

Talent Management

Harvest the high hanging fruit

by LtCol Kevin Chunn

In March 2020, the 38th Commandant of the Marine Corps released *Force Design 2030*; the sweeping changes described in the report implies the need for a new way to conduct enlisted first-term talent management in order to assemble a Purpose Built Force that will serve as the Nation's Stand-In Force of choice.¹ *Force Design 2030* will require a significant departure from how the Marine Corps conducts first-term retention in order to limit missed opportunities and galvanize a diverse formation capable of thriving in the gray zone.² The Marine Corps needs to commit to identifying the best and most qualified candidates at the intersection of first term reenlistment. One approach is to rank all Marines across the Marine Corps in a single First-Term Alignment Plan (FTAP) tier.

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The goal of talent management is to recruit and retain quality Marines. Marine Corps Recruiting Command is tasked with acquiring new enlisted talent, but every Marine has the implied task of cultivating these talented young Marines in order to retain those of the highest quality for continued service. First-term reenlistment is the last significant opportunity the Corps has to shape a future force. Annually, Marine Corps Recruiting Command delivers a new cohort of approximately 33,000 applicants to recruit training to begin the process of earning the title of Marine, the majority of which are assessed

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with four-year service contracts. By design, the Marine Corps only reenlists 24 percent of each first-term cohort to the career force at the end of their initial contract.³ This relatively low first-term retention requirement creates a distinct advantage in the degree of selectivity the Marine Corps has in comparison to other Services.⁴

This article first frames the current talent management environment, discussing *Force Design 2030* divestment during a period of national economic insecurity and their effects on retention.

The second part offers two recommendations to assist with first-term retention efforts and cast a 2030 Purpose Built Force: Enlisted First-Term Tier Retention System and Lateral Move options.

Talent Management Environment

Enlisted first-term talent management efforts should support the Marine Corps' retention campaign by retaining Marines with proven performance and demonstrated potential.⁵ Retaining the most qualified Marines from across the Marine Corps for the career force must be the end state. By look-

ing at *Force Design 2030* divestments, the national economy, and first-term retention processes as one shot-group, it becomes clear that competition for reenlistment is about to get tougher.

Force Design 2030

Force Design 2030 divestment of nearly 12,000 Marines creates a talent management opportunity. When military organizations undertake modernization programs, it is expected that the changes will produce a far more lethal system than its previous version.⁶ *Force Design 2030* is the Corps' modernization program that seeks innovative ways to overcome threat capabilities.⁷ However, the critical component of innovation is people—and talented people innovate. Therefore, it is crucial during the divestment that the first-term retention system has the ability to both identify all available talent and the agility to retain high quality (HQ) talent, no matter their MOS. This is especially important for Marines assigned to MOSs with planned divestment. Every Marine must understand that the Marine Corps will always place a premium on retaining and retraining actual HQ Marines over low-quality MOS specialists.

Economic Uncertainty

While the COVID-19 pandemic is first and foremost a health care crisis, it is also having significant effects on the national and world economy. The uncertain outlook on the economy, combined with the volatility across

financial markets, will continue to challenge national job security. The U.S. Labor Bureau's March survey announced a national unemployment rate of 4.4 percent.⁸ The most extreme market forecasts caution, and COVID-19 induced unemployment rates could rise to heights not seen since the Great Depression.⁹ In more recent history, the Marine Corps benefited during periods of high unemployment. During the financial crisis of 2007–2008, the Marine Corps expanded end strength to 202,000, while national unemployment reached 10 percent.¹⁰ As long as the economic recovery remains uncertain, the Marine Corps will likely experience better-qualified pools of applicants for both accession and retention—as seen in other times of high unemployment rate.¹¹ That being said, an increase in requests should generally benefit the talent management effort.

