

ALL THINGS FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

Modernizing Air Force financial management



With Lara Sayer, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Air Force (Financial Management and Comptroller)



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

RUBA ELBASHA: I'm very excited to welcome our guest, Ms. Lara Sayer, the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Air Force, Financial Management and Comptroller. Welcome to the podcast, Ms. Sayer.

LAURA SAYER: Well, good morning, and thank you so much for inviting me to join you. I'm really excited to be a part of this podcast.

RUBA ELBASHA: Of course, our pleasure. Thank you again for being with us, and I'm really excited to talk with you today. It's certainly been an interesting past two years for you. Ms. Sayer, can you tell us a little bit about your journey to becoming the deputy comptroller of the Air Force?

LAURA SAYER: Well, sure. Thanks for that question. So when I was in college, I worked on a music degree in my undergrad, and I had dreams of being a professional singer. But ultimately, I decided that that career wasn't the best fit for me, and I went on to get a Master's in Business Administration. And as I was trying to figure out what to do with my life, a family friend suggested that I apply for the Air Force PALACE Acquire Program. I was in Dayton, Ohio, where I'm from, and I drove over to Wright-Patterson Air Force Base and completed an application in-person. And then several months later, I was accepted into the program, and I moved across the country to work at Los Angeles Air Force Base as a GS-7 Target 11 financial analyst. This really turned out to be a great fit for me, as music is all about numbers and math, so my degree translated well into the financial management field.

And from that point on, I jumped at every new opportunity and challenge that I could, whether it was a different part of financial management work in budget or costestimating, earned value management, or audit. I did some time as an executive officer, and I've even had experience not just within the Air Force, but across the Navy, U.S. Special Operations Command, and even Congress. I can't believe how fast 28 years have gone by. It still feels a bit like a whirlwind, and I feel very blessed every day that I get to do this work for a living.

RUBA ELBASHA: That's amazing and very admirable. I've always admired your diverse background and array of experience. What's been your favorite position, or favorite part of your career? I'm curious.

LARA SAYER: I have to say my favorite job has always been the job that I'm in at the moment. There is always something that I find to love about any position, and then I have the opportunity to make things my own and play to my strengths or work on my weaknesses. And so that's always been exciting for me. I'm a huge advocate for continuous learning, which was part of my upbringing since both my parents were professors. I was always encouraged by them to try new things, to step outside my comfort zone. And so because of this, I've looked at my career shifts as learning experiences and embraced the new opportunities and challenges, or puzzles to solve.

RUBA ELBASHA: I love that. And you recently came back to the Air Force about two years ago, and that was at such an interesting time in our industry. Can you talk to us a little bit about the changes that you've been navigating?

LARA SAYER: Well, as you know, there have been significant changes to the workforce since the current administration came on board. We've had reductions in both the civilian and contractor workforce, and we've had to look at how to accomplish the same or more workload with the team that we have. That said, we've been able to leverage AI tools to be more efficient, streamlining our workflows and simplifying some basic administrative tasks. Even simpler tasks like email or writing memos, which may have previously taken an hour or more, we've been able to cut in half with AI.

One of the big areas we're looking at leveraging AI is to support our audit goals. And a great example of that is how we're using AI for transaction matching and to eliminate variances associated with system reconciliations and Fund Balance with Treasury.

RUBA ELBASHA: Very interesting. And it sounds like, obviously, some of the changes that you've been experiencing and having had to lead through have been unplanned. What do you think is important as a leader? What are the qualities that are most important when navigating change?

LARA SAYER: Well, I enjoy stepping outside and trying something new and taking risk. To navigate change, you have to be comfortable with being uncomfortable and embrace change to not just survive, but thrive. And adapting to the culture of wherever you go, whether it's a new physical location or a new division covering new subject matter you've never worked with. And be comfortable that you may not be the expert on everything, but that doesn't mean you can't add value.

One of the big, I think, super strengths of any leader is being open to new ideas and new ways of doing things. And so that requires taking time to observe and listen to the team and trust the subject matter experts. And I can't foot-stomp enough how building trust with your team is so important. It's also very necessary to be humble and resilient and understand your individual strengths and weaknesses as you approach these new opportunities.

RUBA ELBASHA: Absolutely. I can certainly say, having seen you in the role for the last couple of years, you certainly make it look easy. What about PPBE? I know that that's something that you're very passionate about. What's been your involvement with the PPBE Improvements Commission and your vision for PPBE in the Air Force?

