



## ACQUISITION RESEARCH PROGRAM SPONSORED REPORT SERIES

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### **Improving Internship Program and Intern Retention at Naval Surface Warfare Center Port Hueneme Division Contracting Office**

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Approved for public release; distribution is unlimited.

Prepared for the Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA 93943

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## ABSTRACT

Entry-level employees (ELEs) play a vital role in the Naval Surface Warfare Center Port Hueneme Division (NSWC PHD) Contracting Office, as they enable the office to complete contract requirements for current and future missions. More specifically, ELEs are responsible for procurement planning, preparing documents, conducting negotiations, and ensuring compliance with regulations and policies. NSWC PHD spends between \$100,000 and \$250,000 annually to recruit, onboard, and train each ELE with the expectation that ELEs will transition into full-time employees after graduation. With one to three ELEs hired annually, the total annual cost of recruiting, onboarding, and training ELEs ranges from \$300,000 to \$750,000. Despite recent improvement in the retention rate of ELEs, only 58.3% of ELEs over the past five years chose to maintain full-time employment with NSWC PHD upon completion of their internships, meaning over 40% of funds spent on the internships fail to produce the desired results. This shortfall translates into reduced numbers of staff devoted to managing contracts. In turn, this shortfall causes delays in contract completion, overworks existing employees, and lowers office morale. This study will gather data on ELEs' perceptions of the program and how these perceptions inform their decisions whether to seek full-time employment with NSWC PHD. The intention is to provide information and insight to managers charged with overseeing the internship experience.



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— Demi DeGarmo

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— Brian Carpenter

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CS	Contract Specialist
DATM	Director, Acquisition Talent Management
DAU	Defense Acquisition University
DAWIA	Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act
DOD	Department of Defense
DON	Department of the Navy
ELE	Entry-Level Employee
FAM	Functional Area Manager
GS	Government Service
IDP	Individual Development Plan
KSA	Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities
MDP	Master Development Plan
NACC	Naval Acquisition Career Center
NADP	Naval Acquisition Development Plan
NSWC PHD	Naval Surface Warfare Center Port Hueneme Division
PD	Position Descriptions



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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

The Department of the Navy (DON) established the Naval Acquisition Development Plan (NADP) as a centrally funded training program executed for the Director, Acquisition Talent Management (DATM) by the Naval Acquisition Career Center (NACC). Using a two- to three-year curriculum, the NADP develops highly skilled professionals to meet projected Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act (DAWIA) requirements. The NADP strives to develop experienced entry-level employees through a structured program that entails rapid advancement, development, various job assignments and interactive training (DON, 2022). This paper will discuss the policies, procedures, instructions, and operations of the program at Naval Surface Warfare Center, Port Hueneme Division (NSWC PHD) and the actual Entry-Level Employee's (ELE) experiences in and perceptions of the internship program. We will present our findings based on qualitative analysis of data gathered through semi-structured interviews with current and past ELEs at NSWC PHD Code 02. Lastly, we will present recommendations on how to modify the internship program based on our findings.

### **A. BACKGROUND**

According to the position descriptions (PD) for a Government Service (GS)-1102-07 ELE, these new federal employees complete an extensive curriculum of formal and on-the-job training. The main focus of the NADP program is to provide training and career development to ELEs to prepare them for a successful career in acquisitions. As a trainee in the program, ELEs must successfully complete all requirements specified in the Master Development Plan (MDP) (DON, 2022). According to the DON NADP Operations Guide (2022), they are also responsible for completing all DAWIA certification requirements prior to program completion. The MDP specifies the competencies, job rotations, formal training, special projects, and education that must be completed during the internship. The NADP program is set up as a two or three year program dependent on the applicant's experience (DON, 2022). The NADP program was designed to supply local commands with experienced journeyman Contract Specialists (CS) upon graduation. These



individuals are key to the future success of naval acquisitions and the Department of Defense as a whole.

## **B. CURRENT SITUATION**

At NSWC PHD, ELEs enter the workforce and are treated as equals to their peer CSs. Each member is given the responsibility of understanding contract files, executing modifications, drafting pre-award, award and post-award documents, communicating with their customers and stakeholders, and completing DAWIA training requirements. These tasks must all be completed in conjunction with the DOD and command level mandatory trainings.

When new ELEs are brought on board, they are assigned to a specific team within Code 02, the contracting office at NSWC PHD. They work with their supervisor and Functional Area Manager (FAM) to ensure they are completing the necessary steps to be on-boarded. This includes getting their common access card, computer asset, and completing all required systems access requests. Supervisors and the FAM should also ensure that each individual has the necessary resources to familiarize themselves with the program and its requirements.

Once the ELE has been fully on-boarded, they receive job tasking identical to everyone else on the team. They will work through their requirements, sometimes with mentors, to ensure tasking is completed in a timely manner. As they gain more experience in contracting work, they are expected to complete rotations both internally within NSWC PHD, as well as externally with another DOD component. Throughout the program duration, ELEs are required to attend several in person and online trainings to complete their DAWIA certification. They also attend bi-weekly meetings to check in with their peers and the FAM.

The FAM is the local point of contacts for all program duties and responsibilities, and is the most important person in the NADP program when it comes to the success of the ELEs and the program as a whole. The FAM should be the subject-matter expert for all aspects of the program including components, requirements, deadlines, points of contact, employee development and training. The FAM is responsible for the content of the





employee development plan and ensuring completion of program requirements prior to the employee's graduation (DON, 2022).

The concern about low retention of the commands ELEs has been on the docket for a few years. The retention rate among ELEs who have completed the program is 58.3% over the past five years (S. Nolan, personal communication, December 28, 2021). With over 40% of ELEs choosing not to onboard, NSWC PHD has experienced high turnover and in turn increased recruiting, onboarding and training costs. This leads to the contracting workforce at NSWC PHD needing to manage the extra workload while new employees get up and running.



