Understanding Assessments and their Relevance to the Future Success of the U.S. Army

Lt. Col. Anthony "Tony" Bianchi, U.S. Army

Today the U.S. Army is in a war for talent. The continued existence of an all-volunteer force rests on the Army's ability to win this war by appropriately managing its number one resource—people. The director of the Army's Talent Management Task Force (ATMTF), Maj. Gen. Joseph P. McGee, highlights how industry leaders talk about the war for talent regarding the management of their people. "That 'war on talent' is going to be a decisive factor on how we fight future wars. One of [the Army's] strengths

Assessments pertain to a successful implementation of a new talent-based personnel system for the Army.

According to Army Regulation 623-3, *Army Evaluation Reporting System,* evaluation reports are "independent assessments of how well the rated Soldier met duty requirements and adhered to the professional standards of the Army's Officer Corps or NCO [Noncommissioned Officer] Corps within the period covered by the report."[2] It is easy to conflate the terms of evaluation and assessment when defining an evalua-

> "Evaluations provide snapshots of performances that are mostly subjective, whereas assessments provide objective data on an officer's knowledge, skills, and behaviors."

is the people that we bring in and the leaders that we develop."[1] To address this, the Army is moving away from an industrial-age personnel management system and toward a twenty-first-century talent management system, beginning with the officer corps. The legacy system, built on the tenets of strength management, is data-poor, driven by rigid timelines, and focused on the institution. The new information-age talent management system is data-rich, flexible and transparent, aligns personnel based on talent, and places the preferences of the individual at a premium.

Assessments are critical components of a twenty-first-century talent management system that supports the Army enterprise for a few reasons. First, assessments facilitate the collection of granular data needed to drive more informed decisions on personnel by the institution. Next, the use of assessments throughout an individual's career will collectively drive behavior throughout the ranks in a positive way. Third, data collected from assessments gives the Army a better way to identify gaps in its human capital necessary to dominate a peer threat in large-scale combat operations within a multi-domain, highly contested environment.

Before going in depth on each of these key points, one must understand the difference between evaluations and assessments, the various types of assessments, and the unavoidable shift in mindset across the Army as a result of this new culture of assessments.

tion in regulations. This conflation of terms within the Army's doctrine amplifies the lack of understanding about assessments throughout the Army and perpetuates angst about this new culture of assessments.

There are key differences between assessments and evaluations that need to be understood in order to buy into this new culture. Evaluations provide snapshots of performances that are mostly subjective, whereas assessments provide objective data on an officer's knowledge, skills, and behaviors (KSBs). Assessments provide a standardized lens through which to compare individuals of the same rank across the Army; evaluations compare individuals within a constrained population dictated by the echelon and criteria of the senior rater. Assessments go through a rigorous scientific validation process and are reliable to provide accurate and detailed talent data on an individual. Evaluations have no extensive validation process and rely heavily on the experience of the senior rater's opinion to gauge the talent and potential of the rated individual. However, a senior rater's experience-based opinion combined with the observed performance of the rated individual during the rating period is still very important and should have the majority of the input on that individual but not the sole input. Evaluations should and will remain a huge part of the talent management process and, combined with assessments, provide a holistic view of an officer.

The use of assessments throughout an officer's or an NCO's career creates a major paradigm shift. The legacy personnel system placed special emphasis on physical fitness, hyper-compliance, and staying the course on a traditional combat arms career path. A new system would still value physical fitness and meeting commander's intent but will also value individual cognitive and noncognitive abilities, communication skills, and career path flexibility as important, if not arguably more important, than physical fitness. The Army is very comfortable with the use of assessments in the physical fitness realm but very uncomfortable with using assessments in the intellectual realm.

In 2019, the Army instituted the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) at all the Captains Career Courses (CCC), mandating that all officers attending the CCCs take the GRE. The purpose of the GRE is to measure an individual's ability to succeed in his or her first year of graduate school. Specifically, the GRE measures verbal reasoning, quantitative reasoning, critical thinking, and analytical writing skills.[3] The GRE mandate garnered mixed reviews across the Army including those from senior leaders. One high-ranking general officer made the comment, "Jomini never took the GRE."[4] One could argue that Jomini never took the Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT) either, but the current culture in the Army has no problem conducting and using the APFT as a physical assessment. This simply illustrates the mindset change that must occur across the Army at every rank to acknowledge that what someone has above the shoulders is just as important, if not more important, than what someone has below the shoulders. The bottom line is the Army needs to become comfortable valuing intellect as much as physical fitness, especially as rank increases.

