

Are We Managing, Mismanaging, or Hoarding Talent?

An Experience-Based Perspective

By Sergeant Major Gedney P. Riley

The Army uses the term “talent management” to describe the assignment processes at the enterprise level. Similarly, senior leaders use the term when slotting individual Soldiers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) into line-numbered positions based on their skills at the organizational level. Army talent management (ATM) is the comprehensive approach by the Service to manage the careers of Army personnel by focusing on the development, utilization, and retention of talent within the organization. ATM is a people-centric strategy that aims to maximize the potential of each Soldier, officer, and civilian professional by aligning their knowledge, skills, and behaviors (KSB) with the needs of the Army.¹ While ATM sounds logical in theory, it is flawed in execution and application. Challenges with personnel management at the enterprise level and below plague the ATM process. This article examines several ATM challenges from an active-duty enlisted perspective.

Talent

Leaders often use the word “talent” in diverse ways when discussing people, but what exactly is talent? According to the *U.S. Army Talent Management Strategy: Force 2025 and Beyond*, talent “. . . is the intersection of three dimensions: knowledge, skills, and behaviors (KSB) that creates an optimal level of individual performance, provided individuals are employed within their talent set.”² What does that mean? The Army Office of Economic and Manpower Analysis (OEMA) created the standard Army definition of talent, which states that it is the “. . . unique intersection of skills, knowledge, and behaviors in every person [that] . . . better suit them to some development and employment opportunities than others.”³ The OEMA definition leads one to believe that effective talent management should easily occur at echelon; however, that is not the case, and the current enlisted assignment market only increases talent management challenges.

The Enlisted Market Construct and Talent Management Paradox

ATM is fraught with obstacles, and the existing systems and processes often hinder rather than help. The enlisted

assignment market presents many challenges, including the mismatch between Soldier skills and unit requirements and the limited opportunities for Soldiers to pursue their career goals. These challenges can lead to frustration, disillusionment, and decreased job satisfaction among Soldiers, undermining the ability of the organization to retain and develop its most talented personnel.

Under the current concept, the enlisted assignment market is a one-way market that allows NCOs to view available job openings and make preferences for those openings from 1-to-n.⁴ The market aligns participants based on the individual’s year-month availability to move, grade plate, and military occupational specialty. It does not account for additional skills or language identifiers (even though the market displays them); therefore, excluding certain specific locations/specialties, the system can place NCOs on assignment without the requisite skills or language.

Another unintended consequence of the market is the ability for NCOs to make assignment decisions that can be detrimental to their career. Assignment managers and talent management NCOs can only recommend which assignments the individual should avoid; however, individual preference outweighs professional development considerations. The enlisted marketplace is simply talent distribution rather than talent management.

Despite Human Resources Command (HRC) aligning individuals against job openings at the brigade level, the reality is that the orders of the HRC send them to the gaining installation and nothing lower. Once the individual arrives at the gaining installation, installation strength management can assign inbound personnel as necessary. This often leads to talent and skills mismanagement.

Talent and Skills Mismatch

Upon arrival at the gaining installation, strength management and senior leaders locally manage individual talent. This is where talent mismanagement frequently enters the process. Installations often haphazardly assign NCO talent to open positions without examining individual skills, goals, or professional development. This approach often

leaves specialized skill gaps unaddressed as strength managers allocate individuals with talent and the appropriate KSBs to other areas. This type of mismanagement occurs regularly at numerous installations. Instead of assigning NCOs with additional skill identifiers (ASIs), such as L6—Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear (CBRN) Reconnaissance for brigade combat teams or L3—Advanced Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear, and Explosives (CBRNE) Enabler to the units with the need, strength managers often assign these specialized NCOs to organizations with no valid L6/L3 requirement. The U.S. Army Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear School (USACBRNS) leadership witnesses mismanagement as they travel to different camps, posts, and stations, where they often receive complaints about the lack of ASI-qualified personnel and its negative impact on proficiency and readiness. When asked to provide ASI strengths at those same installations, HRC frequently discovers that the necessary number of Soldiers with those ASIs are allocated to units conducting CBRN gas chamber training, serving as rifle cadre, filling CBRN NCO staff roles, occupying immaterial positions, or functioning as borrowed military manpower. The appropriate personnel are present at the installation, but they are assigned to the wrong positions. Although ASI management is widespread across the force, the most severe form of talent mismanagement lies with rating officials who render inaccurate or over-inflated evaluations.

