

Talent Management for the 21st Century

Embrace an “Offensive Mindset” and data competency

by LtCol Scott A. Humr

War is a human-centered affair. It is therefore no wonder the common cord woven through the prodigious number of recent Navy and Marine Corps guiding documents emphasizing the competitive advantage highly educated and trained personnel provide. The thread woven through the 38th *Commandant’s Planning Guidance*, the former Acting Secretary of the Navy’s *Vectors*, and the Department of the Navy *Information Superiority Vision* is the value and importance of our talented human capital. Marines who are educated, well-trained, and provided opportunities to serve in places which meaningfully employ their talents are the Marine Corps’ bid for success. Maintaining and expanding this talent will, however, require revolutionary changes in how the Marine Corps’ Manpower and Personnel Administration (MPA) occupational field embraces a new vision for its critical role in leading this charge. To achieve these corporate visions, MPA Marines must embrace an offensive mindset for their field while promoting data competency in order to provide their organizations a genuine human resource (HR) capability.

The data systems and approaches currently employed within the MPA field can be described as “defensive” in nature. Defensive uses of data entail compliance with regulations and governance. Unit diary entries, changes to pay and entitlements, Personnel Casualty Reports, capturing awards information, routing naval correspondence, and submitting morning reports are all important processes that have a meaningful function; however, almost all actions are responding to some past

>LtCol Humr is currently a student at the Naval Postgraduate School studying Information Sciences.

event. What is needed by the Commandant is an equally important offensive manpower strategy, which embraces a maneuverist mindset and style to HR management.

An offensive approach to manpower seeks more predictive capabilities; it anticipates a need to dynamically adjust when situations and missions change. An offensive manpower mindset towards data would leverage a variety of individual characteristics of the Marine, which go beyond a static two-factor assignment process of rank and MOS. An offensive approach deliberately places

Marines with the right skill sets in the right occupation based on the needs of the unit or commander—not an outdated table of organization. Yet, it goes even further. An offensive method to manpower management would track and manage a unit’s diversity metrics to ensure units are not sub-optimally staffed based on an assignment made in the past that did not account for changing unit and mission dynamics. In short, offensive manpower is talent management in action. To achieve this, the MPA community must become the aggregator of all human factor data, which currently falls outside of the community’s responsibilities.

The Marine Corps captures a great deal of data about its personnel; however, because of functional boundaries, this data resides in distinct silos and



An “offensive mindset” applied to manpower is talent management in action. (Photo by LCpl Stormy Mendez.)

is rarely brought together to provide a complete picture of individual and unit readiness. For instance, the operations section typically records information on individual training, health services maintain medical readiness, and manpower retains and updates personal information. While there is no concern with functional areas maintaining such information, what is absent, however, is a true HR function that brings all information together to provide a com-

prehensive picture of each individual Marine. A single entity responsible for bringing this information together could add significant value to the Marine Corps by providing the most holistic picture of an individual and—by aggregation—unit readiness. Therefore, the MPA community must begin an acculturation process, which places an increased emphasis on data literacy and data science education to assemble this all-inclusive representation. While not easy, the development of data science literacy and competency will provide MPA Marines the skills they need to overcome the challenges the Sea Services have with data and information.

become an important first step toward making the Marine Corps a true data-driven organization. Therefore, the need to develop an extensive culture of data literacy within MPA is crucial for converging efforts with better access to data to support a realistic implementation of any talent management initiative.

The MPA community suffers from the same 5V (volume, velocity, veracity, variety, and value) problem with data and information. Data literacy several platforms such—as R, Tableau, and Anaconda—are already available to Marines on the Marine Corps Enterprise Network. Data science training is also freely available from sites like EdX, Udacity, Coursera, and others. For sure, such training will help empower better decision making. Understanding of when and when not to use averages to make sense of one's data; which type of regression should be used; avoiding simple errors in discerning between correlation and causation; and learning to ask the right questions requires data science training and are reasons MPA Marines will need this basic data science training. Otherwise, it is easy to fall into the many traps that await the untrained person. Cognitive biases, visually skewed charts, manipulating data to fit one's own ends, or finding a local optimum while missing a globally optimal solution are snares that await the untrained. Training in fundamental data science principles will therefore go a long way to both improve decision making and for "unleashing talent" as described by the Commandant.