Furthermore, assessments are not something new or a surprise in Army culture. In addition to the APFT, multiple assessments already exist in the Army. Examples include the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery implemented in 1976 and the Tailored Adaptive Personality System implemented in 2009.[5] The Army uses both assessments during the recruiting process to determine the best career choice for the soldier when enlisting in the service. For decades, the Army Rangers, U.S. Army Special Forces, and other elite special mission units utilized assessments as part of their overall selection and assignment processes. The idea of using assessments to gain more insight on an individual before making a personnel decision is not an entirely new concept for the Army.

Assessments only work if utilized for their intended purpose. Assessments fall into one of the three categories based on their validated purpose. The three types of assessments are developmental, diagnostic, and predictive. Developmental assessments focus on the individual and provide individuals with information about themselves in the form of strengths and weaknesses for personal development. Diagnostic assessments inform the institution on how to guide and develop an organization toward meeting organizational job requirements. The institution uses predictive assessments to make assignment and selection decisions and can also have a developmental and diagnostic purpose as well.[6] However, there must be a balance between the amount of developmental and diagnostic feedback given to the individual and institution respectively while protecting the security and integrity of the predictive assessment.

Examples will better explain the usage of the three types of assessments. For developmental, a writing assessment taken at the CCC or at the Command and General Staff Officer College (CGSOC) Intermediate Level Education informs select officers that their written communication is weak. Those officers can elect to participate in self-development activities to better their written communication ability. For diagnostic assessment, a writing assessment taken at the CCC informs the Combined Arms Center that a majority of captains across the Army are weak in written communication.

Lt. Col. Anthony "Tony" Bianchi, U.S. Army, is a field artillery officer attending the National War College at Fort McNair, Washington, D.C. He holds a BS from the U.S. Military Academy and an MS from George Mason University. Recent assignments include chief of assessments on the Army Talent Management Task Force and commander of 3rd Battalion, 314th Field Artillery in First Army Division East. Bianchi also served with 17th and 214th Field Artillery Brigades, the 82nd Airborne Division, and the 3rd Infantry Division. He also taught in the Department of Systems Engineering at the U.S. Military Academy and achieved assistant professor status.

Officers who were selected by the board to participate in the Battalion Commander Assessment Program pilot conduct standardized testing July 2019 at Fort Benning, Georgia. (Photo courtesy of the Army Talent Management Task Force)

The result is a change in the curriculum across all CCCs to improve upon this aggregate gap. For predictive assessment, a writing assessment taken at the Battalion Commander Assessment Program (BCAP) informs the selection process that an officer is strong at written communication and adds objective support to this officer's selection on the O5 Centralized Selection List (CSL). After understanding the difference between an evaluation and an assessment, the three types of assessments, and comprehending the culture shift that must occur throughout the Army, one can now begin to grasp why assessments are so critical to a modern-day talent management system for the Army.

The first reason why assessments are essential to the implementation of a new talent management system for the Army is that assessments facilitate the collection of granular data needed to drive more informed decisions by the institution on its personnel. In 2019, two major Army talent management initiatives made their debut. The first was the Assignment Interactive Module 2.0 (AIM 2), otherwise known as the assignment marketplace. AIM 2 is a web-based information system designed to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of the officer management process and facilitate communication between soldiers (e.g., officers and warrant officers with talents), units (e.g., commanders with requirements), and the Officer Personnel Management Directorate.[7] AIM 2 ensures that assignment decisions are made using as much accurate data as possible and employ a regulated market mechanism to better match officer talents to unit requirements.[8] The other initiative is the BCAP. BCAP is the U.S. Army's new selection process that assesses an officer's fitness for battalion command. During the BCAP, officers take a series of cognitive, noncognitive, physical, verbal, and written assessments. They also participate in psychological

interviews and conduct interviews with a "blind" panel of senior Army officers. Officer BCAP scores, combined with an officer's standing on the CSL order of merit list, will inform a new order of merit list.[9] In both cases, data from assessments was or will become a major factor to drive the successful execution of each initiative.

