

Attracting and Employing Top-Tier Civilian Technical Talent in the Department of the Air Force

A Comparison of Six Occupations with Other Federal Agencies and the Private Sector

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ISSUE

As demand for technical talent is expected to increase across the U.S. workforce over the next decade, the Department of the Air Force (DAF) wants to ensure that it is competitive in attracting top-tier talent (e.g., highly skilled experts and promising new graduates) by identifying barriers related to the ability of current DAF hiring authorities and practices to attract and employ civilian talent in certain technical fields.



APPROACH

We examined current recruiting and hiring practices for six occupational series, which were selected for focus by the study sponsor: Computer Science, Operations Research, Electronics Engineer, Engineering Technician, Airfield Manager, and Nurse. For each occupational series, we conducted interviews with subject-matter experts and stakeholders and analyzed civilian personnel data to better understand recruiting and employment challenges, the use of available hiring authorities and flexibilities, and how current DAF pay compares with the sister services, other federal agencies, and the private sector. We also conducted interviews with select university career services offices, private-sector recruiting experts, and recruiting and hiring representatives from the sister services and other federal agencies to identify potential strategies the DAF could adopt to attract top talent.



CONCLUSIONS

- Common barriers identified by DAF representatives to recruiting and hiring top-tier talent include a small talent pool with the desired skills and credentials for some occupations, lower pay relative to the private sector, lengthy hiring timelines, challenges with hiring in remote or overseas locations, and a lack of effective marketing and recruiting at the local level.
- Although many of the occupations included in this review have direct hire authority (DHA), DAF representatives voiced concerns regarding whether DHA and its associated flexibilities were being used to the fullest extent.

- Data show inconsistent or minimal use of recruiting, relocation, and retention incentives for some occupational series.
- For several occupations, pay comparisons show that DAF pay lags behind that of the other services and certain federal government agencies. This gap is due to fewer positions in demonstration projects and alternative personnel systems that provide more flexible pay options. In addition, data show that DAF pay is often lower compared with other services and other agencies within pay plan type—General Schedule, demonstration projects, or alternative personnel systems.
- Representatives from university career services offices and private-sector recruiting experts indicated in interviews that recruitment of top undergraduate candidates and experienced talent requires more than compensation: It demands emphasis on mission, innovation, and professional opportunities.
- These interviews, along with interviews with representatives from other federal agencies, also highlight the importance of increased marketing and branding through the use of specialized recruiters and expanded and effective use of social media and internet tools.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- Ensure that hiring managers are aware of and understand how to use available hiring authorities and related flexibilities.
- Review current outreach and marketing efforts to ensure that they address factors important to potential candidates, including focusing on mission, values, and opportunities for innovation and professional growth.
- Create opportunities throughout the educational life span of potential undergraduate student candidates to build familiarity with DAF and civilian job opportunities.
- Consider the increased use of specialized civilian recruiters at the Air Force Personnel Center, whose focus is on identifying applicant pools and interfacing with potential applicants, to help facilitate an enterprise-wide recruiting approach.
- Review position scope and level of work for those occupations covered under this study that had inconsistencies with sister services to determine whether positions are accurate and comparable to sister service positions.
- Assess why some positions that could be covered by alternative pay structures are not, and explore options for expanding or adopting alternative pay structures that allow for more competitive compensation through pay banding.

OCCUPATION-SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

Two of the occupations we reviewed were significantly distinct from the others, and we offer two recommendations to address issues specific to these occupations:

- Explore the feasibility of creating a specific occupational series for Airfield Managers with other services, the Federal Aviation Administration, and the Office of Personnel Management to facilitate better career field management.
- Explore options for more creative recruitment of Nurses, including paths for hiring directly out of school.



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