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# NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL Monterey, California



**ANALYSIS AND REDESIGN OF NAVY  
RETENTION/SEPARATION  
QUESTIONNAIRE**

by

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Julie Dougherty

October 1995

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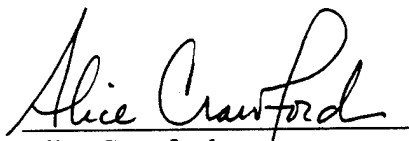
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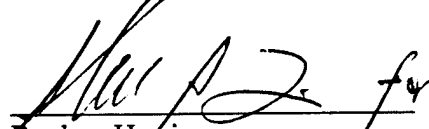
  
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<b>13. ABSTRACT (Maximum 200 words.)</b> The Navy Separation/Retention survey (NSRS) is administered to Naval enlisted personnel at the point of reenlistment or separation, and to officers following a permanent change of station or prior to separation. The data allow manpower planners to anticipate the factors that influence decisions to stay in or leave the Navy. The Bureau of Naval Personnel (Pers 23) asked the Naval Postgraduate School, Systems Management Department to analyze and revise the NSRS to eliminate some problems that had been identified. This document describes the procedures used to revise the NSRS, the new survey items and scales, and recommendations for follow-on work to maintain a quality survey for the Navy.
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**ANALYSIS AND REDESIGN OF NAVY  
RETENTION/SEPARATION QUESTIONNAIRE**

By

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and  
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Navy Separation/Retention Survey (NSRS) is administered to Naval enlisted personnel at the point of reenlistment or separation, and to officers following a permanent change of station or prior to separation. The data allow manpower planners to anticipate the factors that influence decisions to stay in or leave the Navy.

Several problems with the current survey have been identified. Administrative procedures are inconsistent and participation, which is voluntary, is low. These two factors combined indicate that respondents may not represent the population. Additionally, there are considerable overlap and ambiguity among the questionnaire items, making analysis and policy decisions difficult.

The Naval Postgraduate School (NPS), Systems Management Department proposed to analyze and revise the current survey in response to a request initiated by the Bureau of Naval Personnel (Pers 23). The two organizations agreed that the focus of the effort would be on the redesign of the questionnaire items to create a survey no longer than one page. This would allow for continuity for analysis purposes and would not require additional time for Naval personnel to complete the questionnaire.

A factor analysis was used to identify ambiguous items in the current survey. Since the NSRS had not been revised since 1990, the Nominal Group Technique was used to elicit new issues that are satisfying or dissatisfying to Naval personnel. Nominal Group interviews were conducted at the Naval Postgraduate School and onboard the USS Carl Vinson.

A list of 136 potential NSRS items was forwarded to the CNO Career Information Team (Pers 232) for input on reducing the list to a number that would not exceed the one-page requirement. The Career Information Team, at the direction of the Under Secretary of the Navy, is conducting focus groups with fleet personnel who are voluntarily separating before retirement. As such, the team members are familiar with current issues and concerns within the fleet. Both positive and negative issues most frequently mentioned to NPS researchers and the Career Information Team were kept, items available from other Navy surveys were eliminated as feasible, and the final list was derived by an assessment by Pers 232 of the issues most relevant to the current needs of Navy manpower planners and policy makers. The revised NSRS includes 35 items and two measurement scales.

The following recommendations are made:

1. Review the questionnaire periodically.
2. Collect regular feedback from data users.
3. Conduct a factor analysis on the revised NSRS.
4. Develop and implement a procedure for consistent administration.
5. Consider implementation of a computerized NSRS.

## INTRODUCTION

This report describes the revision of the Navy Separation/Retention Survey (NSRS), which was conducted in the Spring of 1995. The survey provides the data needed by Navy manpower planners to anticipate the factors that influence decisions to stay in or leave the Navy and to improve and develop personnel related policies and initiatives. There has been increasing attention to this survey because of the drawdown and subsequent need for retaining the proper mix of skilled, quality people. Both the Marine Corps and the Army are also revising their separation surveys during this period.

