

Navy Seeks Total Human Asset Visibility

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In support of operation Iraqi Freedom, Seaman Jerry Portillo, USN, monitors the auto tracking management console in the Combat Direction Center aboard the USS John F. Kennedy. Transformational efforts in the U.S. Navy include consolidating some ratings where training and duties overlap.

Knowledge, skills and ability become cornerstone of transformation.

The U.S. Navy is laying the keel of a human capital strategy that ultimately will make the service more robust and agile while simultaneously offering career opportunities unlike any seen in the past. Success of the initiative depends on the Navy's ability to integrate its active duty, reserve and civilian components; to create and catalog job descriptions; and to match sailors' knowledge, skills

and abilities to the tasks at hand. The transformation is putting the Navy in a state of constant readiness to fight the war on terrorism, provide humanitarian aid, defend the homeland and support stability operations.

Leading the development of this strategy for the massive overhaul of the Navy's human resources schema is Rear Adm. (Sel.) Scott Van Buskirk, USN, commander, Task Force Total Force. The task force operates under the auspices of the Office of the Chief of Naval Personnel, Washington, D.C. All the work the task force is conducting is part of the process of integrating the force into what Adm. Van Buskirk calls the total force. The Navy components comprise approximately 366,000 active duty personnel, nearly 145,000 reservists and more than 175,000 government civilian employees. The admiral allows that examining all and revamping some human resources processes will increase the operational availability of personnel, a critical goal for the services.

The initiative began in June 2004 when Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Vern Clark, USN, challenged the Navy's personnel department to create a plan for managing, growing, developing and sustaining its work force. The time is right for the Navy to develop a human capital strategy because it is currently "winning the war for talent," Adm. Van Buskirk says. Attrition is down and retention is up, "but the question is, Are we retaining the people with the right skills? We're now in a position to focus on getting the right people, maintaining the right people and enrolling the right people," he notes.

The first steps are developing a database of the knowledge, skills and ability (KSA) required for jobs and assessing the KSAs of the naval work force. This will allow the Navy to determine whether military or civilian personnel are the best fit for a job and which individuals have the right mix of skills. On the larger scale, units will be able to put together the right blend of people to carry out the organization's mission. It is only by identifying the KSAs that the Navy can build a competency-based staff and ultimately offer and award incentives based on performance, the admiral explains.

This massive evaluation is not as easy as creating a simple job description, Adm. Van

Buskirk admits. “We’re talking about hundreds of components to describe each job. There is the personnel side of it—the five-vector model of our person—but then there is the job itself. There may be 50 different skills that we believe are necessary for a specific job. Not everybody’s going to have 50 of those 50 skills; the person may have 45. But then we can, through distance learning for example, improve the match and close the gap,” he explains.

Navy personnel records include a sailor’s duty stations and education, but the strategy’s cataloging approach will incorporate many more details. “We’ve always had a database of personnel; we’ve had multiple databases of personnel, and that’s been one of the issues. This foundational work is based on knowledge, skills and ability and is providing a framework. I don’t know if ultimately there will be a single database, but the information will be common so that we understand the skill sets to do a particular job and we can determine the best person for the job.

“In addition, we can advertise those jobs in that way. A competency-focused work force will allow us to do a lot differently in terms of compensation and incentives. We can offer incentives based on competencies and based on performance. It also provides a much more flexible system and will allow the service to respond rapidly to demands from the joint world,” he says. This is a radical change to how billets were filled in the past, the admiral notes, when many of the assignment decisions were based primarily on a person’s reputation and fitness reports.

The new system is going to create what the chief of naval operations calls the “power of choice.” First, because job qualifications will be detailed, people interested in a position will know if they already qualify or need additional skills. This transparency may prompt personnel to acquire new knowledge and skills through education, for example, because they will know that by taking a class or acquiring a certification they could be in a better position to get the job they want, the admiral explains. They also will be able to vie for positions based on their unique skills and abilities. This approach creates a marketplace of talent, he adds.

On the flip side, personnel with the right KSAs for a job will be in a better position to negotiate compensation. Although the pay system dictates the financial aspects of posts, Adm. Van Buskirk points out that compensation also refers to other benefits. “Compensation for you might be that you don’t have to move for 12 years so your kids can stay in certain schools or you and your family can keep the same medical care. There’s stability there, and that’s a benefit. The CNO calls that a ‘cafeteria of compensation’ because you’re appealing to a different reward than money. We have found that it isn’t all about the money. Sometimes people want to stay in a job, not be transferred and use their skill sets,” he explains.

In addition, the KSA approach will proffer benefits to military personnel who separate from the service. Because job descriptions will be based on national occupational standards, veterans will be able to describe their skills to potential employers in terms that are common to the civilian workplace. For example, someone separating from the Navy as a lieutenant holding a specific position on a ship or shore station would have “middle management experience,” a term civilian employers recognize.

“We’re not creating anything new. In fact, we’re trying to reduce the number of differences or to better qualify them so they’re better understood in terms of occupational standards in the work force. That linkage is critical to what we’re doing,” the admiral states. All of these

changes will make the Navy a competitive employer of choice in the marketplace, he adds.

