What Do People Want from Work?

The Simple Question that Can Transform Unit Engagement and Retention

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Creating an organization that can consistently attract, engage, and retain talented people is difficult. It is especially challenging in industries where competition for talent is intense. Likewise, the transitory nature of careers is forcing organizations to pay special attention to how they discretely manage employees. Individuals have redefined their expectations and relationships with employers. Today's employees view work differently and are progressively reevaluating and prioritizing work attributes such as flexibility, development, and enjoyment. These changes can be problematic for traditional human resource departments and organizational leaders. Developing effective cross-organizational programs, policies, processes, and culture that can satisfy employees while staying competitive is difficult for even the best teams. Organizations realize they must adapt and shift their focus toward employee-centric approaches. In short, they are asking and solving a simple question: What do people want from work?

On its surface, this seems like an easy question for any organization to answer and maybe even too simplistic to base a complex human resources strategy. However, organizations are repeatedly struggling to get this right. Many consistently miss recruiting,

productivity, or retention goals. Even those which are succeeding have difficulty antici-pating external and internal changes that can quickly drain talent. These are not easy tasks, but organizations that can focus on this simple question have the best chance to successfully attract, engage, and retain talent.

This question is especially important for military organizations. Answering and focusing on what people want from work is not only necessary but also requires an organization-wide effort. Although most personnel solutions are conceived and executed at the higher-headquarter level, commanders and supervisors play an incredibly important role, especially with unit productivity and retention. Yet, they may not know where to focus their limited time and resources. This article's individual-centric framework (ICF) pro-vides organizations, commanders, and supervisors that focus by considering the question: "What do people want from work?" The ICF uses five distinct categories to answer this question—compensation, enjoyment, interest (and balance), career opportunity, and recognition.

Why Should the Military Use an Individually-Focused Talent Management Framework?

During the past decades, numerous social and business changes reshaped the relation-ships, expectations, and social contracts between employees and companies including those within the military. These changes include improved productivity, declining union influence, the flattening of corporate structures, automation, a reliance on technology and information operations, lean operations, consolidations, and shifting from manufacturing to services and technology. Individual work experiences also changed and could involve telecommuting, flexible work schedules, extensive use of electronic communications and scheduling, and improved benefits transportability. Maybe more consequential, attitudes toward work and happiness have shifted. Research has shown "emotions matter a lot at work. Happiness is important. To be fully engaged, people need vision, meaning, purpose, and resonant relationships."[1] It turns out individuals are increasingly expecting more from work and are willing to explore other employment options when expectations are not met.

Today's dynamic, competitive labor markets are putting pressure on existing human resource programs and forcing them to be more flexible, transparent, creative, and re-sponsive. These changes also apply to the military in unique ways as well. The all-volunteer force model requires a consistent flow of high-quality recruits and sufficient numbers deciding to make the military a career. The all-volunteer force is not only expensive but also sensitive to societal changes and perceptions about military service. Today, there are numerous factors that should cause the military to rethink how it recruits, engages, and retains personnel. These factors include:

- Recruiting and retaining talent is difficult when "the economy is robust, civilian unemployment is low, and young people find it easy to secure civilian employment."[2] In fact, there is a strong correlation between the unemployment rate and number of

high-quality recruits. As unemployment rates remain low or the military expands, recruiting (and retention) will become more difficult.[3]

- There are fewer Americans qualified and available to serve. According to an Office of the Under Secretary of Defense Accession Policy study, "only 17 percent of 17- to 24-year-olds are qualified and available (for example, not enrolled in college) to enlist without a waiver."[4] This number drops to 13 percent if those scoring in the bottom 30th percentile on the Armed Forces Qualification Test are excluded, which is a common practice of the military services.

- The number of recruits joining the military who have a close relative in the military is high. In fact, "between 77 and 86 percent of new military recruits have a family member who has served in the military, and approximately one-third have a parent who has served."[5] Although it is not surprising that children follow in the parents' professional footsteps, this trend highlights that the all-volunteer military force is less diverse and is appealing to a very small subset of the population.

