

Strategy Research Project

Down and Out About Up or Out: A Viable Alternative

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Abstract

The Secretary of Defense's 'Force of the Future' initiative has yet to reform the up-or-out promotion system. This may be because senior leaders do not believe the case for change has merit or they may have difficulty visualizing an alternative. Valid concerns sufficient for driving change include a shift from an industrial to an information era, competition for talent, poor talent management, and a history of criticisms. Any alternative promotion system must account for the philosophies associated with the windows and ceilings that regulate officer flow through and out of the military. The three philosophies driving the current system are timelines, promotability, and generalization. However, relevant literature identifies the three philosophies that should be paramount: competencies, employability, and specialization. A viable alternative to the up-or-out promotion system uses competencies to determine promotion eligibility, focuses on employability to retain valuable members, and facilitates specialization. Implementing such a system will not be simple; however, the benefits will be worth the effort. If senior leaders become down and out about the up-or-out system, there is a viable alternative.

Down and Out About Up or Out: A Viable Alternative

It is inconceivable that a service member who has been screened many times during his service life is suddenly of no further value to his service simply because there are not enough promotions to go around.

—Defense Manpower Commission, 1992¹

Objections to the military's up-or-out promotion system are nothing new. As early as 1976, when the all-volunteer force was still in its infancy, the Defense Manpower Commission deemed up-or-out a wasteful practice.² Since military leaders correctly tout service members as their most valuable assets, it is no wonder that the system used to manage this critical asset is under such persistent scrutiny. Most people would agree that the personnel management system should be designed to attract, develop, and retain the most talented people. However, there is no such consensus on exactly how to design the system to do that. The up-or-out nature of the promotion system is at the heart of those debates.

Some of those debates involve congressional leaders. In and of itself, congressional concern about the personnel management system is nothing new. Fifteen years ago, Congressman Ike Skelton expressed concern about the outdated personnel system and said, "...the up-or-out promotion system may not make the most sense...."³ Current congressional leaders are echoing similar concerns. Senator John McCain, the Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) Chairman, asked, "Is the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act of 1980 still appropriate for the joint force of 2015 and beyond, or is it time to review this law?"⁴ However, now these congressional leaders are doing more than talking.

The SASC is holding hearings to explore defense reform efforts, to include those regarding personnel policies. Dr. David Chu testified at one of these hearings. He is

currently the President and CEO of the non-profit Institute for Defense Analyses and previously served for seven years as the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness. He lamented, “We’re grooming all our officers to be chief of staff. They are not all going to do that. But, many are looking for a career in middle management that they can perform for a long period of time.”⁵ These hearings are still ongoing, but Congress is not the only one focused on this issue.

Current military leaders and service-specific commissions are also sounding the alarm. The head of the Department of Defense’s (DoD’s) personnel and readiness office likened the personnel system to “a Polaroid in the age of digital cameras, once cutting edge, but now superseded.”⁶ In laying out “A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower,” the Secretary of the Navy said he will “remove the long-standing ‘up or out’ system, which fails to maximize our investment in our people.”⁷ The Army’s Talent Management Concept of Operations for Force 2025 and Beyond lists “eliminating up-or-out” as a potential solution that functional integrators may wish to consider in connection with applicable key tasks for transformation.⁸ The National Commission on the Structure of the Air Force noted, “The ‘up-or-out pyramid’ that arbitrarily eliminates highly qualified people while the Air Force still needs them and before they are ready to stop serving is a poor approach to talent management.”⁹ These comments all highlight a need for change.

The Secretary of Defense’s “Force of the Future” initiative seeks to address that need by reforming the personnel management system. When unveiling this initiative in a speech to students at his high school alma mater, Secretary Carter noted the DoD needs to keep pace with change in order to attract, inspire, and excite the next

generation of talent.¹⁰ He highlighted several different areas needing review and specifically said, “We also have to look at ways to promote people, but not on just when they joined but even more, based on their performance and talent.”¹¹ Promotion system reforms were central to the proposals that Carter’s staff initially provided to the Joint Chiefs.¹² However, they were not included in the first round of reforms resulting from this initiative. Why is that?

