

# OPTIMIZING OFFICER RETENTION IN THE US SPACE FORCE

## A Strategy for Success

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This article proposes a targeted talent management strategy to optimize officer retention within the US Space Force. In exploring how retention influences operational readiness and strategic effectiveness, this article underscores the critical nature of talent management in maintaining US space dominance. A strategy that integrates a comprehensive career-mapping doctrine, algorithm-based assignment systems, and order-of-merit promotion practices aligns officers' aspirations with organizational goals, thereby enhancing job satisfaction and retention. Rather than focusing primarily on broad retention strategies across various military branches, such a strategy specifically addresses the Space Force's unique challenges and needs.

Imagine the US Space Force at a pivotal moment in a not-so-distant future, leading an international coalition to safeguard satellites from a sophisticated cyber-attack that threatens global communication. At the heart of this operation is a team of highly skilled officers, each a product of the Space Force's visionary talent management strategy. Having navigated their careers through a system that values merit, aligns assignments with individual skills and aspirations, and charts a clear path for professional growth, these officers are not just participants in this critical mission; they are its linchpins. Yet, as the Space Force ventures into this new frontier, it faces a challenge from external adversaries and from within: retaining these indispensable officers.

The stakes could not be higher, as losing even one officer could mean a setback in operational readiness and mission success. The impact is particularly significant in the Space Force, where the small size of the force and officer corps amplifies the effects of losing even a single member. While the structure and broader personnel base might absorb such losses in larger military branches with less immediate disruption, in the Space Force, such transitions are not so readily made. The critical role of each Guardian officer in maintaining the strategic and operational balance stems from their specific expertise and responsibilities, which are not quickly or easily replaceable. The heightened dependency on each officer underscores the importance of focused retention

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strategies tailored to the unique needs and scale of the Space Force. This need is particularly crucial considering the 14 percent reduction in the civilian workforce in early 2025, a cut that disproportionately impacts the service due to its small size and reliance on civilian expertise.<sup>1</sup>

The situation described illustrates a critical concern at the heart of current military strategic priorities, emphasizing that officer retention transcends simple personnel management to become a vital element of national security and operational effectiveness. This article argues that to effectively mitigate an officer retention issue within the Space Force, the service must implement a targeted talent management strategy that incorporates a clear doctrine for career mapping, assignment algorithms, and order-of-merit promotion systems, leveraging insights from across sister service branches.

First, developing and implementing a comprehensive career-mapping doctrine will provide officers with a clear path for professional growth and advancement within the Space Force. Next, assignment algorithms will actively match officers to positions that best align with their skills and professional and personal aspirations, enhancing job satisfaction and retention. Finally, establishing an order-of-merit promotion system will foster a culture of fairness and recognition, which is critical for retaining highly skilled officers.

## Background

An analysis of job satisfaction trends across other military branches indicates the importance of talent management to retention. From November 2022 to February 2023, a national independent panel on military service and readiness consisting of retired US generals, state representatives, and Pentagon officials worked together to identify practices within the military that undermine retention and recommended actions to ensure the military remains lethal and prepared to protect national security.<sup>2</sup> The military branches initiated their research response to ongoing and extreme recruitment challenges. With the services consistently missing their yearly recruitment goal, the panel determined that retention might be the next crisis.<sup>3</sup>

Within the military, retention is “the rate at which military personnel voluntarily choose to stay in the military after their obligated term of service has ended.”<sup>4</sup> For officers, depending on their initial contract, the obligation can range from three to six years. In its report, the panel found that officers’ experiences during the initial years

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1. Shaun Waterman, “How Is the Space Force Handling Civilian Personnel Cuts?,” *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, 4 March 2025, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/>.

2. Michael Walz et al., *Report of the National Independent Panel on Military Service and Readiness* (The Heritage Foundation, 30 March 2023), <https://www.heritage.org/>.

3. Walz et al., *Report*.

4. Kristy N. Kamarck and Carly A. Miller, *Defense Primer: Active Component Enlisted Retention*, In Focus 11274 (Congressional Research Service, updated 15 November 2024), 1, <https://sgp.fas.org/>.

are critical to determining the likelihood of them extending their contract. In 2021, the overall retention rate for the US military—excluding the newly formed Space Force—was 55 percent, a decline from previous years.<sup>5</sup> More drastically, the US retention rate is the second worst among all NATO countries.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, the presumption that retention across the military services is the next crisis is highly plausible.

