



Fighting for the future military workforce

The future demands broader, more agile military work

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Responding to an unprecedented catastrophe

On March 11, 2011, Japanese military leaders faced an unprecedented triple disaster. It began at about 2:50 p.m. (5:50 a.m. GMT), with one of the largest earthquakes ever recorded occurring just off the coast of northern Japan.¹ The earthquake collapsed buildings, severed road and rail lines, and knocked out power and water to large portions of the population. A little over an hour later, the situation worsened. The earthquake had generated a massive tsunami that now swept up to 10 kilometers inland, literally sweeping away everything in its path. Among the structures in that path were the four reactor buildings at the Fukushima Daichi nuclear plant. Without electricity, and with its backup systems now knocked out by the tsunami, the reactors quickly overheated, ultimately releasing radioactive contaminants into the air and sea.

AS THIS DISASTER unfolded, the Japanese Self-Defense Forces and their US counterparts in Japan faced the daunting challenge of efficiently deploying their forces to respond to a situation never before seen in human history. There was immediate need to get trained rescuers to affected areas. The military had to bring in personnel and equipment to sense nuclear contamination, along with robots and operators that could operate in contaminated environments. To get rescuers and supplies to where they needed to go, both militaries needed to essentially open an international airport from scratch. New technologies, such as the combination of smartphones, GPS, and inexpensive sensors to give individual readings

of radiation doses, were being utilized for the first time under actual conditions. Compounding these circumstances was a language barrier, challenging US forces working in a foreign country.

With Tokyo's Narita International Airport shut down, the aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan served as the functional landing strip for relief supplies; a US Navy barge tied up pierside provided critical cooling water to prevent a complete meltdown of the reactor; and amid concerns over the uncertainty of the radiation situation, 7,000 family members of US service personnel were voluntarily evacuated to the US West Coast. The American effort ultimately involved 24,000 service members,

189 aircraft, and 24 naval ships, at a cost of US\$90 million.

The ultimate success of Operation Tomodachi in the face of all these challenges shows the resilience and capability of the US military. But it also highlights the challenges that militaries must overcome if they are to maximize their greatest asset, their people. First, militaries must know the full range of

skills and talents of each individual service member to quickly put them in the right places for the right missions. Second, militaries need access to civilian expertise and knowledge to keep pace with the latest technology developments. In short, a military's ability to respond to a complex and uncertain future rests on its ability to create an open and agile workforce.



The *what* of conflict stays the same; the *how* changes

WAR IS A fundamentally human endeavor, a clash of wills.² As a result, no matter how much weapons or technologies change, the core of military work, *what* it does, is unlikely to change. That said, social, political, and technological shifts are changing the nature of *how* militaries do their work.

Emerging technologies are one example of this change. Military leaders are eager to harness capabilities offered by new warfighting concepts and new technologies. Augmented reality has become part of training. The US Marines and the Army are testing the use of robots in infantry squads through Squad X from the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency.³ The US Navy is experimenting with a fleet of unmanned ships.⁴

These innovations are groundbreaking and exciting—yet their adoption ultimately comes down to military personnel. New technology means new skill sets. In addition, to get the best out of this new technology, the military must apply new ways of thinking about problems.⁵ In fact, research has shown that cognitively diverse teams are six times more likely to come up with breakthrough innovations than individuals working alone.⁶

But at the exact moment when the military needs access to the widest variety of talent and skills, it has perhaps the narrowest reach in its history. Why? Because the military is increasingly pulling from a small and shrinking talent pool. In the United States, 80 percent of military recruits are close relatives of veterans, yet only 16 percent of the population comprises veterans.⁷ While these recruits are familiar with the military and are

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motivated to join—US Department of Defense (DoD) data shows that the majority of new active duty recruits initiated the first contact with their recruiter—it represents only a very small slice of the American population.⁸ According to some estimates, less than 1 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds in the United States are both qualified to join and interested in joining the military.⁹ Not only does this mean that the burden of decades of fighting is borne by a very small group, increasing burnout and harming retention, but it also limits the military's access to the new thinking and new skills it needs to thrive in future conflicts.

