

# Domain Expert Officers

The 21st-century approach to talent management, a transformation long overdue

by Maj Aaron Viana & Capts Angel Maldonado, Renato Costa

The Marine Corps must be ready for the next war, in which technical skills will be paramount in combating the enemy. Currently, despite the necessity for technically adept experts, the Marine Corps' talent management system pushes every officer toward the "commander" career path rather than offering the domain expert path as a viable alternative. Why not provide a competitive percentage of officers with the option to opt-in to a career path that provides them the opportunity to master their PMOS?

During my overseas tour as a supply officer for Task Force 51/5, Bahrain, I routinely received questions from field-grade officers on how to conduct entry-level business in the logistics community. Competency was not to blame, as I soon realized the officers underwent a steep learning curve to relearn their PMOS after years of absence from their communities. This is a common occurrence, as time away from their PMOS provides a broad array of experiences that makes officers competitive for lieutenant colonel command boards. Later, I was tasked to write an operation order for an amphibious landing off the east coast of Africa as part of my online Expeditionary Warfare School assignment. After completing the assignment, I questioned the benefit of having a supply officer complete such a task and, particularly, the opportunity cost of not focusing on my role as a supply officer in the MAGTF. What force multiplier would our Commanding General at 51/5 have had if he was armed with a cadre of domain experts who thor-

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***"Developing leaders who are competent in national-level decision-making requires broad revision of talent management among the Armed Services."***

**—2018 National Defense Strategy  
Secretary of Defense James Mattis**



Figure 1.

oughly understood their PMOS role in the MAGTF?

Through the implementation of a domain expert career path, the Marine Corps can save millions of dollars and better utilize our scarce human resource by retaining incredibly competent Marines. This new talent management platform will protect costly investments in technical education and training that are lost through the skill atrophy inefficiencies in the commander model. More importantly, the implementation of our recommendation will act as one of several catalysts to maintain our superiority over peer competitors both now and in the future.

### Organizational Problem

Company-grade officers are groomed early in their careers to pursue the commander career model by fulfilling “key billets,” influenced by the old adage of “bloom where you are planted.” The commander career path is ingrained in every officer as the only path to command, which subsequently leads to promotion. This model places a higher value on key billets necessary for commanders and fails to recognize the value of expertise within one’s PMOS. The effort to create generalists is meant to avoid “one trick ponies” who may be incapable of applying a wide range of skills to a problem. This mindset fails to recognize that we require stable “one trick ponies” to deliver a debilitating kick to our adversaries.

Bruce Lee references the power of specialization when he stated, “I fear not the man who has practiced 10,000 kicks once, but I fear the man who has practiced one kick 10,000 times.” Envision the power a certified domain expert supply officer possesses with 10,000 hours of PMOS experience under their belt in comparison to their PMOS peer filling the same position after returning from their non-MOS tour. The domain expert will be more adept at resolving readiness problems and innovating as technology changes. The power of 10,000 hours is proven by Dr. K. Anders Ericsson in his American Psychological Association publication and highlighted by Malcolm Gladwell in his book *Outliers* to be the key component to mastering a skill.<sup>1</sup>

The Marine Corps should not replace the current commander-focused system with the domain expert career path. Nor should the Marine Corps specialize in ways similar to our sister services. We are cognizant of the value our commanders bring to the fight and how the current system provides a vast array of experiences to ensure we have well-rounded officers who can make decisions at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels. Rather, we contend that the Marine Corps can benefit by providing a percentage of competitive officers with the opportunity as captains, majors, and LDO aspiring CWO3s to make a domain-expert designation and enter a focused career path where MOS expertise is valued over cross-pollination.