As AIM 2 matures into the Integrated Personnel and Pay System–Army, individuals will be able to use

at the number of above-center-of-mass or most-qualified-block checks an officer received in his or her last five evaluations, how well an officer did in key and developmental positions as a major, and the enumeration and stated potential by the senior rater in the first and last sentence of the soldier's narrative portion on each evaluation. The BCAP provides more vectors of information to assist in this selection of battalion

> Assessments given to officers at their precommissioning source, professional military education venues, and key milestones such as battalion- and brigade-level command selection will undoubtedly influence the behavior of officers in their self-development.

data from assessments to validate self-professed KSBs. Units can also use assessment data in the marketplace to objectively measure potential hires. Additionally, assessment data obtained by the individual for developmental purposes can, at the discretion of the individual, foster engaged discussion with units and influence an individual's preference in the marketplace based on known strengths. In the past, assignments were products of career managers at Human Resources Command. Career managers used data inputs from officer evaluation reports and officer record briefs to align "top" officers with career paths of their predecessors who were also successful officers under the legacy system. This process had very little transparency and gave little emphasis to officer preference and aligning talent. Assessment data will influence preferences for both the individual and unit inside the Army Talent Alignment Process, the cornerstone of the AIM 2 marketplace. The result is a data-rich assignment marketplace that places the preferences of the individual at a premium while placing the right person in the right job at the right time all the time.

Much like the usage of assessments throughout an officer's career will change the culture of the Army, the BCAP changed the way the Army selects its lieutenant colonel CSL positions. Historically, battalion commander selection was an outcome from a board that spent less than two minutes reviewing an officer's file. During this cursory review, the board primarily looked

commanders or what Gen James C. McConville, the fortieth chief of staff of the Army, calls "the seed corn for the Army's future strategic leaders."[10] The result was a data-rich, holistic analysis and a more informed decision by the institution to select officers to fill, arguably, the most consequential leadership positions in the Army: battalion commanders. As BCAP continues to refine and imbed itself as the routine process of selecting battalion commanders going forward, the behavior of officers coming through the ranks should change as well. In September 2020, the Army executed the inaugural Colonel Command Assessment Program, the brigade-level version of BCAP. Similar to BCAP, the Colonel Command Assessment Program will change the way the Army selects its colonel CSL positions and ultimately drive the behavior of the officer corps as well.

A career-long assessment structure will collectively drive behavior throughout the ranks in a positive way. Assessments given to officers at their precommissioning source, professional military education venues, and key milestones such as battalion- and brigade-level command selection will undoubtedly influence the behavior of officers in their self-development. Similar to how the APFT, and more recently the Army Combat Fitness Test, became part of Army culture and drove the soldier population to work on various techniques to improve select physical skills, career assessments will do the same for improving intellectual and communication skills.

Collaborative efforts are already underway between the ATMTF, the Combined Arms Center, the Office of Economic and Manpower Analysis at West Point, and the U.S. Army War College to ensure a synchronized career assessment program for Army officers. This career-long officer assessment structure begins with giving assessments to all cadets at their precommissioning sources and continues with touch points at all the professional military education venues as well as key milestones like battalion- and brigade-command selection. The purpose of these assessments varies between developmental and predictive. Assessments tend to be more developmental early in an officer's career and more predictive later in his or her career. However, all the assessments have the ability to provide diagnostic data to the Army in a de-identified aggregate manner as needed.

From 2013 to 2016, West Point piloted another talent management initiative: talent-based branching (TBB). The case for TBB was to optimize workforce productivity by aligning cadets with the branch that had the best fit for their talent.[11] TBB uses a market concept with cadets preparing and submitting resumes on the supply side and branches articulating job requirements on the demand side in an effort to determine the best fit for both sides.[12] A key element in making TBB work is the Talent Assessment Battery (TAB). The TAB measures "the cognitive and noncognitive skills, knowledge and behaviors of each relative to their peers and across the branches' talent demands."[13] The assessment data collected on cadets from the TAB combined with the legacy order of merit list information derived from academic, military, and physical performance paints a more holistic picture of the individual. The data from the TAB as part of the TBB process enables the Army to better align cadets with their initial branch choice commensurate with the cadets' and branches' informed preference. Today, TBB is in full implementation at the U.S. Military Academy, Reserve Officers' Training Corps, and Officer Candidate School.