With the *how* of warfare changing rapidly, future military success rests on adopting new technologies and adapting to new circumstances quickly. Research suggests that the US military and its democratic allies may have an innate edge in this adaptability due to a more skilled and educated workforce.¹⁰ But to maintain and build upon that edge means investing in advanced human capital with new skills and experiences. Failing to adjust the workforce in response to technology changes in warfare will have dire consequences—particularly if adversaries are quick to adjust theirs.¹¹

The future demands a broader military workforce

TO ADDRESS THE challenge of a limited workforce, it helps to start with the question, “Why aren’t more Americans interested in the military?”

Polling data and anecdotal evidence all seem to point to the same conclusion: Many people simply are not aware of what the military is and does, so they do not see it as a career option. Wendin Smith, the former deputy assistant secretary of defense for Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction (CWMD), says, “Unless you grow up in a military family or a few key locations, you are not really exposed to defense professionals or leaders. Absent the introduction, most people just never even think about it as an option.”¹²

The lack of connection to the military is more important than just a lack of awareness, because in the absence of information about the military, many young people develop inaccurate perceptions. Lernes “Bear” Hebert, who served as the acting undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness, sees those misperceptions as a key barrier to creating the broader workforce of the future: “While there is great support for military service men and women, we do find that misperceptions about service have taken a toll on propensity to serve, and because we’re not out there offering a contrary message, we’re seeing a decline that is most troubling.”¹³ One survey showed 61 percent of teenagers and those in their 20s believe it “likely or very likely” that a person leaving the military today will have difficulty readjusting to everyday life.¹⁴ However, the exact opposite is true. According to the US Department of Labor, the unemployment

rate among veterans is slightly below the national average unemployment rate—3.2 percent compared with 3.7 percent—as of June 2019.¹⁵

Another jarring statistic is that 48 percent of youth believe it is “likely or very likely” that a person departing the military will have a physical injury.¹⁶ Again, the reality is quite the opposite. Of the more than 4.2 million soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines who have served since 9/11, only about 1.2 percent have been wounded while deployed.¹⁷ In fact, deployment to a combat zone only fractionally increases the chance of death for the average 25-year-old compared with staying at home (0.16 percent compared to 0.12 percent).¹⁸

Can’t buy talent

So how can the military attract the broad workforce needed for the future? A number of options exist. First, it could seek to just train the workforce it already has on new skills, much as the military already does with infantry, armor, or aviation skills. No one arrives in the military already knowing how to drive a tank or fire a machine gun; those skills are taught entirely within the military workforce.

The challenge is that as new commercial-origin technologies ranging from [drones to social media to augmented reality](#) play an increasing role on the [battlefield](#),¹⁹ many of the skills needed to use or counter those technologies are not resident within the military, so it cannot provide all the needed training itself. External expertise is needed.

Another option is simply to increase both pay and bonuses to attract new talent and reduce attrition. One common idea about the military is that its pay is noncompetitive with the civilian sector, which is another misconception. A 2017 RAND study found that overall compensation for military officers

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would place them in the 77th percentile of pay for comparable civilian jobs; for enlisted personnel it was even higher, at the 84th percentile.²⁰ So greater pay is unlikely to attract additional talent into the military, at least at the scale needed. In fact, in 2018, the Army was offering bonuses of as much as US\$40,000 to new recruits, yet it still came up more than 6,000 recruits short of its goal.²¹

Similarly, greater pay and incentives are proving ineffective at retaining current service members. For example, competing with airlines and other industries amidst a global shortage of qualified pilots, the Air Force has substantially increased retention bonuses for pilots by up to US\$35,000

per year for certain segments. Yet even as the Air Force strives to stay fully staffed, in key fields such as mobility pilots, less than half as many pilots are accepting bonuses.²²

With this data, it becomes clear that service members join the military—and leave it—for more intrinsic reasons than money. They

join the military because they are familiar with it and want to be a part of its mission.²³ They may leave to find new skills, or advance their careers, or for family reasons. If the military is to attract and retain the workforce needed for future conflict, it needs to connect to a wider audience and give current service members greater flexibility.

