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Understrength Air Force Officer Career Fields

A Force Management Approach

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Summary

Understrength Career Fields (see pp. 1–5)

Generating and projecting aerospace power in the 21st century are technologically complex, requiring a myriad of different skills. Recruiting, training, and retaining people with the necessary mix of skills are major challenges for the U.S. Air Force's personnel community. With the end of the Cold War, the United States armed forces began to implement a substantial reduction in total personnel, or end strength. The Air Force, for example, went from a total end strength of 571,000 in 1989 to 368,000 in 2002, despite the fact that it was involved in numerous crisis deployments, including major operations to liberate Kuwait, stop Serbian operations in Kosovo, and after 9/11, pursue parts of the war on terror in Afghanistan and Iraq. All of these events left the Air Force with severe manpower problems at the beginning of the 21st century. Many career fields were understrength: Authorizations went unfilled, and many fields had severe skill imbalances, such as a dearth of middle-level people.

This study's original charter was to examine career fields that have been "chronically and critically" under strength over time, and to look for root causes and potential solutions. We initially pursued a case-study approach, focusing on five varied career fields from the set of non-rated line officers, also known as Air Force Specialties (AFSs), or Air Force Specialty Codes (AFSCs). We found that the details of those problems and potential solutions were widely known to the managers. However, the managers had little or no access to relevant policy levers, such as accession and retention policies, which are the

basic components of force management. This systemic disconnect in force management lies at the root of many of the current understrength problems. Accordingly, after consultation with our sponsor, we reoriented the project to develop an overall framework for force management that would identify roles and organizations that could provide analysis and diagnosis of understrength conditions and could also execute appropriate policy interventions to solve the problems.

The Force Management Framework (see pp. 7–14)

The Air Force needs a workforce with a balanced skill and experience mix; maintaining such a workforce that meets Department of Defense (DoD) and economic—i.e., budget—constraints requires that determination of personnel requirements, accessions, retention, education and training, assignments, and promotions be managed closely and attentively. Further, such management must be performed at three different levels (which we denote by the familiar military terms of tactical, operational, and strategic):

- Tactical: the assignments of individual officers and their individual careers.
- Operational: individual career fields (or a set of closely related fields).
- Strategic: the total Air Force workforce, including overall force size, officer/enlisted and component mix (i.e., active, Guard, Reserve, civil service, contractor), and the balance between individual career fields.

Understrength Issues for Individual Career Fields (see pp. 15–55)

The case-study career fields for our detailed analysis were electrical engineering, acquisition, personnel, communication-information sys-

tems, and intelligence. Our research (our own data analysis for the case studies, review of previous Air Force work, and discussions with managers both of the selected career fields and of the Air Force workforce as a whole) revealed chronic manning problems: For example, the Air Force has attracted enough lieutenants to meet end-strength requirements, but severe problems exist in meeting experience requirements in many occupations (e.g., in many career fields there are too few middle-level people). The problem is that most career-field management activities concentrate on decisions for *tactical* problems. These short-term problems are formidable and leave little time for managing longer-term operational and strategic issues reflecting a career field's health.

Force Management in the Air Force: Challenges, History, Current Initiatives (see pp. 57–64)

We argue that the root of understrength problems is gaps in force management, particularly at the operational and strategic levels. Operational-level force management is the key to force management as a whole. It provides both the policy framework that guides tactical-level management *and* the basic informational input for strategic-level decisions. Strategic-level management transcends operational management to allocate resources among career fields, possibly changing their structure and function.

Currently, the Air Force is oriented toward tactical activities because of the continuous near-term pressures to fill empty positions, coupled with an organizational structure that tends to emphasize a decentralized approach toward achieving objectives. The force draw-down of the 1990s has only exacerbated this phenomenon by reducing the number of people available to do force management at any level.

Conclusions and Recommendations (see pp. 65–73)

While the lack of force management does not cause all of the Air Force's understrength problems (such as competition from private-sector firms that drain away experienced people), it does inhibit diagnosis of problems and the formulation of effective responses to those problems across the service.

Doing the Operational Job

Operational-level force management, the management of career fields or career-field families, requires two distinct skill sets: substantive knowledge of the career field and knowledge of how to manage a dynamic, closed, hierarchical personnel system. The latter management skill, generic across career fields, is generally missing in operational-level management. We recommend

- making the career field manager (CFM) a full-time position (currently it is usually part-time¹), and putting a senior functional officer in the position.
- providing the CFMs with dedicated and standardized analytic support.

Doing the Strategic Job

The strategic management job is the most difficult and important for the long-term health of the force. Essentially the locus where resources are allocated so that the Air Force has the balanced force it needs, this job sometimes requires making explicit decisions about which career fields get such resources as bonus payments, requiring making trade-offs among career fields and accepting those trade-offs. Our recommendations are to

- establish strategic-level personnel decisionmaking in a senior body with authority to make decisions for the Air Force.

¹ As of this writing, late 2003.

- provide the strategic-level decisionmaking body with a full-time staff, including access to analytic support that is integrated with the analytic support provided for operational management.

Doing the Tactical Job

One half of tactical-level management already has a good process in place in the Air Force: the process of assigning officers to their next job. The other half is defining longer-term career goals and plans for individual officers, which has received less consistent attention (although, with the introduction of development teams to review each officer's records regularly, it has become the focus of current changes in Air Force personnel management). We recommend that the Air Force

- provide the development teams and assignment teams with clear operational- and strategic-level guidance for managing individual careers and making assignments.