## BACKGROUND

The process of exit interviewing and surveying (EIS) was developed as a means of gathering data from a person whose employment with an organization had been voluntarily or involuntarily terminated (Goodale, 1982). EIS usually addresses issues such as pay, benefits, working conditions, opportunities for advancement, the quality and quantity of the workload, and the rapport between coworkers and supervisors. (More background on exit interviewing and surveying is provided in Appendix A.)

OPNAVINST 1040.8D authorizes the Navy Separation/Retention Questionnaire for data collection and policy analyses. While the completion of the questionnaire is voluntary, the instruction directs commanding officers to ensure maximum participation from enlisted personnel at the point of extension for more than 24 months, reenlistment or separation, and from officers following execution of Permanent Change of Station (PCS) orders or upon separation. Parent commands are directed to submit questionnaires with information on the front page for personnel declining to participate voluntarily.

Besides providing basic demographic information, respondents are asked to rate satisfaction with 45 aspects of Navy life (Part A), and to identify the one factor of the 45 that makes (or made) the respondent think about leaving the Navy the most (Part B). The data can be used in the formulation of future policy and lend support for current initiatives that affect Naval service members.

Several problems with the current survey have been noted and were documented by the Center for Naval Analyses (Sharma, 1994). First, participation has been low. This was also addressed in a message

from the Chief of Naval Personnel noting that of 69,865 enlisted separations in FY 94, only 9,511 (13.6%) filled out the questionnaire and that of the 13,227 (non-student status) officer PCS transfers in FY 94, only 1,130 (8.5%) officers participated (CNO/N1 WASH DC NAVADMIN 230/94). CNA addressed concerns of both nonresponse and selection bias that potentially exist. There is great concern that those who respond may not represent the entire group and, thus the data collected may not be indicative of trends throughout the fleet.

Second, it was noted by the Center for Naval Analyses (CNA) that there was considerable overlap among the 45 items in Part A. Some items seem to address the same issues in different ways, and other items appear so similar that respondents may have difficulty distinguishing one from the other. Further, there are no subject-related divisions among the questions allowing potential measurement error to arise from the respondent taking less care in answering each question.

Additionally, CNA pointed out that the 45 choices available to choose from for Part B are excessive. In fact, the data they analyzed from 1990-1992 showed small response frequencies for this item. This presents another type of measurement error since the reason for nonresponse is not known.

Following the CNA study, a memorandum was written to the BUPERS Research Management Advisor by the Assistant Chief of Naval Personnel for Military Personnel Policy and Career Progression that requested a study to analyze the administration and results of the Navy Retention/Separation Questionnaire (Konetzni, 1995).

In response to the concern shown by the Bureau of Naval Personnel (Pers 23) with the problems in the current survey, the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS), Systems Management Department, submitted a proposal to analyze and revise the survey during the period 31 March 1995 to 30 September 1995. A meeting was held in April 1995 in which representatives from NPS and Pers 23 agreed that the proposed effort would be restricted to revision of the survey items and that the administrative problems of the survey would be worked out at some time in the future. It was also agreed that the new survey could be no longer than the old survey, which is a single page with one side for demographic data and the other for the actual survey questions. This decision was made due to both time and resource constraints and a desire to keep the data categories relatively consistent with those that have been used since the survey was developed. Pers 23 should be able to continue to monitor trends that have already been identified as indicators of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the Navy.

## APPROACH

### Factor Analysis

A principal components factor analysis of the 45 items on the current Navy Retention/Exit Questionnaire revealed seven factors accounting for 54.7 percent of the variance, all having eigen values greater than 1.0. In general, items tend to load significantly on one factor. However, four items loaded on different factors probably because the wording was vague leaving the item open to multiple interpretations. One item, "Amount of enjoyment from my job" was eliminated because it was too general. The other three items were reworded to be consistent with the factor they were attempting to measure.

