SPECIFIC DIRECTION FROM CONGRESS

MANAGING DOWNSIZING IN THE MILITARY

Army Employment Assistance Centers Are Established

Susan J. Harvey

"The Secretary of Defense shall establish permanent employment assistance centers at appropriate military installations...."

This requirement of law, codified in 10 USC 1143(b), is part of specific direction from Congress to the military services on taking care of individuals affected by the long-term reduction in military forces. How has the Army implemented the law? How do employment assistance centers, decidedly a new concept for the military but common in the private sector, operate in a military environment? How effective are they in helping military transitioners find a job?

Background

Before the current downsizing, the Army staff considered establishing employment assistance centers to help separating and retiring soldiers in their transition to a new career. As planned, briefed and approved by the Army leadership in the mid- to late-1980s, the program was to be integrated into the Army personnel life cycle as a recruiting and retention tool and as an expression of Army intent to take care of its own. It was originally conceived as a multimillion dollar contracted program, and the largest private sector outplacement counseling firms were encouraged to respond to the request for proposal (RFP).

Before contract award, however, funding for the program was eliminated as part of a routine cost-cutting review. Subsequently, the Army transition program was reduced to one headquarters action officer and an experimental program at Fort Bragg N.C., operated by local staff.

Army Transition Program

In the spring of 1990, the transition program was resurrected when the Army found itself faced with the large-scale downsizing mandated by the end of the Cold War. A well-balanced transition program was seen as the key to going through the upcoming changes, while remaining strong both during and after the changes. The leadership committed to providing employment assistance

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as a means of simultaneously meeting Army needs and minimizing the negative effect of force reductions on soldiers. The Secretary of the Army established the Army Career and Alumni Program (ACAP) to manage the downsizing, and approved establishment of contracted Job Assistance Centers (JACs) throughout the Army as an integral part of the ACAP program.

The ACAP is organized with two components: a government employee-operated Transition Assistance Office (TAO), and the contractor-operated JAC. The TAO serves as the initial reception point for transitioners and, according to Ms. Pauline Botelho, Director of the ACAP program, "serves as the orchestrator of all on-post activities that potentially can assist transitioning personnel and their families."

The post ACAP manager is called the Transition Services Manager (TSM). The TSM directly supervises the activities of the TAO, coordinates all on-post transition-related services, and works closely with the contractor's local JAC manager who, typically, is collocated with the TSM in a common TAO/JAC facility. The TAO counselors meet with transitioning military and civil-service employees (and family members) ideally 180 days prior to separation. At the first session, an Individual Transition Plan (ITP) for each transitioner is developed. The ITP serves as a referral for on-post transition services such as legal and financial counseling, education benefits and testing assistance, and reserve recruiting consultation. The "career" part of the ACAP program includes retention counseling to ensure that eligible military careerists are afforded every opportunity to reenlist.

After a year-long pilot program involving eight JAC sites, and a respite caused by the Persian Gulf War, a contract was competitively awarded to Resource Consultants, Inc. (RCI) to establish 47 additional JACs throughout the world over a three-month period. This formidable task involved furnishing government-provided facilities with new furniture, a computer network and a comprehensive library, and with recruiting, training, and staffing of the worldwide centers with more than 225 qualified outplacement specialists. This routinely was accomplished by business men and women accustomed to meeting tight deadlines. The requirement included establishing mobile teams equipped with portable automation systems with a mission to travel to remote locations and providing the same level of service as offered at fixed sites. The resulting program served more than 120,000 clients in its first year of operation and was described by Dr. Thomas M. Hale, RCI program manager for the project, as the "largest outplacement counseling effort ever undertaken by the outplacement industry."

The scope and popularity of the program is such that, by the summer of 1994, more than 325,000 clients had been provided services by the JACs, and more than 50,000 visits for services were being made to JACs each month. Most JAC clients leave the Army with lifetime job search skills in addition to finished resumès and targeted job leads. According to Brigadier General Patricia A. Hickerson, Adjutant General of the Army, "Over the past three years the ACAP program has been completely integrated into the Total Army personnel strategy as an integral part of the recruiting, retention, and transition cycle." Thus, the program has been accepted as a permanent part of the Army personnel system, achieving a goal of its original designers.