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## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

We reviewed peer-reviewed articles on recruitment, training, career development and retention in relation to internship programs in the acquisition career field. These four topics were chosen as they appeared to be relevant to our study based on the current situation with the NSWC PHD Code 02 ELE program. With the concern surrounding the low retention rate of ELEs, these four topics play an important part in an organization's ability to retain its employees. When looking at recruitment we reviewed the Naval Acquisition Development Program Operations Guide from the NADP (DON, 2022) website as well as a peer-reviewed article from the *Human Resource Management Review* titled "Employee Recruitment and Job Search: Towards a Multi-Level Integration" (Acikgoz, 2019). For the next topic, training and career development, we reviewed the operation guide (DON, 2022) and DAU certification pathway (DAU-2, 2022). Finally, we looked into retention and reviewed three separate articles. The first article, titled "The Importance of Developing Strategies for Employee Retention" (Cloutier et al., 2015) was published in the Journal of Leadership, Accountability, and Ethics Volume 12. The second article is from the *Open Journal of Social Sciences* and was titled "Study on Determining Factors of Employee Retention" (Kossivi et al., 2016). The last article, "A Review of Literature on Employee Retention" (Kamalaveni et al., 2019), was from the *International Journal of Innovative Research in Management*. These government documents and peer reviewed articles provided us with insight on how different factors play into employee retention and provided us with the background needed to analyze our data while keeping the goal of increasing the retention rate of ELEs at NSWC PHD Code 02 at the forefront.

### A. RECRUITMENT

Employee recruitment is key to the success of every organization. In fact, a study conducted by the Boston Consulting Group found that employee recruiting has the largest impact of all human resources functions (Sullivan, 2012). Due to recruitment's effect on the success of an organization, it is integral to ensure the proper recruiting methods and tools are being used to bring the right people in for the position and organization. If an



organization doesn't focus on making sure they are attracting the right candidates, they could be wasting their time, effort, and money as those being hired in aren't likely to stay (Sullivan, 2012).

According to Acikgoz (2019, p. 1), "Employee recruitment can be defined as activities that influence the number and types of applicants who apply for a position, stay in the applicant pool, and accept a job offer." In order to help support DAWIA, NACC was designed to improve the competency of the acquisition workforce. More specifically, NACC's mission is to "provide the DON acquisition enterprise with the workforce development tools and programs that enable delivery of the products and services required by the warfighter" (DON, 2022). NACC consists of two major functions: the Naval Acquisition Development Program and acquisition workforce programs.

The NADP was set up to develop DAWIA certified journeyman acquisition workforce members who will be highly qualified, talented, and able to support the mission of the DOD (DON, 2022). NADP handles all hiring activities for NADP candidates by posting position openings and accepting applications through USAJobs, the federal government's official employment website. There are two distinct programs within NADP, one for entry level individuals and the other for associates. The entry-level program is geared towards recent graduates whereas the associates program is geared towards mid-career professionals (DON, 2022). All candidates are hired to participate in a two to three year program where they will complete an individual development plan, work to gain competency in their respective career fields, complete rotational assignments and participate in acquisition leadership training (DON, 2022).

## **B. TRAINING**

Solid training contributes to a high quality workforce. According to the ELEs, required training takes up a lot of time, patience and attention. There are a variety of training courses and requirements that ELEs must meet coming from their command, the NADP, and the DON. They must perform developmental assignments designed to increase knowledge, skills and abilities (KSA) in contracting (DON, 2022). In addition to the training requirements previously discussed, DAWIA training is also required to increase



contracting competency. DAWIA was enacted to “improve the effectiveness of the military and civilian acquisition workforce through enhanced education, training and career development, thereby improving the acquisition process” (DON, 2022).

## **1. DAWIA Training Requirements**

All NADP employees are designated members of the Acquisition Workforce and fall under the purview of DAWIA. Employees must meet at least the minimum certification requirements for CSs. Meeting DAWIA requirements is an integral part of the NADP and is the basis of determining eligibility to promote and graduate the employee (DAU-1, 2022).

According to the NADP Operations Guide (2022) attendance at mandatory DAWIA training is critical and takes precedence over all other training and education assignments. The required courses are listed on the MDP for convenience and in the iCatalog on the DAU site so employees can easily access them (DAU-2, 2022). The NADP requires each individual to complete the DAWIA certification to show that they have achieved journeyman level proficiency and subsequent certification. This certification is invaluable and will help employees throughout their careers.

According to Skertic (2015), the DAWIA Certification is detailed and if the process is not managed properly it can have a negative impact on an individual’s experience. The current standard for contracting certifications in DAU is to obtain the professional level. Once the basic requirements are met, a person will choose a functional area to specialize in. As this is the only available level to a CS and ELE, each person must complete the trainings (Figure 1) within their program timeframe.



Figure 1. DAWIA Core Certification Standards. Source: DAU-2 (2022).

