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Rebalancing Retention: Organizational Solutions for the Marine Corps Career Planning Program

June 2025

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Prepared for the Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA 93943.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the structural and organizational challenges facing Marine Corps Career Counselors and the Career Planning Program amid increasing enlisted retention demands following the publication of Talent Management 2030. Using a grounded analysis approach, the research analyzes data from 25 in-depth interviews conducted with active-duty Career Counselors across multiple billet types to identify key drivers of performance and systemic barriers within the Career Planning Program. This research informs the development of the Human Performance Drivers framework with two core dimensions: Workload Management and Resource Allocation, and a Systematic Approach to Retention. The analysis findings reveal a disconnect between growing performance expectations and available institutional support, including staffing, training, and administrative resources. To identify actionable recommendations, the thesis conducts a comparative case analysis of the Marine Corps' recruiting and retention structures, highlighting transferable practices from Marine Corps Recruiting Command that may enhance the Career Planning Program.



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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ACCC	Advanced Career Counselor Course
AR	Active Reserve
AT4C	Advanced Tools For Coaching
BCCC	Basic Career Counselor Course
BMOS	Billet Military Occupational Specialty
CRM	Command Retention Mission
CRP	Commandant's Retention Program
DAP	Direct Affiliation Program
ECC	End of Current Contract
EMOS	Excepted Military Occupational Specialty
FTAP	First Term Alignment Plan
HQMC	Headquarters, United States Marine Corps
IRB	Institutional Review Board
IRR	Inactive Ready Reserve
JD-R	Job Demand-Resource
MAGTF	Marine Air-Ground Task Force
MARADMIN	Marine Corps Administrative Message
MCO	Marine Corps Order
MCRC	Marine Corps Recruiting Command
MCTIMS	Marine Corps Training Input Management System
MEPS	Military Entrance Processing Station
MMEA	Manpower Management Enlisted Assignments Branch
MOS	Military Occupational Specialty
MSC	Major Subordinate Command
PMOS	Primary Military Occupational Specialty
RELM	Reenlistment / Extension / Lateral Move Request Form
RI	Recruiting Instructor
SEAP	Senior Enlisted Alignment Plan
SMCR	Selected Marine Corps Reserve
SNCO	Staff Noncommissioned Officer



SNCOIC	Staff Noncommissioned Officer In-Charge
STAP	Subsequent Term Alignment Plan
T&R	Training and Readiness Manual
TFRS	Total Force Retention System
TO&E	Table of Organization and Equipment
USMC	United States Marine Corps
XO	Executive Officer



I. INTRODUCTION

The United States Marine Corps is undergoing a period of rapid institutional transformation. In October 2021, the 38th Commandant of the Marine Corps, General David H. Berger, unveiled *Talent Management 2030*, a bold plan to modernize the service's industrial-era manpower system for the demands of 21st-century conflict. The principle amongst those changes was the need for a more mature and capable force to prepare for future conflict with near-peer competitors. To achieve this, the Marine Corps needed to break from its longstanding "Recruit and Replace" model, in which nearly 75% of first-term Marines separated from service. In its place, Berger advocated for a new approach: "Retain and Invest," a model focused on increasing reenlistments and expanding Marines' technical competencies (Berger, 2021). To meet this future force objective, the Commandant directed a rebalancing of recruiting and retention of enlisted Marines.

Since that announcement, enlisted retention has taken center stage. New programs have expanded both monetary and non-monetary incentives to encourage continued service. Commanding Generals now receive annual retention missions directly from the Commandant, and these missions have steadily grown in size and complexity. But as expectations rise, so do the pressures on the Career Counselors tasked with executing this mission. These Marines are now the tip of the spear in building the future force. Yet, despite the critical nature of their work, Career Counselors often operate without the resources, structure, or support necessary for long-term success.

This thesis seeks to identify ways to enhance the Marine Corps Career Planning Program by examining the challenges Career Counselors face at the operational level and exploring potential structural alternatives found in a sister organization, Marine Corps Recruiting Command.

A. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This thesis addresses the following primary and secondary research questions.



1. Primary Research Questions

- How can the Career Planning Program be enhanced?

2. Secondary Research Questions

- What are challenges faced by Career Counselors given increased retention demands?
- What capabilities, personnel, or training, presently employed by MCRC, could enhance the Career Planning Program?

B. APPROACH AND SCOPE

This research takes a two-phase approach to answer the above research questions. The first phase is a grounded analysis of 25 semi-structured interviews with active-duty Career Counselors serving in commands throughout the Marine Corps. The interviews were analyzed to identify themes across the population of Career Counselors. The results of the Phase I analysis identified challenges Career Counselors face today, which included a lack of adequate staffing, burdensome processes, inadequate evaluation systems, inadequate supervision, and a lack of standardization.

The second phase of this research involves a comparative analysis between the Marine Corps Recruiting Command (MCRC) and the Career Planning Program. MCRC was chosen as a comparison group because, as a sister organization within the Human Resources Development Process (HRDP), it fulfills a similar role in developing the enlisted force. However, it operates within a more formalized and well-resourced organizational structure. The comparative analysis takes an iterative approach to examine three distinct areas of each organization: a mission output and personnel, leadership continuity structures, and training infrastructure. These three areas are critical to identifying elements of MCRC that could be used to improve the effectiveness of the Career Planning Program and address challenges identified during the interview phase of this research.

The scope of this research was exclusively active-duty Career Counselors in operational roles. Though the 4821 MOS includes Active Reserve Marines, and there is a growing trend towards total force retention, reserve personnel were excluded from the



interview scope. Additionally, this research excluded Marines serving at the service headquarters and in other external Career Counselor roles. This choice was made to ensure those selected could provide the most accurate representation of the operational realities of Career Counselors today.

C. RECOMMENDATIONS

From this analysis, I developed a series of recommendations detailed in Chapter 7. To improve the Career Planning Program for both the betterment of the Career Counselors and the overall program effectiveness, the program should take the following corrective actions:

1. Transform retention management by creating a retention officer hierarchy starting at the O-5 command level and culminating in a new Enlisted Retention Branch within Manpower Management Division. Such a change would only add additional personnel to the general officer command levels.
2. Increase unit-level Career Counselor staffing and automation of burdensome retention processes.
3. Establish standard practices for on-the-job (OJT) training for untrained Career Counselors and adopt MCRC's new recruiter training and evaluation format.

These recommendations aim to improve the effectiveness and sustainability of the Career Planning Program. By establishing clear leadership accountability, increasing unit-level support, and professionalizing training standards, the Marine Corps can better equip Career Counselors to meet growing retention demands and, in doing so, secure the force it needs for the future fight.



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II. INSTITUTIONAL BACKGROUND

The structure and resourcing of the Career Planning Program shape how it responds to the evolving demands of the Marine Corps. This chapter examines the program's design, the role of Career Counselors, and recent policy developments, while also providing a comparative examination of the Marine Corps Recruiting Command, its better-resourced counterpart in the enlisted manpower enterprise. By outlining the Career Planning Program's current structure and recent policy developments, this chapter provides essential context for interpreting the interview findings that follow. Understanding these institutional dynamics is critical to evaluating why certain challenges persist and why specific recommendations may be necessary for reform.

A. ENLISTED RETENTION FRAMEWORK AND THE CAREER PLANNING PROGRAM

The Marine Corps' *Enlisted Retention and Career Development Program*, outlined in Marine Corps Order (MCO) 1040.31, identifies the Career Planning Program as a command responsibility. Its mission is to conduct quality interviews and retain Marines to meet the Corps' career force requirements (Headquarters, United States Marine Corps [HQMC], 2010). The program emphasizes aligning individual talent with institutional needs, contributing directly to force readiness.

1. Reenlistment Eligibility and Approval Process

Reenlistment in the Marine Corps is a voluntary process, initiated by Marines nearing the end of their enlistment contracts. Eligibility is determined by a Marine's retention year cohort, based on their End of Current Contract (ECC) and their retention category. Marines on their initial enlistment fall under the First Term Alignment Plan (FTAP), while those who have reenlisted at least once fall under the Subsequent Term Alignment Plan (STAP). Senior careerists with over 18 years of service, as well as Marines in Primary Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) 8999, are categorized under the Senior Enlisted Alignment Plan (SEAP).



To request reenlistment, a Marine submits a Reenlistment, Extension, and Lateral Move (RELM) request through their unit Career Counselor. After a preliminary eligibility screening and options counseling session, the Marine must secure endorsements from their company leadership. The Career Counselor then validates the request and forwards it through the chain of command. Once fully endorsed, the RELM package is scanned into the Total Force Retention System (TFRS) and routed to the Career Counselor SNCOIC for review.

If approved, Manpower Management Enlisted Assignments (MMEA) adjudicates the request. The decision is returned via TFRS to the Career Counselor, who briefs the Marine and their commanding officer. If the Marine accepts the offer, the Career Counselor prepares reenlistment paperwork, coordinates the ceremony, and ensures all administrative reporting is completed.

2. Organization of the Career Planning Program

The Career Planning Program operates across multiple levels of the Marine Corps' organizational structure. While the program is administered by Headquarters Marine Corps, its execution depends on leadership at every echelon—from general officers to unit-level staff noncommissioned officers (SNCOs). The following subsections outline the key organizational stakeholders responsible for shaping and executing enlisted retention efforts.

a. Headquarters Marine Corps: Enlisted Retention Section (MMEA-1):

According to MCO 1040.31, the Enlisted Retention Section, now designated MMEA-1, oversees the Marine Corps' enlisted retention campaign, develops policy, and manages the Total Force Retention System (TFRS). MMEA-1 is a section of the Enlisted Assignments Branch of Headquarters, Marine Corps. Staff within MMEA-1 process all retention requests, enforce policy compliance, and advise the Commandant of the Marine Corps (CMC) and Deputy Commandant for Manpower and Reserve Affairs (DC M&RA) on matters related to enlisted retention. This section serves as the institutional hub for all career counselor activities across the active component (HQMC, 2010).



b. Commanding Generals and Commanding Officers

Commanding Generals (O-7 to O-9) and Commanding Officers (O-5 and O-6) hold ultimate responsibility for the success of their unit's Career Planning Program. *Enlisted Retention and Career Development Program*, MCO 1040.31, charges them with properly employing their Career Counselors and ensuring that subordinate leaders prioritize retention efforts (HQMC, 2010). Their leadership sets the tone for how retention is valued and executed within the command.

c. Executive Officers and Chiefs of Staff

Executive Officers (XOs) and Chiefs of Staff often serve as the Reporting Seniors (RS) for Career Counselors on fitness reports, when this responsibility is delegated by the Commanding Officer. Although MCO 1040.31 permits delegation no lower than XO or Chief of Staff, these officers are not otherwise assigned direct retention tasks in official doctrine (HQMC, 2010). Nevertheless, their oversight role can influence how retention programs are carried out within a command.

d. Sergeants Major and First Sergeants (MOS 8999)

While not formally listed in MCO 1040.31 as part of the program's chain of command, Sergeants Major and First Sergeants play critical roles in supporting enlisted retention. According to the *MOS Manual*, NAVMC 1200.1K, they are expected to actively screen Marines for special duty assignments, "B" billets, and overseas assignments (HQMC, 2024a). At the O-4 and O-5 command level, Sergeants Major advise commanders on retention matters, assist commanders with the career development of all enlisted personnel, and provide guidance to collateral duty staff, including Career Counselors (HQMC, 2024a).

e. Officers and Staff Noncommissioned Officers

Leaders at the section, platoon, and company levels often act as informal influencers in the reenlistment decisions of the Marines they lead. Although not explicitly tasked by doctrine, their opinions and mentoring directly impact the retention culture



within a unit. Their support is essential to reinforcing the Career Counselor's efforts and maintaining a positive view of continued service.

f. Career Counselors (MOS 4821)

Career Counselors serve as the commander's subject matter experts on enlisted retention and manage the unit's Career Planning Program. Assigned as special staff officers, they advise commanders, counsel Marines, and ensure the accurate and timely processing of all retention-related documentation. Career Counselors are uniquely positioned to bridge the strategic goals of the institution with the individual goals of Marines. Their roles and billet structure are further detailed in Section B.

B. CAREER COUNSELORS: MOS 4821

1. Origin and Development of the MOS

According to Goodrum (2003), the Career Counselor military occupational specialty (MOS 4821) evolved in response to significant retention challenges faced by the Marine Corps in the late 1990s. Initially a collateral duty or "B" billet, the role became a Primary MOS (PMOS) in 2003 to professionalize and centralize enlisted retention efforts (Goodrum, 2003). Cole (2014) explained that the MOS had undergone several name and occupational field changes, including previous designations such as Career Planner and Career Retention Specialist. It began as MOS 8421, then became 0147, and was ultimately reclassified as 4821 (Cole, 2014). A review of the recent MOS Manuals, published annually, revealed that the current title, Career Counselor, was only officially adopted on October 1, 2024 (HQMC, 2024a).

According to a former version of the program's governing order, MCO 1040.31B, unit commanders selected Career Counselors from within their ranks, often assigning them for tours of two years or longer (HQMC, 1980). By creating a dedicated occupational field, the Marine Corps sought to build institutional knowledge, ensure consistency in program execution, and enhance the credibility of its retention force (Goodrum, 2003).