- The number of entry-level positions across industries is shrinking. According to *Axios*, "Despite a growing worker shortage, American companies today are only rarely prepared to spend the money to train their own workers. Instead, they want fully formed workers to show up at the door."[6] If this trend continues, it could benefit military recruiting. However, the demand for highly-trained and highly-educated military members will remain high. Those joining the military as a path to future, nonmilitary careers may be less likely to pursue a military career.

- Technologies such as artificial intelligence, automation, quantum computing, big-data analytics, and smart manufacturing will change the nature of work including within the military services. Future Airmen will be aided by these technologies and will move up the "value chain" into analysis, diagnostics, information operations, and problem solving. Some existing jobs will be eliminated, but most that remain will require individuals who possess advanced skills, training, and experiences. These super-enabled technicians will be in high demand by the military and private sectors alike.

- It is increasingly expensive to train highly-skilled professionals. "The cost to train a fifth-generation fighter pilot to prepare him or her for their first operational squadron is approximately $11 million."[7] The cost to prepare a cyber-security professional could exceed $250,000.[8] Equally important, it takes years to fully train and certify these professionals. The investment of both time and money in these Airmen is enormous.

- The military services do not typically access personnel laterally from outside organizations. Although there are career fields that access highly specialized professions and fast-track new recruits to higher rank (doctors, lawyers, and dentists), this is a very small percentage of the total force.

- Although the Air Force is expanding, it has contracted in the past two decades, while the demand for USAF capabilities remains high. For example, since Operation Desert Storm, the number of Air Force personnel and aircraft have decreased by 30 percent and 37 percent, respectively.[9] This combination of high demand and low supply is overloading units and individuals.

- Specific career fields are either not meeting retention goals and/or are short-staffed.

- Benefits and retention incentives such as the 20-year retirement plan have changed. Although it is too early to conclude how these changes will impact recruiting or retention, existing retention models and goals may be affected.

- Retention models require accurate predictions; however, the science of prediction is still imperfect. This problem is further complicated when existing systems do not have sufficient excess capacity and/or fluidity to offset earlier inaccurate predictions. This is even more problematic for the military's up-or-out personnel model.

- The world is too dynamic and military weapon systems too complex to rely on a surge of new recruits or draftees. The Air Force's dependence on advance technology requires a sufficiently sized, highly skilled, and experienced force.

Singularly, each of these trends poses a challenge, but collectively, they require the military to reexamine how it approaches the recruitment, engagement, and retention for all Airmen—enlisted, officers, and civilians—individually. Focusing on "individualism" is a departure for military organizations that value self-sacrifice, teamwork, dedication, and selflessness. These attributes are absolutely necessary to accomplish the mission, and for unit cohesion and esprit de corps. However, when it comes to recruitment, engagement, and retention, individuals and families are making decisions based on their own needs, goals, and aspirations. The ICF acknowledges people are self-reflective, internally and externally motivated, and seek to optimize opportunities. This framework provides answers to address what individuals want from work as a mechanism to specifically improve recruitment, engagement, and retention.

What do People Want from Work?

Research and exit surveys regularly confirm individuals join organizations, stay productive, and ultimately decide to stay or leave for very similar reasons. According to the article, "Why People Really Quit Their Jobs," Facebook employees "left when their job wasn't enjoyable, their strengths weren't being used, and they weren't growing in their careers."[10] In their book *What Millennials Want from Work: How to Maximize Engagement in Today's Workforce*, Jennifer J. Deal and Alec Levenson offer a compelling model focused on people, work, and opportunities.[11] In Annie McKee's article, "Being Happy at Work Matters," she highlights, "To be fully engaged, people need vision, meaning, purpose, and resonant relationships."[12] In his article, "Keeping the Talent: Understanding the Needs of Engineers and Scientists in the Defense Acquisition Workforce," Alan K. Jenkins stresses

"pay and benefits, growth and development opportunities, relevance or meaning of job, supervision, feelings toward coworkers, job security, and workplace satisfaction" as essential to workplace satisfaction and organizational commitment.[13] Even Air Force surveys provide lists of similar reasons ranging from interesting, but balanced work, assignment flexibility, meaning and purpose, development opportunities, and enjoyment.

