

Demystifying Talent Management for Army Civilian Professionals

Richard A. Harfst, SHRM-SCP, U.S. Army CHRA ACCMA

In my role as a career program manager, I often hear frustration from both individual Army civilians and managers that the Army “doesn’t really *do*” talent management for Army civilians; instead, we talk about it as something we *want* to do. We look at the centralized promotion, selection, and assignment processes used by our military counterparts or the flexibilities inherent in the private sector, and question how we can execute talent management in a system that is largely decentralized, in a manner consistent with merit system principles, and when options are often constrained by resources and procedures. To be clear, I completely understand the frustration I hear from the field. The prevailing culture hires someone for a job instead of a career, which results in stagnation and reduced employee engagement. We don’t see a rising star “promoted” unless someone senior vacates a position. Yet, not only is it possible to execute talent management for Army civilians, but we’re already doing many of the activities that synergistically build to talent management. However, it takes a concerted effort, by leaders throughout the institution, to understand, navigate, and leverage a complex system of systems to truly achieve the results we’re seeking.

What is Talent Management?

To begin, we need to define talent management. The Office of Personnel Management defines talent management as “a system that promotes a

high-performing workforce, identifies and closes skills gaps, and implements and maintains programs to attract, acquire, develop, promote, and retain quality and diverse talent.”¹ A 2022 Defense Business Board study defined talent management as “the anticipation of required human capital for an organization and the planning to meet those needs. Talent management activities include workforce planning, talent acquisition, talent development, performance management, succession planning, and retention.”² And, the now-rescinded 2019 *Army People Strategy* described talent management as a system that “integrates all people practices, generating a positive effect on organizational outcomes and leveraging each individual’s knowledge, skills, behaviors, and preferences . . . for the mutual benefit of the Army and the individual.”³ There are even more definitions within the human resources industry, academia, and the Army, and what all these definitions share in common are three main elements: (1) recognizing that talent management isn’t a single system or action, (2) meeting organizational requirements, and (3) addressing the individual. What does this mean for Army civilians? These are the ingredients of talent management that we need to bring together. Simplified, the objective of talent management is getting the right person in the right job for the right cost. Doing so requires the synchronization of three interrelated processes: (1) staffing, (2) training and professional development, and (3) performance management. Let’s examine each process individually.

Staffing

The staffing process is the first step in talent management. The federal government's hiring process is notoriously Byzantine, and the Army (despite a lot of well-meaning efforts) isn't exempt from criticism. Ultimately, however, staffing boils down to organizational requirements; everything begins and ends with requirements. It would take several separate articles to thoroughly describe the workforce planning and force management systems that underlie how to identify organizational requirements, then convert those requirements into a qualified person performing the necessary work, but let's highlight five aspects.

First, there must be a resourced authorization on the organization's TDA. Creating a new authorization can be its own complex and lengthy process, but, in many cases, such as when an existing employee retires or moves to a new position, this step is relatively straightforward. If this isn't the case, managers must clearly identify how the new position addresses a capability gap for



Civilian Human Resources Agency (Image courtesy of CHRA)

the organization and, usually, identify a lower priority position as a billpayer.

Second, we must document the position's requirements on a position description or "PD." While a previously encumbered position will already have a PD, it is essential for talent management purposes that the PD is updated and accurately reflects the position's current requirements—not what was developed *before* the last person was hired. These requirements capture the key duties and associated competencies necessary to do the job. In short, the PD is the foundational expression of the "talent" we're seeking. The appropriate career program manager, functional subject matter experts, command human resources, and CHRA classification specialists all contribute to developing effective PDs. This step isn't to be taken lightly!

Third, key stakeholders hold a strategic recruitment discussion. These key stakeholders include the hiring manager (normally the position's supervisor), the command's human resources representative, and the supporting CHRA Service Center's staffing specialist. As with updating a PD, these discussions are often viewed as a "check-the-block" activity but are in actuality key to maximizing the way in which the human resources system fulfills the customer's



Army Civilian Career Management Activity (Image courtesy of ACCMA)

needs. This discussion is the time when the position's requirements are translated into specific recruiting actions. Recruiting for the National Capital Region is different than recruiting for remote locations. Similarly, there are important differences between recruiting for difficult-to-fill positions and for those where the available talent pool is relatively large. Numerous other variables also shape recruiting actions. Furthermore, there currently exist a variety of recruitment methods, hiring authorities, and

professional development journey. Effective sponsorship and a comprehensive onboarding and acculturation program are critical for effective talent management. Remember the excitement and apprehension you felt when you were first hired? Supervisors must address both, to leverage the excitement and ease the apprehension. The Army Civilian Career Management Activity (ACCMA) and commands have a wealth of resources, but the primary burden—and opportunity—rests with the supervisor. Army

“Talent management ... takes place in a variety of routine, often subtle, activities all across the Army every day.”

platforms (e.g., USAJOBS, Handshake, etc.) that can be used. The strategic recruitment discussion is the opportunity to leverage all these considerations in search of talent. At that meeting, engage with your staffing specialist to tailor approaches for maximizing applicant quality for your unique situation.

