

Officer Development: Meeting the 30-Year Strategy

Think Tank Group 1
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Executive Summary

The Think Tank for SOS Class 16B was tasked to answer the question, “Should the USAF transform current officer career development and progression models as the 30-year strategy suggests? Why? If so, then what changes need to take place and how would you implement them?” Think Tank Group 1 answered the questions by first defining the problem. Group 1 defined the problem as an outdated, inflexible career development and progression model that does not meet the needs of younger officers. Group 1 completed a literature review and proposed a course of action that best addresses the problem within the current fiscal constraints faced by the USAF. Group 1’s proposed course of action is the creation of a dual-track officer progression and development model. One track is a technical track that allows officers to refine their technical expertise. And, the second track is a command track that models the current officer progression and development model. By bifurcating the officer corps into a technical track and a command track, Group 1 predicts the following second and third order effects: cost savings, innovation, proficiency, a cultural paradigm shift, possible difficulty moving between tracks, and the misperception of this COA as a revival of the warrant officer program.

“We must be fearless in our efforts to build agility into our processes, capabilities, concepts, and thinking – it will become our asymmetric advantage only if we are bold enough to take the necessary steps to achieve it.” – *America’s Air Force: A Call to the Future*

Officer Development: Meeting the 30-Year Strategy

The Commander of Air University, Lieutenant General Steven L. Kwast, tasked three groups of competitively selected Think Tank students from Squadron Officer School (SOS) Class 16B to think critically about the current officer development and progression model and whether or not it will meet the needs of the USAF as outlined in *America’s Air Force: A Call to the Future* (30-year strategy). He further tasked that if the groups determine the current model does not meet the needs of the USAF, they propose thoughtful solutions for the way ahead. In the 30-year strategy, the Secretary of the Air Force, Ms. Deborah Lee James, and the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, General Mark A. Welsh III, clearly state their desire for Airmen to be bold, innovative, and adaptive problem solvers in an environment where uncertainty is common and rapid technological advances can provide the solutions to ensure the USAF will continue to dominate the domains of air, space, and cyberspace.

Based on the requirements set forth by Secretary James, General Welsh, and Lieutenant General Kwast, Group 1 determined the current model for officer development and progression does not meet the needs of the USAF’s 30-year strategy. As such, Group 1 developed a comprehensive course of action for senior officer consideration. To meet the USAF’s needs over the next 30 years, Group 1 proposes a paradigm shift in the way that company grade officers (CGOs) are currently viewed within the officer corps. Group 1 proposes movement from the current officer development and progression model to a dual-track officer corps.

Creation of a dual track model where one track focuses on command¹ and the other track focuses on developing the USAF's finest technicians² meets the charge set forth by Secretary James, General Welsh, and Lieutenant General Kwast and does so within current fiscal constraints. Group 1's proposal provides the USAF with a comprehensive solution that will meet the objectives of the 30-year strategy by increasing its ability to recruit and retain the best and brightest Airmen with the promise of flexibility, increased career control, and the ability to reach the pinnacle of their talent and innovative capabilities. By employing the dual-track officer progression model the USAF will improve as an instrument of national security and be better prepared to deliver global vigilance, reach, and power.

Methodology

Group 1 began by reviewing the problem as posed by Lieutenant General Kwast, which was, "Should the USAF transform how we develop and progress our officer corps as the 30-year strategy suggests? Why? If so, then what changes need to take place and how would you implement them?"³ After reviewing the prompt, Group 1 reviewed the 30-year strategy to determine whether or not the group agreed with the assertions posed within it regarding officer education and development. Ultimately, Group 1 concluded that it agreed with the 30-year strategy's assertion that changes did in fact need to be made to the current officer development and progression model in order to ensure the USAF maximizes the retention of its top talent for as long as possible.

Group 1's next step was defining the problem. To do so, Group 1 reviewed the prompt and the 30-year strategy again and then had an open forum discussion where the members shared

¹ The command track allows officers who desire to lead our outstanding Airmen in their role as sword and shield to focus on developing those skills.

² The technical track system allows officers who desire to focus on their technical expertise to become true subject matter experts.

³ Office of the Secretary of the Air Force, America's Air Force: A Call to the Future, 2014.

their initial assessments of how they defined the problem. Based on that discussion, the group negotiated a shared definition of the problem. Group 1 defined the problem as follows: the current development and progression model is inflexible, outdated, and overall does not meet the needs of younger officers.