Rating officials for NCO evaluation reports have the ability to prevent one form of talent mismanagement. Raters and senior raters must ensure that NCOs receive evaluations based on their actual performance, rather than on perceived merit or favoritism simply because they are considered “good individuals.” Raters and senior raters must accurately and objectively document when NCOs underperform or if they have reached their maximum potential. Failing to do so dilutes the quality of the NCO pool. It allows poor-performing NCOs to continue along the path of mediocrity or, even worse, receive a promotion over someone much more deserving. Conversely, raters and senior raters who have NCOs with superior talent must appropriately rate that talent and then allow those talented NCOs to move on when the time comes.

Organizational Talent Hoarding

Commanders and command sergeants major at echelon aim to build their teams with gifted Soldiers, NCOs, warrant officers, officers, and civilians. Organizational leaders want to enable success “down and in,” and a way to do that is by stacking the proverbial talent deck in favor of their organization. However, this practice often conflicts with an individual’s career progression and development. In other words, the organization benefits while the individual bears the cost. Leaders frequently retain personnel based on demonstrated performance without regard to career progression or leader development. Senior leaders regularly make statements such as, “I can’t afford to let Staff Sergeant X leave because they are my only land and ammo NCO,” or “this NCO is critical to the battalion operations section and excels

at their job,” to justify retaining personnel instead of allowing them to move on to more career-enhancing positions, even after devoting significant time to the organization. This perspective is flawed for several reasons.

First, relying on a single individual for the success or failure of an organization highlights a significant issue in leader development. If one person is so vital to the organization that they can never afford to get sick or take leave and must be on call 24 hours a day, something is wrong. However, in most instances, the reality is that most leaders are simply more comfortable with a known entity than with someone new whose work ethic, commitment, and values are unknown. Instead of taking a chance on a new individual and developing them where necessary, leaders often revert to the easy choice—hoarding the talent. Stagnating a person simply because they are exceptionally good at their job is not an appropriate or effective way to cultivate talent.

Second, talent hoarding is counterproductive to the principles of talent management. To truly develop talent, organizations must provide opportunities for growth, training, and education to help individuals achieve their career goals. Department of the Army (DA) Pamphlet (PAM) 600-25, *U.S. Army Noncommissioned Officer Professional Development Guide*, outlines the positions and assignments that each career management field deems as critical or beneficial to leader development. During performance and professional growth counseling, raters and senior raters review DA PAM 600-25 with the rated NCO to determine which jobs and development opportunities the NCO needs for career advancement.⁵ Many times, these growth opportunities exist outside of their current organization. These same raters and senior raters hoard NCO talent and do not provide individuals a chance to capitalize on leader development opportunities in different units. These mixed messages lead to confusion and weakened individual development.

Prioritizing the organization over the individual is reasonable if there is a need. However, there are many instances in which senior leaders refuse to allow NCOs to transfer units, even if their current unit is overstrength at grade and specialty. Currently, some divisions in the operational Army face shortages in certain brigades while being overstrength in others. Cross-leveling personnel at grade within installations could resolve manning concerns. Organizational leaders must consider the personal and professional implications of manning decisions on individual personnel while simultaneously prioritizing the overall needs and objectives of the organization, striking a delicate balance between individual interests and organizational requirements. In his article, “Operationalizing Talent Management,” Charles L. Montgomery states that effective talent management at the organizational level is a blend of art and science.⁶ Organizational goals can easily overshadow the needs of individual team members. To genuinely foster talent, leaders should prioritize individual growth when the situation allows. This is not simply good practice—DA PAM 600-25 specifically directs leaders and Army HRC talent managers to thoughtfully balance individual interests with the broader requirements of the Army.