The MPA community should expect its functions to expand in the field of talent management. This will, however, require better training in data science to achieve something akin to *Moneyball for Manpower*. Popularized by Michael

Data literacy and competency are key components for ... extracting the correct interpretations from ... information systems ...

and competency are key components for equipping any staff for gathering, processing, and extracting the correct interpretations from its information systems within a 5V environment. Training in the use of the most basic tools such as spreadsheets to more advanced data visualization software and machine learning is needed—but currently not taught at our entry-level schools. Many data science tools are also open source with a seemingly endless number of free video tutorials and training. Moreover,

The recently released Department of the Navy *Information Superiority Vision* published in February 2020 highlights some of the challenges the Sea Services have with data and information. As the *Information Superiority Vision* points out, "Forward-deployed Sailors and Marines must manually contextualize raw data from multiple unintegrated systems." This problem is not likely to go away anytime soon, especially in Joint environments where Service-centric manpower systems do not share information. However, the Marine Corps can pursue a path to accelerate access to data by the people who need it the most. Democratizing access to data, while helping to equip Marines with the right skill sets, will

become an important first step toward making the Marine Corps a true data-driven organization. Therefore, the need to develop an extensive culture of data literacy within MPA is crucial for converging efforts with better access to data to support a realistic implementation of any talent management initiative.



Data competency is essential and the necessary training readily available. (Photo by SSgt Chad Simon.)



Nothing will replace in-person, human contact in Marine Corps talent management. (Photo by LCpl Alison Dostie.)

Lewis's book, *Moneyball: The Art of Winning an Unfair Game*, the Oakland Athletics' general manager, Billy Beane, developed an analytical approach to selecting the best players based on what he determined were the most important player statistics. Many organizations are adopting similar methodologies to managing talent through the collection and development of a more data-driven approach. For example, the Army recently rolled out its Battalion Commander Assessment Process, which is analogous to the NFL Scouting Combine to collect a large number of data points from physical fitness scores, a battery of cognitive tests, and interviews to help surface the right person for the job. If successful, it will likely raise the interest of the other Services to pursue a similar methodology. Within the Marine Corps, the recent introduction of the Criteria Cognitive Aptitude Test for Marines at The Basic School should provide additional data points that may yield better insights for matching personnel with an occupation and follow-on assignments. All of these and other sources will provide a great deal of personnel data and, if used correctly, should drive better decision making. One thing is clear, the MPA community will play a critical part in the talent management equation, which will require training in data science to fully realize these futures.

MPA will likely play a much larger role than it has historically. For instance, the Army, Air Force, and Navy are all in the process of developing new approaches to their assignments process. A defining feature of them is that they include individual command involvement. These "talent marketplaces" are platforms where individuals and commands can come together to negotiate an assignment more effectively. These marketplaces include more detailed resumes of the individual and commands showcasing the billets and desired skill sets of the individuals they are seeking. These platforms use variations of common matching algorithms to find the best pairing for both parties as well. While still nascent in many respects, these efforts are demonstrating success thus far. In the case of the Navy, the former Acting Secretary of the Navy's *Vector 5* stated:

We are implementing a new human capital strategy to better access and curate best in class talent. This strategy was developed leveraging leading private sector business practices designed for the new economy.¹

To be successful, MPA must begin educating and bringing together its most promising data science-minded Marines to work towards better talent management.

Conclusion

The Commandant has made it clear: "All of our investments in data science, machine learning, and artificial intelligence are designed to unleash the incredible talent of the individual Marine."² To unleash this talent, the MPA community must embrace a fundamentally different approach to human capital management. Bringing this vision to fruition will require several converging efforts, particularly access to authoritative data sets and the need to broadly educate a greater number of Marines in these technologies. However, and more importantly, Marines equipped with these skill sets must look beyond the tools and methods themselves to challenge the unquestioned cultural constructs to avoid shoehorning these technologies into outmoded processes. Collectively, the MPA community will need to envision a fundamentally different future where such advanced technologies completely revolutionize the value they provide their organizations. Moreover, the military demographic has changed over time. The need for talent management is clear. "Modern warfare relies less on hordes of expendable infantry and more on sophisticated platforms."³ The one-size-fits-all approach to managing our personnel needs to end. This will take an all-MPA-hands-on-deck approach to managing the talented individuals under a new HR design. Elevating data literacy and competency in the MPA field through education will help empower the one community responsible for making talent management a true reality.

Notes

1. Secretary of the Navy Vectors, *ALNAV 2020, SECNAV Vector 5*, (January 2020), available at <https://www.public.navy.mil>.
2. Gen David H. Berger, *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: July 2019).
3. Staff, "Recruits to America's Armed Forces Are Not What They Used to Be," *The Economist*, (April 2020), available at <https://www.economist.com>.

