

## FOUR STEPS THE DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE CAN TAKE TO FIX ITS BROKEN PERSONNEL SYSTEM

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COMMENTARY

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As we recently heard from Secretary of Defense Ash Carter, “America’s advantage is tied to its people,” and, “in the face of generational, technological and labor market changes, we in the Pentagon must think outside our five-sided box and try to make ourselves even better at attracting talent from new generations of Americans.” Unfortunately for the Department of Defense (DOD) and the federal government more broadly, top talent is leaving at alarming rates and a mere 2.3 percent of college graduates in 2012 listed the federal government as a place they

would like to work. While such difficulties in recruiting are problematic across the federal system, they may be especially devastating for the Department of Defense as it tries to foster the innovation it will need for the unpredictable mission sets of the future.

Based on my own personal experience with friends, family, and acquaintances, I'm not surprised at this problem and I think there are some concrete steps the DOD (and the federal government) can take to attract and retain America's most talented engineers, scientists, researchers, and thought leaders.

I'm a Gen X-er (barely, as I was born in 1981) who recently left a U.S. Army research and development lab. But I was not alone — I left along with a fairly steady flow of other hard-chargers who had grown increasingly frustrated and disillusioned with the current personnel system for civilians. Unlike in start-ups or tech companies where engineers like me often work, the federal government personnel system is cumbersome and unresponsive to effort. It is very difficult to fire underperformers, nepotism and favoritism are commonplace, and motivational managers are rare. It is almost always easier to accept mediocrity than to demand improved performance. There are few mechanisms available to managers to reward and retain capable and effective civil servants. In such conditions, with a robust set of alternative options in industry, why would talented, hardworking personnel stick around to watch underperforming personnel receive recognition and pay raises regardless of the work or effort they put in? I think it's pretty clear — they won't and don't.

### **The Problem: Too Much Red Tape!**

It is tempting to say this is all because of the modest pay scale in the federal government. I'm sure that more money would help, but it's not fundamentally a pay issue. Secretary Carter was correct when he said in his recent interview with *War on the Rocks* that people want to feel like they are making a difference. However, federal personnel policies — especially within DOD — are so hidebound that it is

nearly impossible to get things done quickly even in response to urgent mission requirements. This understandably leaves many employees feeling they are not making a difference (and cannot), no matter how much effort they put in.

Let me be concrete: If I were to design a revolutionary technological capability, the best part of working in the government for an engineer like me would be that I could put this capability in the hands of operators and analysts quickly. I would not have to go looking for a buyer and convince them to purchase my invention as I would in the private sector. That creates the potential for an incredibly rewarding feedback loop that would motivate me (and engineers like me) to keep innovating and creating new technologies for our warfighters.

Instead, aside from a very few rapid fielding programs like the Army's Rapid Equipping Force, the Air Force's Rapid Capabilities Office, or DOD's Joint Rapid Acquisition Cell, getting capabilities to the military force is one of the most painful processes one can go through as an engineer. First, I have to put my technology through years of testing and evaluation. I'm not opposed to testing and evaluation but the process is not efficient, does not take into account previous testing, and is unnecessarily burdensome. Once the testing phase is complete, I have to brief acquisitions personnel, obtain multiple signatures and funding approvals, and jump through unknown bureaucratic hoops to get technology approved to be fielded. This technology development, acquisition, and fielding process can take upwards of four years.

At Facebook, Apple, Google, and many other Silicon Valley technology firms, my ideas could go from concept to implementation to market in months or even weeks. That kind of rapid innovation cycle is attractive to technologists and many other talented young minds with passion and drive to create something bigger than themselves. This is why so many newly-minted MBAs (many of whom have undergraduate degrees in computer science, electrical engineering, and mechanical engineering) from top-flight business schools are seeking jobs in

Silicon Valley. DOD, and the federal government more broadly, will be hard-pressed to attract that kind of talent unless they can replicate that feeling of rapid accomplishment.

### **Four Fixes: End Red-Tape Culture, Fix Performance Reviews, Expand Leadership Development, and Create a Flat Structure**

Leaders at every level of the U.S. government have made the issue of attracting and retaining top technical and business talent far too complicated. Secretary Carter's Force of the Future Initiative is a good step forward and addresses some key issues for military personnel, but the Department of Defense needs to take several steps to restart the flow of civilian talent from top engineering and business schools to public service instead of Silicon Valley, Silicon Alley, Austin, or the Research Triangle.

First, DOD has to change its red-tape culture. The bureaucratic processes required of DOD Science and Technology (S&T) or Research and Development (R&D) personnel stymie innovation and suppress creative drive. Furthermore, DOD's bureaucratic technology fielding processes ensure that intelligence community analysts, special operators, and especially general purpose forces don't receive the cutting-edge technology being developed at DOD R&D labs or at private technology firms. Technology is evolving much more rapidly than DOD's antiquated technology transition and fielding mechanisms can handle.

The second action DOD can take to attract and retain the best talent is to fix DOD performance review systems. The DOD's attempt at implementing a Pay for Performance system has failed because of inexperienced and sometimes unqualified DOD managers. The Pay for Performance system was intended to reward hardworking, talented employees. Instead, the talented, hardworking employees feel as if their efforts are not recognized. Managers, unwilling to give poor performance scores, simply score everybody within a few standard deviations of each other. The high-performing employees receive similar pay raises and

promotions as underperforming employees. But there is a straightforward fix that won't require an entirely new performance rating system or other seemingly impossible reforms: Simply reward those who work hard and produce and do not reward those who work in government because they know they cannot be fired and can get away with taking advantage of generous time-off and telework policies. This requires adequately trained managers who are held accountable for turnover rates and agency performance metrics.

The third action DOD can take is to expand leadership development programs. Current leadership development programs often require that the applicant complete various civilian education requirements or attain the grade of GS-15 before they may apply. Many industry leadership development programs like General Electric's Early Career Leadership Programs take new college graduates and prepare them for positions of leadership within the company. Reserving leadership development programs for primarily senior-grade individuals deprives the DOD of an opportunity to indoctrinate talented, energetic graduates into the DOD's organizational cultures and shape them into current and future leaders. The difference in approaches the DOD takes to its civilian and military workforces is especially striking on this point.

The fourth action DOD needs to take is to recognize the situations where its hierarchical military organization is counterproductive to its mission. Silicon Valley-based technology firms have been advocating and implementing flat organizational structures for many years. This has taken off among some small defense contractor firms who use their flat organizational structure to allow innovative technology ideas to go from an idea to operation much quicker than their larger, hierarchically structured competitors. DOD should take a page out of the Silicon Valley book and transition its agencies to a flatter organizational structure when appropriate.

## **Parting Thoughts**

These steps won't fix every DOD human resources problem, but they are relatively straightforward and would go a long way toward making DOD an attractive employer for America's most talented engineers, scientists, and business people. Without the best talent, our defense industrial complex surely cannot keep pace technologically with the rest of the world. Secretary Carter's DIUx initiative near Moffett Field, which will allow DOD to interact more closely with Silicon Valley technology firms; increased funding to Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) and Intelligence Advanced Research Projects Activity (IARPA); and DOD agencies' use of technology from In-Q-Tel-backed startups are all positive actions that remind me why the United States is home to the most technologically advanced fighting force the world has ever seen.

Steps must be taken, however, if the United States expects to keep that distinction.

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