Core Certification Standards (required for DAWIA certification)	
<b>Education</b>	No education requirement for certification
<b>Training</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The virtual or "V" version of a course, noted by the "V" after the course number in the course ID, is acceptable in lieu of the "(R)" version.</li> <li>● <b>CON 1100V</b> Contract Foundational Skills</li> <li>● <b>CON 1200V</b> Contract Pre-award</li> <li>● <b>CON 1300V</b> Contract Award</li> <li>● <b>CON 1400V</b> Contract Post-award</li> </ul>
<b>Experience</b>	Twelve (12) months full time experience applying a representative sample of the Contracting competencies is the minimum experience requirement. Equivalent experience may be considered in government or industry but must be documented and presented in detail. Representative samples of contracting competencies will be determined by the Component.
<b>Assessment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Comprehensive exam required for certification in FY22.</li> <li>● <b>CON 3990V</b> Contracting Certification Exam</li> <li>● Optional Contracting Certification Exam Prep Course is available to complete as additional training for the CON exam.</li> <li>● <b>CON 3900V</b> Contracting Certification Exam Prep Course</li> </ul>
<b>Certification Currency</b>	80 hours of Continuous Learning (CL) every 2 years per DoDI 5000.66. CL hours may be completed in technical, professional, and/or specialty competencies. A certain number of CL hours, as determined by Supervisor, shall directly map to professional competencies.

These core courses will take a person approximately 168.5 hours of time to complete. Once an individual achieves certification, they must complete 80 credit hours every two years in accordance with DoDI 5000.66 (2022). The functional areas individuals can choose to specialize in are systems acquisition contracting, services contracting, operational contracting, purchasing, research and development contracting, contracting in a logistics and sustainment environment, international and foreign military sales contracting, cost and price analyst, construction contracting, architect and engineer contracting, contingency contracting, contract administration, industrial contract property management, and small business professional (DAU-2, 2022). Individuals can choose multiple functional areas with the concurrence of their supervisors to become more well-rounded employees.

## 2. Rotational Assignment

According to the NADP Operating Guide (DON, 2022), “a rotational assignment is a non-permanent, planned assignment to a different supervisor and/or job for a specific period with a final evaluation of the results.” Rotations are a mandatory part of the program and rotational assignments may be up to 90 days maximum and cannot exceed the current funding limit set forth by NACC. There should be a specific written plan in place prior to the rotation. The employee should receive pre-assignment information from the rotation site POC (i.e., who, when, what and where) (DON, 2022).



There should be a specific job for the employee and a reporting supervisor during the assignment. The supervisor should be readily available to the employee and should greet new employees with an orientation session. Facility requirements should be explained and available at the beginning of the assignment during the orientation. These facility requirements include a desk, computer with email capability, permits, passes, and a dedicated workspace (DON, 2022). During the rotational assignment, the FAM should review and relate the KSAs individuals are gaining from the specific duties assigned. Tasks should be meaningful and related to functional areas and IDP requirements. The employee should receive regular feedback on performance throughout the rotation. ELEs should have several opportunities to meet the senior staff and attend (as an observer) senior staff meetings. At the completion of the assignment, there should be a final evaluation involving the employee, supervisor and FAM (DON, 2022).

Rotations provide excellent opportunities for ELEs to grow and learn while developing their personal goals. Rotations are divided into internal and external opportunities. The internal rotations are often at or near the homeport command and are offered for all individuals within the program (DON, 2022). Their purpose is to familiarize each employee with a specific command's internal affairs such as how the program interacts with other departments and specialties. The learning objectives of the rotations are used to provide ELEs a look at many differing parts of the Government (DON, 2022). For example, an ELE can use their internal rotation to learn how contracting officer representatives are a part of the contracting network within a command. The internal rotation can also be completed within the department with a specific team such as simplified acquisitions division or policy division.

There are also opportunities for external rotations, which allow members to work outside of the functions of their assigned tasks. The external rotations provide a member with the opportunities to grow their abilities by providing a larger variety of professional situations. These external rotations can provide ELEs with vast opportunities for career field masteries (DON, 2022). The external rotation can be with the homeport command or outside of command. Many individuals can choose other departments within their organization such as financial or technical divisions. The other option is to partake in



another command such as Naval Facilities or with The Department of the Army and so on. These rotations can provide opportunities for individual growth and information sharing for the department and the commands that share the individuals (DON, 2022). In short, ELEs and the commands that support them can learn invaluable information from each other.

### **C. CAREER DEVELOPMENT**

There are two main areas of focus for ELEs in the program when discussing career development: the MDP and the IDP. These resources are supposed to be provided to ELEs at the start of the program and used as guideposts. The MDP becomes the IDP when it is changed to provide an individual employee what they need in terms of skills development and knowledge of acquisitions. The IDP is personalized for a career field while the MDP is designed to meet the specific requirements of an employee and their desired position. Each employee is responsible for meeting with their supervisor and/or FAM for guidance to establish their IDP within 45 days of their onboarding. The IDP should be reviewed annually or as needed with the supervisor and the FAM. The ELEs IDP should be kept on file at the local command and will never need to be submitted to the NACC (DON, 2022).

The career path of individuals in contracting can vary greatly based on a wide range of factors, which include but are not limited to the types of contracting, a person's experience, career mobility, goals and continuing education. Overall, this program is a three-stage career advancement opportunity of tactical, operational, and strategic (DON, 2022). Each ELEs support team should regularly discuss the areas of improvement that are identified for the individual's short-term and long-term career goals. Once the ELE and their support team complete regular checkups and discussions, there is high potential for a smooth and lofty development through the program's completion.

The occupational competencies and experiences are developed in this program throughout the years by utilizing well rounded training, mentoring, and other various learning options (DAU, 2022). DAU states that it is important for command to understand that, "Aligning individual development goals with the recommended developmental elements should improve the professional competency of the contract specialist workforce"





(DAU, 2022). Every warranted contracting officer, CS, contracting supervisor and ELE needs to pursue quality training in order to uphold the U.S. Navy mission and core values of honor, courage and commitment. These career development guidelines are instilled into each ELE if the program is successfully implemented.

### **1. Roles and Responsibilities**

According to their NADP operation guide (DON, 2022), ELEs must understand specific roles and responsibilities. These range from being their own career advocate, to gaining systems access, to completing training requirements, to managing their own IDP responsibilities. Each employee should work closely with their homeport FAM, supervisor and mentor to ensure they are completing the NADP requirements in a timely manner. These general responsibilities are designed to benefit the ELE and allow for a versatile learning program.

