

SUSAN A. RESETAR, MICHELLE D. ZIEGLER, AARON C. DAVENPORT, MELISSA BAUMAN

# U.S. Coast Guard Workforce 2040

## Better Management Through Transparency

**L**ike most employers, the U.S. Coast Guard will face personnel management challenges because of emerging technologies, changing demographics, and employment trends, such as the rise of online platforms and the gig economy.<sup>1</sup> But participants in a Coast Guard Evergreen V workshop, Workforce 2040, discussed several ways in which technology could also help the Coast Guard effectively recruit and retain its future workforce by providing greater transparency in personnel management practices. Workforce 2040 is among Coast Guard efforts to retain its top talent in an increasingly competitive environment. The Office of Emerging Policy engaged hundreds of Coast Guard personnel and experts as part of a rigorous process to identify the biggest drivers of change for the service in the coming years, and the need to focus on the future workforce emerged as one of the most important.

The workshop, conducted by the Coast Guard Office of Emerging Policy on September 10–12, 2019, at the Yorktown, Virginia, training center, presented the approximately 35 participants with four possible futures that served as the



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backdrop for each workshop group to tease out emerging and potential future challenges to Coast Guard operations. Participants came from a variety of Coast Guard fields, specialties, and organizations.

Inspired by the emphasis on transparency at the workshop, this Perspective focuses on more-widespread information-sharing practices and greater transparency in recruiting and workforce management decisionmaking. The Perspective integrates findings from empirical research on transparency with the insights from workshop participants into the future challenges and overall employment trends that work against the Coast Guard.

*Transparency in personnel management* refers to practices that offer visibility and knowledge into how personnel management processes work, as well as the outcomes they generate. When an organization effectively provides it, transparency can influence the perceived fairness and efficacy of both process and process outcomes to the benefit of individuals and institutions. An individual gains the necessary information to make better career decisions and might

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feel a greater sense of engagement and job satisfaction than when dealing with a less transparent organization. An institution benefits when transparency improves employees' commitment to the organization, job performance, and morale.<sup>2</sup> For example, through transparent processes, the Coast Guard could generate data (based on stated and revealed preferences) to help service members and leaders alike better understand career progression paths, along with the options for deviations from these paths and their effects. This approach enables leadership to set and adjust priorities, resources, policies, and guidance. It also allows service members to better understand how their assignment choices and preferences could affect their careers.

The Coast Guard has an opportunity to reap these benefits by improving transparency in personnel management areas, such as recruitment and hiring, compensation, performance assessment, assignments and rotations, and promotions. Recruitment, the assignment process, and the promotion process were specific areas of interest for workshop participants. The first steps toward increased transparency are identifying the areas with the greatest need for transparency and potential for benefits, then assessing what information and actions are necessary and feasible given data availability, privacy, security, legal, and cost concerns. Moreover, transparency is more than simply providing information; it means ensuring that information is received, understood, and interpreted correctly, builds knowledge of the process, and provides an accurate and complete picture. As the Coast Guard explores greater transparency in personnel management, these nuances must be considered with the full spectrum of costs and benefits to the service and its members.

## Transparency: Definitions, Practices, and Key Coast Guard Considerations

Essentially, transparency is achieved when complete, quality information about how a process works, and the results the process generates, is provided in a way that ensures that the information will be interpreted correctly. *Institutional transparency in personnel management systems* refers to information and communication practices, policies, and procedures and training and management methods that provide clarity into overall workforce policies, management and decision processes, and process outcomes. Transparent systems provide enough quality information to leaders (who set policy), commanders (who direct service members) and supervisors (who direct civilians), and the workforce so they understand how the processes work and what results are produced.<sup>3</sup> The U.S. Office of Personnel Management defines *transparent* as having useful information about workforce management readily available while protecting privacy and security concerns.<sup>4</sup> The right level of transparency can improve both institutional and individual decisions because all involved understand processes and outcomes more clearly. Transparency can improve employees' job satisfaction, organizational commitment, productivity, and work performance by providing a level of accountability for process fairness, equity, and merit. According to the World Economic Forum, several industries indicate that providing transparent career paths, opportunities, and salary information while maintaining leadership accountability is an important part of the solution to eliminating gender bias.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, technology advancements that facilitate greater access to information

are becoming the norm. The Society for Human Resource Management has reported that, as members of the workforce become increasingly comfortable with having access to all kinds of information in their daily lives, they will expect greater access to personnel management systems to enable career decisions.<sup>6</sup> For the Coast Guard, this could mean an increased expectation that an individual service member could see how their preferences for the next billet might influence their potential for advancement or how selecting a nonstandard assignment (such as a short tour) might affect their progression.

