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Ensuring Language Capability in the Intelligence Community

What Factors Affect the Best Mix of Military,
Civilians, and Contractors?

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Executive Summary

To provide language capability in the intelligence community, RAND analysis suggests that the Chief Human Capital Office in the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) should continue to use language professionals from three personnel categories: military service members, government civilians, and contractors. The analysis indicates that each category of personnel provides unique advantages and belongs in the workforce mix. The analysis suggests that the intelligence community do the following:

- Build intelligence community language capability around permanent civilian positions.
- Continue to develop and train military personnel.
- Continue to use contractors to augment and extend the military and civilian workforce.

Several factors can inform the selection and management of language professionals. Existing U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) guidance directs that risk mitigation should take precedence over cost savings when necessary to maintain appropriate control of government operations and missions. If no such needs are present, then civilians are generally the preferred source of manpower. In addition, it is important to consider a time horizon sufficiently long enough to incorporate the career patterns of a variety of personnel. Finally, when assessing the costs and benefits of using personnel from different categories, it is useful to understand the factors that drive differences in productivity as well as labor costs. Productivity includes not just the amount of work performed but also quality, timeliness, and responsiveness, which are determined by knowledge, skills, and abilities; availability and flexibility; incentives; and other factors.

RAND used a case-study approach and conducted interviews at one critical agency that uses a large language workforce, the National Security Agency/Central Security Service. We also interviewed functional managers and language managers in DoD and ODNI, and we reviewed DoD workforce policy.

We supplemented the interviews with an exploratory, quantitative analysis of the relative cost and effectiveness of military versus government civilian language professionals from a government-wide perspective. The different analyses were consistent and complementary in reaching conclusions about key factors affecting the best mix of personnel to provide language capability, including the value of depth of knowledge and previous language experience. The exploratory analysis suggests that, from a government-wide perspective, civilians are a more cost-effective source of language capability than military personnel, even after accounting for the flow to the civil service of trained veterans with language capability. The key drivers of the higher cost of military personnel in the analysis are their high language-training costs, their relatively short careers, and the relatively low flow of trained veterans to the civil service, even

though a large fraction of newly recruited civilians have prior military service. While the results are exploratory, they suggest that policies that reduce language-training costs and increase the flow of veterans to the civil service might be fruitful to consider further. It is important to recognize that considerations not included in the analysis also need to be weighed, such as the need for military-specific knowledge and skills and the ability to deploy and use military personnel in dangerous situations. Furthermore, results could differ with an agency-specific perspective.

In assessing workforce mix, RAND also made some observations about how to improve the management of military and civilian language professionals for the benefit of the defense and intelligence communities, drawing especially from the interviews RAND conducted. While additional analysis is needed to assess the feasibility and effectiveness of new policies, RAND recommends that the intelligence community consider assessment of the following:

- a career path for military language professionals that deviates from the typical enlisted career
- recruiting military personnel who are already proficient or nearly proficient in a foreign language
- incorporation into workforce mix decisions the additional contributions of civilian language professionals who are former military personnel, and steps to encourage the hiring of these language-proficient veterans
- current constraints on the hiring of civilians.