There are sure to be many contributing factors, but two in particular are perhaps the largest obstacles. First, some senior leaders probably do not believe the case for changing the promotion system has much merit. Second, some senior leaders may struggle with visualizing an alternative to the current promotion system. Without understanding the need for change or visualizing what an alternative might look like, senior leaders have not yet decided to reform the promotion system as part of the first round of the Force of the Future initiative. This project intends to answer both of those factors and demonstrate there are definitely valid reasons for changing the current up-or-out promotion system and a viable alternative certainly does exist.

This paper will provide senior leaders with useful information to consider as they participate in the ongoing Force of the Future deliberations. It will first present sufficient evidence to demonstrate that the case for change is not without merit and that leaders should not simply dismiss it out of hand. Next, this paper will explore aspects of two types of systems used by civilian organizations as part of their promotion process and discuss the pros and cons of each. It will then describe one viable alternative the military could use should it decide to reform the up-or-out promotion system. Finally, this paper will briefly cover the changes needed in order to implement this alternative.

In order to meet certain academic requirements, this paper will limit the scope of its review in a couple different ways.

First, this paper only focuses on the officer promotion system. While many of the factors discussed may also apply to enlisted promotions, their analysis and application would require additional study. Second, it is important to note that this paper is not arguing whether the up-or-out promotion system is capable of meeting the future personnel needs of the military. The overall personnel management system is extremely complex with far too many components to consider in one paper. The Force of the Future initiative is reviewing the entire system, to include assignment policies, compensation practices, lateral entry possibilities, and expanding on- and off-ramps for service (e.g. – sabbaticals and easier transfers between active duty and reserve components). It is entirely possible that changes in some of these other areas would produce the desired result without having to make any changes to the up-or-out promotion system. However, if senior leaders do change the promotion system, it will be because they believe the changes will address an identified problem.

Ironically, the DoD has not actually made a case that it even has a problem that needs to be addressed. The central premise of those advocating for reform of the up-or-out system is that it forces good people to leave. However, according to Mark Cancian, a retired Marine colonel working at the Center for Strategic & International Studies, "...the standard personnel metrics about intelligence and test scores...all look pretty good...retention looks pretty good...there's no evidence that the people who stayed in were any worse than the people who got out."¹³ Furthermore, retired Army Lieutenant General David Barno and his colleague Dr. Nora Bensahel claim, "The

military does not even attempt to measure the 'quality' – by any definition – of those that are leaving, or have already gone.”¹⁴ They continue, “Senior service leaders, personnel managers,...who are concerned that the best talent is leaving the force, have no choice but to rely on anecdotes to sniff out trends.”¹⁵ According to Tim Kane, one of the loudest advocates for personnel system reform, “The only reason the ‘bureaucratic concrete’ has outlasted reformers dating back to the Gates Commission in 1970 is by denying a problem...No data means no problem.”¹⁶ Of course, the lack of data does not necessarily mean the DoD does not have a problem. It just means the DoD has failed to examine whether a problem exists.

This failure partly stems from a lack of critical thought on the issue. The previous Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff claimed the military’s “...most important advancements will come through innovations in...personnel management...”¹⁷ However, such innovations will never be possible with an unflinching adherence to a forty-year-old system. “One senior defense official acknowledged the significant resistance from some pockets of the military: ‘...You’re changing something that’s been around for 75 years...and you don’t abandon things that seem to have worked for you in some way, unless you have a compelling case about the need for change.’”¹⁸ As Dan Grazier from the Project On Government Oversight puts it, “And why shouldn’t they believe the system is fine the way it is? It worked for them.” This is a type of “confirmation trap...a condition in which people tend to seek confirmatory information for what they think is true and either fail to search for, or discard, inconsistent and disconfirming evidence.”¹⁹ If senior leaders thought critically about the up-or-out

promotion system, they would find there actually are valid concerns that could provide an impetus for change.

The first valid concern is the changing environment. A 2014 article in the *Journal of Business Studies Quarterly* points out that 20th century workplace managers focused their efforts on labor and capital; whereas in today's economy, 50% of the domestic product of developed economies is now knowledge based.²⁰ This shift "led organizations to develop a highly integrated approach to talent management as a necessity to ensure productivity, profitability, and sustainable growth over time."²¹ It is not clear the military has this same awareness. According to David Segal, a University of Maryland sociology professor researching military manpower and demographics, "When [the DoD] went to the all-volunteer force in 1973, they just had very little idea of the kind of force they would need 40 years later. They thought they would be competing with McDonald's and Denny's for workers. That is not the case now. For these high-tech skills, they're competing with colleges and Google."²² The military's need for these high-tech skills is growing. For example, a destroyer-size ship in the 1970's had 300 sailors, ten percent of which required highly technical skills. A similarly tasked ship planned for 2020 will operate with 100 sailors, but up to three-quarters will now need those advanced skills.²³ Such a changing environment is raising the stakes in the search for talent.