Fourth, the CHRA Service Center's staffing specialist develops, in conjunction with the hiring manager, a job opportunity announcement for the opening. This step communicates the position's requirements and desired talent (e.g., knowledge and skills) to potential applicants. Crafting job opportunity announcements, as with PDs, is an art form, and a lynchpin in the process. If you do not ask for the right thing, you will certainly be disappointed in the results!

Finally, the hiring manager makes a selection. How to conduct a resume review and hiring interview are both worthy of separate articles, but suffice to say, these actions should be conducted with talent management in mind. Some gaps or shortfalls are more easily addressed than others and some aspects of a candidate's existing knowledge and skills may be more broadly used than others.

Training and Professional Development

Onboarding and acculturation, which conclude the hiring process, is the first step in an employee's

civilians should be lifelong learners (it is one of the DOD's core leadership competencies for all DOD civilians) and no one should ever consider themselves to be a finished product. The Army Management Staff College (AMSC)-led Civilian Education System (CES), a “progressive and sequential leader development program,” is the backbone of formal training for Army civilians.⁴ In addition to some mandatory training, AMSC's Foundation Course is the typical starting point for all newly hired Army civilians; effective talent management requires carving out time to attend CES throughout one's career. Moreover, effective talent management requires supervisors to help prepare their subordinates prior to CES attendance to get the most out of these critical developmental training opportunities and then leverage the training to help their subordinates progress. Attendance at CES is an excellent time for Army civilians to work with a member of the Army Coaching Program to “assist in developing and improving their knowledge, skills, and behaviors in order to achieve their goals.”⁵ Other key ingredients of professional development include functional training, a very robust range of self-development options (e.g., Udemy, AMSC's self-paced, online courses and professional seminars; Defense Acquisition University, the Center for Development of Security Excellence educational programs; ATRRS Self-Development Center, etc.), supervisor training, the Enterprise Civilian Talent

Development Programs (formerly SETM/ETM), and, importantly, on-the-job training. However, talent management doesn't revolve around building an impressive resume of training; the Army doesn't need professional students. Rather, it is about taking a deliberate approach to growth and development through a thorough assessment of one's strengths (including those that are overdone) and relative weaknesses. The assessment process involves individual Army civilians, their friends and significant others, supervisors/managers, mentors, Army coaches, and a variety of formal tools. Competencies, both technical/functional and non-technical/leadership (so-called "soft skills"), serve as the building blocks for determining training needs. Supervisors, especially higher-level managers, must encourage and use these assessments.

Performance Management

The third leg in the talent management triad is performance management. Too often we view it as just the annual ratings. While these annual ratings and intermediate counseling/progress reviews are important, true performance management is much more. One of the foremost scholars in performance management describes it as "a process for establishing shared understanding about what is to be achieved and how it is to be achieved, and an approach to managing and developing people that improves individual, team and organizational performance."⁶ It is a day-to-day, even task-to-task, activity and at the core of managing talent. Supervisors manage talent

by gradually increasing the breadth and depth of their employees' responsibilities by fully leveraging all of the tools in their employees' toolkits. By doing so, other knowledge they brought to the position doesn't go to waste and secondary skills don't atrophy but continue to develop. Supervisors and their managers can also leverage details, internal rotations, and special projects to help Army civilians build their skills and refresh their motivation, address gaps in current staffing, and fully leverage the range of talents that exist within their workforce. They can also use shadowing—bringing in a junior employee to more senior-level engagements—and low-risk briefing opportunities to help expose talent to increasingly senior levels while developing them.

Conclusion

There is a tendency to view talent management as something monolithic and set apart. The reality is that it takes place in a variety of routine, often subtle, activities all across the Army every day. The binding force is leadership. The most effective leaders integrate seemingly disparate actions to nurture talent within their teams. They seek out talent two levels down, work with leaders above them, and network across organizational boundaries. They make decisions selflessly, for the Army's benefit, and take a long-term view whenever possible. They push the system—or systems—to hire, develop, and fully engage Army civilian talent. ■

Notes

1. "Talent Management," U.S. Office of Personnel Management, accessed 28 March 2025, <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/human-capital-framework/talent-management>.

2. Defense Business Board, Strengthening Defense Department Civilian Talent Management (Office of Prepublication and Security Review, 12 May 2022), 47.

3. "The Army People Strategy" (U.S. Government Publishing Office, October 2019), 2, accessed 25 April 2025, https://asc.army.mil/web/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/the_army_people_strategy_2019_10_11_signed_final.pdf.

4. U.S. Army Management Staff College, "Civilian Education System (CES)," Army University, accessed 29 March 2025, <https://armyuniversity.edu/amsc/EducationalPrograms#ces>.

5. U.S. Army Talent Innovation Directorate, "Army Coaching Program," *Army.mil*, accessed 29 March 2025, <https://talent.army.mil/acp>.

6. Michael Armstrong, *Armstrong's Handbook of Performance Management: An Evidence-Based Guide to Delivering High Performance* (Kogan, 2009), 55.

Richard A. Harfst has been the career program 35 (intelligence) manager with the Army Civilian Career Management Activity since October 2021. In this role, he conducts strategic workforce planning and provides career management support for the Army Intelligence and Security Enterprise. He has been an Army civilian since 2010, and previously he was a strategic planner at INSCOM. He is a retired military intelligence officer and a Society for Human Resource Management Senior Certified Professional.