

Modernizing Officer Career Management

Analyzing Eleven Issues

The 2018 and 2019 National Defense Authorization Acts (NDAAs) required the Department of Defense (DoD) to provide three reports that addressed an extensive list of potential statutory and policy changes in military officer career management. (Some of these potential changes were put into effect through the 2019 NDAA.) RAND's National Defense Research Institute (NDRI) was asked to help obtain perspectives from the military departments and services about the issues covered in the three reports.

While deliberating the issues in the NDRI report, Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) officials identified 11 additional issues related to modernizing officer career management; they asked NDRI to examine these 11 issues in a subsequent study. Specifically, NDRI was to determine whether there were any statutory, policy, cultural, or fiscal constraints on officer management flexibilities; gather service perspectives on these constraints; and offer potential mitigation strategies.

What We Did

To better enable analysis, we sorted the 11 issues into three categories: promotions, tenure, and an “other” category for unrelated issues. The five promotion issues are the following:

1. promotion alternatives for technical-track competitive categories
2. possibilities for different competitive categories to have different promotion rates and frequency
3. ensuring that officers who opt out of promotion consideration are not adversely affected at future statutory boards
4. reserve commissions for active-duty officers*
5. promotion board guidance about deployability.

*Originally, we studied the issue of whether DoD could advocate a return to permanent and temporary promotions. With the concurrence of the research sponsor, we changed the question to more accurately reflect the intent of this issue: whether using reserve commissions for active-duty officers would aid permeability between the active and reserve components.

KEY FINDINGS

- Among the statutory, policy, cultural, and fiscal considerations across the 11 officer management issues, cultural considerations were the most prominent.
- Addressing each issue would require specific statutory or policy changes, and some issues were of little to no interest to the services.
- The services were open to experimentation with available flexibilities for only four issues.
- An incremental approach that largely preserves the existing system but allows for smaller changes over time appears to be the most realistic way to modernize officer management.

The three tenure issues are the following:

1. more-liberal policies for stagnant officers (officers who detract from or no longer contribute effectively to service objectives)
2. removal of age limits for accessions
3. contracted service for officers.

The three other issues are the following:

1. providing for a continuum of service among active and reserve personnel
2. the use of warrant officers (WOs) and limited duty officers (LDOs) in all the services
3. the selective use of officers without rank.

We began by qualitatively assessing the existing professional and academic literature on the 11 areas of interest. We then used that review to develop a baseline understanding of the limitations on officer management flexibilities and to create a framework for assessing statutory, policy, cultural, and fiscal constraints. We also conducted additional quantitative analysis when the literature or stakeholder suggestions raised research questions that allowed for modeling with readily accessible Defense Manpower Data Center data.

We then engaged in stakeholder discussion with current policymakers—including principals and other representatives from OSD, officials in the service secretariats, and military staffs responsible for officer management policy—to confirm or disconfirm our findings. As a final step in obtaining service perspectives, these same representatives reviewed a draft of our report for accuracy. We also consulted with RAND officer management experts to enhance our understanding of constraints on officer management flexibilities.

What We Found

Constraints

Table 1 shows that cultural constraints (the highlighted column) are the most common obstacles to potential officer management modernization, affecting all 11 issues. Statutory and policy constraints were unlikely to affect potential promotion issues, and fiscal constraints did not affect these issues at all. Statutory, policy, and fiscal constraints were much more likely to affect tenure and other issues.

Culture limits adoption of change for all 11 issues, mainly because OSD and the military services are all wary of changes for which outcomes are uncertain. Historically, the military has pursued an incremental

approach to officer management reform to ensure that the officer management structure continues to be predictable and stable. An approach that scales reforms to small populations (at least initially) and avoids implementing more than one reform at a time could eventually add considerable flexibility to the system. At the same time, an incremental approach that largely preserves the existing system but allows for the accumulation of smaller changes and insights over time appears to be the most realistic way to eventually establish a new 21st-century system that breaks with many of the principles of officer management as they exist today.

Service Perspectives

Each of the 11 issues would require specific statutory or policy changes and buy-in from the services. We sorted the 11 issues into five categories—which are not necessarily mutually exclusive—of service perspectives on change and buy-in. Three categories addressed ways that the services reacted favorably to an issue:

1. routinely using available statutory or policy provisions
2. being open to experimenting with available provisions
3. seeking new statutory provisions.

Two categories identified ways that the services reacted negatively to an issue:

1. little or no interest in available provisions
2. little or no interest in seeking new provisions.

