Literacy — The Credential Ladder: From Entry to Executive

The career map. The doctrine teaches you how a pursuit works. This page teaches you how the career that runs the pursuit works — the roles, the accountability, the pay bands, the certifications, and the federal analogue — so you can plan a path, not just land a job.

> **The one sentence that frames the ladder.** *A career in federal business development is itself a pipeline: you qualify yourself into the next role the way a pursuit qualifies itself into the next gate — with evidence, not wishes.*

This page is the career map that research/credential-mapping.md §9.5 recommends: the professional journey from entry to executive in the business-development and capture/proposal disciplines. The doctrine is the craft; this page is the *professional* — how to be someone who does this work for a living, what each role is accountable for, what the market pays, and how the credentials and the curriculum ladder line up beside it.

Two honest commitments before you read a single row:

1. **Compensation varies, and this page is a planning tool, not a promise.** Every range below is drawn from public job boards and pay aggregators (the source frame is named in §10). Your actual offer will depend on geography, company size, clearance level, deal size, and how an employer weights base against bonus and equity.
2. **Certifications certify discipline; they do not substitute for it.** A certified team that skips its capture gates still loses, just more professionally. Earn the credential, but prove the discipline.

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1. The ladder at a glance

Role	Typical experience band	What you are accountable for	Compensation range (base, USD)
BD Analyst	0–3 yrs	The quality of the data, not the decisions	$70K–$100K
BD Representative / Associate	2–5 yrs	Qualified opportunities entering the pipeline	$85K–$125K

Role	Typical experience band	What you are accountable for	Compensation range (base, USD)
Capture Manager	5–10 yrs	The win strategy — the pWin on one pursuit	$115K–$175K
Proposal Manager	4–9 yrs	On-time, compliant, persuasive submission	$110K–$180K
Capture Director	10–16 yrs	A portfolio of pursuits and the gate discipline	$180K–$300K
VP Business Development / Growth	12–20 yrs	The bookings number and the growth engine	$225K–$350K+
Executive (CRO / COO / President / CEO)	15+ yrs	The whole firm, its capital, and its survival	$300K–$600K+ total comp

The arrow is a map, not a straitjacket. People enter at every rung, jump tracks, and fork between capture and proposal in the middle. What stays constant is the shape: each rung is a *gate* — you qualify into it with evidence of the rung below, and you are accountable for a bigger, less tactical thing at every step up.

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2. Business Development Analyst — the eyes

What you do. You keep the market visible. You run the opportunity register, watch the forecast and the published pipeline, screen solicitations the moment they appear, build watchlists, draft the first read of an RFP or NOFO, and maintain the market and competitor picture. You are the person who knows what is out there before anyone else has looked.

What you're accountable for. Data quality and currency. A clean, honest register is a real business asset — a wrong NAICS code or a missed amendment costs a capture team real money. You are not accountable for whether the firm pursues; you are accountable for whether the firm *knows*.

What you should have mastered from this curriculum. Doctrine 01 (where the money lives — the three kinds of money, the four identifiers), doctrine 02 (reading a solicitation, the six questions), doctrine 03 (the pipeline and where a lead sits in it), and the reading maps in `literacy/how-to-read-an-rfp.md` and `literacy/how-to-read-a-nofo.md`. If you can do the money-map exercise

(SC-E1) and build a compliance matrix (SC-E3) on a real, closed RFP, you can do this job on day one.

Typical experience band. 0–3 years. This is the entry rung — often the first job in the industry.

Compensation range. Roughly **$70K–$100K** base (US, 2026 public-job-board frame). DC-metro and cleared-work roles sit at the top of the band.

Curriculum tiers and certifications. Starts at **Launchpad L1 Explorer → L2 Builder**; undergraduate track (DL 101–102). Certification target: **APMP Foundation** once you have 1+ year in role — it validates exactly the vocabulary this curriculum teaches.

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3. Business Development Representative / Associate — the connectors

What you do. You move leads into the pipeline and start relationships. You qualify opportunities against the firm's strategy and certifications, conduct initial research on an agency and its programs, reach out to partners and primes, attend industry days and networking, and prepare the first qualification artifacts that feed the gate. You are the connector between "there is a solicitation" and "this is a pursuit."

