

Recruit, Train, and Retain

A game plan to successfully compete in the global information technology battlespace

by Maj Olaolu N. Ogunyemi

The United States of America's competitors are proving to be formidable in the information battlespace; thus, the U.S. military must prepare its information technology (IT) professionals to gain military advantage and enhance deterrence during the greatest and most pivotal competition in the Nation's history. Each information technology professional requires a level of expertise that equals or exceeds the competitors' expertise. Therefore, the military should prioritize recruiting the right people, focus training efforts, and retain the most talented people.

Recruit

The Recruiter

Several industries—including health-care, education, community service organizations, and Fortune 500 corporations—share the same recruiting challenges as the military in the IT profession. Thus, examining different industries and militaries around the world provides unique insight into how the military can recruit the most talented IT professionals to compete in the IT battlespace. The foundational principle across all industries is that recruiting the right people begins with recruiting the right recruiters.

Recruiters must be passionate and knowledgeable about the military and the IT profession. They must have the ability to develop a general career plan and adequately explain how the prospective military IT professional's personal goals align with the mission. The recruiter must also have a general understanding of the current and future IT architecture designs for the individual military branches to ensure he is recruiting the right capabilities, characteristics, and skill sets. Overall, the recruiter is responsible for estab-

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In order to recruit prospects with IT talent, recruiters must be knowledgeable in this field and the Marine Corps' requirements. (Photo by Sgt Scott Schmidt.)

lishing a trusting relationship with the prospect and beginning the ongoing assessment of whether or not the applicant is a good match for service as an IT professional.¹

Before the recruiter begins this assessment, he must find the right people. To do so, the recruiter must develop working relationships with IT professionals in the military, community-based organizations with a consistent touchpoint with the community, and institutions of higher learning that offer certificate programs in IT. All entities receive tangible and immediate benefits. The IT professionals in the military benefit by receiving well-qual-

ified IT professionals who meet both current and future IT requirements. Community-based organizations benefit by gaining insight on how to best serve IT professionals within a given community.² Institutions of higher learning benefit from the increase in the post-graduation job placement rate. For the recruiter, these critical relationships help identify cultural differences that exist within certain demographics, communities, and the IT profession.³

As such, the recruiter will learn how to serve the prospect and answer their most prevalent question: *will this help me and my family?* There are primarily three immediate benefits that any

prospective military IT professional will consider: access to skilled IT professionals in the military that will provide ongoing interpersonal contact and a comprehensive career plan; the possibility of benefiting from a self-fulfilling career; and the opportunity to serve and contribute to society as a part of a larger cause. This approach to recruiting rests on the principle of developing and maintaining positive, consistent relationships at each level of leadership within the military IT community.

The Prospect

Though a large part of the responsibility of developing an ongoing relationship with the prospective military IT professional lies with the recruiter and military IT leaders, the prospect must have a specific set of values, qualities, and skills. The military should only hire self-disciplined IT professionals who have the drive and initiative to hone in on their craft and become continuous learners. Prior to joining, the prospect should also examine whether or not service as an IT professional in the military is a good match. This personal *match quality* assessment should continue throughout the IT professional's career. The Government of Sweden—a country that employs both conscripts and volunteers—explained this dynamic by highlighting that “a person is rarely best suited if he does not find that the training for which they reserve a part of their life can be considered relevant.”²⁴

Once the recruiter and the prospect reach an initial match quality agreement, the newly hired IT professional will begin training where he or she will continue to examine whether or not he fits with the culture and values, can perform required tasks, and “derive satisfaction from available rewards as they experience the job.”²⁵ Therefore, IT leaders and supervisors should collaboratively work with the newly hired IT professional to develop a training plan and a comprehensive career plan that supports both personal and organizational goals.

Train

With the help of his or her leadership, IT professionals in the military must

have laser focus on developing his craft. This requires the military IT community leaders to prioritize individualized realistic training and comprehensive career planning. The IT battlespace is ever-changing; thereby, all deviations from the above priorities are costly and could be fatal.

The military should develop certification-based training plans for each IT professional that are similar to the corporate IT industry. For example, in the Marine Corps, the courses currently taught at the communications training centers can be used as a baseline, and the Communications Training Battalion (CTB) with the Marine Corps Communication-Electronics School should continue to adjust these courses to align industry standards to current and future Marine Corps IT systems. In recent years, the CTB has done an excellent job in soliciting feedback from

training plan will ensure IT professionals continue to develop critical technical skills relevant to current systems while maturing each IT professional's leadership abilities. Furthermore, this training plan will attract well-qualified professionals and keep current professionals engaged. These factors are key components to competing in the IT battlespace.

Retain

Retaining the best IT professionals begins with understanding why these professionals join and developing a comprehensive career plan that supports the individual's ambitions. As with many organizations, a vast majority of service members join the military for intangible reasons. After personally asking hundreds of service members—both young and old—why they joined the military there were three primary rea-

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the FMF to inform curriculum development. CTB leadership should continue to prioritize these efforts and advocate for professional curriculum developers to give IT professionals the most relevant and necessary training.