Research indicates several factors impact retention in the US military. Across the services, toxic leadership can erode morale and discourage long-term service, especially in smaller units where poor command climates have an outsized effect.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, limited freedoms—such as the requirement to move duty stations due to an unexpected change in assignment—can negatively affect job satisfaction. Inadequate compensation, particularly when compared to private-sector opportunities for technical and leadership talent, also plays a role, especially among dual-income households and officers stationed in high cost-of-living areas. Although military pay remains competitive on paper, RAND research and the 2025 *Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation* suggest that perceived gaps in housing allowances, incentive pay, and family support programs can affect retention decisions among officers.<sup>8</sup>

While toxic leadership, limited freedoms, and inadequate compensation are commonly cited challenges across the broader military, the Space Force faces a more specific set of retention concerns.<sup>9</sup> A 2019 study published in *Armed Forces & Society* found that younger officers increasingly value flexibility and purpose over traditional incentives like pay and rank progression, while a 2024 retention analysis indicated that “newer generations” are primarily concerned about work-life balance.<sup>10</sup> According to a 2024 RAND Corporation study, Guardians broadly agreed that family stability, impacted by assignment location and length of stay, was a key concern when reviewing current personnel policies.<sup>11</sup> While there is some overlap with the broader services, these specific factors must be considered when addressing the staffing challenges confronting today’s Space Force.

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5. Skyler Bernards, “Military Retention Rates: How to Increase the Numbers,” *ExecutiveBiz*, 30 January 2024, <https://executivebiz.com/>.

6. Rob Shaul, “Air Force Leads All US Military Branches in Re-Enlistment Rates: Overall, US Military Retention Is 2nd Worst in NATO,” Mountain Tactical Institute, 16 February 2023, <https://mntactical.com/>.

7. Jean Lipman-Blumen, *The Allure of Toxic Leaders: Why We Follow Destructive Bosses and Corrupt Politicians—and How We Can Survive Them* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

8. Beth J. Asch et al., *Improving the Efficiency of the Military Compensation System* (RAND Corporation, 2024), <https://www.rand.org/>; and *Report of the Fourteenth Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation*, vol. 1, *Main Report* (DOD, January 2025), <https://militarypay.defense.gov/>.

9. Bernards, “Military Retention Rates.”

10. David R. Segal et al., “Changing Conceptions of Officer Careers in the U.S. Military,” *Armed Forces & Society* 45, no. 1 (2019), <https://www.jstor.org/>; and Amanda Huffman, “Can Adding Flexibility Help Retain Guardians in the U.S. Space Force?” *Clearance Jobs*, 31 January 2024, <https://news.clearancejobs.com/>.

11. Raymond E. Conley et al., *Alignment of U.S. Space Force Military Human Capital Management Functions* (RAND Corporation, 2024), <https://www.rand.org/>.

## Recruitment and Retention in the Space Force

Across the US military, recruitment has also faced significant challenges in recent years. In fiscal year 2023, the Army, Navy, and Air Force all missed their active-duty recruiting goals, prompting widespread concern about the future force structure and readiness of the all-volunteer force.<sup>12</sup> Unlike these services, however, the Space Force has not faced significant recruitment shortfalls. The unique allure of space operations and the smaller recruitment quotas associated with the service's compact size contribute to this success.<sup>13</sup> The specialized and innovative nature of the Space Force also attracts individuals with interests in advanced technology and space operations. Yet as the service continues to grow and the broader sector evolves, it remains uncertain whether these recruitment advantages will persist. Factors such as the expansion of commercial space industries and shifting public and governmental priorities could influence future trends and intensify competition for talent.

On the retention front, the Space Force currently reports relatively high officer retention rates. In fiscal year 2024, approximately 90 percent of Guardians chose to continue their service, aligning closely with retention trends across the Department of the Air Force (DAF).<sup>14</sup> Yet, the same qualities that attract individuals to the Space Force—its cutting-edge operations and specialized focus—may not suffice to keep them long-term. The demanding environment and abundant opportunities in the civilian space sector—where employment has grown by 27 percent over the past decade and average salaries surpass \$130,000 a year—could lead to higher turnover rates among skilled officers.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, the global space economy is projected to approach \$800 billion by 2027, further expanding competitive opportunities for talent.<sup>16</sup> Thus, while recruitment is currently robust, proactive retention strategies are essential to prevent potential attrition issues as the Space Force matures.