The ICF is a consolidation of the most common individual wants or attributes. They are organized into five categories—compensation, enjoyment, interesting (and balanced), career opportunity, and recognition. Individuals generally want each of these. The degree to which one prioritizes individual attributes varies, but ultimately, most employees want a mix of these attributes. The consideration of these attributes applies when individuals consider joining, staying engaged, or remaining with an organization. Although it could be argued engagement also affects retention and therefore they are not mutually exclusive. However, the use of the ICF provides organizations a mechanism to improve productivity and engagement independent of retention decisions.

Table. Individual-centric framework: what people want from work

Enjoyment Friends and Mentors Team Supervisor
Interesting (but balanced) Meaning and purpose Adventure and challenge Innovative and creative Goal-oriented Autonomy and empowerment Flexibility and predictability
Compensation Pay Benefits Retirement
Career Opportunity Feedback and communication Development Training and education "Experience" Promotion, upgrade and leadership
Recognition Want to be valued (formally and informally) Supervisor's appreciation Support network to value their work

Compensation

Although this framework in the table lists only three compensation categories—pay, benefits, and retirement—these categories can also include overtime, bonuses, commissions, allowances, insurance, and paid vacation. Regardless of what compensation includes, it remains important. According to *What People Want from Work: Motivation*,

"Money still provides the basic motivation for employees."[14] In fact, "compensation is important to 99 percent of millennials and very or extremely important to 81 percent of them."[15] This is not unique to younger employees. Compensation is still at the top of most employee priority lists regardless of age, but it may be prioritized differently.

It is important to point out that compensation is only one dimension of what people want from work. In fact, "almost two-thirds (64 percent) of millennials said they would rather make $40,000 a year at a job they love than $100,000 a year at a job they think is boring."[16] But, even in this example, they did not say $0 a year, but rather quantified their premium for interesting work. It is important to make this distinction because compensation represents more than paying bills, providing disposable income, or creating savings. Organizations use compensation to entice potential employees, measure performance, shape behavior, provide a comparable yardstick, and retain talent; and employees still value compensation and use it to make comparison judgements about other factors.

The military is no different. Service members value compensation, too. Since implementing the all-volunteer force in 1973, improving military pay and benefits was important to entice and retain high-quality recruits. The 1970 Gates Commission recognized "adequate pay alone will not attract, but inadequate pay can certainly deter."[17] Compensation is also one of the most utilized levers to influence recruiting and retention goals. The military offers new recruits college tuition, medical insurance, paid vacation, and housing to entice them to join the military. Bonuses and monthly incentive pay are utilized to retain members of critical career fields. Spouse tuition, expanded GI Bill, and commissary access are provided to support and retain families. Pay and benefit programs are implemented to shape decisions, behavior, and offset bills. Compensation may not be the most important or influential factor when individuals consider military service or remain in uniform, but it is still an important variable nonetheless, especially when comparing employment options.

Enjoyment

Individuals want to come to work and enjoy the experience with coworkers, mentors, teammates, or supervisors. These relationships are incredibly influential on enjoyment, productivity, and desire to stay with an organization. In fact, "we know that people join an organization and leave a boss. A dissonant relationship with one's boss is downright painful. So, too, are bad relationships with colleagues. Leaders, managers, and employees have all (said) that close, trusting and supportive relationships are hugely important to their state of mind—and their willingness to contribute to a team."[18] A bad work environment may be offset by other work attributes but certainly at a cost.

Interesting (and Balanced)

Generally, people want to belong to organizations that do meaningful and purposeful work. They want work that is challenging, innovative, goal oriented, and an adventure. "People want to feel as if their work matters, and that their contributions help achieve

something really important. They want to know that they—and their organization—are doing something big that matters to other people."[19] More and more organizations are turning to "purpose" to motivate and fulfill employee desires to belong to meaningful organizations. Some companies offer volunteer opportunities, direct profits toward charities, and even ensure employees understand the broader, positive impact their products and services provide to the world community.

Although the separation between work and life have blurred as technology connects people to work, people still want scheduling control and predictability. Having a constant connection to work is becoming a standard. Many people see a positive side of continuous connectivity, but they also want the flexibility that should come with this technology. In fact, "Millennials expect flexibility. It is critical to them because of the way they live their lives, because they are independent, and because it is logical."[20] However, like many attributes, this phenomenon is not unique to only one generation.