### Survey Item Revision

While CNA had made it clear that the survey items needed to be revised to eliminate redundancy, etc., it seemed equally clear to the present researchers, given that the survey had not been revised since 1990, that the items might be out of date. It seemed likely that there were items that could be eliminated because they were no longer relevant, or because they are addressed on other Navy surveys. Further, in light of significant changes in the Navy in recent years, it also seemed likely that there would be a need to add new items to reflect the current Navy environment.

To determine the current issues of most importance to Navy people, a short survey was administered to 52 officers at NPS who were students in a management course that is a requirement for all of the Systems Management curricula. The class included students of most major Navy designators, and were primarily Lieutenants with some Lieutenant Commanders. It is not assumed that this group necessarily represents the Navy population. Rather, this first step was undertaken to (1) give the researchers an idea of the range of issues that should be expected, and (2) to use later to compare with the main body of data collected from group interviews. The NPS student survey asked for rank, designator, curriculum, intentions to stay in the Navy, what they like most about being in the Navy, and what they like least about being in the Navy.

The NPS student data revealed a wide range of issues of concern, more than could be constrained to a one-page survey. On the other hand, the data showed a remarkable consensus about what people like about being in the Navy.

Subsequently, group interviews were conducted with shore-based personnel from NPS and personnel on board the USS Carl Vinson. The

NPS groups included 21 enlisted personnel divided into four groups called "First Termers" who are in their initial tour of duty, "Careerists" who have more than six years of service and intend to make the Navy a career, "Retirees" who were already scheduled for retirement, and "Separating Personnel" who were voluntarily separating. The same four groups were represented in the people interviewed from the USS Carl Vinson, which included 21 officers and 14 enlisted members.

#### Nominal Group Procedures

The group interview procedure used was the Nominal Group Technique, which has been used by Giacalone (1993) for collecting data relevant to exit surveys. The procedure involved the following steps:

1. Groups were assembled, welcomed, and briefed on the purpose of the meeting.

2. Each individual was asked to fill out a form that asked for demographic data (shown in Appendix B). Group members were assured that no attempt would be made to connect their names with the data to be collected during the meeting.

3. Individuals were asked to fill out a second form (Appendix B) that asked them to list the things they like most and least about being in the Navy. They were asked to think about their total Navy experience, not to concentrate just on the present command or most recent experience.

4. Group members were asked to engage in a discussion of the items they had listed that they liked least about being in the Navy until all items had been mentioned and the entire group was clear on the meaning of each item. Each item was written on easel paper, numbered in order of mention, and taped to the wall of the meeting room. The discussions lasted about 50-60 minutes.

5. Individuals were asked to fill out another form (Appendix B) in which they rated each numbered item as either "0" (does not apply) or on a scale ranging from "1,2,3" (not very important) to "4,5,6,7" (moderately important), to "8,9,10" (very important).

6. Steps 4 and 5 were repeated for the items that people listed as those things they liked most about being in the Navy.

7. Final questions were answered and the groups were thanked and dismissed.

## Data Analysis

The group interview data were aggregated to pool all responses from all groups. Although all groups did not list the exact same items as satisfiers or dissatisfiers, there were enough similarities among the groups that the researchers were able to compare and combine results into aggregate data. Responses that had been rated as "8," "9," or "10," (very important) by more than half of the respondents were kept. This list of responses was compared to those obtained from the NPS students and found to be very similar. Thus, the response set seemed to be comprehensive and there appeared to be nothing potentially valuable that had been missed. This response set included 136 items. The next task was to reduce the response set to a number that could be represented on a one page survey.

