



**STRATEGY  
RESEARCH  
PROJECT**

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**THE ARMY TRANSITION PROGRAM:  
TIME FOR INSTITUTIONALIZATION OR TERMINATION?**

BY

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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

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by

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## ABSTRACT

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This study examines the U. S. Army Transition Program. The thesis of the study is that the Army Transition Program is critical to meeting the needs of soldiers departing the Army voluntarily and involuntarily. Also, the program is critical to the Army in the way it effects the level of organizational commitment of soldiers remaining on active duty. The study briefly traces the program's policy development and implementation. Program performance and outcomes are analyzed to demonstrate that the program is meeting the needs of separating soldiers. Program resource costs are analyzed in the context of benefits derived for the Army and the Federal Government. The study concludes that the program has become part of the Army personnel life-cycle system, expected and valued by soldiers, and should continue as a permanent component of the Army's overall human resource strategy.

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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to examine the U. S. Army Transition Program. The program is commonly associated with the Army drawdown which began following Operation Desert Storm and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The program is at risk of being considered a temporary measure by uniformed and civilian policy makers. Program costs have already been questioned and will continue to be closely scrutinized in an era of diminishing resources. Long-term survival of the program will require research which demonstrates program effectiveness and a positive cost-benefit relationship.

The thesis of the study is that the Army Transition Program is critical to meeting the needs of soldiers departing the Army voluntarily and involuntarily. The program is also a critical factor in shaping the level of organizational commitment of soldiers remaining on active duty. Additionally, elements of the program impact on recruiting and retention. Finally, research studies conducted thus far indicate that the Government and society enjoy a monetary benefit from the program's existence.

The study briefly traces the program's policy development and implementation. Program performance and outcomes are analyzed to demonstrate that the program is meeting the needs of separating soldiers. Program resource costs are analyzed in the context of benefits derived for the Army and the Federal Government. The research provided is based on both qualitative and quantitative studies.

The research conducted thus far and this paper are limited by several factors. The program's young age, approximately five years, has not been a sufficient amount of time for volumes to be written on the subject. Little, if any, examination has been conducted by anyone outside the Department of Defense or consulting firms under contract to the

Department. Most of the research literature which exists has been conducted or requested by those close to the program.

Other challenges which have limited research of the program include the program's dynamic existence, the amount of time required, and the cost involved. During its approximate five year life span the program has grown significantly in size and character. The services provided have evolved, expanded, and been improved continuously over the life of the program. This situation makes immediate feedback on the present value of the program difficult to establish. Research takes time to arrange, to construct, and to conduct. This ensures that the body of existing literature and studies to be conducted in the future will provide analysis of the program benefits, or lack thereof, at some point in the past. The Army has conducted program examinations but does not do so on a continuous basis as the cost of this research would be borne by the program itself thereby detracting from its available resources.

## MAIN BODY

The Army considered implementing a transition program for separating and retiring soldiers during the mid 1980s. As envisioned by the Army staff the program would have established centers to assist soldiers in gaining civilian employment upon their departure from the Army. A request for proposal on a multimillion dollar contract was solicited from civilian outplacement firms. Although the program had the support and approval of the Army leadership the program was eliminated during a cost-cutting review. All that survived of the initiative was a single officer assisted by a small staff conducting an experimental program at Ft. Bragg, North Carolina.<sup>1</sup>

The Army leadership reconsidered implementation of a transition program in 1990. On this occasion the consideration of a transition program was prompted by the approval of a plan to reduce the size of the Army by almost one third. The downsizing plans were developed and approved in the spring of 1990. The drawdown was heralded by some as a component of a "peace dividend" to be enjoyed due to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Ironically, the drawdown component of the peace dividend was delayed by the advent of Operation Desert Shield and the subsequent Gulf War.

Leaders in the Army considered a transition program, and specifically employment assistance, an important element of the drawdown plan. Such a program would, in theory, ease the burden of those being required to separate involuntarily. The program, in conjunction with other incentives, also offered the possibility of enticing soldiers to separate voluntarily.