Creating a modern military workforce

THE FUTURE OF military work demands an open and agile workforce. An open workforce will connect the military to the widest possible talent pool, while an agile workforce helps to ensure that the military can then make the best use of those skills, talents, and experiences that individuals offer (figure 1). Together, they allow the military's strategic differentiator, its advanced human capital, to meet any challenge the future of conflict may entail.

What is needed is more direct contact with a large part of the population.

Open workforce: Tap into a broader talent pool

As already seen, one of the most significant barriers standing in the way of the military's access to the talent it needs is simply a lack of awareness among much of the population. Creating that awareness could broaden the military talent pool by nearly four times what it is today, allowing access to a host of new skills and experiences.²⁴ But real awareness goes well beyond advertising or tributes to the military at football games. In fact, given the emphasis of many such events on sacrifice, those efforts may actually reinforce many of the misconceptions about the military and make it seem a less attractive career option to many. What is needed is more direct contact with a large part of the population. As Wendin Smith says, "Young people need to be able to meet a military leader and see what it is all about. For me, the question is how do we get those speakers out to those schools and make kids aware

of the great careers they could have both in uniform and as civilians in this space."²⁵

The first step to connecting to a wider population is to be physically closer to them. This can mean

locating more units, organizations, and commands away from isolated military bases and into communities. The Army Futures Command has done exactly this in Austin, Texas. As more cross-pollination between the military and other industries occurs, it can provide the military with new

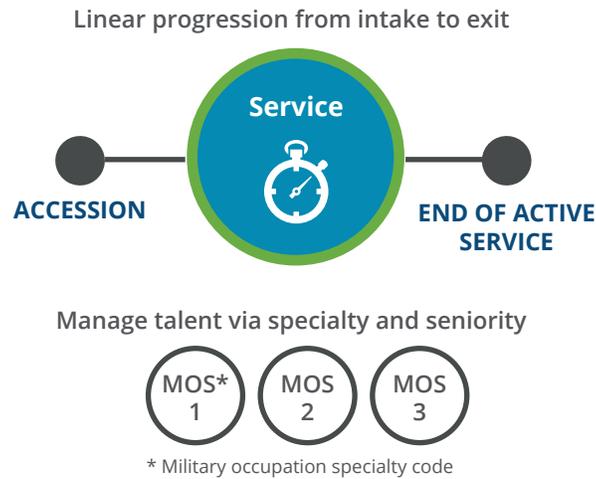
connections, ideas, and insights. It can also show the community just what its military does—helping seed the next generation of military leaders. These types of natural interactions have proven significantly better than advertising at breaking down misconceptions about the military among youth. For example, the Australian Defence Force uses a series of videos where a wide range of service members share their unscripted personal experiences to help expand recruiting among minority populations, ultimately contributing to a 29 percent increase in female recruits.²⁶

Formal programs such as "gap year" programs can also be a good way to provide youth with exposure to the military. The Australian Defence Force established one such program in 2013, which allows recruits to sign up just for one year of service rather than a long-term contract.²⁷ These types of programs are important for a number of reasons. As mentioned, they offer young people an

FIGURE 1

The military requires an open and agile workforce

CURRENT INDUSTRIAL-AGE TALENT MODEL



FUTURE TALENT MODEL



Open workforce

- More flexible career paths
- Contact with civilian population to get access to the skills and talent the military needs

Agile workforce

Individualized talent management to use the full potential of every service member and employee

Source: Deloitte analysis.

opportunity to learn more about an unfamiliar profession. Second, they put the individual back in control of his or her career. Survey results show that many youths are concerned that the military lifestyle will not be a good fit for them.²⁸ This “try before you buy” approach allows young recruits to try multiple roles in the military before committing to longer terms of service. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, these represent an effort by the military to proactively shape its talent pool. Rather than passively fishing for recruits of the right skills and quality, the military can take action to train youth with the right skills or cultivate the right traits.

