

## Managing Military Careers

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## Managing military careers

Military careers—particularly for officers—are strongly influenced by legislative parameters. The Defense Office Personnel Management Act (DOPMA) and other laws establish limits on the length of careers, the rates and timing of promotions, the proportion of senior officers, and some assignment patterns. These legislative parameters are intended to strike a balance between sometimes conflicting traits that are either required or desirable in personnel. As the mission of the military has shifted—from a one-dimensional focus on warfighting readiness to a multidimensional approach across a range of missions—and as technology and demographic factors have changed, the previous balance sought between characteristics may no longer be appropriate:

- *Youth and vigor vs. experience.* Greater technical sophistication of combat systems, decentralization of decision-making, and more management oversight resulting from outsourcing are tipping the balance to a greater need for experience. Youth and vigor, while still necessary in some jobs, should have a diminished role in determining career lengths.
- *Turnover vs. stability.* Assignment stability is vital when working with complex systems or complicated jobs. It also provides for a greater return on investments in training and allows individuals to make more significant contributions in their billet assignments. Rapid turnover is healthier in the junior ranks because it increases the population with a broader range of experiences and allows for greater competition for promotions.
- *Fixed vs. variable careers.* Under the old system, careers were more lockstep and assignment policy was based on the assumption that everyone has the potential to reach the highest ranks. Increased job complexity means a greater need to tailor careers to particular sets of assignments. As careers become more tailored, increased flexibility in the timing of promotion and retirement may be necessary to better manage careers relative to the services' manpower needs.

- *Generalist vs. specialists.* Developing competent generalists to effectively perform in a variety of jobs requires a significant commitment to education and a broad range of billet assignments. Conversely, the development of specialists may be efficient in certain circumstances but may also quickly stovepipe individuals' careers and allow for limited competition in future promotion decisions. Considerable investments are made by the services to provide highly technical training to their personnel. Current policies often result in the release of key personnel with valued expertise.
- *Out-of-service vs. in-service assignments.* Requirements for joint service and stipulations for specialized acquisition qualifications have placed additional career milestones on officers' careers. There is considerable debate within and across services about the value of serving in out-of-service billets versus the due-course career paths that have historically lead to successful military performance.

A major adjustment in the management of military careers may be appropriate at this time. A possible alternative to the current "up-or-out" personnel system would be an "up-and-stay" system. Under this system, there would be a two-tier progression. The junior force might be larger, but the senior force would be smaller and have longer careers. Selection into the career force might be congruent with some significant mid-career milestone, such as selection for O-5 or for command. The concept of command might have to be broadened because force structure cuts are severely limiting the opportunity for command. Promotion opportunities would sharply drop for officers entering the career force. However, once selected as a careerist, the officer would experience greater opportunities for multiple tours in key assignments and increased promotion rates. Furthermore, once officers are selected in the career force, they would be able to complete their entire career in the military (i.e., retirement age in the late 50s or early 60s instead of much earlier). Under current DOPMA, expected career length averages about 12.7 years across all services. Extending the maximum career length by 5 years is estimated to increase this average by only about 1 year. Studies show that the expected career length for the two-tier system is about 2.5 years

greater than the current DOPMA guidelines; this is despite the forced level of attrition at earlier levels. Therefore, simply increasing maximum career length by 5 years (without implementing other management tools) may not be sufficient if longer, more stable careers are desired.

Another element of this system would be to change the idea of promotion zones. Promotion zones could be expanded to allow for four or five looks before the promotion board without prejudice. Expanded promotion zones allow promotions to be linked to actual officer development in career paths rather than solely to their respective years of service. Coupled with longer careers is the need to also reexamine compensation issues as well. Pay tables and the retirement system would have to be changed to accommodate this new system. In addition, given changes in requirements that are likely to result from the various trends discussed above, DOPMA and other force management tools will need greater flexibility.

A novel approach to expanding career enhancing opportunities for both officers and enlisted may be to develop closer working partnerships with businesses. Developing better cross-walks between civilian and military occupations may result in better use of personnel during their shore assignments, provide enhanced educational and training opportunities not available otherwise, and improve the relationship between the military and the civilian population that they serve. If fixed career lengths were not a concern, business sabbaticals or work exchanges could be established to broaden one's experiences and background. These corporate ladders and linkages may potentially also be used as force management and shaping tools because such relationships could assist in mid- or late-career transitions out of military service. Conversely, business persons may also be valuable assets for serving in the military for selected specialities if provisions for lateral entry were devised. . . .