This fierce competition for talent is the second valid concern. That same *Journal of Business Studies Quarterly* article suggests, "...there has become a shortage of talent in the workforce and that companies will have to actively wage war for talent in order to get the right people with the right skills into their organizations."²⁴ The military is

already fighting that war for talent with one hand tied behind its back. Basic entrance requirements immediately whittle down the available pool of talent; only 17% of the youth population is available and qualify to join without a waiver.²⁵ Although the services continue to meet their annual recruiting goals, the margins are narrowing. According to budget materials submitted to Congress in February, Army recruiters will face “significant challenges due to lower entry pools and a more competitive recruiting environment.”²⁶ There are also minor indicators that the military is losing top talent to outside competitors. “According to the Department of Defense, only a half of 1 percent of officers entering the military last year hailed from the top 20 U.S. colleges and universities – a percentage that is half that of just 20 years ago.”²⁷ This fierce competition for talent should make talent management principles paramount. However, that may not be the case.

The lack of adherence to sound talent management principles is the third valid concern. “The concept of talent management is grounded on developing an employee in order to find and reveal his or her potential.”²⁸ An individual’s true potential may lie in project management and not in senior leadership. However, the military routinely discards those it does not promote, despite their value to the organization. Big accounting firms also use an up-or-out system, but according to an article in *The Economist*, they “are starting to recognize that an overly aggressive ‘up or out’ approach is a risky strategy when skills and bright people are in short supply. ‘Not everyone will be a senior partner...but they can still be extremely valuable to the firm.’”²⁹ One of the large accounting firms mentioned in that article also highlighted the astronomical cost of turnover. According to the firm’s managing director of human resources, “...every

percentage-point drop in annual turnover rates equates to a saving of \$400M-500M.”³⁰ Were the military to revamp its up-or-out policy, it may discover equally significant savings in initial education and training dollars alone. As the Acting Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness said, “We should stop thinking about our people as a cost center, but rather as a profit center...They’re not an expense, they’re an investment.”³¹ Sound talent management principles require the development, not the divestiture, of organizational investments. This aspect has been central to complaints about the up-or-out promotion system.

The robust history of such criticisms is the fourth valid concern. How many smart, experienced people need to criticize the up-or-out system before the military even begins to consider that there might be an issue? One of the earliest critiques came from former Secretary of Defense Thomas Gates, Chairman of the Commission in 1970 that recommended the all-volunteer force, who warned that the up-or-out promotion system was in need of reform.³² It has been 46 years and nothing has changed, despite the fact that at least three out of the five previous defense secretaries also called for such reforms.³³ In the past 12 years, organizations like CNA, the RAND Corporation, the Center for a New American Security, and the Center for Strategic and International Studies have published no less than eight separate reports or studies on this problem. However, senior leaders do not even need to look outside the military for commentary on this issue. The previous 12 years have also seen no fewer than seven relevant research projects submitted by field grade officers attending one of the various prestigious schools for professional military education. These officers were the brightest minds in their services, handpicked to spend a year thinking critically about

issues of strategic importance. Senior leaders should at least consider what they had to say. Were they to do so and realize reforms were actually necessary, they should then review aspects of at least two types of systems used by civilian organizations as part of their promotion processes.

The first is the system used by the federal government for the promotion of its civil service employees. Richard Cozby describes this system in a strategy research project for his Defense Acquisition University Senior Service College Fellowship:

In the civilian system, promotions are generally accomplished as a result of an individual employee's ability and desire to compete for a vacant position at a higher level. If the employee successfully competes, then the promotion is granted and the employee is considered to be competent at that level unless he or she proves otherwise...The promotion decision is made by the hiring authority at the local organization, with fitness for the particular job at hand and relative merit to the available competition being the primary determinants of the hiring and promotion decision.³⁴

One aspect not mentioned in this description is that there is no "out" consequence for not moving "up." For the most part, employees may remain in their current position until retirement. Obviously, adopting this system would be a drastic change for the military.