The Space Force needs to prioritize retention for three primary reasons: to strengthen unit readiness, to save time in training personnel, and to keep costs of recruitment to a minimum.<sup>17</sup> These reasons are interrelated.

Retaining seasoned and skilled military personnel is crucial for sustaining the armed forces' operational effectiveness and readiness. The continuation of service by these experienced members safeguards vital institutional knowledge and proficiency,

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12. *Military Recruiting: Actions Needed to Address Digital Marketing Challenges*, GAO 25-106719 (US Government Accountability Office [GAO], November 2024), <https://www.gao.gov/>.

13. *Department of the Air Force, Written Statement to the Senate Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Personnel* (statement of Kristyn E. Jones, assistant secretary of the Air Force, financial management), 22 March 2024, <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/>.

14. Jones, statement.

15. Space Foundation Editorial Team, "The *Space Report 2025 Q1* Shows Growing Need for Skilled Labor in Space Workforce, Budget Concerns for U.S. Space Force, and Highlights Space Pharmaceuticals Investments," Space Foundation, press release, 7 April 2025, <https://www.spacefoundation.org/>.

16. Brett Loubert et al., "Delivering on Space Development Growth," Deloitte Insights, Government & Public Services, 4 June 2025, <https://www.deloitte.com/>.

17. Bernards, "Military Retention Rates."

which are essential for the successful execution of military missions. In 2023, the US Government Accountability Office noted that between fiscal years 2017 and 2021, military readiness ratings increased in the ground domain, decreased in the sea domain, and both increased and decreased in the air and space domains.<sup>18</sup> One of the two key inputs to the rating factor is the ability of the service to train and retain personnel.

The development of field grade officers in the Space Force, particularly for roles requiring integration and planning capabilities within joint and component commands, is characterized by a lengthy and specialized training process. As highlighted in the Space Force's career development guidelines for space operations officers, the path to becoming a senior officer involves a series of progressively advanced training and leadership roles.<sup>19</sup> These roles are strategically sequenced over many years to ensure officers acquire the necessary expertise and experience. This extensive timeline ensures that officers are proficient in space operations and skilled in essential command and staff functions that support the integration of Space Force capabilities within the broader defense framework. Such deliberate development is critical for the Space Force's mission, where each officer's strategic and operational insight plays a pivotal role in maintaining national security and space dominance. The recent decline in the services' ability to maintain service members inversely impacts their unit readiness.

Additionally, a healthy retention rate also saves the Space Force in terms of training time as well as recruitment costs. High retention rates not only ensure the stability and cohesion of a team but also alleviate the need for the intensive and costly process of recruiting and training new personnel. Maintaining the current workforce allows the military to avoid the substantial expenses involved in advertising, screening, and onboarding recruits.<sup>20</sup>

Given the multifaceted challenges of retaining military personnel, as highlighted by studies on Space Force human capital management and evolving officer career expectations, it becomes imperative to forge innovative solutions tailored to the unique demands of space operations.<sup>21</sup> Recognizing the pivotal role officers play in the success of missions and the overall readiness of the force, the Space Force stands at the threshold of adopting novel approaches in talent management.

Currently, the Space Force does have a key organization responsible for talent management within the force. Its Enterprise Talent Management Office oversees personnel policy and career development frameworks. In addition to the office's efforts, the Space Force has introduced several initiatives aimed to improve recruitment and retention,

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18. *Military Readiness: Improvement in Some Areas, but Sustainment and Other Challenges Persist: Testimony Before the Subcommittee on Readiness and Management Support, Committee on Armed Services, U. S. Senate, 118th Congress (2023)* (statement of Diana Maurer, director, Defense Capabilities and Management), <https://www.gao.gov/>.

19. *ETMO Guardian Employment Division Roadmap* (Enterprise Talent Management Office, September 2021).

20. *DOD Active-Duty Recruitment and Retention Challenges*, GAO 23-106551 (GAO, March 2023), <https://www.gao.gov/>.

