

It Pays to be a Winner

Employing analytics to assess Marines for retention, promotion, and opportunity

by LtCol Alfred B. Ruggles

“The core objectives of all modern personnel management systems are to recruit individuals with the right talents, match those talents to organizational needs, and incentivize the most talented and high-performing individuals to remain with the organization.”¹

In the ever-evolving landscape of military operations, talent management is a critical determinant of organizational success. Within the Marine Corps, the efficient allocation of human resources is paramount for maintaining our warfighting prowess. Traditionally, promotion and retention decisions have been made based on marginally objective evaluations, leaving room for inefficiency. However, advanced analytics offer a compelling solution to enhance the accuracy and objectivity of these processes. With the abundance of data available for each Marine in *Marine Online*, Marine Corps Recruiting Information Support System (MCRISS), and Marine Corps Training Information Management System, Manpower and Reserve Affairs (M&RA) can apply a discrete analytic score to each Marine. In so doing, this score would serve as the leading factor in determining the Marine’s potential for promotion, retention, and assignment to leadership opportunities.

When a young man or woman first meets a Marine recruiter, the recruiter must screen the potential applicant for their potential to be a Marine. If merited, the recruiter immediately enters the applicant’s name and basic information into MCRISS, a massive database that contains information about every Marine applicant, poolee, and recruit since the early 2000s.² If the applicant

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joins the delayed entry program, the recruiter will regularly add data about the applicant into MCRISS ranging from: height/weight, IST score, home address, education, history, ASVAB score, performance at unit events, relationships with influencers in the community, how many referrals the applicant has brought to the recruiter, GPA, and much more. If a particular applicant used illegal substances a specific number of times, the applicant would require a waiver from a major, colonel, or commanding general. Every waiver is slightly different based on the recruiting district and can often entail 50 to 100 pages, especially if there are medical considerations. However, a preponderance of the waiver consists of subjective information from the recruiter, applicant, or family. For example, an applicant is sometimes required to have multiple letters of recommendation. Attaining two to three subjective letters of recommendation is trifling and does not provide any substance to the adjudicating commander. The commander must decide to accept or deny this waiver; however, the commander

is inundated with waiver packages, and they rarely ever meet the applicant. This entire process can last weeks to months and is completely unnecessary. Rather, all the data can be distilled down to a specific number ranging from 0 to 100. This score will objectively encompass all the information within MCRISS and provide the deciding commander a clear indication of whether this applicant’s waiver should be approved. For example, if the applicant has a questionable tattoo, but is a college graduate, runs a high physical fitness test (PFT), has completed volunteer service in the community, and has given a couple of referrals to a recruiter, this applicant will have a higher score. If the same applicant had none of these *green weights*, then their score would be dramatically lower.

Upon accession into the Marine Corps and completion of basic training, an enlisted Marine’s analytic score should be built upon like an officer’s ranking at The Basic School. Upon graduation from The Basic School, the class rank of a Marine officer will follow them throughout their career, affecting retention and promotion timing. Similarly, the entirety of a Marine’s enlistment should be entered into and contribute to an overall analytic score. For example, if a Marine is a company honor graduate, a code should be entered and followed by that Marine throughout their career. Moreover, during a typical enlistment, sundry data points are maintained within *Marine Online* about every Marine. These include rifle score, pistol score, swim qualification, PFT, combat fitness test (CFT), civilian education, military education, height/weight, foreign language proficiency, leadership markings within the Junior Enlisted Performance Evaluation System, Marine Corps Martial

Arts Program (MCMAP) level, fitness report evaluations, leadership aptitude based on fitness reports, etc.

Despite all these data points, a typical reenlistment package boils down to a few metrics concerning PFT, CFT, MCMAP level, and subjective comments from leadership. Even worse, the data points are informational and can be evaluated based on the bias of the chain of command—if the officer-in-charge loves MCMAP, then a black belt will have more weight, etc. There should always be room for input from the Marine's chain of command; however, the entire enlistment package should feed into one objective analytic score that grades the Marine according to their peers. Manpower and Reserve Affairs can determine the tiers; however, the closer a Marine is to 100, the greater priority that should be applied to their reenlistment package. Reenlistment packages below a certain threshold should be automatically denied. Finally, scores above a high threshold can be linked to incentives for meritorious promotion upon reenlistment, special duty assignment preference, expedited orders during the permanent-change-of-station season, and other rewards for performance. In practice, a Marine with an exceptional analytic score should always receive orders before Marines with lower scores. Bottom line: It pays to be a winner!

