

Civilian Personnel: Preparing to Meet the Future

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The Air Force of today bears little resemblance to that of 1990. The end of the cold war brought about a “peace dividend” with manpower reductions in both the military and civilian ranks to bring about the desired savings. Many different personnel management tools were used to effect this reduction: buy-outs, reengineering, restructuring of processes, regionalized personnel servicing, contracting out, and reductions-in-force. However, while the cold war ended, the Air Force’s involvement in the world has expanded. To support this expansion, the Air Force transitioned from a fight-in-place force, ready for large-scale conflicts, to a mobile (and deployable) force that can operate simultaneously in multiple locations. This movement to the “expeditionary” aerospace force allows us to meet our responsibilities while providing predictability in the demands placed on our personnel.

Civilian Personnel servicing in the Air Force has also changed radically in the past decade. In 1990, the Air Force had a full civilian personnel administration presence at each base. Subsequently, the National Performance Review and National Partnership Council highlighted areas in public administration where we needed to reengineer business processes. Civilian Personnel administration was one of the career fields identified. We had to prioritize where we placed our resources—both dollars and people. As a result, business process improvement was introduced as one means of achieving the efficiencies needed to absorb this prioritization and reduce manpower levels. Technological change has enabled this reengineering. Today, we have a much smaller presence at each base, primarily to resolve issues that require direct customer contact. For the most part, backroom operations have been centralized at the Air Force Personnel Center to maximize efficiencies gained from standardized and automated processes. In the future, we will focus on effective interaction with customers using web-based tools and expert systems where practical, and we will also provide customers with “reachback” capability to personnel expertise. These efforts are already under way with the implementation of the Benefits and Entitlements System (BEST) call center and web site, the electronic official personnel folder (PARIS), and the Civilian Employment call center. These interactive

voice responses (IVR) and web services were developed and established under PALACE Compass, the Air Force plan for regionalizing and improving civilian personnel servicing.

Notwithstanding these improvements in organizational alignment and strategic management, there remain several obstacles we must overcome to meet our civilian human resources management challenges. While the aforementioned changes produced a leaner, more efficient Air Force operational civilian personnel structure, they also created turbulence in our workforce. As high-performance organizations have come to realize, human resources are the most critical assets. The placement of quality people as the foundation of the Air Force Strategic Plan underlines the importance we place on obtaining, developing, and retaining a quality workforce. Today’s tight labor market, coupled with the rapid advance of technology, along with the challenge to connect our missions and manpower levels, results in a highly volatile workforce leadership environment.

In an effort to ensure our Air Force civilian personnel management system is prepared to operate in this environment, personnel planners conducted a variety of fact-finding exchanges with Air Force members at all levels. Focus groups interviewed hundreds of service members, both military and civilian, as well as commanders, employees and supervisors, career field managers, union officials, and functional area experts. The results of these efforts and related surveys indicate that while the pay gap between private and public sector compensation is a factor, it is not the paramount issue. For the civilian workforce, job stability and a streamlined hiring process are the most important factors for recruiting and retention. Job stability for civilians ranks high on every indicator because of continued pressures to obtain efficiencies through competitive sourcing and privatization (CS&P). CS&P creates unpredictability in the workforce and challenges us to develop the force management programs and policies; to optimize utilization of our human resources—active duty, civilian, reserve forces, and contractors.

To accomplish this, we must take a clean-page look at how and where we use our resources. One fundamental change in our planning effort centers on the role of civilians in the Air Force of tomorrow. All future planning efforts will be assessed with regard to their effect on our civilian workforce as we best utilize all components of the Air Force. Military/civilian personnel integration has blurred the distinction between stovepipe personnel management systems, and we are taking the best aspects of both systems to design

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a better tool chest for managing our core civilian career force. The size and behavioral tendencies of our civilian workforce give us a level of confidence that we *can* significantly improve our strategic corporate management of our civilian cadre. These and other recent advances in civilian personnel management posture us to take Air Force civilian personnel human capital planning to the next level.

Our planning efforts begin with career field reviews that identify the requirements and career paths needed to sustain each Air Force specialty. These studies consider the unique life cycle parameters, skills, and missions to ensure that our recruiting, development, and utilization programs and policies will supply and sustain the civilian force. The diversity of mission areas in the Air Force drives a need for a similarly diverse group of civilian employees. The knowledges, skills, and abilities needed to succeed in the research and development arena are much different from those required by our logistics functions. We are designing the set of personnel tools our career field managers need to meet their particular demands. Some segments of the civilian workforce rely on a steady influx of new employees with current, state-of-the-art technological savvy. Investment in “grow your own,” corporately managed force renewal program such as PALACE ACQUIRE will increase over the next five to 10 years to meet this need. Other segments need journeymen and managers with a broad experience base gained mainly from military service. Repeal of the dual compensation constraints will help us recruit the experienced human capital we need to accomplish our missions by providing many of our military members a second career in our civilian workforce. In short, we are tailoring our force shaping and sustainment programs to meet the requirements of each career field to achieve a balanced, sustainable civilian workforce strategy.

The Air Force leadership development framework is undergoing an evolution, too, by viewing civilian force development as an investment in our people, rather than an

operational cost. For the first time, we are building succession plans with the total force in mind. Senior civilians are entering roles of increasing importance, assuming responsibilities that have historically been filled with officers, as we strive for optimum utilization within the total force. Our future civilian leaders are being offered career-broadening opportunities to expose them to a wide variety of cultures across the service. The Defense Leadership and Management Program (DLAMP) is the Defense Department’s approach to developing a cadre of senior career civilian leaders with the competencies necessary to lead the Department of Defense into the twenty-first century. The Air Force is an active participant in DLAMP, and we constructed our development programs to take advantage of the opportunities offered by DLAMP. We are also embarking on a quest to develop a Personal Trainer, a web-based software package to help each Air Force employee receive the skills proficiency training, leadership development, and education needed to succeed in current career fields and prepare for positions of higher responsibility.

Significant progress is being made to redefine the role of the civilian workforce in the Total Air Force, and we must ensure that the concerns of our people are continually addressed. Each service member and employee must be assured that leadership is concerned not only about the mission, but also about the welfare of its most important asset—the people who make the United States Air Force the finest air and space force in the world.

Air Force Civilian Personnel plays a critical role in meeting the Air Force mission. We are eager to fulfill our responsibility as a key component of the Total Aerospace Force of the twenty-first century. Air Force people are at the heart of operational readiness, and Civilian Personnel has never been a greater factor in meeting the national security strategy.