Lack of transparency can lead to misconceptions or negative attitudes about a process that carry over to job satisfaction and performance. Sometimes personnel might *perceive* a process as lacking in transparency when the real issue is a lack of knowledge about the process or data regarding its outcomes. This is why transparency, rather than simply offering data, can require many forms of communication to ensure that the information has been received and understood and is trusted.<sup>7</sup>

A 2014 *Harvard Business Review* article presented an in-depth review of successful “game-changing” talent management strategies. Researchers chose three businesses that were purpose-driven, performance-oriented, and principle-led and concluded that a faithful connection between how a company presents itself and what it truly values creates authenticity. Subsequently, the authors pointed out, “Authenticity paves the way for transparency. When employees know what it takes to perform, develop, grow, and succeed, they trust that their company is a meritocracy.”<sup>8</sup> More tactically, employees in transparent organizations align their individual performance with

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organizational goals and with the incentive structures of the transparent personnel system in order to thrive.

### **Participants Identified Four Key Considerations About Transparency for the Coast Guard**

Transparency is created when quality information is intentionally provided and delivered in a manner that is understood and enables the information consumer to act on it.<sup>9</sup> When planning for greater transparency, the Coast Guard should consider several issues:

- **In practice, transparency requires finding the proper balance between providing enough information to planners, supervisors, and the workforce to be useful and protecting the privacy of individuals.** For example, in previous RAND Corporation work, researchers found that

organizations take different approaches to providing information on poor employee performance. Some simply describe the process for handling poor performance, while others publicize the number of suspensions, demotions, and removals, aggregated to maintain privacy.<sup>10</sup>

- **Transparency occurs on a continuum, with information provided at various levels of an organization.** If the purpose of the information is to monitor an issue and make course-correction changes, perhaps only the organization's leaders need granular information. On the other hand, if the purpose of the information is to demonstrate that a process is fair and equitable and enables individual action, broader distribution might be warranted.
- **To ensure that information is useful and trustworthy, transparency requires that the information be provided in a timely, accurate, complete, and instructive manner.** The greatest benefit to personnel comes from presenting data and information in the context of the larger personnel management system. This context helps address concerns about the perceived fairness of both the process and the outcomes it produces, which are related to employee attitudes and behaviors.<sup>11</sup> For example, providing the number of performance improvement plans for poor performers does not convey any ongoing actions to address the performance deficiencies, nor does it indicate the outcomes of these plans, such as an employee's decision to stay or leave.<sup>12</sup> However, it can provide context to show how many poor performers exist or the extent to which leadership is taking action to correct unsatisfactory

performance. There is also a balancing of providing the right amount of information to demonstrate that processes are effective and equitable and providing so much information that people learn to “game the system,” leading to unintended and undesirable behaviors. Recall that a well-positioned transparent process will align organizational objectives with individual objectives.

- On a cautionary note, poorly implemented efforts to promote transparency—for instance, information that is inappropriately framed or hard to understand—can be counterproductive if these efforts lead to misinterpretation or misperception.<sup>13</sup> In addition, greater transparency does not provide a simple solution to chronic management issues.<sup>14</sup>

Providing greater transparency essentially comes down to ensuring that personnel understand how the system works (i.e., the policies, procedures, and criteria that are applied) and providing opportunities for them to see that the system is fair and generates the desired outcomes. Disseminating this information requires a portfolio of actions, including the presentation of concise and comprehensive data; communications, such as briefings, reports, emails, and web-based content; management practices; and training opportunities. One example of a personnel management program that uses multiple methods to increase transparency is the U.S. Department of Defense’s Civilian Acquisition Workforce Personnel Demonstration Project (AcqDemo), a demonstration program that tests alternative personnel management procedures for the acquisition corps. It provides training to supervisors and other personnel to increase their familiarity with the demonstration program. It also explains career fields and expectations,

forming the basis for using common factors for assessing employee performance. At the beginning of a performance period, each supervisor meets with each of their employees to discuss job expectations to ensure that all employees are aware of and understand the factors that tie their duties to the organization’s mission. During that time, periodic meetings serve as checkpoints to provide actionable feedback. Finally, if an employee believes that the results of the assessment do not accurately reflect their contributions, they can offer input into the performance process or utilize a grievance process.<sup>15</sup> As this example suggests, achieving greater transparency can require a suite of activities.

