RESEARCH SUMMARY

Considering U.S. Air Force Culture When Modifying Career Development Pathways for Longer Assignments

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U.S. Air Force (USAF) assignments and career development timelines are closely linked, and extending assignment lengths will disrupt established career development practices.

APPROACH

The authors analyzed insights from subject-matter experts representing the perspectives of USAF offices involved in assignment processes and career development management. They also conducted a decomposition analysis of Department of the Air Force Instruction 36-2110, *Total Force Assignments*, to map the policy elements shaping USAF assignment and career development culture.

CONCLUSIONS

- Historical assignment patterns have fostered institutional and workforce expectations that frequent moves are necessary for career development and promotion.
- Modifying career development pathways to reflect extended assignment durations would disrupt established practices and personnel expectations for career advancement.
- USAF assignment policy includes four categories of assignment action: directing a permanent change of station move, directing a member to stay in place, offering consideration factors for assignment calculations, or any combination of these actions.
- USAF assignment policy produces four categories of outcomes: mission fulfillment, career development, member consideration, and cost savings.
- Existing variation across personnel interpretation and application of USAF assignment policy introduces challenges to implementing policy changes.
- Culture—including unwritten norms and values—plays a critical role in shaping both the implementation of assignment policy and the viability of modifying career development pathways.

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- Successfully modifying USAF assignment and career pathways would require integrating formal policy, local practices, and cultural expectations into a coherent, updated system responsive to emerging demands and long-term career development objectives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Balance clarity and flexibility in policy revisions. Assignment and career development policies should be clear yet adaptable in recognition of the need to balance mission fulfillment and individual service member preferences.
- Account for variation in implementation. Strategies for implementing policy changes should acknowledge the variation in interpretation and application across career fields, organizations, and individuals (e.g., senior leaders serving on promotion boards).
- Deliberately address cultural context. Successful reform will require deliberate consideration of the broader cultural environment, including how airmen and their leaders perceive career progression, assignment equity, and work–life balance.
- Take immediate actions to revise specific sections of Department of the Air Force Instruction 36-2110 to explicitly prioritize longer assignments as a career development tool, provide new guidance to promotion boards to reflect expectations for longer assignments, and develop senior leader communication templates that reframe extended assignments as strategic investments rather than career stagnation.
- Leverage change management tools to identify champions of the new approach and areas of resistance among stakeholders and in the workforce. To demonstrate success stories under new assignment processes, publish case studies of personnel who achieved career advancement through extended assignments, and establish formal feedback mechanisms to monitor implementation challenges and adjust strategies in real time.
- Establish baseline cultural metrics and conduct longitudinal analysis comparing career outcomes between traditional rotation-heavy careers and extended assignment pathways, providing empirical evidence to support or refine the cultural change initiative.

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