

Cari Pack knows that outstanding job performance just isn't good enough these days. As the government financial management profession grows increasingly competitive and education requirements tighten, Pack looked to certifications to position herself above the rest.

Pack, a staff accountant with the Defense Finance and Accounting Service's (DFAS) Accounting Procedures Branch in Kansas City, recently became both a Certified Government Financial Manager (CGFM) and a Certified Defense Financial Manager (CDFM).

Pack, the CGFM coordinator for AGA's Kansas City Chapter, said the certifications are her marketing tools. "If I am to be selected for promotions, I have to prove that I have more knowledge and ability than my competitors. Attending continuing professional education (CPE) courses counts for a great deal, but holding both the CGFM and CDFM demonstrates that I understood and retained what I've learned."

In the future, she said, government accountants may be required to hold a degree in accounting, but with two sons, aged 5 and 8, she didn't see an opportunity to get a second bachelor's degree or a master's degree any time soon. "I wanted to have these certifications to retain a competitive edge until I can pursue an advanced degree," she said.

Pack never started out to be a government accountant. Instead, she received her secondary education certificate in 1982. Not feeling ready for high school teaching, she worked at the University of Texas for a few years and then enlisted in the Army Reserve to try something different. She ended up pulling a three-year tour as an Active Guard/Reserve, a "weekend warrior" on active duty in the personnel section of a military intelligence battalion.

When she married in 1989 and left the military, she took a secretarial position with the National Park Service's Accounting Operations Center in Reston, VA. At her supervisor's suggestion, she enrolled in a basic accounting course "just to get an idea of what we're talking about". She enjoyed it so much she took additional courses.

By summer 1994, with a 4.0 grade point average and the required hours under her belt, Pack was started on her career in government financial management.

She was detailed to a team that took the Park Service's financial statements from a disclaimer to an unqualified opinion in one year. That gave her the chance to enter DFAS' Outstanding Scholar Program, graduating from the program at the American Society of Military Comptrollers' annual conference, the Professional Development Institute, in 1998.

More recently, she has worked on the DFAS – Kansas City's CFO Team, producing the Marine Corps' annual financial statements. She was promoted to her new position in May, and she believes her active pursuit of the certifications was a deciding factor. She is also confident that holding two certifications, which both require 80 hours of CPE every two years, will help keep her competitive for further promotions. "I am convinced that the certifications will give employees a preferred status in hiring as managers become familiar with the certifications and the continuing education requirement they carry," she said. "Fulfilling the CPE requirement also will make me exercise my mental 'muscles' and keep me informed about the best ideas available for achieving our mission."

Having both certifications gives her multiple options, she said. The CDFM, which requires specialized study in areas unique to the Department of Defense, will help her most if she stays with Defense. Anyone who takes the exams will appreciate how difficult they are, she said. But nothing is certain, and as she intends to remain in federal service, the CGFM will be of great value if she must move to another government agency. The CGFM spans a broad range of topics that covers all areas of government financial management, including state and local government.

To prepare for the certifications, she took a community college course in governmental and not-for-profit accounting. She also took on-site at DFAS-Kansas City AGA's GFM courses taught by Management Concepts Inc. and ASMC's CDFM course taught by the USDA Graduate School. The courses and her wide-ranging government experience linked up with a little luck, and she passed all the exams. She took her first CGFM exam in August of 1999 and the other two this past June, one week apart. For the CDFM, she took all three exams on May 30 **in conjunction with attending** ASMC's annual conference in Philadelphia—a practice she normally wouldn't recommend, but she didn't want to miss any of the professional development **sessions offered Wednesday through Friday.**

Pack also acknowledges that she wanted to be one of the first at DFAS – Kansas City to earn the certification and she was among the first in DFAS to earn the CGFM by exam as well. According to Pack, “DFAS is very supportive of professional development. Director Tom Bloom has really encouraged certification study at DFAS.” Nearly 500 employees at DFAS are certified as CGFMs, CDFMs, CPAs, or other designations in financial management. So far, about a dozen people are CGFMs by exam, and half of those, including Pack, also hold the CDFM.

The certifications have other less tangible benefits—the feeling of achievement is exhilarating, Pack said. The certifications gave her confidence in her new job, which involves interpreting accounting policy and developing procedures.

“When I considered my limited experience as a government accountant, I felt it very presumptuous to believe I could interpret policy,” she said. “Passing the exams made me more confident in my knowledge, not only of ‘how things are,’ but in how they ought to be as well.” Interested in learning more about professional development at DFAS? See www.dfas.mil or contact cari.pack@dfas.mil or carol.codori@dfas.mil. As certification program manager at DFAS, Carol Codori, Ph.D., CGFM, shares Pack's enthusiasm. Codori was AGA's first director of certification and professional development, 1994-1999.