

The Current Officer Evaluation and Promotion System

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Abstract: The current Air Force officer evaluation and promotion system is only a "snapshot in time" rendered by an immediate supervisor. Based upon this, future advancement is impacted by subjective factors such as a supervisor's writing abilities, knowledge of the system, and personal likes and dislikes. As a result, many officers don't perceive a direct relationship between advancement and actual duty performance. Furthermore, other inherent factors in the current system, such as inflation of ratings, may not promote the most capable leaders. It is important officers understand the current Air Force officer evaluation and promotion system and have confidence in it, and it is essential the very best leaders are promoted to the senior ranks, ensuring our continued commitment to excellence.

More and more does the 'System' tend to promote to control, men who have shown themselves efficient cogs in the machine... There are few commanders in our higher commands. And even these, since their chins usually outweigh their foreheads, are themselves outweighed by the majority—of commanders who are essentially staff officers.

Captain Sir Basil Liddell Hart
Thoughts on War, 1944 (31: 344)

Introduction

How many times officer promotion board results were released has someone said, "I can't believe so-and-so made it," or "...can you believe so-and-so got passed over?" Although these cases might fall into the minority, there are times when the Air Force officer evaluation and promotion system seems to involve more than a little black magic, rather than being an objective evaluation of an officer's performance and promotion potential. Although this may not always be the case, the evaluation and promotion system could better meet the stated purposes in Air Force Pamphlet 36-2506, *You and Your Promotions—The Air Force Officer Promotion Program*; which are to promote sufficient numbers as vacancies occur; provide a reasonably stable, consistent and visible progression pattern; ensure the best qualified officers are selected; and provide accelerated promotion opportunities for officers with exceptional qualities (3:1).

Problems in the current system relate more on the latter rather than former two objectives. Promoting numbers based on vacancies is routinely met and although some officers might dispute the second purpose—a known expectation of progress needed for promotion—is met, most officers know what they need to do to remain competitive. The last two objectives; ensuring the best officers are promoted and exceptional officers are promoted ahead of their peers, may not be met in our current system however. It's said officers are promoted not on who they are but on what their records say—unfortunately, these two pictures of an Air Force officer

can be drastically different. Are there some recommended changes to the current system to better meet these two objectives? This study attempts to do just that in recommending improvements to the current officer evaluation and promotion system.

Concerns with the Air Force Evaluation and Promotion System

A survey by the author of Air Force officers detailed concerns in the current system and indicated problems degrading from its objectives. The following chart depicts these concerns highlighted by this survey:

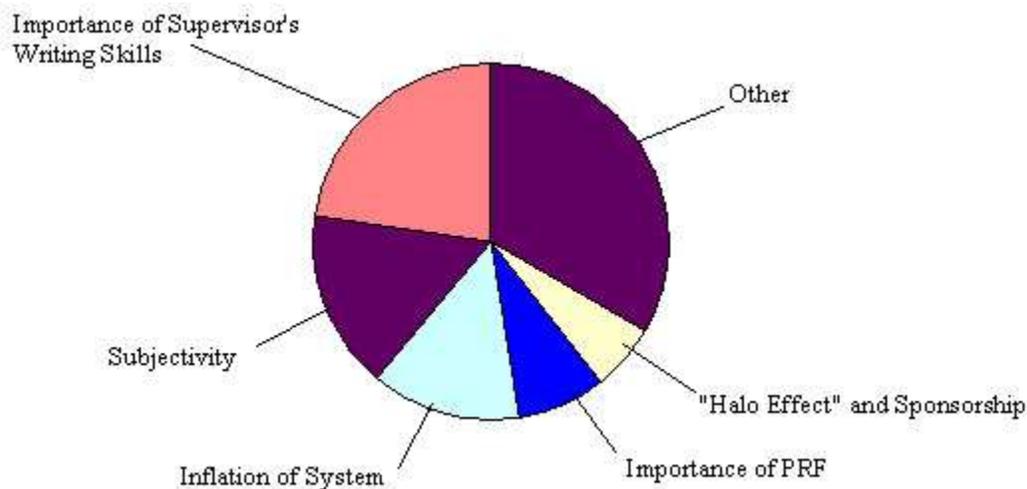


Figure 1. Primary Concerns with Current Air Force Officer Evaluation and Promotion System (32:NP, 33:NP)

