

Ten Things Field-grade Officers Should Know About Career Progression

A sustainment officer who was assigned to the Army Human Resources Command provides 10 considerations for officers who want the best career outcomes.

■ By Lt. Col. Charles L. Montgomery

An assignment at the Army Human Resources Command (HRC) is an incredible opportunity for officers and enlisted personnel to learn how the Army executes personnel processes. During my time at HRC, I learned many things about field-grade officer career progression that I want to share. To achieve desirable career outcomes, an officer must consider the following 10 aspects.

1. Performance Versus Position

Being mentored by a senior leader is a great opportunity to develop a viable career plan. The goal is to achieve diversity of thought, so officers should have multiple mentors to avoid a myopic assignment approach. However, officers must understand that not all advice is relevant.

The way officers perform far outweighs their assigned positions. Unequivocally, all fiscal year 2017 lieutenant colonel selectees had at least one “most qualified” officer evaluation report (OER) during their key developmental (KD) positions. This is the most important promotion statistic about going from major to lieutenant colonel.

Nevertheless, a large percentage of officers assume that if they do not receive KD opportunities as a support operations officer or battalion executive officer, promotion failure is guaranteed. KD opportunities may affect what type of battalion an officer will

command; however, the key to success is to perform well regardless of the position. This debunks the myth of the so-called “accepted population.”

2. Put First Things First

Stephen R. Covey’s book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* highlights a principle that is one of the most underrated by field-grade officers. Covey’s third principle, which he calls “put first things first,” helps leaders to discern urgency from importance.

One of a major’s first priorities is to complete the Command and General Staff Officers Course regardless of assigned method. Secondly, a major must actively establish a reputation as a field-grade officer and pursue KD opportunities immediately.

Department of the Army Pamphlet 600-3, Officer Professional Development and Career Management, states that the length of a KD position should range from 12 months to 24 months. Generally, the rule of thumb is that officers should have two OERs in a KD position.

Majors should approach future career goals logically and sequentially. This approach should include preparing for promotion to lieutenant colonel, competing for the centralized selection list, and commanding a battalion, if desired. Essentially, this is an algorithm, and step one must be accomplished before step two is initiated.

Officers projecting five-to-10 years

into the future tend to lose sight of the criticality of their current performance, which jeopardizes growth potential. As an officer’s performance changes, so does the five-year plan.

Often officers place a high priority on joint assignments; however, there are risks associated with receiving jobs for which only “the best” are assigned. Approximately 51 percent of the officers who enter these types of assignments will not exit them in the same performance tier.

Officers may have promotion to lieutenant colonel basically locked, but the probability of being selected for battalion command may be lower. A joint assignment is a great opportunity, but if you do not get promoted to lieutenant colonel or selected for battalion command, it will not take you very far.

Put first things first, and place your efforts on the immediate next step of getting promoted to lieutenant colonel. Promotion opportunities are many, and multiple paths lead to the same end state. However, officers must develop realistic plans that mitigate risks to accomplish their overall career goals.

3. Talent Management

Talent management affects all officers regardless of their current performance. HRC will continue to move personnel in predefined cycles, and senior leaders must not shy away from being involved in the process ear-

ly. Talent management encompasses multiple data points so that leaders can make the most informed organizational decisions.

Organizational leaders must understand that the assignments process essentially starts at the unit level. (See figure 1.) The mission-essential requirements (MER) list represents consolidated unit priorities for organizational manning requirements specific to the movement cycle.

The submission of a detailed MER is critical to enabling HRC to select the right officers for specific organizational requirements. If detailed data is not submitted, units leave the decision to assignment officers who may not have complete information to assign the officer who is best suited to the unit's mission.

The fundamental purpose of the MER is to give commanders and human resources professionals the ability to formally advocate for the skills, experience, and knowledge required to accomplish specific missions. The MER is the unit's best opportunity to submit formal input into the process. Unit human resources professionals

must have a firm grasp of their projected losses as depicted by officers' year and month of availability for assignment (YMAV) or date eligible for return from overseas (DEROS).

Timing of the MER submission is critical, and G-1s are ultimately responsible for submitting it to HRC. Leaders should expect the MER approximately six months before the cycle opens. Currently there are two cycles: the 01 cycle, which runs from Oct. 1 through March 31, and the 02 cycle, which runs from April 1 through Sept. 30. As a point of clarity, units and officers must understand that vacancies do not equate to validated fills.

Finally, account managers and assignment officers have different responsibilities. HRC account managers are responsible for representing their assigned units' requirements. Therefore, an account manager's concern is filling "spaces."