It is also important to note that balancing life and work requires sufficient resources, competent leadership, and accommodating policies. Organizations that lack these crucial ingredients often rely on individuals to make up the shortfalls. Work/life balance can be affected as employees put in longer hours, become overloaded, work during weekends, or delay vacations. Military personnel and their families also have additional unique challenges, including long deployments, a lack of predictability, stressful environments, and the possibility of physical injury. Most people will tolerate an imbalance—but only to a point.

Career Opportunity

Having career opportunities are important to individuals regardless of their experience and age. According to Deal and Levenson, Millennials "place a high priority on development. About three-quarters say they see their position as an opportunity to develop technical expertise, develop leadership potential, and demonstrate their abilities as a leader."[21] Baby Boomers are exploring different career opportunities. They value giving back. "Many (Baby Boomer's second) careers tend to be in education, nonprofits, healthcare and faith-based organizations as this generation seeks to 'self-actualize and make a meaningful contribution in their life.'"[22] Regardless of priorities and aspirations, belonging to organizations that provide career opportunities remains essential. Development is one of the most important reasons employees join specific companies, while the lack of development is a reason many leave a company.

Yet, career opportunities must also include training and education programs, feedback, and open communications. It is important to recognize that "people want to be able to see the future and know how they fit in. People learn and change when they have a personal vision that is linked to an organizational vision."[23] The best organizations link career opportunities to development programs, promotions, upgrades, and leadership positions—and are open and transparent about their processes. Career opportunities and development must also align with enjoyment, interests, compensation, and recognition programs. Get-

ting these attributes and processes aligned correctly is especially important in today's work environment.

Military members share similar expectations and goals. Promotions offer additional responsibility, pay increases, improved chances for future advancement, validation for hard work, and a measuring stick among peers. Assignment actions provide leadership opportunities, experience, adventure, but also unpredictability and stress. Professional development provides certifications, experience, and opens doors for greater opportunities.

Recognition

People want to be formally and informally recognized for their hard work. They want their supervisor to appreciate their efforts and give them time and attention. Individuals want responsibilities and autonomy, but they also need recognition and feedback. The author of *Business Innovation for Dummies*, Alexander Hiam, may say it best: "Responsibility is about giving them a chance to make a difference, but attention is the human dimension of managing."[24]

Recognition can also serve as a measuring stick and an informal feedback loop, but it needs to connect to broader company incentives. In their book *The Human Capital Edge,* Bruce N. Pfau and Ira T. Kay point out: "People want recognition for their individual performance with pay tied to their performance."[25] Although in general, the military cannot tie performance directly to pay, feedback should reflect in statements on performance reports and signal a supervisee's ability to handle greater levels of responsibilities.

If the Attributes are Simple and Obvious, Why is This So Hard to Implement?

It is not easy crafting the right policies, procedures, and programs that satisfy every employee's wants. Although there are many reasons why it is difficult, each organization has their own distinct challenges. Some of these challenges, relevant to both the private sector and the military, are summarized below.

Organizations have another purpose. Organizations exist for purposes beyond satisfying employee wants. They create shareholder wealth, provide needed services, educate students, or defend the country. Individuals are central to achieving these objectives, but many organizations have historically viewed employees as "inputs" and "requirements."

Organizations have competing priorities. Often organizations must place their priorities ahead of individual wants to accomplish their missions. Supervisors may ask an individual to work on weekends or put in longer hours to meet an impending deadline. Typically, organizational priorities outweigh individual wants, which employees understand. However, they may vote with their feet if the balance becomes lopsided for too long.

Organizational personnel requirements can change quickly. Most organizations compete in environments that are complex and change rapidly. This puts extra pressure on organizations to find experienced talent and keep their employees relevant. If they have the flexibility, organizations can hire individuals directly to fill voids or offer training

to redirect existing employees to an emerging career field. However, these changes may not align with existing employee expectations.

Numerous stakeholders with degrees of influence. All organizations have relationships with external and internal agents. Organizations with diffused relationships must work with these agents who have their own equities, interests, and priorities. Military organizations also have numerous relationships with groups with different levels of influence, authority, and priorities including Congress, contractors, combatant commands, interagency partners, foreign militaries, and sister services.

Lack of authority. Hierarchical institutions retain and delegate authority throughout their organizational structure differently. Although unit-level leaders have direct interaction with their personnel, they may lack specific authorities to address individual wants such as pay, benefits, and promotion selection.