The survey items were forwarded to Pers 232 for their assistance in the evaluation. Pers 232 is part of the Career Information Team, which is tasked with providing the latest information on personnel policy issues to the fleet and reporting fleet concerns back to senior Naval leaders in Washington, DC. In this capacity, the team members are familiar with all of the current concerns of fleet personnel, and aware of which of these seem the most important at any given time. Additionally, the Career Information Team, at the direction of the CNO, is in the process of conducting focus groups with fleet personnel who are voluntarily separating before retirement in order to learn what influences their decisions. Therefore, it was decided that the team members were the most qualified to help reduce the list of potential items to a comprehensive, yet manageable number of survey items.

Pers 232 recommended a list of 31 items to NPS researchers, which were then compared to a list of 39 items independently derived by NPS. After several discussions between the two organizations, a final list of 35 items was agreed upon. The criteria for inclusion in the final list were:

1. Items frequently mentioned as negative factors (i.e., factors that could cause people to leave the Navy) in NPS nominal group interviews and Career Information Team focus groups. Many of these items are currently under review by policy makers, for example the military retirement system may be changed. Keeping such items in the survey will be important so that data trends can be monitored.

2. Items frequently mentioned as reasons for staying in the Navy. Considering all possible uses for the questionnaire data, it may become increasingly important to communicate and

build on the factors perceived as motivators.

3. Items used on other surveys were not included.

4. Items considered by Pers 232 to be most relevant to current needs of Navy manpower planners and policy makers.

## RESULTS

### Questionnaire Items

The 35 items for the revised questionnaire are:

1. Amount of family separation
2. Number of inspections
3. Challenge of work
4. Length of work days
5. Amount of personnel to do jobs
6. Amount of responsibility
7. Competence of coworkers
8. Opportunities to serve in leadership roles
9. Type of assignments
10. Participation in assignment decisions
11. Impact of PCS on spouse's career
12. Travel opportunities
13. Advancement opportunities
14. Job security
15. Friendships made in the Navy
16. Pay compared with local living costs
17. Pay compared with other civilian jobs
18. Cost of living allowances
19. Personal access to medical and dental care
20. Quality of personal medical and dental care
21. Access to medical and dental care for family members
22. Quality of medical and dental care for family members
23. Access to military housing
24. Quality of military housing
25. Possible reduction in retirement benefits
26. Paid vacation time
27. Access to job-related training
28. College education programs
29. Employee assistance programs (financial, etc.)
30. Consistent enforcement of rules/regulations
31. Leadership ability of immediate supervisor
32. Recognition from leaders
33. Support up the chain of command
34. Accuracy and consistency of performance evaluations
35. Quality of career information

## Scales

Two rating scales were created. The first scale addresses the importance of the issue to the individual in his/her decision to stay in or leave the Navy:

1. Not at all important
2. Somewhat important
3. Very important
4. Not applicable

The second scale measures whether the individual is (1) satisfied or (2) dissatisfied with the issue. Both scales are essential for effective use of the questionnaire data. While all of the items are important to the respondents in some sense, there will be differences among subgroups of individuals (e.g., officers vs. enlisted, stayers vs. leavers, etc.), and there will be changes over time. Using the two scales will allow users to focus on the two factors for any given data extraction. That is, which subsets of items are seen as relatively more important to the respondents, and the level of satisfaction that respondents feel regarding those issues.

Part (B) of the original survey, which asked respondents to choose the one item that makes (or made) them think about leaving the Navy the most, is no longer required. The two measurement scales should give enough information about the respondents' decisions without that single question. Additionally, although the list of items that the respondent has to choose from has been reduced from 45 to 35, choosing a single one would still be difficult for most respondents.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Review the questionnaire periodically. An update or revision of the questionnaire items must be considered periodically. Although such an update/revision need not be extensive, the changing environment in the Navy, as well as external technological and social changes that impact Navy life, may result in the addition of new items and/or the revision or deletion of existing items. One way to monitor the need for change is to include additional space for respondents to indicate if there are other items not mentioned that are important to their decision to stay or leave the Navy and whether they are satisfied or dissatisfied with that particular issue.