Over 22 percent of respondents made the number one concern in the current system the importance of a supervisor's writing skills, which has a bigger impact than actual performance. Subjectivity and inflation of the overall system were listed next, accounting for 16 and 13 percent respectively, followed by perceived over-importance of the PRF raised by almost eight percent. Rounding out the top five issues was what many termed the "Halo Effect" and the corresponding perception that sponsorship was more significant than superior duty performance. Several respondents described the "Halo Effect" as officers with previous below-the-zone promotions or recognition by senior Air Force leaders, who continued to progress rapidly, sometimes in spite of their performance. Other responses are listed in descending order (32:NP, 33:NP):

- Competition across differing AFSCs creates uneven playing field
- Allocation of "Definitely Promote" (DP) recommendations
- Minimal second chance for Above-the-Primary Zone officers
- Outside factors appear to take precedence over duty performance
- Lack of time for promotion boards to review officer records
- Lack of realistic and objective feedback from promotion boards

Measurement Criteria for Evaluation Systems

To evaluate the current system's effectiveness, comparison against performance measurement theory should first be done. Criteria to assess an evaluation and promotion system are how relevant the system enforces desired behavior, how valid it predicts future performance, its consistency, and how it discriminates differences in personnel and their performance (16:210-214). These four criteria will be looked at separately in the following paragraphs.

In assessing relevancy, the survey asked respondents how often they had seen officers not deserving of advancement get promoted. The response was slightly below "some of the time" and indicated personnel occasionally receive promotions without demonstrating the appropriate traits and thus a lack of relevance (32:NP, 33:NP).

How valid does the Air Force predict future performance and desired leadership traits? In the survey, two responses indicated concerns with the system's validity. One question asked respondents how often people were promoted who did not deserve advancement. The response was slightly below a rating described as "some of the time" and indicated perceptions the system may not promote the best personnel as often as it should. Another question asked the opposing view of how often the system rewards the most deserving people for advancement. The response was slightly above the rating "some of the time" and again indicated perceptions that many passed-over personnel may be more deserving than others who were promoted (32:NP, 33:NP).

Is the Air Force system consistent across raters and situations? The top three responses to what respondents least liked about the current system, which accounted for over 50 percent of all answers, were inflation of OPRs, dependence upon supervisor writing skills, and system subjectivity. These responses indicated significant concerns with the system's consistency.

Discriminating power is the final criteria, and is the ability of rating scales to distinguish differences between personnel, affected by the system's objectivity and appraisal inflation. In the survey, respondents were asked how subjective the current system is on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being "very objective," 3 "well balanced" and 5 "very subjective." The average response was 3.97 and had the highest deviation from the average within the survey, showing the significant perception of subjectivity and a lack of discriminating power to distinguish between officers and their performance (32:NP, 33:NP).

In summarizing, the Air current system does not meet any of the necessary criteria defined in performance measurement theory. Minor concerns exist in the relevancy and validity of the system; however, major disconnects exist in the system's ability to meet the criteria of consistency and discriminating power. A majority of officers did not feel the evaluation and promotion system was consistent across raters and situations nor did it to distinguish between personnel due to subjectivity, dependence on writing skills and inflation. Overall, the current system partially met the former two criteria and failed to meet the latter two.

Performance Measurement Theory Tenets

The Air Force system also needs to be assessed against the two tenets of performance measurement theory, which are to ensure evaluations give supervisors the truest assessment of subordinates and to ensure integrity is maintained in the system. As discussed earlier, officers have a lack of faith in the accuracy of OPRs based upon concerns highlighted within the survey. Additionally, officers were asked to rate the accuracy of OPRs and PRFs, and they received a grade well below the rating of "accurate" (32:NP, 33:NP). Respondents also indicated the current system strayed from the other tenet, integrity. Responses to, "What do you like least about the Air Force promotion system?" included dependence upon a supervisor's writing skills, inflation, subjectivity, perceived favoritism towards certain career fields, and fairness in allocation of "DP" recommendations. These responses all indicated concerns with the system's integrity (32: NP, 33: NP).

Reasons for Divergence between the Air Force System and Accepted Theories

How can so many concerns in the current system exist? One explanation is inflation of OPRs. Today, virtually every officer 'walks on water,' making it almost impossible to detect differences between the real person, their actual duty performance, their true leadership abilities, and what their records indicate about these traits. Thus, in order to find variances in the potential of all these officers who "meet or exceed standards," OPR comments have become critical. Unfortunately, no formal training program exists for supervisors on the intricacies of these comments and instead, they must be learned through experience. As such, the importance of these comments—without formal training—creates a situation where an officer's advancement is not only dependent upon their own abilities; but also upon their supervisor's writing skills and knowledge of the intricacies within the OPR system.

