Status of the U.S. Navy Recruiter Selection System

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The United States Navy had difficulty in recent years meeting its annual accession goals because of a positive economic environment and abundance of private sector jobs. The American youth of military age have been propensed towards college education and higher paying private sector jobs rather than military service. As a result of the recent recruiting difficulties, the Navy greatly increased its recruiter force by moving a large number of sailors from their military jobs into recruiting duty. It is now certain that a significant percentage of sailors who became recruiters involuntarily did not perform well. There may be an overall negative impact on Navy retention if many of the recruiters, or sailors who are about to be assigned recruiter duty, decide to leave the Navy because they perceive the three year recruiter duty will cost them educational opportunities, promotions, and career advancement. The U.S. Navy recruiter force represents approximately ten percent of a yearly accession goal (5,000 recruiters to obtain approximately 50,000 recruits), which is a significant percentage of the total Navy to be concerned about.

The Navy believes, and anecdotal reports from recruiters confirm, being a recruiter builds character and personal integrity. However there are so many negative aspects to the recruiter job that much needs to be done to convince the sailor that he or she will benefit in the long run, if not in the short run. Quality of life surveys and a recent recruiter focus group reveal that low command climate, leadership deficiencies, long hours, training on weekends, inequitable treatment of performers and non-performers, and micro management have such negative impact on motivation and moral, that not much in the way of tangible rewards could compensate. Recruiters also believe that not every sailor can succeed in recruiting duty, and that candidates for the job should undergo screening in the same way that is done for general sales positions. Currently, the only screens for recruiters are financial debt load, physical condition, and mental disposition.

Through the project reported in this paper, the U.S. Navy is attempting to make better decisions about who should become Navy recruiters. To that end, Navy Personnel Research, Studies, and Technology (NPRST), sponsored by the Office of Naval Research (ONR), set out to develop a comprehensive recruiter selection system that results in increased productivity of a smaller, more efficient, congenial recruiter force. Recognizing that many sailors better serve the Navy if they remain in their Navy jobs, or are at least not long removed from their jobs so as not to be negatively impacted by missed career training opportunities and advancement opportunities, Commander, Navy Recruiting Command facilitated this project and was instrumental in developing the research phases and providing technical input and support.[2]

This paper reports on the status of the four main phases of the project. Two of the phases, a cost effectiveness model of selecting recruiters with a valid selection battery, and the criterion development to support validating the selection battery, are completed. The two remaining phases, development of the recruiter selection battery with its administration and validation, and a cost effective recruiter incentives model, are in progress. Three firms were contracted to work

with NPRST on the projects. The firms are Human Resources Research Organization (HumRRO), the Lewin Group, Inc (Lewin), and Personnel Decisions Research Institute (PDRI).

Recruiter Performance Criterion Development

PDRI (Penny, Borman, Hedge, Abrahams, &, Drenth, 2001) developed, revised, or had input to the three criteria used in this project for the purposes of validating the potential recruiter selection battery. These criteria are recruiter school grades, job performance as measured by behavioral anchored rating scales (BARS) developed through the critical incident methodology, and recruiter production indices.

Regarding recruiter school grade criterion. The recruiter school, the Navy Orientation Recruiting Unit – NORU) was undergoing a major curriculum change when the project began. The replacement curriculum focuses more on recruiters and applicants being engaged in interactive dialogue and information seeking behaviors, rather than the recruiter delivery of a scripted dialogue that is memorized and staged to produce a hard sales contract closure outcome. PDRI provided an evaluation of the curriculum, and had input to the role playing exercises that are part of the curriculum modules, and to the recruiter training grading system.

Regarding the behavioral anchored rating scale (BARS) criterion. PDRI conducted workshops for recruiter supervisors to obtain subject matter expert (SME) inputs and updates on the original Borman developed recruiter BARS (Borman, Hough, & Dunnette, 1976). The method of critical incidents was used to describe actual job behaviors that produced anchors on the high and low levels of proficiency, with less extreme behaviors falling somewhere in between, and all behaviors rated on a 4-point effectiveness scale. A retranslation of the dimensions was performed in workshops attended by independent SME groups to produce an index of rater agreement. PDRI reported close to ninety percent of the time that the retranslation exercises resulted in consistent job dimension categories between original and independent SME groups, and consistent 4-point effectiveness scales.

The resulting BARS for recruiters consisted of the following job dimensions: (1) Locating and Contacting Qualified Prospects. (2) Gaining and Maintaining Rapport. (3) Obtaining Information from Prospects and Making good Person-Navy Fits, (4) Salesmanship Skills, (5) Establishing and Maintaining Good Relationships in The Community, (6) Providing Knowledgeable and Accurate Information About the Navy, (7) Administrative Skills, and (8) Supporting Other Recruiters and The Command.