The Army was also directed to create a transition program by Congress and the President. Public Law 101-510, The National Defense Authorization Act of 1991 mandated the implementation of career counseling and a job assistance program.<sup>2</sup> Specific requirements of the legislation called for job assistance centers to be established, and the provision of assistance and counseling in the identification of opportunities for employment and training. Army voluntary separation programs such as the Voluntary Separation Incentive (VSI) and the Special Separation Bonus (SSB) were also directed. The VSI and SSB incentives had termination dates set for 1999. However, the law required that job assistance and other related services continue.<sup>3</sup>

The Secretary of the Army created the Army Career and Alumni Program (ACAP). Program management responsibilities were given to the Total Army Personnel Command (TAPC). An ACAP program was designed with two components. The first element would be a Transition Assistance Office (TAO). The TAO would be a government employee operated entity responsible for serving as the initial point of reception for transitioning soldiers. The TAO would coordinate all of the services located at Army posts which could assist separating soldiers and their family members.

Prior to its creation the functions of a TAO had been administered by several staff sections, agencies, and activities on a post. These included personnel offices, retirement services, outprocessing centers, Army Community Services, and others depending on the unique circumstances of individual installations.

The ACAP program's other component was similar to what had been considered back in the mid-1980s. The Army would contract for a civilian firm to establish Job

Assistance Centers (JACs). A contractor operated JAC would be located in a government provided facility on the post. The JAC would be staffed by outplacement specialists skilled in the process of career and job transitions. Each JAC would be equipped with facilities sufficient to conduct group seminars and individual counseling. Also, an extensive use of computer network automation would be utilized.

A Transition Services Manager was designated to supervise the TAO and monitor the functioning of the JAC site. The program was put into place as a pilot program with eight JAC sites in 1990. Following the conclusion of Operation Desert Storm and the commencement in earnest of the Army drawdown a significantly expanded contract was awarded to Research Consultants, Inc. (RCI) of Vienna, Virginia. This contract required RCI to establish, within three months, an additional 47 JAC sites around the world. Within the first year of the contract the JAC sites and mobile teams of outplacement specialists had worked with more than 120,000 clients. This gave the Army the distinction of conducting the largest outplacement program ever undertaken.<sup>4</sup> ACAP continued to grow in the number of JAC sites established, outplacement counselors under contract, and clients assisted as the drawdown accelerated. Figure 1 shows the numbers of soldiers transitioning since the inception of the pilot program.

| 1990 | 1991 | 1992 | 1993 | 1994 | 1995 |
|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| 132  | 105  | 181  | 114  | 110  | 110  |

Figure 1.  
Military separations (in thousands) during the period 1990-1995.<sup>5</sup>

During the first year of the program over 120,000 personnel utilized some or all of the services available. In 1992 registrations at JAC sites numbered 10,000 per month. At the end of 1993 over 250,000 personnel had participated in the program.<sup>6</sup> By 1994, over 325,000 personnel had utilized the service and visits to JAC sites were totaling 50,000 monthly.<sup>7</sup>

Job Assistance Centers are not employment offices attempting to match departing soldiers with specific positions in the private sector. The purpose of a JAC is to teach transitioning personnel employment related skills which will serve them not only at the time of separation from the Army but for the rest of their lives as well. Ms. Pauline Botelho, the ACAP program director at TAPC states, "Our objective is to teach the transitioner how to maximize the skills acquired during Army service and to translate these skills to optimize success in the job search."<sup>8</sup>

The services available at a JAC include a three day transition workshop, individual counseling, the identification of career and salary goals, and resume and cover letter preparation. Upon completion of, or during, this educational phase the transitioner obtains access to specific jobs and employers through the computer networks maintained by the contractor at each JAC site.

The networks available to users include the Army Employer and Alumni Network (AEAN). This network consists of over 17,082 civilian companies which have agreed to consider transitioning personnel for employment.<sup>9</sup> This network allows personnel to get into direct contact with the human resource personnel of these companies or organizations. The Defense Outplacement Referral System (DORS) is an automated

database where JAC clients place their resumes. Private sector personnel departments as well as civilian placement firms have access to this database for locating individuals with their organizations desired skills. Other features of the automation include a bulletin board which provides leads on specific jobs. Transitioners may also have their resumes and desires forwarded to Army recruiters who in-turn distribute them to potential employers in their geographical area.

