



July 2010

ENTER THE ERA OF PERSISTENT COMPETITION FOR TALENT

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The era of persistent conflict is forcing the U.S. Army to become more nimble and adaptable, driving changes in equipment and doctrine. Yet the systems required to manage its most critical asset—people—continue to operate in a Cold War paradigm with Industrial Era processes. The Army must take action to implement modern and creative human resource management systems if it hopes to maintain a high-quality force capable of fighting the wars of the future. As we live in an era of persistent conflict, we are also entering an era of persistent competition for talent.

With a national population where only three out of ten young people meet enlistment standards, the Army must develop innovative ways to attract and retain talented individuals. Career expectations have shifted from that of a long-term commitment to a single employer by earlier generations who believed that “work is life,” to that of an alternate view of work held by younger generations which emphasizes the desire to “have a life.” These younger Americans seek balance and flexibility in their lives. They routinely enter and exit the workforce or move laterally to find job satisfaction, have time for family or education, or to enjoy more lifestyle choices. This is a noteworthy shift that the Army must take into consideration as it develops strategies to retain Generation X adults, who are entering, or are in the mid-level grades. The Millennial Generation, just entering the work force, is comprised of technically literate and team-oriented individuals who work well in groups. The challenge for the Army is to find ways to compete with a civilian marketplace that also covets these same demographics.

What these two demographics have in common is that instead of viewing work as a career ladder, they see it as a career lattice. They expect to change employers, jobs, and careers several times in their lives to achieve their goals. To remain competitive and man the future force, the Army must build programs that support a career lattice and provide Total Force volunteers the flexibility they seek. A continuum of service program would offer this.

A continuum of service concept has been discussed for more than a decade. In 2000, the Defense Science Board Report recommended that the Department of Defense (DoD) “move to a more seamless integration of active and reserve components with a single integrated personnel and logistics system.” In 2008, the Commission on the National

Guard and Reserves recommended that DoD implement steps to achieve a continuum of service to remain competitive in recruiting and retaining a top-quality 21st century force. The model has evolved and is now envisioned as a comprehensive personnel management strategy that allows “on- and off-ramps” on the career “highway” to broaden perspectives and support personal goals of all components of the Total Force – regular, guard, and reserve.

So as the largest military service with the biggest demand for human capital, why is the Army creeping along, only inching incrementally towards a continuum of service strategy? Like any other paradigm shift, significant institutional and cultural change must occur.

Many active duty leaders see the continuum of service concept as a way to “access the reserves” to support the active force but do not deem it “acceptable” for an active duty soldier to go into the reserves for a few years. Even within the reserve components, some individuals experience a stigma when they need to move from an active participation unit status to the Individual Ready Reserve, Inactive National Guard, or Standby Reserve. To attract and keep the best talent, Army leaders, promotion boards, and career managers must support a vision that allows military members – to take the path less traveled – to move between active and reserve duty, to take sabbaticals for educational or personal reasons, and return to military service without career-ending penalties.

Although continuum of service has been supported at the Secretary of Defense and reserve component chiefs level for at least 6 years, little progress has been made. Just as achieving “jointness” required the Goldwater-Nichols Act and the Skelton Panel advanced Joint Professional Military Education, continuum of service will probably require congressional action.

Finally, continuum of service for the Total Force means shedding the Cold War mentality and embracing creative human resource strategies, policies, and regulations. Several studies have proposed ways to correct these, and efforts are underway to examine legislative changes and benefit issues. Additionally, automated pay and personnel management systems must be brought into the 21st century.

To deal with the increasingly complex international, interagency, and civil-military environment, the Army must recognize the benefits gained from the culmination of education and experiences gained outside the Army in the private sector. Individuals who pursue a career lattice that translates into a more innovative and adaptive force must be encouraged, acknowledged, and rewarded.

DoD needs to develop a road map and work legislative issues to make continuum of service a reality. The Army must take action now to reform policies and personnel systems to create a first-class human resource strategy that supports the needs of its most valuable resource – people – and ensure America’s Army will be competitive in an era of persistent competition for talent.

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