An attempt to correct inflation has been incorporation of PRFs, which has also increased senior rater involvement in the process. However, problems with the PRF and its effects on the promotion system exist. In the survey, officers ranked the items most important to a promotion board and what they felt should be most important. The table below contains both the rankings and scores of each response.

Table 1. Rank Order of Importance of Record Items by Air Force Promotion Board

Rank Order of what Items Promotion Boards Consider to be the Most Important			Rank Order of what Items Officers Feel Promotion Boards Should Consider as Most Important		
<u>Item Description</u>	<u>Rank Order</u>	<u>Score</u>	<u>Item Description</u>	<u>Rank Order</u>	<u>Score</u>
PRF	1	470	OPR	1	462
OPR	2	541	PRF	2	606
Assignment Progression	3	637	Assignment Progression	3	610

Awards and Decorations	4	1075	Awards ad Decorations	4	1046
Duty Location	5	1206	Duty Location	5	1231

Sources: Combined survey results on the Air Force Officer Evaluation and Promotion system from paper survey at Minot AFB, 4 Sep 01 – 15 Feb 02; and electronic survey with personnel at Brooks AFB, Charleston AFB, Grand Forks AFB, Luke AFB, Minot AFB, Shaw AFB and Wright-Patterson AFB, 3 Feb 02 – 29 Mar 02.

Note:

Assignment progression refers to upward movement in responsibilities and duty location refers to assignment at less-than-desirable areas or homesteading.

Based upon these responses, many officers felt the PRF might be over-emphasized. Although officers recognized it as the most important document for promotion, most felt it should be secondary to the OPR. The scores also indicate many respondents felt assignment progression may even be more important to assess promotion than the PRF.

Recommended Changes to the Evaluation and Promotion System

In order to address these concerns in the Air Force evaluation and promotion system, the first and foremost question is: What should be changed? Due to the impact the OPR and PRF have on promotion, recommended actions will focus on these documents. Although other items have a bearing towards promotion, they are either not as subjective, or they are dependent on information contained in the OPR and PRF.

Recommended Changes to the Evaluation Process

Ultimately, many concerns with the OPR and evaluation process centered upon rating inflation. Other concerns, such as subjectivity and dependence on supervisors' writing skills, would likely be resolved by stopping inflation within the current process. In order to resolve inflation, OPRs must better discriminate between officers, and supervisors must use the entire spectrum of ratings instead of fearing the harm an accurate rating could pose to a subordinate's career.

The current OPR contains six performance factors, but only two ratings; either an officer "meets" or "does not meet standards." To better distinguish between officers, this two-tier system should be replaced with a five-tier rating system. A change in the rating scale itself will not reduce inflation within current OPRs however. In addition to a wider range of ratings, the next step is to hold supervisors and senior raters more accountable for the accuracy of these ratings while ensuring the system does not hurt a superior performer's career. To accomplish this, it is recommended the evaluated officer's average rating (determined by combining the numerical ratings and dividing by six) be included in the evaluation report and compared against both the supervisor's and senior rater's average rating against others in the same rank and competitive

category (i.e. active-duty line, medical corps, etc.). This comparison system is based upon the Navy's system, which has demonstrated good inflation control. Although ratings might differ based upon a superior's own personal rating system; the key factor is the comparison of an evaluated officer's average rating against the rater's average for other officers in the same grade and competitive category. The following table gives an example.

	1.0 Below Standards	2.0 Progressing	3.0 Meets Standards	4.0 Above Standards	5.0 Greatly Exceeds Standards
Supervisor			3	3	
Senior Rater		1	5		

Figure 2. Sample Rater and Senior Rater Ratings

The supervisor marked three 3.0 ratings and three 4.0 ratings, resulting in an overall average of 3.50 for the evaluated officer. By itself, this information is difficult to assess; however, when compared against the average this supervisor gave for other officers in the same grade and competitive category, let's say this is 3.15, it shows the evaluated officer was rated above his or her peers. Using the same example, the senior rater's average was 2.83. Again, this one rating makes it difficult to know how the officer is evaluated, but when compared against the senior rater's overall average rating for similar officers of 2.50, the rater and senior rater indicate this officer is above average. In order to easily see and compare these ratings, it is recommended the OPR include a section for both the raters' and senior raters' averages of both the evaluated officer and other officers in the same rank and competitive category. This rating system would assist in both helping to better delineate between evaluated officers and also to increase the objectivity of the system.