The Secretary of the Army has expressed, "The ACAP is an enduring program that will continue well beyond the current drawdown."<sup>10</sup> Figure 2 shows the planned number of separating personnel through the year 2001.

| 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 |
|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| 109  | 105  | 98   | 100  | 100  | 95   |

Figure 2.  
Planned military separations (in thousands) during the period 1996-2001.<sup>11</sup>

The program costs for ACAP, while relatively small compared to many Army programs, are not insignificant. Figure 3 shows the 1994 actual costs and projected program costs for the period 1995 through the year 2000.

| 1994 | 1995 | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 |
|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| 34.2 | 32.7 | 37.6 | 34.8 | 30.8 | 30.1 | 28.7 |

Figure 3.  
Actual and projected ACAP dollar costs (in millions).<sup>12</sup>

The cost per client has increased since the program pilot in 1990. In 1993 Dr. Thomas M. Hale, the JAC program director of the contractor, Resource Consultants, Inc. placed the cost per client at \$130 during the first program year.<sup>13</sup> The most extensive evaluation of ACAP, conducted during 1994-1995 placed the program cost per client at \$160.<sup>14</sup> The cost per client figure currently cited by TAPC is \$300.<sup>15</sup> These per client costs compare very favorably with the costs of outplacement services available in the private sector. For \$300 ACAP provides group instruction, individual counseling, and near unlimited access to the extensive automation and network resources located at JAC sites. It is estimated that the cost for group workshops only in the private sector is \$500 per individual.<sup>16</sup>

A cost-benefit analysis of ACAP can be accomplished quantitatively and qualitatively. This study will now examine ACAP first in the direct monetary cost-benefit situation for the Army and the Federal Government. Next the study will examine the benefits obtained by ACAP participants. These two areas can be examined primarily through quantitative means. A qualitative analysis of the program will look at the benefits obtained by the Army, the individual program participants, as well as those remaining in the Army and not utilizing any aspect of ACAP.

A useful means of determining the dollar cost benefit to the Army is to monitor the Army's unemployment compensation costs provided to jobless soldiers who file for compensation upon their separation. In FY 1992 the unemployment compensation costs to the Army were \$265 million for an eligible population of 78,729. This equates to a per capita cost of \$3,365. Two years later, in FY 1994, the Army's contribution to

unemployment compensation decreased to \$171 million for an eligible population of 85,882. This produced a per capita cost of \$1,991. The decreased per capita cost produced a savings for the Army of \$1,374. By multiplying this saving times the number of eligible personnel forecasted for FYs 96 and 97 (79,830 and 76,909 respectively) and then subtracting the predicted ACAP program costs for the same years (\$37.6 and \$34.8 million respectively) a cost avoided figure is obtained. The cost avoided by the Army in FY 96 is \$72.1 million. In FY 97 the avoided cost figure is \$70.9.<sup>17</sup> Mr. Stephen McCarthy of TAPC claims, "Since 1992, (there has been) a \$94 million (35%) decrease in unemployment insurance costs paid by the Army. Unemployment insurance costs per transitioner have been reduced by over \$1,000."<sup>18</sup>

ACAP clients who transitioned during FY 93 were examined to discern what characteristics contributed to an increase or decrease in the utilization of unemployment compensation. Variables such as greater numbers of dependents and servicemembers who had a second job while still in the military utilized unemployment compensation at rates higher than the transition population as a whole. Retiring personnel and those owning their own home were less likely to draw compensation.