### The History of the Specialist

Between 400 and 380 BCE, the Athenian General Iphicrates supplemented his infantry phalanx with *Peltasts*: a less heavily armed light infantry for reconnaissance purposes.<sup>2</sup> Later, their ability to quickly move, pivot, and repel an enemy’s attack proved valuable on the flanks of the less maneuverable main body. At that moment in history, the *Peltasts* became the earliest “specialists” to land a permanent position amongst military ranks. Through the centuries, the military developed a large number of specialists ranging from artillerymen to engineers. These new specialties required officers who possessed technical expertise to properly employ those capabilities in combat. The trend toward domain expertise continues to this day with the officers who lead our unmanned aerial vehicle units and cyber Marines. The demand for domain expertise permeates all communities from our acquisition professionals to our pilots and from our financial managers to our MARSOC operators. The Marine Corps pays top dollar for our officers to master these skills that are vitally necessary in our organization’s future as we inevitably adopt additive manufacturing and artificial intelligence.

### Financial Losses of the Commander Talent Management Model

Despite the evolution of military

profession, the Marine Corps’ talent management model remains fixed to the one-size-fits-all commander model. This model lacks the flexibility necessary to adequately manage the multitude of skills our officers bring to the fight. (See Figure 1.) Further exacerbating the problem, a disproportionately large amount of resources are allocated toward Expeditionary Warfare School and Command and Staff College to support our commander-focused talent management system, while some MOSs, such as supply, still lacks an officer advanced school. Only eighteen percent of lieutenant colonels are selected to command annually.<sup>3</sup> Why not reallocate some of our educational and talent management resources to support the competitive percentage of the 82 percent not selected for command to capitalize on their acquired skills? Our current and future operating environment requires domain expertise that extends past the current entry-level training and education offered in most MOSs.

A recently published Financial Performance Metrics and Indicator Report from HQMC, Programs and Resource Department, identifies that, over a five-year period, the Marine Corps accumulated \$631 million USD of losses in Unliquidated Obligations (ULOs) in only our 1106 Operations and Maintenance funding.<sup>4</sup> To explain, a ULO displays an amount of funding in our accounting system allocated to pay for supplies and services requested throughout a fiscal year (FY). Unfortunately, a portion of the supplies go unreceived and some services unrendered. To further intensify the problem, our fiscal laws expire funds and result in ULOs becoming lost obligations at the end of a FY. While scenarios exist where supplies and services are received, and a ULO was nothing more than an accounting error, the fact remains that for the past five years we have not accurately closed out a FY. We attribute the failure to properly manage funds to the lack of advanced-level education in the supply and financial management officer communities and to the skill atrophy suffered by these communities pursuing the commander career path. Out of the \$631 million, if at a minimum we could



Figure 2.

reduce 10 percent of ULOs by creating a domain expert career path that assigns certified officers to higher headquarter billets, we could ultimately recoup \$63 million USD or more. Instead of losing this funding, we can increase our lethality by reallocating it to the warfighter via our unit training and equipment readiness. Additionally, we can create an Advance MOS school for supply officers to receive education on how to manage the increasing financial audit regulations they are learning to comply with on-the-fly.

**Solutions at the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS)**

In MarAdmin 554/17, the advocacy for acquired skills took a major leap when the Commandant selected the first four officers to attain their doctorate degrees in the Doctoral Strategist Program and the Technical PhD Program at NPS. This program “develop[s] ... strategic thinkers and technical leaders capable of applying substantive knowledge ... with their operational MAGTF experiences to achieve the innovative thinking desired by the Marine Corps.”<sup>5</sup> This decision by the Commandant was the first recognition in Marine Corps history toward the necessity of doctor-

ate-level-education in our ranks. More importantly, it displays another need for domain experts.

**Commander Model Consequences on NPS Educational Resources**

We applaud the Commandant’s decision; however, when reviewing the records of these officers, the lieutenant colonel promotion board may not take it into account. Likely, the board members will experience skepticism on whether to promote an officer who has missed his/her “key billets” to attend school full-time. NPS produces a multitude of solutions for the Marine Corps via thesis research it would be a waste of resources for promotion board members to dismiss the value that education brings to the fight. Future boards may look similar to those in Figure 2, and those officers will require a non-command career path to sustain the skills they attained to remain relevant in their career fields.