First-Term Retention

As the Marine Corps slims down, Marines retained for a second enlistment need to be capable of doing more than just their MOS. MOS proficiency is important, but HQ candidates should also be on track for promotion to staff sergeant and qualified for Special Duty Assignment (SDA). First, FTAP is primarily designed to support the career staffing of each individual MOS while standardizing promotion tempo across all MOSs.¹² Therefore, each MOS focuses their talent scan inward, and retention choices are limited to the best available within each cohort. This siloed approach to talent favors retaining MOS capability over bringing in a qualified HQ Marines from another MOS. Second, when the Marine Corps chooses to reenlist a first-term Marine for another four years, they are investing in future staff sergeants. In FY19, the average time in service for selection to staff sergeant was 7.1 years.¹³ Third, the Corps requires a significant quantity of Marines to serve in SDAs outside of their primary MOS. There is zero indication that SDA requirements will decrease as the Corps becomes leaner. This will actually require a denser population of Marines qualified to thrive on SDAs.

Computed Tier Score Method and Weights		
Component	Max Score	Max Weight
Rifle Marksmanship Score	350	16.3%
CFT Score	300	14%
PFT Score	300	14%
Average Duty Proficiency: _____ x 100	500	23.3%
Average Conduct: _____ x 100	500	23.3%
MCMAP Belt Points	100	4.7%
Meritorious Promotion	100	4.7%
	2150	100%

Figure 1. (Figure provided by author.)

Purpose Built Force through First-Term Retention

Committing to transformational change in talent management requires peeling open the MOS silos to “get the right people on the bus,” “get the right people in the right seats,” and “get the wrong people off the bus.”¹⁴ This section challenges leaders to consider the 76 percent of first-term Marines that were not retained. How could the Marine Corps’ wide view of first-term talent increase the operational readiness of the Corps, and what is the risk if nothing is changed? Here is one specific example

at retention and promotion together at the intersection of first-term reenlistment, MOSs may retain Marines that the Corps will likely not promote. In order to seize the *Force Design 2030* induced opportunity for second-term talent management, two areas should be of focus: development of a first-term cohort-wide tier system and leveraging lateral moves.

First-Term Tier Assessment

The Marine Corps Tiered Evaluation System is the foundation for identifying quality first-term Marines for retention.

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to underscore the need to expand the Corps talent scan: During the FY19 staff sergeant promotion board, a total of 225 promotion spaces across 55 MOSs were left short (unfilled) by the promotion board (three MOSs only filled half of their allocations), and all 55 MOSs had an eligible quantity greater than allocation. This example is most unfortunate but real. It is not meant to disparage but to call out the seams that exist between how the Marine Corps views talent differently at retention and promotion. Therefore, without looking

The computed tier system introduced in 2011 added an objective component while retaining the subjective recommendations from the Marine’s chain of command.¹⁵ The Computed Tier process uses seven attributes to generate an individual score for each first-term Marine (Figure 1). The Marines’ individual scores are binned by MOS, and all members of that specific cohort are assigned a Tier value of one through four (Figure 2 on next page). Although the policy change was an improvement over the “first to volunteer” program,

