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Creating and Maintaining a Specialized Occupational Force: Marine Information Environment Operations

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NPS NRP Executive Summary

Creating and Maintaining a Specialized Occupational Force:
Marine Operations in the Information Environment (Oie)
Report Date: 12/31/19, Project Number (IREF ID): NPS-19-M268-A
Naval Postgraduate School Graduate School of Defense Management



NAVAL RESEARCH PROGRAM

NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL

MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA

CREATING AND MAINTAINING A SPECIALIZED OCCUPATIONAL FORCE: MARINE OPERATIONS IN THE INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT (OIE)

Period of Performance: 01/01/2019–12/31/2019

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Project Summary

Specialized occupations, because of their small size and unique skill requirements, offer status and association with an elite community. However, these very characteristics pose challenges for talent management. This mixed-method study investigated drivers of occupational and organizational commitment among operations information warfighters, and explored the factors that influence the development of information operations (IO) expertise. Analysis of interviews informed a literature review; a literature review elaborated the interview findings; and a survey investigated the findings with a broader sample. Overall, the analysis shows that IO warfighters do not attain expertise by the end of their tour. IO warfighters are committed to the Marines but less so to the IO occupation. Enlisted Marines with a psychological operations (PSYOPs) military occupational specialty (MOS) scored higher on commitment than IO officers, who lack an IO career path. The findings support the proposition that the degree to which Marines perceive they are promotable drives occupational commitment to IO, which in turn, drives their desire to remain in IO. Increased time in IO could positively influence the development of IO skills. To support the short-term development of IO expertise, leaders should do the following: create a promotability-commitment feedback loop; design a professional pipeline; leverage pride in mission to build pride in the profession and increase commitment; improve IO skill development and knowledge sharing; and improve the selection process. In the long term, IO skills should be strengthened within command leadership.

Keywords: *Information environment, organizational commitment, occupational commitment, talent management, community capacity, expertise.*

Background

The effectiveness of the Marine Corps in the future operating environment will require a robust command and control (C2) system that is integrated with naval operations and the joint world (USMC, 2019). To improve the effectiveness of C2, the Marines have created Operations in the Information Environment (OIE) to help unify network operations, oversee upgrades to the technical infrastructure, and improve the survivability of command and control in contested conditions (USMC, 2019).

IO is the ability to “modify the behavior, influence the decisions, or support the actions of friendly, neutral, and hostile actors” (USMC, 2019). At the lower end of the conflict continuum, information operations are often the primary means of producing effects in a volatile and uncertain operational environment. Because of this volatility, IO requires a complex set of skills for analyzing the environment, skills that include the “assessment and analysis of the cultural, political, social, and economic factors that influence the objectives and behaviors of key actors in a conflict (USMC, 2019).

A 2019 study conducted at the Naval Postgraduate School identifies two concerning issues with the management of OIE warfighters. First, the authors conclude that OIE forces only just attain proficiency at

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the time they are required to transition back to their primary military occupation (PMOS) (Cybulski and Yarbrow, 2019).

Second, the 2018 study found that, because there is no PMOS, there are few command opportunities in OIE. Only 2.4% of colonels in fields that do not have a domain-expert career path were promoted because promotion is not possible absent holding a lieutenant colonel command (Cybulski and Yarbrow). IO warfighters thus have a limited time to develop and utilize their specialized expertise.

The mixed-method study reported here answered the following questions: What are the drivers of organizational and occupational commitment among Marine OIE warfighters? What are the best practices for recruiting and retaining information specialists? What are challenges/opportunities for managing talent in a Marine OIE MOS and how should they be addressed?

Findings and Conclusions

To answer the questions, the research team conducted interviews, a literature review, and a survey of Marines with experience in IO. The study followed a grounded, iterative approach whereby initial phases of the research informed subsequent phases (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009). Initial analysis of the interviews informed the literature review; the literature review elaborated the interview findings; and the survey confirmed the findings with a broader sample.

The research team conducted 13 in-depth interviews lasting approximately 40 minutes each. The team surveyed Marines holding IO relevant MOSs. A total of 159 Marines completed surveys. The research team analyzed interview transcripts using software-supported thematic analysis. The team conducted quantitative analysis including descriptive statistics, correlational analysis, comparison of means, and mediated regression.

An effective OIE requires a level of proficiency that goes beyond traditional warfighting skills. IO warfighters require a portfolio of competencies, which can be acquired by selecting the right people, developing processes for skill building, driving commitment, and building a professional pipeline. The integrated analysis resulted in a conceptual model that suggests that increasing IO warfighters' perceptions of the value of their experience to their promotability may serve as a key lever to drive expertise and, thus, the overall performance of OIE.

The findings support the proposition that the degree to which Marines perceive they are promotable drives occupational commitment to IO, which in turn, drives their desire to remain in IO. Increased time in IO could positively influence the development of IO skills. To support the short-term development of IO expertise, leaders should create a promotability-commitment feedback loop, design a professional pipeline, leverage pride in mission to build pride in the profession and increase commitment, improve IO skill development and knowledge sharing, and improve the selection process. In the long term, IO skills should be strengthened within Command leadership.

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The threat posed to our national security by information warfare calls for specialized information warriors to defend our national interests. Specialized occupations, because of their small size and unique skill requirements, offer status and association with an elite community. However, these very characteristics (small size and unique skillsets) also pose challenges for talent management. This study offers recommendations for improving talent management of Marine IO warfighters. The findings are directly relevant to Marine OIE and, more broadly, to other branches of the DoD that are seeking manage specialized talent.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study recommends actions to develop a professional pipeline, commitment, and skills. Future research should explore environmental and organizational drivers and impediments to change that will affect the implementation and maintenance of an IO force. Action research could support the development of specific alternatives and investigate: What effects do internal and external stakeholders require? What are internal and external levers, barriers and likely effects of potential organizational changes? How can the effects of potential organizational changes be measured?

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Acronyms

C2	command and control
IO	information operations
MOS	military occupational specialty
OIE	Operations in the Information Environment
PSYOPs	psychological operations