

Facing the Human Capital Crisis

Successful Recruitment Program Pilot at Edwards AFB

Rachel Schwarz

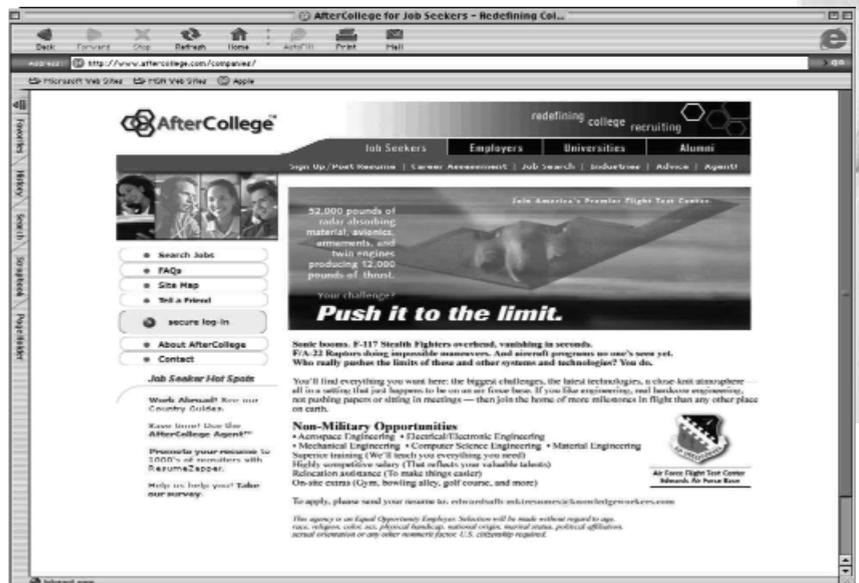
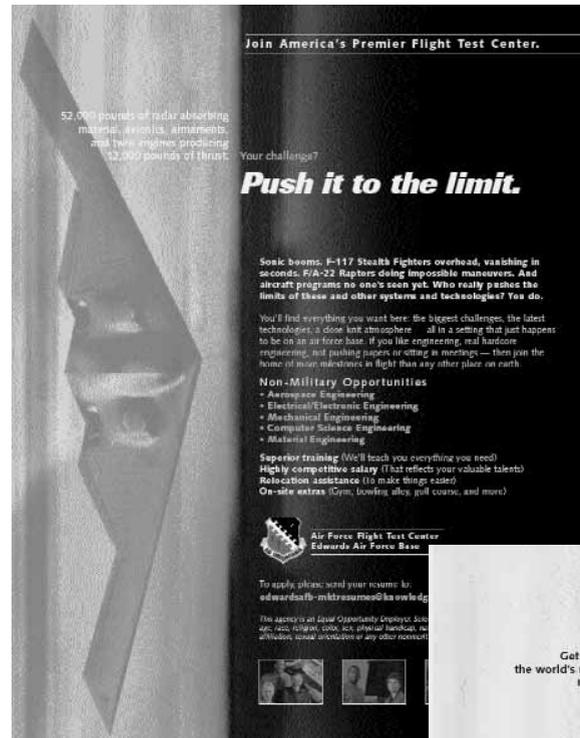
Human capital crisis. Over the past few years, it's become a common catchphrase within the Department of Defense (DoD). What exactly does it mean? Whom does it affect? And what is DoD doing to keep at bay the reality behind the buzzword?

According to a report (Feb. 2003) of the Performance Institute, a private think tank and leading authority on performance-based management practices for government agencies, over half the federal workforce is between the ages of 49 and 69. Over the next few years, 50 percent of the current acquisition, technology, and logistics (AT&L) workforce will be eligible for early or regular retirement. The percentage will continue growing until the number of people eligible to retire from the AT&L workforce reaches a predicted 70 percent in the year 2010. A loss of this magnitude is potentially debilitating for the federal government. As more senior personnel retire, the AT&L workforce will lose far more than just numbers: there will be a precipitous loss of workforce knowledge and experience. Without creating a strategic plan to reduce the impact of this enormous loss of human capital, DoD won't have the resources necessary to successfully carry out the organization's mission.

The human capital crisis is complex and involves numerous agencies within the DoD. The solution is no single quick-fix program, so the government is approaching the problem from several different angles. One specific approach involves the DoD's working with specific agencies to develop general methodologies that will be useful in future resolution of the human capital crisis.

DoD Initiates Pilot Program

Realizing the seriousness of the human capital situation facing DoD, the acquisition workforce and career management (AW&CM) office is taking action to implement processes and procedures to build up the workforce now so it will con-



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continue to be strong in the future. To this end, in the summer of 2002, the AW&CM office contracted with Knowledge Workers, Inc., a Colorado-based firm specializing in human capital solutions, for assistance in meeting the challenge ahead.