## Several Personnel Management Areas Are Ripe for Improvement

Where might the Coast Guard look for opportunities to provide greater transparency in workforce planning and personnel management? As part of the Human Capital Strategy released in 2016, the Coast Guard identified three priorities on which to focus:

- **mission** needs that focus on the processes that determine the Coast Guard’s requirements for people and competencies
- **service** needs that focus on the development of military members and civil servants to meet mission demands
- **people** needs that focus on supporting the individual and their career objectives fairly and equitably.<sup>16</sup>

These needs—establishing data-driven personnel requirements, developing a proficient and diverse workforce, and supporting individual decisionmaking and

growth—can provide a road map for areas to consider for providing greater transparency into Coast Guard personnel management processes, starting with recruitment and hiring, compensation, performance assessment, assignments and rotations, and promotions. These areas align well with the issues raised at the scenario-based Evergreen workshops and observations of Coast Guard personnel management processes, which include the following:

- **The assignment process is not well-understood, nor can the results always be reconciled with Coast Guard guidance.** Although guidance documents for the assignment process provide some information, they lack specific criteria and rules, as well as details about the process itself. For example, the sense is that assignments are determined using an unpublished set of “business rules” that favor some billets and categories of people, but it is unclear overall how decisions are made. Other services have identified the assignment process as an area of focus. Both the Army and the Navy experimented with more-visible, market-like assignment processes—the Green Pages (2010–2012) and Data-Enabled Talent Management (2015–2017) programs, respectively—and the Coast Guard might consider reviewing the results.<sup>17</sup>
- **The board and panel process can be ambiguous, particularly to the many members who have not served on a board or panel.** Although promotion boards and assignment panels have commandant guidance that is published, it is considered a guideline and, therefore, not compulsory. This leads to many questions about what aspects of diversity, for example, addressed in that guidance might or might

not have been part of the criteria that the board or panel used in its decisionmaking process. The value of every board or panel establishing its own process (within legal and policy limits) must be weighed against whether increased visibility or transparency adds value and demystifies the promotion board and assignment panel process. One option to increase visibility on the process overall is piloting improved communications with the publication of board guidelines, process, and instructional memoranda, along with more-detailed data on selection decisions.

- **Some cultural biases influence the perception of process fairness and efficacy.** For example, waivers to the assignment policy are available for families with special needs (e.g., disability, medical conditions), but workshop attendees noted that these requests are not always encouraged in some operational communities. The Coast Guard has initiated two studies to understand the effects that gender and race have on representation, retention, and performance;<sup>18</sup> additional research could yield further insight into the biases of the Coast Guard personnel system.
- **Better information is needed on idealized versus actualized career pathways.** Some guidance exists for career pathways in theory, but little information is available on whether these pathways are valid in practice. Additionally, little is known about the effects of deviating from a traditionally successful pathway (although some research has established the correlation between service on certain large vessels and positive enlisted career outcomes).<sup>19</sup>

When uncommon opportunities arise during the assignment process, service members are often making best guesses or attempting to crowdsource scuttlebutt on what the different options might indicate, what sort of long-term effects an option might have on advancement likelihood, and how to rank choices to game the process.

## Moving Forward Involves Weighing the Benefits Against the Costs

The Coast Guard can expand transparency by determining where the benefits are most promising when weighed against the potential costs. This could involve

- assessing the areas of personnel management in which leaders want greater transparency and visibility to inform institutional decisionmaking and planning today and in the future
- surveying Coast Guard personnel to determine where they want greater transparency. For example, how might additional data inform individual decisionmaking? What aspects of the personnel management system are perceived as unfair, confusing, or ambiguous—and where would more transparency help change those perceptions and improve worker satisfaction, retention, morale, and performance?
- determining which perceptions are due to a lack of transparency or a lack of knowledge about a process, because the remedies differ. If lack of transparency is the reason for this perception, then making more information available on process and process

outcomes is one solution. However, if lack of knowledge is the reason, potential solutions could involve meetings with leadership or additional training to ensure that available information is received and understood.

The results of the above exercise could be triaged and analyzed to determine how greater transparency can lead to better decisions in the specific personnel management areas identified. Ideally, processes should be well defined with established criteria and have accessible data on outcomes (or the potential to generate some). The Coast Guard will need to answer several questions: What information needs to be collected to provide greater transparency? What benefits do we expect to see? What policy or procedural changes, training, documentation, or other communications need to change? In other words, what suite of actions must be in place to provide greater transparency?

The next phase would be to consider the potential challenges of greater transparency. Some key questions in this phase include the following:

- Are the existing processes reproducible or definable?

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- Do data exist, or are they feasible to gather?
- Are there cultural or legal barriers to greater transparency (e.g., a perceived loss of flexibility or greater vulnerability to criticism)?

The Coast Guard could learn from previous experiments with greater transparency in Department of Defense programs and personnel assignment processes.

