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Velcro Soldiers: Global Professionalism in the Reserve Components

by

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Introduction

We are an Army obsessed with the future. Our institutions, concepts, policies and evolving doctrines are always reconsidering the way we will fight and are always determining the tools necessary to outrange and outgun the adversaries of tomorrow. And for good reason—the character of war is evolving with the global diffusion of technologies, emerging economies and societal evolutions. But, as the character of war evolves, so too does the character of the citizen Soldier whom we recruit. The citizen Soldiers of today exist within a civil sector that is globally-oriented and is inundated with information technology. They are globally-astute and technologically-savvy and are imbued with new industry practices across all sectors of society. This human element of the All-Volunteer Force can provide the differential advantage over the diverse landscape of global threats to prevent future strategic surprise. Achieving this end will require senior leaders who first understand the changing character of the citizen Soldiers and then apply their evolving talents in the right place and time. If done well, this will have a profound effect on our operational capabilities well into the future.

A burgeoning class of global professionals has emerged; citizen Soldiers are operating within it at all levels. They are the global project managers, cyber experts, software developers, innovation officers and social entrepreneurs among us, each with a corporate global account to manage. They possess enhanced insights to the strategic changes that often occur at a revolutionary level. They serve as enlisted Soldiers and officers in all ranks. With the onset of globalization, they have thrust themselves squarely into the growing class of global professionals. Regardless of how the character of war inevitably evolves, the global professional remains positioned to provide a unique perspective on the security environment; it is *within* that very environment that he or she reliably finds profit and sustenance as a civilian employee.

A global professional embodies the global progression of the international free market enabled by information technology. This is not a career field defined by the rigid principles found within a university syllabus, but rather a new ethos that has firmly grasped a global corporate code. International trade policy, banking and the expansion of the industrial base around the globe are each contributing to this emerging cosmopolitan class. Whether it is in the arena of an internationally recognized corporation or a family export company, global professionalism has indisputably emerged. With the ubiquitous use of new technologies, a

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broader class of professionals is now empowered to compete beyond once impenetrable boundaries. Whether or not our American culture has moved on from industrialization to ubiquitous information technology or to the emerging global mega trends is debatable. What is not debatable is that the reserve component Soldier is deeply embedded within this culture.

Zones of Conflict

The global professional talents are of great benefit to all echelons of staffs within the U.S. Army. Joint doctrine demands that the future operational environment be viewed from a global perspective to determine where operations might occur.¹ Who better to maintain a differential advantage over threats than citizen Soldiers who are adept at discerning the complex and ambiguous environment in which they work on a daily basis? They understand innovation and new technologies, work within the megacities of the world, understand international relations and value human capital. Their perceptions of the operational environment and acute cultural awareness will pay dividends when deployed. These global professionals are capable of thinking deeply and finding the socio-cultural solution. Their innovative behaviors are necessary for survival in the corporate world and are a combat multiplier on Army staffs. And, unfortunately, they are leaving the reserve components.