These professional curriculum developers naturally reside at the Marine Corps University. This critical requirement would compel Marine Corps University to hire an IT curriculum developer and establish an ongoing relationship with the CTB. As a part of the certification-based curriculums, the IT curriculum developer would incorporate IT management electives. These electives would be informed by the Marine Corps Training and Education Command—eliminating the requirement to attend additional professional military education for promotion outlined in *MARADMIN 474/21*.⁶ Ultimately, aside from on-the-job training, the CTB and its subordinate entities should be the sole training organization for IT professionals. This future

Alignment of personal values, vision, and goals with the respective military Service's values, vision, and goals. To become a part of something greater than themselves. To serve their country by doing something meaningful and pursuing their purpose. This translates into an individual's willingness and capacity to take responsibility for, invest in, and optimize “the self” as a marketable brand or enterprise competing within any given organization.

In recent years, more emphasis has been placed on the former rather than the latter two as service members are more inclined to pursue self-fulfillment above all other motivators to serve.⁷ Many would agree that though important, tangible reasons like salary, bonuses, health and dental benefits, college, and job choice supplement the intangibles; they no longer serve as the primary reason for joining or continuing service as they did in previous years.⁸ Many join to live up to the idealistic image of “active, responsible, and produc-

tive citizenship.”⁹ That means service members in the IT profession are only interested in continued service if the military can offer meaningful work that aligns with the IT professionals’ intangible reasons for joining while meeting their economic or tangible needs.

Self-Fulfillment

As proven by several studies, continuous personal development—from the constituent’s perspective—is the key to retaining talented IT professionals.¹⁰ Since the aforementioned is true, military leaders—from immediate supervisors to senior officials at the Pentagon—must establish and maintain disciplined processes and systems that allow individual IT professionals to focus his efforts on personal development. Some will argue that the pursuit of personal development can potentially conflict with achieving organizational goals. Though true, military leaders can align personal goals with organizational goals by recruiting the right IT professionals and developing unique individual training plans and career tracks that best suit each IT professional. The two are only mutually exclusive if military leaders fail in this regard. Goal alignment begins early in the recruitment phase and continues throughout the IT professional’s career.

As in many industries, new joins and the organization will assess *match quality* in the early stages of employment.¹¹ This is where the military as a whole has focused its efforts in recent years with talent management efforts. To capitalize on recent successes, the military’s IT leaders should identify key billets both on active duty and in the reserves.¹² As part-time employees, IT professionals serving in the reserves provide a ready bench in times of conflict and a unique perspective and network gained from the IT community outside of the military. This is just one of many examples of how an individual’s self-fulfillment benefits the organization as a whole.

Talent Management

As stated in the Marine Corps’ *Talent Management 2030* document: “Talent management is the act of aligning

the talents of individual Marines with the needs of the service to maximize the performance of both.”¹³ Leaders and IT professionals will continue to assess match quality daily while individual talents and characteristics are aligned to specific jobs. Hence, retention efforts do not fall solely on senior military leaders. IT leaders and supervisors at every level must assume responsibility for assessing match quality and maximizing each IT professional’s potential within any given billet.

This requires an intense focus on *leaning out* processes and procedures that distract current and future IT professionals (e.g. administratively processing system authorization access requests). Since service members join to do meaningful and purposeful work, leaders should use automation, technology, and refined policies to reduce insignificant and non-cognitive tasks which will allow IT professionals in the military to focus their efforts on purposeful work.

Misfits and Misalignment

It is important to note that over time, misfits—those who are unable to align their goals with organizational goals—exit. These IT professionals will “leave most during early employment when person—job mismatches are readily detected. ... Those who fit remain—exiting less often as seniority accrues.”¹⁴ IT leaders in the military must be willing to accept this fact and allow misfits to quickly exit to make room for IT professionals who better suit the military’s goals and objectives.

Some will argue that the above recommendations oversimplify larger issues that have led to retention problems in the past. To support their argument, they accurately assess that there have been numerous reports backed by empirical and anecdotal data that point to concerns like inequitable treatment for retention struggles.¹⁵ However, these are symptoms of the broader issue—a misalignment of the intangibles. That is why military leaders and supervisors at all levels must own the responsibility of maintaining a culture that aligns with the respective organization’s values. Failure to do so should result in disci-

plinary measures to include dismissal as required.

Conclusion

The United States of America is in competition with autocratic societies. These autocratic leaders rely on coercion, force, and manipulation to recruit, train, and retain talented IT professionals.¹⁶ Moreover, it is well known that conscripted service members who refuse to serve these autocracies have lost other fundamental rights and freedoms or they have been imprisoned or killed.¹⁷ The U.S. military’s advantage is nested within this fact. Because the military is an all-volunteer force, its members are more inclined to join and remain engaged for intangible reasons. Though previously frowned upon, serving for self-fulfillment has become the norm, so the IT leaders in the military must apply the above recommendations to recruit, train, and retain the most talented people. This will ultimately contribute to the United States’ ability to win the most critical and pivotal competition in the Nation’s history.

Notes

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