Within that definition, there are several key words Group 1 chose to define further in order to clarify its position. First, Group 1 defined “inflexible” as an officer’s difficulty or inability to choose different professional paths. Next, Group 1 defined “outdated” as the assumption that all USAF officers are interested in pursuing command or their boss’ job and their loyalty is to the USAF rather than to their own goals and aspirations. Thirdly, Group 1 defined the “needs of younger officers” as their desire for career control, the flexibility to participate in lifelong learning that develops their technical expertise, their ability to work in their area of expertise⁴, and their ability to be creative at work. Based on the group’s definition of the problem, Group 1 concluded the USAF has not been able to fully reap the benefits of the technical expertise of its younger officers because many of its most talented and innovative Airmen are leaving as soon as their initial contract has been fulfilled.

Group 1 supported its definition of the problem initially with its collective knowledge of how officers flow through the current officer development and progression model. However, Group 1 also completed a literature review to determine what, if any, research had been done to identify the root causes for why so many talented USAF officers were leaving active duty. Once the literature review was complete, Group 1 discussed its findings and developed a course of action (COA) that provides the most tenable solution to the problem given the monetary constraints facing the USAF.

⁴ For example, matching mechanical engineers with mechanical engineering billets rather than matching a mechanical engineer with a chemical engineering billet.

After developing its COA, Group 1 discussed the potential second and third order effects of its implementation. Based on the research, Group 1 concluded after implementing its COA, job satisfaction and retention would increase, the USAF would be able to actualize cost savings, and the USAF would experience the benefits of career stabilization. However, the COA proposed would require a cultural paradigm shift related to how the company grade officer (CGO) corps is viewed within the USAF and a manpower study must be completed to determine which career fields would be best suited for the technical track.

Literature Review

The United States military is not immune to the generational shifts that impact society. In 2000, Leonard Wong drafted, *Generations Apart: Xers and Boomers in the Officer Corps*, a Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) report that focused on the impact of generational differences in the United States Army. Wong discovered that Xer Captains⁵ are more confident in their abilities, see loyalty differently, want more life and work balance, desire more than money, and are not impressed by rank.⁶ This study, now 15 years old, lends itself to being even more true to the new Millennial Generation. In 2015, Colonel Michael Arnold of SSI examined a similar question from the perspective of the Millennial Generation.⁷ Colonel Arnold argues that the senior leaders of today need to “provide the transformational leadership and innovation needed to create the intrinsic value that Millennials seek in their profession.”⁸ Millennials have shifting workplace preferences that include: work-life balance, meaningful work, and attention and

⁵ Xers refers to members of Generation X.

⁶ Wong, Leonard. *Generations Apart: Xers and Boomers in the Officer Corps*. Strategic Studies Institute. 11-16, 2000.

⁷ Colonel Arnold defines Millennials as individuals born between 1980 and 2000.

⁸ Arnold, Michael J. *The Future Security Environment: Why the U.S. Army Must Differentiate and Grow Millennial Officer Talent*. Strategic Studies Institute. ix, 2015.

recognition.⁹ These new preferences must be understood and taken into account in order to unlock the potential of the new junior officer workforce.

In 2005, Mr. Derek Beck of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) conducted a study related to the retention issues of scientists, engineers, and program managers in the USAF. In his study, Beck completed a literature review, a web-based survey, and some limited interviews.¹⁰ Of the 592 respondents to Beck's web-based survey of USAF officers, 48% were program managers, 40% were engineers, 7% fell into the "other" category, and 5% were scientists.¹¹ Their rank break down was as follows: 47% Lieutenants, 32% Captains, 14% Majors, 5% Lieutenant Colonels, and 2% Colonels.¹² From this survey, Beck found that job satisfaction was the primary reason why officers were separating.¹³ Within the study, respondents listed the lack of feeling value, the lack of opportunity to use one's degree or skills, the lack of leadership opportunities, and lack of operational experience as the top four reasons for their overall lack of satisfaction within their jobs.¹⁴ He also found that of the junior officers who completed the survey, 47% expressed intent to separate¹⁵, many of [whom] intend to do so at the 4-5 year point.¹⁶ While this study primarily focuses on junior officers within the scientist, engineering, and program manager Air Force Specialty Codes (AFSC), Group 1 believes that its findings related to job satisfaction are also applicable to other USAF junior officers. The research has found that job satisfaction is extremely important to retention. Therefore, Group 1 focused on proposing a course of action that emphasizes the importance of job satisfaction.

