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# Evaluating Options for Expanding Lateral Entry into Enlisted Military Occupations

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Each year the U.S. military recruits about 180,000 new soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines. Although some of the recruits enter the military with occupational skills learned through education or experience outside the military, the military typically ignores this nonmilitary human capital. Instead, it either teaches the military-specific knowledge or skills germane to an occupation to an entrant who knows the nonmilitary form or trains that entrant for a new occupation. In FY 2002, for example, the military spent about \$3.3 billion for advanced occupational training, some of which may duplicate training and experience acquired by recruits before joining the military.

Another option is lateral entry, under which new recruits are given credit for prior education and experience in similar nonmilitary occupations. Although lateral entry does occur in select military grades and occupations, on the whole this option is currently little used by the military, particularly into enlisted occupations. However, the current Department of Defense (DoD) Military Personnel Human Resource Strategy envisions more widespread use of lateral entry in the future. Therefore, the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Personnel and Readiness) asked the RAND National Defense Research Institute (NDRI), a division of the RAND Corporation, to develop a framework for evaluating the use of lateral entry programs for the recruitment of non-prior-service personnel into enlisted, active-duty occupations.

The study found that pursuing a policy of large-scale lateral entry of non-prior-service personnel into enlisted occupations would not likely lead to a significant reduction in training costs absent other significant changes. As reported in *Expanding Enlisted Lateral Entry: Options and Feasibility*, a better alternative, given the goal of cost savings, could be to consider expanding lateral entry of prior-service personnel.

## Abstract

Researchers developed a new framework to evaluate options for expanding lateral entry of non-prior-service personnel into enlisted, active-duty military occupations. The framework links goals of lateral entry with program design features. An exclusive focus on the goal of reducing training costs led the authors to recommend an alternative, namely that DoD explore options for increased lateral entry of prior-service personnel, both active and reserve. Emphasis on other goals, such as introducing new or higher experience levels into the enlisted force, could lead to different conclusions.

## A Framework for Evaluating Lateral Entry Options

The researchers drew on previous studies as well as examples of current programs in the military and private sector to identify potential goals of lateral entry programs and the program features that might be manipulated to achieve those goals.

Lateral entry programs might be used to achieve at least four goals:

- **Reducing training costs.** Lateral entry programs can take advantage of the general human capital a prospective entrant has gained through his or her own investment in education or experience.
- **Filling gaps in personnel profiles.** Lateral entry is frequently discussed as a means of obtaining personnel for occupations with shortages at higher grades or for raising skill levels or adding new skill sets to the workforce.
- **Expanding recruiting markets.** Lateral entry can potentially be used to tap the market of peo-

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ple who have developed occupational skills through either education or workplace experience and who might consider military service if their skills were recognized by the personnel management system.

- **Avoiding the disruption of general military culture.** Although this fourth goal might be better characterized as a constraint, lateral entry programs should be designed either to minimize anticipated cultural disruption or to manage cultural change.

At least four categories of program features can be manipulated to support the goals:

- the occupations into which lateral entry will be permitted;
- the training and experience profiles and levels required of lateral entrants;
- the scale and flexibility of implementation; and
- the program's incentive structure.

### **If Reducing Training Costs Is the Primary Goal, Large-Scale Lateral Entry of Non-Prior-Service Personnel Does Not Seem Promising at This Time**

The sponsor identified the reduction of training costs as the principal motivator for considering more widespread adoption or expansion of lateral entry in the current environment. Researchers therefore selected program features that would help achieve this goal.

- **Occupations with high military training costs.** Given the goal of reducing training costs, appropriate candidate occupations should demonstrate high training costs relative to other military occupations, high training costs relative to their civilian counterparts, and/or large numbers of personnel to train. Because of data and project scope limitations, only the first of these criteria was used in the current analysis.
- **Entrants with advanced training.** A lateral entry program should seek recruits with relatively high levels of training and experience (i.e., completion of at least the equivalent of advanced individual training for an occupation).
- **A large number of lateral entrants (i.e., 50 percent or more of total recruits) and excess external labor supply.** Although lateral entry of high-level recruits can threaten cohesion, the effects are likely to be reduced if most or all members of an occupation are recruited laterally. Recruiting large numbers laterally also allows for dramatic downsizing or total elimination of military training infrastructure for an occupation, which is necessary to achieve meaningful reductions in training costs. However, suffi-

cient external labor supply is needed to ensure the availability of large numbers of lateral entrants and to reduce the risks associated with the elimination of training infrastructure.

- **Occupations whose civilian members earn the equivalent of or less than their military counterparts.** Crafting an appropriate incentive structure can be central to the success or failure of a lateral entry program. Past experience indicates that enlistment bonuses can nullify the savings in training costs generated by lateral entry programs. Thus, a more effective incentive in the present case would be relatively high compensation.

Using these criteria, the research team identified four possible candidate occupations for lateral entry. However, concerns about the quality of the match between the military occupations and their civilian counterparts, the reliability of civilian earnings data, and the stability of external labor supply led the team to conclude that pursuing a large-scale policy of lateral entry of non-prior-service personnel in even these four occupations does not show promise at this time.

### **A Shift in Focus Might Increase the Attractiveness of Lateral Entry**

Because expanded use of lateral entry programs for non-prior-service personnel is unlikely to be successful in reducing training costs on a meaningful scale without introducing serious force management risks, the researchers recommended that, in the near term, DoD refrain from launching pilot studies or new programs of this kind. Instead, DoD should continue existing lateral entry programs and consider other alternatives for expanding the use of lateral entry.

**Explore options for increased lateral entry of prior-service personnel, both active and reserve.** By recruiting prior-service personnel back into the same occupations, the military services can amortize training costs over a longer career length, avoid new training costs, and minimize the cultural disruption caused by lateral entry.

**If the goals of filling personnel gaps or expanding recruiting markets advance in priority, consider improving and enhancing established, but little used, programs such as the Army Civilian Acquired Skills Program (ACASP) and the Navy's Direct Procurement Enlistment Program (DPEP).** Integrating program goals into recruiter training and incentives will be key to any improvement efforts, as will the consideration of incentives for recruits. Both programs would be helped by the support of strong, high-level service advocates. ■

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This research brief describes work done for the RAND National Security Research Division documented in *Expanding Enlisted Lateral Entry: Options and Feasibility*, by Dina Levy, Joy Moini, Jennifer Sharp, and Harry Thie, MG-134-OSD, 60 pp., \$20.00, ISBN: 0-8330-3514-2, available at [www.rand.org/publications/MG/MG134/](http://www.rand.org/publications/MG/MG134/). It is also available from RAND Distribution Services (phone: 310-451-7002; toll free: 877-584-8642; or email: [order@rand.org](mailto:order@rand.org)). 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.

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