2. Duties and Expectations

Career Counselors serve as counselors, advisors, and administrators within their assigned commands. These functions directly support the commander's retention objectives and enable Marines to make informed decisions about continued service.

As counselors, they conduct structured interviews with individual Marines to assess career goals, explain available retention pathways, and identify opportunities that align the needs of the service with the interests of the Marine. MCO 1040.31 explains, these interviews are intended to be purposeful and persuasive, and to occur at designated periods within a Marine's enlistment, as to promote effective decision-making (HQMC, 2010).

As advisors, Career Counselors provide commanders, executive officers, and senior enlisted leaders with timely updates on retention cases, policy changes, and program performance. They are expected to develop and maintain command-specific assessments of retention posture and to provide informed recommendations on how to improve results.

As administrators, they are responsible for the generation, tracking, and completion of all retention-related documentation. This includes but is not limited to RELM requests, screening packages for special duty assignments, reenlistment contracts, and extensions of enlistment. They ensure all submissions meet policy requirements and are processed accurately and without delay.

Each of these functions supports the broader objective of retaining high-quality Marines and executing the command's responsibilities within the Career Planning Program.

3. Billet Structure and Assignment Levels

Marines enter the 4821 MOS through a lateral move after completing at least one enlistment, beginning at the rank of Sergeant (E-5). Career progression is tied to a combination of billet complexity, rank, and experience. The following describes the primary billet types of Career Counselors:



a. *Unit-Level Career Counselor*

This is the foundational billet in the MOS, typically assigned to battalion or squadron-level commands under an O-5 or O-6 Commanding Officer. These Marines operate independently and are responsible for all aspects of the unit's Career Planning Program. Although it is considered an entry-level role within the MOS, billets are valid for Marines ranging from E-5 to E-7.

b. *Career Counselor SNCOIC*

Serving at the regimental or group level, Career Counselor Staff Noncommissioned Officers in Charge (SNCOICs) oversee both their own command's program and those of subordinate units. In addition to processing high-level retention packages, SNCOICs conduct quality control, evaluate counselor performance, and deliver monthly training (HQMC, 2010). These billets are held by E-6s and E-7s.

c. *General Officer-Level Career Counselor*

Assigned to staffs led by general officers (O-7 to O-9), these senior Career Counselors supervise Career Planning Programs across an entire major command. At the O-7 and O-8 levels, these billets are typically staffed by E-7s or E-8s and often include an assistant Career Counselor. At the O-9 level, a single E-9 is assigned with no assistant. Per the *Recruiting and Retention Training and Readiness Manual*, NAVMC 3500.71D and MCO 1040.31, these Marines are required to provide quarterly training for both subordinate SNCOICs and unit career counselors and advise Commanding Generals on enlisted retention matters (HQMC, 2018; HQMC, 2010).

d. *Headquarters and Support Billets*

Outside of the operating forces, senior 4821s are assigned to critical roles within Headquarters Marine Corps, primarily at MMEA. These include the Retention Chief, Assistant Retention Chief, Processing Chief, and Retention Liaisons. These billets typically range from E-6 to E-9. Additionally, three Career Counselors serve as instructors at the Career Counselor Courses located at Marine Corps Recruiter School in San Diego, CA.



4. Training and Professional Development

There are two formal training courses for Career Counselors: The Basic Career Counselor Course (BCCC) and the Advanced Career Counselor Course (ACCC), both delivered by the Marine Corps Recruiter School.

a. Basic Career Counselor Course (BCCC)

This seven-week program trains new Career Counselors in public speaking, communication, sales techniques, interview strategies, and administrative tasks. Marines must complete this course to earn the 4821 MOS.

b. Advanced Career Counselor Course (ACCC)

Designed for experienced career counselors, this three-week course prepares Marines for SNCOIC responsibilities. It expands on topics from the BCCC and includes the “Advanced Tools for Coaching (AT4C)” curriculum. Per the *MOS Manual*, Staff Sergeants must complete this course within two years of promotion or before assuming a SNCOIC role (HQMC, 2024a).

c. General Officer-Level Career Counselor Training

As of 2024, no formal course exists for a General Officer-Level Career Counselor. However, the updated Recruiting and Retention Training and Readiness (T&R) Manual (available within the Marine Corps Training Input Management System [MCTIMS]) outlines new training requirements and performance standards for these billets, not reflected in the 2018 version of the reference. This change demonstrates a change in the organization’s training approach to senior career counselors.

C. RECENT POLICY SHIFTS SHAPING THE CURRENT ENVIRONMENT

1. The Strategic Shift: From “Recruit and Replace” to “Retain and Invest”

In *Talent Management 2030*, released in October 2021, then-Commandant of the Marine Corps, General David H. Berger, outlined a vision for modernizing the Marine Corps’ legacy manpower system. Central to this reform was the shift away from the



historically high-turnover “Recruit and Replace” model, under which approximately 75% of first-term Marines separated at the end of their contract, toward a more sustainable “Retain and Invest” approach (Berger, 2021).

This new model aimed to preserve the time and resources invested in trained Marines, reduce strain on entry-level training and recruiting, and build a more mature, disciplined, and technically capable enlisted force (Reid, 2021). Berger’s intent was clear: retention was no longer a supplemental function to recruiting, but an equal pillar in sustaining the force. As his successor, General Eric Smith, later emphasized, “No single issue is more existential for our Corps than recruiting and retaining high-quality Marines” (United States Marine Corps [USMCA], 2024, pp. 9).

2. Retention Reforms under Talent Management 2030

This strategic shift drove a wave of policy changes designed to increase opportunities, reduce administrative friction, and empower commanders to act earlier in the retention cycle.

In late 2019, the Marine Corps introduced the Delegation of Retention Authority and Early Reenlistment Authority via Marine Administrative Message(MARADMIN) (HQMC, 2019). These programs granted Major Subordinate Command (MSC) Commanding Generals new authority in the Career Planning Program to reenlist select high-performing Marines at their level or recommend others for reenlistment ahead of the normal retention timeline. Together, these initiatives represented an early move towards the service’s desire for a reenlistment process that paired decentralized execution with centralized oversight, as described in the *Fiscal Year 2022 Enlisted Retention Campaign Plan* (HQMC, 2021b).

Building on these changes, the Marine Corps launched the Commandant’s Retention Program (CRP) in May 2022. According to the program’s initial announcement, MARADMIN 271/22, CRP, one of the first programs to follow Talent Management 2030s publication in November 2021, pre-approved top-performing first-term Marines for reenlistment, offering benefits such as assignment of choice, reduced administrative burden, and public recognition via MARADMIN published to the entire force (HQMC,



2022a). The CRP allowed unit commanders to target exceptional first-term Marines and expedite their retention.

Simultaneously, the Early Reenlistment Authority expanded. In FY2023, MARADMIN 590/22 was released, which announced Tier I-III Marines were authorized to reenlist up to one year early without a Commanding General's endorsement, depending on MOS competitiveness (HQMC, 2022b). This marked a transition away from isolated early reenlistment programs and toward a more fluid and continuous retention cycle.

3. The Multi-Cohort Retention Model

To accommodate early reenlistments and rising retention demands, the Marine Corps adopted the Multi-Cohort Retention Model in 2023. While retention campaigns have always overlapped, this model formalized and expanded the overlap between fiscal year cohorts.

Historically, retention campaigns were launched in July for the upcoming fiscal year, as Figure 1 demonstrates (M. Richardson, email to author, May 5, 2025). Marines whose contracts expired in the early months of that fiscal year faced compressed decision timelines. Under the new model, reenlistment opportunities arrive earlier, and campaign windows extend longer, often overlapping by as much as nine months.



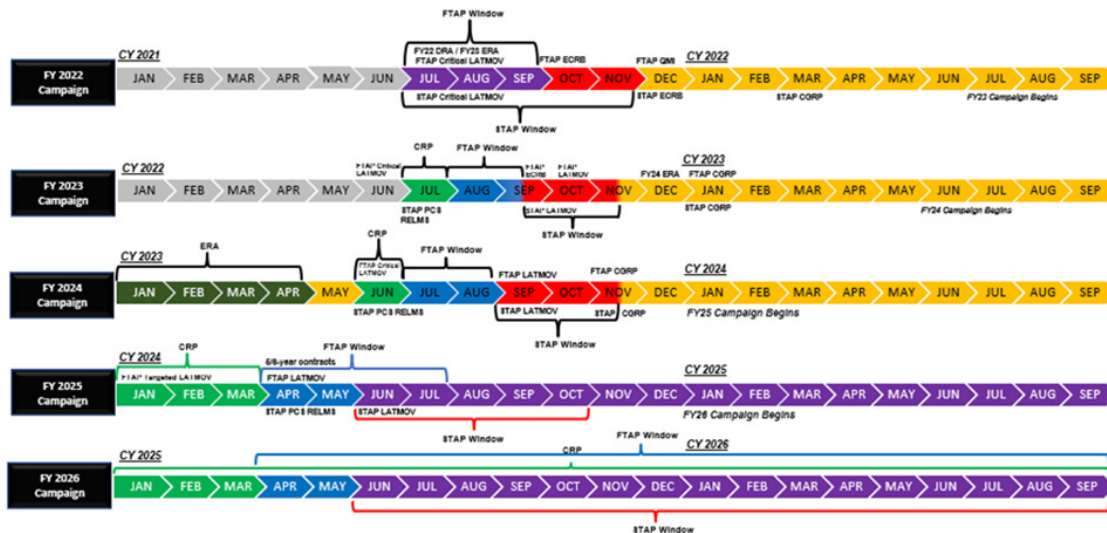


Figure 1. Retention Timeline Comparison FY22-26, Adapted from M. Richardson, MMEA-1, email to author (May 5, 2025).

For example, only three months of the FY22 retention campaign overlapped with FY23, while half of the FY25 campaign coincided with FY26 execution. This sustained overlap has increased administrative workload and added complexity to managing timelines, screening requirements, and policy changes across cohorts.

4. Institutionalizing Command Involvement: The Command Retention Mission

In June 2021, the Marine Corps introduced the Command Retention Mission (CRM) via MARADMIN 335/221 as a mechanism to drive greater command-level accountability in enlisted retention (HQMC, 2021c). For the first time, Commanding Generals of 27 major commands received formal retention goals aligned to their unit's size and occupational field composition. These missions, directed by the Commandant himself, required Commanding Generals to ensure their commands reenlisted their fair share of eligible Marines by MOS and category.

Commanders retained discretion to delegate these missions to subordinate commanders, though they remained ultimately responsible for outcomes. Execution and reporting responsibilities were shared between the General Officer-level Career Counselor

and the Assistant Retention Chief at MMEA-1. The CRM marked a fundamental cultural shift: retention was no longer a staff function; it was a command priority. It served as a forcing function to ensure senior leaders actively engaged in shaping the future of the force, rather than relying solely on career counselors or administrative processes.

5. Emerging Responsibilities: The Direct Affiliation Program (DAP)

In September 2023, the Marine Corps expanded the scope of its retention efforts by assigning General Officers an additional mission, the Direct Affiliation Program (DAP). Under this initiative, MARADMIN 446/23 tasked commanders were tasked with retaining a fair share of active component Marines into the Selected Marine Corps Reserve (SMCR), supporting a broader Total Force retention strategy (HQMC, 2023b).

According to MARADMIN 395/23, the responsibility for the Direct Affiliation Program (DAP) was transferred from Marine Corps Recruiting Command to MMEA earlier that year (HQMC, 2023a). To facilitate the transition, Active Reserve Career Counselors and Prior Service Recruiters were reassigned to General Officer-level Career Counselor offices across the Fleet Marine Force. This expansion increased both the workload and scope of responsibilities for Career Counselors, but it was the first such increase to include a corresponding adjustment to personnel structure.

D. MARINE CORPS RECRUITING

1. Mission and Organizational Structure

The mission of Marine Corps Recruiting Command (MCRC) is to access qualified individuals into the active and reserve components of the Marine Corps. Munoz (2005) described the unique nature of MCRC's organizational structure in his Master's thesis. According to Munoz, MCRC is led by a Major General (O-8) and serves as a direct report to the Commandant of the Marine Corps while remaining administratively subordinate to the Deputy Commandant for Manpower and Reserve Affairs (Munoz, 2005). This dual reporting structure reflects the strategic importance of recruiting to the institutional health of the Marine Corps.



MCRC is organized into two Recruiting Regions, each commanded by a Brigadier General (O-7), and further divided into six Recruiting Districts commanded by Colonels (O-6). Beneath the districts are 48 Recruiting Stations led by Majors (O-4), each overseeing Recruiting Substations (RSS) for enlisted accessions and Officer Selection Teams (OST) for officer procurement. These units operate across the United States, its territories, and select overseas locations. Figure 2 illustrates MCRC's organizational hierarchy.