2. Get regular feedback from data users. While the current items may satisfy Navy needs now, it is important to realize that in the future, the needs of those who use the data may change. Additionally, new data users may develop over time. Such changes could result in a need to change the questionnaire items.

3. Conduct a factor analysis on the data collected from the new questionnaire. Once the revised questionnaire is in place, it would be appropriate to analyze the new data collected and determine whether the factors derived from the analysis fit Navy expectations and whether all items are loading cleanly on one factor (i.e., are unambiguous).

4. Develop and implement a procedure for consistent administration of the questionnaire. There is a need for the development of a procedure for administering the instrument, as well as closer monitoring of the consistency with which the procedure is followed. It is recommended that the policy of the Navy be analyzed and critiqued in order to determine an effective way to proceed with policy development. Active participation of transition sites via interviews, phone calls, and surveys should be undertaken to determine how the procedures and policy might best be formulated to increase the quality and amount of data as well as to minimize interference in the varying transition points. A formal procedure, based on the research, should be developed and sent to responsible personnel at the transition points. Furthermore, a clarification of the meaning of "voluntary participation" may be needed.

5. Consider implementing a computerized instrument. The Navy could benefit by changing from a paper and pencil measure to a computerized format. This format would have many beneficial outcomes. Particularly, computerizing the instrument would make it more closely resemble an exit interview (without the expense of individual interviewers or the interpersonal, nonverbal cues that

interviewers may reveal), and would increase the efficacy of the instrument for many reasons. There would be no out-of-range or multiple responses, there would be automatic data entry, missing data could be disallowed, and survey time could be quicker. More importantly, it would allow for interview-like follow ups (via branching techniques) and would be more easily adaptable for special topics and quick response tasks, thereby allowing the Navy to insert new items and/or supplements without the concern for printing and the sunk costs of surveys already printed. Such a computerized instrument would also allow for much quicker reporting time to sponsors.

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APPENDIX A

EXIT INTERVIEWING AND SURVEYING

## EXIT INTERVIEWING AND SURVEYING

The process of exit interviewing and surveying (EIS) was developed as a means of gathering data from a person whose employment with an organization had been voluntarily or involuntarily terminated (Goodale, 1982). EIS usually concerns issues such as pay, benefits, working conditions, opportunities for advancement, the quality and quantity of the workload, and the rapport between coworkers and supervisors. The EIS process provides information for three distinct purposes: diagnosis and strategy (turnover, training and development needs, and the creation of planning goals), public relations (the transition from an employee status to a customer, and personal catharsis (to bring about an amicable parting between employee and company)).

The premise behind EIS, that parting employees will give complete and accurate information, is quite idealistic. EIS has often been criticized for two reasons. First, administrative critiques of the process have argued that EIS is a symbolic gesture (because no use is made of the information obtained), and that the process itself is done hurriedly on the employee's last day of work (Woods & Mccauley, 1987), making the data questionable. Additionally, when dissatisfaction is reported by the exiting employee, the feedback to management is lacking because the EIS administrator (for different reasons) often fails to report it (Hinrich, 1975).

Secondly, methodological critiques, which have attended to the more serious issues of reliability and validity, have argued that the underlying techniques used in many EIS processes are fundamentally problematic. For example, in the exit interview, because the exit interviewer is not always completely objective (Hinrichs, 1971), interviewee defensiveness may result. Exiting employees may therefore mitigate the severity of the problem areas, overstate the positive nature of generally satisfactory issues, or provide themselves with an opportunity to retaliate against the company via responses that are directly the opposite of felt concerns. Additionally, some studies (Hinrichs, 1971; Zaradona & Camuso, 1985) have shown potential inconsistencies over time in explanations for leaving provided by separating personnel.

Although there are legitimate concerns with EIS processes, nowhere in the literature is the EIS process condemned as an ineffective process, per se; the administrative and methodological concerns are curable ones. Many EIS problems are caused by comparatively simple issues of poor planning, lack of insight, ignorance of methodology, and a host of other mistakes associated with a "quick fix" mentality. It is important to note that even with these problems, the EIS process is not different from other human resource management processes and must be adjusted to deal

with the administrative and methodological problems inherent to the particular process.