⁹ *Id.* at 9

¹⁰ Beck, Derek W. *An Analysis of Retention Issues of Scientists, Engineers, and Program Managers in the US Air Force*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology. 18, 2005.

¹¹ *Id.* at 30

¹² *Id.* at 30

¹³ *Id.* at 32

¹⁴ *Id.* at 45

¹⁵ *Id.* at 45

¹⁶ *Id.* at 50

A 2014 Navy retention study conducted by Commander Guy Snodgrass, United States Navy, sought to uncover whether there was the potential for a retention crisis in the service. The study used a web-based polling form and received 5,536 responses from Sailors. Of these 5,536 Sailors, 3,127 (56.5%) were Naval Officers, and of them, 1,699 were Junior Officers (O1-O3).¹⁷ From this survey, 52.6% of responding junior officers “[did] not want their boss’ job” due to risk aversion and the high administrative burden.¹⁸ Furthermore, 1,494 self-identified as qualified Naval Aviators or Naval Flight Officers; 76% of whom felt that squadron leadership spent most of their time “performing admin/management functions” while 4.5% believed time was spent “leading the command and executing the mission.”¹⁹ These two statistics highlight Group 1’s assumption that not all officers desire a command career path. While this study focused on junior officers within the Navy, Group 1 postulates that its findings related to job satisfaction and technical expertise are also applicable to USAF junior officers, because the Navy has the same retention issues as the USAF.

In 2010, Mr. Sayce Falk and Ms. Sasha Rogers of the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University conducted a study of 242 former junior military officers from across all four services²⁰ who left the military between 2001-2010.²¹ In this study, *Junior Officer Military Retention: Challenges & Opportunities*, 57% of respondents claimed the limited ability to control their own careers was the first or second most important reason for leaving.²² Additionally, 41% of respondents ranked frustration with bureaucracy and a lack of commitment to innovation as the “most important” or a “very important” factor as to why they left the

¹⁷ Snodgrass, Guy and Ben Kohlmann. *2014 Navy Retention Study*. 6, 2014.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 22

¹⁹ *Id.* at 28

²⁰ (See Table 1.1 for specifics)

²¹ Falk, Sayce and Sasha Rogers. *Junior Military Officer Retention: Challenges and Opportunities*. Harvard University: John F. Kennedy School of Government. 3, 2011.

²² *Id.* at 11

military.²³ One recommendation from the Falk and Rogers study was “no penalty for non-command track” desires.²⁴ According to Falk and Rogers, only 12% of billets are command opportunities and the military should reward those technical skill-sets.²⁵ Group 1 posits that the lack of control over career paths and the stifling of innovation within the company grade officer (CGO) corps is a contributing factor to retention issues within the USAF.

Table 1 - Rank and Service of Survey Respondents²⁶

	U.S. Army	U.S. Marine Corps	U.S. Navy	U.S. Air Force
O-2	2	5	2	1
O-3	82	25	44	6
O-4	5	1	8	8
O-5	3	0	0	0

It is important to note that 75% of respondents in the Falk and Rogers study claimed this survey was the first opportunity to provide feedback to the military after leaving the service.²⁷ With only 4% of total respondents, the USAF is admittedly under-represented in this study; however, it provides a starting point for future research within the USAF.²⁸

A 2010 SSI report, *Towards a U.S. Army Officer Corps Strategy for Success: Retaining Talent*, found that only “55% of West Point graduates, who incur a 5-year service obligation, remain on active duty for 5 1/2 years of service.”²⁹ The cost of officer development is high during the first three to five years, due to the heavy burden of training. This training is immediately lost if the officer is not retained past the initial service commitment. As such,

²³ *Id.* at 5

²⁴ *Id.* at 41

²⁵ *Id.* at 41

²⁶ *Id.* at 6

²⁷ *Id.* at 3

²⁸ This statistic points to a larger problem across the services of not understanding what causes officers to depart from the military. Changing a culture to improve retention is difficult, and attempting to do so without any data is nearly impossible.

