



# The Advisability of Sabbatical Leaves for Officers

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In recent years, the Department of Defense (DoD) has focused increasing attention on ways to attract and retain highly skilled personnel at greater rates. Specifically, DoD is seeking to develop management strategies that will improve the quality of life of its officers, thereby competing more effectively with the civilian job market and creating a more flexible personnel system to prepare the military for the future. One area under active consideration is the increased and strategic use of extended leave programs, also known as sabbaticals.

Long a feature of private-sector employment, paid and unpaid leaves of absence enable employees to attend to a family crisis, undertake professional development, work in social service, take time for personal renewal, or even help their company through a financial crisis. Extended leave programs also exist in varying forms in the civilian sector of the U.S. government and in foreign militaries. Within the U.S. military, however, extended leaves are primarily restricted to educational sabbaticals, during which time officers receive only basic pay and certain benefits and after which they must “pay back” one month’s service time for every two months away. The services also offer return-to-service programs, with returns contingent on service need. Still, for officers seeking a leave of absence for non-educational reasons and who hope to receive some compensation or maintain their benefits during their time away, no full-scale option exists.

But are the more expansive and flexible extended leave programs offered in the civilian world a viable option given the unique demands of the U.S. military? Would a targeted introduction of new leave options be an advisable—and cost-effective—personnel tool for military planners?

## Why Should the Military Consider New Extended Leave Programs?

RAND researchers identified three rationales for why the U.S. military might want to implement a

### Abstract

As a competitive employer in the United States, the Department of Defense (DoD) strives to maintain benefits comparable to those of the public and private sector. DoD recently asked the RAND Corporation to explore the greater use of extended leaves as part of the department’s strategic human resource plan. The researchers offer recommendations and observations on which extended leave programs would most benefit military officers as well as ideas on how to implement such programs.

more comprehensive range of leave options. First, *legal and legislative changes* may mandate it. That is, Congress or the President could decide to extend civilian workforce laws (e.g., the Family and Medical Leave Act) to military personnel. Second, the *human resources value* of specific extended leave options may merit their adoption. In other words, a program might prove the “right thing to do” to keep officers satisfied and motivated and to ensure the military remains competitive with the private sector. Finally, many of these programs, depending on their design, may prove *cost-efficient*, either through direct savings or by generating a return on investment (ROI) in the form of increased officer retention, which in turn can result in a more experienced force and lower accession and training costs.

### Return on Investment: Balancing Size, Target Cohort, Duration, and Cost

Using these rationales, the research team evaluated a wide variety of civilian, foreign military, and existing U.S. military programs for their potential human resource value. Determining whether these programs are ultimately advisable, however, requires

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an analysis of the third rationale: cost-efficiency. Programs may be legally tenable or mandated and may serve a public relations and morale function, but they may not be cost-effective.

To create a framework that DoD might use to formulate effective programs, the researchers conducted an illustrative ROI analysis to determine the *variables that most affect whether a program's benefits outweigh its costs*. The purpose was to generate general principles from which to shape and evaluate programs offering a positive, or at least neutral, ROI.

Researchers assessed four sample programs—two leaves for social service and two for personal growth—each with varying eligibility, participation, and benefit levels. The process demonstrated that the purpose of the leave has only a minor impact on efficiency. Instead, the characteristics with the greatest impact on ROI are the duration of the leave, the number of participants, the compensation offered, and the likelihood that participants would otherwise have left the service. The researchers also determined that

- programs with limited-length leaves resulting in changes in retention behavior in at least 10 percent of participants generally have a *positive ROI*
- programs targeting subpopulations with the highest likelihood of changing retention behavior (e.g., junior officers) are more efficient
- programs that are some combination of small, short, and low cost have the more favorable ROI.

All told, *program size, duration, and cost must be in balance to achieve the desired effects on retention*. For instance, if costs are high, the program should be smaller and offer shorter leaves. With such programs, however, personnel managers must weigh whether the retention needed for favorable ROI can be achieved from a small group of participants taking a short leave. Further, large programs offering full compensation and long leaves may be too costly (if not substituted for other funded programs), but those providing only basic pay or benefits and short leaves may still be feasible despite their size.

### **Extended Leave Programs, If Well Crafted, Can Provide Desirable Flexibility**

ROI analyses indicate that, with a thoughtful weighing of program features, benefits can surpass costs. When one adds in the possible legislative mandates and such qualitative values as morale improvements, these programs could be highly beneficial. Based on these findings, the researchers made the following recommendations:

**Implement a Range of Programs Devoted to Personal Leaves,** both paid and unpaid, with some open to all occupations and others restricted to critical ones. These programs would acknowledge and accommodate officers' personal responsibilities while allowing flexibility for both officers and personnel managers, permitting them to, for instance, employ leaves as incentives for exemplary performance.

**Consider Replacing Some Intermediate Education with More Flexible Educational Sabbaticals.** Educational sabbaticals could substitute for the current intermediate program of officer education, allowing some officers more freedom to study areas of individual interest and of value to their service.

**Improve Existing Return-to-Service Programs.** Currently, these programs do not guarantee that officers can return, even if service needs make a return desirable. Such programs should be revisited in the context of larger service priorities and total accession plans.

**Evaluate Personal Growth or Sabbatical Programs for Specific Cohorts.** Because target population is a major factor in cost-effectiveness, DoD should conduct a cohort-based analysis to assess programs for specific groups in order to evaluate with more precision the possible effects on population size, continuation rates, and retention. Findings could also help community managers steer programs toward those officers most likely to leave (e.g., junior officers).

### **Leadership Support Will Be Crucial to Successful Implementation**

Regardless of which programs are instituted, leadership support will be critical to their success. Such support will help ensure that eligible officers are made aware of their options and also that they are not disadvantaged for making use of them. Indeed, the importance of internal perceptions of both programs and participants should be taken into consideration when formulating program parameters. For instance, merit-based leaves are more likely to meet internal acceptance.

Ultimately, a more comprehensive system of extended leaves carries the promise of greatly enhanced flexibility for individual officers and for the military more largely. These programs can be adjusted, replaced, or eliminated based on different service needs, work-life patterns, private-sector trends, legislative developments, or shifting national priorities. However, they should not be entitlements. Moreover, in addition to the potential for concrete benefits (e.g., improved retention rates), implementing these programs may help reinforce the military's reputation as a competitive and conscientious employer. ■

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This research brief describes work done for the National Defense Research Institute documented in *Officer Sabbaticals: Analysis of Extended Leave Options*, by Harry J. Thie, Margaret C. Harrell, and Marc Thibault, MR-1752-OSD, 2003, 97 pages, \$20, ISBN: 0-8330-3456-1, 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.