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# Challenging Time in DOPMA

## Flexible and Contemporary Military Officer Management

Peter Schirmer, Harry J. Thie, Margaret C. Harrell, Michael S. Tseng

Prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense  
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1776 Main Street, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, CA 90407-2138

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# Summary

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## Background

The RAND National Defense Research Institute (NDRI) has studied changes to law and policy that would support the Secretary of Defense's desire to have officers serve longer in their assignments and in their careers. NDRI began by studying how assignments and careers could be lengthened for general and flag officers (grade O-7 and above).<sup>1</sup> A key finding was that some, but not all, jobs and careers could be lengthened without significantly affecting promotion opportunity through the grade of O-9 (lieutenant general or vice admiral). The second phase of the study, the findings of which are presented in this monograph, examines how assignments and careers could be lengthened for active-duty officers in grades O-1 through O-6. The general and flag officer phase of the study focused on which jobs to lengthen and for which officers; the current phase of the study focuses on how to enable officers to have longer assignments and longer careers through changes in law and policy.

Many of the laws and policies that govern officer career management (commonly, if somewhat inaccurately, referred to as DOPMA, after the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act of 1980) have been in place for at least the past quarter-century. The Defense Officer Personnel Management Act was more evolutionary than revolutionary. It built upon legislation from the 1940s and 1950s, and some of

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret C. Harrell, Harry J. Thie, Peter Schirmer, and Kevin Brancato, *Aligning the Stars: Improvements to General and Flag Officer Management*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MR-1712-OSD, 2004.

its key sections incorporated ideas and policies that had been around since the 1960s or even earlier (up-or-out, for example, has been a Navy policy since the beginning of the 20th century, and mandatory retirement at age 62 dates back to the Civil War). DOPMA has served the needs of the services reasonably well, but there is a growing sense that the current personnel-management system may not meet the requirements of the future operating environment. One of the criticisms of the DOPMA system is that it does not allow for much variety in the career paths of most officers. Under the DOPMA system, decisions about assignments, promotions, and retirements are driven by time-based laws and policies that are applied more or less uniformly across the services. As an alternative to the current time-based system, the emerging focus in defense planning and in the services' human capital strategies is on knowledge, skills, and abilities—i.e., officer competencies—as a basis for career management. The focus on managing officer competencies could require a system with greater flexibility that would enable certain officers to have longer assignments and longer careers.

Although the expectation by the Office of the Secretary of Defense is that greater flexibility in career management could improve organizational outcomes and individual performance, it is beyond the scope of this research to forecast or predict such effects. We do not attempt to determine optimal assignment or career lengths, nor do we recommend specific assignments to be lengthened or identify types of officers—e.g., specialists, fast-trackers, due-course officers (those whose careers follow typical time lines)—who should have longer careers. We focus on changes to law and policy that would enable the desired outcomes of a future officer career-management system, especially longer assignments and longer careers.

## **Modeling Career Path Alternatives**

We examined the outcomes of extending assignment and career lengths in a time-based system and compared them with the outcomes of extending assignment and career lengths in a competency-based system. To make that comparison, we modeled the flow of officers through the

system in a variety of scenarios. We used the current system as a baseline, and then we examined various scenarios that extend assignments and careers for specific communities within the military services: surface warfare officers in the Navy, infantry officers in the Army, space and missile officers in the Air Force, and Marine officers who are not aviators.

For each of these communities, we produced baseline results using a set of inputs specific to each community and the laws and policies (or “business rules”) that govern the officer career-management system. We refer to these inputs as our Baseline Scenario. We then changed some of the business rules and compared the new model results with the results of the Baseline Scenario and with other scenarios, as was appropriate. Table S.1 lists the various alternatives. The Baseline Scenario and Scenarios 1, 2, and 3 use the DOPMA time-based rules; Scenarios 4, 5, and 6 apply a more flexible set of promotion policies that allow for more-varied time to promotion.

## Trade-Offs Between Breadth and Depth in Different Systems

The DOPMA system is a time-based management system with relatively fixed career “flow points.” The fixed flow points compel a trade-off between the length and the number of assignments, or between

**Table S.1**  
**Comparison of Model Scenarios**

	Scenario						
	Baseline	1	2	3	4	5	6
Assignment length	Status quo	Longer	Longer	Longer	Status quo	Longer	Longer
Career length	Status quo	Status quo	Longer	Longer	Status quo	Status quo	Longer
Time to promotion	Status quo	Status quo	Status quo	Longer	More varied	More varied	More varied

what could be called officers' depth and breadth of experience. If officers have longer assignments (greater depth), they will have fewer assignments within a fixed period of time (less breadth). Lengthening careers will allow officers to regain some lost breadth by giving them more time for additional assignments. However, unless promotion timing also changes, lengthening careers provides additional time only in the grade from which an officer separates or retires; officers will still have fewer assignments until they reach their final grade. These officers, therefore, may not bring the appropriate breadth of experience to key assignments throughout their career. Delaying promotion timing allows officers to have additional assignments mid-career, but, under DOPMA, it is difficult and cumbersome to delay promotions selectively for some officers but not for others.