21. Conley et al., *Alignment*; and Segal et al., "Changing Conceptions."

including targeted onboarding, cross-functional training programs, and investments in a digital talent marketplace.<sup>22</sup> These efforts are designed to enhance flexibility in career paths and improve overall workforce engagement.

Yet, while these institutional initiatives reflect progress, they remain primarily administrative in nature and lack the personalized, actionable guidance necessary to address individual officer concerns. While the Enterprise Talent Management Office plays a vital role in enforcing policy and advising officers, it does not directly shape officer retention in a proactive or data-driven way. Given this distinction, this discussion prioritizes structural reforms—such as career mapping, assignment transparency, and leadership selection—that have a more immediate and individualized impact on officer satisfaction and long-term retention.

In line with the chief of space operation's aims, the Space Force is clarifying roles across its personnel—officers, enlisted, and civilians—to optimize effectiveness. Officers are leaders and planners with comprehensive mission knowledge, enlisted Guardians serve as technical experts and primary warfighters, and civilian Guardians provide stability and specialized skills. The definition of roles supports the Space Force's goals of integrating smoothly into joint operations and boosting readiness.<sup>23</sup> Drawing from lessons learned across other military branches, the Space Force can craft a targeted strategy that prepares its officers for tomorrow's demands and keeps them motivated to continue serving.

The US military faces a crisis in retention, and existing policies do not adequately address challenges including toxicity in the workplace and career inflexibility. The Space Force must therefore adapt these models to address these key retention challenges. By highlighting how structured career pathways have improved retention through better leadership selection and increased officer autonomy, this article demonstrates how these military-specific models can address the Space Force's unique challenges.

## Career Management Doctrine

First, developing and implementing a comprehensive career-mapping doctrine will provide officers with a clear path for professional growth and advancement within the Space Force. Step one is the development of the doctrine, while step two is its implementation. Foundational documents such as Space Doctrine Publication (SDP) 1-0, *Personnel*; Space Force Doctrine Document (SFDD) 1, *The Space Force*; Air Force Doctrine Publication (AFDP) 1, *The Air Force*; and DAF Instruction 36-2686, *Officer Development*, primarily provide broad overviews of force development, personnel

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22. Department of the Air Force Presentation to the Subcommittee on Military Personnel, Committee on Armed Services, US House of Representatives, Subject: Military Personnel Posture Hearing for FY25 (statement of Major General Katherine A. Kelley, US Space Force), 17 April 2024, <https://www.congress.gov/>.

23. B. Chance Saltzman, Chief of Space Operations Guidance and Intent: Officer, Enlisted, and Civilian Guardians' Narratives and Principles (US Space Force, 17 January 2024).

policy, and readiness.<sup>24</sup> They are not designed to provide actionable, role-specific guidance for individual officers navigating assignments, development opportunities, or long-term career planning. As such, they fall short of offering the kind of interactive individualized mapping system proposed in this article. A comprehensive career-mapping doctrine would fill this gap, offering tailored planning tools aligned with officer aspirations and Space Force needs.

A career-mapping doctrine is a detailed, strategic plan that outlines the career development paths and opportunities for Space Force officers. It moves beyond merely presenting a visual diagram or graph. Rather than a simplistic depiction of potential career paths, it involves a systematic approach that includes policies, procedures, and guidelines designed to lead officer progression and readiness. By providing a transparent and structured pathway for career progression, Guardian officers gain greater control over their careers, mitigating frustrations associated with limited freedoms—one of the key factors that discourage retention.

The ability to see a clear trajectory for their professional future reduces uncertainty surrounding assignment and broadening opportunities, fostering engagement and long-term commitment to the service. Many Space Force officers look to the Career Stages Map in its current form, which is based on the Air Force's Career Progression Map, to provide an example of how they need to align assignments. Yet while the Career Stages Map is important, it does not adequately detail essential aspects of their career.

Career mapping is a strategic framework that provides officers with a road map for their professional development, detailing potential career trajectories, key milestones, and the competencies required at different career stages. Aligning individual goals with the military organization's needs offers a clear path to advancement and leadership roles, essential for motivating long-term service and maintaining a committed and capable officer corps. The process ensures officers know the growth opportunities, demystifying the steps needed to achieve professional aspirations. Consequently, by leveraging successful practices from across the military branches, many branches have established specific doctrines that lay out detailed career plans for their officers.