The Edwards Air Force Base pilot created a proactive approach to fighting the human capital crisis, one based on targeting the needed personnel and going after them at the Web sites they visit or the universities they attend.

As a first step, Knowledge Workers researched human capital problems within the AT&L workforce and drafted a proposal to prepare DoD for the future: implement a pilot program where Knowledge Workers could “demonstrate a standardized, metric-driven, and measurable recruitment action program paying particular attention to external, mid-level hires.”

Site Selected

In the fall of 2002, AW&CM focused on finding an appropriate site to implement a recruitment pilot. “We wanted a location that was having problems,” says Steve Tkac, program sponsor, AW&CM office. “Since strategic planners told us the AT&L workforce’s greatest need was in engineering, we especially wanted a pilot location with vacancies in engineering career fields. And we really wanted to challenge the system with difficult circumstances.”

Edwards Air Force Base (AFB), located in the heart of the Mojave Desert, met the requirements for the recruitment pilot site, and on Jan. 1, 2003, the Edwards Air Force Base Pilot was born. “Having the opportunity to go to Edwards and work with people with similar vision, people who were willing to challenge the system, was a blessing,” says Tkac.

Existing Processes Researched and Re-engineered

When Knowledge Workers began their work at Edwards AFB, they found a human resources staff that was overwhelmed with paper and unable to give applicants as efficient and responsive support as they would have liked. Knowledge Workers also discovered a passive recruiting approach (attending job fairs and posting jobs on government Web sites), bland marketing materials, and no formal relationships with universities.

To fully understand the hiring process and practices used at Edwards AFB, Knowledge Workers conducted in-depth interviews with key hiring authorities within the Edwards human resources and hiring directorates. From the information gathered in the interviews, Knowledge Workers created the existing, “as-is” process map.

The validated map was then used to determine key points, meaningful to Edwards, to measure recruiting results within the Edwards process. Once the combined Edwards and Knowledge Workers team had selected measurement points, the workflow was embedded in Knowledge Workers' applicant tracking system. This allowed for the automatic capture and reporting of hiring productivity measures in a fully Web-enabled dashboard-style reporting tool that gave key Edwards and DoD decision makers real-time access to applicant data and hiring metrics. Once the basic redesign of the application and hiring system for engineering jobs at Edwards was established, Joe Weiner, Knowledge Workers' managing director, led the pilot team through the creation of a new, more user-friendly Web-based applicant sourcing system that would challenge the conventional recruiting model and bring 21st century technology to Edwards. Now potential employees can search for available engineering jobs in their specific fields and apply online, and recruiting coordinators can respond quickly to qualified candidates. This quick response encourages more candidates to stick around longer in the application process and has resulted in a much larger candidate pool for base engineering jobs. In addition, moving the application process online allows Edwards to track steps in the hiring process more effectively.

Online Visibility Improved

Edwards AFB also increased its visibility in the electronic world, thereby making it easier for potential employees to find their Web site: <<http://www.edwards.af.mil/>>. "We didn't want to simply post jobs on USAJOBS and hope people would find them," explains Tkac, "We wanted to actively pursue passive job seekers who may never have considered working for the DoD." So Edwards entered into a commercial arrangements with Google.com, Aftercollege.com, and FastWeb.com among other search engines. In the case of Google, when someone browsing the Web entered certain keywords (such as "avionics design," "military aircraft," "electrical engineering," etc.) Google sent the searcher an electronic postcard with a direct link to the Edwards Web site.

New Branding Developed

In addition to improving the application/hiring system, Knowledge Workers, with their partner Bernard Hodes Group, developed a new branding and marketing plan for engineering jobs. "Edwards AFB is regarded as the world's top flight test center," says Tkac. "We wanted their brand to portray that." The new branding design reflects the "Edwards swagger" and is used in recruiting brochures, banner ads, university relations flyers and posters, and an upcoming interactive recruiting CD-ROM—all designed for maximum appeal to the engineering professionals that Edwards seeks and to point potential applicants to the Edwards AFB Web site.

Focus Turns to University Outreach

The team next directed their efforts at reaching out to local universities. Edwards worked initially to develop a close relationship with California State University at Northridge (CSUN). There were two primary reasons for choosing this school over other universities in the area. One, the University has a strong engineering school; and two, it is the nearest four-year university campus to the base.

