35 program, Joint Strike Fighter. And it was at this location, this is where I learned about really the complexity of high-level programs. The F-22 was a high-level program, but the F-35 was a whole new level. It was Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force, international partnerships, foreign military sales. It was just everything that you could imagine in acquisition in one program. And so, I did that for a while. And again, I was going back, I still was kind of interested in cost and thought that cost estimating was going to be my career path and tried to finagle my way back into a cost estimating job. And it was around a couple, two and a half years into that program that I ended up, that same mentor who had put me onto the F-22 program, let me know that there was a position opening up in SAF/FMC and said, “I thought that it would be good for me to apply for that.”

So, I applied for it, ended up doing workforce development for SAF/FMC. And so, this position was doing anything from cost estimating courses for analysts, to, what I really enjoyed, was that enterprise view of collaborating with folks with cost estimators across all services in the fourth estate to rewrite the cost estimating courses at Defense Acquisition University. What I learned about myself there was, I’m never going to be that really deep technical expert, but I’m really good at leading folks who are those great technical experts. And I walked in and I could tell that everyone knew what they were talking about, but I knew that they weren’t going to actually accomplish anything. And so, I took lead to make sure that we got through that curriculum review and I got the courses updated.

I entered into the audit agency, and I went through the Civilian Strategic Leadership Program (CSLP). That program was intended for career broadening for high potential civilian personnel. I signed up in the early springtime, threw my hat in the ring, again, not really thinking that one through and thought, This sounds like a great opportunity." And with civilian development, you apply in the January timeframe and you don't find out until the end of the year. I think it was November, I found out I had been accepted into the program. Well, during that time, I had settled down a little bit more, purchased a home, I was kind of settled into D.C., and then I found out that I got accepted into CSLP, and I thought, "Oh, this requires me to be mobile." And I thought, "Well, you know what? I probably won't even hear anything further until next summer." And so, I was like, "This is awesome. We'll see how this plays out."

Well, the next week I got an email that said, "You have 48 hours to decide if you want to apply for this position at Offut." I was like, "Offut?" I was like, "Where is that?" And so I looked it up on the map and I was like, "Absolutely not. I am not going to Nebraska." But then this program got real. And the way that works is you can only turn down a position three times and then you're kicked out of the program. And I felt that was going to be a black mark on my record. So, the first one I had to say, "No, it's just not going to work for my life." And then at the very next week, I got three opportunities and it was SAF/LL, so Legislative Liaison, I was like, "Yes!" The next one was SAF/IA, International Affairs. And that one sounded really cool. And then the third one was the Air Force Audit Agency. And I was like, "Eh, doesn't feel so far removed from FM." And I thought, "Well, I'm not going to use up my second strike and turn down the Audit Agency, but maybe I'll just slow roll this one." And so I immediately said, "Yes, I want to do LL and IA." And I waited until, you have 48 hours, I waited until hour 47.5, and I reluctantly said sure to the audit agency.

I thought, "Well, maybe during the interview, I just will be a little bit lackluster and then they'll maybe turn their heads and go in a different direction." But they ended up hiring me without having only looked at my resume. And so, when I was talking to the Director of Staff as we went through the program and all that, he said, "Well, you just let me know if you want to go ahead and do this position or not, and we'll move forward from there." And I said, "Dan, I said, you don't understand. With this program, if you guys have hired me and offered me the job, if I say "No," I get kicked out of the program." And he was like, "Oh." And he said, "You know what? You let me know if you want the position or not, and I'll go back and let the program know that we're going to go in a different direction if you don't want the position. And it took me a half a second to respond back to him, and I said, "I'll take the job." And here's why.

I knew that he was going to take care of me. That someone would go to that extent to say, "If you don't want this job, we'll take care of you and we'll go in a different direction." And so, I absolutely took that job because that's where I kind of learned that who you work for matters as much as what you do.