For example, Army officers can effectively use Department of the Army Pamphlet 600-3, *Commissioned Officer Professional Development and Career Management*, to map out their career and then share that plan with mentors, career managers, and commanders. In turn, career managers can provide them with information about educational development, key developmental assignments, and broadening assignments.<sup>25</sup> Similarly,

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24. Space Force Doctrine Publication 1-0, *Personnel* (USSF, September 2022), <https://www.starcom.spaceforce.mil/>; Air Force Doctrine Publication 1, *The Air Force* (Curtis E. LeMay Center for Doctrine Development and Education, March 2021), <https://www.doctrine.af.mil/>; and Department of the Air Force (DAF) Instruction 36-2686, *Personnel, Officer Development* (DAF, 9 February 2024).

25. Brandon Eans, "You Are Your Best Career Manager," *The Green Notebook*, 27 April 2023, <https://fromthegreennotebook.com/>; and Department of the Army (DA) Pamphlet 600-3, *Commissioned Officer Professional Development and Career Management* (Headquarters, DA, 1 February 2010), <https://career-satisfaction.army.mil/>.



the Air Force uses the Career Field Education and Training Plan.<sup>26</sup> This document shows how an officer can progress through the ranks by breaking down their career path into multiple efforts—experience, education and training, and leadership—forming a year-by-year and grade-by-grade framework. The plan provides an officer with predictability on assignments and education needed through their career.

Although much broader than the Air Force career plan, Marine Corps Order 1300.8, *Marine Corps Personnel Assignment Policy*, discusses the methodology behind career aspects such as time on station requirements, officer assignments and key billets, and specific considerations like dual military households and single parent considerations.<sup>27</sup> In terms of scope and purpose, it more closely resembles the Space Force's SDP-1 or the Air Force's AFDP-1, as it outlines foundational personnel assignment policies that inform career planning and force structure decisions. Each of these documents offers ways in which professional and personal assignments can be incorporated into the development of a Space Force career management doctrine.

Building on these foundational strategies, the implementation of a clear doctrine for career mapping can take several strategic steps. First, it is crucial to establish a comprehensive database that encompasses all available career paths, educational opportunities, key assignments, and broadening experiences relevant to each officer's specialty. The database should be accessible and easily navigable, enabling officers to visualize their potential career trajectory from commissioning to retirement.

Next, leveraging technology, an interactive career-mapping tool can be developed, allowing officers to input their current status, future aspirations, and preferences. The tool would use algorithms to suggest personalized career paths that align with the officer's goals and the military's needs, highlighting educational and training milestones. Users must regularly update the tool with new policies, opportunities, and feedback to keep it current and effective.

Lastly, experienced career managers and mentors should organize workshops and seminars to guide officers in effectively utilizing the career-mapping tool. These sessions would provide valuable insights into navigating career decisions, understanding the importance of each developmental assignment, and planning for long-term success. The Space Force can use the Army Career Tracker (ACT) as a frame of reference. The ACT, a leadership development interface, is a valuable resource that assists Soldiers in organizing their career paths, advancing in their fields, and developing skills throughout their military tenure.<sup>28</sup>

Integrating the ACT within the Space Force's career-mapping strategy offers a robust example of how personalized career pathways can enhance officer retention. By

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26. "Career Field Education and Training Plan," Air Force Learning Professionals, accessed 1 May 2024, <https://www.learningprofessionals.af.mil/>.

27. Marine Corps Order (MCO) 1300.8, Change 1, *Marine Corps Personnel Assignment Policy*, with Change 2, *Marine Corps Directives with Compliance of Executive Order 14168* (Department of the Navy, 7 March 2025). <https://www.marines.mil/>.

28. "Individual Development Plans/Army Career Tracker," US Army Garrison Daegu, accessed 1 May 2024, <https://home.army.mil/>.



adapting ACT, the Space Force can provide its officers with a clear, interactive visual representation of their career trajectory tailored to individual strengths and aspirations. This approach deepens job satisfaction by aligning career progression with personal goals and reinforces officers' commitment to the organization. Enhanced with advanced analytics, this system can dynamically adjust to the changing needs of the officers and the Space Force, ensuring continuous professional growth and adaptation. The utilization of ACT in this manner underlines the Space Force's dedication to fostering a workplace where officers feel genuinely valued and see tangible paths toward their professional and personal development.

