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TECHNICAL REPORT

Integrated Planning for the Air Force Senior Leader Workforce

Background and Methods

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Summary

As Chief of Staff of the Air Force in 1998, Gen Michael E. Ryan observed a mismatch between the qualifications of Air Force general officers (GOs) and some of the jobs they needed to fill. Finding too few candidates with backgrounds appropriate for filling senior warfighting positions and many GOs with backgrounds too specialized to be very useful at higher grades, he asked RAND Project AIR FORCE (PAF), a division of the RAND Corporation, to help improve the Air Force's GO development approach. Through an initial position-level analysis, PAF found that selectivity could be increased and utilization improved if GOs, including those who came from operational backgrounds, had broader experience. Based on these findings, the senior leadership of the Air Force chartered PAF and the Air Force General Officer Matters Office (AFGOMO) to undertake a more detailed study. As this study unfolded, PAF and its Air Force sponsors recognized that a significant part of the Air Force senior leadership need is supplied by members of the Senior Executive Service (SES). Accordingly, the study was expanded to include that segment of the senior leader force.¹

To execute this study, PAF and the Air Force

- Identified required competencies for each GO and SES position. (See pages 7–16.)
- Identified the ideal mix of competencies among annual cohorts promoted into the GO and SES ranks using a model of the flow of individuals through GO grades and career progression tiers within the SES. (See pages 17–26.)
- Constructed templates to guide the development of competitive middle-grade officers and civil servants based on the competency distributions within these entry cohorts. (See page 26.)
- Examined the boundary between GO and SES utilization to find new flexibilities in meeting senior leader needs. (See pages 27–32.)

¹ As an eventual consequence of this decision, the Air Force Senior Executive Matters Office (AFSEMO), which managed the SES workforce, merged with AFGOMO in 2002 to form the Air Force Senior Leader Management Office (AFSLMO).

- Employed the flow model and other, related analyses to help the Air Force improve the identification and GO/SES mix of the set of senior leader positions it intends to fill (referred to as the *objective force*). (See pages 33–39.)
- Constructed a decision support system (DSS) prototype to help the Air Force employ competency information in GO assignment actions. (See pages 41–45.)

As PAF worked through these steps, a framework for organizing competency requirements emerged. Most jobs were found to have a *primary occupational competency*: prior experience gained in a specific operational/functional area (e.g., fighter pilot) or a “bin” containing a number of such areas that is critical to success in the position. Many positions also required a *secondary occupational competency*: prior experience in a second operational/functional area or bin. Primary and secondary occupational competencies can be considered “provider-level” skills—that is, the individual is expected to be able to manage the provision of services generated in the function. Additionally, all jobs require multiple areas of *functional familiarity*, which is defined as the ability to be an informed consumer of services generated by other functions. Finally, all jobs require an array of *cross-functional competencies*: leadership skills, management skills, and other competencies that are common across positions in many operational/functional areas.

Methods employed in the study included

- Surveys of incumbents, initially using paper-and-pencil instruments, and later using Web-based or email-based electronic versions. (See pages 8–9.)
- Review and synthesis of survey results by PAF and relatively senior (lieutenant general or SES equivalent) panels of knowledgeable Air Force representatives. (See pages 9–10.)
- Linear programming modeling to optimize objective force configurations (see pages 38–39) and the flow of individuals through positions. (See pages 18–24.)
- Construction and application of rules to determine military or civilian essentiality of senior leader positions. (See pages 30–31.)
- Statistical regression analysis to quantify the relative needs for senior leaders within Air Force organizations. (See pages 35–38.)
- Systematic software development practices to construct a prototype DSS. (See pages 41–45.)

The study's major findings are as follows:

- Most positions require a secondary competency, giving rise to the need for *simultaneous* multifunctionality: the incumbent needs both primary and secondary competencies to enhance his/her success in a given position. (See page 17.)
- Within the set of jobs sharing a common primary occupational competency, grade requirements often do not form a neat career progression pyramid: with expected promotion patterns, individuals cannot progress from grade to grade (GO) or tier to tier (SES) within the same primary occupational competency. Accordingly, individuals must shift among primary occupational pyramids as they rise through the grades or tiers, giving rise to the need for *serial* multifunctionality. (See pages 17–19.)
- Recent cohorts of individuals selected for promotion to brigadier general approximately matched the ideal distribution of primary occupational competencies but exhibited the required multifunctionality to only a very limited degree. To provide the needed competencies in the future, deliberate efforts must be made to broaden competitive middle-grade officers. (See pages 25–26.)
- While most positions have characteristics that make them suitable only for GO incumbents in some cases and SES incumbents in others, a sizable minority of positions can be filled “flexibly,” in other words, by either GO or SES incumbents. (See pages 30–31.)
- Using these flexibilities in the GO/SES boundary, career progression can be enhanced in both the GO and SES segments of the senior leader force. (See pages 31–32.)
- A DSS can help to more systematically manage the assignments of GOs. (See pages 44–45.)