And so, I went and I worked at the Audit Agency. It ended up being only about nine months of the three years that I was supposed to be there, but it was a fantastic experience, and I got to be the CAG director. And so, I learned a lot about messaging and strategic messaging, campaigning, et cetera. But a dream job opened up, at least what I thought was a dream job, about at the nine-month point. And that was going to work for SAF/FMBL. So that's the Financial Management Budget and Appropriations Liaison Office and their Deputy position opened up. And so, I applied and I got the position. And I thought I knew so much about Congress. I was like a big old House of Cards fan and thought, "Oh, this is going to be amazing. I can't wait to do this job." And then when I walked in, it was just such an eye-opening experience.

When you get to go on as part of this, you get to go on what's known as CODELs, which are Congressional Delegations. And so, the Air Force personnel work with professional and personal staffers of members. And then we put these trips together for members that go basically all around the world. And when you're on these trips, you get to see how Congress interacts because all of these trips are bipartisan. You have a mix of Democrats and Republicans. And off camera, you get to see how Congress actually works, and the interactions between Democrats and Republicans and a few independents. And it was, actually made me very hopeful for our country to see that sort of bipartisanship in action during these Congressional Delegations. But that was a really awesome job that I got to do several of those trips. And I got to, I'm a GS-15 by now, and I'm like punching above my weight class, getting to escort the secretary and the Chief of the Air Force over to the Hill and take them into engagements with members. And it was just such a powerful learning experience for me, and I have never been able to get that experience out of my system.

But from there, after a couple of years, almost three years doing the Congressional job, it was time for me to go and do some more civilian development. And so, I got selected to go to the Eisenhower School. That's where I really developed a theoretical strategic framework for my thinking about the Department of the Air Force as well as the Department of War generally. But that was a really great experience where you got to sit in a cohort with all of your fellow students, maybe 20, 25 people. And you'd have civilians, military, foreign military officers, civilians from the Department of State, Department of Energy, DLA. And we would just get in a room and we would go through our curriculum. But that diversity of thought that you would have at looking at challenges and problems, worldwide challenges and problems, and having that comradery and diversity of viewpoint in talking about these challenges. It was just for me, somebody who loves to learn and has a passion for learning, it was just the most fascinating experience that I had in my life.

And then COVID hit, and we all had to go home and go into a telework environment. But it was interesting because you have to select an industry study, and I was in biotechnology. And so that was the only silver lining that I had from being at Eisenhower during COVID was that I was really studying something that was relevant at the time: mRNA and all of the vaccines and all of that. So that was very fascinating.

And so my next position, I've always said that I've had just the absolute best civilian career when they pay you to go to college and get a master's degree for 10 months, and that's your full-time job. And then the outplacement comes after that. And my FM leadership was like, "We need you to go get MAJCOM experience. And I was like, "Okay. Absolutely." And then the only MAJCOM, major command, that was available when I outplaced was PACAF. And so in the middle, what I thought was the beginning or what I thought was the end of COVID was actually still the beginning, not even into the middle, I picked up the family and we moved to Hawaii where I got to be the deputy director of financial management at PACAF.

And that was what gave me that operational experience, having that China, China, China and China being our main focus area. And to actually be in the thick of that and to see the strategy that was taking place, at least from the Air Force, but also through INDOPACOM lens, that gave me a whole different perspective and really broadened my aperture of how I think strategically from an operational perspective.

And then from there, I moved to the Air Force installation and mission support center. And I'll tell you, that was absolutely the best position I have ever had because the mission was so amazing. Anything that went into operating and installation was handled through the Air Force Installation and Mission Support Center. So I was the Director of Financial Management for that organization, and that's like any sort of civil engineering, MILCON, facilities, sustainment, restoration, modernization to dining halls, CDCs, security forces. That all played out under Installation Mission and Support Center. And so that daily interaction and that daily mission impact were just absolutely fascinating to me. And running financial, not just for the financial management at that location, it wasn't just budget and executing like a \$12.5B budget, but the other side of it was the financial operations where it's no pay, travel pay, civ pay, and making certain that our airmen and guardians are getting paid appropriately so they can focus on the mission and not have to be worried about their paychecks. And to have that sort of a direct impact on our airmen and guardians was just the most satisfying part of that job.