The problem of inefficient resource allocation and failure to recognize the acquired skills provided by the NPS only multiplies on every Commandant’s Career Level Education Board (CCLEB) and Commandant’s Professional Intermediate-Level Education

Board (CPIB). For example, the FY17 CCLEB and CPIB board alone selected 100 Analyst (88XX) students to attend NPS, allocating \$30.6 million USD toward tuition, pay, and entitlements to attain these acquired skills.<sup>6</sup> According to the report, of these 100 students, 90 percent of the officers will subsequently not serve in this capacity after their initial utilization tour out of fear of missing experience in key billets. Furthermore, officers will cut their utilization tours short to return to those key billets in the OPFOR prior to a promotion board.<sup>7</sup> A CNA study conducted in 2016 states, “These people firmly believe that mandatory immediate utilization tours prevent many officers from serving in key billets, and thus deprive those officers of a fair chance at promotion.”<sup>8</sup> The data has not matured to determine whether NPS selectees under the new CCLEB/CPIB mandatory attendance is hindering promotion. Nonetheless, from a financial perspective, it is prudent to advocate for the Marines who have acquired these expensive skills to continue serving under the domain expertise umbrella. (See Figure 2.)

**Survey Results**

We conducted a survey of the supply officer community and extracted the data shown in Figure 3 (on next page). We targeted all active duty first lieutenants through colonels with the goal of understanding the MOS educational shortfalls and to obtain data on the percentage that would consider a domain expert career path. While only anticipating 10 percent of the population to make a domain expert designation, we were surprised to note that 62.2 percent made the selection. These results serve as evidence in one MOS where the need to create an alternate career path exist.<sup>9</sup> One can observe a logical distribution for MOS expertise in the earlier ranks and the shift toward being a commander toward the senior field-grade ranks. Unexpectedly, there was a larger number of senior field-grade officers who would have preferred a domain expert officer career path. Despite this, our current system does not advocate for any delineation from the

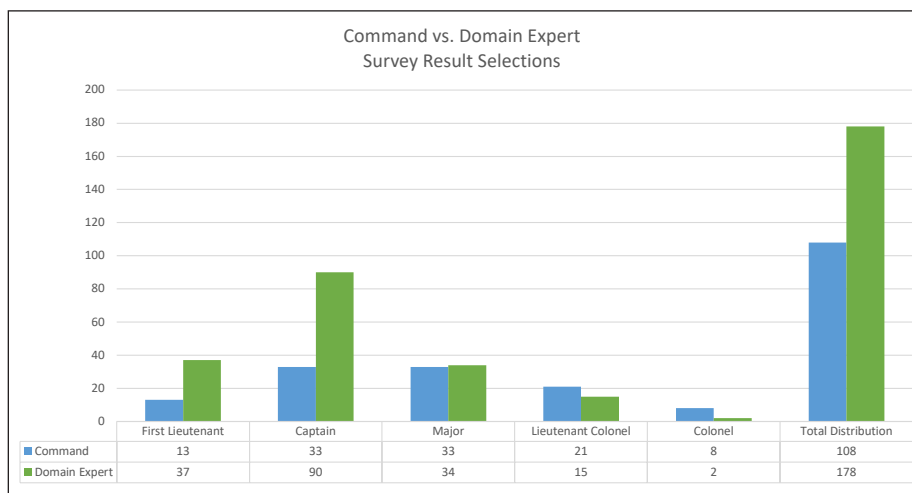


Figure 3.