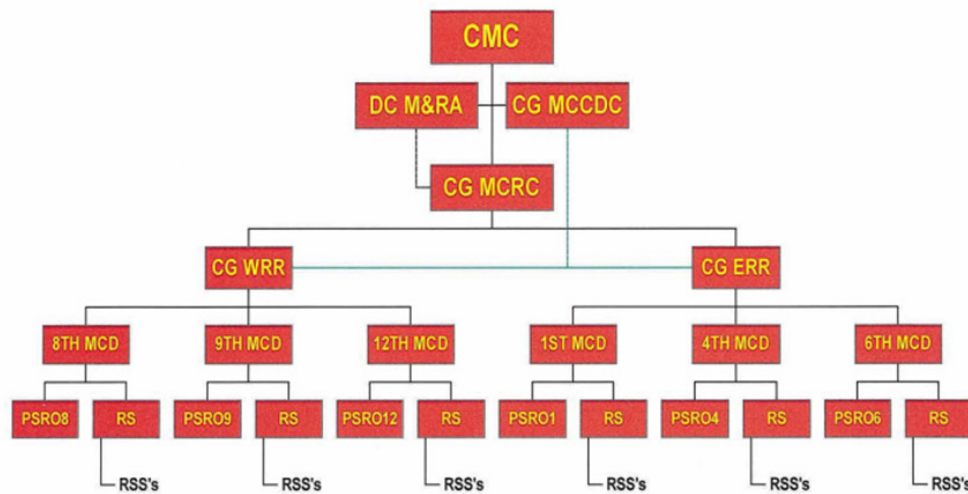


Figure 2. Marine Corps Recruiting Command Structure.
Source: HQMC (2009).

2. Recruiting Doctrine and Oversight

MCRC operates under a system of procedural guidebooks specific to each command echelon, as outlined in MCO 1130.76D, *Conduct of Recruiting Operations*. These documents provide standardized methods for conducting recruiting operations and offer a framework for evaluating performance, diagnosing problems, and implementing corrective actions. This doctrinal structure reinforces consistency and enables senior leaders to maintain effective oversight over a distributed and persistent mission (HQMC, 2017).

Unlike the decentralized and commander-owned nature of enlisted retention, Marine Corps recruiting is highly centralized, unified under a single command, and executed through a chain of command designed specifically for continuous mission execution.

3. Formal Training Infrastructure

MCRC manages two formal training centers: Recruiter School in San Diego, CA, and the National Conference Center in Leesburg, VA.

Recruiters School delivers entry-level training for both enlisted and prior-service recruiters. It hosts the Basic Recruiter Course and Basic Prior Service Recruiter Course, which prepare Marines for duty in MOS 8411 and 8421, respectively.

The National Conference Center provides advanced and leadership-level instruction. Courses include the Executive Officer Course, Officer Selection Officer Course, Operations Course, Career Recruiter Course, and Recruiting Management Course, among others.

In addition to these formal schools, MCRC units conduct command-sponsored training through their internal structure. Recruiting Instructors, District Training Teams, Region Training Teams, and the National Training Team deliver continuous instruction, coaching, and performance evaluation at every level of the command. These teams ensure consistency, reinforce doctrinal best practices, and provide timely remediation as needed.

4. Recruiting-Specific Military Occupational Specialties

The recruiting enterprise includes a variety of MOSs across both enlisted and officer ranks. These roles are grouped within Occupational Field 84-Recruiting and Retention and Occupational Field 48-Recruiting Officers. Below is an overview of key recruiting MOSs as outlined in the MOS Manual (HQMC, 2024a):



a. *Enlisted MOSs*

(1) Recruiter (8411, E-5 to E-6)

Marines in this Excepted MOS (EMOS) complete the Basic Recruiter Course and serve 36-month tours. Their responsibilities include prospecting, applicant screening, Military Entrance Processing Station (MEPS) coordination, documentation, and preparation for recruit training (HQMC, 2024a).

(2) Career Recruiter (8412, E-6 to E-9)

This PMOS is awarded to high-performing recruiters accepted for a lateral move into a permanent recruiting role. They fill leadership billets such as SNCOIC, Operations Chief, and Recruiting Instructor (HQMC, 2024a). Career Recruiters are the professional cadre that complement the temporary nature of recruiter assignments.

(3) Production Recruiter (8421, E-5 to E-6)

Active Reserve (AR) Marines with this EMOS recruit prior-service members from the Individual Ready Reserve (IRR) into the Selected Marine Corps Reserve (SMCR). Their duties are similar to 8411s but exclude recruit training preparation (HQMC, 2024a).

(4) Career Prior Service Recruiter (8422, E-7 to E-9)

This PMOS is the AR equivalent of an 8412 for prior-service recruiting. They serve in roles parallel to 8412s but exclusively support prior-service accessions (HQMC, 2024a).

b. *Officer MOSs*

(1) Recruiting Officer-Marine Corps Total Force Expert-Recruiting Station Commanding Officer (4801, O-3 to O-5)

Majors and Major-selects are screened for Recruiting Station Commanding Officer Billets annually and are selected based on “demonstrated great leadership potential” and successful tours reflecting “outstanding leadership abilities”(HQMC, 2024b). Officers who hold this FMOS have completed the Recruiting Management Course and successfully served a tour as a Recruiting Station Commanding Officer (HQMC, 2024a).



- (2) Recruiting Officer-Operational Expert-Recruiting Station Executive / Operations Officer (4802, O-2 to O-5)

Officers are selected for these billets through the annual MCRC Company Officers Selection Panel (HQMC, 2024c). They are responsible for supervising recruiting operations, fiscal planning, officer procurement, and managing local engagement with high schools and community colleges (HQMC, 2024a). To earn this MOS, officers must complete the Recruiting Management Course and either the Executive Officer Course or the Operations Course. The FMOS is awarded upon successful completion of a tour as a Recruiting Station Executive Officer or Operations Officer (HQMC, 2024a).

- (3) Recruiting Officer-Officer Recruiting Expert-Recruiting Station Officer Selection Officer (4803, O-2 to O-5):

These officers lead Officer Selection Teams and are responsible for the identification and procurement of officer candidates. They must complete the Officer Selection Officer Course and are typically supported by a civilian Human Resources Assistant (HQMC, 2024a). The MOS is awarded upon successful completion of a tour as an Officer Selection Officer (HQMC, 2024a).

- (4) Recruiting Officer-Multiple Tour Expert (4804, Capt to Col):

This Free MOS is awarded to officers who have previously held MOS 4801, 4802, or 4803 and are selected for subsequent command or senior staff billets within the Marine Corps Recruiting Command. This MOS facilitates continuity and long-term recruiting expertise (HQMC, 2024a).

- (5) Career Recruiting Officer (4810, CWO2 to CWO5):

This PMOS is awarded to warrant officers selected for their superior performance, technical proficiency, and leadership as Career Recruiters (MOS 8412). Career Recruiting Officers serve as permanent members of the recruiting force and provide continuity, technical expertise, and oversight across MCRC. They may be assigned to Recruiting Stations, Districts, or higher headquarters, where they supervise operations, advise commanders, and support training and policy implementation. To assume this MOS,



warrant officers must complete the Warrant Officer Basic Course, Recruiting Management Course, Operations Course, and MEPS Liaison Course (HQMC, 2024a).

E. CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter provided an overview of the institutional framework shaping enlisted retention in the Marine Corps. It outlined the structure and mission of the Career Planning Program, recent policy developments that have increased command-level involvement, and the expanding responsibilities placed on Career Counselors. It also contrasted the decentralized nature of retention with the more unified and doctrinally supported recruiting enterprise. Together, these institutional elements form the context in which Career Counselors operate and shape the conditions explored in the following chapter's review of relevant literature.



III. LITERATURE REVIEW

This thesis evaluates the Marine Corps' Career Planning Program in light of increasing mission demands following the publication of *Talent Management 2030*. While military retention is widely studied, such scholarship focuses largely on policy impacts, such as bonuses, changes to retirement, civilian market factors, etc. They focus on the member and their decision to stay or go. In this research, I shift focus from the majority of military retention research to the workforce influencing the retention decision. To first understand the impact of change, I examined organizational behavior literature, which suggests increases in workloads can threaten organizational change by causing burnout and increasing attrition. One recent empirical study suggests the organization design of the Career Planning Program suffers from a lack of clear authority.

A. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS: ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR

The Marine Corps is undergoing a transformative change from a counterinsurgency force to a force prepared to face a near-peer adversary. To achieve those ends, the service is implementing significant reforms in Force Design, Talent Management, Training and Education, and Installation and Logistics. Within the Marine Corps' Talent Management change portfolio, the first line of effort is the rebalancing of recruiting and retention (Borgschulte, 2024). Leaders should consider the shift from a recruiting-first model to one that gives equal focus to retaining talent as its change initiative, a "project within a project" (Kotter, 1996).

One of the most highly regarded works on organizational change is *Leading Change* (1996) by Professor John P. Kotter. Based on his observations of change efforts across industries, Kotter proposed an *Eight-Step Process for Creating Major Change*. These steps include establishing a sense of urgency, creating a guiding coalition, developing a vision and strategy, communicating the vision, empowering broad-based action, generating short-term wins, consolidating gains, and anchoring new approaches within the organizational culture (Kotter, 1996, pp. 21). In later steps, Kotter stresses the need to align systems with the change vision and equip personnel with appropriate skills



and incentives. He also highlights the importance of using early wins to sustain momentum and institutionalize change through staffing and structural support (Kotter, 1996).

Kotter's model lacks an empirical foundation or reference to external sources and instead cites his personal experience as the basis for his conclusions (Kotter, 1996). Despite this lack of academic rigor, the book became wildly successful and remains a widely cited reference in change management literature. To evaluate the validity of Kotter's process, Appelbaum et al. (2012) conducted a meta-analysis of fifteen years of peer-reviewed research on organizational change. They assessed the relevance and empirical support for each of the eight steps and the importance of their sequencing. Drawing from studies across sectors, including healthcare, manufacturing, and public organizations, they found consistent support for the core principles of the model, particularly for the importance of establishing urgency, building a coalition, and communicating a clear vision. However, they also noted that most studies were retrospective and observational, limiting causal claims. The authors emphasized the lack of longitudinal studies and the difficulty of isolating the effects of each step in practice. Nonetheless, their analysis concluded that each of Kotter's steps remains relevant, and that the general sequencing of the model aligns with successful change efforts. While more rigorous, prospective studies are needed, Appelbaum et al.'s work adds meaningful empirical support to a model originally built from experience and practitioner insight. In addition to system-level change, leaders must also consider the personal toll that sustained transformation efforts can have on their workforce.

Kotter acknowledges that temporarily increasing workload can heighten urgency during a change initiative, but warns of the risks associated with prolonged overburdening. Sustained extra workload and the effort required to adapt to institutional change pose significant challenges to the success of a change project (Sirkin et al., 2011). The following section explores how workload and organizational conditions affect individual well-being through the lens of burnout theory and the Job Demand-Resource model.

Leaders should be sensitive to the well-being of subordinates, particularly when they face sustained increases in work demands. The risk of excessive work demands, especially in people-centric roles, is employee burnout. Researchers define burnout as a



negative psychological reaction to one's work environment, characterized by emotional exhaustion, a negative trend in professional relationships (cynicism), and a decreased sense of personal accomplishment (Maslach et al., 2009). Maslach and Jackson (1981) introduced the first version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory to measure burnout theories based on prior qualitative research. Their final products provided a clear method to measure each of the three accepted burnout criteria. Continued research into burnout resulted in variations of the measurement tool, tailored to a broader range of occupations. Experts currently consider the Maslach Burnout Inventory the “gold standard” for measuring burnout, with three variations targeting different occupations (Maslach et al., 2009). To reduce the occurrence of burnout, research suggests intervention strategies that promote job engagement, the “antipode of burnout” (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Demerouti et al. (2001) developed the Job Demand-Resource model of burnout (see Figure 3) to demonstrate how work characteristics and resources affect burnout. Using structural equation modeling, they showed that job demands, such as workload and time pressure, contribute to exhaustion, while the lack of resources, such as supervisor feedback, incentives, and leadership support, leads to disengagement (Demerouti et al., 2001, pp.508).

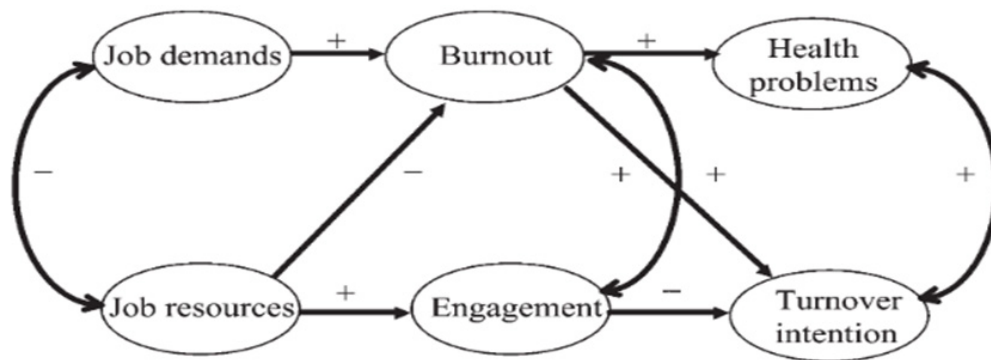


Figure 3. Job Demand-Resource Model.
Adapted from Schaufeli and Bakker (2004).

Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) conducted a multi-sample study to test the Job Demand-Resource model and its ability to predict adverse outcomes in the workplace.