And so now I find myself back in the Pentagon. I recently, I've just only been back in the Pentagon for the last two months. I am now back as the Associate Deputy Assistant Secretary for SAF/FML. So FML became a three letter, and I'm back doing the legislative work. And I have such a different perspective coming back into the legislative world, having that installation experience, having that operational experience in PACAF, and I feel so much more prepared and well-rounded for this position. And I'm very excited to see how the next several years play out for me, given that whole career path.

TOM RHOADS: Ms. Blakesly, such an exciting career and an exciting story. And when you were talking, it reminded me, I read a study one time about mentorship and the role that mentorship plays in helping each of us kind of blossom in our career. And it sounds like you definitely benefited from some very strong mentors.

MELISSA BLAKESLY: I've had a lot of strong mentors, and now I am that mentor. And for me, that's my favorite part of the job is being able to help people, guide people along their careers. And my only requirement of folks is pay it forward. People gave me a hand up, pay it forward, and do that for our junior workforce now. And I just only ask of them that they continue that going forward.

TOM RHOADS: Yeah, it's exciting. One other takeaway I had was how it seems like all of our careers have twists and turns and at every turn an opportunity arises. And it sounds like that's no different for you. Is that through all the twists and turns that every turn, you had a really unique and exciting opportunity that opened up for you.

MELISSA BLAKESLY: Yeah, I never had a plan. And I know that there are folks who have their career paths just charted out, and I don't think there's anything wrong with that. If you are able to do that and you know exactly what you want and where you're going, I think it's great to have a career plan that's laid out. It just has not ever been really what I have focused on. But at the same time, I realized that I have a privilege or a situation that most people don't have. I'm mobile. I'm not tied to a particular location. And so, I have the flexibility in my career to be able to move around and go and see a variety of different parts of the Air Force. And I think that that has been so instrumental for my career, is I just am so grateful for this viewpoint of the Air Force that I have, that I've just been so fortunate to be able to move to different locations and have different experiences.

TOM RHOADS: Well, you definitely have an incredible depth and breadth of experience across the Air Force and also across the Department of War. It's interesting because AI is fundamentally changing the way each of us performs our daily functions, and I suspect it'll likely continue to change as we go into the future. Can you share your perspective on how you think AI is going to reshape FM work in the future based on your experiences?

MELISSA BLAKESLY: Yeah. I think AI is going to have the greatest impact on working than I think anything ever has. And I don't think that that is overstating the impact that AI will have on all sorts of work, but particularly financial management. And I'll be honest with you, I have become fascinated with AI, and I have been studying it now for just over a year. I started looking at it when we went through DRP and people were afforded opportunities to leave federal service early. And as I'm looking at a 15% reduction in the financial management workforce at Air Force Installation Mission Support Center, I was like, "How are we going to not do the same level of work? Because you can't lose that magnitude of personnel and still perform at the same level without those people. But how do we approach the same level of service that we were offering when we were an organization of 300 people? How do you do that with say, 255 people?"

And it was around that time, around the last February timeline, where AI just really seemed, and maybe I just started noticing it, but it really just seemed like it was having a moment. It was surging and of interest in people really using it. And so I didn't think that I was necessarily an early adopter, but apparently to an extent I am. But I started really studying it, and I had some folks at IMSC who were very supportive, and we just nerded out, geeked out on learning about AI. And what I have learned about AI is that it is not just doing your job faster. It's not automation. It's not just the application of AI to data analytics. It is about honing that strategic partner, where you are able to leverage the data for insight. And the Department of War is drowning in data. We are starving for insight, and that is what artificial intelligence can give us.