LARA SAYER: So I've been involved in the PPBE process my entire career. I had the honor of being the executive director of the Commission on PPBE Reform, and I know the pain points very well. And when the commission was coming into being, I wanted to be part of developing actionable solutions, solutions that would make life easier for everyone involved, from airmen or GS-7-level individuals making financial decisions and executing transactions, to program managers and contracting officers trying to figure out how to navigate all the differences in our funding to put together their acquisition strategies, and even Congress.

Some of the major recommendations that we identified on the Commission would help with better agility or flexibility for acquisition, which we're really focused on right now with acquisition transformation. We looked at challenges with colors of money. Sometimes when you read law or you read the Financial Management Regulation, it's very difficult to determine what's the appropriate color of money to use.

And so looking at ways to simplify that so folks can move with speed. Also, we all know the pain of one-year appropriations, so the operation and maintenance and the MILPERS accounts. So how can we work with Congress to increase the availability of those funds? To anything from addressing the challenges of continuing resolutions or better training for how we write our J-book narratives. There's so much that we do to ourselves with the language that we choose or the structure we put it in.

And then, of course, our business systems, which underpin so much of what we do and the data that we have, improving those systems for operations, decision-making, and, of course, auditability. And even with these recommendations, we have to improve how we communicate with Congress and strengthen that relationship. Ultimately, we need to provide Congress with solid data to make it easy for them to understand and approve our budget request.

AI has helped reduce some of these challenges at the Air Force by allowing some deeper dives into underlying data used to support our J-books, helping us look at what Congress has done in prior years and try to preempt markups. We're still just dipping our toe in here at the moment. It's not fully embedded, but we're looking at ways of how we improve all parts of our process and make things easier at the level of execution.

RUBA ELBASHA: That's wonderful. I think the Air Force is very lucky to have you with the vision that you have. I mean, the role of CFOs and comptrollers in the government is very critical to enabling the missions of the agencies that we're in. And I love what you said about executing at speed because that's never been more important than it is today. Staying in line with our theme of change, the Air Force has obviously been evolving its FM strategy to lean more on technology, not just for PPBE reform, but also for accelerating the audit, like you mentioned earlier, ma'am. What are you most excited about, and what does the future of Air Force FM look like to you?

LARA SAYER: So as we've been updating our Air Force FM strategy, it still focuses on the big three: people, processes, and tools or technology. So we are looking to streamline, standardize, and implement processes across FM. We're looking at AI tools as part of those newly designed processes. But for these processes to be effectively implemented, our workforce must develop the competencies and capabilities to use these tools.

To support this, we've implemented an AI and data analytics working group across cost estimating, budget, accounting, and audit. And ultimately, AI implementation will help us accomplish more in less time, which will allow us more time for critical thinking, analysis, and problem solving and less time grinding away at non-value-added tasks.

RUBA ELBASHA: That's wonderful. So thinking about your diverse and very successful career, what's the best piece of advice you can give the FM community on navigating change, especially with the amount of change within the Department recently?

LARA SAYER: I would say embrace new ideas, be flexible, and maintain a solid understanding of the mission you're supporting and that purpose to stay motivated. You have to take care of yourself and your team, make time for rest, fun, good food, going to the gym, all of those things that make us a healthy, whole person.

Be an active component of your own career by getting out of your comfort zone, looking for new opportunities, and don't leave things up to chance. Take the training that's necessary, learn new skills, further your education, and create relationships with mentors who can help guide you.

RUBA ELBASHA: That's really wonderful advice, Ms. Sayer. Thank you again for carving out time to share your perspective on some of the exciting things happening at the Air Force and your advice on navigating change and accelerating our careers. Any closing comments?

LARA SAYER: I will say the only constant is that change is inevitable, and we need to embrace it. I've certainly lived it throughout my career, and it's enriched my experiences and learning. As a kid, I learned from my parents to be a critical thinker. Watching the news with them was like a team sport, and these interactions opened my mind to new ideas and different ways of thinking, which has served me well in my career with being comfortable with change and having a flexible mindset that has allowed me to be open to new ideas and new ways of doing things.

I encourage everyone to embrace change and be open to developing new skills and new learning. The bottom line is, like anything in life, you have to invest time and energy for progress, both as an individual and for the agency you're working at.

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