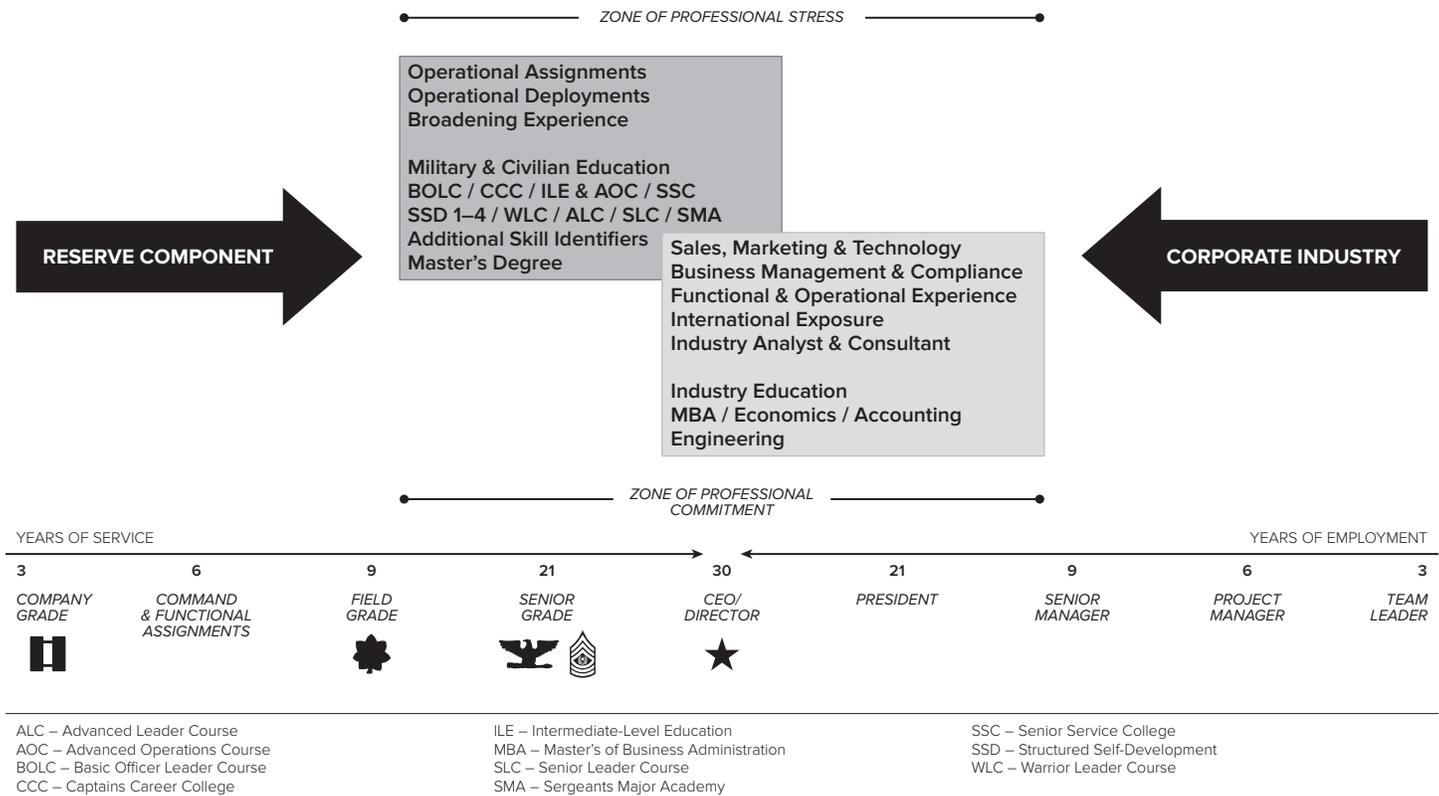
This burgeoning class of global professionals are on executive career paths, spanning private industry and public office. They are completely invested in the corporate world of revolutions and are not tolerating the Army's industrial management practices that harken to wars of attrition. We cannot afford to allow these professional citizen Soldiers to attrit at precisely the time when their unique ability is needed the most, and yet they are attriting or are simply no longer entering the reserve forces. At the onset of the Afghanistan and Iraq campaigns, approximately 50 percent of reserve component servicemembers had prior military service. As of 2014, that number had dropped to approximately 20 percent.² These servicemembers have left the active component to pursue civilian careers in the world of global opportunities. They are choosing to abstain from service because service is now hampering their private corporate careers.

The reserve component global professionals who choose to stay are confronted with the inevitable "zones of conflict" between their military and civilian careers. Unfortunately, this very corporate professionalism imbues competing demands with military professionalism and results in a predictable path: in an effort to save their military career and continue service, citizen Soldiers will transfer first to another unit, then another component, and then finally resign. They have entered the realm of "velcroism." That is, they exchange a unit patch not for duty or advancement, but rather to keep their civilian job. Who can blame them? Their very sustenance is dependent upon a civilian career, not on the Army. To keep these global professionals among us, we must better synchronize their civilian and military career paths. If not, they will continue to walk, and their unique talent skills necessary for the 21st century security environment—and the differential advantage that they bring—will be lost from the National Guard and the Army Reserve.

Talent Management for the Reserve Component Soldier

Talent Management broadly defined means assessing knowledge, skills and behavior and then providing a Soldier-skill match to improve the productivity of an organization. By assessing an individual holistically, a Soldier can be placed in the right position at the right time and provide the best performance possible. Much of this skills-match concept hinges on the fielding of the Integrated Personnel and Pay System-Army, which will provide total force visibility in one Human Resources system. Talent Management promises to be an advancement in Human Resource management. But, for the reserve component Soldier, the question is less about Soldier-skills match and more about capitalizing on talent already present. The way to accomplish that is to better facilitate civilian careers.

The unique advantage of any modular unit in the reserve components is the mix of civilian careers that provides a powerful concoction of different talents. This breeds diversity in thought, professional experiences, innovation and behavioral aptitudes. If commanders become myopic and acquiescent to skills-match, they



risk imposing a type of rigid personnel management practice that should be dissolved. Just because a Soldier is an international banker as a civilian does not mean that the skills-match is to the finance branch. Keeping the global professional within the military ranks and maintaining a differential advantage over threats will require a change to Human Resource Support concepts and policies. The current challenge for the reserve component commander is facilitating both a corporate and military career path. Antiquated weekend drill concepts and personnel management practices must be examined and then modified to facilitate both a corporate and military career path. Examples include:

- Count civilian careers as broadening positions or key developmental positions. Reserve component Soldiers mature in their civilian jobs and gain a level of knowledge in their civilian profession commensurate with senior leader positions of the Army;
- Consider international deployments or other key tasks within industry for drill credit. Creating a system of corporate co-ops should be investigated;
- Incentivize civilian credentialing to an increase in pay for drilling Soldiers;
- Reduce minimum drill points per year to critical training and events as determined by the unit commander;
- Modify key personnel indicators; allow Inactive Guard status for officers; eliminate non-validated pay codes; and create performance and attendance codes for global professional constructive attendance; and
- Eliminate cohort management and the timeline for promotion. This would take into consideration officers unable to complete OES (Officer Education System) due to civilian deployments.

