

Chapter 2H – RECRUITING AND RETENTION OF MILITARY PERSONNEL: UNITED STATES

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After facing the challenges of recruiting an all-volunteer force during the economic boom of the 1990s, the U.S. Navy acknowledged the need to improve recruiting processes and retention efforts. By the year 2000, the Navy undertook initiatives to increase enlistment bonuses, improve packaged incentives, improve applicant screening, improve recruiter screening, and increase recruiter support.¹ The initiatives were guided by Commander, Navy Recruiting Command, the organization charged with executing the Navy's active duty and reserve recruiting program. In addition, the Office of Naval Research (ONR) chose to fund science and technology (S&T) research to improve classification of incoming recruits into jobs, modernize the job assignment process, and develop decision support technologies for overall strategic management of the personnel pipeline. As recruiting challenges continue, some of these improvements have been implemented, and several interim products from the S&T initiatives have been demonstrated.

In fiscal year 2005, the Navy accessed 37,703 recruits against a goal of 37,635.² Accessions are those recruits who actually sign a contract and report to ("ship" to) the Recruit Training Command (RTC). Others who have signed a contract expressing intent to join the Navy, but do not immediately ship are put into the Delayed Entry Program (DEP). The DEP provides a recruiting "cushion" in that, if recruitments run high of target, intake can be regulated by putting more recruits in the DEP. Conversely, if recruitments fall short of target, more individuals can be shipped from the DEP. In 2005 the Navy began the year with the DEP holding 69% of the Navy's goal. By the end of that year, the DEP held 58%. In other words, in order to meet goal in 2005, the Navy reduced the DEP by over 4,000 recruits. The DEP provides that flexibility to the recruiting effort and provides benefits to recruits, as well. It allows extra time to make plans, settle personal affairs, finish school, study military terminology and protocol, and prepare for life in uniform. Studies have shown that the longer a recruit remains in the DEP (up to a point), the less likely he or she is to drop out of recruit training later, perhaps showing a measure of determination.³

Navy recruiters seek out enlisted applicants through leads (perhaps from messages left on the Navy's toll-free number, referrals, or walk-ins) or through "cold calls" to individuals who have not previously shown interest in military service.⁴ To be successful, recruiters must maintain a level of visibility and build relationships with "influencers" in the community (e.g., school guidance counselors, social club leaders). They give presentations at schools, social clubs, recreation centers, etc. – wherever the target 17 – 24-year-old audience might gather. In rough order of magnitude, a recruiter will identify between 80 and 100 potential prospects for every recruit shipped to RTC. As a rule of thumb, of those prospects, only 20 appointments will be scheduled.

¹ Slocum, W. Scott, United States Navy Recruiting Command Snapshot: A Look at the Process, Policies and People with Recommendations, 17 April 2000, pp. 51-55.

² U.S. Department of Defense Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), DoD Announces Recruiting and Retention Numbers for September, News Release No. 1034-05, 11 October 2005.

³ Slocum, p. 3.

⁴ Slocum, pp. 31-32.

Of these 20 appointments, some will be “no-shows” and, ultimately, less than a third will actually complete the interview to the point where the recruiter starts taking personal information. Of these six-or-so individuals who are willing to be interviewed, only two will actually visit the Military Entrance Processing Station (MEPS) (the intake station for all armed services enlisted personnel) to begin testing. Odds are one will be disqualified due to drug test, criminal record check, bad credit rating, or pre-existing medical condition – or simply change his or her mind. Thus, out of the 80 – 100 original prospects, one might actually ship to the RTC.

Figure 2H-1 provides an overall view of the accessing process, from initial contact with the recruiter and processing at the MEPS through shipment to the Navy RTC.⁵

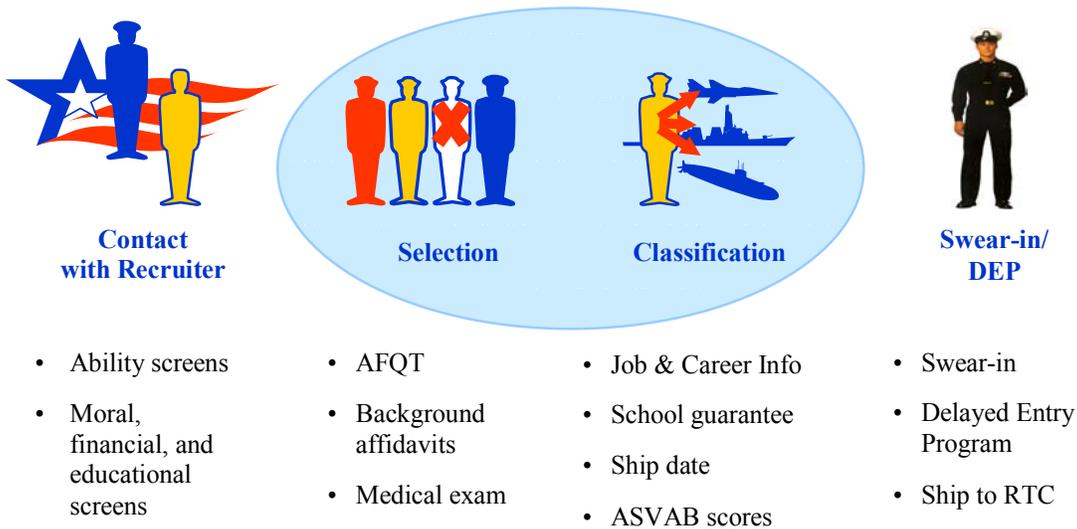


Figure 2H-1: The Accessing Process.