However, this is not the first time someone has suggested it. Lieutenant Commander Ben Kohlmann, one of the founding members of the Chief of Naval Operations' Rapid Innovation Cell said, "In my ideal world, you have billets tied to ranks, and you interview for billets...If you get selected, you're spot-promoted."³⁵ Tim Kane believes, "The military should get rid of its strict seniority rules, making it possible for talented young officers to apply for challenging senior posts. There is nothing wrong, he says, with a colonel of 31 supervising a major who is 42."³⁶ In one of their reports, the RAND Corporation even suggested, "...officers could be allowed to choose when they

are considered for promotion within time-in-grade milestones and other constraints set by the services.”³⁷ As with any option, there are always pros and cons to consider.

There definitely are positive aspects of this type of a promotion system. It would help shift the promotion process away from a time-based, “box-checking” system towards more of a time-neutral, competency-based system. If the system would not force them to compete for promotion within set timelines, officers would have the time to gain the development they felt was necessary for the specific types of advancement they most desired. Additionally, the subsequent elimination of centralized promotion boards would lead to administrative workload and force structure reductions. Perhaps most significantly, this option is somewhat similar to a Force of the Future policy change Secretary Carter has already approved: increasing flexibility in matching troops to assignments by creating a high-tech personnel management system in a format similar to Monster.com.³⁸ However, not everything about this option is positive.

There are also negative aspects of this type of a promotion system. Removing all forcing functions used to keep officers moving would clog the system. Such a clog would significantly reduce promotion rates and decrease the experiential development opportunities needed to provide officers with desired competencies. The civilian hiring and promotion process can also be time-intensive. While the current military process negotiates differences in assignment report dates in terms of days or weeks, it is common for civilian vacancies to go unfilled for a matter of months. Finally, the lack of centralization would increase the perception that the promotion process would be susceptible to favoritism. Anecdotes abound regarding local civilian hiring authorities who selected someone they knew over a more qualified candidate. The veracity of

these tales is of less importance than the fact that they persist. Of course, the federal government's civil service promotion system is not the only option.

A second type of system used by civilian organizations in their promotion process is the forced ranking system. According to the Wall Street Journal, "The method, sometimes called 'rank and yank,' was pioneered by Jack Welch when he ran General Electric Co. from 1981 to 2001, and was rapidly adopted by other firms. Today, an estimated 60% of Fortune 500 firms still use some form of the ranking..."³⁹ An article in the SAM Advanced Management Journal describes this system:

Forced ranking is a differentiation process where managers are required to evaluate an employee's performance, based on predetermined categories, against other employees in the department or peer group. These employee performance rankings are then applied to a bell curve. Those that rank at the bottom of the curve, usually the bottom 10%, are either put on probation, coached to improve performance, or terminated. Those at the head of the curve, usually the top 20%, are generously rewarded for their performance.⁴⁰

While not a promotion system in and of itself, it is clear that this method must play a key role in the systems these companies use for promotion and retention decisions, similar to 'up-or-out'. Of course, this method is also subject to both praise and criticism.

There are definitely benefits to using this method. First, "Proponents of forced ranking say that it fosters meritocracy."⁴¹ Management defines core values, measures employees against those values, and ranks them according to their performance. Second, this method forces managers to be honest with employees and evaluate them based on performance.⁴² "Without forced ranking, managers are tempted to be too kind and not confront performance problems."⁴³ Finally, "...forced ranking leads the company to operationalize core corporate values because those values should be the

basis for the categories employees are evaluated against.”⁴⁴ However, this method is not without its drawbacks.

Forced ranking can also have a negative effect. “Critics...say that it demoralizes workers and fosters backstabbing and favoritism.”⁴⁵ A recent study by The Novations Group, Inc., “...found that almost 44% of respondents felt morale was negatively affected...because individuals are constantly concerned about their place in the team.”⁴⁶ Additionally, “...because the system ranks individuals against each other, forced ranking creates a deterrent to teamwork.”⁴⁷ According to a 2007 study published in the journal titled *Organizational Behavior and Human Decisional Processes*, “...employees’ concern for task performance is trumped when rank performance (concern for being passed by a peer in ranking) is at risk.”⁴⁸ Because of this, the percentage of all companies using this method is actually decreasing, down to only 14% in 2011.⁴⁹ They are tired of the time-consuming paperwork and frustration and they do not believe the time, money, and effort spent on this method actually improved employee performance.⁵⁰ With this context, the question becomes, “How applicable or useful would this method be in the military?”

