Finding the Right Talent:

The 2-357th Infantry Battalion's Officer Marketplace Experience

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I am the executive officer (XO) of an observer-coach/trainer (OC/T) battalion in First Army, the U.S. Army major command responsible for training National Guard units for combat deployment. Like most units Army-wide, mine interviewed applicants in the 22-02 officer talent marketplace, which occurred in the fall of 2021.

Several features of this marketplace were distinct from the preceding cycle. Chief among these was a prohibition against openly declaring exact preferencing, meaning that neither applicant nor unit could declare just how highly or lowly they prioritized each other. A close second to this condition was the downplaying of one-to-one matches between the unit and applicant. Formerly, a one-to-one match was a guarantee of assignment revocable only by certain specialty considerations or the vice chief of staff of the Army. The logic behind these newly imposed injunctions, according to instructions issued to participants in the marketplace, was to discourage all parties from settling on safe choices instead of asking for what they really wanted. By instructing the market not to share its preferences, Human Resources Command (HRC) intended that applicants would be challenged with the most developmental assignments, and units would receive the most motivated candidates.

While I am unable to comment on how well this cycle achieved these ends (since at the time I wrote this the results of the board had not been released), I can share how these considerations affected my battalion's candidate selection process. Specifically, it challenged us to clarify what we wanted in an officer, to develop a methodology that identified desirable traits, and to choose between multiple qualified candidates. Lastly, it left us with a few lingering challenges for next time, which I will briefly share with you.

What Our Unit Was Seeking and Why

My OC/T battalion — the 2nd Battalion, 357th Infantry Regiment — wants several key things in an officer: intrinsic motivation to be an OC/T, the mental maturity and experience to be value added, and an organizational focus (meaning, they do not want the job for any reason other than the work itself). Conversely, what we did not want were people disinterested in observing, coaching, and training, and neither did we want anyone who had not at least cursorily researched who we were. As such, we evaluated lowly anyone who seemed to want the job for the wrong reasons, such as only seeking a perceived desirable location (the Pacific Northwest) or gave the appearance of chasing an easy job (a charge often leveled against "AC/RC" [Active Component/Reserve Component] units). To distinguish one group from another, we used the following methodology.

Interview Methodology

Our process consisted of three phases: gathering desired applicants, conducting an initial interview to identify best talent, and performing a second interview to choose between top candidates. The first phase was to compile a master list of all the officers who signaled interest in our unit plus anyone we knew personally and invited to compete. These individuals were offered an initial interview.

For that interview, my battalion created a panel of four members consisting of two officers and two NCOs. One of the officers was always the battalion XO (me), who served as the chair; the second officer was a sitting team chief (our name for a company command trainer). The other two panel members were one senior NCO and one junior NCO.

This mix allowed for several things. Having the chair be an officer senior to the applicant provided gravitas, while having an officer equal in rank, hopefully, offered candor. The senior and junior NCOs both provided uniquely enlisted points of view, especially in spontaneous follow-up questions, while also signaling that our unit values professional relationships between the commissioned and non-commissioned corps. These individuals took turns asking interview questions to the candidate.

The initial interview was the lengthiest of all the phases and the most in-depth. Its purpose was to identify those who met screening criteria (could this person do the job if he/she had to) and who was best talent. Those put into this second category were marked for a follow-up interview with the battalion commander.

Our 20- to 30-minute initial interviews were conducted entirely by telephone, even if the applicant was local to Joint Base Lewis-McChord, WA, out of concern for fairness. Using voice-only interviews attempted to combat biases like proximity (preferring local candidates), physical appearance, race, and bling awe (what patches or badges the applicant wore), all of which were extraneous to our desired knowledge, skills, and behaviors. To further remove these externalities from our decision making, we did not allow our interview panelists to

see the applicants' record briefs or ask any questions about previous ratings.

We also deliberately did not take into consideration qualifications that were not directly relevant to the job, specifically things like Ranger, air assault, or airborne qualifications; previous evaluation reports; and years of service beyond the minimum qualification of being post-command. While this might run contrary to common Army logic (i.e., past performance is the greatest indicator of future performance), that decision-making shorthand does not always hold up, and often people make choices based on superficial indicators alone. For instance, people who have served in prestigious units might be excellent trainers, and then again, they might not; likewise, Soldiers with great or poor ratings in their last three evaluations might repeat those performances, or they may not.

At the end of each interview, the panelists independently voted (again, on whether applicants met screening criteria and if they were recommended for second interviews) before any discussion was allowed. Once everyone finished voting, the group shared their observations, which sometimes persuaded members to change their choices, but not often. Once reconsidered votes were turned in, the chair made the final decision on whether to advance the applicant to the final interview or not (an authority usually only exercised when the panel was tied). The battalion commander deliberately did not participate in initial interviews to avoid biasing the panel.

This method allowed the panelists to focus more exclusively on the attributes we identified as necessary and desirable. To that end, we crafted a number of interview questions that attempted to ferret out the kinds of officers we were looking for. Below is a sampling of what the panel used.

- *There are a lot of options in the marketplace, what made you express interest in us?* This question probed why they were interested in being an OC/T for the National Guard.

- *What do you understand is the mission of our battalion?* The surest way to impress any board with one's earnestness is to have done your homework.

- *When training you have been a part of has been effective; what made it that way? Conversely, when training went poorly, what made it so bad?* Here we judged applicants' understanding of how to create an effective training environment.