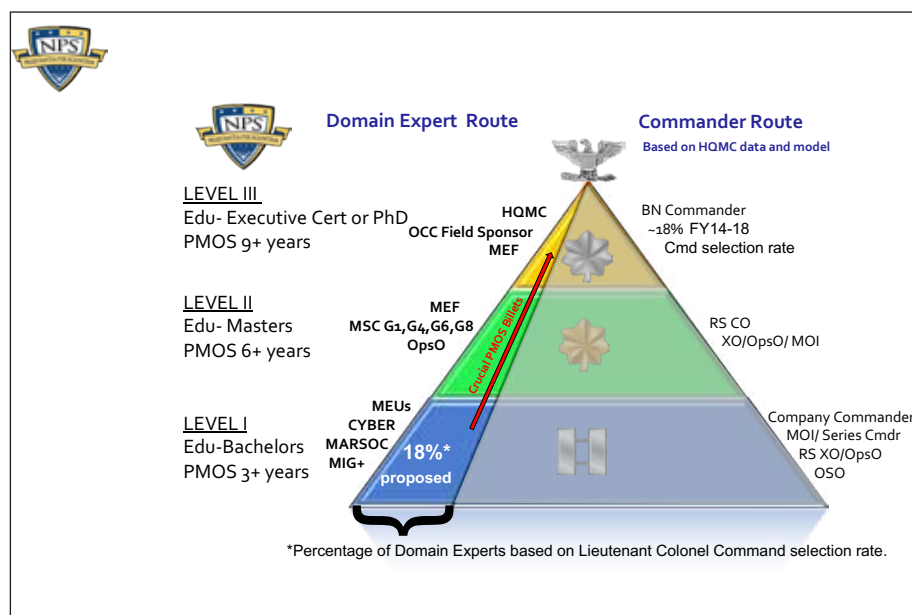


Figure 4.

commander path, creating significant monetary losses for our organization.

### Implementation Proposal

The recommendations presented in this graph only serve as an initial proposal and should not be viewed as the sole solution to our complex talent management problem. Instead, it functions as a template for Manpower & Reserve Affairs to refine. The domain expert career path is designed to encourage a thorough understanding of one's PMOS by assigning them to billets where they thoroughly understand the complexities of their PMOS from

every angle of the MAGTF. All MOS in which domain experts are deemed beneficial would follow the three-tiered certification process in Figure 4. Every community requiring domain experts would determine the prerequisites for Level I, II, & III, but MOS designations (8301, 8302, 8303), respectively, are universal for every MOS to manage all communities under the domain expert umbrella.

### Conclusion

In summary, the road to Domain Expertise is currently being built in our organization; the Marine Corps should

acknowledge this road and put up the road signs to guide our future officers through it. Why subject ourselves to only one path when the future threat environment likely requires both generalist and domain experts? In this pivotal moment in history, where technical expertise is a major contributing factor in sustaining peer-to-peer superiority, we must capitalize on the talents of a competitive percentage of the 82 percent of officers not selected for command. This capitalization begins by implementing the domain expert career path to protect the talents of the future wave of officers who will lead the Generation Z Marines to combat.

### Notes

1. K. Anders Ericsson deliberate practice information available at <http://projects.ict.usc.edu>; and Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success*, (New York, NY: Back Bay Books, 2011).
2. *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: May 1958).
3. Headquarters Marine Corps, "Manpower & Reserve Affairs Lieutenant Colonel Command Screening Board FY18 Statistics," (Washington, DC: 2018), available at <https://www.manpower.usmc.mil>.
4. Headquarters Marine Corps, "Performance & Metrics Indicator Report," (Washington, DC: 2018), available at <https://ehqmc.usmc.mil>.
5. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MarAdmin554/17, Commandant-Of-The-Marine-Corps-Doctor-Of-Philosophy-Program-Phdp-Selection*, (Washington, DC: 2017).
6. Staff, "CNA Research Strengthening the Marine Corps 88XX Analyst Community," CNA, (Arlington, VA: 2016), available at <https://www.cna.org>.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Angel Maldonado, Aaron Viana, and Renato Costa, "Marine Officer Talent Management for the 21st Century," (Monterey, CA: 2018), available at <https://calhoun.nps.edu>.

