



Military Manning on Tap: Rethinking Military Personnel Management to Maintain Job Market Competitiveness

Justin Chock and Dahlia d'Arge

At the end of a long day, two U.S. military officers walk into the officer's club bar to unwind over drinks. Venting about reduced manpower at work, the conversation turns to the military's recent manning problems. In 2022, only the Marine Corps met its recruitment goal, and while retention of current personnel remains high in some services, dissatisfaction with the service experience persists as two decades of war come to an end.¹ Unfortunately, low recruitment and declining retention directly endanger the military's readiness and the nation's security. As one deputy assistant secretary of defense testified, the lack of recruits "constitutes an unprecedented mission gap and is reason for concern."² These two officers share in that concern, having witnessed peers leave the military in droves either out of enticement by civilian employment or dissatisfaction with their increasingly peacetime military careers.

Dissatisfaction aside, our two officers recognize that military service differs significantly from most civilian employment. The American public demands military members be ready to fight and die for the nation's security without regard for job benefits or any semblance of work-life balance. But while our volunteer force is composed of people who committed to this duty, they now find themselves in primarily peacetime roles burdened by bureaucratic tedium that dissociates them from the higher calling of service. The tension of maintaining a force ready to fight our nation's wars during peacetime is not new, but it creates an opening for the civilian sector to draw talent away from our recruitment pool and current force. It is critical for the military services to compete effectively against the draw of the civilian sector in order to retain the right people for its mission, both now and into the future.

Toward that end, our two officers order their first round and embark on a bar top analysis to answer this question: What is causing this military manning shortfall and what can be done to solve the problem?

Objective and Operating Environment

These officers, trained in the military planning process, begin their analysis by identifying the objective: winning the hearts and minds of young Americans who are either considering military service or who are currently in the military, but are considering leaving for a civilian career. Two specific generational groups compose this target demographic: Millennials (personnel in junior and mid-career ranks) and Generation Z (personnel either new to, or not yet in, the military). The military wins this objective by persuading these young Americans that the sacrifices demanded by service are adequately balanced with the benefits of serving.

Similar to previous generations, Millennials and Gen Z desire the American dream, but this dream looks different from those of past generations.³ They seek jobs that enable work-life balance and are less willing to work for an employer who isn't able to achieve some semblance of that.⁴ They value rapid upward progression through an organization as well as the opportunity to develop themselves personally and professionally within that career path.⁵ Our two officers—Millennials by generation—feel the same yearning for these factors within their own careers. Although these aspects are by no means universal or all-inclusive, they still conflict with a military structure built to meet the needs of past generations who held a different understanding of work-life balance, financial stability, and what constitutes a meaningful career.

The current information environment also substantially differs from that experienced by previous generations. Our two officers can check their LinkedIn inboxes at any time to find direct messages from military veteran recruiters offering civilian jobs with six-figure salaries, flexible work arrangements, and rapid promotion potential. Whether through professional networks, advertisements, or social media, military members today are bombarded daily with the civilian career possibilities available to them in the American economy. The military is thus in constant, direct competition with civilian employers bidding for the same target demographic.

Capabilities and Competitors

Our officers next examine and contrast the capabilities of the military and of the civilian sector who are operating within this environment and competing to recruit and retain the target demographic. They together note that the military offers world-class benefits, including:

- Career stability relative to the civilian workforce
- Pay benchmarked at the 70th percentile of equivalent civilian pay (with additional bonuses)⁶
- The opportunity to retire at middle age
- Post-service GI Bill and in-service educational programs
- Tax benefits (both state and federal)
- Consistent healthcare, housing, and support for families

But the officers also agree that the military's most important strength is the uniqueness of the profession. There are few other careers where one can live out their "Top Gun" dreams while answering the call to serve.

But one of the officers, playing devil's advocate, argues, "The civilian sector can offer many of those same benefits, but also caters to the specific priorities sought by Millennials and Gen Z." Some of these competitors and their offers include:

- Institutions of higher education that provide scholarships and new career potential
- Large corporations with larger salaries, autonomy, and flexibility
- Defense contractors offering defense-related jobs with private-sector benefits
- Small start-ups and non-profit organizations offering a sense of meaning and career flexibility
- Civilian roles within the public sector offering direct impacts on government policy and some career autonomy (to include the ability to easily leave for new positions, which boosts upward mobility).⁷

The officer concludes by noting that, while military jobs are unique, financial and work-life balance concerns can outweigh the call to serve, especially if serving itself begins losing meaning. Not everyone wants to be or can be Maverick.

Courses of Action

With empty glasses, our two officers order another round and grab a nearby cocktail napkin to scribble down solutions to the problems identified. Our officers propose the following changes to help the military compete effectively with its competitors for Millennial and Gen Z talent.

First, reform the "Up or Out" promotion system to allow greater individual control of professional timelines. This change would allow personnel flexibility; they can stay in positions longer for either family stability or development, or they can be promoted faster based on merit. This change helps retain military members who are drawn to the civilian sector by a need for greater stability or a greater challenge.

