

Information-Age Talent Management

Some opportunities to jumpstart change

by Maj Tyler C. Quinn

Regardless of the place in history or the technologies employed, the “human dimension is central in war.”¹ The 2018 *National Defense Strategy (NDS)* recognizes this fact and establishes clear objectives with supporting lines of effort.² The Marine Corps has begun several efforts and the *38th Commandant’s Planning Guidance (CPG)*, supplemented by *Force Design 2030*, aggressively marks several organizational and technological objectives. However, the *CPG* plants the flag firmly by stating, “Everything starts and ends with the individual Marine.”³ Therein lies the problem: as the Marine Corps rapidly changes its structure, develops innovative concepts, and acquires advanced equipment and munitions, the personnel system is still based on an Industrial-Age model. The current personnel system assumes a linear approach and focuses on a standard career track resulting in opportunity costs. The Marine Corps can best implement the strategic guidance in the *NDS* by applying an Information-Age talent management system to recruitment, training and education, and assignments.⁴

The Marine Corps must find potential applicants with both the physical grit and mental dexterity necessary to win in complex and uncertain environments. It should pursue individuals with skills and aptitudes critical to operating in dynamic operations where tactical means and ways often result more directly in strategic impacts. The current Industrial-Age model seeks individuals with skills and attempts to align those with a particular specialty. Instead, the Marine Corps needs to investigate the model proposed by investigative report-

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er David Epstein. In his recent book, *Range: Why Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World*, Epstein posits that we need “more people who start broad and embrace diverse experiences and perspectives while they progress.”⁵ This is not to say that the Marine Corps does not need specialists; rather, we need to be more purposeful about finding generalists—people with broad experiences who are more agile in an increas-



The Marine Corps requires individuals with the mental dexterity, physical toughness, and—above all—the skills critical to operating in complex, dynamic, and uncertain environments. (Photo by Cpl Thomas Mudd.)

ingly complex world. This concept will achieve two of the key lines of effort identified in the NDS, increasing lethality and agility as well as achieving greater performance and affordability.⁶ By changing the way it recruits, the Marine Corps will develop a greater pool of talent to mature through more innovative training and education.

The Marine Corps' recent publication of *MCDP 7, Learning*, demonstrates a recognition of the need to adapt toward an Information-Age model through focusing on the learner.⁷ Marines need to have a broader scope of common abilities (e.g. marksmanship, vehicle operator, etc.). By generalizing

organization needs to encourage informal societies, put the controversial problems into their hands, and resource them to conduct research and experimentation. An example of leveraging grassroots initiatives is the Marine Maker program, which uses crowdsourcing to design and refine schematics for three-dimensional printing parts. These plans are then approved by Headquarters Marine Corps Systems Command, and units are then authorized to print replacement parts on station versus waiting on a slow supply chain. Marine Maker is a very practical example, but it serves as a success story for flattening the organization to achieve tempo and connect end-user

is highly complex, and the suggestions made here are cursory at best. Time and resources need to be leveraged, and quickly, to move the Marine Corps into the Information-Age and implement the NDS with the best and most fully qualified individuals possible.

The NDS adroitly points out, "The creativity and talent of the American warfighter is our greatest enduring strength, and one we do not take for granted."¹² Humans invent and employ the tools or design and deploy the teams. We have been in the Information Age for nearly four decades, but the Marine Corps personnel systems remain in the Industrial-Age. The greatest way the Marine Corps can contribute to achieving competitive advantage, and implementing the NDS is through aggressively adjusting recruitment, training and education, and assignments to an Information-Age model.

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more broadly, they can fulfill multiple roles and adapt to a rapidly changing and complex environment. The *CPG* recognizes, "We must be equal or better than this threat by pushing combined arms to the squad."⁸ The Army special operations forces provide a good example of this model. Their teams are comprised of highly trained individuals, and each one fulfills more than one key billet on a team. The Marine Corps could achieve greater lethality and agility by moving to a training model more similar to special operations forces. In practice, this would be lengthening entry-level training and localizing some training and qualifications. The future operating environment and NDS objectives require a more versatile individual to be able to operate in much smaller teams with greater roles and responsibilities than the U.S. military has been accustomed to. Education is the other side of the same coin and supplements training by ensuring Marines know how to think. The Marine Corps should seek to "deliver performance at the speed of relevance" by encouraging and resourcing informal innovation groups through the Marine Corps University.⁹ The or-

solutions more directly with higher authorities. The final element to implementing the strategic guidance in the NDS is how the Marine Corps assigns individuals.

The current Industrial-Age model is highly centralized and results in too much opportunity cost. The Marine Corps can leapfrog the Army as they refine the Integrated Personnel and Pay System-Army. The commander and the unit require more influence in the assignment process to achieve greater lethality, performance, and affordability.¹⁰ Using civilian hiring models, like *ZipRecruiter*, the Marine Corps can allow units to conduct a cursory screening process of available candidates who submit their resumes to a central database with oversight from Headquarters Marine Corps Manpower Branch. The *CPG* discusses using financial incentives, but that is not the only, nor the main motivator for individuals.¹¹ The main goal should be to recognize skills, place people in an area to contribute, and not try to force a parochial vision of growth and development that often leads to high rates of turnover and burn-out. The issue of talent management

Notes

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, (Washington, DC: 1997).
2. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy*, (Washington, DC: October 2018).
3. Gen David H. Berger, *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: July 2018).
4. *Summary of National Defense Strategy*.
5. David J. Epstein, *Range: Why Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World*, (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2019).
6. *Summary of National Defense Strategy*.
7. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 7, Learning*, (Washington, DC: 2020).
8. *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance*.
9. *Summary of National Defense Strategy*.
10. *Ibid*.
11. *Ibid*.
12. *Summary of National Defense Strategy*.

