

Insights on Implementing Technology-Enabled Human Resources Capabilities in the U.S. Air Force

The U.S. Air Force (USAF) is working to replace its traditional human resources (HR) system with a digital talent management system that is driven by data, personnel needs, and business needs. To accomplish this complex transformation, the USAF would benefit from a set of best practices derived from similar organizations that have already made this switch.

This brief summarizes one of three reports aimed at helping the USAF understand the elements necessary for success. The topic of this document is best practices for implementation. The other two reports examine different ways that the USAF could use data to improve its talent management functions and strategies for securing sufficient resources for digital transformation.¹

Approach

Project AIR FORCE researchers interviewed subject-matter experts (SMEs) in the USAF, other U.S. mili-

tary services, and the private sector (conducting 35 meetings with 51 SMEs). Researchers also reviewed select academic literature and USAF documents for relevant background (such as digital transformation strategies, technological and system requirements, and planning budgets). The aim was to identify effective practices that have led to successful transformation of technology-enabled talent management capabilities, examples of digital transformation that are relevant to the USAF, and actionable insights specific to the service's HR enterprise.

Key Findings

The project team's information-gathering led to three key findings about implementing technology-enabled talent management.

Top Leaders' Support Is Essential, and Success Stories Enable Buy-In

The alignment of funding, priorities, and people is critical to a successful transformation, and the support of senior leadership is invaluable in achieving that alignment. Interviewees emphasized the importance of having support from the senior leaders of information technology and HR (and, potentially, Finance because HR and payroll are often linked). Because resistance to change can quickly sabotage

¹ The other two reports are *How the U.S. Air Force Can Incorporate New Data Technologies into Its Talent Management System: Framework and Use Cases for Technology-Enabled Talent Management*, by David Schulker, Matthew Walsh, Nelson Lim, and Ajay K. Kochhar (www.rand.org/t/RR1198-2), and *Funding Technology-Related Business Initiatives in the Department of the Air Force*, by Don Snyder (www.rand.org/t/RR1198-3).

digital transformation, it is critical to gain the support of those who lead the end users of both legacy and new systems. To secure this support, use success stories from within the U.S. Department of Defense that emphasize mission achievement. This is important not only because these stories resonate with such a mission-focused organization but also because measurable outcomes, such as cost savings or head-count reductions, are hard to come by. Interviewees generally noted that *show* is a better strategy than *tell*: Using narrative, stories, mockups, or prototypes to demonstrate how a product or process has addressed another organization's critical need helps leaders internalize the need for change and say, as one interviewee put it, "I want that."

Project Objective Memorandum and Funding Justification Should Be Based on Business Needs and Mission Readiness

One important takeaway is the need to establish a solid foundation of business need before considering any specific technological upgrades. Resistance to change can force advocates for new systems to adapt these new tools to old processes, which can easily nullify the benefits of new features. These difficulties can be avoided in two ways. First, organizations can use product discovery techniques to understand the most-promising ways to employ technology to improve their overall productivity. Second, organizations must reengineer their business processes and procedures to ensure that they align with major technological upgrades.

It can be difficult for HR departments to justify investments in new technology when competing with warfighting and other organizational priorities. This means that it is important to demonstrate how investing in technology-enabled HR management can improve

the USAF's ability to execute its global missions. Interviewees also suggested taking an incremental, deliberate approach to executing technological upgrades to provide early wins, synchronize the work with program funding, and phase out legacy programs gradually.

A Change Management Strategy Is Imperative for Short- and Long-Term Success

Active organizational change management should align digital transformation with short-, mid-, and long-term goals to overcome bureaucratic friction, resistance, and entrenched culture that may slow or redirect change efforts. Private-sector interviewees reported hiring change management specialists to help navigate the transformation. Perhaps most important to change management is communication that (1) prepares the entire organization for transformation, (2) is tailored to the audience, and (3) is designed to solicit feedback and obtain information that can be used as real data to drive the transformation and generate buy-in.

Potential Next Steps

Future work could look to the academic literature on such topics as technology strategy, change management, talent management, and organizational design. Researchers could also seek out additional sectors for comparable organizations that might offer useful insight for the USAF—for example, city or county governments, federal agencies that may have implemented digital transformation on a budget, health information technology organizations (such as those involved in digitizing health records), or smaller vendors of artificial intelligence for talent management.

This brief describes work done in RAND Project AIR FORCE and documented in *Implementing Technology-Enabled Human Resources Capabilities in the U.S. Air Force: Insight from the Private Sector and Military Services*, by Douglas Yeung, Elicia M. John, Jeannette Gaudry Haynie, James Ryseff, Bonnie L. Triesenberg, and Nelson Lim, RR-A1198-1, 2022 (available at www.rand.org/t/RR-A1198-1). To view this brief online, visit www.rand.org/t/RBA1198-1. The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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