Managing Officer Talent in the Army
A Study of the US System

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US Army talent management system indicates reliance on basic human capital theory and the premise that all officers have distinctive talents that need to be honed for senior officer billets which have different and distinctive talent requirements. Research indicates that the Indian Army neither has talent data nor a talent management system that this framework requires. Therefore, it is forced to adopt a one-size-fits-all strategy for managing officers that is primarily centred on developing proficiency only in warfare. While this strategy works well for creating young officers, it is rather inadequate in producing senior officers, whose functions become less operational as they ascend in rank. Several recommendations have been made in this article to address these issues. Recommendations are not all-inclusive, however, they can serve as the foundation for a comprehensive revamp of the HR system that would be constructed around the talent management framework that has been presented.

Keywords: *Subject Matter Experts, Talent Management, Qualitative Requirements, Selection Board, Assessment*

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INTRODUCTION

An army requires a diverse range of skills and expertise to operate effectively in today's complex security environment. To meet these needs, armies around the world are increasingly turning to creating Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) and implementing corporate talent management practices. The development of talent and expertise involves identifying individuals with specialised knowledge and skills and providing them with additional training and support to deepen their expertise. This article explores the prevailing talent management ecosystem in the Indian Army and compares it with the system in the US Army with a view to cull out implementable recommendations that could enable better officer talent management.

The US Army is indisputably a pioneer in this subject; more than 200 documents or studies focusing on Talent Management Strategies for the US Army have been released since the turn of the millennium. Under the aegis of US Army's Office of Economic and Manpower Analysis (OEMA), Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) and US Army War College have devoted a significant amount of their research towards officer talent management. There is a plethora of published studies and documents addressing specific issues right from Choice of Arms on commissioning to identification of talent management issues facing the Army, identifying and developing talent, talent employment, retaining talent, study of business human capital models and senior officer's talent management per say in this vast collection of studies. Various programmes have been launched by the US Armed Forces after careful test bedding on smaller sample populations. US Army OEMA's Green Pages proof-of-concept talent management test bed,[1] which is a Talent Management Information System (TIMS), is one of many such programmes. After trial evaluation, some of these programmes have been rolled out as full-fledged operational programmes in the past two years. These initiatives need to be compared with the system in India through a literature review. While a surfeit of literature exists on the US Army the same is not available to support meaningful research on the Indian Army's unique challenges. Therefore, it was felt that before commencing a study of the US system, an environment scan of Indian Army's issues needs to be carried out through primary research using interviews and surveys.

Structured and semi-structured interviews were conducted either in person or over the phone. The nine interviewees included a mix of very senior officers who had worked on policy-related matters in the Military Secretary Branch (MS Branch) & Adjutant General Branch (AG Branch) and heads of establishments that are majorly reliant on specialist talents to fill up their

officer billets were included. Two Head of Arms from Technical Arms were also interviewed as part of this exercise. Two surveys targeting officer respondents with a diverse range of experiences were conducted for different ranks. There were over 140 responses to the surveys, including those from six lieutenant generals, 10 major generals and 24 brigadiers from all arms and services. Informed consent from participants was obtained by assuring confidentiality and anonymity, thereby alleviating any potential discomfort to participants and increasing participation by sharing of open and honest views. The findings of the interviews and surveys are being used to compare the Indian Army's talent management practices with those of the US Army.

This article 'Managing Officer Talent in the Army: A Study of the US System' examines the subject using the literature mentioned above and the author's survey in the Indian Army to arrive at findings and recommendations that are suitable for the Indian Army.

Part I: Prevailing Talent Management Ecosystem

The Indian Army currently manages its officers to increase their ability to compete for promotions and leadership; this strategy fosters a command-centric, operationally driven culture. Officers carefully avoid non-operational postings because of the perception that for being upwardly mobile one needs a 'warrior' or operations-oriented career profile with command and staff assignments in counter terror, line of control and high altitude area operations along the northern borders dominating the officer's posting profile. Non-operational postings are widely viewed as being dangerous to one's career, despite that they can help one get the specialised knowledge necessary for the majority of senior officer billets, the bulk of which are non-operational.[2]

Most discussions on officer corps management nowadays involves the use of the words/terms generalist and broadening. Some practitioners believe that 'generalist' is a misleading term as it refers to the Army's entry-level ground combat specialist. While the term 'broadening' refers to exposing these very ground combat specialists to the non-operational assignments, which is mostly for an inordinately small period near the midpoint of their careers or later. For an army of the twenty-first century, these may not be enough measures to create crucial competencies. Senior land combat experts are expected to perform well in every assignment under this management paradigm, but they are rarely given the specialised training, career advancement opportunities or tenure length necessary to succeed in the vastly different environment of institutional leadership and management. Figure 1 uses a pie chart for depiction of replies, when flag

rank respondents were asked about their views on the issue elaborated above; approximately 90 per cent of responses were in agreement with the assertion.
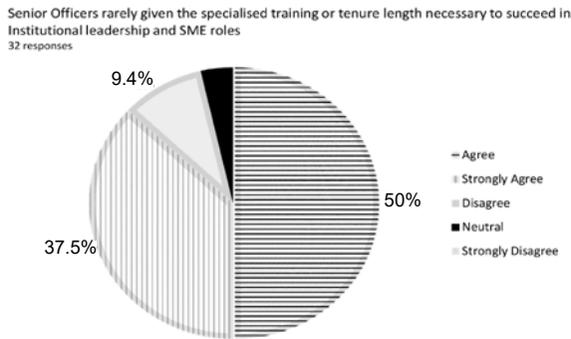
Senior Officers rarely given the specialised training or tenure length necessary to succeed in
Institutional leadership and SME roles
32 responses

Figure 1 Response to Flag Rank Officer Questionnaire
Source: Author's Survey

The US Army (Strategic Studies Institute) undertook an examination of officer talent management practices post 2010 on the directions of the then Army Chief of Staff.[3] As a part of the series of studies that emerged post this directive, a common thread was a set of fundamental challenges identified that mandated better talent management in the Army. These challenges are enumerated below:

- Armed forces suffer severe resource constraints in the twenty-first century, and this situation is expected to persist. There will be a considerable force reduction as a result of decreasing defence spending. The ability to successfully do more with less in this climate depends on talent management, especially at the top officer levels.