APPENDIX B

FORMS USED FOR GROUP INTERVIEWS

IN ORDER TO ASSIST US IN EVALUATION OF THE INFORMATION RECEIVED IN THIS DISCUSSION GROUP, REQUEST YOU ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS. ALL YOUR RESPONSES TO THESE QUESTIONS AND TO THOSE ASKED AS PART OF THE DISCUSSION WILL REMAIN COMPLETELY ANONYMOUS.

WHEN DID YOU ENTER THE NAVY? \_\_\_\_\_

WHEN IS YOUR EAOS? \_\_\_\_\_

HOW MANY TIMES HAVE YOU REENLISTED? \_\_\_\_\_

ARE YOU MARRIED? \_\_\_\_\_ SINGLE? \_\_\_\_\_

NUMBER OF DEPENDENTS? \_\_\_\_\_

EDUCATION LEVEL? \_\_\_\_\_

THANK YOU FOR YOUR ASSISTANCE. WE VALUE YOUR CONTRIBUTION AND APPRECIATE THE TIME AND ENERGY THAT YOU HAVE DEVOTED TO THIS DISCUSSION. IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS, PLEASE FEEL FREE TO CONTACT US.

Professor Alice Crawford  
LCDR Julie A. Dougherty

## NPS SEPARATION/RETENTION QUESTIONNAIRE

Please list the things you like the LEAST about being in the Navy. Try to think of anything that has made you feel dissatisfied with your job, your work environment, or the effects of the Navy on your personal life both here and at any previous places in the Navy.

Now list the things you like MOST about being in the Navy. Try to think of all the things that make you satisfied with your job, your work environment, or the effects of the Navy on your personal life. Again, consider all of your Navy experiences as you answer this question.

## RATINGS FOR DISSATISFIERS

We would like you to rate each of the items that have been submitted by you and the other group members. Using the scale shown below, please assign a value to each of the items (0 through 10) that describes how important the item could be (or was) in making you decide to leave the Navy.

**Scale:**

0	1, 2, 3,	4, 5, 6, 7,	8, 9, 10
Doesn't Apply	Not Very Important	Moderately Important	Very Important

<u>Item #</u>	<u>Importance Rating</u>	<u>Item #</u>	<u>Importance Rating</u>
1.	_____	31.	_____
2.	_____	32.	_____
3.	_____	33.	_____
4.	_____	34.	_____
5.	_____	35.	_____
6.	_____	36.	_____
7.	_____	37.	_____
8.	_____	38.	_____
9.	_____	39.	_____
10.	_____	40.	_____
11.	_____	41.	_____
12.	_____	42.	_____
13.	_____	43.	_____
14.	_____	44.	_____
15.	_____	45.	_____
16.	_____	46.	_____
17.	_____	47.	_____
18.	_____	48.	_____
19.	_____	49.	_____
20.	_____	50.	_____
21.	_____	51.	_____
22.	_____	52.	_____
23.	_____	53.	_____
24.	_____	54.	_____
25.	_____	55.	_____
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27.	_____	57.	_____
28.	_____	58.	_____
29.	_____	59.	_____
30.	_____	60.	_____

## RATINGS FOR SATISFIERS

We would like you to rate each of the items that have been submitted by you and the other group members. Using the scale shown below, please assign a value to each of the items (0 through 10) that describes how important the item could be (or was) in making you decide to stay in the Navy.

**Scale:**

0	1, 2, 3,	4, 5, 6, 7,	8, 9, 10
Doesn't Apply	Not Very Important	Moderately Important	Very Important
<u>Item #</u>	<u>Importance Rating</u>	<u>Item #</u>	<u>Importance Rating</u>
1.	_____	31.	_____
2.	_____	32.	_____
3.	_____	33.	_____
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