Supervisors are overloaded. It takes time and energy to lead and support individuals. Supervisors can also experience too much work, which leads to little time for feedback, recognition, or time to focus on individuals. Following a framework that is focused on individual wants requires supervisors who have sufficient resources including time.

Individuals prioritize wants differently and change them over time. Individual demands, attitudes, and priorities toward specific attributes change from person to person, as well as throughout an individual's employment. For example, an employee with significant college debt may value compensation, loan forgiveness programs, and rapid career development until they repay their loans. It is not to say individuals with no student loans do not value similar benefits, but they may prioritize travel, adventure, and working with likeminded teammates more.

Difficult to anticipate change. Prediction is tough business, but it is even harder to implement precrisis steps when there is no crisis. This is especially true for government organizations that use a complex budgeting process. It is challenging to put retention strategies in place in advance of an anticipated exodus, while retention is good. This situation can place organizations in reaction mode. Fairness drives policy. Employees demand fair and transparent policies but also want unique consideration of their own individual circumstances. This paradox is especially challenging for large organizations where important processes are centralized. Fairness drives the creation of universal standards and policies.

Processes must work for thousands of people. Beyond fairness, large organizations' policies, programs, and processes must work on an industrial scale. To manage, organizations often use *requirements* or ridged standardized processes to ensure consequential personnel actions are manageable including promotions, assignments, and development. As a result, organizational requirements and processes can overshadow individual wants.

There is a supply and demand problem for important development positions. The quality of today's military personnel is remarkable. Often, there are too many qualified candidates to fill coveted positions such as squadron superintendent or commander. Those not selected still have meaningful opportunities available. However, they may re-

prioritize their willingness to accept other positions, especially if they believe future promotion opportunities are affected.

People are not open or honest with supervisors about their current and future aspirations. It is tough to share personal aspirations if an individual believes their organization or supervisor will react negatively. However, supervisors must have open and honest feedback with supervisees, because individuals will evaluate their non-Air Force options with or without their supervisors and may not have the benefit of understanding their Air Force opportunities.

Culture plays an important role. Culture includes the values, priorities, and behaviors emphasized by and within an organization. The ICF describes the basic cultural building blocks that are valued, prioritized and emphasized. No organization is the same because the mix of attributes is different. Some place a higher value on teamwork, while others might embrace individual empowerment. Regardless of the mix, it is possible to see an organization's culture using the ICF. Culture is often referenced as an organization's most important attribute, while changing an organization with a strong culture is difficult. This is especially true for the military. Although the military is certainly adaptive, it can take time to change culturally-influenced processes. For example, the military recruits, develops, and promotes leaders within the existing military force structure. Changing this paradigm goes against years of traditional norms. This is not to say change will not happen, but rather it takes time to change large institutions. The importance of culture cannot be overemphasized.

These are just a few reasons why it is difficult to use the ICF. Although each of these issues are complicated or labor intensive, this does not mean change will not occur. In fact, the Air Force is undertaking unprecedented steps to support Airmen and their families. However, to truly improve recruitment, engagement, and retention, the entire organization must take an active role, including at the unit level. Commanders and supervisors have tremendous influence to improve productivity, engagement, and retention. Yet, some may find it difficult to see how and where they can make a difference. The ICF provides commanders and supervisors with a useful guide to focus their limited time and energy to improve unit engagement and retention.

How Can This Framework Help Commanders and Supervisors Improve Engagement and Retention?

Today, senior Air Force leaders are tackling numerous individual concerns, most of which are found in the ICF (see the table). They are pushing for better work/life balance, eliminating barriers, and rethinking how to support individual goals. For example, a task force is seeking root causes for low pilot retention, which led to initiatives such as adding more "white space" to personal schedules, increasing time at home station, adjusting exercise schedules, reducing deployments to 179 days, limiting year-long fighter pilot deployments to those in command or Joint Staff assignment, increasing aviation bonuses and aviation incentive pay, and establishing a second assignment in-place program.[26] Senior

leaders are also exploring how to give "female pilots time off when they have children, give them access to the base, have them maintain proficiency through simulators, and roll back their year group so they remain competitive for assignments and promotions."[27] Each of these initiatives address specific ICF attributes such as development, flexibility, and recognition.