They collected data from four different occupational groups, with sample sizes ranging from 202 to 608 participants. The researchers used validated instruments to measure job demands, such as work overload and emotional demands, as well as job resources, including feedback, social support, and coaching (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). They also measured the three recognized dimensions of burnout and the three dimensions of engagement. Outcome variables such as health complaints and intentions to leave the organization were also recorded (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). To confirm their hypotheses, the researchers applied structural equation modeling to examine the relationships between multiple variables simultaneously. The analysis showed that job demands were strong predictors of burnout, especially emotional exhaustion, while job resources were closely associated with engagement. In addition, burnout was positively correlated with negative outcomes, while engagement coincided with more favorable organizational results (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). These findings support the core idea of the Job Demand-Resource model: that increasing available resources or reducing excessive job demands can lower the risk of burnout, improve employee engagement, and reduce negative outcomes such as health problems and attrition. While the previous sections focused on organizational dynamics and psychological outcomes, this section turns to leadership structures and accountability within the Marine Corps' recruiting and retention systems.

B. EMPIRICAL RESEARCH: RECRUITING AND RETENTION

In the Marine Corps' Human Resource Development Process, the Marine Corps presents recruiting and retention as equivalent activities employed to meet the service's manpower requirements (HQMC, 2021a). Their close association may lead some to draw false equivalency between the two, but their organization, structure, and level of investment could not be more dissimilar. For example, Hastings (2023) examined the relationship between these two Marine Corps activities and provided recommendations for closer integration to improve retention and meet the service's talent management objectives. Her qualitative research examined the relationship between the enterprises, using a survey of nine Marine Recruiters and Career Counselors, an examination of the two information systems they employ, and a review of their top-level organizational structure.



To evaluate the organizational design of the Marine Corps' recruiting and retention activities, Hastings applied Skin in the Game theory (Taleb, 2018). This theory argues that risk is the key element in fair and just systems, and that the absence of risk for decision-makers is a major flaw in modern society (Taleb, 2018). Hastings distilled four principles from Skin in the Game theory and assessed their application to recruiting, retention, and leadership within each organization. She identified a lack of accountability as the primary theme in retention. According to Hastings, career counselors and their commanders lack skin in the game because retention in the Marine Corps "is everyone's problem, [so] it ends up no one's problem" (Hastings, 2023). She recommends reengineering the career counseling force to better align with the leadership structure of Marine Corps Recruiting Command, thereby increasing accountability and ensuring skin in the game.

Hastings highlighted the risk imbalance present between the recruiter and the career counselor, but overlooked the role of organizational leadership at lower levels. To ensure success on recruiting duty, the Marine Corps employs a rigorous selection process that aims to identify officers with strong leadership potential to serve as Recruiting Station Commanding Officers (HQMC, 2024b). Munoz (2005) examined the effects the Marine Corps' formal, rigorous screening board had on recruiting success. Using descriptive analysis of the Recruiting Station Commanding Officer populations before and after the start of the formal board selection process in 1996, he found a significant decrease in the number of reliefs for cause and an increase in combat arms officers selected for the position (Munoz, 2005). His research was limited in its approach as it did not examine any performance metrics of recruiting stations, such as contracting or shipping mission attainment, but it does suggest a link between leadership quality and performance, given the drop in relief rates. Such a link may apply to retention, as it appears to be in Marine Corps recruiting.

The primary mission of the Marine Corps' Career Planning Program assumes a causal link between interview activities and the decision of individual Marines to reenlist, but I found no studies measuring such a relationship. Brooks et al. (2024) used first-term interviews to identify the factors that contribute to Marines' decisions to reenlist or separate. Their study found value in the free-text portions of interviews, which captured



discussions between career counselors and first-term Marines, including the specific reasons why Marines intended to separate. Using natural language processing models, they analyzed 174,223 first-term interviews from fiscal year 2020–2022, from which they identified 26 themes, which they later binned into five major themes: jobs, self, relationship with family, leadership, and military life (Brooks et al., 2024).

Among the 26 themes identified by Brooks et al., the top four were: “Belief there are Better Career Opportunities Elsewhere,” “Service is Physically/Mentally More Than Marine Can Handle,” “Desire for More Pay,” and “Desire for More Family Time.” These four themes carried nearly equal weight, accounting for between 11.03%-10.15% of the interview content. Aside from the themes addressing ineligibility for continued service, the remaining themes primarily centered on aspects of job satisfaction and quality-of-life matters, ranging from 8.5%-0.1% of the interview content. These themes align with common retention prediction models such as the Annualized-Cost-of-Leaving Model and the Dynamic Retention Models which at their core suggest the decision to separate is based on a comparison of military compensation plus an individual’s satisfaction with military life (tastes) to the perceived value of civilian earnings (Arkes et al., 2019). As reasonable actors, service members decide whether to reenlist or separate by selecting the greater value. As Brooks et al. demonstrate, the tastes of first-term Marines vary widely. Therefore, the Marine Corps could improve retention by aligning non-monetary features and career opportunities more closely with individual preferences.

C. CHAPTER SUMMARY

This thesis provides a ground-level assessment of the Marine Corps’ Career Planning Program in its efforts to meet increased enlisted retention demands. Through qualitative analysis of career counselor experiences, it identifies strengths, shortcomings, and areas for improvement. The study also compares perspectives across elements of the Marine Air-Ground Task Force and command echelons. Its findings aim to inform recommendations for enhancing the career counselor specialty in support of the Marine Corps’ strategic talent management objectives.



IV. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

This research employed a two-phased approach to answer the primary and secondary research questions introduced in Chapter 1. The first phase used grounded analysis of semi-structured interviews with active-duty Career Counselors to explore the current challenges facing the Career Planning Program. The second phase consisted of a comparative analysis of Marine Corps Recruiting Command and the Career Planning Program to identify organizational capabilities that may improve retention outcomes. This chapter details the methods used in both phases.

A. PHASE I METHODS: GROUNDED ANALYSIS

This section outlines the population interviewed for this thesis, the participant selection process, interview procedures, and the analytical methods used to develop the study's findings. A grounded analysis approach was employed to address the primary research questions: *How can the Career Planning Program be enhanced?* and *What challenges are Career Counselors facing given increased retention demands?* This approach aimed to capture insights from enlisted retention professionals operating at the unit level on four core topics: (1) the effects of recent policy changes, (2) training, (3) authority and responsibility, and (4) supervision. These topics informed the study's primary and secondary research questions. Participants were exclusively active-duty Career Counselors who had completed the Basic Career Counselor Course and were serving in valid 4821 billets within operational commands. Between January 11 and March 14, 2025, I conducted 25 semi-structured interviews with Career Counselors assigned across various command echelons and supervisory levels. Of the participants, 13 served as unit-level Career Counselors, 7 as Career Counselor SNCOICs, and 5 as General Officer-level Career Counselors. On average, participants had 7.2 years of MOS experience, were 31 years old, and 68% reported that their current command fell within the Air, Ground, or Logistics Combat Elements of the Marine Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTF).



1. Participant Selection Process

I used a purposeful selection strategy to identify participants. The Institutional Review Boards (IRB) for both the Naval Postgraduate School and the Marine Corps, along with the Marine Corps' Survey Control Office, approved my request to interview up to 30 Marines in support of this research. My selection target included up to 5 General Officer-Level Career Counselors, up to 10 Career Counselor SNCOICs, and up to 15 unit-level Career Counselors.

To identify potential participants, I relied on the publicly available Career Counselor Directory, posted on the "Stay Marine" section of the Marine Corps' Manpower website. This directory included the names, ranks, contact information, units, and billet details for 440 Career Counselors. Although I retrieved the directory in early December 2024, it had last updated on July 17, 2024, which introduced some data currency concerns.

Using the Billet MOS (BMOS) and unit names listed, I categorized each Marine by billet type. This process excluded 44 Marines whose billets did not align with the research scope.

To ensure representation of both sexes across billet categories, I inferred the sex of each Career Counselor based on their first name. When uncertain, I used large language models (primarily Google's Gemini or OpenAI's ChatGPT) to determine likely sex. Based on this process, I estimated the male representation within each billet type as follows: Career Counselors-61%, SNCOICs-71%, and General Officer-Level Counselors-83%.

Using Microsoft Excel's random number generator, I generated a list of primary and alternate candidates from each billet group. I resampled the list until the gender representation of the primary selectees approximated that of the broader population for each billet type.

With the sample finalized, I emailed interview invitations to the primary selectees using their listed contact information (see Appendix A). If no response was received within one week, I sent a follow-up message via Microsoft Teams. If a participant declined or remained unresponsive, I contacted the next available alternate. Once a Marine agreed to



participate, I sent a confirmation email and shared the interview guide corresponding to their billet type (see Appendix B).

The final participation rate was 73.5%, with rates of 68.4% for unit-level Career Counselors, 70% for SNCOICs, and 100% for General Officer-Level Career Counselors.

2. Interview Execution

I conducted 24 of the 25 interviews using Microsoft Teams to take advantage of the platform's recording, transcription, and data storage capabilities. One interview was completed via Zoom for Government due to technical issues. On average, recorded interviews lasted 71 minutes, ranging from 43 to 92 minutes.

Each interview followed a standardized sequence. I began by introducing myself, my affiliation with the Naval Postgraduate School, and the research purpose. I then explained how participant anonymity would be preserved and how their feedback would contribute to the final analysis. With their permission to record secured, I read the following disclaimer as required by the USMC Survey Control Office:

Your participation in this interview is entirely voluntary. You have the right to stop participating at any time without giving a reason. If at any point you feel uncomfortable answering a question, you may skip it. All information you provide will be treated with the utmost confidentiality. Your anonymity will be maintained throughout the interview process (USMC Survey Office, email to author, October 17, 2024).

Following acknowledgment of the disclaimer, I proceeded with the interview using a script tailored to their billet type (see Appendices C, D, and E). After the interview, each participant completed a short demographic survey to support cross-population comparisons. Survey items included age, sex, race, ethnicity, marital status, number of dependents, education level, command type, unit size, commanding officer grade, and number of Career Counselors supervised (see Appendix F for survey details).

3. Interview Analysis

Following each interview, I reviewed the Microsoft Teams transcript against the audio recording to ensure accuracy. All names were replaced with anonymized identifiers



(e.g., Interviewee 1) to maintain participant confidentiality throughout the analytical process. Once finalized, each transcript was distilled into a research memo summarizing the participant's key insights across the four core topics of interest. These memos served as the foundation for identifying patterns and recurring themes.

This study employed a grounded analysis approach guided by the framework described by Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton in their 2013 article, *Seeking Qualitative Rigor in Inductive Research*. Using this method, I began by identifying ideas, first-order concepts, directly from participants' language, then distilled these into second-order themes to interpret underlying patterns, and finally into aggregate dimensions to address the research questions (Gioia et al., 2013, pp. 9). This approach allowed for the development of a visual framework that illustrates the relationship between concepts, themes, and overarching dimensions.

To support the analysis, I used AILYZE Pro, a qualitative data analysis platform that leverages its own AI model to assist with theme identification, frequency tracking, and cross-group comparison. The platform generated an initial output of 62 first-order concepts tied to 799 interview excerpts. Through iterative review and refinement, I merged related concepts into second-order themes, resulting in a final output of 25 concepts, 361 excerpts, six second-order themes, and two aggregate dimensions that form the structure of the final analytical model. Table 1 displays a frequency table showing the representation of each concept across all 25 interviews.



Table 1. Interview Concept Frequency Table

Concept	Interview																									Freq.
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	
Administrative, Policy, and Data Management Complexities Increase Workload	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	14
Career Counselor Well-being and Burnout from Sustained Workload Pressures	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	20
Increased Retention Mission Demands Intensify Career Counselor Workload	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	24
Staffing Shortages Cause Overwork and Limit Career Counselor Effectiveness	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	10
Additional Staffing Reduces Workload Stress and Improves Job Satisfaction	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	6
Administrative Complexity and Task Burden Increase Stress and Limit Satisfaction	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	5
Workload Intensity Drives Career Counselor Stress and Burnout	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	13
Workload Intrudes on Personal Life, Leading to Sacrifices and Burnout Risk	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	9
Enhanced Data Tools and Automation for Efficiency	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	13
Expanded Administrative Support and Adequate Staffing	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	17
Streamlined Administrative Processes and Clear Procedures	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	15
Active Leadership Engagement in the Career Planning Program	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	17
Empowering Career Counselors Through Leadership Support and Authority	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	18
Formal Mission Assignment and Evaluation as Accountability Mechanisms	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	6



Concept	Interview																									Freq.
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	
Leadership Accessibility Enhancing Command Awareness and Accountability	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	22
Leadership Recognition and Public Acknowledgment Drive Retention	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	12
Absence of Clear Standards Causes Confusion and Anxiety	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	13
Formal Evaluation Tools Exist but Are Inconsistently Applied	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	12
Leadership Engagement Enhances Feedback Accuracy and Accountability	0	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	16
Regular Meetings and Informal Feedback Foster Consistent Communication	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	11
Training Gaps Undermine Effectiveness of Evaluation and Feedback Systems	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	1	12
Engagement and Unit Resources Impact Training Quality and Consistency	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	21
Hands-On Training and Supervision Are Crucial for Skill Development	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	13
Trainer Selection and Standardized OJT Delivery Improve Outcomes	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	21
Updated, Practical Training Materials and Tools Enhance Readiness	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	21

Note. Frequency of first-order concepts across interviews, organized by second-order theme.