And when I say that I didn't realize I was an early adopter, this has really become a passion for me. And I was at the local PDI, the SDFM PDI just Tuesday, and I gave my first talk on artificial intelligence, and it was really focused on the novice or the person who's just like, "How do I leverage AI in my day-to-day administrative toil?" Because that's where I am focused on how do we help our workforce leverage AI for where it is today. And they are so hungry for information, and they just don't know where to turn, they don't know how to leverage AI. They maybe dabble in it at home. And anybody who's played around at home with their ChatGPT or maybe a little bit with Gen AI, and then they come in and they understand that, but then they come into work and they're like, "Well, where's the AI in my systems?"

And I don't think we're there quite yet, but what I tell people is, "You've got meet AI where it is today." And to me, that is the power of the prompt. And so when I started playing around with it, I would write up an email and I would say, I would put it into ChatGPT, and I'd be like, "Write this better." And that's all. I mean, that's so basic, right? And then I would start to see, it would give me something and I was like, "Oh, that is a lot better". And so instead of dithering around an email, if you're sending an email to a senior leader, you may dither a bit longer than you would to somebody, a peer, you may spend an hour, half a day just perfecting the email to make it just right. And so I found with AI was I can just write just some basic thoughts and put it into AI and be like, "Turn this into a better email for me." And it provided something that was a lot better.

And then my journey just kept getting better and better. And I started to understand that telling the AI exactly what it is that you want from it, requirements definition, if you will, is the key for getting a good product. And so now I use AI as a strategic sounding board. I will interact with it. I'll tell it what I want. It'll pop something out. And I know a lot of times, I think a frustration across the workforce is that we've gotten to this point and we get this output from AI and we're like, "Oh my god, that's garbage." But the AI just doesn't know what it's doing. And I'll argue that it's not the AI, you have got to teach the AI. Think of the AI as like a toddler or just a brand new employee in your organization, and you've got to teach the AI exactly what you want.

And so that's what I've learned as an example. You start with the prompt. It went from "Write this better," to actually telling the AI what it is: "You are a Senior department of the Air Force strategy, Write a summary for a four star. The tone is concise to you." And so today, whereas AI, I think if we as a workforce can leverage it for writing emails, doing resumes, taking your five page resume to a two page resume, writing bullet background papers, taking disparate sources and putting them into Gemini through Gen AI and saying, write a summary that incorporates all of these products. And that to me is the value today of AI. And I know that there are other organizations and other techies who are applying the AI to their data, and I know DFAS is making, they're making such amazing strides. And within the Air Force and the other services, there's a lot of attention on that. But for the average financial management analyst, this is where they can start to get really smart on AI.

And so when I think about down the road, I think about a vision for, I walk into my office in the morning and I walk into it, and now it's an intelligent office and it provides me with insight. I know a lot of us walk in and we pull up our dashboards and we go to any number of different accounting things or whatever our execution data for our dashboards. So you walk into your intelligent office and instead of dashboards, a voice greets you and it provides insight. And so for me, I need to know what happened overnight in the media. Something like "Overnight media sentiment on the Department of the Air Force: neutral positive. One opinion piece questions the Space Force growth trajectory. An emerging theme is affordability concerns tied to F-47. recommend reinforcing cost control messaging.

So instead of just giving me data like, you're 50% obligated, or you're 25% expended, it's giving me signals of things that I may need to focus on. I didn't have to come in and read through the PA morning report and read all of the articles and figure out what little nuggets inside all of these various news reports, consolidated news reports that I get in my email every morning. I didn't have to read through all of those and figure out, okay, is there a nugget in there that is congressional? The AI has done that for me overnight, has gone through all of the media and everything that has happened, social media, PA (public affairs), media, and it tells me, here's what you need to focus on. And I think that that is just amazing.