### **2. Master Development Plans**

According to chapter 8 of their operations guide (DON, 2022), the MDP contains the minimum education and proficiency levels to be successful in their respective functional areas. These areas in the MDP may contain things like online or DAWIA training requirements, as well as formal training requirements, rotational assignments, and other potential acquisition projects and education (DON, 2022). Employees must complete the MDP with their team in order to graduate. The MDP describes required education at appropriate DAWIA and mandatory requirement such as education or training for the Acquisition Professional Community. This plan must be comprehensive and address many different areas of expertise.

### **3. Individual Development Plan (IDP)**

The IDP is a personalized version of a functional area's MDP (DON, 2022). It is designed to enhance the specific needs for the employee and their desired position. A support team consisting of the employee, their supervisor and the FAM should create this plan within 45 days of onboarding, and it needs to be updated annually to review and reflect the employee's progress (DON, 2022). The IDP includes but is not limited to detailed



descriptions of scheduled timeframes and locations of an ELE's assignment as well as rotational assignments. It should also lay out the competencies, skills and other requirements that are expected for each detailed assignment. Many of the DAU courses and technical trainings are often at the postgraduate level and should be offered to all ELEs.

The IDP needs to be continuously reviewed and regularly updated to ensure it incorporates the requirements of the homeport command and employee. There is also a section for the NADP IDP summary, which is a short document, usually one to three pages in length, which lists the fulfilled and unfulfilled graduation requirements. All NADP ELEs are required to complete the IDP summary with their support teams and these summaries need to be reviewed, signed, and approved by the FAM (DON, 2022). IDPs provide a stable and living document for the ELEs to guide them through their career progression and the life cycle of the program.

ELEs are separated into three levels in accordance with their experience and paygrade: Tactical/Working Level (GS-07 to 13, or equivalent), Entry Level (GS-07 to GS-11) and Journeyman Level (GS-12 to GS-13) (DON, 2022). At the tactical/working level, a person's initial contracting assignments are used to establish as well as build upon and ELEs knowledge and expertise. What distinguishes the tactical level from the other two levels is the various workforce assignments that allow for diverse vocational KSAs. As such, the tactical level of development is broken down into the entry and journeymen levels (DON, 2022). However, the KSA levels of ELEs differ for each person and are considered in the discussions as well as the decision-making process. Tactical/working level contracting employees build occupational competencies as protentional contracting officers that will assist them in their positions. Some ELEs at this level will need mentors for development of their professional networks. The connections gained through networking will assist individuals as they work to gain career guidance, training assistance, and soft skills development on a more personal level (DON, 2022).

The main focus for individuals at the entry level of development is to complete training that is tasked to focused on gaining knowledge and rudimentary competency awareness of the commands functional areas (DON, 2022). In addition to participating in any available education as well as any offered training courses, ELEs go through various



on-the-job trainings, workplace experiences, and personal development opportunities to further develop their functional knowledge and practical skills.

The highest level in the NADP program is the journeyman level. After gaining the basic KSAs while in the initial stage of their career, these employees will deepen and strengthen the skills in their contracting toolbox. There is also formal training and on-the-job training during the journeyman level of development. The program requirement and expectations are designed so that participants will attain an elevated level of knowledge while showcasing a proficiency in a variety of contracting specialties. ELEs will develop KSAs in contracting by working on numerous procurements (DON, 2022). Finally, journeyman level CSs are often trusted as technical experts and are frequently given high-level leadership and training responsibilities (DON, 2022). Improvement exceeds just mastering the acquisition basics and achieving the minimal technical expertise. ELE's at this phase in their program must show a leadership aptitude among their peers.

There may not be one path for success for ELEs; however, this internship program offers a great building block for one's career in the field. The employees' full buy is indispensable for their future success. Many fruitful career paths contain constant growth and the drive for development that allows for high levels of multifaceted experience. Once a quarter, ELEs and their support teams need to review their personal situations and ensure they are still in the right position and meeting the commands needs as it pertains to their career field (DON, 2022). Through these reviews the FAM needs to recognize knowledge and experience gaps and build a professional development plan that addresses them.

#### **D. RETENTION**

According to Kossivi, Xu, and Kalgora (2016, p. 262), retention can be defined as the “process in which the employees are encouraged to remain with the organization for the maximum period of time or until the completion of the project.” How many employees choose to remain with an organization, and for how long, are important metrics for organizations to monitor. A high retention rate can signify the organization is recognizing what is important to their employees and ensure they are doing what is necessary to keep their human capital. On the other hand, if an organization has a low retention rate, it could



signify that employees are not happy working for the organization and are taking their skills and talent to an employer who will better meet their needs (Kossivi et al., 2016).

In order to be successful, every organization strives to hire the right people for the job and keep them on the job for the long haul. According to Kossivi, Xu, and Kalgora (2016), one of the toughest challenges an organization faces in today's world is not only managing their people but also finding ways to keep employees fulfilled and retain them. When employees look at leaving an organization, they look at factors such as pay, work environment, company culture, benefits, career development, career path potential, recognition, training and development, and many others. Because of this range of factors, it is important for organizations to not only figure out what its employees find important, but also to recruit individuals who have the right fit for the position and the organization's culture. If an employee doesn't fit with the organization's culture and they don't feel fulfilled in the position they hold, they are more likely to leave (Kossivi et al., 2016).