Another recommendation is to formalize training on rating and evaluations. Training would of course be needed with a new evaluation system, but this training should not stop once the new system is established. Instead, continued training would teach the proper methods of evaluating and rating officers and reinforce the unnecessary inflation of evaluation reports.

This recommended training should be conducted in several forums. First, this training should occur during the feedback sessions already held between an officer and supervisor. In addition to providing feedback on the evaluated officer's performance however, these sessions should also cover the evaluation system itself, in order to help better understand how the evaluation works and how past ratings compare with other officers. An additional feedback session should also be added after an OPR has been finalized and signed by the chain of command. The evaluated officer should be able to look at the final OPR, prior to incorporation into their records. This would enable truer feedback since they can immediately see the comparison between their ratings and those of their peers. It would also provide the evaluated officer an opportunity to ask

questions about their performance based upon the ratings they received, and it would also stimulate questions on the OPR process itself. Once this additional feedback session is conducted, the evaluated officer would sign in the verification block included on the revised OPR and it would be ready for incorporation into their records.

To minimize dependence on supervisors' writing skills and re-emphasize individual performance, it is recommended OPR comments be reduced to four lines only for the rater and senior rater each and only contain justification for extreme ratings (i.e. 1.0 or 5.0 ratings). This change in philosophy would require a great deal of attention to ensure these comments do not migrate back to the test of writing skills found in today's OPRs. Ensuring these comments are only brief justifications of significant problems or superior performance could be emphasized through continued training.

Another recommended change, which would help minimize comments and ease the calculation of superior's average ratings for similar officers is to accomplish all officer evaluation reports at the same time, as opposed to each officer having varying report dates. Although some exceptions would be necessary based upon cases with minimal supervision time, completing all OPRs at the same time every year would have several benefits. As briefly mentioned, it would de-emphasize OPR comments since supervisors would have several reports to complete and little time to 'word-smith' each and every report to the degree currently done. Also, by accomplishing all reports at once, it would ease in determining the overall average ratings for officers in similar grades and career fields. With all OPRs accomplished at the same time for all officers, personnel specialists and supervisors would have all the information readily available to determine raters' and senior raters' overall average ratings. Again, this change would require a major shift in philosophy, but as the importance of the comments diminishes, the emphasis should shift to the ratings themselves and increase objectivity of the system.

Recommended Changes to Promotion Recommendations

Officers appear to have a "love-hate" relationship with the PRF and promotion recommendation system. Not surprisingly, there was a direct correlation between an officer's satisfaction and how quickly they had progressed. BPZ Officers had significantly more faith and liked the system more than officers selected on-time for promotion (32:NP, 33:NP). This should not be much of a surprise; after all, it's difficult to complain about the system when it's 'the horse that brought you there.' Another positive aspect with the current promotion recommendation was the senior rater's involvement in the process. When asked, "What do you like best about the Air Force officer promotion system?," the third highest response was senior rater involvement (32:NP, 33:NP). On the opposite side of the spectrum however, when asked "What do you like least about the promotion system?," the fourth highest response was the PRF and the seventh highest response was the allocation of "DP" recommendations. The dislike many officers have with the current promotion recommendation system was also evident when almost eight percent of respondents asked to do away with PRFs and "Definitely Promote" recommendations (32:NP, 33:NP).

Based upon these concerns, it is recommended is to delete the current PRF and incorporate promotion recommendations into the OPR itself, as is done in both the Army and Navy. Senior

raters would still be involved in making promotion recommendations, however, these would be accomplished every time an officer receives an OPR with addition of the following section:

Promotion Recommendation	Significant Problems	Progressing	Promotable	Must Promote	Early Promote
INDIVIDUAL					
TOTAL OFFICERS					

Figure 3. Recommended Promotion Recommendation Section

With the concerns regarding allocation of "DP" recommendations, it is recommended no quotas be imposed; however, since this risks inflation, control over these recommendations could be done by comparison against other officers. For example, a completed section would look like this:

Promotion Recommendation	Significant Problems	Progressing	Promotable	Must Promote	Early Promote
INDIVIDUAL				X	
TOTAL OFFICERS		1	3	5	1

Figure 4. Example of Completed Promotion Recommendation Section

In this example, the senior rater recommended the individual is a "must promote" with four other officers in this same category, resulting in a total number of five. The blocks also show the number rated in the other categories, so that promotion boards would have some basis of comparison for each officer.