Selection is the process of legally qualifying a civilian for military service. The first step is for the applicant to take a group-administered test, the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB), which takes from 1.5 – 3.0 hours and is composed of eight tests (two verbal, two math, general science, mechanical, automotive/shop, and electronics information) measuring verbal, math, and technical knowledge. Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT) is a combination of the math and verbal tests that are rescaled to a cumulative percentile (1 – 99) of the general youth population. The AFQT, high school diploma status, and rudimentary physical exam qualify a person to join the Navy. The selection process has been shown to minimize basic training (RTC) attrition, primarily through the requirement that 90% of recruits have a high school diploma.

Classification is the phase where a person is offered a particular job and signs a contract for service. There are roughly 80 entry-level jobs for the Navy. Classification consists of recombining the eight ASVAB tests into 12 – 16 composites (unit-weighted sums of two to four tests), and then determining for which initial technical training a person is at least minimally qualified. Minimum qualification is the Navy’s numerical cut-off score to control “A” School (initial technical training) attrition. At the start of the applicant interview, the classifier queries a database and is shown the schools for which the applicant is qualified. The classifier also accesses

⁵ Alderton, David L., Whole Person Assessment Briefing, 2002 – 2005.

the list of jobs the Navy needs to fill most critically. Because it is in the Navy's best interest to fill critical jobs first, the classifier is motivated to "sell" one of these jobs to the applicant. This classification interview lasts 7 – 10 minutes, but dictates the applicant's entire Navy career, the training they receive, the places they will go, the ships to which they will be assigned, and even their post-service civilian job opportunities.

Because this process is not designed to optimize person-job matching – that is, ferret out those matches in which the Sailor has the greatest chance of successful job performance and career-long job satisfaction – ONR has funded research to improve selection and classification. The result will broaden the measures used to assess an applicant's suitability to the Navy in general and to a job rating in particular. In addition to the cognitive measures of the ASVAB and AFQT, the Whole Person Assessment will include non-cognitive measures, such as conscientiousness, social judgment, extroversion; and vocational interest. Job matches will be made with greater granularity and, when used with job performance measures, with greater predictability of job success.

Once Sailors complete initial and advanced technical training, they begin a career-long series of job assignments – assignments every two to three years, to a unit on shore or at sea, in a job that uses their technical specialty or a specialized skill. Assignments are made by "detailers," that is, individuals (usually other Sailors) who are given lists of jobs coming open and lists of Sailors coming up for job rotation. Within given parameters (e.g., limits on moving costs, sea-shore rotation schedules), detailers assign an individual to each job. Because some jobs are flagged as critical fills, the detailer, like the recruiter, is motivated to assign individuals to the critical jobs first, even if they are highly undesirable.

Dissatisfaction with job assignments and the job assignment process can be a major dissatisfier considered at re-enlistment time. An S&T research initiative currently underway has developed technologies which will improve difficult aspects of the assignment process and, hopefully, increase satisfaction with it. For example, principles of free-market auctions have been applied to demonstrate that difficult-to-fill assignments can be filled with volunteers at lower cost than "slamming" individuals into jobs non-voluntarily and paying across-the-board bonuses to compensate. Interim research demonstrations indicate that increased access to information about available jobs alone increase Sailor satisfaction with the process. In the final demonstration of the research, intelligent agent technologies will be used to give Sailors and commands representation during the assignment process, making their specific needs and preferences available for consideration by the detailer or detailing agent.

To help Navy leadership better manage the entire personnel pipeline (recruiting, selection and classification, training, detailing), a comprehensive set of decision support tools is under development. They will give Navy planners and managers the "big picture" view of what are now "stovepiped" processes and analytical tools to highlight changes occurring in the system, dissect causal relationships, and simulate implementation of various management decision options ("what if" gaming).

Poor personnel retention can further stress the recruiting process, thereby making it an area of concern, too. In fiscal year 2005, the Navy achieved only 91% of its mid-career retention goal.⁶ Research now nearing completion will isolate factors which cause Sailors to decide to re-enlist or leave the Navy after their first term. These measures, along with data collected from Sailors, will help identify Sailors at risk of leaving so that appropriate intervention steps can be taken to persuade quality personnel to stay. Results from this work will be adapted to individuals at other career decision points as well.

⁶ U.S. Department of Defense Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs).

And change may to continue. Proposals for future S&T research focus on, among other things, further broadening and deepening personnel assessment – which in the future will include the total force (active duty, reserve, civilian, contract) – and empowering unit commanders to make more resource management decisions affecting their units. New personnel assessment tools and strategies would enable assessment throughout a career life cycle to help guide career development and job assignment. Elements of substitutability among members of the total force will be defined.

Driving decision-making down to unit commanders gives them direct control over resource decisions. Among those decisions would be direct selection of individuals for jobs within their units. Commanders would negotiate with and select from among members of the total force who “applied” for the job or matched as highly qualified. To encourage thoughtful decision-making, incentive structures, such as authorizing commanders to reallocate funds saved, would be explored.

Under Navy transformation initiatives, required end-strength is expected to decline from almost 366,000 in fiscal year 2005 to approximately 336,000 by fiscal year 2013, by and large from integrating the total force and from migrating from manpower intensive platforms (such as Nimitz class CVNs) to manpower efficient platforms (such as CVN21).⁷ On the surface, that would seem to relieve pressure on recruiting and retention. On the contrary, the pressure to recruit and retain the *right people* will be on.

⁷ Bureau of Naval Personnel (N1/NT SPP), Manpower, Personnel, Training and Education brief, 11 April 2006.