What you're accountable for. A qualified pipeline. Your job is to make sure that the opportunities the firm spends capture money on have actually earned a seat at the table — that they clear the qualify gate honestly, or get killed early with a reason. Volume is not the metric; *quality of entry into the pipeline* is.

What you should have mastered from this curriculum. Doctrine 04 (gates — the four parts of a gate, and how a qualify gate is written), doctrine 05 (scoring and the threshold), and the certification-and-NAICS literacy in doctrine 01 and `modules/mba.md` MBA-4 (certifications as go-to-market). If you can run a bid/no-bid gate exercise (D04-E2) and argue a qualify/no-qualify call (D03-E3), you are doing this job.

Typical experience band. 2–5 years. Promoted from analyst, or entered with a relevant degree and a year or two of experience.

Compensation range. Roughly **$85K–$125K** base (US, 2026 frame). Strong performers move through this band quickly — it is a proving ground, not a resting place.

Curriculum tiers and certifications. Launchpad L2 Builder → L3 Architect; undergraduate track (DL 210, 220). Certification targets: **APMP Foundation** (typically earned by now) and a first look at **APMP Capture Practitioner** if you are trending toward capture.

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4. Capture Manager — the owner of one pursuit

What you do. You run a pursuit end-to-end from the decision to pursue through the readiness gate. You build the capture plan and the win strategy, choose the win themes and discriminators, assemble and run the capture team, drive customer engagement, own the price-to-win position, and take the pursuit to the bid/no-bid and readiness gates. You are the person who can answer, for one opportunity: *why should we win, and what would it take?*

What you're accountable for. The pWin on your pursuit. Not the submission — the *strategy*. A capture manager is accountable for the win strategy and the honest scoring of it: that the firm makes an informed, gated bet, and that every later decision (price, team, discriminators, bid/no-bid) follows the strategy rather than drifting from it. The sunk-cost trap lives here; protecting the gate discipline is your job.

What you should have mastered from this curriculum. Doctrine 04 (gates and governance — writing criteria in advance, the four parts of a gate), doctrine 05 (scoring, price-to-win as a position), doctrine 06 (the ORBITAL — the pursuit as a structured business), and doctrine 09 (capture and competitive strategy — win themes, discriminators, ghost themes). The worked exemplar is the model of this role done once, end to end.

Typical experience band. 5–10 years. The fork where BD/analyst experience becomes either capture or proposal specialization.

Compensation range. Roughly **$115K–$175K** base (US, 2026 frame; senior capture managers at large primes report higher, and deal size — a $25M vs a $1B capture — moves the number). Win bonuses of $5K–$50K+ are common at mid-size and large firms.

Curriculum tiers and certifications. Launchpad L3 Architect; graduate track (M.S. in Capture Management, GC 501+; graduate electives GE 630 competitive market intelligence, GE 640 proposal management). Certification targets: **APMP Practitioner** and **APMP Capture Practitioner / Professional** (the capture-specific ladder), plus the **Shipley** capture course as method fluency. Many firms also list **PMP** as preferred at this level.

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5. Proposal Manager — the owner of the submission

What you do. You run proposal production. You turn the capture strategy into a compliant, persuasive, on-time submission: you build the compliance matrix, the annotated outline, and the storyboards, schedule and run the color-team reviews, wrangle the volume writers, enforce the page limits and format rules, and manage the final assembly and submission mechanics. You are the person who makes sure the firm never loses a pursuit it should have won because the submission was late, non-compliant, or incoherent.

What you're accountable for. The submission: compliance, schedule, and quality. Capture owns *why we win*; proposal owns *did we say it, on time, the way the solicitation required*. The compliance matrix is your instrument — every "shall" tracked, every requirement answered, every deadline honored.

What you should have mastered from this curriculum. Doctrine 02 (solicitation reading, Section L vs Section M), the compliance-matrix craft, doctrine 04 (color teams as a review gate), the four volumes (`literacy/the-four-volumes.md`), and the color-team mechanics in `literacy/how-color-teams-work.md`. The compliance-matrix exercise (SC-E3) and capstone are this role in miniature.

Typical experience band. 4–9 years. A sibling fork to capture — proposal specialists and coordinators enter earlier, and experienced managers move up the proposal ladder (coordinator → specialist → manager → director).