This method would alleviate many problems inherent with the current PRF. "DP" allocation should no longer be an issue and although the potential for inflation of these promotion recommendations exists, showing all recommendations would control it. This change would also stop the current practice by officers to base future assignments off the opportunity to receive a "DP," rather than building upon their ability and experience to benefit the larger needs of the Air Force. Lastly, since promotion recommendations are contained on the OPR, past recommendations would be available for review.

Other Recommended Changes

Supply (21SX)	7	14
Transportation (21TX)	17	16
Mission Support	Total: 294	Total: 271
Support Commander (30CX)	9	0
Security Forces (31PX)	31	32
Civil Engineering (32EX)	28	32
Communications/Computer/Visual Information (33SX)	109	121
MWR/Services (34MX)	15	6
Band/Public Affairs (36B/PX)	14	7
Mission Support/Personnel (36M/PX)	51	46
Manpower (38MX)	4	4
AFOSI (71SX)	14	12
Executive Officer Above Wing Level (97EX)	19	11
Acquisition	Total: 250	Total: 183
Scientist (61SX)	19	29
Developmental Engineer (62EX)	67	60
Acquisition Manager (63AX)	104	35
Contracting (64PX)	24	33
Finance (65FX)	36	26

Source: Air Force Personnel Center Website, "*Demographics of Air Force Specialty Code Field (3 characters) and Commissioned Years of Service,*" 28 Feb 02.

This ensures competition between officers with similar duties and job progression and provides the added benefit for promotion boards to review fewer records. For example, a recent Major's promotion board had 1,909 eligible IPZ officers competing for promotion (5:NP); but with five competitive categories in this same year group the number is reduced by more than half to 958 (4:NP). This reduced number of eligible officers would enable promotion boards more time to review officer's records.

Of course, a disadvantage in creating more competitive categories would be the increase in the number of promotion boards needed. To ensure these additional promotion boards do not put undue strain on the limited number of officers authorized to sit on these boards, consideration to widen the ranks of officers eligible as board members should be considered. For example, Lieutenant Colonels in certain selective duty positions (for example; command billets, Air Staff or Joint Staff) could be considered as board members for personnel considered for promotion to Major. Additionally, it should be noted that although both the Army and Navy use several more competitive categories to limit the number of active-duty line officers being considered for promotion, both services still have all line career fields consider officers in each of the

competitive categories to ensure consistent standards for promotion. This should also be maintained within the Air Force, even with this adoption of five competitive categories.

Summary of Recommendations

This study recommended changes to the evaluation and promotion system within the officer evaluation system, the promotion recommendation process, and segregation of line officer's competitive categories during promotion boards, as summarized below.

Changes to the Officer Evaluation System

Changes to the evaluation process would require a revised OPR, as shown below:

Figure 5. Revised Officer Performance Report

Additional changes to the evaluation system include:

- Implementing a five-tier rating system for evaluated officers
- Including rater's and senior rater's average number rating for other officers
- Including a signature block for the evaluated officer
- Reducing size and scope of comments section
- Make all Air Force officer's OPRs due for completion at the same time

Changes to the Promotion Recommendation System

In order to alleviate concerns based on the number and allocation of "DP" recommendations, this study recommended the PRF be discontinued and instead include an officer's promotion

recommendation on the evaluation form itself. Additionally, this promotion recommendation would be made during every reporting period and would show the total number of officers the senior rater placed in each recommended promotion category.

Changes to the Air Force Competitive Categories for Promotion

The last area included in this study's recommendations would be to break-out the active-duty line officers into five competitive categories and consider opening up promotion boards to more junior officers in specified duty positions, in order to offset the increased number of promotion boards.

Conclusion

The current Air Force officer evaluation and promotion system works fairly well; however, there are some problems that cannot be overlooked. Many officers perceive the most significant to include subjectivity of evaluations and promotion recommendations and inflation of evaluation ratings; which when combined result in some significant issues within the system. These issues could be resolved through incorporation of a five-tier rating system, comparison of a supervisor's and senior rater's number rating of an evaluated officer against their peers, minimizing the impact of the comments and combining the promotion recommendation into the evaluation form itself; all of which would help to improve our current system. These changes would in turn enable our evaluation and promotion system to better meet its objectives to identify the best personnel and leaders for advancement into the senior ranks of our military.

Identifying Air Force officers for advancement is one of the most important things supervisors and commanders do, but unfortunately today's system may not always assist them in ensuring the best officers are always promoted. It's been said within our legal system, that it's better one-hundred guilty should go free, rather than allow one innocent to be punished. A similar analogy should be considered for our system to ensure it promotes the very best personnel without surprises.

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