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REPORT

Improving Soldier and Unit Effectiveness with the Stryker Brigade Combat Team Warfighters' Forum

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Summary

Following Operation Desert Storm, the U.S. Army initiated a major force modernization effort designed to improve its ability to respond to a rapidly changing global strategic landscape. One of the most significant components of this effort was the development of Stryker Brigade Combat Teams (SBCTs) supported by an armored weapons platform that was lighter and more deployable than any the Army had at the time. A brigade coordination cell was established to assist with SBCT development. This cell later became the Stryker Brigade Combat Team Warfighters' Forum (SWfF).

SWfF was designed to facilitate a more collaborative, network-based training system. Specifically, it was designed to support the SBCT community of practice[1] by assisting in the development and dissemination of new lessons learned, leader development tools, and tactics, techniques, and procedures. The Army is currently developing and fielding additional warfighters' forums (WfFs). To support further decisions regarding the WfF concept, senior Army leaders asked RAND Arroyo Center to assess how and how well SWfF works. This report documents the results of that research.

Approach

Our primary purpose was to assess the association between (1) SWfF products and services and (2) soldier and leader proficiency. We designed an assessment that approached this objective from the following three vantage points.

Customer Use of and Satisfaction with SWfF Products and Services. To obtain a robust understanding of customers' views about SWfF, we conducted three usage/satisfaction substudies. In the first one, we surveyed SBCT leaders and staffs about how well a SWfF-maintained website met their needs. In the second substudy, we surveyed a broader pool of SBCT personnel to determine how many used SWfF support; specifically, we sampled the personnel from two SBCTs, analyzing data provided by more than 3,000 leaders and soldiers. In the third usage/satisfaction substudy, we analyzed the logs that SWfF leaders and staff kept on support they offered by telephone and email to determine how often and in what ways they directly supported organizations within and outside of the SBCT community of practice.

Measuring Gains in Individual Tactical Knowledge. To determine whether SWfF tools were associated with improvements in the tactical knowledge of soldiers and junior leaders, we

[1] For this report we define "community of practice" as all individuals either assigned to SBCTs or supporting them in some fashion. This community includes Stryker leaders, staffs and soldiers, Army personnel outside the SBCTs that support the SBCTs, and contractors that directly or indirectly support SBCTs.

designed a substudy in which personnel from two SBCT battalions completed a pre-training assessment and then participated in a tactical training event, called the "Hundredth House," a computer game reenactment of an actual ambush involving U.S. Army forces in Iraq. We contrasted post- and pre-assessment values to determine whether the training event improved tactical knowledge about similar possible ambush scenarios.

Measuring Gains in Unit-Level Tactical Knowledge. To assess whether SWfF tools were positively associated with unit performance, we worked with SWfF to develop a checklist-style handbook, the Iraq Common Events Approaches (ICEA) handbook, and then conducted a test of performance differences between units that used the handbook and those that did not. To create this handbook, we devised a method for rapidly (1) collecting and synthesizing the combat experiences of many soldiers who recently returned from an operational deployment and (2) converting these experiences into timely information that leaders could use during their preparations for upcoming deployments.

Overview of Findings

SWfF Was Used Widely and Viewed Favorably

Considered as a whole, the three usage/satisfaction substudies strongly demonstrate that SWfF was supporting the Army's training and preparation for war through the incorporation of lessons learned. The vast majority of SBCT leaders sampled were satisfied with SWfF's StrykerNet website and would recommend it to others. However, some of the digital resources in StrykerNet were viewed less often than others, indicating that they might benefit from a reassessment of their purpose, content, and/or format. In addition, a small number of respondents indicated that StrykerNet improvement was necessary; the most commonly suggested improvement was to include more prepackaged training material.

The usage survey results confirmed that SWfF was used by the SBCT community of practice. Approximately one-third of senior leaders and staff reported that they visited StrykerNet, and one-half of those visiting the site reported using it for training or individual development purposes. Less than 10 percent of those sampled attended a Stryker symposium or sought SWfF staff support. However, these lower rates probably do not reflect the full value of the symposiums or the SWfF staff. By design and for practical reasons, not all members of a unit attend a symposium or receive SWfF staff support. Instead, units have representatives attend or ask questions and then disseminate the lessons learned to the rest of the unit members.

