



New Approaches to Developing the Air Force’s Senior Leader Workforce

As Chief of Staff of the Air Force in 1998, General Michael E. Ryan observed a mismatch between the qualifications of Air Force general officers (GOs) and some of the jobs they needed to fill. Too few candidates had backgrounds appropriate for filling senior warfighting positions, and many GOs had backgrounds too specialized to be very useful at higher grades. To help improve the Air Force’s GO development approach, RAND Project AIR FORCE (PAF) conducted a study of GO positions and Senior Executive Service (SES) positions (which also utilize senior leaders) and the competencies required for each. This work resulted in new insights and methods for developing future Air Force senior leaders.

PAF Developed a Framework for Organizing Competency Requirements

Researchers found that most jobs have a *primary occupational competency*: prior experience gained in a specific operational or functional area (e.g., fighter pilot), or a “bin” containing a number of such areas that is critical to success in the position. Many positions also require a *secondary occupational competency*: prior experience in a second operational/functional area or bin. Primary and secondary occupational competencies can be considered “provider-level” skills—that is, the individual is expected to be able to manage the provision of services generated in the function. Additionally, all jobs require multiple areas of *functional familiarity*, which is defined as the ability to be an informed consumer of services generated by other functions. Finally, all jobs require an array of *cross-functional competencies*: leadership skills, management skills, and other competencies that are common across positions in many operational or functional areas.

The Air Force Can Improve Its Senior Leader Development in Key Areas

Major findings include the following:

- Most positions require a secondary competency, giving rise to the need for simultaneous multifunctionality: a person needs both primary and secondary competencies to enhance his or her success in a given position.
- Within the set of jobs sharing a common primary occupational competency, grade requirements often do not form a neat career progression pyramid. With expected promotion patterns, individuals cannot progress through grades or tiers within the same primary occupational competency. Accordingly, individuals must shift among primary occupational pyramids as they progress, giving rise to the need for *serial* multifunctionality.
- Recent cohorts of individuals selected for promotion to brigadier general approximately matched the ideal distribution of primary occupational competencies but exhibited the required multifunctionality to a very limited degree. To provide the needed competencies in the future, deliberate efforts must be made to expose competitive middle-grade officers to a broader range of operational and organizational experiences.
- While most positions have characteristics that make them suitable only for GO incumbents in some cases and SES incumbents in others, a sizable minority of positions can be filled “flexibly,” in other words, by either GO or SES incumbents. Utilizing this flexibility, career progression can be enhanced in both the GO and SES segments of the senior leader workforce.
- A decisions support system (DSS) can help to more systematically manage the assignments of GOs.

PAF’s Methods Are Useful Beyond the Air Force

While these findings are specific to the Air Force, the methods that were developed and used in this study are likely to be of interest to other organizations seeking to establish or enhance competency-based, requirements-driven leadership development programs. These methods include surveys of incumbents, linear programming models to optimize workforce configurations, statistical regression analysis to quantify the relative needs for senior leaders within Air Force organizations, and systematic software development practices to construct a prototype DSS. ■

RAND RESEARCH AREAS

- CHILD POLICY
- CIVIL JUSTICE
- EDUCATION
- ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENT
- HEALTH AND HEALTH CARE
- INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS
- NATIONAL SECURITY
- POPULATION AND AGING
- PUBLIC SAFETY
- SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY
- SUBSTANCE ABUSE
- TERRORISM AND HOMELAND SECURITY
- TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

This product is part of the RAND Corporation research brief series. RAND research briefs present policy-oriented summaries of individual published, peer-reviewed documents or of a body of published work.

Corporate Headquarters
1776 Main Street
P.O. Box 2138
Santa Monica, California
90407-2138
Tel 310.393.0411
Fax 310.393.4818

© RAND 2005

This research brief describes work done for RAND Project AIR FORCE and documented in *Integrated Planning for the Air Force Senior Leader Workforce* by Albert A. Robbert, Stephen M. Drezner, John E. Boon, Lawrence M. Hanser, S. Craig Moore, Lynn Scott, and Herbert J. Shukiar, TR-175-AF, 2004, 90 pages, ISBN: 0-8330-3663-7. Copies of this research brief and the complete report on which it is based are available from RAND Distribution Services (phone: 310-451-7002; toll free: 877-584-8642; or email: order@rand.org) or online at www.rand.org/publications/TR/TR175/. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. **RAND**® is a registered trademark.

RAND Offices Santa Monica • Washington • Pittsburgh • New York • Doha • Berlin • Cambridge • Leiden



PROJECT AIR FORCE

CHILD POLICY
CIVIL JUSTICE
EDUCATION
ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENT
HEALTH AND HEALTH CARE
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS
NATIONAL SECURITY
POPULATION AND AGING
PUBLIC SAFETY
SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY
SUBSTANCE ABUSE
TERRORISM AND
HOMELAND SECURITY
TRANSPORTATION AND
INFRASTRUCTURE

This PDF document was made available from www.rand.org as a public service of the RAND Corporation.

This product is part of the RAND Corporation research brief series. RAND research briefs present policy-oriented summaries of individual published, peer-reviewed documents or of a body of published work.

The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world.

Support RAND

[Browse Books & Publications](#)

[Make a charitable contribution](#)

For More Information

Visit RAND at www.rand.org

Explore [RAND Project AIR FORCE](#)

View [document details](#)

Limited Electronic Distribution Rights

This document and trademark(s) contained herein are protected by law as indicated in a notice appearing later in this work. This electronic representation of RAND intellectual property is provided for non-commercial use only. Permission is required from RAND to reproduce, or reuse in another form, any of our research documents for commercial use.