

# The Corps' Talent Management System

An institutional software gap

by Maj Antonio Cillo

The Marine Corps does not use talent management software to assign its personnel. Leaders rely primarily on fitness reports as well as proficiency and conduct markings to assess past performance, experience, and intuition to judge future potential. Yet, combining those criteria cannot accurately predict future performance. Marines can upload training and education completion documents to their Master Brief Sheet and Official Military Personnel File as a way of highlighting strengths and subject matter expertise, but this process is confusing, burdensome, and wrought with administrative complexities. Thus, a great amount of knowledge and unique skills, attributes, and training go unnoticed throughout a Marine's career as the Service fails to capture the appropriate data and use it during promotion and assignment processes. The Service will benefit from using a commercial talent management system to ensure it capitalizes on unique skill sets and retains talented Marines.

The current manpower model does not consider talent management with vigor and seriousness. MOS monitors single-handedly assign hundreds or thousands of Marines using antiquated software without any statistical analysis or matching criteria. A symptom of such outdated and faulty assignment processes is that high performing individuals may opt for alternative employment. Among the most common reasons Marines prematurely leave the Service are dissatisfaction with quality of life, pay and compensation, hours worked per week, and amount of family and personal time.<sup>1</sup> The predominant underlying challenge linked to all of

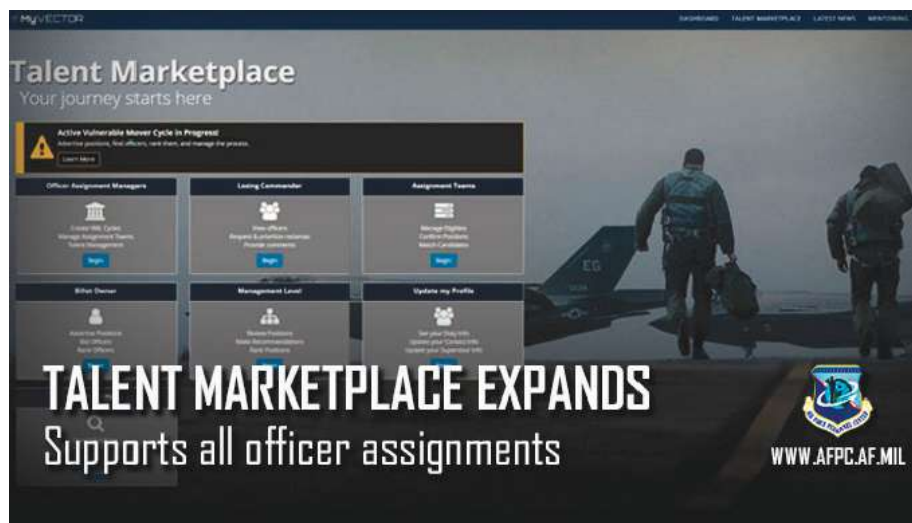
**>Maj Cillo is a Ground Supply Officer currently serving as a Logistics Instructor with Marine Corps Logistics Operations Group in Twentynine Palms, CA. His service includes deployments with 22d MEU and Task Force Lion.**

these is job satisfaction. An innovative talent management system is required to identify hidden credentials, empower members with a degree of influence in their future assignments, and ensure the Service assigns personnel to billets using a holistic process that aligns individual strengths and talent with billet demands.<sup>2</sup>

The National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) is refined and published annually to specify the DOD annual budget and required expenditures. Within the limitations of the NDAA,

some of the military Services experimented with new talent management practices. The Army implemented a pilot talent management program called Green Pages that allowed officers, commanders, and human resources representatives to populate data in an online portal and the ability to collaborate virtually during the assignment process. After three years, the Army used the latitude within the 2019 NDAA to refine the program into an improved online talent marketplace called Assignment Interactive Model, Version 2.0.<sup>3</sup> Assignment Interactive Model, Version 2.0 is still in its infancy; nevertheless, the Army fenced off resources in an attempt to solve its talent management challenges.

Similarly, in 2019, the Air Force implemented an online program called Talent Marketplace as an initial step toward improving its talent management and assignment processes.<sup>4</sup> The



**MyVector is the Air Force's online, interactive talent marketplace available to all officers.**  
(Photo from Air Force Personnel Center website.)

program offers complete transparency of all available jobs across the Service to include expanded billet descriptions and enhanced billet requirements. The web-based portal offers an interactive module for Airmen to rank their preferences, which are then visible to all commanders. In addition, commanders have the ability to filter interested applicants according to their knowledge, skills, and attributes. Such a degree of transparency and information sharing is expected to facilitate responsiveness and agility within the Air Force's assignment process as well as help align talented individuals with jobs that fit their individual strengths, weaknesses, and personal preferences.<sup>5</sup>