In reality, the military already conducts forced rankings, to some degree. Whether it is the forced distribution included in Army officer evaluation reports, or the prevalence of stratifications in the narratives of Air Force officer performance reports, military leaders routinely compare the performance of their officers. Furthermore, promotion boards annually compare the performance of officer peer groups, ranking them from “1 to n.” The difference is that neither of these two examples involves specifically identifying officers in the “bottom” percentages. There are rare occasions

when the military will conduct a forced ranking for the sole purpose of identifying officers at the bottom; one example would be a board held to conduct a reduction in force.

However, the military does not combine the processes of identifying both the top and bottom percentages into a single event. Of course, the forced ranking method and the civil service promotion system are only two of the many possible options that leadership should consider.

However, the intent of this project is not to analyze all possible options. There are far too many alternatives to cover in one paper. Nor is the intent to suggest one particular option is the “best” choice. Doing so would require a set of criteria for use in evaluating the alternatives. Only the DoD can develop such criteria and it must do so in concert with the other aspects of the personnel management system in order to achieve the desired effect(s). The Office of the Secretary of Defense has a team of very smart people currently examining this issue to do just that. The goal of this paper, rather, is to provide senior leaders with a single, viable alternative to the up-or-out promotion system that they can consider as part of any discussions to reform the officer personnel management system.

As a complementary piece of the overall personnel management system, the basic design of any promotion system must account for two fundamental concepts: windows and ceilings. The term “windows” describes the bounded timeframe in which an officer is eligible for promotion to the next level. The term “ceilings” describes the various restrictions that serve as barriers to continued service in the military, including those regarding age and time in service. Windows and ceilings are two valves that are essential to regulating the flow of officers through and out of the system. Determining

their proper placement within a career timeline involves carefully considering the relationship between factors such as tour lengths, the number of tours required at each level, and overall career length. More specifically, military personnel strategists should be cognizant of the overarching philosophies that drive tour lengths, the number of tours, and career length, and then place the windows and ceilings at the requisite career points in order to regulate the flow of officers in a manner that achieves the goals of those philosophies. The fundamental question then becomes, “What are these philosophies?”

The three philosophies driving the current system are timelines, promotability, and generalization. Current law and policy have prescribed very rigid windows for promotion. Officers’ dates of entry into the military are what set the timelines associated with these windows. Congress and the DoD put ceilings in place based on these timelines and an officer’s promotability. If the military does not promote an officer within the prescribed window, that officer hits a ceiling and the military forces him or her to leave the service. These timeline and promotability concepts are what drive generalization. When officers have the same windows and ceilings, they “...often hew to a very narrow career path to ensure they complete all tasks and assignments deemed desirable by a promotion board.”⁵¹ Any officer stepping off this path to seek specialization risks not being promoted, as there is very little, if any, time available to do anything different and still complete the other tasks valued for promotion prior to his or her window. These three philosophies have been the focus of most of the available literature on officer personnel management and the up-or-out promotion system, in particular. A review of this literature reveals a recurring theme: the three philosophies

that should drive such a system are competencies, employability, and specialization.

These three philosophies should form the basis for designing a viable alternative to the up-or-out promotion system

The first step in designing a viable alternative to the up-or-out promotion system is shifting the philosophical focus of promotion windows from timelines to competencies. Competencies are widely defined as sets of knowledge, skills, and abilities. The Center for Strategic and International Studies suggests that determining the windows for promotion eligibility based on competencies will relax time constraints and "...allow for more varied experiences, resulting in a more robust and flexible officer corps."⁵² According to RAND, "The services and service communities would determine the experiences that would lead to promotion eligibility; presumably, those criteria would reflect current career guidelines."⁵³ Similar to the civil service promotion system, this approach would ensure the military only considers officers for promotion after they meet the basic qualifications of the next level. Such a system would also ensure determinations regarding tour lengths and the number of tours an officer should have at each level would center on the officer's deliberate development and not on arbitrary timelines. Eliminating this timeline focus also affects the application of ceilings in a revised promotion system.