Senior leaders are also championing cross-enterprise initiatives such as revitalizing squadrons, changing course 14 and 15 requirements, cutting assignment cycles from three to two, opening remotely piloted aircraft training to enlisted members, reducing Air Force instructions, delegating waiver authorities, changing the officer in-residence professional military education (PME) declination process, increasing Stripes for Exceptional Performers promotion opportunities, eliminating additional duties, changing computer-based training requirements, modifying squadron commander training, assigning more support personnel to units, and considering direct accessions programs for cyber security experts. They are also supporting military spouses and their families by pushing local governments to accept reciprocity for out-of-state certifications, improving quality of schools near bases, and supporting spouse employment. Using the ICF as a guide, it is easier to explain why each of these initiatives are being implemented or discussed—they address individual and family wants and concerns. More succinctly, senior commanders are reducing barriers and improving support to unit leaders. But what can commanders and supervisors do if most of these efforts are above their unit level?

For hierarchical organizations like the Air Force, it is understandable that large-scale changes occur above the unit. However, commanders, supervisors, and peers still play a critical role in improving engagement and retention—especially within their unit. They have the most direct impact on Airmen, and they know them best. The following are some examples of how commanders and supervisors can improve unit engagement and retention by using the ICF.

Do Airmen enjoy work? Research shows that people want to enjoy their work, and those who loathe their boss, peers, or team will probably leave. The adage, "Supervisors need to know their Airmen," remains important. This includes the need to find out if their Airmen enjoy work. If they do not, why? Regardless of the reasons, supervisors must be cognizant of their Airmen's connection and interest with work. The ICF illustrates enjoyment is important to individuals. Hence, commanders and supervisors need to consider Airmen enjoyment during feedback sessions, while reviewing unit climate assessments, and when constructing unit policies, programs, and processes.

Empower Airmen to improve unit processes, policies, and programs. In his article, "*Top Ten Reasons Why Large Companies Fail to Keep Their Best Talent*," Eric Jackson writes, "When top talent is complaining (about big company bureaucracy), it's usually a sign that they didn't feel as if they had a say in these rules."[28] Using the ICF, commanders and supervisors can take an active role to reverse these frustrations and empower unit personnel to change unit policies, programs, and processes, or better yet, make recommendations on how to change policies, programs, and processes outside the unit. Commanders can ask specific, meaningful questions such as, "If you could change two things that would make

work more balanced, what would they be?" The ICF provides a mechanism to frame and understand Airmen concerns so root causes can be uncovered and identified for change. Commanders and supervisors can then improve engagement by empowering their personnel to tackle these specific suggestions.

Set the example, and do not fake it. This is not a new insight, but it remains valuable. Commanders and supervisors are always being watched by those they lead. If commanders dislike their jobs, or they do not have good life/work balance, those considering a similar career track will notice. Commanders and supervisors can use the ICF to make a self-assessment of their own engagement and satisfaction with work. If their life is off-balanced, they should discuss this with their supervisors, peers, family, and friends. Commanders and supervisors are asked to do a lot, but forcing them to put in long hours and getting out of work/life balance will affect their performance and may dampen their replacement's excitement to replace them in the future as well.

Conduct meaningful unit self-assessments. The ICF offers a framework for unit self-assessments. For example, unit leadership can evaluate specific attributes such as how much unit Airmen are working, if they are working on the weekends, or lack predictability. It is essential to understand why individuals are putting in the long hours and have unpredictable schedules, especially if the root cause is within a commander's span of control. If the lack of resources is the root cause, supervisors and commanders can identify the shortfalls and seek relief. The ICF is useful to uncover blind spots, resource shortfalls, and process gaps that affect unit engagement and retention.

Fight for and give feedback. Constant, relentless feedback is important. To truly improve engagement and retention, commanders and supervisors need to know their personnel's goals and expectations. This engagement must happen on a consistent basis because people's priorities change over time. Those considering outside employment will make comparison judgments about their future employment, including their own prospects within the Air Force. Feedback sessions must be more than the Airman Comprehensive Assessment's minimums. Supervisors and leaders must consider "what people want from work" during their feedback sessions and map out a plan. They should also ensure their supervisees understand existing compensation and benefits, development expectations, and career options. Airmen want to develop and know they are on the right track. If they are off-track, then they need to know and have a path to improve. The ICF places an emphasis on a better understanding an individual's goals, expectations, and aspirations because today's employees expect it.