Assessment efforts at the Basic Officer Leader Course, CCC, and CGSOC are predominantly developmental and used to facilitate guided self-development. Data from these assessments will facilitate mandatory discussions between officers and their small-group instructors performing coaching duties using the "leader as coach" methodology as part of guided self-development. There will also be at least one predictive assessment at CCC and CGSOC. The predictive assessment at CCC will equip officers to make informed assignment decisions along a preferred and predictive career pathway. The predictive assessment at CGSOC will influence the key developmental assignment process upon graduating CGSOC. Data from all assessments will also facilitate voluntary interaction with a professional, International Coach Federation-certified coach as part of the Army Coaching Program to make an officer more self-aware. In this scenario, officers have the discretion to share data from developmental assessments with these professional career coaches to create individual development plans and review career options as they pertain to their KSBs and preferences.

The ATMTF and the Center for Strategic Leadership at the U.S. Army War College are working together to provide a predictive assessment at the senior service college level. Since 2018, the Center for Strategic Leadership piloted an assessment instrument that assesses strategic potential of officers in terms of their promotion potential to general officer and slating at the enterprise level. The goal in the next year or two is to have a validated assessment that can assist the Army in building cognitive dominant teams at the enterprise level that can win against a peer threat during large-scale combat operations in a highly contested and ever-changing multi-domain environment.

Data collected from assessments gives the Army a better way to identify gaps in its human capital necessary to dominate peer threats in the future. A May 2020 article from the Army News Service highlights the commander of the Army Futures Command, Gen. John M. Murray, as he emphasizes that having select talent within the Army ranks is the key to filling and executing successfully in multi-domain operations. Specifically, the article stated, "The Multi-Domain Task Force is a model of how the Army envisions joint-warfighting on future battlefields against near-peer competitors, like Russia and China. Before the Army activates additional formations, though, Murray said it will first need the right talent to fill the ranks."[14] Multiple expert opinions on the subject of warfighting in the next fifteen to twenty years revolve around heightened technology and the ability of one side to better leverage technological advances across a multi-domain battlefield.

Col. Joanne C. Moore gives a presentation on talent-based branching 16 March 2017 during the 7th Annual Army G-8 Women's Symposium at the Pentagon, Arlington, Virginia. The process uses a battery of assessments to help cadets determine their branch preferences and best fit. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army)

Cyber expertise, nanotechnology, artificial intelligence, data science, and robotics are just some of the technical domains the Army will need to hone and build a bench in order to win future wars. Degrees and certifications in certain disciplines may provide the Army with a decent snapshot of technical competencies, or the lack thereof, within its personnel inventory. However, assessment data collected on individuals over time will be able to give Army leaders a better idea of the personnel that possess the leadership attributes necessary to acquire, integrate, and analyze technology on the battlefield in an efficient manner. The Army will need technologically savvy leaders who are able to decipher large amounts of information rapidly to make decisions and flourish in a decentralized environment.

Right now, the Army's ability to conduct a human capital inventory is only an inch deep and relies mainly on officer record brief information such as rank, education level, discipline studied in college, military schooling, skill identifiers, language proficiency, and previous assignments. Assessment data can provide much more detail to help the Army cover a blind spot and aid in the talent management process.

Having an accurate inventory of personnel and associated talents can assist in the resource alignment and guidance for recruiters, the Reserve Officers' Training Command, and the U.S. Military Academy. As requirements for the Army grow to meet the needs of multi-domain operations, the need for more assessment data on individuals is paramount to shaping the force for the future. Transforming civilians to work in basic branches like infantry, armor, field artillery, and logistics is not the problem. Finding the right personnel who wear an Army uniform at echelon and building depth in certain technological fields is the conundrum. Assessment data is essential to solving this problem.