Shifting the philosophical focus of ceilings from promotability to employability is the second step in designing a viable alternative to the up-or-out promotion system. "Supporters argue that up-or-out weeds out antiquated or substandard officers, while others counter that it wastes the accumulated expertise of senior officers and reduces the overall experience level of the officer corps."⁵⁴ While up-or-out does weed out

nonperforming officers, it also applies to fully qualified officers demonstrating satisfactory performance who the military is unable to promote.⁵⁵ Adopting the system advocated by RAND, one that emphasizes "...employability rather than promotability as the criterion for continued service," would address both concerns.⁵⁶ The military could accomplish this by modifying the promotion board process to include some of the concepts of the forced ranking system. Instead of merely identifying those selected for promotion, services would use the scoring process to place officers into three categories: promote, retain, or separate.⁵⁷ Such a system would ensure the military retains valuable officers rather than discards them when it fails to promote them. The concept of employability also relates to specialization.

Slightly decreasing the focus on generalization by facilitating an increase in specialization is the final step in designing a viable alternative to the up-or-out promotion system. The experts at the Center for a New American Security believe that "trying to make every officer a jack-of-all-trades means that every officer will be a master of none."⁵⁸ They propose enabling more specialization by developing "...an appropriate balanced distribution of talents across required knowledge areas within segments of the services' officers through more differentiated career paths."⁵⁹ Modest levels of differentiation will already result from the increased time available for development that is inherent in a competency-based promotion system. However, true specialization will require "...rethinking the balance between the need for specialists and generalists at different ranks and the specific responsibilities and requirements of generals, field-grade officers, and company-grade officers."⁶⁰ Retired Army Lieutenant General David Barno and his colleague Dr. Nora Bensahel recommend establishing an

enterprise career track that allows officers to develop an unparalleled depth of experience through their careers and have viable promotion paths to the most senior positions in their functional area.⁶¹ Shifting the philosophical focus of the system to competencies, employability, and specialization will create a viable alternative to the up-or-out promotion system. However, such a significant shift will require several changes.

All three of these philosophical shifts will require a revision to the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act (DOPMA). According to a report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the service chiefs have too few authorities to provide longer, more flexible careers and the provisions they do have are limited Congressional exceptions that are insufficient to manage the increasingly diverse set of manpower needs.⁶² A viable alternative to the up-or-out system would require changes to 10 U.S. Code, Part II, Chapters 32 and 36. These changes are necessary to adjust time-in-grade and time-in-service limitations, to adjust promotion zone definitions, and to revise the consequences for failure of selection for promotion. However, a viable alternative to the up-or-out system requires more than DOPMA revisions.

The DoD and the services would also need to revise their policies. Besides needing to update applicable regulations to reflect any DOPMA changes, the DoD would also need to amend DoD Instructions (DoDIs) 1320.12 and 1320.13 to align the promotion timing for each grade with the focus on competencies. However, the DoD and the services would also need to write or revise other policies to accommodate some of the practices associated with the shift in philosophies. Shifting the focus from timelines to competencies “will require examination of the competencies needed to generate organizational capabilities, an understanding of how those competencies are

developed and applied, and a design of career paths that balance developmental needs with other criteria, such as opportunity, incentives for performance, organizational stability, and so forth.”⁶³ In order to shift the focus from promotability to employability, the services would need to identify the maximum percentage of officers that each board could retain, as the retained officers would affect future promotion rates. The services may even elect to restrict retention opportunities to only certain career fields, presumably either highly technical or low manned specialties. In order to shift from generalization to specialization, the services will need to identify career fields that could benefit from an enterprise track and then codify the associated career development and promotion paths. However, all of these DoD and service policy revisions are just the beginning. “Changing the system is a far bigger task than simply rewriting the law.”⁶⁴