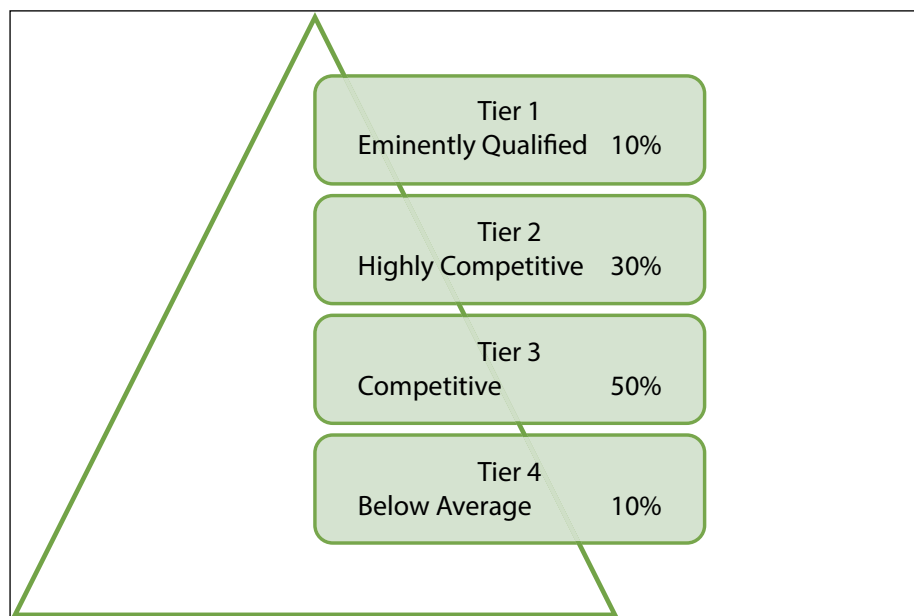


Figure 2. (Figure provided by author.)

the current tier retention system has challenges. Namely, the tier system is not a comprehensive predictor of future performance and provides a siloed talent assessment by MOS cohort.

First-term retention is an investment in future Staff Sergeants.¹⁶ Marines will be eligible for staff sergeant during their second enlistment. However, the tiered score for retention decisions consists of

seven weighted quality attributes (Figure 1), which are nearly identical to the enlisted composite score (Figure 3) used to qualify Marines for promotion to corporal and sergeant.¹⁷ Even considering *MARADMIN 612/19*, which softly aligns the promotion to sergeant near the beginning of a second enlistment period, the tiered composite score must remain forward looking.¹⁸ Using junior

enlisted quality attributes to select the future career force will create missed opportunities. Reenlistment is also an investment in SDA candidates. Therefore, a Marine requesting reenlistment who prequalifies for at least one SDA should have a weighted advantage over a like peer that is not qualified for any SDAs.

Finally, a second-tier composite score should be added to encompass the entire first-term reenlistment cohort in order to supplement the current MOS tier score. A two-tier view illuminates HQ Marines that are buried in a MOS cohort saturated with HQ Marines (Figure 4 on next page). For example, a low-performing MOS cohort (center) could reenlist all tier 1 and 2 Marines, but, in reality, they could be retaining mostly tier 3 Marines by the Corps-wide standard. Conversely, a tier 3 Marine in a high-performing cohort could be a solid tier 2 for the Corps and still grade higher than 90 percent of the Marines in the low-performing cohort. Without a tier comparison to help inform first-term retention decisions, the quality differences may not become noticeable until Marines are compared to peers during the staff sergeant promotion board.

Lateral Moves

Force Design 2030 divestment of some complete MOSs will require picking winners and losers in order to retain HQ Marines and manage the quality of all MOSs. Therefore, this potential surplus of talent creates another opportunity to get the right people in the right seats. Currently, lateral moves are primarily reserved for first-term Marines, in a closed MOS, and are only eligible to compete for boatspaces in open MOSs (space left vacant by the community). This fencing off of lateral moves to fast filling MOSs can create a missed opportunity. Under *MARADMIN 612/19*, a low-performing MOS cohort could meet 100 percent of FTAP goal with supposedly all tier 1 and 2 Marines only to have this same cohort struggle at their first promotion board. Therefore, consideration should be made to invest qualified HQ Marines into fast filling MOSs with low-performing

Composite Score	
1.	Rifle Marksmanship Score
2.	PFT Score
3.	CFT Score
4.	Subtotal of line 1+2+3
5.	General Military Proficiency (GMP) (Subtotal in line 4 divided by 3)
6.	GMP Score from line 5 _____ x 100
7.	Average Duty Proficiency: _____ x 100
8.	Average Conduct: _____ x 100
9.	TIG (months) _____ x 5
10.	TIS (months) _____ x 2
11.	Special Duty Assignment Bonus _____ x1
12.	Special Education Bonus (max of 100 pts)
a.	MarineNet/Marine Corps Institute/Extension School _____ x 15
b.	College/College Level Examination Program/Vocational _____ x 10
13.	Command Recruiting Bonus (max of 100 pts) _____ x 20
Total Composite Score (sum lines 6 through 13)	

Figure 3. (Figure provided by author.)