The 2016 Human Capital Strategy notes that more analysis is needed to determine the appropriate balance between system predictability and flexibility:

*Analysis of facts, data, and stated assumptions influence decisions and policies. This information provides a degree of transparency and predictability that instills trust and produces better decisions in the Coast Guard's and member's best interests, but the HR [human resource] system must have flexibility to adjust to specific circumstances unique to each situation.<sup>20</sup>*

## Conclusion

The purpose of this Perspective is to introduce greater transparency as one approach for ensuring that the Coast Guard leverages new opportunities to remain relevant and competitive in the changing workplace environment. Improved predictability, greater confidence in the system, and a clearer understanding of the consequences of their choices are some of the many merits transparency could bring to the people of the Coast Guard. Additionally, leadership gains key insights into the organization's plans and policies and their effects on the depletion, sustainment, and growth of the current and future workforce. For example, transparency can help provide the data to model

the consequences and effectiveness of potential changes to policies, thus helping to inform decisionmaking processes. These data and information can also be used for analysis to create alerts and other early indicators to serve as warnings about declines in retention, critical talents or skills, or readiness, which are among the most-challenging workforce concerns.

Determining where and how to effectively pursue transparency in ways that are the best fit for the service and its people requires analysis of opportunities, drawbacks, and costs. This analysis can start with a survey of leadership and the workforce that proceeds in parallel with an assessment of available data and information. Example questions include the following:

- Given the changing dynamics in the workplace in addition to Coast Guard goals, what does Coast Guard leadership see as the critical components of a transparent personnel management system?
- What does leadership hope to accomplish through greater transparency (e.g., elimination of inequities and biases, facilitation of career pathways, improved workforce planning capability)?
- On what personnel management processes does the workforce want more information and clarity, and how would that additional information and clarity improve recruiting, engagement, and retention?
- What system investments would be required to achieve these desired states?
- What is the anticipated effect of greater transparency in these particular areas, and is any system or process available to measure and report on that effect?

- What are the drawbacks or trade-offs of each point of transparency?
- How would the process be implemented and sustained to ensure that information is adequate, interpreted correctly, understood, and communicated in a way that ensures that the needs of the mission, the service, and the people are being addressed?

Through exploring opportunities to provide greater transparency in Coast Guard personnel management processes, the Coast Guard can leverage new ways of managing the workforce and new sources of information to remain competitive in the future work environment.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Gig economy* refers to a labor market characterized by the prevalence of short-term contracts and freelance work rather than salaried employment. Even with a “modest” influence on the number of workers engaged in part-time work, the gig economy is influencing the nature of work, as well as expectations among workers, particularly those within the age cohorts eligible for Coast Guard service. For comparison, see Lawrence F. Katz and Alan B. Krueger, “Understanding Trends in Alternative Work Arrangements in the United States,” Cambridge, Mass.: National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper 25425, January 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Roy Maurer, “Leveraging Transparency Is the Future of HR,” Society for Human Resource Management, September 23, 2016; Harvard Business School Analytic Services, *The Impact of Employee Engagement on Performance*, Harvard Business School Publishing, September 2013; Yochi Cohen-Charash and Paul E. Spector, “The Role of Justice in Organizations: A Meta-Analysis,” *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, Vol. 82, No. 2, November 2001; Mary A. Konovsky, “Understanding Procedural Justice and Its Impact on Business Organizations,” *Journal of Management*, Vol. 26, No. 3, 2000; Rebecca Hawk, “5 Benefits of More Transparency in Your Workplace,” American Society of Association Executives, undated; TINYpulse, “7 Vital Trends Disrupting Today’s Workplace: Results and Data from 2013 TINYpulse Employee Engagement Survey,” undated (survey data from 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Laura Werber, Paul Mayberry, Mark Doboga, and Diana Gehlhaus Carew, *Support for DoD Supervisors in Addressing Poor Employee Performance: A Holistic Approach*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2665-OSD, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Office of Personnel Management, “What Is Transparency in the Context of Open Government?” undated.

<sup>5</sup> World Economic Forum, *The Future of Jobs: Employment, Skills and Workforce Strategy for the Fourth Industrial Revolution*, January 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Maurer, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Laura Werber, Lindsay Daugherty, Edward G. Keating, and Matthew Hoover, *An Assessment of the Civilian Acquisition Workforce Personnel Demonstration Project*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, TR-1286-OSD, 2012; Cohen-Charash and Spector, 2001; Konovsky, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Douglas A. Ready, Linda A. Hill, and Robert J. Thomas, “Building a Game-Changing Talent Strategy,” *Harvard Business Review*, January–February 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew K. Schnackenberg and Edward C. Tomlinson, “Organizational Transparency: A New Perspective on Managing Trust in Organization–Stakeholder Relationships,” *Journal of Management*, Vol. 42, No. 7, 2016, pp. 1784–1810.