Knowledge Workers, on behalf of Edwards, initiated the relationship with CSUN, first visiting the Northridge campus to meet, S. T. Mau, dean of the college of engineering and computer science, and several members of his faculty and to learn more about CSUN. Weiner also wanted to understand the dean's attitude toward Edwards AFB as a potential employer of Northridge students. "I can recall vividly the lunch meeting with the dean and his department chairs," he says. "I asked them what they knew about Edwards Air Force Base and was told it was 'hot as hell and in the middle of nowhere.' Given that comment, I knew we needed to change

the view held by this key leadership group before we could ever develop a relationship at the student level."

Site Visit

The initial overtures made, Edwards AFB arranged a site tour for Mau, the department chairs, and student group leaders to show them the cutting-edge engineering facil-

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ities at the base and give them an introduction to the career paths available at Edwards for CSUN students. Edwards engineers who had graduated from CSUN participated in the tour to interact with their former professors, telling them about their jobs and how their education had helped prepare them for their careers. "This was a critical part of the pilot," says Tkac. "In essence what we were doing was recruiting recruiters. These professors and advisors have tremendous credibility with their students, and now they are telling them, 'You should consider Edwards.'"

Meet Edwards Nights

Next, "Meet Edwards" nights were held on campus and tour days arranged for professors and students to visit Edwards and learn about life at the base. The initial Meet Edwards event was well publicized with a goal for attendance of 25 to 30 engineering students. The final attendance count was 210 students, many from the Honor's Co-Op program. These efforts made a lasting impression on the professors and students who participated. As a result, Edwards Air Force Base now has great credibility at California State University Northridge. "I believe the relationship we have developed with Cal State Northridge is the most valuable part of the pilot," says Paul Tierney, chief, avionics systems integration at Edwards.

Edwards Scholarship Program

The next step to building a strong and continuing relationship at CSUN was establishing an Edwards scholarship program for students in the school of engineering. Edwards has plans to give up to eight students \$2,000 scholarships when they participate in a paid summer internship program at the Air Force base. Not only will these students receive money towards their college education, they will also receive compensation for their summer work, gain experience in the engineering field, and make valuable contacts for job applications after graduation.

Edwards personnel invested considerable time and effort in building the relationship with CSUN, and the investment paid off. Mau and many professors and students from CSUN now genuinely believe Edwards is a good place to begin an engineering career. "The people at Northridge were pretty skeptical when we first showed up there," says Weiner, "but now that we've spent time developing a relationship with them, I think they really respect us."

Edwards Reaps Benefits

So how have all these changes impacted Edwards AFB overall? As of Sept. 30, 2003, Edwards had hired 23 engineers, and that number would have been much larger if not for the changing mission objectives related to Operation Iraqi Freedom, which delayed personnel hiring decisions. Edwards now has in excess of 7,600 engineering applicants being actively tracked against 102 positions, with nearly 600 applicants against open requests for per-

sonnel action (RPAs) for future hiring. Average days to fill an open position have been reduced by 46 percent. Average days for a new hire to start work have been reduced 33 percent. All of this was accomplished with a modest DoD pilot investment. In addition to faster hiring of better qualified applicants, the Knowledge Workers Applicant Tracking System and HRDashboard Metrics Reporting Tool have allowed Edwards hiring managers and engineering recruiting support staff to be more strategic in their hiring on base.

Jan Taylor, chief of affirmative employment at Edwards comments, "My team initially expressed concern that the new system would be more time consuming and would add to their current workload. But after training from Knowledge Workers, and as they have become familiar with the automated nature of the applicant work flow and database, they really like the system's ease of use and their ability to tell applicants their current applicant status." This is confirmed by Nancy Cox, engineering recruiting coordinator for the avionics systems integration division at Edwards. "Knowledge Workers tools and technology save me at least 50 percent of my day in dealing with applicants and hiring managers," she says. "I now have a system that allows me to track all applicants to the manager level and know in real time exactly what their status is when they call to ask."

Double Payback

The Edwards pilot was valuable for both Edwards AFB and Knowledge Workers. "I look at what we have now as a pick list of supplies, methodologies, and strategies to position Edwards for hiring success well into the future," says Weiner. And not only will the lessons learned at Edwards AFB allow the base to continue to expand and reach out to new candidates, but Knowledge Workers, too, can use what they learned at Edwards as benchmarks when they implement similar methodologies at different sites throughout the nation.

The Edwards Air Force Base pilot created a proactive approach to the human capital crisis, one based on targeting needed personnel and going after them at the Web sites they visit or the universities they attend. It's an approach that says, "Our jobs and our mission are important to you. If you join us, there will be exciting opportunities to develop yourself and your career." It speaks for the success of the pilot that the Department of the Air Force has decided to take over and continue the Edwards pilot and to fund a spiral activity that will reproduce the Edwards successes at up to seven additional Air Force bases in 2004.

Editor's note: Comments and questions should be directed to Steve Tkac at steve.tkac@osd.mil.