Talent Management initiatives, authoritative guidance and concepts are addressed within a series of implementing documents across the Army. Each recognizes that the geopolitical and technological environments are changing at a rapid pace and that the Army must modify its personnel management to harvest or train talent.³

The predominant theme within these documents when referring to the ARNG is a recognition of stressors imposed on Guard Soldiers and the competing demands of a civilian and military career. However, no real strategy exists to accommodate these employer demands. Leaders are only charged with providing “guidance and support” to facilitate a resilient Soldier.⁴ A general over-simplification of the dual-occupation challenge exists. An appreciation that many reserve component Soldiers are leaders in industry is predominant. But the only strategy seems to be of remaining sensitive to the relationship between civilian occupations and military training.⁵ Human Resource Support concepts and policies must stay abreast of the new Talent Management initiatives and adapt accordingly to keep global professionals within Army ranks.

Another theme emanating from the Talent Management initiatives and concepts is the enamored view of new industry practices and the solicitation of external contributions.⁶ Silicon Valley and other high-tech industry locations have been visited by senior leaders to solicit innovative ideas in 21st century Talent Management concepts. A system of “on-ramps” for civilians who are not a part of Department of Defense (DoD)—but who want to contribute to national security—and “off-ramps” (for those personnel currently in DoD who would benefit from new perspectives from outside industry) is being implemented. There are no on-ramps or off-ramps needed in reserve component units. The talent is already in the ranks. If a better job were done of simply synchronizing the career paths of reserve component global professionals, the military would benefit as these professionals matured to CEOs while simultaneously serving as Soldiers.

Does the Abrams Doctrine Still Exist?

The conflict between a Soldier’s military and civilian career and his or her subsequent departure from military service inevitably risks a dilution of the Abrams Doctrine. The true spirit of the Abrams Doctrine was to rely more upon the reserve components in an effort to remain consistent with the will of the people.⁷ Who better to levy an impact on civil society than the critical absence of a global professional? This vital link to the emerging class of global professionals must be maintained; they must be kept within the ranks of the reserve forces. Otherwise, we will have created an operational force that has lost the most educated class of Soldiers ever to emerge in the civil sector. As more and more Soldiers fill professional corporate roles—Soldiers whose qualifications are at the highest levels of their industry—their absence will force a discussion of the serious problems and consequences which that absence engenders.

However, to fully invest in a corporate professional and so fulfill the essence of the Abrams Doctrine, civilian and Army career paths must be better synchronized. The pathway to executive and leadership opportunities for the global professional presents competing interests with his or her military profession. In the new corporate age, replete with on-going industry certifications, credentialing, qualifications and advanced degrees, time is in more demand than ever before. For every school attendance required to ascend in rank within the military, there is also one in the private sector—and they often conflict with scheduled military training. Furthermore, the necessary pursuit of corporate functional expertise, operational experience and international exposure often directly conflict with the time demanded of military leaders. These global professionals usually begin to emerge as leaders within the private sector at about the same time they pin on Captain or Sergeant First Class rank in the Army National Guard.

Conclusion

A revolutionary response in Army Talent Management is required for the revolutionary emergence of global professionalism within the reserve components. The reserve component professionals who work within the global security environment are a part of the emerging class of global professionals. They are not going to tolerate antiquated Talent Management concepts. This new class of professionals is educated, competent in business and finance, understanding of foreign affairs and international trade and has developed a propensity to reason more pluralistically. The U.S. Army Reserves and National Guard stand at a unique crossroads in harvesting this industry talent and retaining it across all formations. These corporate professionals provide the Army with a vast differential advantage over global competitors and forever maintain the link to civilian

society. The career paths of both military and global professionals must be synchronized, or that talent will be lost.

The complexity of the unknown, unknowable and unknowing global environment has generated a new lexicon of threats ranging from the gray zone to systemic insurgencies to a burgeoning class of near peer threats. Reserve component Soldiers are the epitome of professional citizen Soldiers who operate in this complex world on a day-to-day basis. Their desire is to maintain a civilian career path while maintaining membership within the Army. They understand innovation and geopolitical dynamics, and they are successful managers of human capital—all while building the same necessary core competencies needed by Army leaders to engage the constantly changing 21st century environment. These global professionals, operating within this environment, might just possess the talent to conceive strategies, develop campaigns, innovate solutions and conduct operations that can mitigate ambiguity and complexity on a future battlefield; these are talents that they develop in their everyday encounters as global employees. To retain these professional citizen Soldiers, Human Resource Support concepts and policies that complement their careers must be implemented. Otherwise, the U.S. Army will irretrievably lose this pool of talent.

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Endnotes

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