

Invest Now or Pay Later: Overcoming the Navy's Information Professional Community's
Unwillingness to Formally Train its Officers

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Invest Now or Pay Later:
Overcoming the Navy's Information Professional Community's
Unwillingness to Formally Train its Officers

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The United States Navy's information professional (IP) community¹ claims to be a proponent of training, yet when pressed to provide a six to nine month course, much of the community's leadership and many of its members balk at the idea.² Instead the community supports training that occurs in two-week courses, as on-the-job training (OJT), and as off-duty education. Only by investing in its human capital now will the IP community ensure its members continued success in the fleet. To preserve credibility and to provide timely, relevant, and accurate information to the commander, the IP community needs to provide its members with formal training in communications and information systems at both the basic and intermediate levels.

Background

In July 2001 the information professional community was officially established and was initially manned by laterally transferring those officers from the fleet support community who possessed operational experience or education in the disciplines of communications, information

¹ The Information Professional (IP) Community is the United States Navy's dedicated corps of Communications/Information Systems Officers similar in nature to the U.S. Army's Signal Corps and the USMC's and USAF's Communications Officers.

² This is based upon the responses from numerous IP officers when the subject of training new accessions was broached by the author.

systems or space and electronic warfare (SEW). The purpose of the community is to provide the Navy with a corps of restricted line officers whose expertise in communications and information systems makes them the subject matter experts in command, control, communications and computers (C4). Specifically, the information professional mission statement defines the community as the following:

...the Navy's community of Information Warriors with expertise in information, command and control, and space systems. We own the Naval Network, the foundation of information dominance and successful execution of Naval, joint, allied and coalition operations. We plan, acquire, operate, maintain and secure the Naval Network and the systems that support Navy's operational and business processes to ensure they are reliable, available, survivable, and secure. We evaluate and integrate leading edge technologies, innovative concepts, and essential information elements to ensure a warfighting advantage. We will aggressively foster development and maturation of the skills needed to conduct network-centric operations, both afloat and ashore.³

The community currently consists of 530 restricted line officers, 229 limited duty officers, and 104 chief warrant officers with a billet base of 943 billets. Twenty-seven percent of those billets are rated as sea-duty

³ As drafted and ratified by the IP community at the first information professional summit and re-printed in an article written by LCDR Daniel Barrett, USN in CHIPS Magazine, Winter 2004 edition.

as either ship's company or afloat staff officers.⁴ At present, the community is accepting only lateral transfers of warfare qualified officers from the unrestricted line. This policy of laterally transferring only warfare qualified officers has greatly contributed to the rapid development of the IP community's credibility within the surface, air, and submarine warfare communities. It is this credibility with the warfighter that has become the underpinning of the community. Without this vital underpinning of trust and confidence from the commander, IP officers cannot be effective, regardless of how talented they may be. If credibility is the community's underpinning, then technical expertise is its foundation. This foundation is materialized in the form of core competencies.

Core Competencies

When Rear Admiral Nancy Brown, the IP community's senior-most officer, emphatically stated "that we are not pipes and tubes" at the 2005 IP Community Training Symposium, she alluded to the complex and varied nature of the duties of an IP officer.⁵ The IP community's base is composed of ten core competencies: communications,

⁴ Data provided by Naval Personnel Command (PERS 4420) via telephone interview with the author.

⁵ Stated during RADM Brown's opening remarks to the attendees of the symposium on October 19th, 2005.

information systems, staff C4I officer, space, information assurance, chief information officer, knowledge management, information operations, communications and information systems acquisitions, and combat systems officer.⁶ The warfighter depends on the information professional to be the subject matter expert for all ten core competencies. Due to the dizzying rate of technical development in the fields of communications and information systems, the days of a junior line officer being assigned as the "Commo" with no prior experience are over.

The Current Situation

The IP community's current training regimen is in a state of flux. At present there is a two week basic IP officer's course, which serves as an introduction to the community and provides an overview of the ten core competencies. The only other formal course available at this time is the Senior IP Officer's Course, which like the current basic course, tends to be non-technical in nature, with its emphases on professional development and recent innovations in C4 technology.

The next type of the IP training takes the form of documented on-the-job training (OJT). On-the-job training

⁶ Per the IP community's of practice webpage located on Navy Knowledge Online (NKO).

is accomplished through the use of the Navy's Personnel Qualification Standard (PQS) system. In this system, the individual must seek out a qualified subject matter expert on a specific task or theory and satisfactorily demonstrate the requisite knowledge on the given subject. For IP officers, the PQS consists of a basic, intermediate, and advanced qualification with mandated deadlines and milestones.⁷ These qualifications will eventually become a prerequisite to being selected for promotion.

The third type of IP officer training is continuing education. Continuing education in the IP community ranges from completing self-paced online courses and attending seminars to obtaining a technical master's degree. The most common post-graduate program being the completion of one of the several technical master's degrees offered at the Naval Postgraduate School in the disciplines of C4I, information systems management, or computer science.⁸

Some conclude that there are ample training opportunities for the IP officer already, and that further training and education is not required. It is argued that on-the job training supplemented with off-duty education gives IP officers the requisite knowledge to perform their

⁷ The details of the current IP qualification program can be found on NKO.