For officers, this score can be further developed throughout their professional military education tours. For example, at Expeditionary Warfare School, instructors have nearly an entire year to evaluate a captain before the officer potentially returns to the FMF. This time should not simply be used to educate the captain; rather, the fitness report and corresponding analytic score should determine the officer's propensity to serve in a company command billet upon completion. I have personally seen students at this school squander the entire year and subsequently assume command of a combat arms company in the fleet. With more strenuous observation and application of analytics, the Marine Corps could preclude these immature leaders from company command. The same applies to Command

and Staff College and follow-on education opportunities. If a Marine officer clearly does not contribute to the curriculum during a year at Command and Staff College, how can the Marine Corps allow this officer to graduate and proceed into a key billet, potentially leading hundreds of Marines?

The Marine Corps has already made significant progress toward an analytic score with the implementation of the Junior Enlisted Performance Evaluation System. The application is comprehensive, detailed, and most importantly, transparent to the Marine and leadership. However, upon promotion to sergeant, the fitness report process devolves once again to a mostly subjective evaluation. While performance scores are superimposed on the Marine reported-on worksheet, they merely serve an informational purpose to the reporting senior (RS). The importance that one reporting senior places on a PFT, for example, could be dramatically different from another RS. The billet accomplishments are subjective and oftentimes hyperbolic; furthermore, the RS must consider their historical ranking precedence when assigning a letter score for each category in sections D-H. The section I comments are mostly subjective and useless unless an RS makes a specific statement about the Marine's performance in comparison to peers; for example, "1 of 20 sergeants evaluated." While the RS and reviewing officer's (RO) observation is meaningful, the Marine is only measured against other Marines previously observed by the RS and RO. During selection boards, members must compare one RS and RO profiles to another when evaluating a broad swathe of Marines. This dilemma is exacerbated based on the depth of the RS or RO profiles. In short, using a JEPES-like model, the analytic evaluation of a Marine should continue for sergeants and above. During a board, members would still have access to fitness reports and commander's comments; however, each Marine will have an analytic score for comprehensive comparison.

It is beyond the scope of this article to delineate the variables that should be included in the ultimate analytic score—that is a worthy research proj-

ect for a graduate education student. That being said, M&RA can readily construct the parameters, and these variables can be reevaluated and updated on a three-to-four-year timeframe based on the needs of the Corps and guidance from the Commandant.

In conclusion, the Marine Corps already has a vast amount of data available on each Marine. Unfortunately, the vast majority of this data is dormant and never used. It is time for the Marine Corps to take a page out of professional sports and corporate America's playbook to apply advanced analytics to the field of talent management.³ In so doing, the Marine Corps can apply a discrete score to Marines of all ranks. This score can readily be used as the primary deciding factor to determine whether a Marine should be retained, promoted, and more importantly, offered leadership opportunities, including company first sergeant, battalion sergeant major, company command, battalion command, and greater leadership commands in the future. How long will we continue to use a haphazard, subjective model to determine which Marines have the best propensity for future performance, growth, and leadership prowess within the Corps?

Notes

1. David Berger, *Talent Management 2030* (Washington, DC: November 2021).
2. Kaitlin Kelly, "Marine Corps Modernizes How Marine Recruiters Capture Data with New Mobile Tool," *Marine Corps Systems Command*, 2019, <https://www.marcorssyscom.marines.mil/News/News-Article-Display/Article/1757178/marine-corps-modernizes-how-marine-recruiters-capture-data-with-new-mobile-tool>.
3. Thomas H. Davenport, Jeanne Harris, and Jeremy Shapiro, "Competing on Talent Analytics," *Harvard Business Review*, September 7, 2017, <https://hbr.org/2010/10/competing-on-talent-analytics>; and Andrew McAfee and Erik Brynjolfsson, "Big Data: The Management Revolution," *Harvard Business Review*, October 2012, <https://hbr.org/2012/10/big-data-the-management-revolution>.



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