The UK Ministry of Defence is using one such program to strengthen its cybersecurity skills. The government has introduced cybersecurity education and training for 14- to 18-year-old students through in-class learning, projects, summer schooling, and apprenticeships. In addition, the UK Parliament has started the National Cyber Security Centre to foster new partnerships between government, industry, and the public, including adding cybersecurity to professional development and postgraduate level programs.²⁹

Proactively shaping the workforce not only helps build the next generation of service members with the right skills, it can also bring benefits today. For example, when the US Air Force realized that software development was becoming increasingly problematic, it did not turn to traditional workforce solutions of simply choosing between uniformed airmen, Air Force civilians, or contractors. Instead, it created “Kessel Run,” with a new culture and cognitively diverse workforce. Coders were taken from across the Air Force and, over time, were paired with experts from industry and newly hired civilian talent.³⁰ The result was a smashing success. One of Kessel Run’s first initiatives was to create a new tanker planning tool that saves US\$10 million a month on tanker operations; currently, the group is tackling one of the DoD’s most complex,

cutting-edge pieces of software: the F-35’s Autonomic Logistics Information System.³¹

Agile workforce: Help the current workforce achieve more

At first, it may seem odd that personnel and readiness are typically grouped together in military bureaucracies—that is, until you consider what readiness really is. At its core, readiness is about understanding the capabilities of the force and matching those to mission requirements.³² By extension, if the military is to succeed in its future missions, it needs to understand all of the capabilities of its greatest asset, its people.

The current military model of personnel management is taken from the industrial era—operating like a conveyor belt or assembly line. But responding to the changing demands of a digital era requires a digital approach to personnel management. First, this approach must give back control and flexibility to the individual. The goal of an assembly line is simply to move items as efficiently as possible, but individual service members may have different needs and may *not* want to be moved as efficiently as possible. When family or career goals conflict with the military’s fixed personnel system, service members currently have no other choice but to leave, depriving the military of their skills and experience.

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Programs such as the US Navy's Career Intermission Program are a good first step toward changing this and giving flexibility and control to the service member. These allow service members to take a leave of absence to start a family, pursue a degree, or start a business (all while maintaining their families' health care, access to the military commissary and exchange, or sometimes even a funded relocation and a stipend), and then return to the military without harm to their career prospects.³³

Beyond merely hitting pause on a career, service members also need the flexibility to change how they serve. Ultimately, the military may aspire to the goal of total flexibility: allowing service members to enter and leave the military at all points in their careers. That way, a soldier could leave the military, work in industry for a few years, perhaps get a graduate degree, start a family, and then return to the military a few years later, bringing with her all the new skills and experiences she has acquired.

Industry Fellows programs and other externships do exist within the military, but their scope and scale need to be expanded.³⁴ Ultimately, the flexibility needed in the military looks less like a few months out of uniform and more like the ability to join, leave, and rejoin more seamlessly. The UK Ministry of Defence, for example, has streamlined the process for veterans to rejoin, taking into consideration the context of the person: length of time out of service, previous rank, and employment experience.³⁵

While complete mobility between the military, industry, and academia may be a long-term goal, a more achievable and immediate step could be to create mobility within the military: to use components of the force that already have close connections with industry and academia, namely the National Guard and Army Reserve, in a new way. By their very nature of having civilian jobs

while serving in the military, Guard and reserve service members can bring to the military many of the external skills and experiences the future demands. Therefore, rather than sequestering Guard and reserve units as backups in case of an emergency, using their individual skills as part of active duty units (much like current Individual Mobilization Augmentee programs) can help bring needed skills and experiences to the military, especially in critical skill areas such as cyber, where the majority of expertise is resident in the civilian workforce.³⁶

Mobility can enhance the quality of the military workforce by giving it access to skills and experiences it cannot get in the military. Allowing members to come and go creates an exchange of ideas that is otherwise closed off. Equally important, this exchange of ideas can increase the number and quality of the future workforce—because as more military members interact with different communities, more civilians become familiar with and interested in the military beyond what they see on TV, at football matches, or in video games.