- The nature of work is changing. In the information age, jobs require a high degree of expertise and are evolving quickly in terms of technology. As a result, officers will increasingly work with smart machines in battle as well as in fields that require critical specialised domain expertise. Therefore, human resource processes will have to be altered due to the need for unique abilities and talents.

- Kinetic threats are progressively being augmented by economic and asymmetrical threats. There is an increasing risk from enemies looking to use cyber weapons to directly strike the economy and other key components of national power. The US electric power grid's control systems were breached in 2009, which caused widespread disruptions. The alleged attempts of Russia to alter election outcomes in the last US presidential elections are

even more alarming. Similarly, in April 2022 cyber attackers linked to the Chinese military reportedly broke into the networks of seven power grid hubs in north India.[4] Attacks on private companies in crucial sectors such as banking and defence as well as key infrastructure such as power plants have been documented in the past as well. The Strategic Studies Institute report on Senior Officer Talent Management goes on to point out, "*cyber threat cannot be underestimated, for it adds a game-changing dimension to warfare, much as aviation did a century ago. But what is the Army doing today to cultivate its 21st century cyber counterparts, men and women who are already in its talent pipeline? More importantly, will these young innovators remain on the leadership periphery, or will the Army let them rise to the top of the institution as times dictate?*"[5]

Apart from the issues mentioned above, the rapid rate at which flag officers change leadership and command assignments and the effects this has on organisational and personal effectiveness has also been flagged for concern.[6]

Another concern regarding specialisation and institutional/management expertise raised in the US Army is that general officers have been exclusively a product of Professional Military Education (PME) institutions. To illustrate this point further data from 1995 through to 2010 was studied; in 1995, almost 55 per cent of brigadier generals held a full-time graduate degree from a civilian institution or university. However, by 2010, that number had decreased by more than a third, a significant departure from earlier standards that some believe may be indicative of a rise in anti-intellectualism among the Army officer corps.[7] Outside the US Army, the Department of Defense also has been considering significant reforms to officer management for many years now. Broader contemporary literature on the subject deliberates on issues beyond key challenges. Certain issues identified/observations that are equally relevant in Indian Army's context are summarised below. While the issues and challenges have remained relatively consistent, thoughts on how to meet the challenge have varied across time as evident from the highlights below:

- In 2002 the *Military Personnel Human Resources Strategic Plan* asked crucial questions such as, 'What adjustments should be made to military officer force management to better balance depth of experience (specialisation) with breadth of experience (generalisation)?' And also that 'Should the assignment tenure in senior ranks be increased?'[8]

- The *Quadrennial Defense Review-2006* encourages new career paths that create the specialised abilities required to complete unique tasks in order to promote innovation.[9]
- A Defence Science Board Study in 2011 highlighted the need to carry out improvements in personnel information systems, while alluding to current Army efforts to match officer skills with organisational demand.[10]
- Officers have proven to be typically capable of meeting the demands of war fighting but were less skilled in non-kinetic capabilities, was a critical finding of Army's 2006 *Review of Education, Training and Assignments for Leaders Study*.[11]
- The same study goes on to espouse that each Army officer is required to develop into a 'pentathlete', a multi-skilled warrior, business manager, team builder and diplomat.[12]
- The 2009 *Army Leader Development Strategy* called for a mix of generalists and specialists that collectively provide diverse talents to meet all the Army's requirements.[13]

The survey conducted as part of the study[14] for this article brings out amply that these issues are relevant to the Indian Army as well, almost in equal measure. Government and military leadership have expressed concern over the ramifications of these complex challenges on officer management for more than 20 years now.[15] The overall analysis of officer talent management literature published in the US reveals a paradigm that acknowledges that each person has a special combination of abilities, knowledge and behaviours that, when recognised, developed and unleashed, enable them to perform at their very best in one or more areas. It is also evident that the government, the military academia and the US Army over the last two decades have been calling for enhanced officer development and employment that involves a transition from time-based, one-size-fits-all personnel management to talent management that is individually customised and productivity focused. A synthesis of their top concerns reveals these five crucial change imperatives.[16]

- *Differentiate people by looking for and hiring people with a variety of skills.*
- *Create specialised knowledge through different career pathways.*
- *Invest on advanced and specialised education.*
- *Enhance succession planning, especially for senior officer roles.*
- *Ensure that the assignment tenure is sufficiently long.*

These change imperatives may be equally applicable to the current officer management paradigm of Indian Army. This article endeavours to first

present a conceptual framework for an all-encompassing talent management enterprise. The recommendations are being made in the spirit of service and not criticism of the 'System'; on further delving into the problem areas, it would become more and more evident that a significant portion of the present officer management structure needs to be overhauled. Considering the Indian geo-political and security environment, the nature of new non-kinetic threats and the fast rate at which new technologies are emerging, time for reflection seems to be limited and therefore there is an urgent need to look at the aspect of officer talent management seriously in the Indian Army.