²⁹ Wardynski, Casey, David S. Lyle, and Michael J. Colarusso. *Towards a U.S. Army Officer Corps Strategy for Success: Retaining Talent*. Strategic Studies Institute. 23, 2010

retaining an officer past the initial service commitment offsets development costs through increased productivity.³⁰

Analysis – Course of Action

Group 1 proposes a dual-track officer progression model for the USAF that will consist of a technical track and a command track. The command track mimics the current officer progression model. The only proposed change to the command track is a more robust Squadron Officer School. The technical track begins at O-3 and gives certain officers the ability to distinguish themselves by remaining technical experts throughout the course of their careers. Technical officers will be designated with a “T” which will allow them to take advantage of a tiered pay scale that will compensate them for their expertise. This will require the USAF to allocate technical billets to appropriate Air Force Specialty Codes (AFSC), as well as develop knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) metrics for each AFSC with a technical track.

Once KSAs are developed, a pay chart will be established that takes into account the appropriate KSAs for each “step.” This pay scale will be similar in structure to the General Schedule (GS) scale. Group 1 envisions a pay scale where KSAs determine an individual’s “step,” and in turn, increases their pay. Finally, Group 1’s COA allows for revised assignment length as needed per AFSC. For example, if a scientist needs five to six years to work on a specific project from start to finish, that would be an acceptable assignment length for that officer.

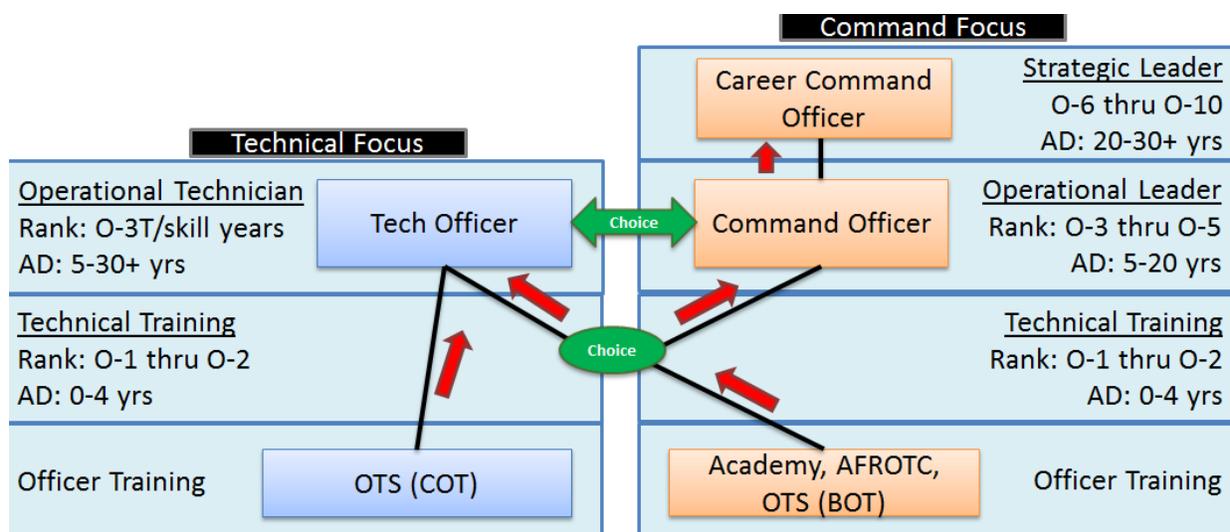
After a technical track is established in the USAF, Group 1 expects new officers to enter military service through existing commissioning sources: USAF Academy (USAFA), Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps (AFROTC), and Officer Training School (OTS)³¹. Once officers

³⁰ *Id.* at 5

³¹ OTS includes Basic Officers Training (BOT) and Commissioned Officer Training (COT).

complete their accession source, they will proceed to their initial assignment. Promotions from second lieutenant through captain are achieved as normal. Between the three and seven year mark, officers have the ability to decide whether to initially pursue the technical track or continue on the command track. Group 1 also proposes that officers will later have the ability to move between the two tracks through a competitive process if they feel that their initial decision was not the right fit for them. See Figure 1.

Figure 1 - Officer Progression



Finally, Group 1 proposes that Commissioned Officer Training (COT) is opened to more than chaplains, lawyers, and medical professionals. By opening COT to career fields with technical billets, the USAF will reap the benefits of recruiting expertise from industry.³² These would be direct accessions into the technical track as O-3Ts. (See Figure 1 above). In order to be competitive in recruiting from industry, Group 1 proposes that new accessions be paid on a “step” level commensurate with their KSAs.³³

Second and Third Order Effects

³² Group 1 envisions expanding COT to include engineers, scientists, cyber professionals, pilots, etc.