When specific elements of ACAP were considered as variables only two proved statistically significant. When surveyed, those who recalled receiving information on unemployment compensation during their transitions were, as a group, with other variables being equal, the largest users of unemployment compensation. All other variables being equal unemployment compensation was used progressively less as the individual received a higher number of services provided by the JAC.<sup>19</sup>

That those individuals receiving higher numbers of ACAP-JAC services were less likely to draw unemployment compensation was also corroborated by the employment rates for transitioners. There is existing research which shows that the employment rate for those receiving ACAPs group training, outplacement counseling, and utilization of the automation available was 89.6 percent. The rate for those who received group training only was 80.9 percent.<sup>20</sup>

The program costs avoided and the actual reduction in Army unemployment compensation costs are positive findings that seem to indicate that ACAP is generating a real cost-benefit to the Army. However, additional study is required in this area. The existing research falls short in the following areas. It does not take into account the national employment or economic situation for the period of the study. While research cites employment rates of 80.9 and 89.6 percent for ACAP participants no economist would portray unemployment rates of 19.1 or 10.4 percent in a positive light. Also lacking in the research is a control group which did not participate in any aspect of job or transition assistance. This makes it impossible to statistically measure the value added of program participation compared to those not utilizing the service.

An analysis of the cost-benefit for the Government was included in a study conducted by Human Resources Research Organization (HUMRO). HUMRO's research posits that the more JAC services received the greater the level of private sector compensation earned. This higher level of monetary compensation produces higher tax revenues for the Federal Government. The HUMRO survey determined that the average enlisted member in their sample had obtained 5.6 JAC services. The post transition

annual salary for this individual was \$16,306. Assuming a 15 percent tax rate the research concluded that were servicemembers to obtain all 12 services the greater tax revenue generated by their annual salaries would produce a net benefit to the Government of \$409.<sup>21</sup>

ACAP participants received personal monetary benefits from their utilization of ACAP-JAC services. Those who partook in greater percentages of the available services obtained employment providing significantly higher amounts of monetary compensation. For enlisted members in the grade of E6 and below there was a dramatic pay differential between those utilizing few and those utilizing all of the JAC provided services. The individuals in this group that took advantage of all available services realized post separation annual incomes \$7,300 higher than those members of the group which had two or fewer services. It was predicted that each JAC service taken produced an increase in annual earnings of \$419.<sup>22</sup> The differential in salary for all members of the sample group showed increased earnings of \$2,500 per year for those taking advantage of all available services. It is anticipated that these higher levels of income during the early years after an individual makes a transition will continue through the rest of that individual's working life.<sup>23</sup>

The program participants surveyed expressed additional satisfaction and benefits obtained beyond higher income levels. The majority of ex-servicemembers surveyed expressed a high degree of satisfaction with transition assistance and JAC services. Of the group that was satisfied with job search assistance almost 80 percent felt very well or

well prepared to enter the job market. Of the satisfied participants 67 percent reported a financial status equal to or greater than their financial status while on active duty.<sup>24</sup>

The three job search services rated most useful by participants were preparation of resumes, career planning, and job interview techniques. Rated least useful was DORS, the bulletin board, and state job banks.<sup>25</sup> These results are consistent with the findings of Richard Bolles who concludes that computer bank listings and employment agencies are among the least effective methods of job-hunting. Resume preparation was listed as the single most useful service provided by ACAP. This is in disagreement with Mr. Bolles studies which indicate that resumes are successful methods of obtaining employment for only eight out of every one hundred persons which employ the technique.<sup>26</sup>

Program participant satisfaction also greatly influenced whether an ex-servicemember would feel positive about recommending the military to others. Of those satisfied with ACAP 83 percent indicated an inclination to recommend the military. Of those dissatisfied with ACAP services only 39 percent expressed that they would endorse the military.<sup>27</sup> This data indicates that not only does high satisfaction with ACAP equate to a willingness to recommend the military, dissatisfaction with the transition experience causes 61 percent of that group not to recommend the military.<sup>28</sup> The high satisfaction rate and willingness to recommend the Army has application in the recruiting arena.