When looking at retention, there is voluntary and involuntary turnover. Voluntary turnover occurs when an employee elects to leave the organization of their own free will. Involuntary turnover occurs when the employer decides to end the employer/employee relationship due to performance, conflict or any other reason (Kamalaveni et al., 2019). There is also functional turnover and dysfunctional turnover. Functional turnover occurs when a low performing employee leaves and dysfunctional turnover occurs when a high performer leaves (Kamalaveni et al., 2019). All turnover is costly to an organization due to the costs associated with recruiting, onboarding, developing, training, paying salaries, providing benefits and everything else involved with getting a new employee up to speed. Each time an organization loses an employee, they are losing the time, effort and money the organization has spent on that individual (Cloutier et al., 2015).



### **III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Due to the low retention rate of ELEs at NSWC PHD Code 02, there is a need to better understand why ELEs are leaving the organization. In order to achieve this end, we have designed this study to uncover the perceptions of ELEs who are currently participating in or have previously graduated from the ELE program at NSWC PHD Code 02. The data gathered from this study will be used to perform qualitative analysis, the results of which will be used to identify potential areas of improvement for the ELE program. This data will then be used to provide recommendations on how to improve the program to department management for review and consideration. This section will discuss our overall research design and strategy with justification for how we came to this study's design. We will also discuss the limitations of our research and some potential areas for further research.

#### **A. RESEARCH DESIGN**

For our research, we employed an explanatory research design. According to George (2022) explanatory research explores the root cause that leads to a specific outcome. By using this research design we are able to analyze and uncover the reason ELEs are not staying at NSWC PHD Code 02 so we can develop recommendations to address those causes. We chose this design because we considered it the optimal strategy for understanding the core issue: why the retention rate among the ELEs at NSWC PHD is low. To this end, we interviewed eight current or past ELEs from the contracts office at NSWC PHD to gather their insights into the program, including what they believe worked successfully, what they believe could use improvement, and what they gained from participating in the program. By using this research design, we were able to glean the perceptions of our ELEs and apply those findings to explain why ELEs aren't seeking full-time employment with NSWC PHD Code 02 once they have completed the program.

##### **1. Philosophy**

The first research design choice we had to make was in regards to the research philosophy. Research philosophy speaks to the underlying beliefs about how data should be gathered, analyzed and used within a research study. The philosophy we used in



designing our research study was interpretivism. This philosophy is used in qualitative analysis and requires the researchers to play a role in observing the world around them and is subjective in nature (Crossley, 2021). Given our first-hand experience of the issues raised during the course of this research, this approach seemed best suited to inform our efforts to observe and gather input from subjects regarding their perceptions of the program. By speaking with and interviewing each ELE, we are able to gain insight into each individual's unique experiences in the program and can use that data to help uncover areas for improvement within the program.

## **2. Research Type**

For this study, we performed inductive qualitative analysis which is used to explain human perception and how individuals describe their experiences (Warren, 2020). This research is considered explanatory because we knew that the retention rate among ELEs at NSWC PHD Code 02 was low, but did not have the necessary data to determine the root causes for low retention. By performing explanatory and deductive qualitative analysis, we are able to take the responses from ELEs regarding their feelings and perceptions of the program to draw inferences as to the reason for the low retention.

## **3. Research Strategy**

We completed qualitative interviews to be able to gain insight into the reason ELEs are not staying on board at NSWC PHD upon completion of the ELE program. We decided to use semi-structured formal interviews. This interview format allowed us to build a list of questions to ask subjects while still providing the opportunity for follow up questions and discussion as needed during interviews (Doyle, 2020). By keeping interviews semi-structured we were able to open the door for ELEs to openly and thoroughly discuss the successes and failures of the program. By using a semi-structured format, we were able to engage in open discussion and conversation with the ELEs to get them to elaborate on different aspects of the program and their perceptions of them.



#### 4. Time Horizon

All interviews were conducted between February 28, 2022 and March 14, 2022. Each ELE interview was scheduled for a one hour time slot; however, a few subjects did want additional time to elaborate on their responses. Several interviews ran closer to two hours so we could allow the ELEs to discuss all pertinent information. Interviews were conducted over Microsoft Teams with both researchers present whenever possible. There were two interviews that Demi was unable to attend, therefore Brian conducted those interviews on his own. There was one interview that Brian was unable to attend, so Demi conducted that interview on her own. Each interview was recorded and later transcribed. Figure 2 summarizes which researchers attended each interview:

Figure 2. Interview Attendance Report

	Demi:	Brian:
Subject 1:	In Attendance	In Attendance
Subject 2:	In Attendance	In Attendance
Subject 3:	In Attendance	In Attendance
Subject 4:	In Attendance	In Attendance
Subject 5:	Absent	In Attendance
Subject 6:	In Attendance	Absent
Subject 7:	Absent	In Attendance
Subject 8:	In Attendance	In Attendance

Transcripts were completed manually by both researchers. All interview transcripts were completed by April 14, 2022. The researchers shared the transcripts of individual interviews with interviewees to ensure they were transcribed accurately. All subjects

concurred with the transcripts as transcribed by researchers and no corrections were requested.

## **5. Sampling Strategy**

Management at NSWC PHD Code 02 provided a list of all current and past ELEs at NSWC PHD from the past five years, which consisted of 18 individuals. We reached out to all 18 for recruitment purposes. All recruitment activity was handled via email, and we confirmed a total of eight subjects were willing to participate in our study. Once we confirmed each subjects' willingness to participate, we reached out to them by email to arrange and schedule interview time slots. At this time each subject was provided with an informed consent form to review and sign prior to their scheduled interview. All consent forms were signed and returned prior to subject interviews.