Compensation range. Roughly **$110K–$180K** base (US, 2026 frame); experienced proposal managers on a dedicated jobs board cluster **$160K–$240K** for senior roles, and proposal directors reach **$200K–$300K+**. Win bonuses apply as in capture.

Curriculum tiers and certifications. Launchpad L3 Architect; graduate electives GE 640 (proposal management & color-team leadership). Certification targets: **APMP Foundation → Practitioner** (the bid/proposal BOK is the closest thing the profession has to a shared textbook), plus the **APMP Bid & Proposal Writing** micro-certification.

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6. Capture Director — the owner of the portfolio

What you do. You run a portfolio of pursuits, not one. You allocate the capture budget across opportunities, mentor and staff the capture managers, own the gate structure for the whole pipeline, run the review gates (color-team style), and decide — with the data — where the firm's scarce pursuit capacity goes. You are the person who says *we pursue these three and we let those two go*, and who defends that call with the numbers.

What you're accountable for. Portfolio health and the gate discipline. Not any single win — the *portfolio*: that the pipeline is honest, the gates are real, the budget is spent where pWin × value is highest, and the lessons from each win and loss feed the next pursuit (doctrine 07's cosmology loop).

What you should have mastered from this curriculum. Doctrine 04 (governance — designing an organization's gates), doctrine 05 (portfolio scoring, threshold discipline), doctrine 07 (the lifecycle and the flywheel), and the Strategic Initiative track's portfolio and governance sessions (`modules/strategic-initiative.md`). The portfolio exercise (SI-E2) and gate charter (SI-E3) are this role in practice.

Typical experience band. 10–16 years, with several captures won or credibly run under your belt.

Compensation range. Roughly **$180K–$300K** base (US, 2026 frame), with meaningful bonus potential tied to bookings.

Curriculum tiers and certifications. Launchpad L4 Networker; forever-learning tier. Certification targets: **APMP Professional (CPP)** — the senior credential earned through a professional-impact paper and panel interview — and, for the contracts-facing side, **NCMA CPCM** (see §9).

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7. Vice President, Business Development / Growth — the owner of the engine

What you do. You set the growth strategy and build the organization that executes it. You choose the markets the firm plays in, shape the portfolio at the executive level, hire and develop the BD and capture bench, own the go/no-go authority on the largest bets, and report the growth story to the board. You are the person who turns "a firm that wins work" into "a firm that grows."

What you're accountable for. Bookings. The revenue the BD engine produces — the pipeline-to-award numbers the whole company watches. You are accountable for the *engine*, not individual pursuits: that the machine reliably senses, qualifies, captures, and submits, and that it compounds (delivery → past performance → higher pWin → more wins).

What you should have mastered from this curriculum. Doctrine 07 (the lifecycle at strategic altitude), doctrine 04 (governance as a designed system), doctrine 05 (portfolio economics), and the executive lane: the Ascension (Orbit / System / Galaxy Commander) framing in the alignment map, and the Strategic Initiative track's leader's dashboard (`modules/strategic-initiative.md` SI-6). The MBA flywheel exercise (MBA-E3) is the compounding model you own.

Typical experience band. 12–20 years, with capture-director experience and a record of growing bookings.

Compensation range. Roughly **$225K–$350K+** base (US, 2026 frame); at large primes, SVP growth roles report into the **$250K–$580K** band with total compensation including bonus and equity regularly exceeding base. Small firms pay less and offer more upside.

Curriculum tiers and certifications. Launchpad L5 Leader; **The Ascension** executive lane. Certifications: **APMP Professional (CPP)** is the expected senior badge; many VPs also hold **PMP** or an MBA.

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8. Executive (CRO / COO / President / CEO) — the owner of the firm

What you do. You run the company. You choose the portfolio at the firm level, allocate capital, hire the leadership, carry the P&L, and decide what the firm *is* — its markets, its certifications, its partnerships, its appetite for risk. You are the person the whole pipeline exists to serve, and the person who re-seeds it when it wins.

What you're accountable for. Survival and compounding. The firm's existence — that it pays people, wins enough, and turns wins into the past performance that wins again. At this altitude the doctrine is your operating system: pipeline, gates, portfolio, lifecycle, loop.