- *What is a professional area you are focused on improving?* This is the last question we asked before letting the candidates question us, and not surprisingly it was one of the most important. This question, of course, is a rewording of what are your weaknesses, but presented obliquely in the hopes of discouraging the humblebrags so frequently heard in interviews (things like: I work too much or I'm

too strict with Army standards). If the panel at any time felt the candidate gave an uncandid or unintrospective answer, it screened that individual out.

At the end of primary interviews, the panel chair collated all the applicants (and non-applicants, those officers in the marketplace who we were not interviewing) into three tiers: top talent (those recommended for second interviews), middle talent (those who were acceptable but not best fitted), and bottom talent (those who did not interview or interviewed poorly). This striation facilitated the forced ranking of all officers in the marketplace, not just our preferred candidates, which was another HRC requirement of the talent cycle.

At this point, we entered the third and final phase of the hiring process, the interview with the battalion commander. The commander was enabled in this by a list of all those individuals identified as top tier, listed in no particular order, with a short explanation of why the panel chose them. These individuals then sat for a 10-minute telephonic interview with the commander, who applied his judgment and rank-ordered the candidates from most desired to least. These results were then returned to the XO who input them into the Assignment Interactive Module (AIM) website.

Who Interviewed Well, and How We Chose Between Them

While a critic could say the jury is still out on whether our methodology worked, what my unit can confidently say is that our process offered excellent chances for talent to identify itself. I feel assured of this because our panel, which rotated through approximately 10 officers and NCOs, routinely felt it could distinguish between a good answer and a bad one. To illustrate better and worse responses, I will again refer to our questions.

Photo by SSG Asa Bingham
A Soldier assigned to 2nd Battalion, 357th Infantry Regiment provides feedback to National Guard Soldiers during an exercise at Camp Grayling, MI, on 16 August 2020.

There are a lot of options in the marketplace, what made you express interest in us? Good answers were things like: I want to give back to the force, or I used to be in the National Guard and I want them to succeed. Bad answers included: Joint Base Lewis-McChord is in a beautiful part of the country, and I hear you guys don't work very hard.

What do you understand is the mission of our battalion? Good answers went something like: You train National Guard units on the West Coast to deploy, while bad answers were universally permutations of I don't know.

When training you have been a part of has been effective, what made it that way? Conversely, when training went poorly, what made it so bad? There were myriad good answers to this like: Thorough planning leads to success, and defining the training goal tells Soldiers what to aim for. However, poor answers usually hovered on buck-passing statements like: When the people around you suck.

What is a professional area you are focused on improving? Good answers to this demonstrated applicants were both self-aware and humble, as realized by statements like: Sometimes it's hard for me to tell my boss bad news, and when I'm frustrated I get short tempered. We never counted any forthright answer against an applicant because most of the things they said were shortcomings found in everyone — in fact, we preferenced them highly for knowing themselves. Furthermore, good answers became excellent ones when the candidates included their mitigation techniques for their own deficiencies, such as I make bad news easier to swallow by offering a solution at the same time.

Lingering Challenges

While I believe this system worked for 2-357 Infantry, it did present several difficulties and drawbacks. The first was an intense time and manpower cost. To be scrupulously fair and thorough, each primary interview took up to half an hour (and this cycle we interviewed 30 applicants). This totaled 15 hours of interviews, not counting the time required to schedule candidates and other administration. While this workload was generally spread out among many leaders within the battalion, the panel chair and the commander were committed for nearly the entirety. By necessity, the 22-02 market cycle became a deliberate item on the battalion training calendar.

Another obstacle was the technicalities of conducting telephonic interviews, especially with applicants outside of the continental United States. We found that several applicants in Europe and Asia could only communicate through civilian smartphone apps, which were both of dubious audio quality and completely unsecure.

Still bigger problems were deciding what we wanted in applicants, crafting questions that identified them, and then choosing between more than one completely qualified applicant. Delineating what we wanted came down to a series of discussions between the commander, command sergeant major, and XO, who ultimately decided upon a discreet and mission-focused set of knowledge, skills,

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and behaviors. These became the core of our interview questions. The initial draft of these was a short and simple body of queries that our first panelists quickly found to be inadequate.

As early as the second day of interviews, we had refined and expanded our questionnaire three times until we reached a version that all felt was adequate. By far the greatest challenge, however, was deciding between multiple qualified and talented choices in our top-tier pool. Admittedly, some of how we arrived at recommending one individual be #1 and another be #2 was intuitive and subjective, especially in the second interview. At the same time, the panel process that differentiated top talent from middle and bottom grades was rigorously formal and uniform. Still, the agonizing decisions between many best-qualified people had one silver lining: no matter who we chose (or, more accurately, the AIM algorithm chose), we would receive a high-quality officer.

Conclusion

Time will tell if the Army's conditions on this market cycle and my battalion's methods produced competitive officers for the force and good fits for our organization. What I do know with certainty now, though, is that the methods my unit used operationalized two key beliefs in our command. The first of these is that job performance matters; those who are best fitted for the work, both in desire and competency, deserve the job. The second is that characteristics often used to paint one officer good and another bad, like how many qualification badges he or she has, are poor tools for choosing a good fit for jobs that do not directly use those skills. I suppose that last statement is open for debate, but our presupposition in 2-357 Infantry is that winning matters, and best talent is identified by directly applicable knowledge, skills, and behaviors — and nothing else.

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