Part II: Creation of a Talent Management Framework

Currently the Army records a lot of data about each officer to include their permanent address, family details, marital and medical status, pre-commissioning education, appointments with tenures, decorations etc. Other things recorded include courses attended, course grading achieved, dates of promotion etc. All this information, and more, is found in each officer's 'paramount card' and dossier of service maintained by the MS Branch. Even a cursory examination of this data reveals that this is just basic accounting information. However, the Army requires decision support data in order to use officer talent. Before coming on to the aspect of recording of data, let us first understand the term talent. Talent is defined by the Cambridge English Dictionary as *a natural ability to be good at something, especially without being taught.*[17] However, in the Army, the Business HR-related understanding of the term would be more relevant. Specifically in the armed forces there is a need to ask the questions: 'What is talent?' and 'Don't we already manage it?' In the Army's parlance talent can be defined as the unique intersection of abilities, knowledge and actions. Talent encompasses a variety of characteristics, such as training, army-provided experiences, life experiences such as background, preferences, interests, travel, personality, education and a plethora of other elements that better suit a person to a particular career option than others. By focusing on talent management, a considerably bigger portion of an organisation's staff achieves optimal performance levels. Because it lacks effective methods for identifying and capturing these skill sets or talents, the Army is currently unable to manage officer talent. Part-III of the article discusses more about identifying and capturing talent inputs.

In order to suggest a framework that effectively and efficiently manages officer talents to yield the desired outputs at middle and senior officer levels, let us consider the current pathways to reaching and tenanting senior officer billets

in the Indian Army. Without precise granular data, the MS Branch is forced to manage officers through policies that treat them as interchangeable pieces, moving them down conventional career routes in an effort to find and choose a small number of operationally skilled general officers. Figure 2 attempts to represent the existing system. In the figure, the shaded area denotes officers with the expertise necessary for the institutional army's highly specialised and complex management domains, including budgets, personnel management, the development and acquisition of weapons systems, information technology, cyber, space etc. Officers with the knowledge of warfighting or operations required to succeed at all levels from the platoon to the theatre/national levels are represented by the unshaded part of the pyramid.
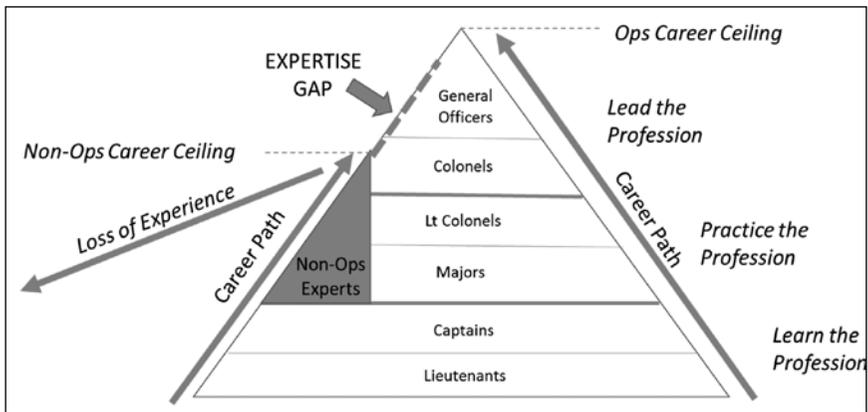

Figure 2 Current Paths to Senior Army Leadership
Source: Author

Often those who rise to the top of the Army echelons, owing to both policy and tradition, are General Service Branch (GS Branch) officers with a heavy emphasis on operational assignments. These officers often have little to no specialised education, but as they advance, their spans of authority and duties grow exponentially. They also experience an ever-increasing amount of job hopping, forgoing the assignment continuity that is essential for strategic leadership and effective change management.

A practitioner's analysis of skill sets required for colonel and above billets in the Indian Army was carried out using the survey. Survey participants opined that an overwhelming majority of these billets (70 to 80 per cent) are non-operational in nature, that is, they require some field of domain expertise or enterprise leadership and management acumen rather than pure Operations

Branch experience.[18] A similar analysis has been carried out for the US Army.[19] Figure 3 illustrates reduction in operational billets, with a substantial increase in billets with a non-operational focus on transit from junior ranks through to mid-career and onwards to the rank of colonel and above for the US Army (ACC in the figure refers to Army Contracting Command, MTOE is a US Army acronym for War Establishment Units primarily from the fighting arms and TDA units are Peace Establishment Units of the Services).
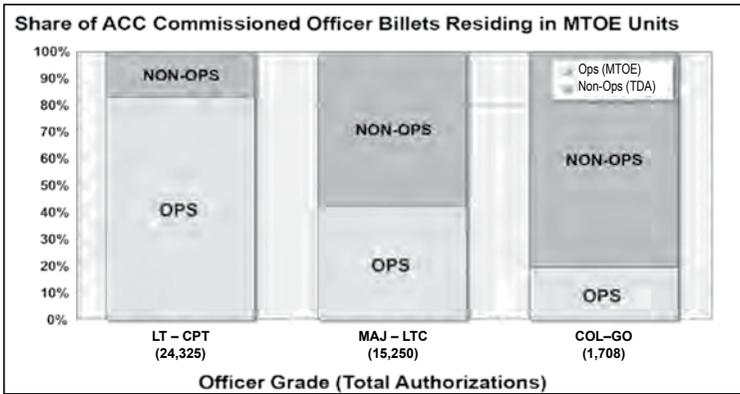

Figure 3 Operational Billets Reduce with Increase in Rank

Source: M.J. Colarusso and D.S. Lyle, 'Senior Officer Talent Management: Fostering Institutional Adaptability', Monograph, Army War College Carlisle Barracks PA Strategic Studies Institute, February 2014.
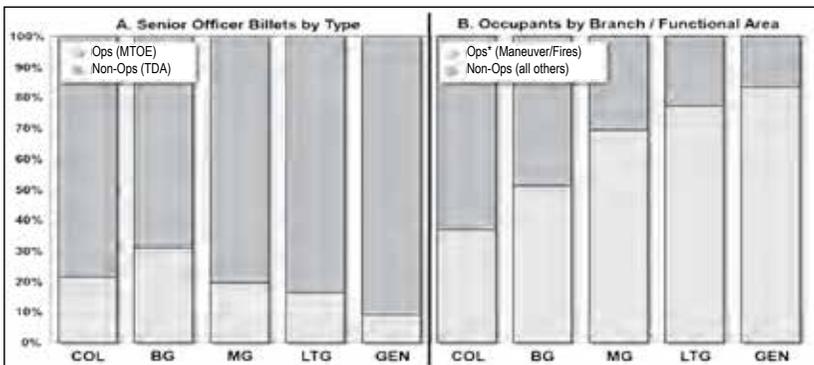

Figure 4 Senior Officer Billets vs Occupants

Source: M.J. Colarusso and D.S. Lyle, 'Senior Officer Talent Management: Fostering Institutional Adaptability', Monograph, Army War College Carlisle Barracks PA Strategic Studies Institute, February 2014.