The analysis of staff communication logs strongly suggests that customers were satisfied with the support they received directly from SWfF leaders and staff. SWfF personnel handled a large number of requests for assistance: approximately 80 customer communications per week (about 3,600 customer communications yearly). Repeat customers were commonplace, accounting for nearly 80 percent of the communications analyzed. The most common type of communication involved members of an SBCT seeking training-related information. The log analysis also suggests that SWfF staff reduced the burden on SBCT tactical units by addressing requests that would otherwise have been directed to them. Specifically, 36 percent of SWfF's communications involved requests from organizations outside of the SBCT community. It is very likely that if SWfF were not present, someone in I Corps or an SBCT would have needed to handle the request, losing valuable time from their deployment preparation or training.

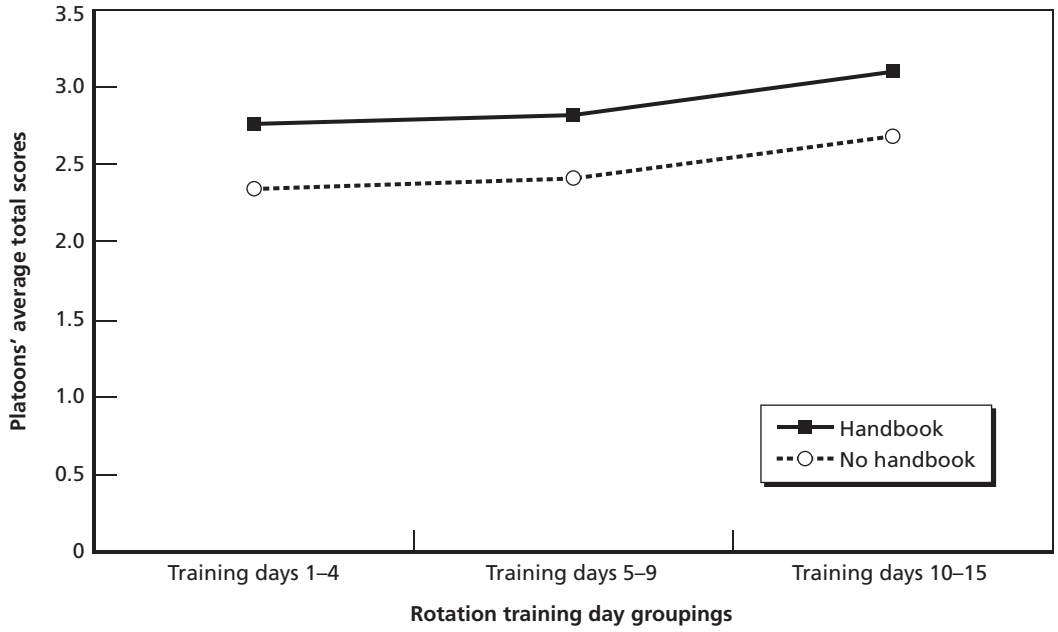
SWfF Tools Were Associated with Gains in Individual Tactical Knowledge

The Hundredth House training tool[2] improved the tactical knowledge of most participants in this substudy. We saw meaningful gains among three of the four groups analyzed: officers, noncommissioned officers with recent Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) experience, and other enlisted soldiers all scored significantly higher on measures of tactical training after completing the Hundredth House training. NCOs with Afghanistan or pre-2006 OIF experience showed little gain. We used results to create feedback reports for battalion commanders; lower scores mean that unit members were less likely to react to situations as commanders expected, information that commanders and their staffs can use to focus subsequent training. Most Army training tools lack accompanying assessments and reports such as this.[3]