One common feature of each established doctrine is their goal to retain the best qualified officers. As stated in Army guidance, these documents aim to encourage officers to manage their careers actively.<sup>29</sup> The Marine Corps aptly states that their policy strives to “improve combat readiness by controlling personnel turnover, increasing the stability of Marine families, and reducing PCS [permanent change of station] cost.”<sup>30</sup> While significantly bolstering professional growth and advancement among officers, providing a transparent and structured pathway for career progression, and enabling officers to acquire new skills and experiences, a career-mapping doctrine can help to ensure that the Space Force will have a more capable, adaptable, and experienced leadership pool ready to meet the challenges of modern defense.

## Assignment Selection

Next, assignment algorithms will actively match officers to positions that best align with their skills and professional and personal aspirations, enhancing job satisfaction and retention. This addresses the key challenges related to limited assignment choice and career control—both of which have been cited as primary concerns among Space Force officers—and also contribute to mitigating broader issues like workplace dissatisfaction that can impact retention.

There are two approaches to assignment selection: manual and algorithm. In the manual approach, officers receive a list of assignments from their career managers to prioritize based on their preferences; the outcome of this prioritized list is often referred to as the *dream sheet* or sometimes the *wish list*. After receiving the dream sheet, the career manager will align officers with an assignment based on factors such as system experience, skillset, time on station, and performance evaluation.

The Army replaced the manual method with the assignment marketplace in 2019, and the Air Force shortly followed in 2022. The significant issue inherent within the manual process was that it lacked transparency and control. Unlike a marketplace that lists all the assignments, officers cannot see a complete list of available assignments and have no personal control over how they align with them outside of what the career manager determines.<sup>31</sup> On

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29. See DA Pamphlet 600-3, *Officer Professional Development and Career Management* (DA, 19 January 2023), <https://www.armypubs.org/>; and Eans, “Career Manager.”

30. MCO 1300.8, 1-1.

31. “ATAP - Army Talent Alignment Process,” US Army Talent, 15 April 2024, <https://talent.army.mil/>.

the contrary, an assignment marketplace that uses algorithms employs a systematic approach to optimize officer placements by aligning their skills, experiences, and career and personal aspirations with the needs of the military.<sup>32</sup>

The algorithm-based marketplace streamlines the assignment process and enhances transparency and fairness, significantly reducing the influence of subjective biases and potential favoritism. The Army's Assignment Interactive Module 2.0 (AIM 2.0) program exemplifies how algorithms can facilitate a more democratic and efficient process, assigning officers based on mutual preferences and requiring all officers to rank all available positions. AIM 2.0's algorithm-based process ensures that Army officers preference all positions, including less desirable ones, reducing reliance on human intervention to fill these roles. This approach not only enhances transparency but also ensures that hard-to-fill positions are addressed equitably within the marketplace framework.

The AIM 2.0 platform enables Army officers and units to input their preferences, which are then algorithmically matched against available positions based on mutual matches.<sup>33</sup> In contrast, the DAF's MyVector platform relies on assignment teams to manually match candidates based on marketplace bids, which introduces challenges in balancing officer preferences and organizational needs.

The Space Force can learn from the limitations and advantages of these systems before implementation. While the systems inherently enhance transparency and control, they can become counterproductive when the marketplace closes. Once this occurs, career managers act as a human-in-the-loop mechanism as the algorithm aligns officers and jobs. Career managers can break mutual matches where the officer preferred the job as number one and the job preferred the officer as number one. Like the dream sheet alignment process, career managers can break matches for the same reasons. Such actions remove the transparency and control that the marketplace grants. When breaking a mutual match, the Army applies strict criteria to maintain transparency and control of the marketplace. In addition, the broken mutual match has to be justified and briefed at the O-6 and O-8 levels. By adopting a similar system, the Space Force can place its officers in roles where they can perform optimally and experience greater job satisfaction.

Incorporating detailed knowledge, skills, and behaviors, which are tailored competencies required for various roles within the force—referred to by the Air Force as knowledge, skills, abilities, and behaviors, and by the Space Force as simply competencies—can further enhance the effectiveness of these algorithms.<sup>34</sup> Including these in the algorithm can provide a clear framework that can be used to identify the best match between the officer's profile and the specific demands of a role. Utilizing a detailed

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32. US Army Talent Management Task Force, *Commander's Guide to ATAP 2020*, Talent Management Task Force, November 2020, <https://talent.army.mil/>.