Buttressing the point further, Figure 4 represents senior officer billets by required expertise type vs occupation of these very billets by officers with specialisation that may not be suitable. We have already seen that these illustrations are representative of Indian Army's structures as well. It can clearly be seen that a large number of these officers might not possess the subject matter expertise necessary to be successful in the top leadership and management roles they have been assigned to. On the other hand, officers who do not tenant the requisite operational staff appointments are far less likely to join the general officer cohort due to a lower career ceiling that forces them to either continue as overlooked officers in roles of little relevance or pursue their professional domain specialisation outside by seeking premature retirement.

The Army lacks the bench strength necessary to tackle the growing number of asymmetrical and non-kinetic national security issues because talent is being culled by being herded onto a certain career route as illustrated in Figure 2. The organisational breadth and depth of talent required for success in a wide spectrum of operational and non-operational roles that might include fields such as financial management, works, capability development, disaster management and numerous other scenarios can only be attained by expanding the number of career paths to higher ranks. Figure 5, which has been adapted from Senior Officer Talent Management Study of the SSI, illustrates this strategy.[20] Such a strategy will enable the availability of crucial skills and abilities to supplement the operational knowledge required at the Army's highest echelons. It will increase the depth and breadth of talent, including operational specialists (depicted by C in the figure), non-operational experts (depicted by A in the figure) and certain officers with both the institutional and operational experience required at the highest levels (depicted by B in the figure). It will address knowledge gaps at the institutional level, resulting in a versatile senior officer distribution.
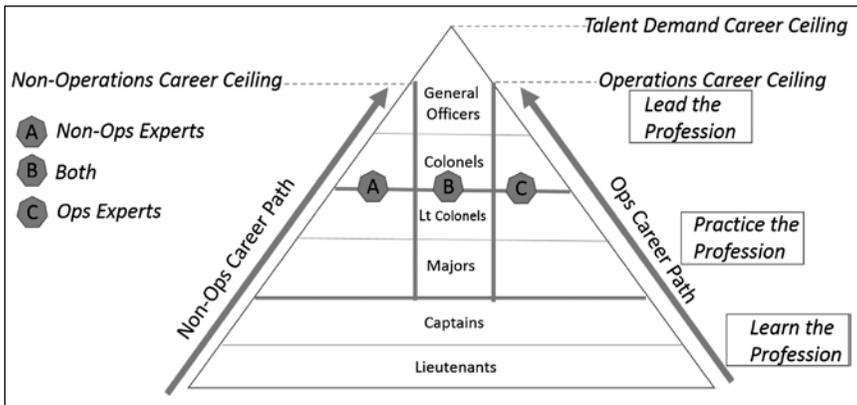
Figure 5 Expanded Pathways to Senior Army Leadership
Source: Author

The elimination of various legacy practices outlined further on in this article is necessary in order to implement such a system. The majority of junior officers' early careers are spent on operational deployments, where relatively homogeneous experiences serve as the foundation for specialists in land warfare. But when they enter mid-career, these officers come across a major roadblock to uncovering and utilising their talents: promotion and management strictly by years in service. This roadblock provides the inflexible foundation of the military's command-centric, up-or-out management structure, and a number of adverse effects flow from it:

- A sole command-centric measure or scale is used to evaluate all officers, stifling individual differences and inhibiting many from pursuing non-traditional postings that might better equip them for institutional leadership.
- Management and promotion by years in service also prevents officers from pursuing posting options that they are most qualified for because they are too low in rank, do not have the required 'qualitative requirements', also referred to as QRs, or are otherwise disqualified because of other prescribed career path constraints.
- As a result, management practices become more concerned with who is available for a position based on rank or length of service and stifling QRs based on Overall Performance (OAP), rather than with who is the best candidate by talent.[21]

Management of officers by years in service and other constrictive QRs for important assignments go against successful practices demonstrated by militaries the world over. Specifically for the US Army in the modern era many such examples come to the fore.

> Had this management system been in place during World War II, for example, not only would General Dwight Eisenhower have failed to rise to command of all Allied Forces in Europe, but General Creighton Abrams might have languished as a regimental adjutant rather than lead an armoured combat command, and General Curtis Le May would have perhaps remained a squadron commander in Europe rather than lead the successful Pacific air campaign. In their day, when the talent for a particular job was present, the assignment was made and the commensurate rank was then provided.[22]

The focus on administrative simplicity and purported justice in promotion could be the reason to resort to management by years of service; this can be inferred as vast amounts of literature reviewed gave no evidence or argument in support of this archaic practice. However, this practice retards the spotting and nurturing of potential and talent in the Army. Therefore, the elimination of management by years of service at the eighth year of commissioned service is one of the primary suggestions of this article. If the same is implemented, the Army would be able to send officers where their skills call for it and promote them as and when necessary, differentiating them based on merit rather than time in grade. Mid-career officers would effectively have 10 years to practise their trade and train for senior leadership, it would also free them from assignments or postings that might not be a good fit for their unique skills or requirements. This may be accomplished by implementing a thorough talent evaluation at the eighth and twentieth years of service. A similar system, as proposed for the US Army, will be discussed in greater detail in the next part of the article, however, brief logic for conduct of comprehensive talent assessments at the timelines as proposed is as under:
- Roughly around eight years of service, the officer encounters the Staff College waypoint. Given that they have already accumulated a considerable performance history, it is appropriate to examine them now and classify them according to their individual skills and talent gaps. Here, functional designation should be carried out, taking into account each officer's abilities and preferences and determining the best talent area in which they may thrive. The specifics of the recommended mechanism will be discussed in the succeeding part of the article.