What you should have mastered from this curriculum. All of it, as an integrated system — and, critically, the *governance* and *lifecycle* chapters (doctrine 04, 07), because the executive is the ultimate gate owner. The company-building module and the launch sprint are how you would stand one of these up from zero.

Typical experience band. 15+ years, with VP-level growth ownership and ideally a stint running a P&L.

Compensation range. $300K–$600K+ total compensation (base + bonus + equity; US, 2026 frame), heavily shaped by firm size and ownership. A CEO of a small, owner-operated GovCon firm may earn far less in base and far more in equity and distributions.

Curriculum tiers and certifications. The Ascension and **The Transcendence** (stewardship). No credential makes you an executive; the evidence is the firm itself.

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9. The certification ladder

The credentials sit beside the career, not ahead of it — each one certifies a level of practice you should already be doing. The two ladders a GovCon BD/capture professional most often climbs:

Credential	Issuing body	Level	Experience the credential expects	How the curriculum aligns
APMP Foundation	APMP	Entry	1–3 yrs in bid/proposal work	Strong — the doctrine's vocabulary *is* the BOK's vocabulary

Credential	Issuing body	Level	Experience the credential expects	How the curriculum aligns
APMP Practitioner	APMP	Mid	3–7 yrs, leading others in the practice	Strong — the pipeline, gates, and scoring chapters
APMP Professional (CPP)	APMP	Senior	7+ yrs, demonstrated leadership + impact paper + panel	Practice ground — the whole doctrine is the "operating system" a CPP paper must narrate
APMP Capture Practitioner / Professional	APMP	Mid–senior (capture)	3+ yrs capture work (Foundation not required)	Strong on the capture side — doctrine 04/05/09
CCMA	NCMA	Entry (contracts)	Bachelor's **or** 1 yr experience	Environment covered; craft (CMBOK) is a separate body
CFCM	NCMA	Mid, federal	Bachelor's + 2 yrs contract management; FAR-based exam	**Weak** — the FAR is a rulebook; the curriculum teaches FAR as governance, not article-level depth
CPCM	NCMA	Senior	Bachelor's + 5 yrs contract management	**Weak** — needs post-award administration the curriculum only sketches

Credential	Issuing body	Level	Experience the credential expects	How the curriculum aligns
Shipley One Star → Two/Three Star	Shipley Associates	Method fluency	Complete Shipley coursework; star ladder assessed on real work	Conceptual — the Shipley method is the doctrine's paraphrase source
FAC-C / DAWIA	FAI / DAU	Government (buyer-side)	Requires a federal acquisition role	Context only — these certify the *buyer's* side of the transaction

Two honest notes, carried over from the research backbone (credential-mapping.md):

- **The curriculum is conceptual alignment, not official prep.** A real APMP or CFCM exam assesses against the body's own study guides and BOK. This curriculum teaches the concepts the credential certifies; earning it requires the body's materials, exam, and — above all — verifiable work experience that no curriculum can manufacture.
- **The strongest alignment is to APMP Foundation/Practitioner and the Shipley method** — because those disciplines are what the doctrine is built from. The weakest is to NCMA (post-award + FAR depth) and PMP (project-management discipline), which are different bodies of knowledge than the pursuit pipeline.

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10. The federal analogue: GS-1101

If the private-sector BD/capture ladder has a government-side mirror, it is the **GS-1101 Business and Industry series** — the federal career field for business and industry specialists who work the industrial base, business opportunities, and acquisition-support side of the house. (The direct federal *contracting* series is GS-1102; program management is GS-0343. GS-1101 is the closest analogue to the private-side BD/capture function — the federal cousin who understands the market the way you do, from the buyer's chair.)