Designing a viable alternative to the up-or-out promotion system will also affect other areas of human resource and talent management. As one example, RAND says, “...the redesign of career paths for some occupational communities will almost certainly require longer careers. Should that occur, officers will require additional incentives – financial and other – to commit to those longer careers. Longer careers could also result in fewer accessions to certain career fields and different service obligations in exchange for advanced civil schooling.”⁶⁵ Increased specialization and the development of enterprise career tracks will likely force service secretaries to consider whether they need to revise their competitive categories for promotion. These are but a handful of the possible changes to the overall personnel management system that may be required. Yet, successfully implementing an alternative to the up-or-out promotion system will require changes in other areas, as well. “Creating and managing a more

flexible system requires not just changes to laws and policies but to practices based on military- and service-specific culture.”⁶⁶

Changing the military- and service-specific cultures will be the most difficult aspect of changing the up-or-out promotion system. Case in point is the Career Intermission Pilot Program. Approved in 2008, this program allows service members to take up to a 3-year break in service to pursue personal or professional goals and return with no impact to their careers. However, a recent Government Accountability Office report noted that the military culture was not always supportive, with some senior leaders thinking participants made family a priority over career advancement.⁶⁷ Similarly, military culture causes officers to think that an “...absence from the traditional career track will hurt their chances at promotion...” and “...an officer who takes a couple years off to get a business degree from Harvard is at a distinct disadvantage compared to an officer who takes a joint staff job at the Pentagon.”⁶⁸ For this reason, RAND recommends a slow and progressive approach to implementing any changes to the up-or-out promotion system: “A measured approach allows time for all the other variables – particularly service cultures – to adjust and allows services to design a system that works for them versus a one size fits all approach.” Aside from the strategic difficulty in changing military culture, there are other drawbacks to implementing this alternative to the up-or-out promotion system.

According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a competency-based system “...will certainly increase the challenge of managing the officer corps...”⁶⁹ The first challenge services will face will be their ability to “...specify broad sets of knowledge, skills, and abilities commensurate with the responsibilities of each rank in

order to create the basic framework of a competency-based system.”⁷⁰ Though extremely daunting, it is not impossible. The Air Force embarked on just such a journey in 2011 as it had career field managers identify all of the experiences associated with each job in their specialty. Service experts mapped those experiences into a system called Career Path Tool that service members and leadership could use to view the experiences of members in a particular specialty, both individually and collectively. However, the challenge of this effort will always persist because experiences will evolve as roles and missions continue to change over time.

Another drawback to implementing this alternative to the up-or-out promotion system will be the challenge of determining the extent of specialization required. According to a Center for Strategic and International Studies report, “Service leadership must determine the proper balance between deep expertise in one small subset of requirements of officership and the broader strategic perspective that is necessary for senior leadership of a branch or service.”⁷¹ This is easier said than done. In 2009, a handful of three-star generals on the Air Force’s Officer Force Development Panel attempted to draft a memorandum to the force emphasizing the fact that they valued both “broad” as well as “deep” leaders. They spent several hours over multiple sessions debating the proper verbiage. In the end, the undertaking proved too difficult and they never sent the memo forward for signature. If a group of senior leaders was unable to craft a memo to simply express the value of both specialists and generalists, imagine how difficult it will be for them to tackle the complex task of specifying the functional areas that require deep expertise and balancing those requirements against the broader strategic perspective that is necessary for senior leadership. However,

there is likely an even larger hurdle to successfully implementing this alternative to the up-or-out promotion system.

The last drawback, and perhaps the most significant, is the overall Herculean effort that will be required, in multiple ways, to implement this change. In Janine Davidson's blog on the Council for Foreign Relations website, Jesse Sloman raises an interesting point:

There is also the question of just how much stamina the services have to expend on manpower reforms while contending with a host of other difficult challenges, both at home and abroad. In the midst of combat operations against ISIS, the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan, a reduction in the Pentagon budget, and sequestration, it is fair to ask whether military leaders have the time or energy to take on another potentially divisive issue – especially without some sort of galvanizing event to precipitate their action.⁷²

This is a valid question with no easy answer. These proposals would be the most sweeping changes to the personnel management system since the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act over 35 years ago. Clearly, such drastic reform would entail an immense amount of work. However, if senior leaders are convinced of the justification for such a change, then the resulting benefits will be worth the effort.