- Officers who have been in the profession for close to 20 years have finished the 'practitioner' stage and are ready to take the reins as senior officers. At around 20 years of service they would have had at least two exposures to the domain or functional area assigned to them at eight years of service and would have yielded enough data for assessment of their suitability for continued retention in the same domain at higher ranks. Pension being assured, some would be contemplating retirement and life outside of the Army. The moment is appropriate to determine whether they are a good fit for 'executive' leadership in terms of talent match.

These efforts will offer a broad framework for managing officer talent that strikes a consistent balance between officer talent needs and availability. By restoring discretion to promotion opportunities and timing, this balance will enable the Army to identify, evaluate and select officer talent. But for this to work effectively, the Army has to start differentiating its officers at all ranks.

Part–III: Differentiating Officers for Talent and Promotions

Differentiation is the first step to uncovering the hidden productive potential of every workforce. It involves identifying what people do well and what development would enhance their performance. Differentiation is becoming increasingly important in a knowledge economy where jobs are more technical, specialised and complicated and top employers understand this. For example, General Electric, which for years promoted jack-of-all-trades types to its top positions, has changed its executive development strategy to foster more in-depth sector specialists.[23]

The Army does differentiate its officers; the question is the methodology adopted and the results achieved at the end of the differentiation exercise. Unfortunately, differentiation in the Army in its current form can be typically described as 'above centre of mass' and 'everyone else', a bimodal distribution that was partly produced by comparing all officers to a command-centric, operational yardstick only.[24] Like the US Army differentiation, the Indian Army too mostly depends on the following two assessment/evaluation mechanisms.

- The Army's primary evaluation tool is the Annual Confidential Report (ACR). The existing ACR is a highly ineffective tool for talent separation due to rating inflation and capturing of generalised information that is inherent to the current format of ACR. Despite the vastly different distributions of abilities, knowledge and behaviours needed to operate

effectively as an Infantry Platoon Leader, a Signals Company Commander or a colonel dealing with procurement in the Army Headquarters, the ACR in its present form looks only for limited attribute distribution in each individual, primarily looking at command centric issues only. The above-mentioned lacuna can be addressed by overhauling the ACR format, making it apt at capturing talent information. Specific issues regarding the overhaul of the ACR system are not being discussed here being very vast in scope and is being identified as a research gap.[25]

- The second evaluation method comprises Selection Boards for Command and Staff promotions, as well as for opportunities such as Higher Command or the National Defence College. Board members regrettably depend mostly on inefficient ACRs when making decisions, accompanied by basic 'accounting' information about each officer, including things such as field postings, awards, disciplinary or adverse remarks etc. For the value judgement portion, each board is also given instructions or guidelines that includes pointers about valuing certain things over others. Understandably even the value judgement has limited 'value' in promoting talent. The board procedure is totally paper based, and the evaluation of each officer's years of service takes only a few seconds. Each board is an HR exercise that can be termed futile, especially on considering the benefits that should have accrued from the same but are not even looked at as one of the objectives or by-products of the board. Assuming a notional empanelment rate of 30 per cent, the 70 per cent non-empanelled majority does not receive any feedback on the decisions that are made for their future at the end of the board. Instead, the profession to which they have dedicated their lives remains silent. Even while it may have wanted each officer to serve for a number of additional years, the Army unintentionally but strongly conveys to them that it is not interested in their careers.[26]

As seen above, the Army makes no attempt to evaluate and record officer abilities and talents at the conclusion of selection boards that analyse the dossiers of hundreds of officers every year. Nothing new is discovered. In reality, it is really challenging to distinguish between these officers, because so little is actually known about them. Most Selection Boards base their decisions on the second or third digit after the decimal in the quantified merit list, while simultaneously disclosing nothing about the candidates' actual abilities. In conclusion, Selection Boards represent a lost chance to separate officers into the diverse talent pools required to make the Army more adaptive, especially at the senior level. The capacity to identify and choose

officers who are best suited to lead Army's non-kinetic initiatives is lacking because there is insufficient information to distinguish officer abilities and an excessive emphasis is placed upon operational/command competence. Instead, there is a continued reliance on information-starved selection boards, whose members frequently promote officers who had similar career trajectories to their own. Differentiation is needed to increase the depth and breadth of talent, which has been discussed in Part-II of the article.

Differentiation necessitates a comprehensive evaluation process that provides the Army a thorough understanding of every officer. Thorough periodic evaluations of each officer and a talent management information system that records the findings and makes them actually relevant should be the pillars upon which such a system should stand. The essential change that is being proposed is that instead of placing an excessive amount of emphasis on 'promotion and command' as is being done today, evaluative objectives should move to focusing on each officer's individual growth, qualification and best employment matching the talents identified.

A broad recommendation for 'conducting comprehensive assessments' of all officers nearing their eighth and twentieth years of service was given at the end of Part II of the article. This concept is borrowed from the SSI document and has been suitably adapted for Indian requirements.[27] Hereafter in this article, this exercise of conduct of such assessments shall be referred to as the Functional Employment Assessment Boards (FEABs). The FEABs can take place not just at those times, but also at significant career crossroads during the course of an officer's military career. *The idea of a career crossroads was first proposed by Walter Mahler, a pioneer in the fields of succession planning and executive development. Mahler stated that these transitions or as he called them career crossroads mandate commensurate adjustments in an employee's time horizons (i.e., tenure), abilities, work values, and education.*[28] Penetrating talent evaluations should be carried out at career crossroads since that is when management and leadership duties move into more complicated bands. Identification of these crossroads or milestones and associated actions is carried out in the succeeding paragraphs. Between pre-commission training and retirement, an officer can move through various career transitions:

- First crossroad is the Services Selection Board (SSB). This is the point at which talent management really starts. It is evident that recruitment efforts here establish the basic talent profile of the senior officer pool 30 years later.
- Next crossroad relates to commissioning and the process of the allocation of Choice of Arms. Currently, each commissioning source does not do much to match individual skills and undergraduate education to the unique talent

requirements of the various Arms and Services. Therefore, more needs to be done to first capture and thereafter utilise talent inputs at this stage.

