

Assessment and Selection for U.S. Air Force Special Warfare

Vol. 1, Defining Attributes and Designing Rater Training

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ISSUE

Air Force Special Warfare (AFSPECWAR) operators conduct some of the most physically and mentally challenging missions in the U.S. military. To improve assessment and selection (A&S) practices for some AFSPECWAR specialties, the Department of the Air Force (DAF) has sponsored several lines of effort since 2015 across the AFSPECWAR enterprise. This project aims to unify that work, which includes A&S programs that encompass the entire career progression of an operator, by developing a common set of nontechnical attributes for A&S, improving the accuracy of raters' evaluations of candidate behaviors, and identifying gaps in A&S practices.



APPROACH

The authors focus on the characteristics an individual needs to possess (i.e., nontechnical attributes) to ensure they will be able to acquire the technical knowledge and skills to perform known job tasks and adapt to the unknown demands of tomorrow's warfighting environment. The authors applied a mixed-methods approach. To define the nontechnical attributes needed to effectively perform the job, they leveraged prior research and held discussions with AFSPECWAR subject-matter experts (SMEs). To examine attribute relevance and evaluate options for weighting attributes, they conducted a job analysis survey. To improve rater accuracy for evaluating candidates on target attributes, the authors developed a bank of attribute-relevant behaviors (for rating scales) and video clips demonstrating a range of attributes and performance levels (for rater training). To identify critical gaps in A&S practices, they observed elements of A&S courses, conducted statistical analyses of existing A&S candidate data, and held discussions with key stakeholders.



CONCLUSIONS

This project identified eight job-relevant attributes for AFSPECWAR (see Table 1). These attributes are important to many organizations and relevant to the future fight.

Based on evaluations from 786 AFSPECWAR survey respondents, some attributes are weighted as more important; however, applying these weights to prior candidate data showed final selection decisions were unlikely to change.

TABLE 1
AFSPECWAR ATTRIBUTES

Label	Definition
Communication	Expresses thoughts and ideas to convey information and influence others
Drive	Initiates action and persists to accomplish tasks and goals to high standards
Integrity	Behaves in an honest, fair, and ethical manner
Teamwork	Works productively with others and adapts appropriately to different roles and situations
Physical Fitness	Develops and maintains physical capability to train and execute job duties
Problem Solving	Identifies and uses resources to generate, critically evaluate, and select course(s) of action
Stress Tolerance	Continues to perform under difficult, unpredictable, and ambiguous conditions
Trainability	Demonstrates capability to learn and execute core tasks and duties

Two approaches to improve rater accuracy are the development of behaviorally based rating scales and rater training, with the latter being most critical.

The authors initiated the development of a behaviorally based rating scale by conducting a systematic process with 20 SMEs, which resulted in a bank of over 200 attribute-relevant behaviors. These behaviors represent a first step toward standardizing different rating scale formats for different events.

With the assistance of Air Force Combat Camera, the authors directed scenarios over three days that resulted in approximately 250 possible video clips illustrating a range of attributes across performance levels to provide high-fidelity practice opportunities for rater training. This training emphasized opportunities for raters to receive feedback on observing, recording, classifying, and evaluating candidate behaviors.

Primary gaps in AFSPECWAR A&S practices center on how best to measure the attributes and whether these assessments and selection decisions predict meaningful training and job outcomes.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on this work, the authors offer six key lessons and possible next steps to improve AFSPECWAR practices in A&S; see Table 2.

TABLE 2
SUMMARY OF AFSPECWAR LESSONS LEARNED AND POSSIBLE NEXT STEPS

Overarching Questions	Lessons Learned	Possible Next Steps
What should we measure?	1. Attributes are foundational to a talent management system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify opportunities to integrate attributes into other talent management components, such as professional development practices and programs
	2. Attributes can be further differentiated by defining their facets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use the attributes and their facets to guide the design of assessments, rater training, and behaviorally based rating scales
How should we measure the attributes?	3. There are multiple approaches to measuring attributes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure each attribute is evaluated by at least two different assessments • Monitor the effectiveness of assessments and raters
How do we use the data to make a decision?	4. Systematic integration of A&S inputs is critical to reproducibility and transparency of selection decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design a transparent decisionmaking tool
Are we making good decisions?	5. A&S scores should predict future performance outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct a criterion-related validation study
Is this approach worth it?	6. A&S courses are resource-intensive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct a return-on-investment assessment



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