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## CREATING AN OFFICER ASSIGNMENT PROCESS TO MEET THE TALENT OF TODAY

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TO MEET THE TALENT OF TODAY**

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# **CREATING AN OFFICER ASSIGNMENT PROCESS TO MEET THE TALENT OF TODAY**

## **AIM**

1. The intent of this paper is to provide recommendations for the best way forward including the Army Interactive Module 2 (AIM 2) system and Army Human Resources Talent Management to best maximize individual officer assignment preference, needs of the Army and officer retention. With a goal of the right officer in the right job, the Army Talent Alignment Process (ATAP) is only going part way to truly revolutionize military officer assignments and career progression. This paper will address how to best maximize officer and unit participation in the unit market place. Additionally, it will provide recommendations to encourage officers to both remain in the military and consider traditionally undesirable assignment locations.

## **INTRODUCTION**

2. Following input from the Talent Management Task Force, US Army Human Resources Command (HRC) is currently executing the AIM 2 and ATAP systems for officers moving in the summer of 2020. Active Duty US Army Officers relocating in the summer of 2020 are currently experiencing this fully interactive market place for the first time. While this market does provide increased transparency for officers and units with open positions, there are still many challenges that have not been fully addressed. This paper will address those challenges with the new AIM 2 system and provide recommendations to continue improving talent management and officer retention.

## **DISCUSSION**

3. The 2020 AIM 2 system does increase officer and unit transparency by listing all available officers and validated open positions in the market place.<sup>1</sup> However the system fails to clearly display measured strengths and weakness of those officers or clearly define the value of market job openings based on career progression as outlined in DA PAM 600-3. The AIM 2 system currently depends on officers' self-professed knowledge, skills, and behaviors (KSBs)<sup>2</sup> for units to evaluate how well an officer will fit into their organization. The system does not provide officers or units a true measure of officers' future potential based on their previous Officer Evaluation Reports (OER). This problem is two-fold; first, it does not give the officer a clear view of their own previous performance when viewed against their peers. Second, the units who are ranking officers

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<sup>1</sup> United States Army Human Resources Command. "My Talent Market Place." Last accessed 15 October 2019. <https://aim.hrc.army.mil>.

<sup>2</sup> United States Army Talent Management Task Force. "Talent Management" Last accessed 20 October 2019. <https://talent.army.mil>.

to fill their own vacancies have no visibility or metric to determine officers' prior performance.

4. To address this short fall, AIM 2 should incorporate feedback to officers on their previous performance compared to their peers. This will encourage officer self-reflection and self-comparison among their peers. Using this information, officers are more informed to make decisions about assignment preferences to best meet their career goals. Without an accurate understanding of their previous performance compared to their peers, officers are not able to honestly evaluate their own competitiveness for certain positions that may complement their KSBs. Historically, HRC has not provided officers with their rank in an order of merit list (OML) of their peers, as there is no perfect way to enumerate all officers. To implement this method, an officer will be placed into four sub-categories based on previous performance and positions held. This will take into account officers who were placed in historically more competitive positions, such as nominative positions, and produce a score. Officers will then be able to sign into their AIM 2 page and see their current standing and also receive updated scoring when a new Officer Evaluation Report (OER) posts to their file.

5. In the current system only units and officers are able to express their preferences, potentially not providing the best utilization of an officer's KSBs. Giving a voting power to assignment officers in the AIM 2 market place would allow a neutral party to have input on what positions best match the officers in their population. Assignment officers not only know the officers in their supported populations, but they can also see those officer's OERs and know their goals, both personal and professional. Giving assignment officers a vote will enable both units and officers to narrow the positions they should focus on. The challenge with the truly open market place is the sheer volume of positions and officers involved. Allowing assignment officer input can greatly assist moving officers in narrowing their effort on positions that meet their own KSBs and align with their personal and professional goals. This is not intended as a forcing function on an officer to re-rank their assignment preference, but would provide the officer with even more information as they make their decision. The current implementation of AIM 2 is negating the role of the assignment officer, a key individual who has the greatest understanding of officers and the assignment process. The Army career model guideline, DA PAM 600-3, highlights the amount of information and career advice an assignment officer can provide,<sup>3</sup> yet the ATAP seems to be reducing the role of assignment officers in the process.