## **6. Data Collection**

We performed qualitative semi-structured interviews with each subject in order to understand ELEs perceptions of and feelings about the internship program experience. Each subject was asked the same interview questions, which were designed to be open-ended to promote open conversation and discussion. If there were any responses researchers needed additional information or clarification, follow up questions would be asked. The following questions were asked of each ELE subject:

1. What is your current position/job title?
2. How long have you worked in contracting?
3. How long have you worked for the federal government?
4. What are your short term career goals?
5. What are your long term career goals?
6. How did you find out about the ELE program?
7. Describe your daily job duties as an ELE in the ELE program.
8. What expectations did you have coming into the program? Were these expectations met? Why or why not?





9. How would you describe your overall experience as an ELE?
10. What did you find to be the most useful thing that you learned from the ELE program?
11. What would you consider to be the biggest strength of the ELE program?
12. What would you consider to be the biggest weakness of the ELE program?
13. What suggestions would you make to the current ELE program to improve it for future ELEs?
14. Based on your experience as an ELE, do you foresee yourself staying with NSWC PHD Code 02? Why or why not?
15. Do you feel your participation in the ELE program at NSWC PHD helped prepare you for your current position or career? Why or why not?
16. Do you feel the experience gained from the ELE program will help you achieve your short term and long term career goals? Why or why not?

## **7. Data Analysis Methods**

We employed thematic analysis in our research study. We analyzed the data to find common themes among the subject responses regarding what has been successful with the program, what hasn't worked, what has caused frustration or issues, and what could help the program improve. We used an inductive approach to our analysis to help find out what commonalities could be found in the reason ELEs are leaving NSWC PHD Code 02. Inductive reasoning involves taking specific observations, identifying patterns from those observations, and using those patterns to make conclusions (Streefkerk, 2019). By using an inductive approach to our analysis we were able to look at raw data provided through interview responses to find commonalities and themes that could help explain the low retention rate among ELEs.

## **B. RESEARCH LIMITATIONS**

The first limitation we encountered in our study was the lack of subjects who had completed the program and left the command. Every subject interviewed was still a current



employee of NSWC PHD Code 02. This meant we were unable to learn specific reasons individuals had left and could only learn of perceptions of the program from current employees. Another limitation we encountered was the inability to locate other scholarly articles on government contracting or acquisition ELE programs. This limited our ability to compare the current ELE program to outside research which looked specifically at intern programs within the DOD. The lack of outside research also leads to a potential area for future study. We believe performing a comparative analysis of the current program at NSWC PHD Code 02 with another ELE program that has been proven to be successful from another department or command. By comparing the program at NSWC PHD to other contracting office ELE programs, we could potentially better identify best practices and further recommendations for improvement.



## **IV. FINDINGS**

Our analysis of the data led to four key findings that could be negatively affecting the retention rate among ELEs at NSWC PHD Code 02. In this section we will be discussing each key finding, followed by a brief discussion on our interviewees' perceptions and experiences in regards to them. In short, we discovered the FAM and direct supervisor's lacked sufficient program knowledge; the program suffers from an overall lack of structure and formality; the program's chain of command is unclear; and there appears to be a lack of documentation surrounding program requirements.

### **A. FAM AND SUPERVISORS LACK PROGRAM KNOWLEDGE**

After reviewing interview transcripts and analyzing the data, it became clear that the biggest issue for our interviewees was an overall lack of program knowledge among the FAM and direct supervisors. The FAM is meant to serve as the ELEs main point of contact for assistance and questions regarding the ELE program. However, in our research, five of the eight subjects raised concerns with the FAM and their supervisors' inability to truly support and guide them through the program. Another three of the eight subjects discussed instances of reaching out to the FAM for guidance, who in turn then directed them to ask another ELE who had already done the research. To this point, Subject 7 stated "If I have questions that are specific to my supervisor or team lead, and I ask them, then I am told ask my peers. It makes it rough. As an ELE I feel like they need to be able to at least answer" (Subject 7, interview, March 14, 2022). Other subjects agreed the FAM relied heavily on the other ELEs to do the footwork and learn program requirements, when the FAM should be the one providing that information.

### **B. PROGRAM LACKS STRUCTURE, FORMALITY AND CONSISTENCY**

The second most common finding we encountered during our interviews is the sense of an overall lack of structure and formality within the ELE program. Five subjects brought up this lack of structure. They discussed how this issue becomes apparent during the onboarding process and continues throughout the program until completion. One subject described their experience with the program as, "I would say there's no structure.



There is no guidance or instruction on what this program is. There aren't even instructions on where to find the material you would need to figure out how this program works" (Subject 8, interview, March 14, 2022).

Subjects highlighted the fact that the lack of structure starts early in the onboarding process. There appeared to be little consistency between the subjects when it came to onboarding. Each ELE seemed to have different experiences, documentation, and resources dependent upon their direct supervisor. Due to these discrepancies some subjects would receive all necessary resources to understand the program, while others did not. While several subjects brought up issues with their onboarding experience, Subject 5's telling of the experience definitely stood out. "My onboarding experience was crazy and horrible. I got in and the first thing they did was sat me at my desk for two weeks before anyone came over and asked me to do anything. I got a FAR thrown on my desk and then got put into the file room. I learned files, but there was no actual training or help from my supervisor, my team lead, or my representative from NACC" (Subject 5, interview, March 1, 2022). During our interviews it became clear that this lack of training and guidance was causing confusion, which we will discuss further at the end of this section.

Once ELEs have been fully onboarded see my point above and are full-fledged members of their team, they continue to attend bi-weekly meetings with the FAM and all ELEs. During our interviews subjects expressed a similar lack of structure or formality with these bi-weekly meetings. According to one subject "They have the bi-weekly's but when you go in, they aren't talking about much about what the program is about. I think that there should be, not so much weekly, but maybe bi-weekly or monthly, where they are all together, trying to figure out what each of them need help with, what they are struggling with, what their working on, just communicating with one another and figuring out a way forward from there" (Subject 5, interview, March 1, 2022). The lack of structure, schedule and planning in these meetings clearly increased frustration among the ELEs trying to figure out and complete program requirements.