The JAC: The Army Employment Assistance Center

The JAC provides a full range of outplacement counseling services similar to those found in private industry. Once a client is referred to the JAC from the TAO, the client is scheduled for a full menu of services starting with the three-day Department of Labor-sponsored Transition Assistance Program (TAP) workshop. In locations where there is no TAP, such

as the 15 JACs located in foreign nations, a JAC workshop is provided. Following the workshop, the client receives detailed one-on-one counseling during which job search objectives are translated into action, and the client is introduced to other JAC services such as the library and automated tools provided by the center.

The masters-degree-level counselors operate the JAC and are trained to assist the transitioner in developing a job-search strategy with a view toward capitalizing on skills acquired in the military and using acquired skills to develop opportunities in their post-military career. Given the nature of the working world today, "JAC clients, both military and civilian, may well face a lifetime of career and job transitions that go beyond the drawdown," says Ms. Katie M. Cohen of the ACAP headquarters staff. Accordingly, the JAC philosophy is built on the principle of empowerment. "We give clients the information, skills, and guidance necessary to succeed in today's job market. They're encouraged to assume responsibility for this and all future job searches." Graduates of the program, Cohen explains, take with them a set of skills "that will serve them for the rest of their working lives."

The JAC also provides a sophisticated array of automated tools to facilitate the job-search process. While automation is common in most transition centers in industry, the Army program is unique because of the absolute dependence of the counselor on the computer, and vice versa. Because of the need to handle client loads in excess of 100,000 per year, the automated system is integrated with workshop materials and counseling protocols to maximize client throughput.

For example, the automated resumè writer prompts users to refer to worksheets introduced in the workshop to facilitate data entry, and automatically produces a laser-quality

U.S. Army photo

The Job Assistance Center at Fort Belvoir, Va., is typical of the permanent employment centers that the Army has established throughout the world.

functional or chronological (or both) resumè with vital information such as name, address and telephone number already contained in the system. From the counselor's perspective, the network is essential for tracking client progress through the system. Client records in the automated system track services provided on each visit and permit the continuation of counseling with a minimum of time lost in reconstructing where the client is in the job search process. With client loads that often exceed 2,000 clients per month in large centers, automation is key to providing efficient service.

In addition to the service tracking provision, the automated JAC management information system (JAC-MIS) includes software tailored to the Army transitioner. Included in the system are as many as 10 client terminals where clients can directly access the resumè writer, an automated cover-letter writer, and a database of more than 15,000 employers and service providers who are part of the Army Employer and Alumni Network (AEAN) and have committed to helping the Army transitioner find a job.

The network of employers is connected with a quarterly newsletter published by RCI for the Army and regular support from Army leadership. Database quality is maintained through twice-monthly updates and a regular schedule of verification and reverification of data.

The JAC-MIS also contains the DoD Outplacement Referral System (DORS) computer software. The JAC-MIS generates a DORS mini-resumè from data entered into the resumè writer and other input, and automatically transmits the mini-resumè' to the Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC) in Monterey, Calif. From there, it is accessed by potential employers registered in the DORS system. Clients who prefer to create their own formatted resumès' may use the Word Perfect 5.1 word processing software that is resident on the JAC-MIS.

Other computers in the JAC contain America's Job Bank, an automated listing of Department of Labor-generated jobs; the Transition Bulletin Board, a DoD collection of job openings; Executive Search software, a listing of search firms covering a range of salary levels; and Quick and Easy, a multiuser SF 171 software package. The JACs often provide other software packages unique to the local area. Hot leads and actual job announce-

ments received from employers are transmitted daily to JACs from RCI corporate headquarters, ensuring that clients have ready access to job opportunities from even the most remote sites like the JAC at Camp Casey near the Demilitarized Zone in South Korea. According to Dr. Edward Jones, JAC manager at Ft. Bliss, Texas, "the hot lead system is one of the most important products of our program. We can always count on the bulletin boards where the daily hot leads are posted, to be the most popular service at the JAC."

The most unique benefit of the JAC program is the standard level of service throughout the system. Dr. Hale, RCI program manager, relates that, "standardization of JAC services was important to the Army, and we worked hard to make one center indistinguishable from another." Standardization is such that a client on leave in St. Louis, Mo., from Fort Clayton, Panama Canal Zone, will find the same computer system, level of service, library materials, and general office configuration in the St. Louis JAC as in the Fort Clayton JAC. One Army transitioner, former Army Major Craig Costello of Springfield, Va., related, "I started my transition at the Stuttgart, Germany JAC, continued with it at the Yongson JAC while visiting my wife's parents in Seoul, Korea, polished up my resumè at the Ft. Myer JAC before some important interviews, and was able to relate my success in landing the job of my choice to the Stuttgart JAC staff by the time I returned to Germany."