Table 2 indicates the services' attitudes toward each of the 11 issues. The services were open to experimentation with available flexibilities for the first three promotion-related issues. Although they did not identify any specific implementation plans, staff from several of the services mentioned interest in using alternative promotion authority—with its expanded promotion zone—to match promotion considerations to the development and utilization patterns suitable for highly technical fields. The Navy already differentiates promotion rates and frequencies for its line officers to a greater extent than the other services. The Air Force and the Marine Corps are the least differentiated, but the Air Force recently announced a split in line officer competitive categories, which could possibly lead to more differentiation of promotion outcomes. All the services are contemplating opt-out policies; the Army recently published a governing regulation in that regard.

TABLE 1
Constraints on Potential Officer Management Modernization Attempts

Category	Issues	Constraints			
		Statutory	Policy	Cultural	Fiscal
Promotions	1. promotion alternatives for technical-track competitive categories	X		X	
	2. possibilities for different competitive categories to have different promotion rates and frequency			X	
	3. ensuring that officers who opt out of promotion consideration are not adversely affected at future statutory boards			X	
	4. reserve commissions for active-duty officers	X	X	X	
	5. promotion board guidance on deployability	X	X	X	
Tenure	6. more-liberal provisions for stagnant officers	X	X	X	
	7. removal of age limits for accessions			X	X
	8. contracted service for officers	X	X	X	X
Other	9. providing for a continuum of service among active and reserve personnel	X	X	X	X
	10. the use of WOs and LDOs in all services	X (LDOs)		X	X
	11. the selective use of officers without rank	X	X	X	
Total Issues Affected by Constraints		8	6	11	4

Among tenure-related issues, only the need for better tools to remove stagnant officers stood out as requiring new provisions. Although force-shaping authorities are not ideal for this purpose, the services, particularly the Navy, must use them to involuntarily retire officers who detract from or no longer contribute effectively to service objectives. Although our analysis suggests that stagnant-officer issues are very limited, more-flexible authorities would be useful.

Among “other” issues, despite much discussion and effort devoted to removing impediments to movement between active and reserve components, such impediments remain significant enough to discourage full utilization of available human capital to meet defense needs. Statutory changes, such as duty-status reform, have removed some impediments, and the services have developed workarounds for others, but much more could be done to enhance permeability between the components.

Proposed Ways Forward

The services could be encouraged to experiment with new flexibilities (subject to the discretion of the service

secretary) for the four issues in which the services already are open to experimentation with available provisions—promotion alternatives for technical-track competitive categories, possibilities for different competitive categories to have different promotion rates and frequency, ensuring that officers who opt out of promotion consideration are not adversely affected at future statutory boards, and providing for a continuum of service among active and reserve personnel. For the two issues for which the services are seeking new provisions—more-liberal provisions for stagnant officers and additional enhancements for active/reserve permeability—OSD and the services could begin or continue dialogue on legislative proposals to provide new flexibilities.

In all cases, limits should be put on the scale and timing of reforms to ensure that the desired outcomes, measures of effectiveness, and results can be clearly identified, documented, and leveraged. In general, an incremental approach that scales reforms to small populations (at least initially) and avoids implementation of more than one reform at a time could eventually add considerable flexibility to the officer career management structure.

TABLE 2

Constraints on Potential Officer Management Modernization Attempts

Category	Issues	Statutory and Policy Provisions				
		Available Provisions Sufficient and Routinely Used	Services Open to Experimentation with Available Provisions	Services Seek New Provisions	Little or No Interest in Available Provisions	Little or No Interest in New Provisions
Promotions	1. promotion alternatives for technical-track competitive categories		X			
	2. possibilities for different competitive categories to have different promotion rates and frequency	X	X			
	3. ensuring that officers who opt out of promotion consideration are not adversely affected at future statutory boards		X			
	4. reserve commissions for active-duty officers					X
	5. promotion board guidance on deployability	X				
Tenure	6. more-liberal provisions for stagnant officers			X		
	7. removal of age limits for accessions					X
	8. contracted service for officers					X
Other	9. providing for a continuum of service among active and reserve personnel		X	X		
	10. the use of WOs and LDOs in all services	X (Navy and Marine Corps)			X (Air Force—WOs)	X (Army—LDOs, Air Force—WOs and LDOs)
	11. the selective use of officers without rank					X

This brief describes research conducted in the RAND National Defense Research Institute and documented in *Officer Career Management: Additional Steps Toward Modernization*, by Albert A. Robbert, Caitlin Lee, William H. Waggy II, Katherine L. Kidder, Natasha Lander, and Agnes Gereben Schaefer, RR-4337-OSD, 2020 (available at www.rand.org/t/RR4337). To view this brief online, visit www.rand.org/t/RBA416-1. The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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