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TECHNICAL
R E P O R T

Options for Filling Vacant Officer Positions

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Prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense

Approved for public release; distribution unlimited



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The research described in this report was prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD). The research was conducted in the RAND National Defense Research Institute, a federally funded research and development center sponsored by the OSD, the Joint Staff, the Unified Combatant Commands, the Department of the Navy, the Marine Corps, the defense agencies, and the defense Intelligence Community under Contract W74V8H-06-C-0002.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Options for filling vacant officer positions / Roland J. Yardley ... [et al.].

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8330-5058-8 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. United States—Armed Forces—Officers—Supply and demand. I. Yardley, Roland J.

UB413.O65 2010

355.6'1—dc22

2010050309

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Published 2010 by the RAND Corporation

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Summary

Background and Purpose

The military services and combatant commands (COCOMs) have officer vacancies on their staffs. That is, funded officer manpower authorizations (or billets) are unfilled. Officer vacancies result when an officer with the requisite qualifications is not available to serve in a billet that requires such an officer. When this occurs, organizational performance and mission readiness can suffer.

The services and the COCOMs have reported vacancies in funded officer billets. This has prompted DoD to become more interested in how best to use military manpower to meet mission demands. However, efforts to rectify the issue are complicated by the services' different approaches to meeting these demands. The services use different categories of military manpower to meet DoD mission needs, including the categories of commissioned officer, warrant officer (WO), limited-duty officer (LDO), and enlisted. Service approaches even to what appear to be the same duties can vary, as, for example, when the Air Force uses commissioned officers to pilot unmanned aviation systems while the Army uses enlisted personnel.

In recent decades, three broad trends have reshaped the U.S. military and the work it performs. First, the number of active-duty personnel has diminished to 1.4 million, nearly its lowest number in the post–World War II era. Second, the qualifications of military personnel continue to improve, with the current force being the most qualified in U.S. military history. Third, the nature of military work continues to evolve and has become increasingly technical.

To better understand how to match its changing workforce with its evolving needs, DoD asked RAND to assess possible alternative mixes of military manpower that can (1) meet manpower needs for specific billets without degrading performance and (2) minimize and possibly reduce the costs of manpower. This effort investigates the perception and the reality of the relationships among knowledge and skill requirements, prerequisites (e.g., education, experience), and the category of military manpower required to perform specific jobs.

RAND researchers examined opportunities to enhance or maintain personnel fill rates through alternative mixes of military manpower. One alternative mix of manpower is to increase the use of enlisted personnel, WOs, or LDOs (or civilians) in positions currently designated for officers. Our research included an analysis of how the enlisted force has evolved, a review of current manpower policy, development of a proposed framework for considering the conversion of positions held by officers to those held by others, and application of these criteria to some specific positions to provide an example of the process.

The research considers opportunities to fill funded but vacant billets with alternative manpower sources. It examines, for selected specialties, what work is currently done by officers

that could be done by other categories of personnel (enlisted, WO, LDO, civilian). This work does not constitute an exhaustive list of issues or positions that the military should consider for conversion. Rather, it is an illustrative analysis of how the military may wish to approach this issue on a billet-by-billet basis.

The Evolving Enlisted Force

Though it has shrunk in recent decades, the enlisted corps has increased considerably in terms of education and experience. For example, about half of the personnel in the highest enlisted ranks now have at least an associate's degree; two decades ago, less than one in four did. Educational attainment for many senior enlisted personnel is comparable to that of WOs. In 1977, the average number of years of experience of the enlisted force was just over six years, but that experience level has risen since the inception of the all-volunteer force. The average number of years of experience of the enlisted corps is now about eight years, and it is higher still in the Air Force and the Navy. The work of enlisted and other military personnel has also changed substantially over time. Technical and craftsmen work now constitutes most military work; general military and service and supply work, traditionally the two biggest categories of military work, now constitute less than one-third of all military work. Altogether, a smaller, more educated, more experienced, more qualified, and more capable enlisted force is carrying out increasingly complex and sophisticated work for the military. This has fundamentally altered both the expectations and the capabilities of a now highly professional enlisted corps. WOs and LDOs, who come from the ranks of enlisted personnel, might offer opportunities to fill positions now held by unrestricted line officers. These very capable and very experienced personnel might therefore present an opportunity to fill vacant officer positions at, potentially, reduced manpower costs.

