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Do Air Force Personnel Broaden Their Skills During Deployments?

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United States Air Force personnel are typically trained to perform jobs in a specific occupational category. However, they may be called upon to perform a variety of jobs during their military careers. Recognizing this, the Air Force has set goals that will require some personnel to acquire skills and competencies in more than one occupational category. For example, an individual with expertise in operations may need to expand his understanding of strategy or to improve his leadership skills.

To assist the Air Force in this effort, RAND Project AIR FORCE (PAF) conducted a survey to identify the settings in which individuals learn occupational skills and universal competencies outside of their primary occupations, with an emphasis on deployments. Occupational skills are specific to a particular occupation. Universal competencies are applicable across job categories and are expected to some extent among all Air Force personnel. PAF surveyed officers and enlisted personnel who had recently returned from Prince Sultan Air Base (PSAB) and Eskan Village (a military housing facility) in Saudi Arabia. The two locations were selected because the Air Force had identified deployments as a likely setting for substantial learning and because a large number of Air Force personnel in a wide variety of occupations were deployed there. Respondents were asked to consider a broad range of skills and competencies and to rank the environments that were most conducive to learning. Environments included initial and mid-career training, the PSAB/Eskan deployment, other deployments, and settings outside the Air Force. Major findings include the following:

- **Personnel learn skills outside of their specialty during deployments.** 75 percent of survey respondents indicated that they spent some portion of their time during deployment working outside their occupational specialty.
- **Personnel identified the PSAB/Eskan Village deployment as the best environment for learning more than one-third of the skills and competencies listed on the survey.** Many of the skills and competencies learned best during deployment were from the operations, organization, and strategy categories on the Air Force list.

PAF recommends that **if the Air Force develops a system for tracking the learning of occupational skills and universal competencies, it should incorporate the learning that occurs during deployments.** Such a system would give the Air Force a better understanding of which personnel have certain combinations of skills and where gaps still exist. ■

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