Research Brief

RAND ARROYO CENTER

Army Warfighters' Forums Can Be Innovative and Successful

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

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The U.S. Army fielded Stryker Brigades to fill the void between heavy forces that were quite capable but took a long time to deploy and light infantry forces that could deploy quickly but lacked punch and staying power. Stryker Brigades provide armored mobility and can deploy faster than the heavy mechanized units.

The first Stryker Brigade began its conversion in 2000. By 2003, Stryker units were preparing to deploy to Iraq. The comparatively short time between creation and commitment meant that the units had little time to refine their doctrine and warfighting tactics, techniques, and procedures. To help overcome this shortfall, the Army created the Stryker Brigade Combat Team (SBCT) Warfighters' Forum, a networked and collaborative means of sharing information that leverages modern computer-based technologies to facilitate the exchange of information. This forum, which has its own staff,[1] includes a website (StrykerNet) with an information repository, Internet-based interactive leader and staff symposiums, and direct response to queries, all of which enable units, including those in a combat theater, to share lessons learned, pose questions, identify problems, and report solutions. The Army is developing additional warfighter forums and asked RAND Arroyo Center to assess how well the SBCT Warfighters' Forum works.

To make that assessment, Arroyo researchers posed three questions:

- How satisfied were those who used the forum?
- Did individuals' tactical knowledge increase?
- Did units' proficiency increase with theater-based feedback during a combat training center event?

How Satisfied Were Users?

Arroyo researchers gauged user satisfaction by surveying SBCT leaders about various Stryker-Net elements, surveying approximately 3,000 soldiers in two SBCTs to estimate how many individuals in the SBCT community of practice used various forum products or services, and by having forum leaders and staff complete a communications log. The log recorded elements of email and face-to-face and phone conversations.

Analysis of the three data-collection efforts indicates that the majority of SBCT leaders sampled were satisfied with the StrykerNet website and would recommend it. Approximately one-third of senior leaders and staff reported that they visited StrykerNet, and one-half of those visiting the site reported using it for training or individual development purposes. Analysis of staff communication logs strongly suggests that customers were satisfied with the direct support they received. Repeat customers were common. The log analysis also suggests that the Warfighters' Forum staff reduced the burden on Stryker units by dealing with requests that would otherwise have gone to units.

Did Individual Tactical Knowledge Increase?

The method used to gauge an increase in tactical knowledge was evaluation of the Hundredth

[1] The staff numbers approximately seven retired military personnel and an active-duty leader.

Key Points

- Stryker Brigades have little time between when they are organized to train and before they deploy to combat.
- Users were very satisfied with Stryker forum products and services.
- Participation in forum training activities improved tactical knowledge.
- Units that had theater-based feedback increased their tactical proficiency.

House tool, which combines a computer-based reenactment of an insurgent ambush of American forces in Iraq, recorded interviews with the unit members who took part in the ambush event, and a battalion commander–led discussion among trainees that occurred after they viewed the reenactment and interviews.[2] The study involved a before-and-after test given to about 130 soldiers from two battalions that were preparing to deploy to Iraq. The training tool improved the tactical knowledge of most participants. Meaningful gains occurred among three of the four groups analyzed: Officers, NCOs with recent Operation Iraqi Freedom experience, and other enlisted soldiers all scored significantly higher on measures of tactics after completing the training. NCOs who had participated in Operation Enduring Freedom or Operation Iraqi Freedom before 2006 showed little gain. The reason for the comparatively small gain in this group is unclear, but two possible explanations are that NCOs who had deployed to Afghanistan or pre-2006 Iraq felt confident in their abilities and therefore failed to pay attention and absorb the knowledge/training, or that the NCOs consciously decided that their experience was a better model to follow/adopt than the techniques conveyed during the Hundredth House training.

Did Unit Proficiency Increase with Theater-Based Feedback During a Combat Training Center Event?

To assess improvement in unit proficiency, Arroyo researchers developed an Iraq Common Events Approaches (ICEA) handbook consistent with SBCT Warfighters' Forum techniques and approaches. The handbook reflected the experiences of SBCT soldiers who had recently returned from a 15-month deployment to Iraq. It included information about ten common events that combat units faced, e.g., coming upon a suspected improvised explosive device (IED). Collective responses from deployed soldiers were distilled and, if they occurred frequently enough, were included in the handbook. For example, for a suspected IED, common actions included secure and cordon off the area, place vehicles in an overwatch position, and set up roadblocks.

To assess the effect of the handbook, Arroyo researchers measured and compared the performance of units at a combat training center that had received the handbook before the training event and one that had not. Observer-controllers, who accompany units during training and are experienced in the duties of those whom they are observing, collected evaluation data.

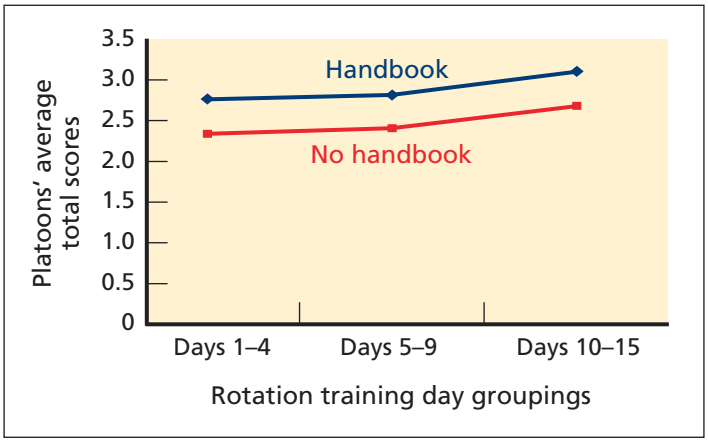
Units that had the ICEA handbook did significantly better on tactical tasks during combat training center rotations than platoons that did not receive the handbook. Researchers found the positive effect of the handbook at both the Joint Readiness Training Center and the National Training Center, regardless of how many training rotations the observer-controller had seen and across the ten tactical scenarios. The figure shows the positive effect and that it extended across the entire training period. Generally, all units improved during the training period, but those that had the handbook did better.

Recommendations for the Army

In light of the positive effects of the SBCT Warfighters' Forum, Arroyo researchers recommend that the Army take the following steps:

- Ensure that Warfighters' Forums continue to provide dynamic information to their communities.
- Monitor views within the community of practice about what Warfighters' Forums offer to identify potential improvements.
- Incorporate feedback reports into prepackaged training aids and tools.
- Consider broader adoption of the method used to produce the ICEA handbook. ■

Differences Attributable to the Handbook During a Training Rotation



[2] The Hundredth House tool was developed by Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Battle Command Training Center, Leader Development Section and is available through the Stryker Warfighters' Forum. The name derives from soldiers' descriptions of the ambush site as looking like a hundred other houses they had been to.

This research brief describes work done by the RAND Arroyo Center and documented in *Improving Soldier and Unit Effectiveness with the Stryker Brigade Combat Team Warfighters' Forum*, by Bryan W. Hallmark and S. Jamie Gayton, TR-919-A, 2011 (available at http://www.rand.org/pubs/technical_reports/TR919.html). This research brief was written by Jerry Sollinger. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit institution that helps improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. **RAND®** is a registered trademark.

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RB-9630-A (2011)

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