A more flexible system would allow for longer careers and would have wider promotion zones. Conceptually, such a system manages careers according to competencies rather than according to time. The key distinctions between a competency-based system and today's time-based system are the rules governing eligibility for promotion: Accumulated experience gained through jobs, education, and training would make officers eligible for promotion. There would be no primary promotion zone, based on seniority, from which most officers would be selected. The services and service communities would determine the experiences that would lead to promotion eligibility; presumably, those criteria would reflect current career guidelines. We would expect to see "due-course" promotions distributed over multiple years for a single grade and perhaps even some overlap in the timing of promotions to different grades. While there would be greater variation in outcomes for individuals, average outcomes would probably resemble current average outcomes if promotion eligibility criteria reflect current career guidelines.

A competency-based system can accommodate longer assignments for some officers, but if a large number of assignments are lengthened, the amount of time required to accumulate work experience that leads to promotion eligibility could increase significantly. As a result, either careers must also be lengthened or the promotion eligibility criteria must be changed. The latter option is similar to what would happen



with longer assignments in a time-based system: With longer assignments and fixed promotion timing, officers would have fewer assignments in each grade. A competency-based system can also accommodate additional assignments or education for some officers who may be at a disadvantage relative to their peers if they have such assignments in the current system.

## **Implementing a Competency-Based Career-Management System**

Making aspects of DOPMA more flexible to allow for officer career management on the basis of competency rather than time will not require drastic changes to law or policy. The key phrase in Title 10 of the U.S. Code that compels a time-based promotion system is “failed of selection,” which is applied to officers not selected for promotion while in the primary promotion zone with their peers. Among other things, the phrase has implications for how promotion zones are constructed and how officers are involuntarily separated or retired. Even without changing Title 10, DoD could provide the services with more flexibility in managing officer promotions by rewriting its directives and instructions to omit references to desirable promotion timing and further clarify that it is acceptable policy for competitive categories to have different promotion timing and promotion opportunity. This would be only a partial solution, because it does nothing to address career lengths and allows only for greater variation across competitive categories, but not within them.

The greatest amount of work in implementing a competency-based system will fall to the services and the service communities. Greater flexibility does not mean greater ease of management; the opposite is probably true. The biggest challenge will be in identifying the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) that are conferred and required by each job, school, and training event. This is not a one-time effort, particularly on the demand side. Changes in the geopolitical environment, in technology, and in society have a continual influence on individual competencies that generate the capabilities of military

organizations. Although we modeled a system in which officers are assumed to develop competencies by virtue of their having had particular assignments, a complementary or alternative policy would be to individually assess officers to determine whether the KSAs have been conferred or developed to the desired level. Assessments could differentiate individuals not only by professional experience but also by the KSAs actually gained or improved through that experience.

Implementation of a competency-based management system may not result in significantly different outcomes for many officers, should the services and service communities believe that current outcomes yield the right types and mixes of competencies for certain groups of officers. The extent to which outcomes vary across individuals or average outcomes shift depends in part on whether assignments and careers are lengthened and by how much. Variation of outcomes might also depend on whether individual assessments are used to determine whether individuals have desired competencies.

Fairness and credibility among the officer corps are the *sine qua non* of a new career-management system. Officers must believe that they are being treated fairly and that the new system produces officers who are at least as effective and credible as those produced by the old system. Explicit and implicit contracts—the terms of the “deal” between officers and the institutions that they serve—may need to change as more information about the changing environment and about officer behaviors is known. However, one virtue of the proposed personnel-management system is its flexibility. Rather than specifying a single prescription for officer management as most previous systems have done, we suggest creating boundaries within which managers can reshape the deal as needed to adjust to changing environments and changing needs. We would also argue for a gradual implementation of many of these practices over a period of years, so that the deal can be viewed as evolving and designed to meet the needs of both officers and their organizations and institutions. Gradual implementation is also recommended, because what is known today about required competencies, particularly for more-senior positions, is often based on subjective assessments and not necessarily on a more systematic evaluation of competencies, how frequently those competencies are employed in

an assignment, and the importance of those competencies to job performance. As the system gradually evolves, so, too, should the services' ability to manage officers' competencies to meet the diverse operational needs of the 21st century.