Review of Manpower Law and Policy

There are four sources of guidance on managing DoD manpower: United States Code (USC), the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), and the services. USC, OSD, and CJCS provide broad, overarching guidance but say very little about allocating the type of military workforce to billets. For example, USC offers broad guidance on aggregate numbers of personnel allowed in the service (e.g., how many officers are authorized in the force, the ratio of senior enlisted personnel to the rest of the enlisted force) but provides little guidance related to whether a position is to be designated a military position or what criteria should be used to designate the position for officer or enlisted performance. CJCS offers some broad and some specific guidance on the qualifications of officers and enlisted personnel assigned to the Joint Staff but leaves to the services the designation of positional requirements for officers or enlisted personnel. DoD guidance does specify criteria for positions that should be designated for performance by military personnel, but the guidance does not indicate whether the billet should be performed by an officer or an enlisted.

In sum, existing USC, OSD, and CJCS policy provides broad, overarching manpower guidance and very little guidance directing the allocation of the several types of military workforce to billets. The designation of positional requirements (i.e., whether officer or enlisted) is

the domain of the services. The services therefore have flexibility to determine which positions should be filled by officers and which by enlisted personnel. The services offer much guidance on positional requirements but only limited guidance on what positions must be designated (1) as officer-only because of an officer-unique requirement or (2) as enlisted-only because of an enlisted-unique requirement. Examining alternatives to fill vacant officer positions by other manpower sources is not restricted by higher-level guidance.

If OSD takes no action and the status quo of officer vacancies remains, then ad hoc solutions will be used to address vacancies in officer manpower authorizations. This research presents an option for and a systematic approach to addressing potential solutions to manpower vacancies.

Officer Vacancies and Options to Fill Them

The project sponsor provided us with data on vacancies within the services and the COCOMs. Each service provided a listing of critical skill shortages along with inventory and requirement counts. The COCOMs also provided a list, by service, grade, number of manpower authorizations¹ and assigned personnel, and DoD occupation code, of critical manpower shortages.

To determine whether other personnel might fill officer vacancies, we considered whether it would be suitable to substitute other personnel (e.g., WOs, LDOs, enlisted personnel, civilians) or to change the role or responsibility of the billet to meet available manpower. The primary criteria we used to determine whether a position could be filled by a workforce type other than officer included whether the work was inherently military, whether it was graded for O-4s and below, and whether an officer was required to supervise other officers (i.e., for command and control or to mitigate risk). Secondary criteria for determining whether military personnel other than an officer could fill a billet included whether alternative labor sources have the requisite knowledge, skills, and abilities; whether they are used in similar jobs elsewhere; whether their use would be less costly; and whether they could fill demand.

To demonstrate how these criteria could be applied to possible positions for conversion, we selected, with the sponsor and considering current shortages and conversion possibilities, six occupations for further analysis. These were

1. unmanned aviation system (UAS) operators
2. Air Force communications and information officers
3. meteorological and oceanographic officers (weathermen)
4. Army telecommunications officers
5. Army information systems officers
6. Army signal officers.

Chapter Five provides the details of our evaluation of billets in these occupations for potential conversion, and Tables 5.1 and 5.2 summarize our application of all the criteria we used to these six occupations.

¹ A *manpower authorization* is a funded manpower requirement.

Recommendations

Our research indicates that DoD may have opportunities to better leverage the experience, education, and capability of the enlisted force, WOs, LDOs, and civilians in some billets currently designated for officers. To enable such substitution, DoD should promulgate guidance for designating positions for performance by enlisted personnel, WOs, LDOs, or officers. Therefore, for positions that are designated for military performance, DoD should revise Department of Defense Instruction 1100.22, *Guidance for Determining Workforce Mix*, to provide criteria and a process for the services to determine whether the military person is to be for an officer, enlisted, WO, or LDO. The research presented here provides some direction regarding—but not an exhaustive treatment of—issues to consider in developing any such guidance.