Talent management also needs to keep pace

Even with flexibility for service members, the current personnel system is not set up to take advantage of those new skills. Many military personnel decisions are made knowing little more than a name, rank, and military occupation specialty (MOS) code. A fully digital approach to personnel management demands that the military know more about its people and their skills, languages, and even hobbies.

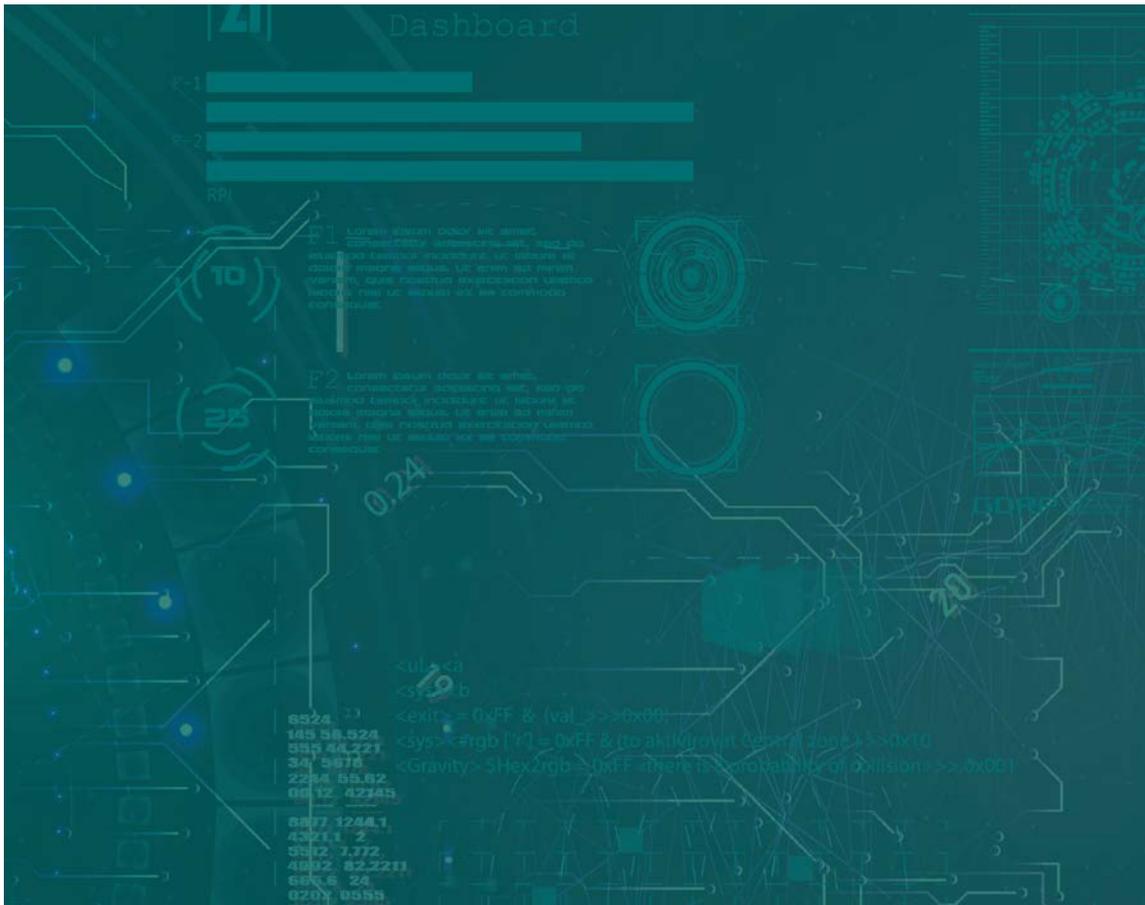
With a full picture of the individual, and not just their service record, military leaders can match the best person to any particular mission. For example, in a crisis, they can find the one person that speaks