The JAC-MIS permits the easy accumulation of client statistics from all JACs into a central server at RCI corporate headquarters. The RCI also maintains a 24-hour hot line for hardware and software problems and has a quick response repair team that keeps the more than 1000 computers and related electronic equipment in the system operating at a 99+ percent reliability rate.

Why Contract Out the Employment Assistance Center Function?

The Secretary of Defense is obligated by law to:

...procure each supply or service necessary for or beneficial to the accomplishment of the authorized functions of the Department of Defense (other than functions which the Secretary of Defense determines must be performed by military or Government personnel) from a source in the private sector if such a source can provide such supply or service to the Department at a cost that is lower...than the cost at which the Department can provide the same supply or service.[1]

Implementing regulations clearly limit Secretarial prerogatives on performing new services "in house" without regard to costs for functions that are not inherently governmental in nature.[2] Since outplacement counseling functions are not "inherently governmental" in nature, the Army was required to seek the least costly means of performing the service. Under the guidance of the Secretary of the Army, a task force was established in the spring of 1990 to review the transition issues and to determine the most effective and efficient delivery systems. The Army considered building in-house infrastructure to perform the employment assistance function. However, it did not make sense to build Army infrastructure at a time when the Army was facing significant downsizing. The Army also needed to launch the employment assistance effort quickly in order to have it in place for soldiers exiting the Army following Desert Storm.

Following a series of cost-and-benefit studies, the Army turned to the private sector where professional outplacement services could be obtained quickly and economically. In alignment with current policy, and working within privatization parameters, the Army then proceeded to use private sector competition to achieve even further economy and to enhance productivity.

Although privatization had been encouraged strongly for several years, the Army decision to turn to the expertise of the private-sector outplacement industry was reinforced by President Clinton's guidance in a memo of September 11, 1993, "Streamlining the Bureaucracy." In response to the memo and consistent

U.S. Army photo

The first step in the employment assistance program is an intensive three-day workshop, which typically includes a self-assessment, the acquisition of resumè writing skills, and uncovering secrets of the hidden job market.

with the Vice President's National Performance Review, the DoD established several objectives and a plan. A key component of the plan was to outsource non-core functions when it made operational and economic sense.

Full and open competition was accomplished by seeking sealed bids in response to a JAC RFP in an open competition. The competition was open to any organization who thought they could perform the specifications of the contract, including nonprofit firms and other government agencies. The selection process required a rigorous review of proposal submissions, the elimination of unqualified bidders, oral interviews, clarifications, and the submission of a Best and Final Offer by qualified bidders. The selected contractor was considered to provide the best value to the government. Annual cost effectiveness reviews are conducted to revalidate this decision prior to the exercise of contract option years.

The tight time schedule of the start-up period, which required establishment of 47 Job Assistance Centers within three months, was dictated by the large surge of deferred transitioners and involuntary releases caused by the rapid drawdown following the Persian Gulf War. The ability of the selected bidder to perform this task was a major factor in the selection process.

Thus, in 1990, the Army embarked on a path to seriously consider the national and DOD privatization policy in providing an employment assistance delivery system for transitioning Army personnel. Has the contracting effort proven to be an appropriate delivery system? Results of studies conducted on the Army privatized employment assistance efforts indicate that the Army is getting the results sought. So far, due to the decision to outsource the employment assistance function, the Army has realized several benefits:

—The Army found a contractor who could do the work for less cost than could be performed with in-house employees. In part, this was due to the readily available private commercial outplacement sources. Not only was outsourcing cheaper, the contractors were able to provide the program faster than an in-house effort.

—By using a contract as a delivery system and requiring the contractor to perform the job-assistance function, the Army did not need to get into the outplacement business and remained focused on its primary mission — defense. For example, the Army did not need to invest in training in-house employees. Instead, it was able to tap into the well-developed private sector outplacement industry, with the contractor providing employees with existing expertise.

