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The Officer Market: The Army Responds

A follow-up to the original story 'The Officer Market'



Written by: [Eric Tegler](#) on February 27, 2011

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U.S. Army 2nd Lt. rank insignias are shown during a commencement ceremony at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y., May 23, 2009. DoD photo by Master Sgt. Jerry Morrison, U.S. Air Force

Tim Kane's survey of West Point graduates "The Entrepreneurial Army" and an article in the January/February issue of The Atlantic Magazine ("Why Our Best Officers Are Leaving") are stirring discussion among Army veterans, Atlantic readers, defense journalists, bloggers, and others, which we covered in our earlier story "The Officer Market." However, the survey had not elicited much comment from the Army itself as of early February. Defense Media Network requested an interview with U.S. Army Human Resources Command or with Headquarters, Department of the Army, but those were declined. However, we did put a series of questions to Col. Thomas Collins, chief spokesman for Army Public Affairs. His responses follow:

What's your reaction to the main finding of the survey that 90 percent of respondents feel that the Army fails to retain half or more of its best officers and that a majority believes this harms national security?

I'm not sure that a survey of only 250 people is enough to make such a sweeping judgment. Personally, I simply don't believe the best are leaving; certainly some of them are, but just as certainly some are choosing to stay. We are the most powerful and proficient land force in the world today and the primary reason for that is the high quality of our people. Amongst the officer corps, one need only look at the incredible experience level. From our lieutenants up through the general ranks, this is a battle-tested force and highly seasoned after almost a decade of continuous operations.

What do you think of the idea of an "internal job market for officers" that mirrors the private sector job market in terms of its supply and demand logic? Has this idea been considered within the Army?

You have to remember that in the Army, our jobs aren't about business models and the bottom line. Our job is about protecting the lives of our soldiers and taking it to the enemy. We rely on officers to be highly proficient in technical, tactical and leadership skills. It would be hard to attain the levels of proficiency that are required to be effective in combat if we had officers moving around in various branches or skills every couple of years. I don't think that would engender the same level of confidence from our soldiers either. At it stands now, officers at about the 8 or 9-year mark of their career can apply to another branch of the Army, and many do move on to do something different from what they originally came into the Army to do.

Given the Army's recent embrace of business processes (Lean Six Sigma, Enterprise Resource Planning) in its "transformation" efforts, might a private sector-type approach to human resources management find favor with Army leadership?

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Lean Six Sigma has gained a lot of traction in the Army since about 2005. As an example, the U.S. Army Human Resources Command at Fort Knox has used it to improve its process and projects to create new efficiencies in officer and enlisted assignment processes.

The lack of opportunity to specialize (stay within one mission or job field) was one of the major complaints of the survey respondents. Has there been any effort recently to offer officers more latitude in career planning?

The Army periodically assesses its officer development and career path models. The wars of the last couple of years have placed a lot of stress on the force, so we are exploring various ways we can better accommodate the expectations of our officers and soldiers. But mission requirements and the incredible demand for Army personnel around the world limit us in what accommodations we can make. But assignment officers do try to work with officers to meet their personal and professional desires while still accomplishing the mission.

Do you agree that a centralized, requirements-based approach to officer advancement and career management fails to best leverage the talents of individuals and thus the officer corps as a whole?

I believe the system can always be improved, but sweeping statements like that mask the underlying, enduring mission requirement: That is to fill the Army's officer ranks with high-quality people, performing a vast array of functions, in war and peacetime, whenever the nation calls. Again, the Army's assignment officers strive to accommodate the wishes of the officer, but at the end of the day, we have a mission and we have to make sure the required skills are filled with high quality people. Does everyone always get the job they want? No. But we certainly strive to give people jobs that are important, within their skill set, and that they can have a reasonable expectation for promotion.

Should the emphasis in promotion shift from the current time-in-grade metric to a more merit-based performance calculus which allows individual officers to advance regardless of seniority?

I have to take issue with that statement because it is not correct to say someone is being held back because of time-in-grade requirements. Army promotions are based on merit. You have to do well in your assignments. There are minimum time-in-grade requirements to make sure officers have adequate time to gain experience in those assignments before they advance to the next rank. Also, the Army recognizes its truly exceptional officers by advancing 5 to 6 percent of year groups from the field grade ranks ahead of their peers.

Has the Army's new Human Resources Command CO (Maj. Gen. Gina S. Farisee) seen this survey? What are her thoughts?

I don't know. I do know that Maj. Gen. Farisee is interested in seeing the Army's enlisted and officer force be the best they can be, so I'll bet her staff will get this study to her.

Given the Army's growing personnel cost issues, could an internal job market assist the service in cutting or better managing its personnel costs?

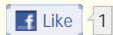
The Army has Congressionally-mandated requirements. The 'internal job market' concept would not work for an organization whose number one mission is to fight and win our nation's wars. I mean, can you imagine trying to implement such a concept in our units in Afghanistan that are waging daily combat? It would be very difficult, to say the least. Plus, a strength of the Army is the diversity of the experience of our people. There is definite advantage in people moving from organization to organization over time; that cross-pollination of information and experience that is shared across the Army is a good thing.

Does today's Army do a good job of recognizing and advancing its most "entrepreneurial" or innovative officers?

I think it does do a good job. In my own experience, I've seen some good officers not make it to the next rank, but on the whole, I think our current promotion system does recognize the best-qualified people.

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Rather than basing officer assignments on an open market scheme (that would be culturally repulsive as "equity" is one of the top three hidden values of the US Army in particular), I would suggest widening opportunities by making many more captain-and-above assignment positions coded as "generic." That is to compensate for "over-specializing" we should make non-technical* positions open to all who apply. Why can't an infantry officer seek a logistics planning position in a JTF J4 directorate or a logistics corps officer seek an infantry company command? Career paths need to be more "exploratory" and "emergent" rather than preordained. In the midst of complexity, we should fight emergence with emergence.

*A technical position would be something like a contracting officer or medical corps officer who must have credentials.

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