The first benefit is that “a competency-based system can...accommodate additional assignments or education for some officers who may be at a disadvantage relative to their peers if they have such assignments in the current system.”⁷³ This would prevent situations like the one in which Lieutenant Joseph Riley found himself. The top nationally ranked ROTC cadet of 2013, Riley's advisors told him he would likely not be promoted because he spent two years as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University instead of holding the typical positions required for promotion.⁷⁴ Without rigid timelines, a competency-based promotion system would allow Riley to study at Oxford as well as

hold the jobs required for promotion. It may take him longer to get that first promotion than some of the lieutenants commissioned with him, but that would be time well spent. Furthermore, it is likely the timing of his future promotions would offset that lag based on the advantage such an education offers. This aspect may lead to longer careers, but that can also be a benefit.

According to a RAND study, “A competency-based system makes better use of longer careers.”⁷⁵ Because of increased life expectancy, “many military members are retiring from active duty during their most productive years.”⁷⁶ As one example, “...less than 3 percent of Navy personnel have over 20 years of service compared with at least 40 percent of nonmilitary workers.”⁷⁷ Secretary Rumsfeld questioned the logic of this when he asked, “Is the thought that maybe we ought not to bring people in, the best people we can find, train them, and then shove them out when they’re 46 or 47 or 48 years old?”⁷⁸ A competency-based system allows for longer tours and additional assignments and therefore utilizes longer careers to maximize officer development. This improved use of longer careers provides an additional benefit: financial savings.

A competency-based promotion system that is focused on employability rather than promotability, “...tends to minimize both accession and termination costs and maximizes the return on development costs.”⁷⁹ By focusing on employability, the military does not force valuable service members to separate simply because there were not enough promotions available. This minimizes termination costs. It also minimizes accession costs because the military does not need to recruit, access, train, and educate a replacement for that retained service member. Finally, it maximizes the return on development costs by extending the productivity of valuable service members

who the military would have forced out otherwise. These benefits are just a few of the many things senior leaders must consider when contemplating the promotion system.

Objections to the military's up-or-out promotion system are nothing new, but the debates are growing louder as of late. Critics expressed concern even before the advent of the all-volunteer force. Congressional representatives have questioned the system's usefulness for years, but now they are holding hearings on possible reforms. Even current senior leaders are among those entering the fray. Perhaps Vice Admiral J. Kevin Moran, the Chief of Naval Personnel, describes the situation best:

[Young officers are] paying attention to the talent management revolution going on around us. Inspired by the thoroughly American creed of opportunity, equality, and freedom to pursue individual gifts – they watch their corporate peers rising past others based on merit, not merely when they joined the firm. Or they see opportunities to master a profession without worrying about an 'up or out' system which assumes everyone must be groomed for the highest possible rank. They wonder why they can't do the same, in service to their country.⁸⁰

The Secretary of Defense's 'Force of the Future' initiative intends to address these concerns and has already begun making policy changes. However, promotion reforms are not yet among them. This may be because senior leaders are not convinced the case for change has merit or because they have difficulty visualizing an alternative to the up-or-out promotion system.

If senior leaders look closely at this issue, they would find there are actually valid concerns that could provide an impetus for change. The global environment has changed from an industrial to an information era. A fierce competition for talent characterizes this environment. This competition should drive the military to adhere to sound talent management principles, but that has not been the case. The military routinely divests itself of valuable members because it failed to promote them, despite

having invested heavily in them during their career. This central issue has been the foundation of a robust history of criticisms spanning decades. Should these criticisms finally ring true and senior leaders work to reform the promotion system, they must first understand the foundational aspects required in the design of that system.

The basic design of any promotion system must account for the philosophies associated with the windows and ceilings that regulate the flow of officers through and out of the system. The three philosophies driving the current system are timelines, promotability, and generalization. However, a review of relevant literature reveals three other philosophies that should be paramount: competencies, employability, and specialization. A viable alternative to the up-or-out promotion system incorporates these three philosophies. It uses competencies to determine promotion eligibility. It focuses on employability in order to retain those valuable members the military was unable to promote. It facilitates specialization by enabling an enterprise career track that allows officers to develop depth of expertise.

Implementing such a system will not be simple. Leaders will need to revise law, update policy, and most importantly, change culture. Managing the officer corps will be more challenging. Identifying competencies, determining the extent of specialization, and summoning the sheer will to affect such a change will be difficult. However, the resulting system will improve officer development, make better use of longer careers, minimize costs, and maximize return on development. If enough senior leaders finally become down and out about the up-or-out promotion system, and would like to pursue change, there is a viable alternative.

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