⁸ Obtained from the Naval Postgraduate School catalog.

job. However, the current training regimen is missing two critical elements: technical training on current naval C4 systems and education on how to employ those systems effectively in an operational environment. In addition, the system lacks a base-line level on knowledge for IP officers to build upon as they develop professionally. Although the PQS system attempts to standardize the level of knowledge, in practice the results vary greatly.

Models for Success

Fortunately for the IP community, a solution already exists. This solution can be found by examining how the other services are currently educating their communications/information systems officers. Specifically, the curriculum of the sister services' basic communications officer schools could be used a framework, thus saving valuable time and resources. The Army's Signal Officer Basic Course is located at Fort Gordon, the Air Force Basic Communication Officer Training Course is located at Maxwell AFB, and the Marine Corps' Basic Communications Officer School is located at MCB Quantico. The schools are four to six months long and cover a myriad of subjects, which include radio wave theory and propagation, microwave theory, terrestrial and celestial transmission systems,

information systems architecture, information assurance, and the Defense Messaging System. Although these courses are not intended to train officers to be technicians, all of them provide the students with a solid foundation in the discipline of command, control, communications and computers (C4).⁹ In addition to the basic schools, the other services offer several advanced and specialty schools. One such advanced school is the Expeditionary Warfare School (EWS) at MCB Quantico.

EWS, the Marine Corps School of Knowledge Management

The Expeditionary Warfare School is the Marine Corps' mid-level career school that prepares Marine Corps captains for the second half of their careers. Specifically, EWS provides them the training, tools, and resources to become successful staff officers and experts in the Marine Corp Planning Process (MCP). Although officers from all military occupational specialties (MOS) within the Marine Corps attend the school, EWS emphasizes in creating knowledge managers out of its students. The Marine Corps leadership demonstrates the importance of this process by awarding a secondary MOS of information management officer

⁹ Information obtained from a survey conducted of USMC, USA and USAF communications officers attending EWS.

(9985) to the EWS graduates.¹⁰ The Marine Corps information management officers are synonymous with Navy knowledge managers, an IP core competency. In addition to learning the art and science of the Marine Corps planning process and developing the skills of knowledge management, students receive advanced training specific to their MOS. Students who possess the MOS of communications/information systems officer attend the eight week C4 Planner's Course at the Marine Corps Communication School.

Some may argue that spending nine months at school without earning either a Masters Degree or JPME credit is an unwise investment in time, money, and resources, but when one considers that the skills learned at EWS serve graduates in virtually every billet held for the remainder of their career, it is obvious which side of the cost/benefit equation EWS will fall on.¹¹

A Proposal

As the current IP training scheme is falling short of the mission to prepare IP officers for billets represented by one of the ten core competencies, the following is proposed. First, that the Navy utilizes the basic

¹⁰ Per the Expeditionary Warfare School webpage.

¹¹ Based upon a conversation with CDR Jay Bottleson, USN, EWS faculty member.

communications schools operated by the sister services and augments them with a short IP Basic School which focuses on Navy specific C4 systems and issues unique to operating in the maritime environment. Fortunately one such course is currently conducted by the Center for Information Dominance. It is a two week course which trains officers to be an at-sea "Information and Communications Manager."¹² The combination of training at one of the basic schools followed by the short course will eliminate the need for the unwieldy and labor intensive IP qualification program. Second, all career IP officers should be sent to EWS prior to being assigned to a numbered fleet, strike group, or joint staff billet. This prerequisite will ensure that each IP officer possesses sufficient training to be successfully integrated into an operational staff as either the staff C4 officer or the knowledge manager. In addition, the Senior Officer's IP Course, based on feedback from the attendees, should be retained in its current format as it provides a valuable professional review/refresher as well as an exposure to the latest in C4 innovations.¹³

¹² Course number A-202-0041 version 2.

¹³ This is based upon the overwhelming positive feedback provided at this year's IP training symposium.

If the Navy and the IP leadership adopt this plan, each individual IP officer will serve in a training billet for approximately sixteen months, composed of four to nine month blocks. This nominal amount of time, when spread over the course of an entire career, will have little impact on meeting the community's manning requirements. In addition, if the IP leadership dedicates itself to this course of action, the perception that time spent away from the operating forces is detrimental to one's career will be mitigated.

Consequences and Conclusions

If the senior IP leadership and the community sponsor, NETWARCOM, do not realistically address the issues of training in the community now, the effects will be felt for years to follow. By not investing in its human capital, the IP community will begin to lose credibility in the fleet as it will become more and more difficult to fill billets with officers who have the knowledge and skills to be effective. At present, the IP community takes great effort in placing the right officer in the right billet, specifically in the milestone at sea billets in order to gain the respect and trust of commanders afloat.¹⁴ Closely

¹⁴ Milestone at sea billets are those specific IP billets which have been identified as key to professional development due to their technical scope and breadth of responsibility.

screening these officers is necessary because any individual failings are seen by the fleet as failure of the IP community as a whole. Rather than micro-screening officers for a particular billet, the entire community needs to be brought up to the same rigorous standards required by the warfighter. Only by bringing the entire IP community up to such standards will the community succeed in its mission to provide timely, relevant, and accurate information to the commander.

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