This article explained the basics of why assessments are essential to the Army's new twenty-first-century talent management system; assessments facilitate the

collection of granular data needed to assist the Army in making better decisions on its people. Assessments given throughout soldiers' careers will positively drive the collective behavior of personnel. Data collected from assessments provides the Army with an understanding of its people's KSBs so the Army can better manage the force. This article also explained the difference between evaluations and assessments, the various types of assessments, and the unavoidable shift in mindset across the Army as a result of this new culture of assessments. Understanding these fundamentals about assessments will hopefully alleviate some of the tension or concern that exists about the implementation of assessments throughout the Army.

The Army will continue to refine its career-long-assessments approach to the officer corps and look to implement the same with its warrant officers and NCO corps. Assessments are and will continue to be one of the main bridges between the industrial age, data-poor legacy system built on performance management and quantity distribution to the information age and the data-rich talent management system centered on talent alignment and individual preference. In reference to the new talent management system, McGee stated during an Association of the U.S. Army Institute of Land Warfare breakfast in 2019, "The institutional requirements are to bring people in and to take a unique understanding of their knowledge, skills and behaviors and preferences, what we call talents, and use that [understanding] over a career to manage them, so they can most contribute to the mission of the United States Army. It's a simple recognition to this question, 'Who's the best officer in the room?' The answer is, 'What job are you considering them for?'"[15] Assessments are the only way the Army can accurately answer that question through a detailed understanding of its number one resource—people. ∎

Notes

1. "319th ILW Breakfast-MG Joseph P. McGee-Nov. 14 2019," YouTube video, 38:16, posted by "Association of the U.S. Army," 14 November 2019, accessed 4 January 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OFu0RAhtrH8.

2. Army Regulation 623-3, *Evaluation Reporting System* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2019), para. 1-9, accessed 4 January 2021, https://ssilrc.army.mil/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/AR-623-3-Evaluation-Reporting-System-14-June-2019.pdf.

3. "About the GRE General Test," ETS, accessed 4 January 2021, https://www.ets.org/gre/revised_general/about.

4. A senior leader made a comment about Jomini never having to take the Graduate Record Exam during an Army senior leader update on talent management initiatives in February 2020.

5. "History of Military Testing," Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB), accessed 4 January 2021, https://www.officialasvab.com/history_res.htm. According to the official site of the ASVAB, the ASVAB was first introduced for usage in the military in 1968 and later adopted by the Army in 1976; David Vergun, "Personality Test Helps Ensure Civilians are Compatible with Army Life," Army.mil, 19 May 2015, accessed 4 January 2021, https://www.army.mil/article/148691/personality_test_helps_ensure_civilians_are_compatible_for_army_life.

6. The definitions of developmental, diagnostic, and predictive assessments were developed and agreed upon by the Office of Economic and Manpower Analysis, Army Research Institute, Center for the Profession and Leadership, and the Army Talent Management Task Force in preparation for a brief to the chief of staff of the Army in March 2019.

7. "Assignment Interactive Module 2.0 (AIM 2)" (online presentation, U.S. Army Human Resources Command, Officer Personnel Management Directorate, April 2017), accessed 8 January 2021, https://www.hrc.army.mil/site/assets/directorate/OPMD/What%20is%20AIM%202.pdf.

8. Ibid.

9. Deputy Chief of Staff G-1/Army Talent Management Task Force, "Battalion Commander Assessment Program," STAND-TO!, 6 December 2019, accessed 4 January 2021, https://www.army.mil/standto/archive_2019-12-06/.

10. James C. McConville and J. P. McGee, "Battalion Commanders Are the Seed Corn of the Army," War on the Rocks, 23 December 2019, accessed 4 January 2021, https://warontherocks.com/2019/12/battalion-commanders-are-the-seed-corn-of-the-army/.

11. Michael J. Colarusso et al., *Starting Strong: Talent-Based Branching of Newly Commissioned U.S. Army Officers*, Officer Corps Strategy Monograph Series, vol. 9 (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, 2016), 13, accessed 15 January 2021, https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/1013690.pdf.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid., 25.

14. Thomas Brading, "Talent Management Key to Filling Future Specialized MDO Units," Army.mil, 21 May 2020, accessed 4 January 2021, https://www.army.mil/article/235813/talent_management_key_to_filling_future_specialized_mdo_units.

15. "319th ILW Breakfast-MG Joseph P. McGee-Nov. 14 2019," YouTube video, 38:16.