There is existing and recent research which indicates that the drawdown has had a significantly adverse impact on the level of organizational commitment felt by mid-career officers toward the Army. Two professors from the United States Military Academy (USMA) conducted a study to assess levels of commitment unique to Army officers as

the Army downsized. Commitment, for the purposes of this study, was defined as, “a belief in and acceptance of organizational goals and values, willingness to exert effort toward organizational goal accomplishment, and a strong desire to maintain organizational membership.”<sup>29</sup>

The study authors used two groups to obtain their data. The first group consisted of captains and majors assigned as instructors at USMA in the spring of 1990. The date is significant because this period precedes the Army’s announcement of its downsizing plan. This USMA group provided the baseline data for the officers commitment to the organization.

The second group studied provided data to measure officer commitment to the organization following announcement of the drawdown plan. This group was comprised of the entire U. S. Army Command and General Staff College (CGSC) class of 1992. The study authors examined all of the Army’s separation programs and incentives as well as ACAP. An examination of the literature pertaining to private sector downsizing was also conducted. The authors found that little research exists on the effects of downsizing on those who remain with an organization. The authors call these individuals survivors.<sup>30</sup>

The qualitative study led the examination toward three issues raised by officers. First, the perception of an “informal contract” between the Army and its officers. Secondly, the uncertainty generated during downsizing. The third area focused on whether officers perceived the Army was taking care of its members. It is interesting to note that the CGSC class is comprised of officers generally considered in the upper half

of their cohort. Given the drawdown numbers known at the time of the study one might assume that these officers had little reason to feel directly threatened by the drawdown.

The authors postulated five hypotheses after comparing the two groups studied. Overall, the authors concluded that “the organizational commitment of survivors will be lower than it was before downsizing.”<sup>31</sup> One additional hypothesis had direct connectivity with ACAP. The study found that, “The organizational commitment of survivors who perceive transition assistance as adequate will be higher than those who perceive it as inadequate.”<sup>32</sup> When the CGSC class was asked if the Army provides adequate transition assistance those in disagreement with the statement (261) were twice the number of those who felt that transition assistance was adequate (127). The numbers of “don’t know” (152) were also higher than those who believed transition assistance was adequate.<sup>33</sup>

The study also found that officers with a greater awareness of transition assistance tended to have a stronger bond with the Army. This suggests that additional publicity about transition assistance is valuable to the Army. Not only must those separating be aware of the services available but those remaining on active duty experience positive result as well. For Army policymakers this suggests a sustainment of ACAP, and conducting even greater efforts communicating the assistance available to survivors of the drawdown.

The case for the Army to sustain ACAP beyond the drawdown is strong. ACAP has measured well when examined in the context of most frequently used program evaluation criteria. Foremost among these criteria is a need for the program. As

presented earlier in this paper personnel transitions from the service will exceed 95,000 individuals for each of the next five years. After the turn of the century the annual outflow is still anticipated to exceed 70,000 servicemembers.

Another criteria for program evaluation is its cost effectiveness. At a cost of \$300 per departing soldier using the services available ACAP-JAC produces a \$200 benefit over private sector outplacement programs offering far fewer services. The cost to the Army might be held at this level, or possibly even reduced, through several methods. For example, in July of 1995 Secretary West designated TAPC a Reinvention Laboratory thereby significantly increasing the ability of ACAP program managers to develop and implement initiatives.<sup>34</sup> One result of this increased flexibility is the ability of the ACAP Contracting Representative to make JAC services available to agencies outside of the Army and the Department of Defense. JAC sites and services are already being utilized by the Navy, NASA, and the Forest Service. These organizations transfer funds from their accounts to the Army Contract Representative who in turn pays the contractor. This ACAP outsourcing technique produces economies of scale for the contractor and helps defray the cost of the Army program.

Additional cost savings might be possible by curtailing those ACAP-JAC services deemed least useful by the ACAP customer. Still another technique, likely to be proposed in the future, would be a copayment made by servicemembers. A small monthly deduction, similar to the Veterans Education Assistance Program, could help reduce the direct program costs to the Army while still making quality transition services available to military personnel and their family members at a reasonable cost.

The final program evaluation criteria is the value added which the program produces. As was discussed earlier the value to the user can be quantified financially. Each of the twelve JAC services utilized produced an increase in earnings of \$419. The higher annual earnings of ACAP participants in turn produced greater tax revenue for the Government.