Second, increase funding for unit training and for military members to return to the professional schools within their occupational specialties while reducing the bureaucratic burdens imposed by garrison tasks and mandatory training. Peacetime military life can be tedious, especially if units are not able to train frequently and are instead

bogged down by administrative tasks. By keeping personnel engaged with the jobs that enticed them to join, we can increase readiness while also helping with the retention of talented, dedicated members.

Third, reform transitions in and out of service and across services to become faster, more intentional, and more supportive of flexible talent management. Military members could leave service after five years, work in a related civilian industry for another five years, and return to the military while bringing with them the knowledge gained in the civilian sector. Making this change requires a more cohesive personnel system, support for the pursuit of civilian opportunities, and a perspective of a military career beyond a binary choice between staying in for twenty-plus years or leaving after five to ten years.

With these thoughts written down, the two officers order their next round filled with the hope that they'll one day see a military that adopts these recommendations.

A Parting Toast

But others nearby overhear the two officers' conversation and chime in.

From down the bar, a senior officer says, "The military spent millions of dollars researching solutions and recently implemented big adjustments to its personnel management systems. Be patient." Unfortunately, there is no time for patience. Slowly developed personnel management updates are not enough to keep our peers from leaving and they fail to compete on the same level as the civilian sector. These peers will become the senior leaders of the future, and we need strong leaders to fight future wars. You cannot surge quality leadership.

The bartender, a veteran, comments, "Military members know what they are getting into when they sign the dotted line; if they can't handle the tough lifestyle then they need to leave." The prioritization of work-life balance is here to stay with future generations of American workers. While military members are willing to sacrifice their work-life balance as well as their lives when the nation calls for it, efforts should be made to protect some semblance of work-life balance where feasible to compete with the civilian sector. A peacetime military asking for wartime-level sacrifices will find few personnel willing to needlessly give up a well-rounded life simply to wait-in-place for the possibility of utilization.

Finally, a disgruntled junior officer at the next table asks, "Why do you care? Nothing is going to change." While things may not change much during our time in service, we still have a duty to try to improve the force. Applying the same analytical techniques we use to plan operations, we can develop solutions to these long-term strategic issues. We love our service to our nation and we want to take every opportunity we have to work towards its improvement. This publication is a unique opportunity to give voice to concerns usually only spoken over drinks in bars and to hopefully inspire further discussion and analysis.

And toward that end, we raise a glass.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, the Department of the Navy, the Department of Defense, nor the U.S. government.

Justin Chock is a senior instructor in the Political Science Department at the Naval Academy.

Dahlia d'Arge is an intelligence officer in the U.S. Army.

- ¹ “Defense Official Says Multiyear Appropriations May Help Recruiting,” *U.S. Department of Defense*, October 3, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3187034/defense-official-says-multiyear-appropriations-may-help-recruiting/>. Tom Jurkowsky, “The Military Has a Serious Recruiting Problem — Congress Must Fix It,” *The Hill*, June 21, 2022, <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/3527921-the-military-has-a-serious-recruiting-problem-congress-must-fix-it/>. There is disagreement on whether services met their goals, though all services “barely reached” their goals: Lolita C Baldor, “U.S. Army Misses Recruiting Goal, behind about 15,000 Soldiers,” *USA Today*, October 3, 2022, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2022/10/03/us-army-misses-recruiting-goal/8166523001/>.
- ² Roxana Tiron, “U.S. Military Faces Biggest Recruiting Hurdles in 50 Years,” *Bloomberg Government*, September 21, 2022, <https://about.bgov.com/news/us-military-services-face-biggest-recruiting-hurdles-in-50-years/>.
- ³ We also note that ethical leadership and management are important to this group, but since the military is seen as highly trustworthy and ethical in this regard then further improvements are beyond the scope of this article. Eric O’Boyle, “4 Things Gen Z and Millennials Expect From Their Workplace,” *Gallup Organization*, March 30, 2021, <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/336275/things-gen-millennials-expect-workplace.aspx>.
- ⁴ Ali Francis, “Gen Z: The Workers Who Want It All,” *BBC*, accessed September 11, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20220613-gen-z-the-workers-who-want-it-all>. “What Gen-Z Graduates Want From Their Employers,” *The Economist*, accessed September 11, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/business/2022/07/21/what-gen-z-graduates-want-from-their-employers>; “Striving for Balance, Advocating for Change: The Deloitte Global 2022 Gen Z & Millennial Survey” (Deloitte, 2022). Part of this work-life balance includes the space for spouses to focus on their own employment rather than a traditional military personnel system assumption of a single-earner household: “The Rise in Dual Income Households,” *Pew Research Center*, accessed September 11, 2022, https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/FT_dual-income-households-1960-20121; Mary Beth Gahan, “Military Spouses’ Unspoken Oath to America? Giving Up Career Stability, Seniority,” *The Seattle Times*, September 1, 2021, <https://www.seattletimes.com/explore/careers/military-spouses-unspoken-oath-to-america-giving-up-career-stability-seniority/>.
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- ⁷ Ethan Steinberg, “Want A Pay Raise? Switching Jobs Has Much More Upside Amid Soaring Inflation, Report Finds,” *Forbes*, accessed September 11, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ethansteinberg/2022/07/28/want-a-pay-raise-switching-jobs-matters-much-more-amid-soaring-inflation-report-finds/>.