- Platoon and company command periods can correspond to more crossroads, however FEABs at these turning points are not being advised since they occur during the formative period of an officer's career.

- As already outlined in Part-II of the article, officers with an eight-year service career would have a substantial body of work experience, allowing the Army to recognise their distinct abilities and talent gaps. It will also be the point at which the officer would harbour thoughts of getting into the Staff College. Officers of the Short Service Commission Entry type who happen to be a poor skill match for the Army may also peel off after this crossroad. The most important role of this crossroad should be functional designation of officers. Functional designation ideally should happen, taking into account the officers' talents and inclinations and determine the most suitable talent domain for them. Domains such as Finance, HR, Works, Land, Info Systems etc. must be allocated to each general and non-general cadre officer as an institutionalised practice at this stage of their careers.

- At around 15 years of service, officers are experienced practitioners of the profession and are approaching another crossroad, as this time coincides with the Number 3 Selection Board that selects officers for promotion to the rank of a colonel and command. In order to strengthen the bench of future leaders, it is now necessary to review their skills in light of current and emerging talent demands and realign them into suitable/ additional talent pools as necessary. If the FEAB is carried out here, it will obviate the requirement for the conduct of Number 3 Selection Board with its results being used in lieu of the board per say. This may result in an additional advantage as depicted in Figure 6. The FEAB at Step A in this figure evaluates 10 officers. In Step B, based on merit and functional expertise two officers are placed in Command Pool (Operations) while two are allocated Command Pool (Logistics). The balance six are placed in various Staff Domain Pools based on their probability of success in each of domains that have a demand as per predicted billets for mid-level and senior officers in the future, as also after considering their performance in the given functional area billets provided to them post eighth year in service. Reassertion of functional designation for a majority of officers at Step C provides each officer with good feedback, indicating institutional involvement in their careers with respect to their allocated domains.
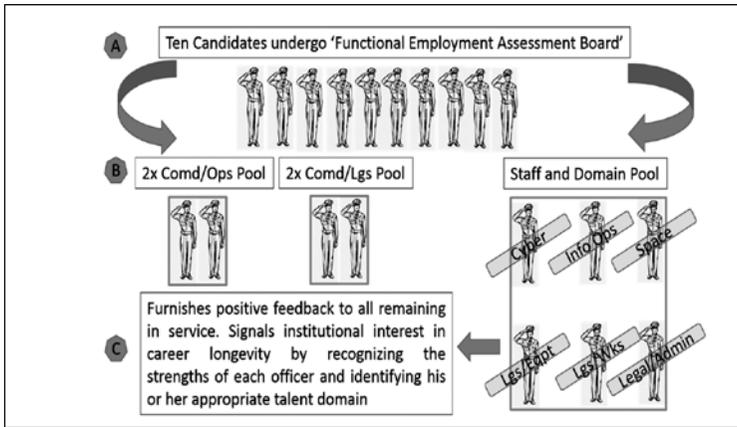
Figure 6 FEABs Replace Competitive Selection Boards
Source: Author

- The next crossroad would correspond to officers growing close to 20th year of commissioned service and finishing the 'practitioner' stage of their careers. They are now ready to take the profession's leadership roles as senior officers. The period is appropriate to determine if they are capable of 'executive' leadership. Since this period roughly coincides with the timeline of current practise of nomination for Higher Command Course, one output of FEAB could be the nomination part. Some officers may be thinking about retiring now that their pensions are guaranteed. A proper feedback and incentive to them may motivate them to stay thus retaining talent fostered in the Army over 20 years.
- The last crossroad pertains only to senior commanders whose careers are primed to ascend to the highest echelons of the Army. Here they can be explicitly recognised for the genuinely important billets at the two and three-star levels in accordance with the talent data gathered from prior FEABs.

There is a need to give out a broad framework for the concept of the FEAB here. The objective of FEAB is to get to know each officer in depth so that the Army can capitalise on their specific abilities for the good of the organisation and the individuals themselves. Self-Awareness, Work Evaluation, Accounting Information and Personal Interview are the four information sectors that FEAB examines, as shown in Figure 7. Each sector significantly relies on input from the officer being evaluated as well as a mentor, a supervisor, the MS Branch and the career counsellor. The MS Branch compiles the data and delivers it to the FEAB.
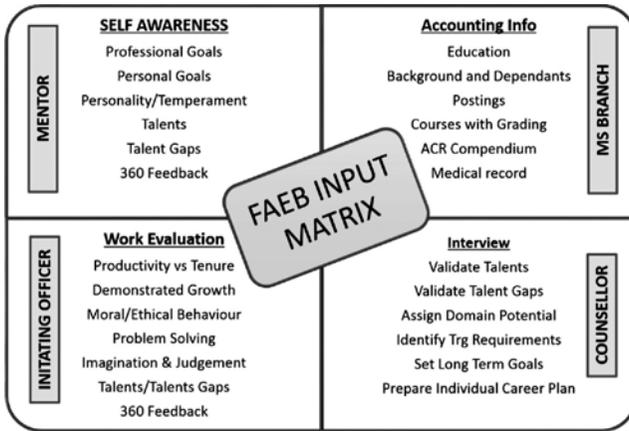
Figure 7 FEAB Matrix
Source: Author

- *Mentorship*: Each officer should choose a Mentor by the seventh year of service; this connection should be formally recognised by the Army. The mentorship must start at least a year before the initial FEAB. Mentors will give honest but confidential talent evaluations, encourage officers to conduct self-assessments and assist them in developing their career objectives. Because of this, the officer must choose his own mentor and feel at ease with him. The mentor will be a senior officer who is not in the chain of command but who has knowledge relevant to the mentee's development. Mentoring and patronage are two different things. In any workforce, patronage will continue, but mentors and patrons serve fundamentally different purposes. A senior officer with institutional power to influence a junior officer's future postings and chances is not a mentor. A Mentor would just decode unique talents and motivators to assist officers understand themselves and they would then offer advice to the officer without using any institutional influence.