6. The goal of ATAP and AIM 2 is for officers to have greater agency and control in their careers and assignments.<sup>4</sup> The goal of empowering individual officers and units to advocate for themselves in an open market setting, to best match officer's talents with

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<sup>3</sup> United States, Secretary of the Army. *Officer Professional Development and Career Management*. DA PAM 600-3. Washington, DC: Chief of Staff, 2019, 21.

<sup>4</sup> United States, ASA M&RA. *HQDA EXORD 145-19, Annex A*. Washington, DC: Deputy Chief of Staff G-3/5/7, 2019. 1-3.

unit needs is an important vision that still faces some challenges in realistic implementation. Another opportunity to increase transparency is to allow officers to see units who preference them low or did not submit a preference. In the current system officers only receive positive feedback, meaning they only see when units do preference them. The AIM 2 system does not provide both positive and negative feedback. The more information available to officers allows them to make more informed future decisions. This is also another tool to allow officers to again narrow their considered postings. If an officer is able to see a unit has ranked them low they are then better able to reconsidered other possible units and locations. Negative feedback is also a way to increase dialogue between assignment officers, units, and moving officers.

7. In the ideal market place officers will only consider the unit, its mission, and how it aligns with their own knowledge, skills and behaviors. In reality, however, many other factors go into officer preferences. A key challenge that remains unaddressed in the current ATAP system is how to best ensure officers preference units that are located at historically unpopular locations. This also relates to the importance of ensuring talent distribution across all units and locations. The AIM market test case from summer 2019 movement preferences provides strong indications of officers' preferences for certain locations. The test case illustrates that Eglin Air Force Base, Florida is a highly desired location. On the contrary, Fort Polk, Louisiana and South Korea were two of the least desired locations.<sup>5</sup> When HRC reviewed the officer preferred locations compared to the total number of positions available at each location, the data provided clear evidence that it is unrealistic to be able to match officers' preferences based on location alone. As a result, units at typically undesirable locations are at a disadvantage when attempting to recruit talented officers to their organizations.

8. Traditionally unpopular locations should be incentivized to enable those units to receive an equal interest from talented officers. One method would be to utilize a variation of an existing Homebase/Advance Assignments Program (HAAP). This is designed to allow an officer to be posted to unaccompanied tours, Korea as an example. The officer either chooses to leave their family at their current assignment or pre-selects their top three follow on assignments to allow their family to move ahead.<sup>6</sup> Applying a similar model to locations like Fort Polk would allow officers to preference more desirable (and often hard to get) assignments for their next posting and would incentivize ranking less traditionally desirable locations. In this version of the HAAP the officer would be permitted to move their family to both locations however. This is a great tool to encourage officers to preference less desirable locations that may match their talent.

9. Another way to incentivize locations could be through pay tied to Brevet promotions. The HQDA Exord 145-19 plan calls for utilizing a Brevet promotion system

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<sup>5</sup> United States, Army Human Resources Command, Officer Personnel Management Division, *AIM 2 Market Place Training*. Fort Knox, KY: OPMD Chief, 2019. 20.

<sup>6</sup> United States, Secretary of the Army. *Officer Assignment Policies, Details and Transfers*. Army Regulation 614-100. Washington, DC: Chief of Staff, 2019. 17.

to allow high performing officers to apply to fill positions above their current rank. If accepted, officers will both wear the rank and receive the pay commensurate with that rank as long as they are in that specific position. From the rank of Captain to Colonel there are 770 positions identified as priority fills for this program.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps this system could be more successful if tied to actual early promotion and career advancement for high performing officers. This could be a method to reduce the rigidity of the current promotion and time-based systems used by the US Army and allow junior officer talent to be recognized and those officers more immediately progress. There is currently a commitment within HRC that 25% of the Brevet positions will be to traditionally undesirable locations as an incentive.

10. As the US Army looks at ways to increase and sustain the force, more creative retention tools will need to be considered. If more flexible family leave encourages and allows more talented officers to remain in the military then this seems like a very possible solution. If a more liberal family leave policy was implemented in a way that reduced the perceived negative career impacts for men and women, this could be a strong tool to retain more senior Captains. An example of more liberal family leave policy is the Canadian Forces Maternity and Paternal leave policy. This policy allows service members to take from 18-37 weeks of flexible family leave.<sup>8</sup> The Canadian system also has fewer negative impacts on officer career progression, partly due to their lack of up or out policy, as the US system currently enforces. When examining generations Y and Z there is a higher importance placed on flexibility and family than compared to the baby boomers.<sup>9</sup> Adding more liberal family leave gives young officers more flexibility and the ability to better balance their personal and professional goals. This will also better align with how US society is changing in this regard.