Establish recognition that matters. One important aspect to the ICF, is that each attribute interacts and supports other attributes. This aspect goes for the commander's and supervisor's priorities as well. If commanders value those who fly safely, use good crew resource management practices, and make appropriate judgments, they should reward and incentivize this behavior. If awards are not what interest certain Airmen, but rather, they would like to lead an innovation project or attend a unique training class, these might be better incentives and forms of recognition. Regardless of the forum or

format, everyone wants recognition for their work. The best informal and formal recognition programs reward the behavior and decisions valued by individuals and unit leadership.

Address individual wants during commander calls. Creating engaging commander's call presentations can be challenging, but the ICF provides a good starting point. Before addressing any audience, it is useful to review each ICF attribute to identify items of interest. Commanders can select topics that address new compensation programs, development opportunities, meaningful recognition, and impacts from the unit's work.

Lead innovation through experimentation and pilot projects. Individuals can become frustrated with organizations and supervisors who are risk adverse or unwilling to try something different. Innovation, creativity, empowerment, autonomy, and flexibility are important to Airmen. Experimentation and pilot projects are useful approaches to create an innovative environment while also providing unit leadership a measured, goal-oriented process. Some organizations are fortunate to have visionaries and critical thinkers who can identify problems. Others need commanders to play this role. Regardless of who initiates a project, commanders must empower and support Airmen, knock down barriers, and flight following progress.

Assessment for additional authority and command flexibility. Commanders who want to improve their unit's ability to retain personnel should consider the ICF attributes to determine how much authority, influence, and decision space they possess to support their Airmen. If they believe they lack any of these, they need to address their concerns with higher-level commanders and staffs. In some cases, they will not gain delegated authority (e.g., the ability to give pay increases); however, there are numerous other individual concerns upon which commanders could and probably should have input (e.g., assignments, attending PME, announcing promotions, and eliminating unnecessary additional duties).

These are just a few examples of how commanders and supervisors can use the ICF to address their Airmen's concerns and goals. Improving unit productivity and retaining talent requires feedback, an understanding of what individuals want, providing meaningful recognition, and connecting people to organizational success and purpose. Most importantly, unit-level engagement is essential and complimentary to servicewide engagement and retention initiatives. It requires a cultural shift—a mindset focused on individuals. Although these examples do not specifically address how they can improve recruitment, the elements within ICF are what potential employees are looking for from an organization. Organizations who address "what people want from work" and make this synonymous with their culture will successfully and consistently attract talent.

Conclusion

Out of necessity, organizations are rethinking how they can better recruit, engage, and retain their employees. By focusing on individuals, many are making themselves more competitive at attracting talent, making their workforce more productive, and retaining talent. The ICF simplifies complex human resource programs, processes, and policies by

answering the question, "What do people want from work?" Why? Because, this is exactly what potential and existing employees consider when they join or decide to remain with an organization. Individuals desire work that is enjoyable, interesting (but balanced), provides compensation, gives career opportunities, and recognizes their efforts.

Clearly, improving organizational recruitment, engagement, and retention is complicated. It is also very personal for individuals. Organizations must execute their mission, which will require individual sacrifice. Airmen understand this, and in fact, they are seeking meaningful, productive work and want to be part of a profession that is bigger than themselves. However, there must be a balance and a recognition that individuals have their own goals, priorities, and limited patience. Military commanders and supervisors may not think about adopting unit policies, processes, and programs with engagement and retention in mind, but they have consequential influence on Airmen within their unit. The practical problem is commanders and supervisors may not know where to focus their limited time and resources to improve productivity and retention. The ICF provides a simple guide to help commanders and supervisors address what Airmen want from work. This approach has to become a part of their unit's culture and more broadly, part of the service's culture. Having a culture that considers and addresses individual goals and desires is an advantage. Today's Airmen are highly educated, motivated, and in demand. Focusing on what they want from work is not only necessary but is essential to improve recruitment, engagement, and retention throughout the Air Force. ✪

Notes

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