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In December 2019, the Navy replaced its outdated Career Management System-Interactive Detailing talent management system with a new one called MyNavy Assignment. The new system offers a "resume" feature where Sailors can populate their hidden credentials for detailers to use when matching personnel with open jobs.<sup>6</sup> In fact, Sailors can review a catalog of job openings over the next twelve months, providing them a broader view of future opportunities. Moreover, the Navy recently took initiatives similar to the Army's and implemented a variety of programs aimed at retaining its top performers, via expanded training and education opportunities, across a variety of job fields that spread throughout a 20-year career.<sup>7</sup> It is still too early to determine whether these programs influenced retention of high quality naval officers; however, the Navy's intent is to replace monetary incentives with educational opportunities for those serving in hard-to-fill billets.

In recent years, the Marine Corps completed its own initiatives aimed at understanding talent management,

retention, and recruiting. In 2017, the Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps stood up the Talent Management Executive Council and the Talent Management Oversight Directorate.<sup>8</sup> The Talent Management Executive Council "serves as a catalyst for ensuring the Marine Corps attracts, retains, and develops Marines in order to increase warfighting readiness and maximize individual potential."<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the Talent Management Oversight Directorate "provides insight and information to inform strategic talent management guidance ... in order to optimize the Marines Corps ability to attract, develop, employ and retain the talent necessary to achieve our institutional and strategic

objectives."<sup>10</sup> Both groups work directly for the Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps but frequently collaborate with Combat Development and Integration and Manpower and Reserve Affairs personnel to develop research proposals, initiate studies, analyze findings, and publish results to advance the Service's understanding of its talent management challenges.

These organizations completed the *2018 Exit and Milestones Longitudinal Study, Characterizing Individual Marine Quality* study<sup>11</sup> and *Improving the Talent Management of Female Marines* study.<sup>12</sup> The studies attempted to uncover reasons for talent attrition and recommend ways to retain the Service's top performers.<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, in 2018, the *Characterizing Individual Marine Quality* study recommended development of a proof of concept platform similar to LinkedIn to determine if the Marine Corps would "benefit from a professional profile database ... that would allow senior leadership to target exceptionally qualified individuals for a particular mission or position."<sup>14</sup> That same study also proposed efforts

to "gather data from all areas of personal and professional development" (i.e. hidden credentials) to support analyses of talent management metrics.<sup>15</sup> A pilot talent management system will indisputably validate or nullify some of the Service's assumptions about talent recruiting, management, and retention.

Additionally, the Marine Corps intends to use money as a focused weapon system to retain specific skill sets.<sup>16</sup> Retention bonuses achieved their desired effect and retained skill sets to include pilots and reconnaissance Marines. Nevertheless, few MOSs within the logistics community are eligible for bonuses, and those with eligibility encompass skill sets that transfer well to the civilian workforce and promise higher-paying jobs outside the military. In 2010, the Army experimented with the Critical Skills Retention Bonus and Officer Career Satisfaction Program in an attempt to increase retention. The biggest problem with these blanket programs was that the Army had to pay the least talented and most talented Soldiers the same bonus, and talented individuals have more options. The two incentives costed taxpayers more than \$500 million without any evidence they helped retain talented Soldiers.<sup>17</sup> Using money as a weapon and a retention tool, although successful in retaining particular skill sets, ultimately fails to retain the target population of top performers across the spectrum of occupational specialties.

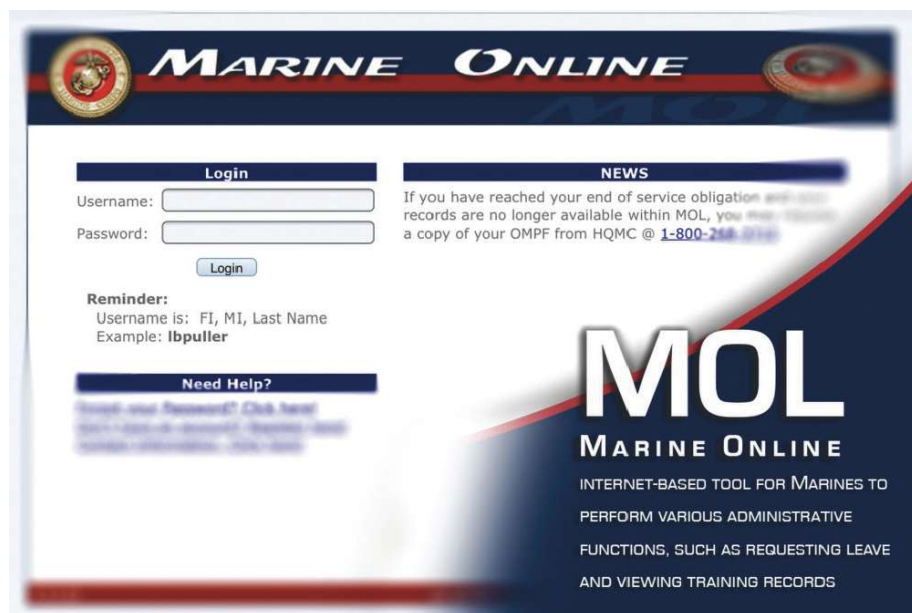
The Marine Corps continues collecting data to frame the problem and hesitates to apply resources toward developing and implementing a talent management system fit for the Corps' needs. Yet, even the most basic commercial-off-the-shelf talent management system stands to improve the Service's ability to align individual talents with billet descriptions. A software program would increase transparency in the assignment process and provide an easy-to-use system for which Marines can highlight hidden credentials (i.e., not listed in their Master Brief Sheet or Official Military Personnel File). Marines could prioritize future billet vacancies while commanders anonymously prioritize candidates for future assignment