The ICEA Handbook Produced for SWfF Led to Improved Unit Proficiency

Platoons in an SBCT that received the ICEA did significantly better on tactical tasks during combat training center rotations than platoons that did not receive the handbook. The findings were very robust: We found this effect at both the Joint Readiness Training Center and the National Training Center, regardless of how many training rotations the observer had previously seen, and across ten different tactical scenarios. In addition, as shown in Figure S.1, these

Figure S.1
Differences Attributable to the ICEA Handbook During a Training Rotation



RAND *TR919-S.1*

[2] The Hundredth House tool was developed by Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Battle Command Training Center, Leader Development Section, and is available through the Stryker Warfighters' Forum. The name derives from soldiers' description of the ambush site as looking like a hundred other houses they had been to.

[3] It is possible that some may exist, but we did not uncover any, and none were being used by SWfF during our research.

differences were observed during the entire training rotation.[4] On average all platoons—those that did and did not receive the ICEA—improved during the course of the rotation.[5] However, the platoons from SBCTs that had the ICEA did better than the other platoons throughout the entire rotation.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Army's training system must be able to respond more rapidly to changes in the strategic and tactical landscape. Our findings indicate that SWfF is a successful step in this direction, harnessing available computer-based technologies to rapidly collect, analyze, and synthesize lessons learned from theater and then disseminating them as training resources. These findings appear to be generalizable to other warfighters' forums, and thus we recommend that the Army continue to develop and refine the WfF concept. To this end, we offer several recommendations that could help other WfFs and Army knowledge management organizations:

1. **Ensure That WfFs Continue to Provide Dynamic Information to Their Communities.** We think a primary reason for SWfF's success was its focus on collecting and disseminating the most up-to-date information to the community of practice. Commanders, staffs, and subordinates want to obtain the most recent TTPs and/or information that pertain to where they will deploy next. WfFs need to continue to make this an important element of what they do.
2. **Monitor Views Within the Community of Practice About What WfFs Offer.** We found that leaders generally were satisfied with StrykerNet offerings, but some did indicate that improvements could be made. We believe WfFs will continue to be valuable, particularly if they track and address their customers' preferences. For example, tracking could reveal that some elements of a WfF are so rarely used that they should be discontinued or that there is more demand for some types of information than the website currently provides. Such tracking is not difficult or costly. We recommend it become a standard component of warfighters' forums.
3. **Incorporate Feedback Reports into Prepackaged Training Aids and Tools.** We are not recommending that assessments be used for assigning grades or for comparing or evaluating units. Rather, training tools should give commanders feedback to help them decide how to alter professional development courses or individual and/or collective training programs. The tool then supports units in two ways: it helps teach soldiers, and it is a diagnostic for command groups. Incorporating embedded assessments into training aids is a consideration not just for WfFs, but for other Army organizations as well. The Army would benefit from a continuous review of which Army training tools/aids could best be modified to include embedded assessments.
4. **Consider Broader Adoption of the Method Used to Produce the ICEA Handbook.** The ICEA was positively correlated with success at the combat training centers. The

[4] A 0–5 scale was used by observers. The unit received a 0 when it should have done the skill/task but did not, and a 5 when the performance was "superior."

[5] The means for training days 10–15 were statistically greater than those for training days 1–4 and 5–9 at $p < .05$. There was no statistical difference between the means for training days 1–4 and 5–9.

method used to create it offers several promising advantages for rapidly converting soldier knowledge into training and mission execution materials that can be employed by units preparing for deployments. The method's advantages include

- Leveraging current and relevant information: The information is derived from those who just returned from a deployment.
- Disseminating information rapidly: The time between information collection and publication of a document is three months or less.
- Placing a low burden on leaders and soldiers: It takes less than one hour of a combat returnee's time to provide the necessary information.
- Using empirical data: The technique moves away from anecdotal stories of a few and instead synthesizes the combat knowledge of hundreds of soldiers.
- Applying to other areas of interest: The technique could be readily adapted to collect and disseminate information about the performance of systems, equipment, or other areas of interest.

Given the positive outcomes demonstrated for this method, as well as its potential advantages, we believe it merits further consideration and broader application.