U.S. Army Sgt. Traice R. Prentice, a U.S. Army Explosive Ordnance Disposal technician from the 707th Ordnance Company (EOD), prepares a Skyraider Unmanned Aerial System during field testing at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington, Sept. 1, 2021. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. 1st Class Jeremy M. Walsh)

Maintaining the Leader Advantage in Future Multi-Domain Operations

By Sgt. Maj. Jeffrey A. Guida

Eighth Army

"In a post-pandemic era of great power competition, people, as key enabler[s] of American readiness, will only become more critical" (Moore & Martinez, 2020, para. 12)

An all-volunteer military is no stranger to recruitment and retention challenges. The global pandemic, political tensions, lure of the civilian sector, and challenges of keeping up with ever-evolving technology are obstacles hindering today's recruiting needs. However, to be successful with tomorrow's weapons and equipment, today's leaders must take immediate steps to secure requisite national talent and skills. Army leaders must understand the future operational environment and improve policies to recruit and retain talented Soldiers to maintain the advantage in multi-domain operations (MDO).

Future Operational Environment

The U.S. Army continues to procure and operationalize technology to leverage its advantages over adversaries. The future operational environment will be complex, fluid, and encompass all domains to include emerging technology such as artificial intelligence and autonomous systems (AI/AS).

U.S. Army Lt. Col. Brian R. Miletich, commander of 1st Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment (Airborne), 173rd Airborne Brigade, gives instructions to his Soldiers during live-fire training as part of Exercise Eagle Storm at Croatian Army range "Eugen Kvaternik" in Slunj, Croatia, Sept. 21, 2021. (U.S. Army photo by Elena Baladelli)

Artificial Intelligence and Autonomous Systems

Artificial intelligence and autonomous systems are already prevalent in today's society. From smart homes to self-driving cars, they have evolved and integrated continuously for convenience (West & Allen, 2018). This advanced technology is already operational in several military applications. From unmanned aerial attacks to unmanned ground vehicle reconnaissance, these modern systems add a crucial dimension to the battlefield but require skilled operators to monitor them, conduct maintenance, and establish parameters, boundaries, and commander's intent. Some national defense strategists believe China is already on par with the U.S. in military AI/AS capabilities (Hodge et al., 2020). To maintain the advantage in MDO, the U.S. Army must recruit and retain Soldiers who understand and integrate these systems as well as leverage the increasing role of the cyber and space domains.

Current Army Retention and Recruitment Challenges

The U.S. Army faces difficult obstacles in not only increasing the force, but also increasing the talent base. According to Maj. Gen. Joseph McGee, former director, Army Talent Management Task Force, "At the core, what we're trying to do is to move the Army from a very industrial age approach to how we manage people" (Seffers, 2020, para. 3). Three areas that can be adapted and improved on to entice current and future talent are compensation, family stress, and eligibility.

Compensation

The Army has recently taken strides to improve Soldiers' quality of life and promotion programs, such as implementing the tenant bill of rights (assurances of safe, quality, and well-maintained housing) and shifting to evaluation boards over promotion boards; however, they have

yet to keep up with the pay compared to the civilian sector (Tilghman & Copp, 2018).

Family Stress

Because of a high operational tempo/rotation schedule, Soldiers and their families may experience frequent periods of stress from long separations and numerous moves. Every time a family moves it must consider spousal employment, adjusting to a new community, the financial strain of relocating, and stress on their children (Lilley, 2018). This is also compounded by the fact that many Soldiers spend a large amount of time away from their families during deployments causing missed milestone events such as births/birthdays, graduations, and anniversaries.

Eligibility

The U.S. Army must draw from the same societal pool as civilian sector employers. Two areas where prospective recruiting falls short are physical fitness and a lack of focus on prior service. According to Mcmahon and Bernard (2019), the largest discriminator is that 27% of applicants cannot meet fitness standards due to obesity. They also claim the Army's policy on recruiting prior-service Soldiers is restrictive and hinders the Army from attaining high-quality potential Soldiers.

Enticing Tomorrow's Leaders Today

To bolster recruitment and retention, the Army should focus on improving the previously mentioned areas and implement or adjust policy to focus on recruiting the nation's top talent.

Improve Compensation

The Army should continue to increase Soldier base pay but must incentivize unique skills and talents with special pay that would further influence talented people to join the military rather than work in the private sector. Furthermore, the Army should invest more of its budget on retaining talented, well-trained Soldiers who contribute to the mission.

The Army should also capitalize on professional certifications such as Security+ and Project Management Professional (Project Management Institute, n.d.). Professional certifications and targeted education will increase the Army's desirability and afford investment in long-term success.

Reduce Family Stress

As the Army's charge is to fight and win the nation's wars, the requirement for training or deploying will always be necessary. This need will continue to cause stress to family units. However, because much of MDO can be executed from any location, especially AI/AS and cyber, the

Army can mitigate some stress by decreasing separations and PCS moves. Minimizing how often a family moves, and the associated stressors, could greatly benefit job satisfaction and increase Soldiers' probability of re-enlistment. Incorporating less human-on-human interactions, could save money through fewer deployments and family moves, while leading to higher retention rates.

Adjust Eligibility

Since obesity in the general population is on the rise, the Army can implement a Pre-Basic Training Fitness Program that would place potential Soldiers who meet all other enlistment requirements except fitness into a special reception battalion focused on holistic fitness and health for two months prior to basic training. This way recruits would have a better opportunity to complete basic training and be a force multiplier (Guida, 2021).

Additionally, the Army should update its policies on recruiting prior-service members. Prior-service Soldiers are a unique asset to the Army not only because they have experience and education from their prior service, but they may also have earned civilian experience and education, which can multiply their talent and benefit the Army's mission. McMahon and Bernard (2019) state "The military needs to adopt a comparable policy and reward prior-service candidates with exceptional performance and accomplishments outside the services by re-enlisting them at a higher rank" (p. 93). If the Army exerts more focus on prior-service Soldiers who are capable of supporting MDO, they can quickly fill and maintain a pool of talented Soldiers.

Conclusion

Recruiting and retention challenges are a normal part of military operations but are now more significant as the level of talent must meet the level of technology. As the future of war shifts into MDO, Army leaders must understand the future operational environment, current recruitment and retention issues, and improve policies to entice talented Soldiers to join and remain in order to retain the talent advantage in MDO.

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