The program's value added calculations go well beyond financial estimates. One of the value added indicators which offers the Army tremendous potential dividends is the correlation between ACAP and recruiting. Of servicemembers which utilized the transition program 83 percent indicated they would recommend a career in the military.<sup>35</sup> One can imagine the damage to recruiting were a similar percentage of soldiers leaving the Army advising young people against enlisting or pursuing careers in the military.

The Army recruiting command also recognizes the positive connection and is assisting in two ways. Hometown recruiters are circulating the resumes sent to them from the JAC sites and they are networking on behalf of the soldier about to transition from the Army. Recruiters are also emphasizing to prospective enlistees that the Army does take care of its own and will assist them in making a smooth transition at the expiration of their term of service. Some caution in this endeavor may be warranted. As the West Point study pointed out there already exists in the Army a feeling that the Army has broken its informal contract with its soldiers concerning job security and benefits. While the law requires the military to conduct transition assistance programs it does not stipulate a program as extensive as the one we enjoy today.

## CONCLUSION

The Army needs a constant influx of young, high quality, men and women to fill its vacancies. Most of these soldiers, however, are not needed beyond four years of service and of initial accessions very few remain to the thirty years of service mark. All of these individuals will be making a transition back to the civilian world at some point. It makes good sense for the Army and the Nation to treat their separation as seriously as it did their initial entry training. It's important for the Army to turn out winners able to compete for good jobs in the private sector against their peers which opted not to serve their country in the armed forces. We do not want the image of ex-soldiers to be one of homeless people or individuals capable of obtaining only the lowest forms of labor. We do everything we can to ensure that our soldiers are winners while they are on active duty. Why would we want anything less for them when we send them back, voluntarily or involuntarily, to the civilian sector?

Civilian employers recognize ex-soldiers as productive employees with valuable training, discipline, adaptability, and a willingness to succeed as part of a team. ACAP makes it easier for civilian employers to tap into the soon to be ex-soldier market. This relationship gives our soldiers a job search advantage and enhances the image of the Army in the corporate world.

The analysis is positive from so many different angles that the Army leadership should remain committed to providing transition assistance to its departing soldiers. The current system of utilizing contracted private sector outplacement services is a cost effective means of operating such a program. ACAP has been able to translate military

service and experience into enhanced opportunities for success in the civilian society. Both departing soldiers and those remaining on active duty have developed positive feelings of commitment toward the Army through utilization and awareness of the program.

Institutionalization of ACAP would possibly generate greater competition in contract bidding thereby holding the line, or possibly reducing, program costs. Formalization of the program into the Army's personnel life-cycle would generate greater awareness and utilization of the program through instruction provided in the Army school system. As program awareness occurs commanders at all levels are likely to feel a greater sense of obligation toward ensuring their departing soldiers utilize the program.

In an era of diminishing resources, both inside and out of the military, it is to the Army and the Nation's advantage to exploit the potential of the individuals in which it has so heavily invested already. With a constantly shrinking pool of young veterans in the civilian workforce it is imperative that those who have served are continuing to do so in respected and, at least reasonably, well compensated positions. The message for potential recruits would be clear - not only is serving in the armed forces a worthwhile endeavor, it is a stepping stone to success throughout an individual's entire life.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>4</sup>Harvey, Program Manager, 49.

<sup>5</sup> Jim Hoffman, Chief, Transition Operations, Army Career and Alumni Program. Interview by author, 7 February 1996, Alexandria, VA.

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<sup>15</sup> Jim Hoffman, Interview by author, 7 February 1996.

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- <sup>16</sup> Stephen F. McCarthy, 1.
- <sup>17</sup> Jim Hoffman, Interview by author, 7 February 1996.
- <sup>18</sup> Stephen F. McCarthy, 1.
- <sup>19</sup> Human Resources Research Organization. 53.
- <sup>20</sup> Hale and Jenkins, 73.
- <sup>21</sup> Human Resources Research Organization. iv.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid. 51.
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- <sup>24</sup> Human Resources Research Organization. 65.
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