33. "ATAP."

34. Air Force Handbook 36-2647, *Competency Modeling* (DAF, 8 February 2022), <https://static.e-publishing.af.mil/>.

catalog of competencies makes the matching process more precise and more synchronized with the organization's strategic goals. Integrating competencies into the Space Force assignment marketplace algorithm ensures that personnel fit their roles well and occupy positions that foster their professional growth and long-term career progression. Such strategic placement is crucial for maintaining the force's operational readiness and maximizing the utilization of talent within the ranks.

If adopted by the Space Force, the Command Assessment Program (CAP) initiated by the Army can provide an additional layer of data to enhance the assignment process. This program systematically evaluates officers for command roles using a variety of assessments, including psychological evaluations, leadership tasks, and simulations.<sup>35</sup> The insights gained from these assessments help refine the algorithms' decision-making process, ensuring that the most suitable candidates fill command positions. CAP improves unit leadership quality and contributes to higher morale and cohesion among the ranks, which leads to higher retention rates.<sup>36</sup>

By looking at the successes and integrations of similar technologies in branches like the Army and the Air Force, the Space Force can tailor these systems to meet its unique operational and strategic needs. The careful implementation of marketplace assignment algorithms—grounded in comprehensive evaluation and a clear understanding of knowledge, skills, and behaviors—promises to optimize assignment processes and transform the broader talent management strategy within the Space Force. This shift toward more data-driven, objective, and transparent assignment practices is critical as the branch evolves to meet new challenges and fulfill its mission in an increasingly complex security environment. Additionally, the Space Force's adoption of the CAP makes officers who desire command want to continue to serve.

## **Accelerated Promotion**

Finally, establishing a transparent, accelerated promotion system will foster a culture of fairness and recognition, which is critical for retaining highly skilled officers. Such a system ensures that promotions are awarded based on objective assessments of an officer's performance and potential rather than seniority or subjective criteria. This approach helps eliminate biases and enhances morale by demonstrating that hard work and competence are valued and rewarded. For example, when officers see that their efforts lead to tangible career advancements, their job satisfaction increases, positively impacting their commitment to remain with the force. Moreover, accelerated and order-of-merit-based promotions can address a core retention concern in the Space Force: the desire for increased career control and clarity in professional progression. By providing more predictable, performance-driven advancement timelines,

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35. "Command Assessment Program," US Army Human Resources Command, 4 March 2025, <https://talent.army.mil/>.

36. Army Directive 2024-14, *Reinstatement of Order of Merit List Sequencing for Officer Promotions* (DA, April 2024).

the service can reduce uncertainty and increase confidence in long-term career planning, both of which support sustained officer commitment.

Additionally, accelerated promotions encourage a competitive yet equitable environment where officers are motivated to develop their skills continuously. The order-of-merit-based promotion dynamic is essential for building a capable and responsive military force where each member feels invested in and responsible for the organization's success.

Under the broader category of accelerated promotion, two distinct concepts exist: below-the-zone promotions and order-of-merit-based promotions. While both are based on merit, below-the-zone promotions are to fast-track the careers of highly qualified officers who demonstrate exceptional potential for serving in senior ranks.<sup>37</sup> Historically, officers can be considered for promotion to the next grade one year before their original consideration year. Recently, the Army started allowing officers to be considered for promotion up to two years before their original consideration date.<sup>38</sup>

On the contrary, the Air Force removed below-the-zone consideration as an option due to the belief that overaccelerated timelines come at the expense of the development of that officer.<sup>39</sup> As such, the Air Force moved to order-of-merit-based promotion, which allows for the promotion of selected, high-performing officers in the first month after exhausting the last fiscal year's board list. Subsequently, the system promotes remaining officers by seniority, determined by their time in service and time in grade.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, the Army also conducts order-of-merit-based promotions in conjunction with below-the-zone promotions. To retain quality officers, the Space Force can utilize lessons from both services to promote quality while not disadvantaging the officer's professional development and experience.