- *Assessment*: The Initiating Officer (IO), who is each officer's present boss, will be essential to the FEAB procedure as he will basically provide the input for the Work Assessment part. Under an improved ACR system, as recommended earlier, information on the talent inventory should also be found in the IO's assessment. IOs keep an eye on everyday performance, which is a great vantage point for evaluating moral/ethical conduct, judgement, problem-solving etc. If done properly, the IO's evaluation might support or refute the officer's personal evaluation. Additionally, IOs can assist in determining how well an officer matches the sort of task

that the officer is currently engaged in. The weightage assigned to the IO and other reviewing officers up the chain can also be reconsidered in view of the holistic scope of the FEAB system.

- *FEAB Administrator*: The MS Branch is currently responsible for maintaining an officer's HR records. The MS Branch personnel will need to synthesise data from all the input mechanisms covered in this study with the use of improved technology, which will allow them to manage considerably more data about each individual. But as information technology advances, fewer records technicians will be needed. This will eventually enable MS Branch to reallocate a larger portion of personnel and resources into career counselling, a defining characteristic of effective talent management.

- *Career Counselling*: There is no institutionalised career counselling at all in the modern Army. Each officer should receive professional guidance from a Career Counsellor on how to enhance his or her performance and potential. Through continuous communication, using phone calls, online tools and interviews with each officer, counsellors and officers will become familiar with each other. Career Counsellors would construct official individual career plans for their officers and accurately represent them in FEABs, in contrast to mentors, whose job is more advisory in nature. The Career Counsellor's participation in each officer's talent evaluation is essential to the success of the proposed system.

FEABs may have the potential to firmly cement talent management environment into the Army. To do that, FEAB outcomes must be recorded and presented in a way that empowers managers to make the most effective HR choices. The nine-box talent matrix as shown in Figure 8 can be a crucial tool for this. Similar evaluation matrices have been used by transformational HR teams at leading companies for nearly three decades to map the junction of an employee's performance (vertical axis) and potential (horizontal axis).[29] The numbers in this diagram are there just for the sake of discussion, they do not indicate an evaluation value. An officer, for instance, whose performance and potential map to Box 1 signifies someone who has performed beyond all expectations and is now prepared to function possibly at two complexity levels higher. An officer who maps to Box 6 is underperforming yet is considered to have great potential.

Figure 8 The Nine-Box Talent Matrix
Source: Adapted by Author from https://rapidbi.com/nine-box-grids-for-talent-
management

An underperforming officer could never be considered high potential under the current system, since ACRs frequently mix the measurements of both. The officer who maps to Box 6 is a skilled professional who was given the incorrect assignment—a talent mismatch. Due to its lack of knowledge on the skills required by each post or the talents of its personnel, the Army is now unable to do this sort of nuanced assessment. Identifying the functional/expertise domain being evaluated is critical before utilising the nine-box matrix to evaluate an officer. In the proposed Nine-Box Talent Matrix the Assessment Domain field is located at the top of the chart. Considering operations, logistics, human resource management etc. as required areas of expertise, Army can develop its officer talent pools in and around these domains, especially at the mid-career and senior ranks by utilising such tools.

It is recommended that a nonbinding FEAB pilot project with a group of promotable lieutenant colonels of a particular Arm or Service be carried out. Small administratively manageable sampling of a FEAB would certainly reveal a variety of crucial lessons. The concept could be validated by the pilot project results, which would also offer a roadmap for full implementation.

The evaluation procedure outlined above will produce a ton of talent data about officers, especially as they get closer to joining the senior officer cohort. However, unless such data is supported with accuracy

and granularity, volume would be counterproductive. Fielding a secure, web-based Talent Management Information System (TIMS) is the ideal approach to acquire, organise, and utilise this data in an effective manner. The TIMS would have to be designed specifically for the Army keeping its unique needs into consideration. This endeavour to design and develop the TIMS may be strengthened by using the knowledge gained through the US Army OEMA's Green Pages proof-of-concept talent management test bed.[30] Green Pages was developed as an experimental environment and lacked complete capability, but it featured a talent marketplace at its core, and this market mechanism may be the key to the success of such a system being launched for Army. It is recommended that a similar pilot project be launched for niche talent requirements by MS Branch. Exact modalities would need to be worked out.
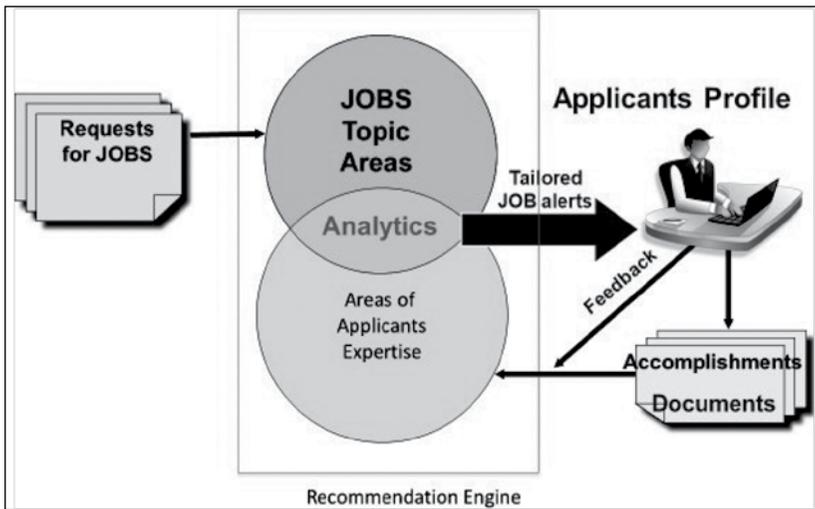