³³ For instance, a cardiologist with significant experience will enter the USAF an O-3T at a “step” level commensurate with the pay level of an O-6.

Group 1 acknowledges that there may be indirect consequences that result from the implementation of the COA. By bifurcating the officer corps into a technical track and a command track, Group 1 predicts the following second and third order effects: cost savings, innovation, proficiency, a cultural paradigm shift, possible difficulty moving between tracks, and the misperception of this COA as a revival of the warrant officer program.

The first indirect effect that Group 1 anticipates is cost savings. By converting a fraction of current officer billets to technical billets, technical officers will be able to remain in their specialty. Allowing them to stay in their specialty, the USAF not only maximizes its return on their training investment, but also decreases the need for new accessions. This assertion is supported by the research conducted by Wardynski et al. in 2010. Wardynski et al. found that the USAF incurred monetary savings by minimizing attrition and reducing retraining costs.

Next, Group 1 anticipates an increase in innovation and technical proficiency. For officers to succeed in the USAF, they are expected to grow their skill sets and performance capabilities. By fostering technical expertise, Airmen will be given the opportunity to become creative problem solvers within their career fields.

Further, Group 1 acknowledges that depending on which track an officer selects, he or she may experience challenges if they decide to change tracks too late in his or her career. Given that proficiency is a dynamic process, if an officer remains on either track for too long, he or she may not have the skills required to be competitive in the opposite track.

An additional effect is the misperception that this COA is a revival of the warrant officer program. The USAF determined in 1959 that it no longer required warrant officers. At that time, the USAF did not have the enlisted grades of E-8 and E-9. The grades of E-8 and E-9 were instituted to take the place of warrant officers. Group 1's COA is not a warrant officer program

because the technical officers are commissioned officers from the start, officers can transition between the technical and command tracks, and the technical track is envisioned to encompass more than aircrew AFSCs. Despite the differences, senior officers may challenge this COA because they believe it is a simple recreation of the warrant officer program.

Finally, Group 1 anticipates a cultural paradigm shift. The USAF will require a cultural paradigm shift to change the way its leaders view the new technical and command officer tracks. Airmen must move away from the pyramid rank progression mindset and embrace the change. Technical officers will not have to develop leadership skills as much as the command officers, while command officers will require much less technical training. Once the USAF adopts and embraces this new structure, skill proficiency, flexibility and innovation will flourish.

Recommendations

In summary, it is evident the USAF is in need of change. The world is changing, technology is advancing and there has been a generational shift. In order to meet that change, and progress with the times, a new officer progression model is recommended; a dual-track model that allows officers to develop themselves and their skills at the same rate technology is changing. But, that model cannot be instantaneously implemented without some work. First, the USAF will need assess and evaluate each AFSC to determine what career fields will become a part of the technical track. The reality is not all career fields require as much study or skill development as others. Ultimately, a process needs to be created for determining which career fields make sense to be a part of the technical track. A manpower study will assess which AFSCs will benefit most from a technical track.

In addition to the AFSC evaluation, the USAF will need to conduct a manpower study. Once the determination has been made as to what AFSCs will fill the technical track, the study

will look at how many officers are needed to continue down the command track versus officers needed for the technical track. What is the correct number for each track to keep the USAF continuing in an efficient and effective manner? The study will need to account for a greater number of officers staying in for a greater length of time. Also, as more officers stay longer, less will need to be recruited. From the manpower results, an exact number of billets will be generated so accessions can be correctly quantified.

Not only will there need to be a manpower study but a budget assessment will need to occur. Those officers that stay on the command track will continue to receive pay from the current existing pay chart. However, with the change of adding a technical track, appropriate pay and compensation will need to be assessed. What is an appropriate paycheck for an O3-T with 7 years of service as opposed to an O3-T with 15 years of service? How will advancement in expertise be monetarily awarded? What is the appropriate metric to deem monetary compensation? The proposed idea is to create a pay scale similar to the current GS pay chart where individuals receive a pay increase every few years with step increases as they hone their technical skills. Ultimately, each career field will have to be assessed to determine the correct pay scale for an O-3T. It is also imperative that the USAF realizes this pay chart could have one general chart but each career field will have an add-on to the general chart so their pay is fair and competitive in their career field (i.e. a doctor versus a cyber operator).

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