B. PHASE II METHODS: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

To conduct an instrumental comparative analysis of Marine Corps Recruiting Command and the Career Planning Program, I employed a range of techniques and data sources to address my secondary research question: What capabilities, personnel, or training, presently employed by MCRC, could enhance the Career Planning Program? This comparison focused on three primary areas: (1) mission outcomes and workforce trends, (2) leadership structure and accountability mechanisms, and (3) training and evaluation systems. The remainder of this section describes the data sources and analytic methods used to develop the findings presented in Chapter 6.

1. Mission and Workforce Trends

The first element of my comparative analysis of MCRC and the Career Planning Program sought to examine the trends in both mission outcomes and staffing trends from 2019 to 2024. That period is significant because fiscal year 2019 marked the beginning of General David H. Berger's tenure as Commandant of the Marine Corps and major institutional change within the manpower enterprise, while 2024 is the last full fiscal year available to measure results against. In both the literature on change management and the measurement of burnout, increased workloads and job demands are suggested to threaten both the success of change initiatives and employee well-being (Kotter, 1996). This element of the analysis was critical to quantify the change that is underway within these two organizations and the differing nature of their organizations' response to change.

a. Defense Manpower Profile Report

To obtain the annual enlisted accession results for Marine Corps Recruiting Command from 2019 to 2024, I retrieved Defense Manpower Profile Reports (DMPR) for Fiscal Years 2020 to 2025. These publicly available reports are published on the DoD's Office of the Under Secretary for Personnel and Readiness (OUSD(P&R)) website and detail each service's present manpower situation and plan across future years. Each report was organized in a near-identical fashion, with manpower component and service, which allowed for streamlined identification of regular, enlisted accessions into the active



component of the Marine Corps. Across all five reports retrieved, the data collected came from Table 3–3c: Marine Corps Active Duty Enlisted Gains and Losses, and the total for the row titled Regular Accessions (OUSD(P&R), 2019–2024). The data for each year, 2019–2024, was compiled in R Studio under the variable ‘Accession’ to be visualized against a comparable retention dataset from the enlisted retention.

b. Total Force Retention System

To obtain active-duty enlisted retention results for the Career Planning Program from 2019 to 2025, I requested access to the Total Force Retention System from MMEA-1. Within TFRS, I retrieved Boatspace Reports (BSR) from each fiscal year within my scope. As a Career Counselor, I was familiar with the specific nature of each element of the BSR and TFRS itself, which allowed me to navigate the system and use the report without outside assistance. The report is used to track real-time progress of the retention mission in the aggregate and at the individual MOS level. TFRS produces two BSRs for each fiscal year, one for the FTAP and one that combines the STAP and SEAP. From each report, I identified the total reenlistments for FTAP, STAP, and SEAP for each fiscal year and recorded them within R Studio under their variable. All three variables from the BSRs were merged in R Studio into a single ‘Retention’ variable, reflecting the total of active-duty reenlistments across the FTAP, STAP, and SEAP for fiscal years 2019–2024, respectively.

c. Total Force Data Warehouse

The Senior Marine Officer assigned to the Defense Manpower Data Center processed the data request from the Total Force Data Warehouse (TFDW) for the structure comparison portion of this analysis. For this comparison, I requested only information contained within the Marine1 dataset, which was primarily demographic and service data. I received annual snapshots from five TFDW sequences (367, 379, 391, 403, and 415), which correspond with the final data cycle of each fiscal year from 2019–2024. I also requested two distinct populations for this data. The first was active-duty Marines with the PMOS 4821, Career Counselors. The second population was all Marines, regardless of component, assigned to the commands of MCRC, which I defined by the following Unit



Identification Codes: MS5601, MS5602, MS5603, MS5604, MS5605, MS5606, and MS5607.

To develop a direct comparison of the workforces within recruiting and retention, I had to first isolate the element of MCRC's workforce that is dedicated to enlisted recruiting. Based on the prior examination of the MOS structure, this required me to isolate Marines serving in the BMOS of 8411 and the PMOS of 8412 and exclude BMOS 8421 and PMOS 8422 (which directly support prior service recruiting). I cleaned and merged the two datasets in R Studio to develop a dual-axis line plot to demonstrate the staffing trend of the two workforces.

2. Leadership Structure and Accountability

The second element of my comparative analysis explored the leadership structures and accountability differences between the two manpower enterprises. For this analysis, I relied on the organizational structures I introduced in Chapter 2, Sections A and D, and the Skin in the Game theory, introduced in Chapter 3, Section B. The purpose of this section is twofold: (1) directly compare the leadership structure of each organization at the unit and organizational level, and (2) identify the effects the leadership structure had on accountability and skin in the game. This approach allowed for the clear identification of MCRC organizational designs that could have a positive impact on the Career Planning Program.

3. Training and Evaluation

The final portion of my instrumental comparative analysis of Marine Corps Recruiting Command and the Career Planning Program focused on the way Recruiters and Career Counselors are trained and evaluated. For this assessment, I relied exclusively on governing policy for each organization. For MCRC, I examined *Volume I: Recruiting Sub-Station Operations, Recruiting Sub-Station (RSS)*, and for the Career Planning Program, I used the *Enlisted Retention and Career Development Program*, MCO 1040.31. Since both Career Counselors and Recruiters are trained at Recruiter School, it is reasonable to assume there would be similarities in training designs that extend beyond the formal school environment. Using a simple design, I compared the organizational approach in terms of



both training and evaluation milestones, but also the level of specificity and oversight established by doctrine. This methodology facilitated a clear distinction between the programs, while allowing for the identification of portions that may be directly transferable to the Career Planning Program.

C. LIMITATIONS

By design, this research limited its interview population to a specific subgroup of Marine Corps Career Counselors: those serving on active duty within operational commands. This excluded active reserve Career Counselors and those assigned to headquarters, support, or external billets.

Additionally, the interview protocol posed challenges for participants with limited time in the MOS. Several questions focused on policy impacts over the past three to four years; however, six of the Marines interviewed had not yet served three full years as Career Counselors. In these cases, questions were simplified to maintain consistency across interviews. If this study were to be repeated with the same objectives, narrowing the sample to include only more experienced Career Counselors would likely improve the reliability of responses to policy-related questions.

A final limitation relates to my professional relationship with the interview population. Having served as a Career Counselor for over 14 years, I was professionally known to most participants and personally familiar to some. While this rapport likely enhanced the interviews by allowing participants to speak in technical terms without extensive explanation, it may also have constrained some participants' willingness to speak candidly about leadership or systemic issues within the community. Though the overall tone of the interviews was frank and open, some of the more junior Marines seemed less comfortable expressing negative opinions than their senior counterparts were.

D. CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter details the two-phased methodological approach used to explore the current challenges facing the Career Planning Program and identify potential improvements based on comparative insights from the Marine Corps Recruiting



Command. Phase I employed a grounded analysis of 25 semi-structured interviews with Career Counselors to surface the operational realities of enlisted retention work, while Phase II used a comparative case study to examine structural and procedural differences between MCRC and the Career Planning Program. Together, these methods provide both depth and breadth in understanding the institutional and organizational factors shaping the current retention landscape. The next chapter presents the results of the grounded analysis, highlighting the key themes and patterns that emerged from interviews with Career Counselors across the Marine Corps.



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V. PHASE I ANALYSIS

To answer this research's primary and secondary research questions, I developed the Human Performance Drivers framework, as shown in Figure 4. This framework was developed using a grounded approach as described in Chapter 4. The thematic coding of each interview led to the development of the 1st order concepts, which inform the second-order themes, and ultimately the two aggregate dimensions of this framework. This chapter explains each dimension of this framework and its supporting themes while providing ample supporting evidence from interviews to preserve the voice of the Career Counselors who participated. This chapter demonstrates the challenges facing Career Counselors today while also demonstrating areas for enhancement for the Career Planning Program.

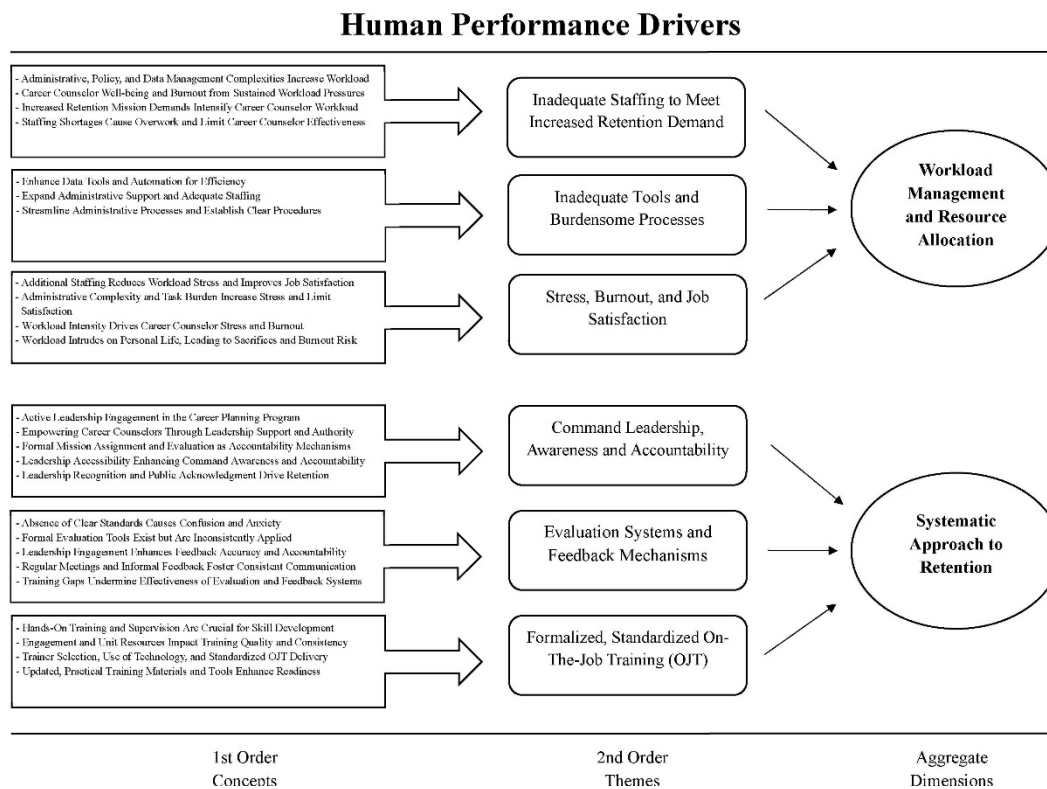


Figure 4. Human Performance Drivers



A. WORKLOAD MANAGEMENT AND RESOURCE ALLOCATION

The first dimension of the Human Performance Drivers framework, Workload Management and Resource Allocation, explores the structural barriers that constrain the performance of Marine Corps Career Counselors amid rising retention demands. As the expectations placed on these Marines have grown, organizational support systems have not been scaled accordingly. The first two themes in this section focus on performance barriers: shortages in staffing and support, and the administrative complexity and inefficiency of essential tools and processes. These barriers not only limit what Career Counselors can accomplish but also amplify the intensity of their daily workload. The third theme shifts from structural causes to personal consequences, highlighting how sustained pressure manifests as stress, burnout, and diminishing job satisfaction. Taken together, these findings illustrate the demand side of the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, as introduced in Chapter 3, where persistent operational burdens, unbuffered by sufficient resources, compromise both effectiveness and well-being of personnel (Demerouti et al., 2001; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).

1. Inadequate Staffing to Meet Increased Retention Demand

The increased retention demands of recent years have introduced significant structural barriers to Career Counselors' performance. Participants described how rising quotas, compressed timelines, and expanded responsibilities have transformed the Career Planning Program's tempo and complexity.

One General Officer-level Career Counselor noted, "Each year we've seen a significant increase in the amount of Marines that we have to retain, which puts a lot of pressure on the individual Career [Counselor]." He explained that a command he once served in and now supervises has an FTAP mission today that is double what it was a decade ago. A Staff Sergeant at a large GCE command echoed this trend:

Exponentially increasing... and even if it wasn't incrementally significant from one year to the next, I think that the fact that they overlapped each other gave us that perception that it was just this immeasurable mission with the '24 and '25 overlapping and now '25 and '26 overlapping.



These overlapping mission cycles erode any natural pacing in the retention calendar, making it difficult for counselors to plan or recalibrate between campaigns. From a JD-R perspective, this reflects a sharp increase in job demands without a corresponding increase in resources, an imbalance believed to drive emotional strain and reduce engagement (Demerouti et al., 2001).

Career Counselors also noted that although the CRM is formally assigned to Commanding Generals, execution often falls to the unit level. One Staff Sergeant described her reaction to the rising targets: “I get the Fiscal Year 24 mission and... I’m looking at the population and it’s like damn near similar to Fiscal Year 2023... but then Fiscal Year 25 came out and it was more as well... and I didn’t say much. I’m just like. ‘Why does it keep getting higher?’”

Another Sergeant explained that the simultaneous execution of DAP and overlapping fiscal year campaigns caused a significant uptick in responsibility: “Last year, we weren’t even doing DAP stuff... and then both FYs at the same time... instantly that was a big one as well. So just those two things made it kind of like, okay, it’s manageable, but it is a lot.” These quotes reveal a common barrier: mission growth without adequate structural adjustment, where responsibilities are layered onto existing duties with little added support.