Regarding the recruiter production criterion, a review was conducted of the current recruiter production metric, average contracts written per month. Average contracts written per month have served recruiting as the only objective quantifiable index of job performance. PDRI described ways to adjust this index for territory influences such as economic climate and military aged youth in the area. It was also suggested that the production measure be combined with the BARS in a weighted composite in order to produce a more comprehensive recruiter performance index. Also, ways were suggested to provide extra credit for high quality youth contracts defined in terms of AFQT score (Armed Forces Qualification Test, a composite of verbal and math tests of the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery - ASVAB) and high school degree diploma.

A final part of the project involved a full development of the BARS for the job of recruiter supervisor with the objective of providing the Navy with more concrete objective metrics upon which to select recruiters into supervisory positions, recognizing that not all good production recruiters make effective supervisors. The job performance dimensions developed for the

supervisor broke out into two categories – Recruiting Role and Leader Role. The scales for each are described in the PDRI report (Penny et. al., 2001).

Recruiter Selection Battery Development

NPRST, as the former Navy Personnel Research and Development Center, started development of a recruiter selection battery based upon personality theory in the 1970s (Abrahams, Neumann, and Rimland, 1973). The work was developed and augmented to include personality, biographical information, interests, and job behavior scales (Borman, et.al., 1976; Borman, Rosse, & Toquam, 1979; Borman, Rosse, & Abrahams, 1980; Borman, Rosse, Toquam, & Abrahams, 1981). The battery, named the "Special Assignment Battery" (SAB), was proven valid for selecting military recruiters and put forth recommendations for implementation but was never implemented because the military recruiting climate in the United States turned positive.

From a literature review of the civilian sales force and past military recruiter selection research (Bearden & Fedak, 2001), it was evident that most of the SAB should still be relevant for recruiter selection. PDRI, under the Navy recruiter selection project, updated the SAB in 2001 and augmented it with some more current promising predictors. Augmentation of the SAB measures of interest, personality, and biodata, included job classification aptitudes, skills, and abilities as measured by the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB), and modern personality theory traits, as measured by the big five factors measured in the NEO-5 (Costa & McCrae, 1985). The NEO-5 dimensions, Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness were thought to be more appropriate for linkage to the recruiter job tasks than the dimensions measured by other more clinically oriented personality instruments. An emotional intelligence test is also included in the battery because one is currently or has been recently for recruiter candidate evaluation by the United States Air Force, Army, and the Navy.

The experimental Navy recruiter selection battery was developed in 2001 and administered at the Navy Orientation Recruiter Unit (NORU) in Pensacola, Florida. Testing took place for six months, and over 500 cases were developed as a cohort with pertinent predictor information and school grades. Productivity measures will be collected in June 2002. The recruiter job performance scales (BARS) will be administered to the supervisors of a subset of the 500 recruiters later this year. Based on the results of the battery validation, it is hoped that a shortened revised battery is finalized by deleting redundant and non-performing items, scales, and measures. Contingent on the results, the battery could be in operational use before the next wave of increased recruit contract goals is in place for 2003.

Recruiter Selection Cost Effectiveness Model

Based upon the literature review of the military work already done in recruiter selection, NPRST accelerated development of a cost effectiveness model to show policy makers and budgeters how much money the military could save by formalizing use of the recruiter selection battery within a recruiter selection system. The validity of the battery was estimated from the validities found in the literature. For this project, historical data were collected from the recruiter school for a two-year period prior to the battery administration. The data were developed to include the following variables: ASVAB scores, school grades, productivity in terms of number of contracts written and number of high quality contracts written (ASVAB AFQT and high school education), available youth in the area, recruiter station location, seasonal fluctuations,

economic conditions, demographics, rank, experience, age, volunteer status, and costs associated with recruiter support and training. A major finding that lent the model plausible early on was that there was sufficient productivity variability among recruiters subsequent to controlling for variables on hand to hypothesize that a portion could be accounted for by personal attributes not currently measured.