Assignment officers, on the other hand, are responsible for locating the right officer available to fill the identified vacancy. Assignment officers are concerned with the "faces" aspect,

which is based on their routine communication with the population completing the process.

Organizations should communicate routinely with their assigned account managers in order to effectively influence the process. Once a space is open and a validated requisition is created, it is up to the assignment officer to find the best qualified officer. Open communication will enhance the process immensely. The end state is getting the right Soldier with the right qualifications to the right place at the right time.

4. Communication

Assignment officers typically serve on the desk for two years or four assignment cycles. Theoretically, each assignment officer will touch approximately 68 percent of their assigned population over a span of two years.

It is imperative that officers communicate with their assignment officers early, especially if they are in the next movement cycle. Assignment officers need time to work on special circumstances that require external coordination, such as by-name

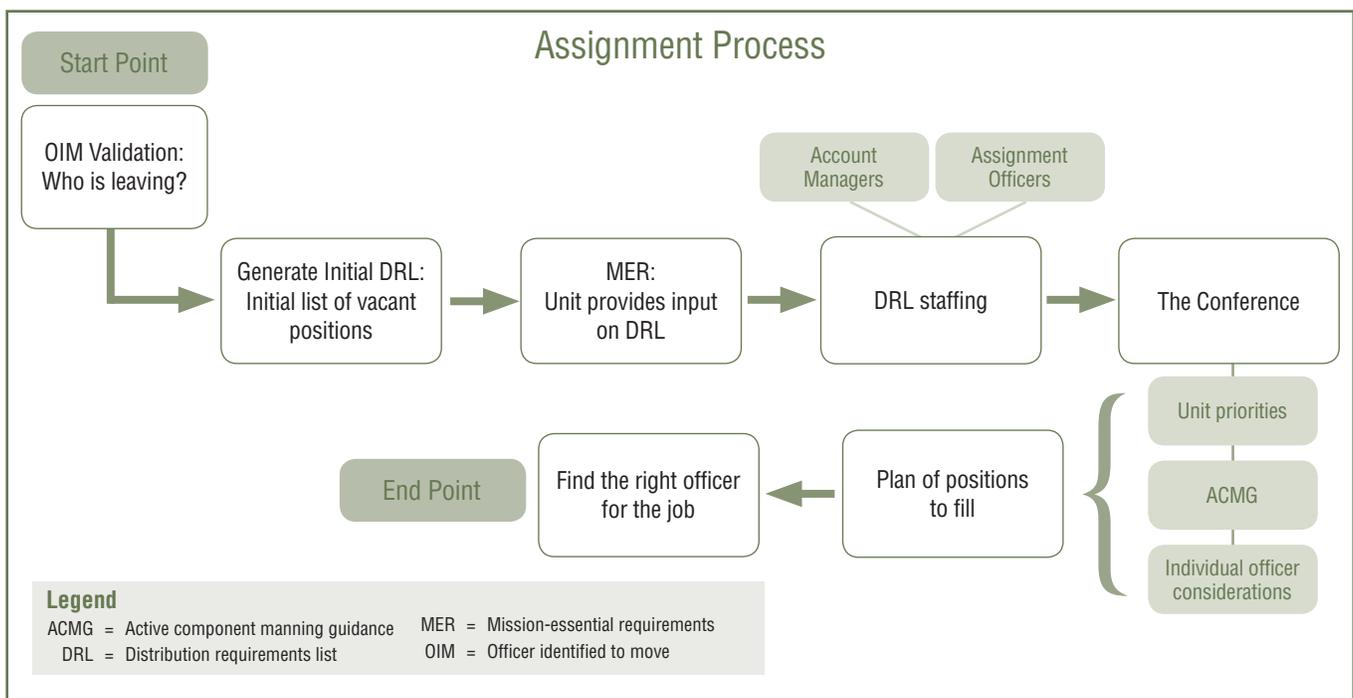


Figure 1. The assignment process starts at the unit level and moves to the Human Resources Command, where account managers focus on their assigned units' requirements and assignment managers locate officers to fill vacancies.



requests, nominations, and accommodations for enrollees in the Exceptional Family Member Program, and Married Army Couples Program.

The nomination process begins with notifying the brigade commander and the selected officer about a nominative assignment. Not all officers are interested in being nominated for special assignments; this desire must be communicated to the assignment officer in order to avoid potential friction. HRC wants to nominate officers who desire the positions and have the right skills for those positions.

Officers' personal assignment considerations are the last aspect in the assignments process. Assignment officers have an obligation to place the best officers in the right organizations to benefit the Army.