A balanced accelerated promotion system can also work to prevent toxic leadership—one of the primary obstacles to officer retention—from taking hold. Beginning in 2018, career intelligence officer Colonel Jason Lamb highlighted critical issues in Air Force leadership and talent management through articles and online posts under the pseudonym of Colonel Ned Stark.<sup>41</sup> During a talent management discussion at the 2019 Air Force Association Air, Space, and Cyber Conference he noted that many fired wing commanders were below-the-zone selectees, and stated his belief that no

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37. "Promotion Timing, Zones, and Opportunity," RAND Project Air Force, accessed 1 May 2024, <https://www.rand.org/>.

38. Devon L. Suits, "Changes to Promotion Process Provide Army Officers More Career Flexibility," Joint Base San Antonio, 19 February 2020, <https://www.jbsa.mil/>.

39. Tobias Naegele, "Air Force to Dump Below-the-Zone Promotions," *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, 10 December 2019, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/>.

40. Kevin Rossillon, "In Search of an Air Force Meritocracy," *War on the Rocks*, 28 September 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/>.

41. Jason Lamb, "Commentary: Farewell to Ned Stark," *Air Force Times*, 21 July 2020, <https://www.airforcetimes.com/>.

“on-time” wing commanders were relieved.<sup>42</sup> He attributed this to the military accelerating commanders too quickly. Additionally, Lamb attested that the failure to have a mechanism to assess leadership potential before taking command dramatically contributed to toxic command climates.

If the Space Force were to adopt a program similar to the Army’s Command Assessment Program, it could enhance leadership selection by identifying and mitigating toxic leadership traits. While comprehensive, data on CAP’s effectiveness is still being gathered; yet, the intent is to ensure that only the most capable leaders advance to command positions. CAP’s approach—which includes peer and subordinate surveys; psychologist interviews; and a four-day, in-person evaluation encompassing physical fitness tests, cognitive and non-cognitive assessments, communication exercises, and 360-degree feedback from subordinates and peers—provides a holistic view of candidates’ leadership potential. CAP offers a gateway and balance between below-the-zone and order-of-merit-based promotions with command selection.

To delve deeper into the significance of accelerated promotion systems, it is essential to recognize how practices like below-the-zone promotions can significantly impact officer retention by accelerating career advancement for competent individuals. This method allows officers to be considered for promotion earlier than their peers based on their outstanding performance and potential, a powerful incentive for high achievers.<sup>43</sup> By implementing such an accelerated promotions system, the Space Force not only motivates its officers through visible recognition of their hard work but also strategically aligns these advancements with the operational needs and goals of the force. This approach ensures that talented officers are retained and not lost to competitive external opportunities, which is crucial for maintaining a robust military capability.

Furthermore, incorporating a comprehensive evaluation mechanism such as the Command Assessment Program can add a valuable layer to the promotion and command selection process by helping identify officers with demonstrated leadership potential and operational competence. These practices collectively foster a transparent, fair, and highly competitive environment that enhances job satisfaction among officers and solidifies their loyalty and commitment to the Space Force, thereby bolstering overall retention rates.

## **Conclusion**

The US Space Force is poised to set a new standard in military talent management by integrating a strategic framework that includes comprehensive career mapping, intelligent assignment algorithms, and order-of-merit-based promotion systems. Drawing from the successes and lessons learned from other branches of the US military, these initiatives offer a robust solution to the critical challenge of officer retention. Implementing such systems

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42. Stephen Losey, “‘Ned Stark’ Takes the Stage at AFA; a Remarkably Candid Discussion of Leadership Ensues,” *Air Force Times*, 19 August 2019, <https://www.airforcetimes.com/>.

43. Suits, “Changes.”

promises to enhance job satisfaction, provide clear pathways for career advancement, and foster a culture of fairness and meritocracy. By ensuring that promotions and assignments are transparently based on performance and potential, the Space Force can build a resilient and dedicated officer corps.

Moreover, as the newest branch of the US armed forces, the Space Force has a unique opportunity to innovate without the constraints of legacy systems, which can sometimes hinder change in more established organizations. Its flexibility enables the creation of a dynamic and responsive talent management system that attracts top-tier talent and retains them by aligning their career growth with the strategic needs of national defense. In doing so, the Space Force secures its future readiness and contributes to the broader goal of maintaining the United States' dominance in space. The practical realization of these talent management strategies will be critical to the Space Force's ability to navigate the complexities of modern military operations and to uphold its mission to protect US and allied interests in the final frontier. Æ

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