Figure 9 Talent Marketplace

Source: https://talent.army.mil/wp-content/uploads/pdf_uploads/PUBLICATIONS/
Green-Pages-Proof-of-Concept-Pilot-Report.pdf

In general, under such a system, officers in the posting or reassignment window would need to create personal profiles and provide information that significantly supplements their MS Dossier or Paramount Card, both of which will also be required to be integrated into a networked IT solution. Units/formations with vacancies would be required to create job description, giving out the skills required to succeed in each appointment. Participating

officers will thereafter go over these vacancies and give their choices for them, simultaneously participating units look over the available officers and give their preferences out of the available talent. Simplistically put units will indicate their staffing needs, and officers who can fill those needs would be drawn in response. The role of MS Branch in such a system should be to coordinate the procedure and act as the final arbitrator of postings. A fully functional TIMS based on lessons learnt out of such a pilot project should be the final objective. This system will aid in changing the Army's archaic employment paradigm to one that is more collaborative and increasingly talent oriented.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The article established the foundation by contending that many officer management practices are age old and have lost their efficacy especially in light of talent demands of various domains. In its second section, the article presented a fundamental framework for talent management that was based on basic human capital theory and applied to the entire officer corps. According to this theory, all officers have different and distinctive talent distributions, just as each senior officer billet has different and distinctive talent requirements. Further, it was indicated that the Army does not yet have the talent data that this framework requires. Therefore, it is forced to adopt a one-size-fits-all strategy for managing officers that is primarily centred on developing proficiency only in warfare. While this strategy works well for creating young officers, it is rather inadequate in producing senior officers, whose functions become less operational as they ascend in rank. As a result, there are frequently talent mismatches when excellent leaders are assigned to tasks for which the Army has not adequately prepared them.

Several recommendations have been made in the article to address these issues. Although the recommendations are not all-inclusive, they can serve as the foundation for a comprehensive revamp of the HR system that would be constructed around the talent management framework that has been presented. These recommendations if implemented after careful piloting might result in an all-ranks officer talent management system that achieves the desired outcomes. The following is a summary of the recommendations:

- Widen the avenues for entry into senior Army leadership, enabling managerial and business skills to support, not replace, operational

knowledge. Achieve balance between the supply and demand of domain expertise.

- Utilise FEAB evaluations to periodically gather specific data on each officer's achievement, potential, aptitude and suitability for employment in particular branches or functional areas.
- Using FEABs at significant career crossroads, differentiate people into domain expertise talent pools.
- Create customised career plans for each officer based on FEAB assessments. Manage officers based on their skills rather than their years in service starting at eighth year of service.
- Assign each officer a dedicated career counsellor and mentor.
- Use the nine-box talent matrix when conducting FEAB evaluations.
- Establish a talent management information system for officers of the Indian Army to make employment paradigm collaborative and talent oriented. A pilot project may be carried out before implementing the same.
- Run a pilot project for the FEAB evaluation procedure to help establish a roadmap for implementation.

The article suggests officer management practices based on data analysis, human capital theory, and methods that have been successful in the corporate sector. The recommendations cover officers starting at commissioning rather than only colonels and above since junior officers serve as the stock for senior leadership.

A staged implementation strategy with clearly defined roles, duties and success criteria will be necessary for comprehensive officer talent management in addition to the recommendations made here. The objective of this research is not to suggest that SMEs or domain expertise should be prioritised over all other factors. Additionally, it does not advocate for managerial or administrative expertise at the cost of soldiering; rather, it argues for both. The Army should be led by officers who learn via operational assignments yet are ready to successfully satisfy talent needs in the evolving domains and also at the organisational level.

Notes

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2. Interviews with Senior Officers involved in Policy Formulation (MS/AG Branch), SME employer establishments and Heads of Arms and Services.

3. M. J. Colarusso and D. S. Lyle, 'Senior Officer Talent Management: Fostering Institutional Adaptability', Monograph, Army War College Carlisle Barracks PA Strategic Studies Institute, 2014, p. 11.

4. 'Chinese Hackers Targeted 7 Indian Power Hubs, Govt Says Ops Failed', *Hindustan Times*, 7 April 2022, available at https://www.hindustantimes. com/india-news/chinese-hackers-targeted-7-indian-power-hubs-govt-says-ops-failed-101649356540330.html, accessed on 5 December 2022.

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13. 'A Development Strategy for a 21 Century Army', 2009, available at https:// indianstrategicknowledgeonline.com/web/ArmyLdrDevStrategy_20091125.pdf, accessed on 9 November 2022.

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15. Standing Committee on Defence (2008–2009), *Human Resource Planning, Shortage of Manpower, Infusion of Hi-Tech Training and Infrastructure for The Armed Forces*, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, available at https://eparlib.nic.in/ bitstream/123456789/62705/1/14_Defence_34.pdf#search=defence, accessed on 16 October 2021.

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19. M. J. Colarusso and D. S. Lyle, 'Senior Officer Talent Management: Fostering Institutional Adaptability', n. 3, p. 37.
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22. Ibid., p. 41.
23. K. Linebaugh, 'The New GE Way: Go Deep, Not Wide', WSJ, 7 March 2012, available at https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB100014240529702045714045772575 33620536076.
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