5. Networking Is Key

Networking at the field-grade level is integral to continuing career progression. Senior leader involvement

in the talent management process encourages officers to build a solid reach-back network. All officers need an advocate to portray their narrative during the assignment process. For the most part, an officer's immediate advocates should be from his or her current chain of command.

Hard work is only part of achieving your goal; developing a solid network is another. Your narrative is important, and developing a proper network will aid in transmitting your goals and desires. Officers are encouraged to start expanding their networks early in their careers to achieve their goals. Senior leaders play a critical role in managing talent across the organization, and your reputation will make the difference during the process.

6. Performance Determines Opportunities

Performance is everything. Officers rated in the top third of their peers represent the best in the field, and

these officers will have the opportunity to serve in joint assignments, as general officer aides, or in other nominative assignments reserved for the very best.

Top third officers are on track for promotion and will compete extremely well for battalion command. Middle third officers are on track for promotion but will not compete as well for battalion command. In most cases, one OER can separate officers in the top third from those in the middle third.

Middle third officers may have a chance for joint opportunities and some nominative opportunities. In this case, a middle third officer may have the right skills and experiences to supersede a top third officer.

Bottom third officers are at risk for having promotion denied and basically have no chance of selection for battalion command. This group of officers is targeted for areas that allow more opportunities to strengthen



Maj. Dean W. Tallant is promoted to major at Aberdeen Proving Grounds, Md., on Dec. 15, 2017. Presiding over the ceremony is Maj. Gen. Kirk Vollmecke from the Program Executive Office Intelligence, Electronic Warfare & Sensors. (Photo by John Higgins)

their files. Selected continuation officers will continue to be assessed for promotion to lieutenant colonel.

Officers must understand how their assignment officers assess them in relation to their peers. This will give them an idea of their future opportunities.

7. Know the Rules to Succeed

Each officer has a specific YMAV or DEROS that identifies when they

are eligible to move. Officers normally serve 36 months in an assignment, and the YMAV or DEROS is usually in the last month.

Army Regulation 614-100, Officer Assignment Policies, Details, and Transfers, offers detailed insight on assignment policies. Officers with Exceptional Family Member Program or Married Army Couples Program situations are assignment officers' first priority. Combat training center and joint assignments represent the next target. Finally, the remaining branch-immateral jobs are filled.

Nominative assignments are continual and do not necessarily align with a specific cycle. All validated requisitions are important, and someone will fill the requirement. Having a clear understanding of your left and right parameters will ease tensions during the transition process.

8. Face Reality to Reduce Friction

The establishment of realistic career goals is paramount to successfully managing expectations. The number one rule is that as your performance changes, so should your future goals. Officers must routinely update their two-to-five year plans, incorporating changes to accurately project future accomplishments.

Being promoted to lieutenant colonel is definitely indicative of a suc-

cessful career. However, if someone strives to become a battalion commander, previous senior rater comments will carry enormous weight during the selection process. Making the alternate list is an accomplishment in itself because there is still a chance to receive a command based on declinations, deferments, or other actions that may require a change in leadership.

9. Your Family Has a Vote

Ensuring family peace is an enduring priority. Serving in the Army is a great opportunity, but it represents a short time in our lives. Family considerations should carry enormous weight during the assignments process. Medical support, educational interests, or exploration opportunities are all worth consideration.

There is a symbiotic relationship between family peace and work productivity. The Army has plenty of assignment opportunities other than brigade combat teams, and these opportunities need solid performers. Take the time to make the next move a family decision and not just about the position available. At the conclusion of your Army career, your family is going to remain the most important aspect of your life.

10. You Matter

Talent management must be viewed holistically. Every officer possesses certain talents that benefit the organization. We should not expend all of our energy on the top 10 percent while the remaining 90 percent are the men and women operating the organization.

Every officer matters to the continued success of our organization. From an assignments perspective, the goal is to match the right skills and experiences to the right position. I encourage officers to perform well regardless

of the assignment, and to trust the organization to keep them on a path of progression. We need all leaders in our quest to remain the dominant force in the world, and it is the responsibility of all leaders to maximize individual talents in the best interest of the organization.

One of HRC's goals is to ensure complete transparency during the as-

signments process. The Assignment Interactive Module II allows complete transparency for units and individual officers. This system allows officers the opportunity to market themselves by adding skills and experience that may enhance the gaining units' mission accomplishment.

HRC will serve as the final adjudicator, but the units' input combined with the officer's skill set are large parts of the assignment decision process. Assignment officers exist to ensure the Army is represented accurately and to match the right officer with the right assignment.

Communicate with your assignment officer routinely, especially if you are in the cycle to move. The transition process can be stressful on everyone; however, if these identified aspects are taken into consideration, friction will be reduced.

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