The federal ladder is the General Schedule (GS), a grade-and-step ladder with annual steps within a grade and promotion between grades:

GS grade	What it typically maps to on the private ladder	2025 base pay (Step 1 → Step 10)
GS-7 / GS-9 / GS-11	BD Analyst / entry	Below GS-12; entry grades into the field
GS-12	BD Rep / early specialist	\$75,706 → \$98,422
GS-13	Capture / proposal manager (journeyman)	\$90,025 → \$117,034
GS-14	Capture director / senior specialist (supervisory)	\$106,382 → \$138,296
GS-15	VP BD / chief (division/office head)	\$125,133 → \$162,672
SES	Executive	Beyond the GS schedule (Senior Executive Service)

Two federal pay realities worth knowing: **locality pay** sits on top of the base table (the DC-metro locality adds roughly 30%+ to base), and **step increases** reward tenure within a grade. A GS-13 in Washington, D.C. clears six figures in total base pay before bonuses. The federal side trades away the bonus and equity upside of the private ladder for stability, a pension, and public-service mission — a real, defensible career choice, not a consolation prize. Government-side certifications (**FAC-C**, **DAWIA**) are the credential layer for this path, and the reciprocity between FAC-P/PM and PMP is a useful footnote for anyone who might cross over.

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11. Four career directions (not just one ladder)

The research backbone describes four directions a graduate can walk. The main ladder above is direction one; the other three are real lateral or alternative careers that use much of the same doctrine:

1. **Bid / capture** (the ladder above) — **APMP → Shipley**. The pursuit-side career this curriculum is built to feed.
2. **Contracts** — **NCMA CCMA → CFCM → CPCM**. The buyer-side and administration discipline. Less pursuit, more FAR, more post-award. The curriculum gives you the *environment*; the contract-management craft is its own body of knowledge.
3. **Program / project delivery** — **CAPM → PMP**, plus the government-side **FAC-P/PM**. The "deliver" end of the pipeline (doctrine 07): scope, schedule, cost, EVM. The curriculum's portfolio edge (MBA-6, SI-6) is the business-side overlap.
4. **Professional-services marketing / BD** — **CPSM** (SMPS). The A/E/C-flavored cousin of federal BD: more marketing, less federal capture.

Small overlap, but a real home for the proposal-writing and client-facing skills.

Most people who stay in this industry walk direction one and borrow from the others. Knowing all four exists is itself career literacy — you are never trapped on a single ladder.

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12. An honest note on compensation

Everything in this page is a **planning estimate, not a guarantee**. The ranges are drawn from a **2026 public-frame mix**: federal job boards (ClearanceJobs, USAJobs), generalist pay aggregators (Glassdoor, ZipRecruiter, Indeed, salary.com, TheLadders), GovCon-specific career guides (GovCon Giants), issuer-published ranges at large primes (CACI, Peraton, Booz Allen, KBR), and the **OPM General Schedule** for the federal table.

Real pay varies along axes this page cannot price for you:

- **Geography.** The DC-metro and other cleared-work markets pay a premium (often 20–40% above national).
- **Clearance level.** A Top Secret / SCI-cleared capture manager commands more than an uncleared one.
- **Company size.** Primes pay more base; small businesses pay less base and often more upside (bonus, equity, and the chance to be a named partner).
- **Deal size.** A capture manager who owns $1B pursuits is priced differently than one who owns $5M pursuits.
- **Compensation mix.** Base, win bonus, annual bonus, and equity trade off differently by firm. Two "equal" offers can differ by 30% in total comp.

Treat the ranges as **negotiation floors and expectation-setting**, not appraisals. The discipline — gates, portfolio, compounding — is what actually moves your market value over a career, and it is exactly what this curriculum teaches.

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13. How to use this map

- **Just starting?** The first-30-days guide is the sprint that turns this map into a plan for your first month in a BD/capture role.
- **Aiming to found?** The company-building module and the launch sprint are the taught and practiced versions of standing a firm up from zero — the ultimate expression of "BE a GovCon professional."
- **Not sure where you start?** The placement self-assessment tells you which curriculum tier you start on; this page tells you which role that tier tends to feed.

Sources

- Research backbone (the verified credential data behind this page): research/credential-mapping.md
- Industry canon and certification posture: literacy/industry-standard-canon.md
- The curriculum's own tiers: guides/onboarding-and-placement.md, align/concept-to-system-map.md
- Compensation frames (public, 2026): ClearanceJobs, Glassdoor, ZipRecruiter, Indeed, salary.com, TheLadders, GovCon Giants, issuer-published large-prime ranges (CACI, Peraton, Booz Allen Hamilton, KBR), OPM General Schedule 2025 base table