

# What's in YOUR toolbox?

By Jesse Sharpe

While attending my agency's Diversity and Inclusion Council meeting, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Office of Management (OM), and Council Co-Chair, Denise Carter, made the analogy of federal employees treating their careers as they should their homes. Just as home maintenance and improvement are required, the same goes for the attention made to federal employee career development. The image painted by Deputy Assistant Secretary was so vivid that I mentally started writing this article before leaving the meeting.



As the saying goes, "A picture is worth a thousand words." Let's imagine, then, that our current career development program is our

dream house. Envision that we are standing outside taking pictures of our major financial and personal achievements and proudly uploading them to Facebook. The utilities inside the house are brand new, the windows are energy efficient, built-in wireless networking for movie and music are streaming throughout the house, the central AC keeps the house cool in the summer and warm in the winter. We even have a walk-in Jacuzzi! Having paid good money for our new house, we are *proud* to call it home.

Fast-forward 10 to 15 years. We find ourselves leaning against the tree in our front yard wondering how much a new roof is going to cost. Leaves and debris clog the gutter that's pulling away from the house, and the crabgrass has taken over the lawn. Mentally, we guesstimate the cost of fixing the refrigerator's icemaker, the dripping bathroom faucet, and the annoying running toilet that makes it hard to sleep at night. Since we didn't invest in a home owner's warranty, we doubt that we can afford the much-needed repairs to the central AC that always seems to break down during our annual Fourth of July cookout. Replacing our once energy-efficient windows, which are now fogging up, and the sump pump in the basement that tends to flood after a heavy rain are now out of the question. Oh, and as if we could

forget—in our hand is a county citation for the out-of-control high grass and persistent weeds. What happened to our dream home?

During those 10 to 15 years, while raising our families and enjoying slight bumps in salary, we neglected our proud home and it started falling apart around us. In fact, the house next door, with the pristine lawn, just sold for three times its original purchase price. If we were to place our "dream house" on the market, with all the work that's needed, we may barely break even. Get the picture?

The horrific image of our dream home in disrepair is one that we can immediately visualize. And, so, too, goes our neglected career. Let's say we are seeking a promotion in grade or applying for a senior position. The question becomes: Have we complacently settled into our routine of "home-to-work and work-to-home" and neglected the upkeep of our career? All too often, this is the case, which provides an answer to the frustrating question of why we are frequently and continuously passed over for promotions.



With career development being very much like maintenance on our home, some career improvements can be made with

virtual hammers, while others might require knocking down virtual walls, expanding rooms, and applying a fresh coat of paint.

Blacks In Government (BIG) members, let's not wait to receive that county citation to clean up our property. In the same respect, neither should we depend on our agency to send us to BIG's National Training Institute (NTI). As homeowners, we must invest in ourselves, and to do that we must become familiar with what's in our toolbox.

When we open our career maintenance toolbox, we discover quite a few Career Enhancer Tools. One of the first tools we tend to grab is our agency's mandatory training hammer. Although the (t)rusty hammer of mandatory training has value, we should refrain from relying on it too much. Agency-required training is provided to help federal employees achieve

the particular goals and objectives of the agency, not necessarily those of the employees themselves. Although agency training is essential, the Career Enhancer Tools below do a better job of helping to maintain and move us closer to our career goals:

- [Updated Individual Development Plans \(IDPs\)](#)
- [Individual Learning Accounts \(ILAs\)](#)
- [Mentoring and Coaching](#)
- [Federal Government-wide Academic Alliances](#)
- [Tuition Reimbursement](#)



In a 2017 govloop.com article, Bill Brantley's [Five Steps to Your Own Personal L&D Platform](#) recommends that government employees who are seeking to create their learning and development platform look into creating competencies trackers that help identify core competencies needed for job-specific job functions. Brantley also suggests: 1) checking out online learning resources, 2) volunteering both at work and in the local community to develop and demonstrate new skills, 3) building portfolios on social media sites, such as LinkedIn, to display career accomplishments, and my personal favorite, 4) joining professional associations.

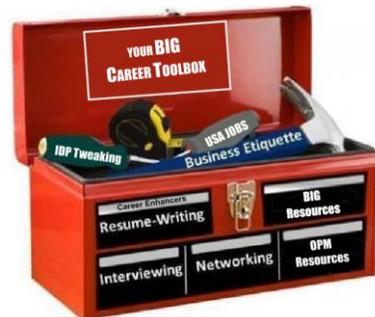
As the only professional organization in the country that advocates for Black federal, state, and local government employees, BIG offers its members a number of resources to maintain and advance career opportunities. When we open this drawer in the toolbox, the following regional and chapter networking and training opportunities found include:

- [Scholarships to Acquire Career Keys \(STACK\)](#)
- [Darlene Young Leadership Academy \(DYLA\)](#)
- [BIG's Partnership with Grantham University](#)
- [National Training Institute \(NTI\)](#)



In conclusion, an African proverb teaches, *"If your only tool is a hammer, you will see every problem as a nail."* Having identified the Career Enhancer Tools in our toolbox, there is no reason for BIG members to rely on one single hammer. With success being described as the crossroads of opportunity and preparation, another African proverb warns the government employee that, *"It's the fool who waits for the rain to fall before patching his/her roof."*

So, the question remains, "What's in YOUR toolbox?"



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Online Resources

Brantley, B., (2017, March 27). Five Steps to Your Own Personal L&D Platform, <https://www.govloop.com/community/blog/five-steps-to-your-own-personal-ld-platform>

BIG, (n.d). National Programs, <http://www.big.net.org>

OPM, (n.d). Training and Development, <https://opm.gov>