The growing complexity of retention policy also emerged as a critical barrier. A Sergeant from a small training command described feeling “overwhelmed with everything we already have to do... the reserves and stuff like that... is just another thing that’s thrown onto our plate without knowing how to do so.” Another junior counselor described the mental burden of sorting through multiple rulesets for Marines across various retention cohorts in real time, explaining that “there’s just a lot of different people that you’re talking to... and I’ll talk to three different people in one day and I’m like, ‘wait, did I tell him the right one?’” Even senior leaders in the community voiced concerns about the retention system’s complexity. A Gunnery Sergeant serving on a General Officer’s staff commented, “You’re adding two FYs, two cohorts... It’s confusing for some.” Taken together, these quotes reflect an environment where shifting policy, competing mission requirements, and limited guidance have created widespread uncertainty.



A final structural barrier is staffing. Many Career Counselors work alone in their offices, limiting their ability to balance operational and relationship-building duties. A Sergeant at a medium-sized training command explained, “I feel like I don’t have as much time to go area canvassing or go spend time with my Marines... and then I feel like if I do miss a day... I feel like I miss a lot.” Her comments suggest that if another Marine were available to handle office responsibilities, she could focus more on engaging with her unit. Similarly, a Staff Sergeant at an LCE command described how sharing the workload would improve performance:

If I had an A slash with me that would’ve definitely helped me out... one focus on interviews, one focus on submitting packages... [and] if one of us is out... we don’t have someone else assist our Marines.

He added that when one Career Counselor is unavailable, neighboring commands are often asked to “cover down,” a workaround that reflects the fragility of current staffing structures.

In sum, Career Counselors described three persistent structural barriers to effectiveness: growing mission demands, increased complexity, and inadequate staffing. Each of these barriers reflects a core category of job demands in the JD-R model: workload, role ambiguity, and insufficient support, which together increase the risk of disengagement, stress, and eventual burnout (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).

2. Inadequate Tools and Burdensome Processes

In addition to rising retention demands, Career Counselors operate within a technological and administrative environment that many describe as outdated, inefficient, and misaligned with mission requirements. Participants across billets and command types expressed frustration with the systems and processes they rely on, particularly the lack of automation and poor data infrastructure. These limitations increase workload, create redundancy, and restrict the time counselors can devote to meaningful engagement with Marines.

Automation was a recurring topic, with several Career Counselors suggesting that digital solutions could alleviate administrative burden and improve efficiency. One Staff



Sergeant explained that he attempted to streamline his workflow by writing a script to automate the creation of RELMs, which he noted TFRS 2.0 is also designed to handle. However, his effort was ultimately blocked because, as he put it, “scripts are not allowed in [the Marine Corps Enterprise Network].” Despite his initiative, technical restrictions prevented the implementation of low-risk, time-saving solutions.

A Master Sergeant serving at the General Officer level explained that improved systems could reduce the need for additional manpower. He stated that “they wouldn’t need two career planners if we just had systems that... automated some of these things for us... outside of just RELMs.” This view reflects a central tension in the Career Planning Program. While current demands suggest the need for more personnel, automation and improved systems may offer greater long-term efficiency and return on investment.

Other participants focused on the outdated nature of administrative practices. A Staff Sergeant at a large command described her working environment as “kind of in a dinosaur age” and said, “we’re still routing stuff like paper, paper-wise.” Although she wanted to modernize these systems, she was unsure when she would find time to implement changes and train stakeholders. A Gunnery Sergeant SNCOIC at another command shared a similar goal but chose not to update his process out of concern that the rollout of TFRS 2.0 later in the year might create further disruption.

Beyond automation, several Career Counselors discussed challenges related to data quality and system usability. A Staff Sergeant working on a General Officer’s staff noted that one of the biggest challenges they face is that “our data’s bad. We don’t have good data management. We don’t have good data visualization. TFRS doesn’t give us the tools that we need.” His comments emphasize a broader frustration among participants: they are expected to manage increasingly complex retention missions without reliable or intuitive systems to support data access or interpretation.

Administrative work also detracts from the core mission of Career Counselors, conducting quality interviews. One Sergeant at a medium-sized ACE command described how office tasks often conflict with meeting the needs of Marines, which is viewed as the most meaningful aspect of the Career Counselor’s role:



If I'm very honest, it's very busy and I do love the job. I love the people aspect of it... I think it's the admin that's like the most overwhelming for me... I kind of have to put [interviews] on the back burner a lot of times... I'm back-to-back, talking to Marines... finding that time to just settle down and do admin work. Do I have to close my door and just have an admin day? Which isn't bad, but it would be nice... if we could like share the load.

Her experience highlights the tension between mission and workload, Career Counselors are often pulled away from the relational aspects of their job by constant administrative demands. Supporting this perspective, another Staff Sergeant described the broader environment by stating, "You're managing everything under the sun and you're bouncing like a... ping pong ball back and forth."

Together, these accounts emphasize how administrative burden forces Career Counselors to navigate competing priorities without adequate structural support. In JD-R terms, administrative overload, inadequate tools, and conflicting role expectations function as intensifiers of job strain and erode the resources that enable meaningful, purpose-driven work (Schaufeli et al., 2010).

3. Stress, Burnout, and Job Satisfaction

The emotional and physical consequences of sustained workload pressure were among the most powerful concepts shared by experienced Career Counselors. These Marines described how increased mission demands, extended operational cycles, and insufficient support have affected both their well-being and their ability to perform effectively. While counselors at all levels noted similar patterns of behavior, long hours, personal sacrifices, and diminished time for reflection or rest, senior counselors more often emphasized the cumulative toll on morale and motivation.

A Gunnery Sergeant SNCOIC explained that, until recently, the retention calendar offered predictable periods of rest that allowed Career Counselors to recover. Now, he said, "we don't get a breather at all throughout the year... it's enough to put someone in the cuckoo." A Staff Sergeant SNCOIC added that the change in seasonality was "not a negative on retention... it's negative for our [Career Counseling] force," and noted, "I feel



like I'm working constantly, like there's no end and it's like constant work and I don't know how to fix it."

Concerns about burnout extended beyond personal experience to the well-being of others in the community. One Gunnery Sergeant SNCOIC estimated that "75% of those Career [Counselors] seek out resources such as Chaplains and MFLCs," adding that "retention is part of that conversation... they're stressed out." Another SNCOIC observed that his junior counselors were "overwhelmed" and in need of "additional support and... guidance and one-on-one mentorship and like pretty much like holding-hand."

The theme of personal sacrifice also appeared frequently across interviews. A General Officer-level Career Counselor described taking a family trip to Disney World but spending his evenings "sitting in the hotel room forwarding packages and answering emails to... the CO." A Staff Sergeant remarked, "I don't have a life... this job takes a lot of it." Another Staff Sergeant, serving in a GCE command, described the effect of daily workload on his ability to pursue personal and professional goals:

I know that I'm not working out... and then in addition to that, school, I'm unable to complete school because when I get home, my priority is my family. So, I have to stay back and... just work on stuff that I'm unable to complete during the day because of the foot traffic, because of all this RELM generation. So, everything gets put off because the Marine reenlisting or going on SDA is the priority.

Even junior Career Counselors reported making similar sacrifices, though their tone was often more positive. One Sergeant at a small ACE command said, "I didn't go to chow most of the time because I... like my work to be done. But... it was a lot of work. It was a lot of submitting packages, you know, but at the end of the day, I signed up for this job, and I want to take care of Marines." This contrast in tone suggests that while behaviors of personal sacrifice are common across ranks, the emotional cost of those sacrifices appears to increase with seniority and experience. If unaddressed, these patterns may accelerate burnout and erode long-term job satisfaction among more experienced counselors.

This contrast in tone suggests that while behaviors of personal sacrifice are common across ranks, the emotional cost of those sacrifices appears to increase with seniority and experience. If unaddressed, these patterns may accelerate burnout and erode



long-term job satisfaction. In the JD-R model, chronic job demands such as unrelieved workload, extended work hours, and emotional strain are directly linked to exhaustion and reduced occupational well-being (Schaufeli et al., 2010).

A nearly universal view among participants was that increasing personnel would reduce stress and improve effectiveness. Even those assigned to small units described the benefits of having another Marine to share the workload. One Sergeant stated, “It would be nice if I could have someone where I could share the load.” A Gunnery Sergeant SNCOIC noted that adding personnel would “affect [his Career Counselors] in a positive way,” and explained that “to be able to cover the other when there’s training to be done... leave to be take... it can only help... no matter what the population is.” A General Officer-level Career Counselor similarly reflected, “At least having someone else that can help us carry the workload would definitely help us.”

Together, these reflections describe a retention workforce that is increasingly stretched thin, emotionally taxed, and operating under persistent strain. While counselors remain committed to their mission, they are often forced to do so at the expense of personal balance, health, or development. Addressing the emotional and physical toll of current workload conditions is essential, not just for individual well-being but for the long-term sustainability of the Career Planning Program itself.

The themes presented in this dimension reflect a Career Planning Program under acute operational strain. Career Counselors are expected to manage increasing mission demands, navigate outdated and inefficient systems, and do so largely without sufficient staffing or support. These structural barriers not only restrict performance but also contribute to sustained stress, personal sacrifice, and signs of burnout, particularly among senior and experienced counselors. Although many participants expressed pride in their work and a continued commitment to supporting Marines, their reflections point to an unsustainable imbalance between organizational demands and available resources. Viewed through the lens of the Job Demand-Resource model, this imbalance highlights how excessive job demands, compounded by inadequate tools and limited staffing, erode both individual well-being and workforce effectiveness. Without deliberate efforts to realign



workload, staffing, and administrative support, the Career Planning Program risks diminishing the very performance it seeks to optimize.

B. SYSTEMATIC APPROACH TO RETENTION

The second dimension of the Human Performance Drivers framework, Systematic Approach to Retention, focuses on how leadership engagement, feedback systems, and training practices shape the work environment for Career Counselors. These elements represent critical job resources, defined in the JD-R model as organizational features that enhance motivation, support role clarity, and buffer against the effects of job demands (Demerouti et al., 2001; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Unlike the first dimension, which concentrated on structural challenges and stressors, this section explores both strengths and opportunities within the Career Planning Program that promote engagement, improve morale, and strengthen retention efforts.

1. Command Leadership, Awareness, and Accountability

While Dimension 1 outlines the barriers Career Counselors face in meeting rising retention demands, this theme demonstrates how leadership engagement has enhanced the Career Planning Program in recent years. Across all command levels, participants described the active involvement of Commanding Officers and Commanding Generals as a key contributor to mission success. One Gunnery Sergeant Career Counselor SNCOIC described her commander as “absolutely amazing” and recalled that after returning late from a meeting with higher headquarters, her commander stayed behind to endorse RELMs so they would be ready first thing in the morning. Another Sergeant Career Counselor with a CGE command explained:

Great command leadership is the bread and butter of whether the retention mission is going to survive or die... if the command leadership, up to down to the section level, is not helping out with that retention, then it’s not going to get done.

The role of leadership engagement extended to the highest levels. A senior Career Counselor noted that successful commands were those where “the Sergeant Major, the CO, the XO, the company leadership” were directly involved. One Sergeant described her



command team as “very involved in the retention process,” adding, “they all sit down if a Marine decides to get out, they’ll talk to the 1st Sergeants.” While not universally observed, these examples underscore the powerful role of leadership in creating conditions for Career Counselor effectiveness.

Participants also noted a cultural shift in recent years, linking increased engagement to new accountability mechanisms. One Master Sergeant observed that his MSC’s commanders had “taken ownership” of their programs, describing it as a shift resulting from *Talent Management 2030*. Another SNCOIC believed the change began in late 2022: “Commanders were more involved with career planning... probably with retention being brought up in their fitness reports, they had to care more.”

Formal mission assignment was one of the clearest manifestations of this accountability shift. A Staff Sergeant at an LCE command explained, “When it became a mission, now you’re having [the O-6 Command] or [MSC] Commanding General saying that mission is now a priority.” A Gunnery Sergeant SNCOIC added that every commander received a mission letter and took it seriously, “because if they didn’t, like any mission, it would reflect on their [fitness report].” Commanders up and down the chain now faced tangible consequences for the success or failure of their retention program, for once they had skin in the game (Taleb, 2018). A Master Gunnery Sergeant described the top-down pressure as producing a “moral awareness” among commanders: “Now, we don’t have to scream up as much... now that top-level pressure and awareness has made commanders more aware.”

From the perspective of Career Counselors, the formalization of command responsibility had elevated the importance of their work. Career Counselors reported greater access to leadership, stronger alignment with command priorities, and a clearer sense of mission significance. These forms of engagement function as job resources by providing support, recognition, and influence within the organization (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).

Another form of impactful leadership engagement was public recognition. Participants consistently cited the CRP as a model for how public acknowledgment of



Marines can improve retention outcomes. A Gunnery Sergeant Career Counselor observed, “The commands that have been successful, they’ve been doing... battalion formations and recognizing those Marines.” He contrasted that with units that left recognition solely to the Career Counselors: “It doesn’t have that sense of pride... compared to them being recognized in front of their fellow peers.” One Sergeant described how her CO highlighted CRP selectees during a squad formation and presented each with a challenge coin. A General Officer-level Career Counselor attributed a year-over-year increase in FTAP mission success to the implementation of CRP recognition, noting that it “really upped our FTAP aggregate mission numbers.”