the local language; or when software fails, they can identify who learned the coding language Python as a hobby. Essentially, a digital, individuated approach to talent management enables leaders to organize tasks at the individual level.

The government of Canada has already made the transition to individuated personnel management with its Talent Cloud program, essentially creating a “free agent” model of government talent. The program uses a searchable database of both workers and jobs that allows workers to find the right opportunities for themselves, and leaders to see who has exactly the skills their project needs.³⁷ Talent Cloud brings together the exact right team for a particular mission, and then, once that is accomplished, releases the team back to the cloud

for the next mission. The results have been faster hiring with the right skills and millions in savings.³⁸ In another example, the US Army’s Integrated Personnel and Pay System-Army (IPPS-A) aims to capture comprehensive information about an individual soldier beyond the traditional name, rank, and MOS, from language skills down to hobbies.³⁹ With that information, IPPS-A can create a sort of “job marketplace” where soldiers can find the right assignments, and leaders can find soldiers with the skills and traits their mission requires.

Personnel and readiness are fundamentally linked. A more responsive talent architecture allows leaders to get the best out of their most important asset and meet the uncertain challenges of the future.



Getting started today

COMPARED WITH THE personnel policies of commercial companies, the maze of policies, regulations, and even laws that govern military personnel can seem daunting. Uniformed personnel are governed under Title 10 of the US Code and the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act, while some civilian employees are managed under Title 5, and others under Title 10. On top of that, service-specific and even occupation-specific policies govern many areas, so that even the most motivated leaders can find themselves overwhelmed while trying to make any change.

However, this is not to say that significant changes are impossible within US government talent management. The Department of Homeland Security, for example, recently took a step toward a more open workforce by creating a Cyber Talent Management System that encourages department alumni who are working in industry to return by allowing them to rejoin at higher grades than the General Schedule system, which would have locked them into returning at the same grade as when they left government.⁴⁰ Some changes may require significant modifications to law, but there are other changes that any leader can make today to move toward the goal of an open and agile workforce. For example, take the problem of physical fitness of incoming recruits. Having recruits show up fit and ready to train can be such a challenge that the US Navy offers a US\$2,000 bonus to any recruit who can simply pass the initial fitness test at boot camp for their gender or age level.⁴¹ The principle of an open workforce can help the military be proactive

in shaping the quality of its workforce even before recruits walk through the doors of boot camp. The Delayed Entry Program offers a great opportunity to reach recruits prior to boot camp and work with them to increase fitness.

Second, the principle of an agile workforce encourages an individuated approach to getting those future recruits fit. Rather than just giving broad fitness guidance, distributing simple fitness monitors can allow recruiters to check the precise fitness of each individual, while algorithms can give each recruit tailored fitness advice to get them as fit as possible even before they show up to boot camp, reducing their likelihood of attrition and increasing their chances of success. This is a manageable change, one that is within the control of a single organization, with low investment and significant benefits and savings.⁴² Ultimately, aiming for an open, agile workforce is as much a change of mindset as of policy.

Prior to March 2011, no one anticipated or prepared for the cataclysmic combination of an earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown. The only way the military can meet the unforeseen challenges of 2021 and 2031 is to have an open workforce with the wide array of skills that may be required, and the agility to get the right people to the right place when required.

Soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines have always met the challenges this nation has faced, and their success in the future may just depend on giving them the freedom to continue to do so.

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