Research Brief

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Is the Navy Developing Flag Officers with the Expertise They Need?

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Abstract

Navy flag officers command large organizations and need expertise in a variety of domains—domains that go beyond their primary area of expertise. A new analysis compares the expertise required with that developed in pre-flag officers recently selected for promotion. Its conclusions: The Navy should learn more about expertise requirements as the officers see them and maintain a database of those requirements. Further, the Navy should work to develop in its pre-flag officers the additional domain-specific skills necessary to perform effectively in flag positions.

U.S. Navy officers typically rise through the ranks developing expertise in a particular area. They may be skilled at surface warfare, for example, or air or submarine warfare. When they become flag officers—officers who hold the rank of rear admiral or above—many are called on to lead and manage large Navy organizations. But do they have the complex array of skills they need to manage the Navy enterprise?

Navy leaders have become increasingly concerned that they do not. Working with the Navy's Executive Learning Officer (ELO), the RAND National Defense Research Institute undertook a project to identify the expertise requirements of Navy flag officer positions, discover whether there is a gap in officer development, and, if so, determine the nature and size of the gap. The RAND researchers surveyed all Navy flag officers regarding the expertise required for their current positions, and they developed and ran a model that identified primary and additional domain-specific skills that flag selectees would need to perform effectively in flag positions. The researchers then compared those requirements with the training and experience of the current flow of officers. They also examined the trajectory of Navy requirements for flag officer expertise in the future.

Flag Officer Positions Require Broad Expertise

The RAND team divided the forms of expertise required into those specific to an operational or functional domain, such as surface warfare or acquisition, and those with potentially broader applicability, such as leadership and management expertise. Out of 38 types of leadership and management expertise that RAND identified, officers rated 22 as critical for at least 70 percent of flag officer positions. Several were rated as critical for 90 percent of positions; these included exercising responsibility and accountability, motivating and mentoring military personnel, exercising good judgment and adaptiveness in integrating priorities, guiding expectations and managing risks, resolving conflicts among associates, and influencing and negotiating with people at all levels.

Officers were asked to identify the primary area or areas of domain-specific expertise critical to their positions. For about 30 percent of flag officer positions, a single, specified primary domain of expertise was judged essential; for the others, any of two, three, or more primary domains was judged to suffice. Officers were also asked to identify the "second-most critical," or secondary, areas of domain expertise required for their positions. These are domains not always deliberately developed in officers who eventually rise to flag rank. Financial management, joint and combined warfare, and strategic plans and policy were each mentioned by at least a third of the respondents. (See the figure.)

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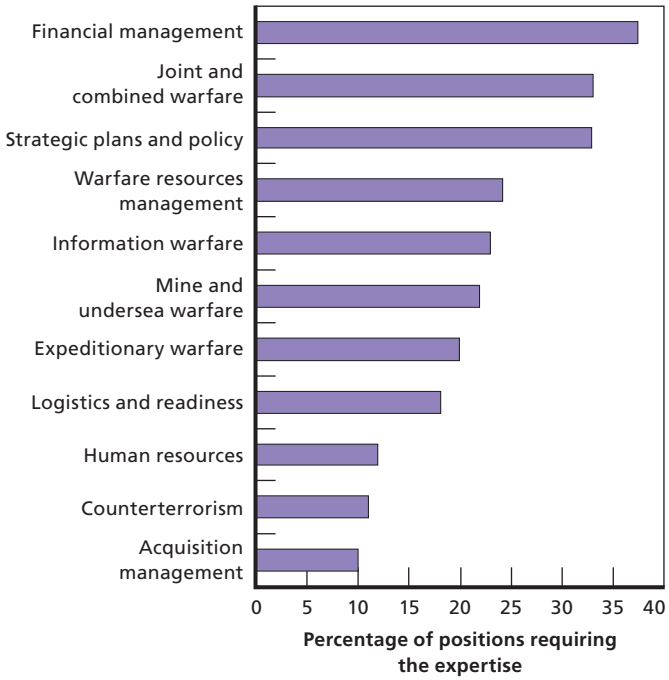
Areas of Expertise Most Frequently Mentioned as Secondary Requirements



NOTE: Only those expertise domains named by at least 10 percent of respondents are shown.

There Is Not a Big Gap Between Expertise Requirements and Supply

The model developed for this study examined specific primary/secondary domain expertise pairs for captains selected for rear admiral from 2001 to 2006. The objective was to determine whether, in flowing these expertise pairs through the flag officer personnel structure at reasonable promotion rates, the expertise demands of all flag positions could be met. The question is of interest in part because there are potential bottlenecks in the flow of personnel up through the ranks. For example, while there may be flexibility in the expertise required to fill positions at the three-star level, more narrowly defined requirements at the lower grades can affect the supply of domain-qualified officers to fill three-star positions. The researchers conducted this analysis only for domain-specific areas of expertise because there was no way they could determine if individual flag officers had the broader leadership and management skills.

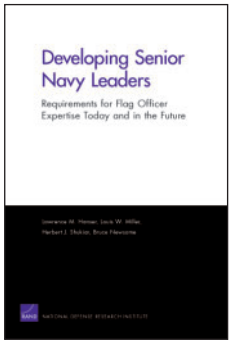
In examining the expertise of captains recently promoted to rear admiral, the researchers found a good match with the overall flag position expertise requirements identified by the model. However, they identified three pairs of expertise that were missing among those recently promoted and that deserve attention in Navy officer development plans. These pairs are special warfare/counterterrorism, civil engineering/financial management, and intelligence/joint and combined warfare.

Of course, the expertise required can be expected to change with the passage of time. A review of ongoing and planned changes in Navy organization, personnel development, operational strategy, and technology suggested some areas for expertise-building. Information warfare appears to be the most likely to become more important in the future. Furthermore, there is no evidence that the importance of any of the following traditional Navy areas of expertise will decline in the near future: surface warfare, submarine warfare, antisubmarine warfare, special warfare, expeditionary warfare, littoral warfare, intelligence, logistics and readiness, and sea basing.

Next Steps for the Navy

RAND recommended that the Navy

- Develop a number of secondary expertise domains among pre-flag officers who are likely to be promoted.
- Maintain an up-to-date database of the requirements for expertise in flag officer positions. There is already a mechanism for doing this—an electronic job book maintained by the ELO—but it ought to be updated frequently.
- Find out more about some of the areas of expertise that were identified by flag officers as critical to their success. For example, many flag officers named "financial management" as a critical skill, but interviews later revealed that the officers really want broad business-related training. The Navy could conduct additional interviews and establish a feedback loop between the ELO and flag officers to ensure ongoing communication. A better understanding of the expertise required could illuminate which kinds of expertise are better developed early in a career and over a longer period of time, and which are acceptably developed in a just-in-time context. ■



This research brief describes work done for the RAND National Defense Research Institute documented in *Developing Senior Navy Leaders: Requirements for Flag Officer Expertise Today and in the Future*, by Lawrence M. Hanser, Louis W. Miller, Herbert J. Shukiar, and Bruce Newsome, MG-618-NAVY (available at http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG618/), 2008, 176 pp., $28.00, ISBN: 978-0-8330-4294-1. 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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