The lack of structure and the inconsistencies throughout the program have also contributed to increased stress and confusion among the ELEs. This appeared during our interviews when one subject stated "You're trying to find different ways, and there's so



many different answers you get from different people and there's just no standardization. So it makes it very frustrating and confusing" (Subject 5, interview, March 1, 2022). The increased stress and confusion was brought up throughout subject interviews and was an obvious point of concern.

### **C. UNCLEAR CHAIN OF COMMAND**

During our analysis, it became apparent there was no official communication regarding the proper chain of command. Ultimately ELEs have three separate individuals that act in different supervisory roles while participating in the program: the FAM, the CFM, and their direct supervisor. Out of the eight subjects interviewed, six brought up confusion regarding their chain of command and the responsibilities within it. They were unsure of when they should reach out to the FAM within Code 02, the CFM at NACC, or their direct supervisor for different situations. Subjects expressed their frustrations with the difficulty of finding the appropriate points of contact for different tasks. In addition, six subjects discussed a lack of communication between these three supervisory roles. One subject stated "I think there is a lack of communication between NACC and the local command that can be pretty difficult and that ends up with kind of a lot of run around" (Subject 3, interview, February 28, 2022). There was an overarching theme surrounding lack of communication and consistency within their respective chains of command. Moreover, definitions of the roles and responsibilities of the CFM, the FAM, the supervisors, and the ELEs appeared to be lacking.

### **D. LACK OF DOCUMENTATION OF PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS**

ELEs struggled with finding, managing, and completing requirements and meeting expectations of the program. Five subjects addressed this as a concern during their interviews. There were multiple causes for the confusion regarding program requirements that were brought up by the subjects. These included outdated information, unclear points of contact, contradictory information, incomplete resources, and the lack of a single source of data. When asked about the process of navigating the program's completion requirements, one subject responded "I feel that as an entry level or internship position as well as being a part of a program, to some extent you should be mentored a little bit more



closely. I don't think that we are provided with all of the guidance and materials that we need to succeed" (Subject 8, interview, March 14, 2022). In order for ELEs to be able to successfully complete the program, they first need to be aware of the requirements and expectations needed to do so.



## **V. RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on our findings, this section will present a series of recommendations to help improve the ELE program at NSWC PHD Code 02. These recommendations have been developed based on the data gathered during interviews with current and past ELEs. This information should be used to guide management on where to focus their efforts in order to improve the program. This section will detail each recommendation and how it can address our previous findings. The key recommendations we have to improve the program are as follows: improve the onboarding process and resources, restructure the FAM position, ensure the FAM and supervisors have the necessary program knowledge, provide additional structure through meetings and one-on-one trainings, and continue to monitor and evaluate the program for future improvement efforts.

### **A. IMPROVE ONBOARDING PROCESS AND RESOURCES**

In order to improve the program, we first need to look at the onboarding process in place. According to our research findings, there is inconsistency with how our current ELEs are brought on. Subjects discussed discrepancies with the documents and guidance they received during onboarding. Some subjects described their onboarding experience being smooth and receiving a lot of guidance, support and documentation to help them get up to speed, while others said their experience was the opposite and would find out about documents they were missing two months into their employment. The ELEs who had missing documentation discussed how they had stumbled their way through the initial learning stages by spending hours researching what the job and program entailed. To address these inconsistencies we recommend department management, ELE supervisors and the FAM work together to create a uniform onboarding process. This should include a detailed plan for each ELE as they move through their first few months in the program. This plan should lay out every system they need to request access to, trainings that need to be completed, chain of command information, and clear program requirements. This should be emailed to every ELE before their first day of employment so they can review all necessary resources and come ready with any questions they may have. Included in this



onboarding email should be documentation of the plan with all mandatory deadlines so ELEs and supervisors can track their progress. Along with the documentation of the plan, new ELEs need to be provided with resources identifying the POCs for each supervisory role and when to reach out to each. By providing ELEs with the necessary information upfront, we can reduce the time individual ELEs must spend obtaining this necessary information. A more streamlined, consistent experience will in turn contribute to a better employment experience. According to Finn (2006), building a thorough onboarding plan can help make the first few months of employment a more positive and edifying experience that will likely improve retention rates.

## **B. RESTRUCTURE FAM POSITION**

According to our research, the FAM position requires in depth knowledge of the program and all of its requirements. Subjects discussed the concern around the FAM's lack of knowledge, and in order to address this shortcoming we recommend restructuring the current FAM position. Currently the FAM splits their time between being a division head within code 02 and acting as the FAM in support of our ELEs. Therefore, we recommend either making the FAM a full time position, or to provide the FAM an assistant who has program knowledge and can support the FAM in guiding ELEs. Recently Code 02 has implemented an informal assistant under the FAM, and we recommend continuing this action until formal changes can be made. By restructuring the FAM position, the department will be supporting the FAM by providing additional time and bandwidth to do the necessary research. The additional time to perform this research will allow the FAM to be more knowledgeable of the program requirements so they can better support each individual in the program. This recommendation will provide ELEs with the guidance and support they need to succeed.

