

## STARTING STRONG: TALENT-BASED BRANCHING OF NEWLY COMMISSIONED U.S. ARMY OFFICERS

**Michael J. Colarusso**  
**Kenneth G. Heckel**  
**David S. Lyle**  
**William L. Skimmyhorn**

For the better part of 2 centuries, the United States Army has assigned each newly commissioned officer to one of several sub-specialty occupational fields referred to as the “basic branches” (for example, Infantry, Aviation, Armor, etc.). Until very recently, the key determinant of branch assignment was a new officer’s graduating class rank rather than any objective alignment of individual talents with branch talent demands. This was because the Army had little, if any, granular information on its talent supply or demand. Sub-optimal branch assignments often resulted, placing downward pressure on overall officer corps productivity, job satisfaction, and retention.

This industrial era approach increases our national security risk. Peer military competitors are demonstrating an advanced ability to innovate in the human capital management realm, quite often drawing upon practices first conceived and applied in the American private sector. As the United States is a free and open society, best practices are readily available to potential adversaries, often just a mouse click away.

There are signs, however, that the U.S. Army intends to better avail itself of American workforce management innovations to maintain its human capital ascendancy over its competitors. Talent-based branching of newly commissioned Army officers is one such innovation. This new approach, inaugurated at West Point and now scaling to the Army’s other commissioning sources, gathers detailed information on the unique talents possessed by each new officer, as well as on the unique talent demands of each Army basic branch. This allows for the creation of a “talent market” that identifies and liberates the strengths of

every officer, placing each into the career field where they are most likely to be engaged, productive, and satisfied leaders.

This workforce optimization methodology has positive implications for long-term officer retention, as well as the cost-savings associated with it. Perhaps most importantly, however, talent-based branching establishes a cognitive and non-cognitive “talent baseline” for every officer entering the service. This is critical to implementing individual development and employment plans that will maximize the contributions and satisfaction of each officer throughout their careers.

By replacing its former top-down, information-starved branching process with the regulated market mechanisms inherent in its new talent management approach, the U.S. Army has dramatically improved the information on both sides of the branching decision. Rather than being framed by an influential mentor or peer pressure, the branch preferences for new lieutenants are now most powerfully shaped by the unique talent “demand signals” emanating from each branch, as well as by an improved understanding of their own talents. Compelling evidence suggests that talent-based branching generates significant gains in talent identification and alignment, as well as in officer career satisfaction. These gains highlight the power of preference shifting engendered by carefully designed and managed information markets.

The success of talent-based branching also demonstrates that talent management is not “too hard, too costly, too cumbersome, too time consuming, and too private sector.” It works because today’s information

technology allows young professionals to post and update their resumes on professional networking sites, search for jobs using online employment forums and, at many firms, negotiate a customized compensation package that aligns with employee preferences while helping the organization out-compete other employers. Talent-based branching also serves as a very useful template for other potential Army talent management initiatives, particularly the conduct of Individual Development and Employment Assessments (IDEAs) at specific officer career crossroads.

Such full-career, dynamic, and comprehensive assessments of each officer's talents will reveal a wealth of granular and accurate data. This in turn will allow the Army to institute a host of other personnel management innovations, including compensation and pension redesign, the creation of "talent pools," and the eventual elimination of officer year group management, which, by its very nature, treats people as interchangeable parts and fails to maximize their productive potential. In other words, the new branching program seems to indicate that a long-awaited revolution in military people management is finally underway, with talent management providing its overarching framework.

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