The consistent presence of leadership involvement, formal missioning, and visible recognition reveals how top-down engagement functions as a job resource for Career Counselors. In the JD-R framework, leadership support and acknowledgment increase employees’ sense of influence and significance, promoting greater work engagement and reducing susceptibility to burnout (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Interview participants emphasized that leadership attention elevated the Career Counselor’s role, enhanced their impact, and strengthened cohesion between Career Counselors and their command teams.

2. Evaluation Systems and Feedback Mechanisms

Career Counselors described two types of evaluation systems they are subject to: their fitness report and their Career Counselor evaluations. The former is completed by the Executive Officer (XO) or equivalent senior officer, as required by MCO 1040.31, while the latter is performed by the Career Counselor SNCOIC on an annual or semi-annual basis based on experience levels. While performance feedback and supervisory coaching are recognized in the JD-R model as key job resources (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), interview participants often described challenges in receiving accurate or meaningful evaluations.

A common concern was that XOs lack the technical knowledge required to assess Career Counselors effectively. One Staff Sergeant shared, “The XO gives my evaluations. She’s a good XO... She doesn’t really understand the program or the purpose of it... I’ve been kind of like... not even saying neglected, but like more like ignored.” A Sergeant at



a small ACE command described the disconnect between her work and her evaluator's understanding:

With the XO, they're like, well, 'How are you mentoring Marines if you only work with yourself?' But I have to show him proof... look at all these interviews that I've had... I am mentoring them by helping them with their careers.

In some cases, participants believed they were capped in how highly they could be rated, particularly in infantry commands, due to a lack of understanding of their MOS. Several senior Career Counselors offered strategies to address these limitations. One General Officer-level Career Counselor explained that she took direct involvement in the fitness reports of counselors under her scope, offering to provide an informal review of each fitness report to ensure accuracy. A Gunnery Sergeant SNCOIC described how she used the Career Counselor evaluation forms she conducted periodically to brief command teams and advocate for her counselors' performance, noting that many XOs "don't sit down with their own Career [Counselors]."

Another recurrent concern was the lack of clear performance standards. One Sergeant explained, "There's no set way to describe if someone's doing well." She described tension between the accomplishment of annual retention missions and interview timeliness, noting that priorities often varied based on the commander's preferences. A General Officer-level Career Counselor agreed, stating, "Before we can even evaluate effectively, we need to establish the standards that are expected."

Coaching from supervisors and performance feedback are critical job resources that promote engagement and clarify expectations (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Interview feedback suggests that when Career Counselors receive accurate and structured feedback, their morale can improve. However, inconsistencies in reporting relationships, limited MOS knowledge among evaluators, and the absence of shared standards undermine the potential benefits of evaluation systems and introduce frustration and ambiguity.

3. Formalized, Standardized On-the-Job Training (OJT)

As a complement to evaluation, training emerged as the final area for improvement for the Career Planning Program. The program relies on a training continuum based around



its two formal training courses, BCCC and ACCC, and is buttressed by supervisor-led monthly or quarterly training events as outlined in the T&R Manual. Additionally, as a lateral-entry MOS, Marines who enter the MOS often have the opportunity to perform Career Counselor duties for an extended period before attending the MOS-producing course. Many Career Counselors identified the absence of formalization and standardization within the training conducted on-the-job, as a critical vulnerability that needs correction to improve the Career Planning Program and to deliver better results for the Marines they serve.

An initial concept that emerged through the interview data was the disparity amongst different commands, stemming from the leadership and resources applied by the Career Counselors SNCOIC. A Staff Sergeant at a geographically isolated command reported, “Since I’ve been here, I have not received any training... but there’s nothing I can do about it.” Another Staff Sergeant in an infantry battalion said, “I don’t really get much training anymore... we’re just all so busy.” Others described positive experiences. One Sergeant shared, “The training that we get monthly is great! We dive into a lot of questions that a lot of Career [Counselors] might be having.” Another Career Counselor at an overseas command praised his SNCOIC for ensuring that the team, regardless of location, could train together. These quotes suggest that training standards across the institution are not being met. Despite hierarchical structures designed for oversight, compliance may be a function of individual care and attention rather than institutional pressure.

In addition to the disparity in the frequency and quality of monthly and quarterly training Career Counselors are receiving in the fleet, there was an equally stark contrast in the initial onboarding training experienced by the interview participants. Training lengths covered a spectrum of up to two years, including no pre-school training at all. Some were trained full-time, others part-time. Some moved commands, others remained with their former commands. The only consistent trend was inconsistency. One Staff Sergeant attributed his success in the community to the “6-8 months” he spent learning under Career Counselor SNCOIC before attending BCCC, saying, “That approach gave me confidence.”



In contrast, another Staff Sergeant described being assigned to a vacant Career Counselor billet for unsupervised OJT before attending BCCC:

I struggled so much, I was making simple errors. I didn't know anything. And then I went to the schoolhouse. And I felt out of place because I felt like everybody at least knew what they were doing... it kind of felt like I got kind of lost in the background because I was too afraid to admit that I just didn't know what I was doing.

This disparity underscores the importance of standardization. While some Career Counselors received robust onboarding and mentorship, others were left alone and unsupported. Learning and development are recognized in the JD-R model as key resources that enhance role clarity, reduce emotional strain, and increase job engagement (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Establishing minimum standards for OJT would reduce disparities and help prepare all Career Counselors to succeed in their roles.

Career Counselors noted two major areas of initial OJT that needed immediate attention: the selection of the trainers who deliver initial OJT and the uniformity of design. All participants agreed that action is needed to prevent delays in the initiation of training while awaiting BCCC. While opinions varied amongst the participants, most senior Career Counselors agreed that Marines in an initial OJT status should be trained directly under an SNCOIC, believing they provide a better balance of unit size and Career Counselor experience when compared to a unit-level Career Counselor. One Master Sergeant disagreed, however, believing there is value in a less structured training environment, saying new Career Counselors should prove their ability to operate independently early on and either "sink or swim." One SNCOIC shared their concern that initial OJT that occurs at the unit level leads to the trainees simply performing the administrative tasks that Career Counselors do not want to perform and limits the overall training value. The general belief is that Career Counselor SNCOICs should be formally responsible for the initial supervised training of new Career Counselors before they attend their formal MOS course.

C. CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter presented the Human Performance Drivers framework, developed through grounded analysis of interviews with Marine Corps Career Counselors. The first



dimension, Workload Management and Resource Allocation, revealed a series of escalating job demands: mission growth, policy complexity, inadequate staffing, and administrative burden, that constrain Career Counselor effectiveness and may fuel burnout. The second dimension, Systematic Approach to Retention, identified job resources that promote resilience and engagement, such as active leadership, effective evaluation, and standardized on-the-job training. Viewed through the lens of the Job Demands-Resources model (Demerouti et al., 2001; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), the Career Planning Program appears to suffer from a systemic imbalance: while demands have grown sharply, investments in resourcing have been inconsistent, localized, or ad hoc. This imbalance threatens the sustainability of the retention mission and the well-being of those who carry it out. The findings here, along with the comparative analysis in the next chapter, will provide the foundation for recommendations for improving staffing, leadership practices, and training within the Career Planning Program.



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VI. PHASE II ANALYSIS

Although retention and accession serve complementary roles in the Marine Corps' Human Resources Development Process, the organizational design of the Career Planning Program and Marine Corps Recruiting Command differs dramatically. Much of this difference stems from the fact that retention is a command function, embedded within the responsibilities of each Commanding Officer, whereas recruiting is executed by a dedicated, purpose-built organization. Still, given their shared role in talent management, it is reasonable and necessary to consider how the Marine Corps' accession arm is structured when identifying potential solutions to strengthen its retention counterpart.

This chapter employs an instrumental comparative approach to analyze MCRC and the Career Planning Program, two internal organizations tasked with sustaining the Marine Corps' force. By comparing their respective missions, staffing models, leadership structures, and training systems, this analysis seeks to identify actionable organizational design features that could help the Career Planning Program address its current structural challenges. The goal is not to critique these programs in isolation but to use the strengths of MCRC's design to inform improvements to the retention enterprise in support of long-term personnel sustainability.

A. MISSION AND STAFFING TRENDS: A FORCE OUT OF BALANCE

The years 2019 to 2024 marked a period of substantial institutional change for the Marine Corps. In alignment with *Force Design 2030*, the service undertook a deliberate restructuring of its active component, reducing end strength and divesting legacy capabilities to reinvest in the future force (Berger, 2020). Concurrently, *Talent Management 2030* introduced a strategic shift in how enlisted manpower would be sourced and sustained, emphasizing the retention of experienced Marines to preserve institutional knowledge and reduce dependency on new accessions (Berger, 2021).

During this time, recruiting and retention efforts evolved in markedly different ways. This section uses two data visualizations to track those changes, revealing a growing institutional reliance on retention outcomes without a corresponding expansion in the



personnel assigned to manage them. These trends not only highlight the Marine Corps’ shifting manpower strategy but also expose key structural imbalances between its recruiting and retention enterprises.

1. Retention and Accession Tradeoffs

Figure 5 compares annual accession and retention outcomes from FY2019 to FY2024. Over this period, accessions declined, reflecting both the strategic shift of *Talent Management 2030* and the broader challenges facing the recruiting environment. In contrast, retention outcomes increased sharply, particularly between FY2022 and FY2024, rising nearly 17% in just two years. Although accessions continued to outpace retention overall, the rate of change underscores a deliberate institutional pivot. Each Marine retained represents one fewer Marine that must be accessed, trained, and integrated to sustain the force.

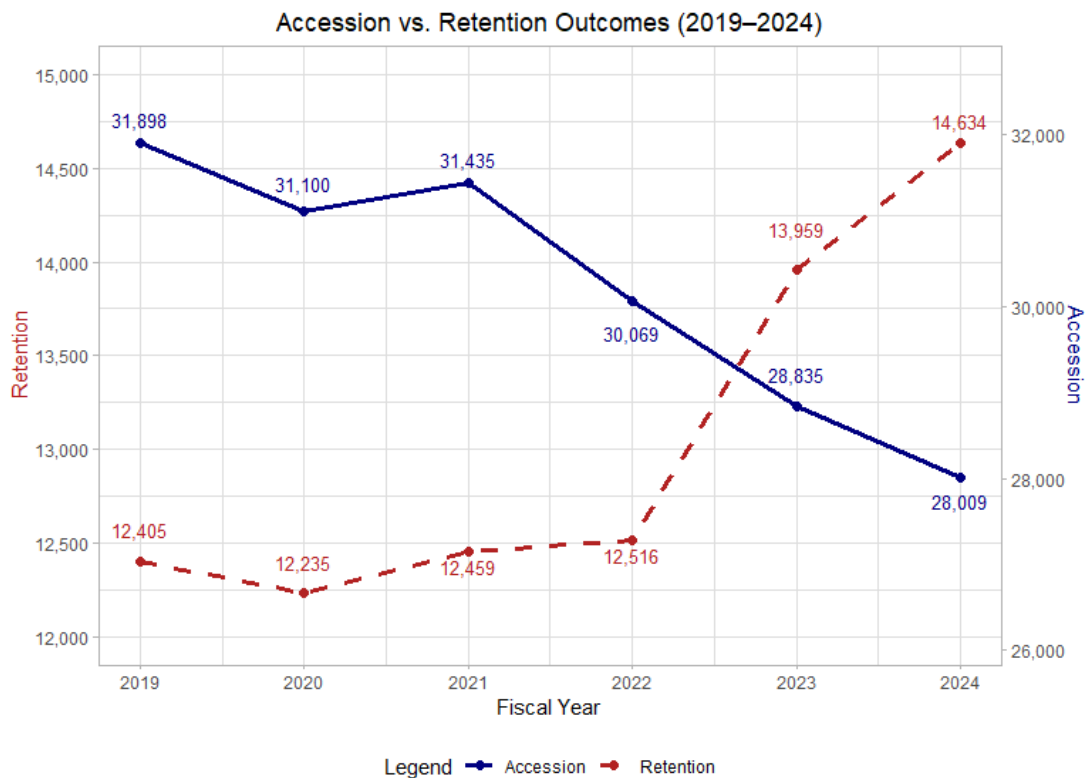


Figure 5. Accession vs. Retention Outcomes (2019-2014)



This trend aligns with guidance found in *Talent Management 2030* and subsequent updates, which emphasize the need to rebalance recruiting and retention as complementary tools of manpower sustainment (Berger 2021; Borgschulte, 2024). Rather than relying primarily on new accessions for force sustainment, the Marine Corps increased reenlistment rates to retain trained and experienced Marines, thereby reducing the demand on the recruiting force and the entry-level training infrastructure.

However, this institutional pivot placed increased demands on the retention enterprise without a parallel investment in its personnel infrastructure. While the mission expanded in both scope and urgency, the structure supporting it remained static. Section 2 highlights this disparity by comparing the staffing levels of Recruiters (MOS 8411 and 8412) and Career Counselors over the same period.

2. Recruiters vs. Career Counselors: Divergent Trends

As shown in Figure 6, the number of active-duty recruiters declined slightly between FY2019 and FY2022 before rebounding sharply to pre-reduction levels by FY2024. In contrast, the population of Career Counselors declined steadily throughout the entire period without recovery. While both communities were initially affected by force restructuring, only the recruiting workforce saw a significant reinvestment, resulting in a growing separation between the two manpower support functions by the end of the period.