HumRRO and the Lewin Group (McCloy, Hogan, Diaz, Medsker, Simonson, & Collins, 2001) teamed to develop the HumRRO-Lewin (H-L) Cost Effectiveness Model, which has origins in both industrial psychology and economics. In industrial psychology, the cost savings from an increase in job performance due to the application of a valid personnel selection instrument has been difficult to obtain for some jobs like those in the military because it is difficult to quantify job performance increases and the job performance standard deviation. The criterion problem is avoided in the recruiter selection cost effectiveness model by holding constant the performance level, in this case, yearly contract goal, and providing recruiting and advertising cost savings achievable by lowering the number of recruiters necessary to obtain that goal. Performance prediction equations are linked with cost equations in the model, with the option of specifying the tolerable probability of obtaining the goal.

The H-L Cost Effectiveness model accounts for (1) total variation in recruiter productivity, (2) explained variation of the R squared in predicting recruiter productivity from a list of measured variables, (3) a selection cutscore, (4) annual cost for a recruiter, and (5) unit cost for testing, and the number of required recruiter candidates to test. The model also can target a high quality recruit goal (AFQT and high school degree combination) in addition to overall recruit goal. As an example of the potential cost savings from a reduced recruiter force selected with a battery that has a realistic .23 validity (R squared of .054), a 37,000 annual high quality recruit goal, unit testing costs of $500, an initial 5,000 member recruiter force, and a .9 probability for meeting the goal, approximately 500 fewer recruiters would be needed to make goal at a savings of about 26 million dollars. Under this scenario, test administration would have to occur for approximately 9,000 recruiter candidates.

Recruiter Incentives Model

The U.S. Navy has structured multilevel incentives programs within the recruiter evaluation system to motivate and sustain productivity of its recruiters over the 3-year duty term. The programs are administered at the national, regional, and local levels and are comprehensive in that they address individual and teamwork performance. In viewing the recruiter job, however, it was obvious that because there were so many types of incentives, that some may be more valuable to the recruiter and effective from a motivational perspective, and that a more effective core incentive program could be developed.

The Lewin Group, Inc. (Hogan & Espinosa, 2001) conducted a literature review of the various incentives programs in place for Navy recruiters in preparation for modeling incentives programs and their effects on performance. Current recruiter incentives include medals, plaques, letters of commendation, awards, a limited number of promotions, recruiter of the year at district and the nation level, and a point based system tied to non-monetary rewards. Latitude is given at the recruiting district to formulate a more tailored non-monetary reward program that can include time off.

One reviewed recruiter incentive program, the Freeman Plan, was applied in the 1980s and evaluated by the Rand Corporation (Asch, 1990). Under the plan, a recruiter accumulated points

for the number and quality of applicants enlisted into the Navy. Recruiters who accumulated a specified number of points over a certain time period received a reward of a special citation or promotion. An important finding in the study was that recruiters modified their work behavior in a time management strategy to obtain goals. Recruiters valued time off, and would ramp up efforts to meet goal either early or late in the month so that more free time was available to them during the rest of the month. Recently, however, recruiters expressed the concern that there is little teamwork at the recruiting stations and that time away from the job would cost them productive leads, causing them to fall behind.

A study conducted at the Naval Postgraduate School (LCDR Emerson, 2001) explored incentives effectiveness in terms of motivational theory. Incentives were categorized as intrinsic or extrinsic, and tangible or intangible. The top five motivators are intangible and are, positive command climate, not letting fellow recruiters at the station down, self-motivation, team success over individual success, and being part of a winning team. With regard to positive command climate, and consistent with a recent recruiter focus group, major demotivators that are not substantially diffused by extrinsic tangible rewards like medals, are management by intimidation, micro-management, long working hours, and extra training used to punish instead of teach.

As a result of the literature review, recruiter focus group, and interviews with both recruiters and their supervisors, the incentive project took a turn in concept. Rather than introduce another, possibly ineffectual reward to the existing cadre of recruiter rewards, the Navy could study the effect of shortening the recruiter duty for those who are ineffective and continuing recruiting duty with significant financial rewards for those who are effective. This would, in essence, produce a second stage screening process – the recruiter selection battery being a basis for selection at the beginning of recruiter duty, and the productivity track record as the basis for extended recruiter duty. The Lewin Group is currently modeling a two-stage recruiter tour length offsetting the costs associated with transfer to a next duty station earlier than the original three year recruiting duty with and the benefits realized in terms of increased aggregate productivity. The model considers the impact of increased experience on productivity, the dollar costs associated with transferring recruiters early out of recruiting duty to a next duty station, the cutscore for selecting recruiters for extended duty, and the increased financial reward in terms of special duty assignment pay.

Several variations of the incentive model are expected to be piloted in some recruiting districts later this year. Pending demonstration of cost benefits of an incentive program, and the validity of the recruiter selection battery, a comprehensive recruiter selection system is expected to become operational in 2003.

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