Improvement Plan


How do we get better at managing talent Army wide? It starts with engaged senior leadership. While there is little that leaders can do to impact the enlisted market and its associated challenges, engaged leadership can impact the way in which NCOs make their market preferences, possibly preventing negative career decisions. Taking the time to review market assignments with subordinate leaders and discussing the career implications of each can go a long way toward helping to improve talent management from an assignment perspective. While the market might still assign the NCO to a less favorable position, it at least allows the individual NCO to make more informed choices in an attempt to better manage their own talent.

Senior leaders can also address the personnel imbalances across units and ASI mismanagement on their installation. Leaders who manage low-density personnel, such as the division CBRN sergeant major in the case of career management field 74, should work with the Chemical Branch at HRC to identify all of the 74Ds on the installation and their current unit of assignment. Once identified, strength managers can reassign overstrength Soldiers to understrength units via intradivision transfers or through coordination with HRC for movements between different commands. Understanding the entire population of the career management field on a camp/post/station will assist in correcting ASI mismanagement.

Most importantly, senior leaders must ensure that raters and senior raters are properly educated on the correct way to render appropriate ratings on evaluations and the effects inflated ratings have on the entire enlisted cohort. A robust leader professional development program aimed at the evaluation process is an exceptional way to address the NCO evaluation report problem without creating undue influence on rating chains. The USACBRNS leadership and proponent offices conduct targeted leader professional development for professional military education students (the Basic Officer Leader Course and the Captain's Career Course for officers, and the Advanced Leader and Senior Leader Course for NCOs). Emphasis is placed on mastering evaluation writing and understanding its consequential impacts. Continued evaluation emphasis through leader professional development once professional military education students return to the operational domain will reinforce the importance of evaluations and lead to a much-needed shift in the rating culture.

Conclusion

Currently, talent management within the Army has significant room for improvement. Challenges such as inefficiencies in the assignment system, inconsistent skill utilization across installations and units, and the tendency to hoard high-performing individuals hinder the ability of the Army to effectively develop and utilize human capital. However, senior leaders play a critical role in achieving a solution. A thorough understanding of Soldier strengths and a deliberate effort to match those

strengths with the right opportunities are essential to maximize potential. Specifically, effectively managing NCO talent requires dedicated leader engagement and a detailed, individual assessment of capabilities. It is not just about unit readiness; it is also about investing in the careers of Soldiers, strengthening the Army, and serving the Nation. Effective talent management is a responsibility shared by all leaders, and the future strength of the force depends on a collective commitment to improve it. 

Endnotes:

¹The U.S. Army Talent Management Strategy: Force 2025 and Beyond, DA, 20 September 2016, <<https://talent.army.mil/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Army-Talent-Management-Strategy-Force-2025-and-Beyond.pdf>>, accessed on 1 April 2025.

²U.S. Army Talent Management Strategy: Force 2025 and Beyond, DA, 20 September 2016, p. 4, <<https://talent.army.mil/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Army-Talent-Management-Strategy-Force-2025-and-Beyond.pdf>>, accessed on 1 April 2025.

³Kent M. MacGregor and Charles L. Montgomery, "Talent Management: Right Officer, Right Place, Right Time," U.S. Army, 5 January 2017, <https://www.army.mil/article/179947/talent_management_right_officer_right_place_right_time>, accessed on 4 April 2025.

⁴Sean Kimmons, "Army Moves Forward with Enlisted Talent Management," U.S. Army, 26 February 2021, <<https://www.army.mil/article/243731>>, accessed on 2 April 2025.

⁵DA PAM 600-25, U.S. Army Noncommissioned Officer Professional Development Guide, 11 September 2023.

⁶Charles L. Montgomery, "Operationalizing Talent Management," U.S. Army, 31 August 2022, <<https://www.army.mil/article/259624>>, accessed on 3 April 2025.

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