—The contract provided manpower flexibility and enabled quick responses to reduction-in-force surges and contractions and the unpredictable environment such as that caused by Desert Storm and the Defense Base Realignment and Closure Program. The Army contracted job assistance function did not build infrastructure and was responsive to the enormous change the Army was experiencing. The fluidity and quick response (30 days' notice) to open and close JAC sites and the mobile JAC teams clearly meet the need and offer the capability necessary in today's dynamic Army environment.

Photo by Amy Hoyt, Resource Consultants, Inc.

The Army's ACAP program includes fully equipped employment centers and a network of over 12,000 employers who are committed to helping Army personnel in their job search.

Army JAC Value and Effectiveness

Two important indicators measure the value of the JAC to the Army — the value of the program to those who remain in the Service, and the value of the program to those who leave. In the private sector, outplacement programs are initiated to assuage corporate officer guilt feelings or, more commonly, as a defensive maneuver to minimize bad feelings or lawsuits from disgruntled former employees. The Army motive from the early days of the program was to help the soldier achieve an orderly transition to another career, fully understanding that a satisfied veteran who left with good feelings about military service would be helpful to the recruiting effort. The post-Cold War drawdown and subsequent large-scale involuntary releases rendered the job-assistance program even more important.

Through several studies from diverse perspectives, the Army is gath-

ering information on whether the nation is getting the most value for the resources invested. The relevance of a successful transition program to the "survivors" of Army downsizing was examined by two West Point researchers. In a recent article in *Armed Forces & Society*, Leonard Wong and Jeffrey McNally found that "survivors" who believed that the Army was providing effective transition assistance had significantly less decline in organizational commitment than "survivors" who did not believe this.[3] Since the ultimate measure of organizational commitment is retention in the organization, the conclusion can be drawn that an effective transition assistance program helps retention more than an ineffective program.

U.S. Army photo

The Army has established employment assistance centers at over 50 locations around the world to help soldiers, Department of the Army civilians and their family members transition to civilian employment after leaving the service.

The author and two others closely associated with the JAC program reported on a small-scale evaluation of the effectiveness of receiving full JAC services compared to receiving workshop services only.[4] Using random sampling techniques, telephonic survey interviews were conducted with more than 100 JAC clients in each of two groups. Two statistically significant findings were observed: those who received full JAC services, both group training and individual assistance, were more likely to be employed after leaving the Army (89.6 percent employed) than those who received only the group-training workshop (80.9 percent employed). Similarly, starting salaries were about 13 percent higher among those who received full services than among those who received only the workshop.

This existing research supports the cost effectiveness of providing full-scale outplacement counseling and job assistance resources services as an addition to the TAP workshop provided by the Department of Labor. Research also supports the value of a successful transition program to downsizing survivors. More importantly, the data suggest that there is considerable lifetime benefit to the transitioner who takes full advantage of available employment assistance services since higher starting salaries can be expected to compound annually the rest of an individual's working life.

In terms of ongoing program management, extensive information and feedback have been gained through the various tracking components of the JAC system and have provided information upon which to base future program decisions. In the fall of 1992, field commanders at the 55 sites that had JACs were asked to evaluate their JAC programs. Their responses indicated a high level of satisfaction with the JAC-contracted services. In addition, clients have provided continuous feedback. So, by using information from multiple feedback systems in place since the program's inception and taking full advantage of state-of-the-art technology, the JACs have undergone continuous operational improvements.

A large-scale, independent evaluation is being conducted by the Army Research Institute (ARI) to validate former findings and to examine other issues such as unemployment insurance costs and time to find employment that have not been determined. The ARI study will compare the outcomes achieved by JAC clients with the outcomes of similar nonparticipants. In this way, the study will provide objective data to help determine whether JAC is making a difference for those who received services. When final results are provided in the spring of 1995, the Army will gain additional data from which to identify the program's strengths and weaknesses and make further refinements to provide even more effective and efficient services.

Endnotes

1. Section 2462(a) of Title 10, U.S. Code, "Contracting for Certain Supplies and Services Required when Cost is Lower."

2. DoD Directive 4100.15, "Commercial Activities Program," March 10, 1989.

3. Wong, Leonard, and Jeffrey McNally, "Downsizing the Army: Some Policy Implications Affecting the Survivors." *Armed Forces & Society*, Winter, 1994, 199-216.

4. Hale, Thomas M., Gerald L. Jenkins, and Susan J. Harvey, "An Army-Unique Program: Job Assistance Centers," *Military Review*, March, 1994, 71-74.