## **C. FAM AND SUPERVISOR PROGRAM RESEARCH AND TRAINING**

The most notable finding from our research was that the FAM and supervisors did not have adequate knowledge of the program and its requirements. These individuals serve as resources and guides throughout the program and need to have a thorough understanding of exactly what it entails. In order to remedy this gap we recommend requiring the FAM





to perform adequate research to fully understand the program. Due to the fact that there is no current process in place to train the FAM on the program and its requirements, this alternative step will require a lot of effort and time on the FAM. They will need to fully research the program at all levels through the resources available from NACC, the DON, the Secretary of Navy website, current and past ELEs, the NADP CFM's, and the DAU. Department Management should ensure this is happening and should follow up to see the outcome within 90 days of implementation. This research will require a large amount of time and effort upfront and is part of the reason we recommended restructuring the FAM position to allow them more time to complete this task.

Further, the FAM then needs to ensure each supervisor is educated on the program requirements. This should take place prior to any supervisor being assigned an ELE on their team. In order to implement this recommendation the FAM will need to have a one-on-one meeting with each supervisor as they are assigned a new ELE. The FAM can use this meeting to review milestones and ensure each supervisor is up to date with the most current data surrounding the program and its completion requirements. Having these meetings will help ensure consistency in guidance and resources provided during their development. In turn, this will reduce the confusion and stress of all stakeholders.

#### **D. PROVIDE ADDITIONAL STRUCTURE VIA MEETINGS AND INDIVIDUAL TRAINING SESSIONS**

Our research showed the need for increased structure throughout the program. Specifically, several individuals identified the need for more structure within the training and development bi-weekly meetings. In order to address this concern, we recommend implementing monthly one-on-one training sessions with each ELE and the FAM. These meetings should be used to check on program progress, address any issues or concerns, and provide guidance on the future state of the program. This provides the ELEs a private forum to discuss anything they aren't comfortable addressing in front of their peers that is currently missing in the program. These meetings can also serve as another opportunity for the FAM to gather data and make necessary adjustments to improve the program as ELEs progress through it. On top of this, we recommend continuing the bi-weekly ELE meetings with improved structure and formality. Each meeting should have a planned topic or



training with an agenda that is emailed out at least 48 hours in advance. By allowing ELEs to review the material ahead of time, they can prepare accordingly and come ready to discuss the topic at hand. These meetings should be structured similarly to the current Warrant Board trainings that Code 02 offers. The topics covered should include contracting basics, program requirements, training opportunities, rotation opportunities, career planning, soft skills, and DOD/Navy knowledge. This format will provide them with a solid foundation to ensure success both in and out of the program.

#### **E. CONTINUED MONITORING AND EVALUATION OF THE ELE EXPERIENCE**

In order to continue the advancement of this program and its stakeholders, we would also recommend to continue monitoring and analyzing the experiences of our ELEs. This step can be done by starting an exit interview process for all ELEs leaving the program, whether through completion or otherwise. The Chief Contracting Officer and Deputy Chief Contracting Officer should monitor exit interview results and review them with the FAM to make appropriate future recommendations for change. The one-on-one meetings with the FAM and ELEs can also serve as a data input as individuals voice their successes and failures as they move through the program. Here are the questions we have developed that will help department management gain insight into ELEs perceptions of the program:

1. What expectations did you have coming into the program? Were these expectations met? Why or why not?
2. How would you describe your overall experience as an ELE?
3. What did you find to be the most useful thing that you learned from the ELE program?
4. What would you consider to be the biggest strength of the ELE program?
5. What would you consider to be the biggest weakness of the ELE program?
6. What suggestions would you make to the current ELE program to improve it for future ELEs?



7. Based on your experience as an ELE, do you foresee yourself staying with NSWC PHD Code 02? Why or why not?
8. Do you feel your participation in the ELE program at NSWC PHD helped prepare you for your current position or career? Why or why not?
9. Do you feel the experience gained from the ELE program will help you achieve your short term and long term career goals? Why or why not?

By continuing to gather data on the perceptions of our ELEs as they progress through and complete the program, we can gain better insight into future needs. This data can be used to help course correct as ELEs move through the program, and can also be used to build more detailed plans to enact overall improvement to help keep our ELEs upon completion of the program.



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## VI. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, through qualitative interviews with the current and past ELEs of NSWC PHD Code 02 we discovered areas for growth within the existing internship program. These newly appointed members of the contracting community go through rigorous and extensive training and education to become an asset to the federal government. These individuals receive online, in-person, on-the-job and personal training for two to three years in order to complete this program. The team of associates for each ELE consists of their CFM at NADP, the local FAM, their direct supervisors, mentors and peers. These support teams work together to provide guidance, training, confidence and support to improve the ELEs KSAs within the acquisition community. ELEs and their support team manage master and individual development plans based on their knowledge and experience throughout the program. The plans are used to guide and assist the ELEs in their growth while also allowing the team to see any gaps or adjustments that may be required. Once the members of this program are settled in their daily tasks and utilizing all the available resources, they will work with the local FAM and team to assist with their rotations, government instruction or law changes, and graduation from the program. These needs are important to provide a high quality and well-rounded employee into the workforce.

Having these requirements and personnel in mind, we chose to take a deeper look into the ELE program at PHD and evaluate its current state. We then interviewed eight people and obtain their insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the program. Through this effort we identified some specific areas for improvement. These findings included a lack of knowledge regarding program requirements on the part of direct supervisors and the FAM; an overall lack of structure throughout the program; an unclear chain of command; and a lack of documentation surrounding program requirements. These findings have been contributing to tension among the ELEs as they work through their program milestones.

In order to address these findings we have developed five recommendations to present to the management at NSWC PHD Code 02 to help improve the program for future



ELEs. These recommendations include improving the onboarding process, restructuring the FAM position, increasing FAM and supervisor program knowledge, adding additional structure to bi-weekly and one-on-one meetings, and performing exit interviews so management can continue to gather data and track best practices to continue improving the program. We strongly believe if management can implement these five recommendations they will see an increase in ELE retention.



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