As the team evaluates both the billets and personnel, it is using five principles in its assessments. Alignment to the total force is the first pillar. “It’s not just about active duty. It’s the whole force—officers, enlisted, reserve, contractor, civilians. All too often, our default goes to officers because that’s what we tend to know best, but we can’t do that. We have to consider a whole total force mix if we’re going to get it right,” Adm. Van Buskirk states.

The focus on competencies is the second guideline. Concentrating on skills and abilities rather than on job titles injects flexibility and will improve the Navy’s ability to meet the capability demands of the commands and joint forces.

The third pillar of the work is consideration of the professional and personal growth of personnel. Opportunities will be available for acquiring new skills, and ratings in several areas will merge, creating what Adm. Van Buskirk calls a “hybrid sailor.” The service also will develop flexible and timely accession processes, the admiral declares.

Advancing a culture of performance-based incentives is the fourth principle of the strategy. The KSA indexing will assist in this area and will link achievement to reward for both individuals and Navy units. Among the elements in this category are personnel excellence, fitness and ethos.

The final pillar of the human capital strategy is creating an agile organization. “Agility is a word that’s being bandied about, but it is just an adjective. It’s speed, agility and adaptability, and we’re really trying to put teeth in that in our processes. What we have to be able to do in the manpower world is be able to respond rapidly to a capability demand. No one can define future work, but we found we could look at what the future work environment is going to be. When you look at the environment, you see the trends, and you know it’s going to change. If you know it’s going to change, you’ve got to adapt, and you know that whatever process you’ve got has to be adaptive,” Adm. Van Buskirk says.

To achieve this adaptability, the Navy is attempting to change its manpower processes. Once it understands the competencies its work force does and does not possess, it can determine whether a demand for a capability in Iraq or in Guantánamo Bay, for example, can be met by naval personnel or must be provided by a contractor. If the service finds that it must turn to a contractor to fill an immediate need, it will then determine if it wants to grow the capabilities within the active duty or civilian force for the future or to continue to rely on contractors.

“It’s developing those processes that allows you to make those choices, and that’s where the information technology [IT] systems come in. This transformation, getting robust IT systems for our human resources, is critical. And that isn’t easy,” Van Buskirk adds.

As with all of the services, the reserve component is and will continue to play a major role in meeting demands. The KSA assessments began simultaneously with the active duty enlisted force and in the reserve community. The admiral believes it is important to have a system that is agile enough to bring in reservists with specific skills quickly when and where they are



Naval reservists participate in a multinational exercise from their stations onboard a P-3C Orion. Reservists increasingly are taking part in exercises alongside their active duty counterparts. The Navy’s human capital strategy aims to better integrate the active duty, reserve and civilian components of the service.

most needed.

“Reservists come with skill sets that may not be resident in our active duty component or may not be needed all the time but are needed at critical junctures. Part of this knowledge, skills and ability database effort is to capture the unique skill sets they develop outside of the service, like software engineering or knowledge management. Language skills are another perfect example. It is important to understand who has the language skill, and culture skills could be just as important. For example, when the tsunami occurred, wouldn't it have been nice to know that there's this whole group of reservists who are specialists in Indonesia? They understand the culture. We don't have the ability to identify that yet, but we're getting there,” Adm. Van Buskirk notes.

All of the elements of the human capital strategy will support the various building blocks of Sea Power 21. An inventory of the competencies of the total force will improve the sea-shore interface for a variety of missions, the admiral says, including stability operations that could prevent conflicts.

In addition, the effort will help identify how the various services can work together. “There are competencies that we all have—they're stronger in some services than others—and we've got to take advantage of those, and that's something that we're looking at as well as those that we want to have common among all the services. We're going to try to get at that a little bit more. Is it protection? Is that a core competency that we want? Is it being able to communicate at a certain level? Clearly, we're seeing that there are some competencies that we'd like all of our people to be able to have at some level. The knowledge of what complements each other and where we have shortages or gaps is the key,” he says.

The team faces some challenges in this effort. Because the Navy's components have operated as stovepipes in the past, some barriers must be surmounted, but the admiral believes that the service has sufficient momentum to accomplish this.

Technology is another challenge. “It's not like this has been done at this magnitude before. It's a tall order when we've had probably hundreds of different databases used for different functions. To get rid of the legacy databases and bring them into a much more robust and agile system takes an investment, and we've got to be willing to make that investment because it is one that will pay off. It's a challenge. Divorcing yourself from legacy systems is not easy. It's a matter of the timing, and it's about when you turn them off and turn them on, but you sometimes have to cut the cord,” he says.

The admiral adds that communication is critical and is always a challenge. If the changes that will occur are not communicated correctly or at the right time, the result can be false expectations or fear in the workplace. The task force is working hard to ensure that this issue is addressed, the admiral maintains.

Sea Warrior is the delivery vehicle for the human resource strategy. Adm. Van Buskirk says that the strategy should be ready in approximately two years; however, segments of the overall effort are already in place for the enlisted component. “We're not waiting to have all the communities in place. We're launching them along the way,” he states.

Web Resources

Department of the Navy Human Capital Strategy: www.hq.navy.mil/mra/NavyPub%207%20July%2004.pdf

Navy Personnel Command: www.npc.navy.mil/channels

SIGNAL Magazine
<http://www.afcea.org/signal/>