to their units. This would also provide Marines more influence over their careers, distinguish personnel based on a diverse range of talents, monitor workplace attitudes before retention becomes problematic, and improve assignment processes by matching skill sets with unique billet requirements.

The Marine Corps already has the foundation of a talent management system. I can login to Marine Online (MOL) today and review the “Slate” in my “Personal Info” tab. From there, I can build a mental list of preferences and even estimate when my peers might rotate. In just a few minutes, I could have enough information to email my monitor to request billet descriptions and inquire about timing my next move. The Service can immediately expand this foundation into the initial framework of a modern talent management system.

The following recommendations offer a means of correcting the Marine Corps’ talent management gaps. First, monitors can attach billet descriptions within the “Slate” in MOL. This one-time, administratively intensive task afterward requires just annual updates, but the transparency this would provide the force could save Monitors hundreds of hours per year currently spent replying to emails. Another minor modification to the “Slate” in MOL could enable Marines to rank order billets. Marines could save their preferences electronically and rearrange them as often as desired. Likewise, Marines could prioritize the complete list of billets rather than just their top three generalized preferences once or twice per year via fitness reports. This minor modification to MOL would further increase transparency between monitors and their populations and would save time completing and reviewing online surveys. These are low-risk, low-cost recommendations with no downside.

If MOL is not the answer, then the Marine Corps must apply human and financial capital toward researching and developing a talent management system. In December 2020, talent management reform was the Commandant’s number two priority with the ultimate goal of developing and implementing a “true



**Marine Online could form the foundation for a Marine Corps Talent Management System.**  
(Graphics by Sgt Jennifer Carrillo Castillo.)

talent management system that measures success by our ability to attract, recruit, identify, incentivize, and retain the most talented individuals across the entire force.”<sup>18</sup> There are numerous commercial-off-the-shelf talent management systems available that could help the Service achieve this goal, and it is imperative for HQMC to receive demonstrations from the top candidates. A demonstration of the functions, capabilities, and limitations of each program is necessary for the Marine Corps to identify advantages and disadvantages of each and compare them to the Service’s requirements. Then, the Marine Corps must fund the implementation and maintenance of the selected software and compensate talented human resources and information technology personnel to ensure it functions as intended. It is unrealistic and foolhardy to expect service members with “admin rights” to maintain, update, and refresh the software without the help of contracted subject matter experts.

The Marine Corps must holistically analyze existing processes, programs, and functional areas for inspections and recommend which ones to eliminate. This will inevitably create time, space, and funding necessary to implement talent management software at the battalion level. Adding another program for

commanding officers to manage needs to come with the removal of others, and it is the responsibility of our senior leaders to reduce the quantity of antiquated and unnecessary systems. Lastly, these recommendations need to be backed by a coherent talent management strategy. Absent a strategy that defines the parameters of true talent management and aligns talent management with job satisfaction criteria and force design initiatives, the Service could potentially continue its lackluster retention efforts with archaic and ineffective assignment processes.

The Marine Corps needs an easy-to-use talent management system to aid the assignment of Marines. It is inappropriate to continue assigning Marines to key billets based on intuition and past performance, which has proven to be an intermittently accurate indicator of future potential.<sup>19</sup> Leading companies in the civilian sector demonstrate net positive results using talent management systems, and the similarities between business and military personnel management processes indicate this initiative is a worthwhile effort. Investing in talent management software will undoubtedly prove useful in aligning individual talents with individual billets, inherently increasing job satisfaction across the force. Improved



job satisfaction stands to increase long-term retention of the Marine Corps' most talented people, a necessity for developing innovative solutions to complex problems against peer competitors.

#### Notes

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