And then from the media shifts to maybe a congressional tone. And then half of the Hack D staff are circulating internal questions on MILCON execution rates, which aligns with their skepticism during last year's mark. The likelihood of a QFR on three specific budget lines is now elevated. Draft defense language is ready for your review. How cool is that? Right? Overnight, the Hack D minority clerk sent an RFI, and I've already prepared something for you that will give you a draft to get started. I haven't had to go through my email or anything. It just tells me, "Hey, this is on your radar. You need to be prepared for it."

And then finally, thinking about looking at actual execution, Sentinel is under executing its MILCON dollars. Given the Hill's focus, this could become an issue. You are considering offering the civ pay account as a source for a reprogramming. Reconsider using that as a source. May trigger a mark in FY27 from a staffer who already questions your ability to execute those funds. These are all real stories, but it's the AI is collecting all of that information and data from disparate sources and providing that information.

Now, that's a grand vision that's down the road. I think today for me in FM, where can we really use the application of AI? Anything that's prose related? And my next focus is j-books and how we are able to craft an AI-generated narrative that provides the justification that we send to Congress in our justification books. And the reason I think this is so important is that anybody in a program office, I think goes through the same experience. You're so focused on the numbers and the top portion of your R1 or your P1 in your submission. And then after you finally get everything balanced, the numbers look good, you get to the narrative and you're like, I don't have time for that.

That's the part Congress actually cares about, right? And so, a lot of analysts, they'll just take last year's submission, copy/paste it, look, try to update it, but they don't ever stop and think strategically, "How does this get after national defense strategy priorities? How does this get after this secretary's priorities? Why is this so important?" And that's what the staffers need. That's what they want to read. And if you think that staffers aren't reading those justifications, I'm here to tell you they read every word of it. And so, for me, focusing on anything that is prose related, be it a j-book submission, a BBP, I think economic analyses and business case analyses, I think there's a lot of AI application there that is easy for the average financial management analyst to actually get after. So that's my focus going forward. And I just think I'm so fascinated by AI and I acknowledge that I have a bias toward it, and that some folks think that AI is going to eliminate all of mankind, but I don't think that we're anywhere near close to that. And I just think it's a fascinating tool to leverage in my day-to-day administrative work.

TOM RHOADS: You can tell just the passion that you have for talking about it.

It was getting me very excited about your vision of the future. I could really get excited about that. But I also liked how you kind of brought us back to where we are today. And so I remember I took a course one time on teaching, and they said, the key to being a good teacher is asking good questions. And it sounds like that's the same thing for AI. Where we are today, if you really want to be good with AI, it sounds like it's all in the power of the prompt. And by asking those prompts, you get the insights instead of just data. But it sounded like that's where the power is right now.

MELISSA BLAKESLY: And I would offer, for anybody who's listening to this podcast, if there is one course, I would say, go take. Go find one. Go take one. Take a prompt writing course. The future is, for the folks who we're not data scientists, some of us are, but the majority of us are not data scientists. We're not trying to manipulate the data. We're not trying to write code. But if you can write a good prompt, you are going to be set for AI because being able to tell it again, it's requirements definition, being able to tell the AI exactly what you want increases the likelihood that you're going to get exactly what you want. And not sometimes, I know I'm not alone on this, where you've put something into AI and when it spits it back at you, you type in all caps, "You don't know what you're talking about. You're not giving me what I need." And you get very frustrated with it. I'll just say, before you dismiss AI, hold up a mirror, take a prompt writing course and try to work with it a little bit better.

TOM RHOADS: And Ms. Blakesly, I know that you're very busy and want to thank you for carving out some time this morning to participate in this podcast and to speak to our listeners. And thank you again.

MELISSA BLAKESLY: Yeah, my pleasure. Thanks for having me on.

TOM RHOADS: Thank you for tuning into all things Financial Management, an SDFM podcast series sponsored by Guidehouse. You can find all our episodes at sdfm.org, and at guidehouse.com/allthingsfinancialmanagement.

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