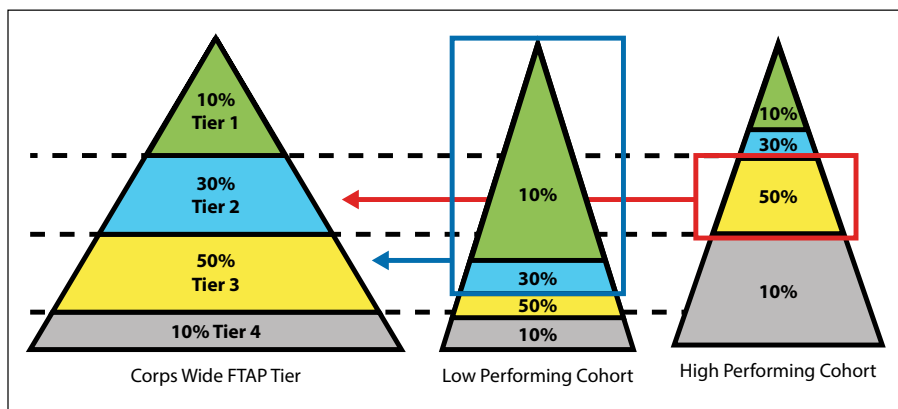


Figure 4. (Figure provided by author.)

cohorts. *Force Design 2030* should be used as an opportunity to strengthen the talent portfolio of each MOS. Each MOS has a different capacity for risk, but comfort-based decisions will not support transformational change.

Conclusion

Force Design 2030 is the Marine Corps modernization program that will cast the Corps as the Nation's Stand-In Force of choice. During this transformation, the Marine Corps will likely have access to a surplus of talent due to numerous internal and external influences. The Marine Corps needs to commit to identifying the best and most qualified candidates at the intersection of FTAP to capitalize on this opportunity. For every high-performing Marine that the Corps reenlists over a low-performing Marine, there will be consequences—some greater than others. The Corps needs to weigh these consequences and the risks it is taking against the risks and consequences associated with missing this opportunity. By modernizing the first-term tiered retention system to include a Corps-wide tier and expand lateral move opportunities, the Marine Corps can ensure the right career force Marines are on the bus and in the right seats. Without a new approach to first-term retention, the Marine Corps could miss an opportunity for a bountiful harvest of talent.

Notes

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Force Design 2030*, (Washington, DC: 2020).

2. Ibid.

3. Congressional Research Service, "Defense Primer: Active Duty Enlisted Retention," (Washington, DC: January 2020).

4. Ibid.

5. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MARADMIN 227/19, FY2020 Enlisted Retention Campaign*, (Washington, DC: May 2019).

6. Bernard Loo, "The Challenges Facing 21st Century Military Modernization," *PRISM*, (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, August 2019).

7. *Force Design 2030*.

8. Staff, "State Employment and Unemployment Summary," *U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics*, (August 2020), available at <https://www.bls.gov>.

9. Miguel Faria-Castro, "Back-of-the-Envelope Estimates of Next Quarter's Unemployment Rate," Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, (March 2020), available at <https://www.stlouisfed.org>.

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11. Lauren Malone and Adam Clemens, "The Impacts of Budget Cuts on Recruit Quality and the United States Marine Corps: Executive Summary," (Alexandria, VA: CAN Analysis Solutions, September 2013).

12. *MARADMIN 277/19*.

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14. Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap ... And Others Don't*, (New York, NY: Harper Business, 2001).

15. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MARADMIN 273/11, Commandant Approved Updated Reenlistment Procedures*, (Washington, DC: 2011).

16. *MARADMIN 277/19*.

17. Current composite formula is under revision. See Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCO 1616.1: Junior Enlisted Performance Evaluation System (JEPES)*, (Washington, DC: 2020).

18. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MARADMIN 612/19, Announcement of Authority for Early Reenlistment, Delegation of Reenlistment Approval Authority, and Changes to Promotion Requirements Policy*, (Washington, DC: 2019).



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