11. Another common complaint causing officer to leave the service is the lack of advanced civilian schooling opportunities. This leads to many talented officers exiting the military to pursue a graduate opportunity and then seek civilian employment.<sup>10</sup> Access to advanced civilian schooling opportunities is currently extremely limited in the US Army. Senior Captains have more options to easily use veterans benefits for full time civilian schooling if they leave the military at that point in their career than if they remain on Active Duty. While Human Resources Command does advertise fully funding graduate programs, there are a very limited number of opportunities, and as a result, they are extremely competitive. Many officers also feel they do not have the time or the career

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<sup>7</sup> United States Army Human Resources Command, "Brevet Promotions" Last accessed 23 October 2019. <https://aim.hrc.army.mil/portal/officer>. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Canada. Department of National Defense. DOAD 5001-2, *Maternity and Parental Benefits*. Ottawa: DND Canada, 2000. Ch.3.

<sup>9</sup> McMahon, Christopher and Colin J. Bernard, "Storm Clouds on the Horizon, Challenge and Recommendations for Military Recruiting and Retention," *Naval War College Review* 72, no. 3 (Summer 2019): 91.

<sup>10</sup> Barno, David and Nora Bensahel, "Can the U.S. Military Halt Its Brain Drain?" *The Atlantic*, 5 Nov 2015. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/11/us-military-tries-halt-brain-drain/413965/>

progression model that supports them to pursue these programs. Providing more options for officers to have a break in service or increasing civilian funded programs in lieu of Command and General Staff College could be used as an incentive for top performing officers. The current ATAP does address a goal of adding the GRE to the current Captains Career Course,<sup>11</sup> but takes no further steps to generate education opportunities.

12. For the upcoming FY 20 boards, the Army is allowing officers in the rank of Captain through Lieutenant Colonel that meet very specific circumstances to opt out of upcoming promotion boards.<sup>12</sup> This program does not go far enough, however. The current career model for the US Army works on the principle to prepare as many officers as possible to be competitive for Battalion Command. This system currently requires officers to follow a strict timeline and complete key development positions in a set order to align with their base year of commission and the set timeline for their promotion. This need for officers to be competitive for battalion command is at odds with how the Army outlines a successful career of 20 years and achieving the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. Relatively fewer officers are actually needed and in the end, selected for battalion command positions<sup>13</sup>. There is little room for a more flexible officer timeline model unless the strict requirements to be considered for battalion command are changed or a new model is adopted. This model could look at allowing officers, as early as their 5-6 year of service, to opt into or out of a command competitive category. This would allow officers to continue to serve who do not desire to become battalion commanders. By allowing junior officer to select a career path they open up more options for themselves to move beyond the traditional strict route to battalion command.

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<sup>11</sup> United States Army Talent Management Task Force. "Talent Management" Last accessed 20 October 2019. <https://talent.army.mil>.

<sup>12</sup> United States Army Human Resources Command, MILPER 19-313, *Eligibility Criteria for Officers Requesting to Defer Promotion Consideration (Opt Out) for the FY20 LTC ACC PSB*. Issued 01 October 2019. <https://hrc.army.mil/milper/19-313>.

<sup>13</sup> United States, Secretary of the Army. *Officer Professional Development and Career Management*. DA PAM 600-3. Washington, DC: Chief of Staff, 2019, 21.



## CONCLUSION

13. As with civilian intuitions, the military needs to adjust talent management and retention strategy as society changes. Overall the US Army has identified that its current system of officer assignment and promotion is not sustainable going forward, and is investing considerable effort to improve its talent management and retention strategy. The US Army developed the Talent Management Task Force to improve transparency and identify ways to reward and retain talented officers. The TMTF can further achieve its goals by increasing the involvement of Assignment Officers, offering more civilian education opportunities, implementing a more liberal parental leave policy and re-evaluating how the HAAP is currently used and apply this already existing program to historically undesirable locations. The Brevet promotion system is currently scheduled for implementation, but should be expanded to promote high performing officers earlier and fill key positions. The US Army has started to address talent management and is quickly implementing changes to allow officers to have more options in their own careers. With the addition of ATAP, talent management will continue to improve.

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