<sup>10</sup> Werber, Mayberry, et al., 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Transparency addresses concerns about procedural justice (the perceived fairness of the process through which an outcome was obtained) and distributive justice (the perceived fairness of the outcome itself), both of which are related to employee attitudes and behaviors (Cohen-Charash and Spector, 2001, and Konovsky, 2000, as cited in Werber, Mayberry, et al., 2018).

<sup>12</sup> Werber, Mayberry, et al., 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Bennett Conlin, “The Pros and Cons of Salary Transparency,” *Business News Daily*, updated October 2, 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Sarah Greesonbach, “The Pros and Cons of Transparent Corporate Cultures,” *Glassdoor*, December 1, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Werber, Daugherty, et al., 2012.

<sup>16</sup> U.S. Coast Guard, “Human Capital Strategy,” January 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Office of Economic and Manpower Analysis, U.S. Army, *Army Green Pages: Proof-of-Concept Pilot Report—Using Regulated Market Mechanisms to Manage Officer Talent*, West Point, N.Y.: U.S. Military Academy, version 11, December 15, 2012; Caroline Baxter, Brad Carson, Steven Deal, Kelsey Greenawalt, Daniel Madden, Joshua Marcuse, Morgan Plummer, and Lloyd Thrall, “Force of the Future,” Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2015, pp. 32 and 41.

<sup>18</sup> See Kimberly Curry Hall, Kirsten M. Keller, David Schulker, Sarah Weiland, Katherine L. Kidder, and Nelson Lim, *Improving Gender Diversity in the U.S. Coast Guard: Identifying Barriers to Female Retention*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2770-DHS, 2019, and Kimberly Curry Hall and Kirsten M. Keller, RAND Corporation, communication with the authors about their ongoing research into holistic study and analysis for recruiting and retention of underrepresented populations, 2019–2020.

<sup>19</sup> Jennie W. Wenger, Maria C. Lytell, Kimberly Curry Hall, and Michael L. Hansen, *Balancing Quality of Life with Mission Requirements: An Analysis of Personnel Tempo on U.S. Coast Guard Major Cutters*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2731-DHS, 2019.

<sup>20</sup> U.S. Coast Guard, 2016, p. 29.

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## About This Perspective

This Perspective documents support by the Homeland Security Operational Analysis Center (HSOAC) to the U.S. Coast Guard's Evergreen project. Founded in 1996, Evergreen is the Coast Guard's strategic foresight initiative, which has historically run in four-year cycles and uses scenario-based planning to identify strategic needs for the incoming service chief. In 2019, Evergreen was restructured in order to best support executive leaders in their role as the Coast Guard's decision engines. The project objective is to help posture the Coast Guard to better bridge the gap between future challenges and near-term plans, which typically focus on the urgent needs of the present. HSOAC analysts reviewed Evergreen activities, examined Coast Guard strategy-making and planning processes, adapted an approach for developing scenarios, and narrated a set of exemplar global planning scenarios. The individual Perspectives that resulted from this project reflect themes and specific subjects that have emerged from a series of workshops that were conducted with subject-matter experts and were identified as areas of particular interest for senior leadership strategic planning activities and emerging policy development.

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## About the Authors

**Susan A. Resetar** is a senior operations researcher at the RAND Corporation. Her research focuses include personnel issues, workforce staffing, disaster recovery, climate change, collaboration, military installation management, and strategic planning using both quantitative and qualitative methods. She has an M.S. in operations research.

**Michelle D. Ziegler** is a technical analyst at the RAND Corporation. Her research focuses include U.S. Army logistics, disaster recovery, U.S. Coast Guard capability and capacity analysis, and cooperation and domain awareness in the Arctic. She has an M.S. in astronomy.

**Aaron C. Davenport** is a senior policy researcher at the RAND Corporation. His research focuses include border and maritime security, emergency preparedness and response, occupational health and safety, and national security strategy. He is a graduate of the U.S. Coast Guard Academy and retired Coast Guard senior officer with security assistance, search-and-rescue, and law-enforcement experience. He has an M.S. in environmental sciences, with a certificate in industrial hygiene and a minor in hazardous materials.

**Melissa Bauman** is a communications analyst at the RAND Corporation. She helps researchers make their complex findings accessible to a sophisticated audience of lawmakers, journalists, and practitioners. She has a B.A. in journalism.



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