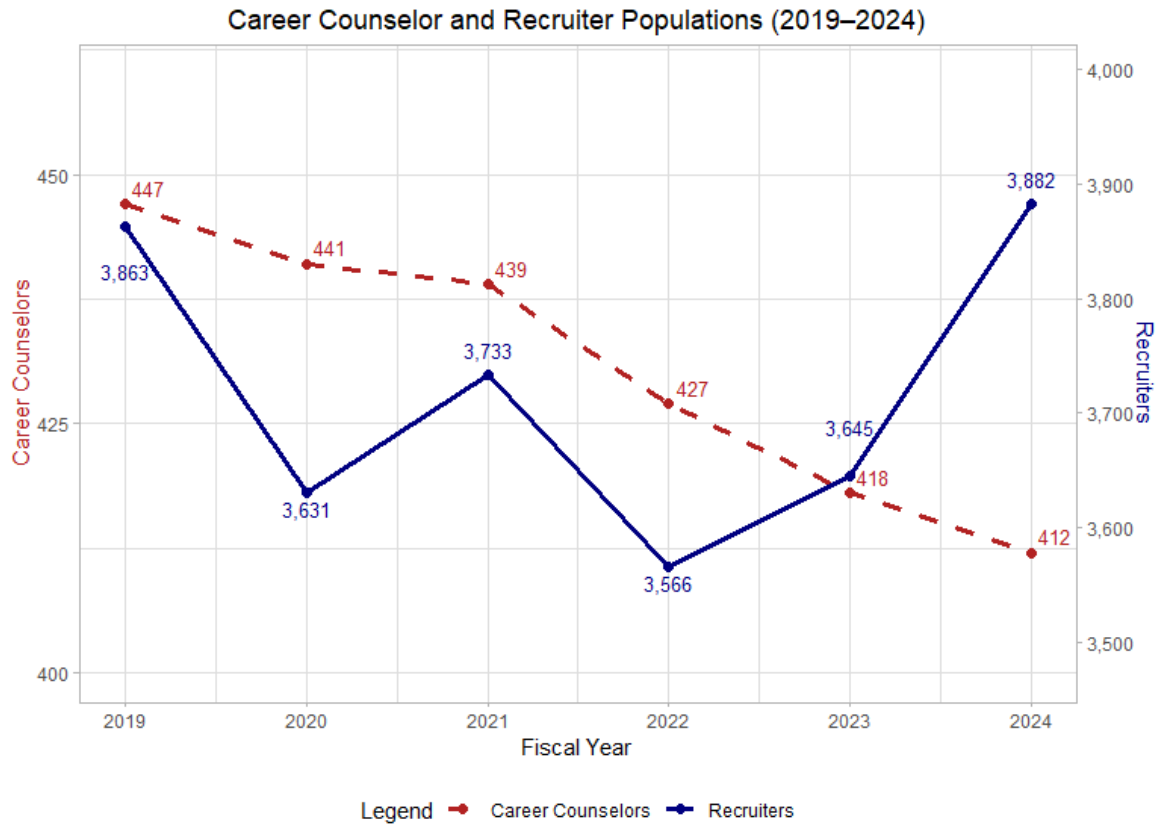


Figure 6. Career Counselor and Recruiter Populations (2019-2024)

This divergence reflects a bifurcation in how the Marine Corps responded to the dual challenges of recruiting and retention. The resurgence in recruiter staffing corresponds with increased national concern about the future of the all-volunteer force and declining enlistment rates among youth. Testifying before Congress, military personnel researcher Beth Asch recommended that all services increase their retention targets and surge recruiting personnel to maintain readiness in the face of declining propensity to enlist (Asch, 2023). The Marine Corps’ decision to expand its recruiting workforce during this period reflects a direct institutional response to these external pressures.

By contrast, the retention workforce remained comparatively static despite increased mission requirements. This imbalance reveals more than a simple administrative lag, it points to a deeper misalignment between strategic intent and structural design. The Marine Corps’ growing reliance on reenlistment outcomes was not matched by an

equivalent modernization of the personnel system tasked with delivering them. In practical terms, the burden of this force optimization fell on a Career Planning Program that was neither expanded nor restructured to meet new expectations.

3. Section Summary

From 2019 to 2024, the Marine Corps fundamentally reshaped its approach to sustaining the force, placing greater reliance on retention in response to both internal reforms and external recruiting challenges. While *Talent Management 2030* and related policies elevated the importance of retention outcomes, they did not result in the structural reinvestment needed to operationalize that emphasis at the unit level.

In contrast, Marine Corps Recruiting Command demonstrated the ability to scale its workforce in response to mission demands. This adaptability reflects the advantages of a centralized, purpose-built organization with clear command-level representation, defined performance metrics, and access to institutional advocacy. The Career Planning Program, by comparison, remains structurally fragmented and reliant on local manpower decisions, limiting its ability to respond to changes in mission scope.

As the Marine Corps continues to refine its manpower strategy, this divergence offers a critical lesson: policy emphasis alone is insufficient. Sustained performance, particularly in a dynamic personnel environment, requires an organizational design that enables scalability, professionalization, and strategic alignment. To fully realize the promise of a balanced manpower model, the Career Planning Program must be empowered with the same structural levers that have allowed Recruiting Command to evolve alongside its mission.

B. LEADERSHIP STRUCTURES AND OFFICER ACCOUNTABILITY

Among the most consequential differences between Marine Corps Recruiting Command and the Career Planning Program is the structure and continuity of their leadership. While both organizations contribute to the broader goal of sustaining the force, they do so under vastly different command models, with distinct implications for policy execution, operational oversight, and long-term effectiveness. MCRC operates under a



tiered, centralized leadership structure, led by officers who are deliberately selected for their experience and alignment with the recruiting mission. These leaders, whether at the District, Region, or MCRC level, have previously served in recruiting billets, creating a leadership pipeline that fosters continuity, credibility, and institutional memory. In contrast, the Career Planning Program's leadership is decentralized and fragmented. Career Counselors are managed locally by unit-level XOs, while policy decisions are made by Headquarters Marine Corps (MMEA-1), which is staffed by officers who are neither screened for assignment nor trained in retention-specific operations.

This section examines how the design of each organization's leadership model reflects differing levels of institutional commitment and "skin in the game," the principle that individuals who make decisions should bear some of the risks and consequences of those decisions (Hastings, 2023; Taleb, 2018). By comparing the career development pathways, oversight responsibilities, and policy roles of officers in both systems, this section reveals how MCRC's design fosters accountability and program integrity, while the Career Planning Program suffers from structural distance between policymakers and practitioners.

1. Leadership Structures

As introduced in Chapter 3, Section E, MCRC has developed a strategy to recapitalize the talent it develops, starting at the Recruiting Station level, to call upon for future leadership and staff roles at higher MCRC echelons. MOS 4804, the Recruiting Officer-Multiple Tour Expert, is the billet MOS for Recruiting District Commanding Officers, Assistant Chiefs of Staff (A/CoS) at the Recruiting Regions and MCRC, as well as the Chief of Staff for MCRC. These billets, as the NAVMC 1200.1K explains, provide MCRC with long-term continuity within their senior staff and command leadership billets (HQMC, 2024a). Despite not being a PMOS, MCRC manages to maintain a pool of leaders it can draw upon to both lead its organization and advise its Commanding Generals.

The Career Planning Program has no such officer continuity. As previously described, leadership within the program is fragmented. At the unit level, Commanding Officers are responsible for the program's success, but their responsibility is temporary,



extending only while they are in command. They have limited impact on policy because it is dictated by the service headquarters (MMEA-1 and higher). Their influence is primarily over their Career Counselor in the proper performance of their duties and the overall morale of the Marines within their unit. The Executive Officer is tasked with supervising the manager of the Career Planning Program, the Career Counselor, but they do so among their various other responsibilities, and without any ties to the program long term.

Driving policy and decisions within the Career Planning Program is a small cohort of officers assigned to MMEA-1. According to the current Table of Organization and Equipment (TO&E) for Manpower Management Division (MM), MMEA-1 is structured with one O-5, two O-4s, and one O-3, all BMOS 8006, which according to NAVMC 1200.1K, allows any unrestricted officer to fill those positions (USMC, 2024b; HQMC, 2024a). There is no screening board or panel to determine their assignment, as there is with the Recruiting Station Commanding Officer or the MCRC Company Grade selection process. Nor is there a formal training course, such as the Recruiting Management Course or Operations Officer Course, to train and educate them in their duties and responsibilities; they simply learn on the job. When these officers finish their tour, unlike a Recruiting Station Operations, Executive, or Commanding Officer, they do not leave with an additional MOS in their record to be used for future assignment; they simply rotate to their next assignment, leaving their earned experience behind.

2. Accountability – Skin in the Game

Building on the Skin in the Game principles discussed earlier (Hastings, 2023), the design of the officer structure within the Career Planning Program creates a situation where those making decisions for the program lack sufficient risk of consequences. Those at the highest levels within MCRC, under their prerequisites for leadership and key staff positions, have done the hard jobs on the ground and they know to live by Taleb's silver rule "do not do unto others what you would not have them do unto you" (2018, pp. 19). Within MCRC's higher echelon leadership structure, there is no risk insulation due to time or distance (Hastings, 2023). The officer structure within the Career Planning Program, particularly at the service level, has no such foundation. The policy makers within MMEA-



I share no risks with those with actual skin in the game. This is not to say they are not dedicated Marine Officers, or great leaders, but the structure of the billets requires no history with the program, nor provides opportunity to contribute to it in the future, which limits their skin in the game.

Within Career Planning Programs at the unit level, similar issues arise. Commanding Officers gain some skin in the game if their Commanding General chooses to assign them a retention mission and establish retention programs as part of their fitness report evaluations. When those conditions are met, a commander has skin in the game, but their XO has no such conditions. They are afforded no formal training or familiarization with the program, aside from what comes from an informal turnover from a predecessor. MCO 1040.31 details no specific duties or responsibilities for an XO in the program, except as delegated by the Commanding Officer. The Career Planning Program may be better served by realigning direct supervision of the Career Counselor to an officer more closely aligned with the program, thus ensuring “if you don’t have Skin in the Game, you shouldn’t be involved” (Hastings, 2023).

MCRC’s leadership framework, epitomized by the 4804 MOS and selective command assignments, intrinsically embeds “skin in the game,” ensuring decision-makers have relevant experience and a stake in long-term outcomes. The Career Planning Program, however, operates with an officer structure that dilutes this crucial element. MMEA-1 policy assignments lack specialized screening or training and do not foster enduring ties to the program. Similarly, unit-level XOs oversee Career Counselors without formal preparation or a continuing role. This disparity means retention policy and execution are often managed by those less directly impacted by the results. To treat retention with strategic importance, the Marine Corps should re-engineer the Career Planning Program’s leadership to cultivate the accountability, professionalization, and vital “skin in the game” that underpins MCRC’s success.

C. INDIVIDUAL TRAINING AND EVALUATION

In the Career Planning Program, individual Career Counselor training and evaluation is the responsibility of the Career Counselor SNCOIC and the General Officer-Level Career



Counselor. According to the *Enlisted Retention and Career Development Program*, MCO 1040.31, Career Counselor training is to be conducted and documented by SNCOICs every month, while General Officer-Level Career Counselors are to do so quarterly (HQMC, 2010). The program's order provides no further information regarding conduct, purpose, or expectation of these training events for the SNCOIC or the General Officer-level Career Counselor. MCO 1040.31, says the intent is for Marines entering the 4821 MOS to attend BCCC "upon selection" to the MOS but acknowledges "in some cases, the [Career Counselor] will report to the new command for on the job training and subsequently attend school" (HQMC, 2010, pp. 17–18). The reference provides no further guidance regarding the conduct or expectations for such OJT.

Career Counselor SNCOICs are also responsible for evaluating their subordinate Career Counselors. Per MCO 1040.31, new Career Counselors are required to be evaluated by their SNCOIC three times within their first year, while all Career Counselors are to be evaluated by their SNCOIC once annually (HQMC, 2010). The reference does not provide a form or evaluation standard for said evaluations of Career Counselors. MCRC, however, spares no such detail for its SNCOICs.

In Chapter 15 of *Volume I: Recruiting Sub-Station Operations, Recruiting Sub-Station (RSS)* SNCOICs are provided detailed instructions to accomplish their sixth of seven primary responsibilities: "develop a comprehensive training program to ensure every Marine recruiter is successful" (MCRC, 2024, pp. 184). The reference establishes the following minimum standards: 4 hours of individual training per recruiter monthly (an additional 4 if identified as a substandard recruiter), four hours of minimum group training per month, and a minimum of one interview observation form per recruiter monthly. (MCRC, 2024). Additionally, recruiters in their first year have training and evaluation standards that SNCOICs must adhere to beyond those for the rest of the RSS.

After joining an RSS, new recruiters will first attend Proficiency and Review (PAR) Training, which is delivered by the Recruiting Instructors at the Recruiting Station. Following that training, they begin a 9 month training and evaluation process led by their SNCOIC, which is designed to include weekly training with the entire RSS, and daily role play with the recruiter and SNCOIC to develop mastery in each skill as outlined in the Managed On-



The-Job Training (MOJT) Checklist (MCRC, 2024). Volume I explains that the SNCOIC is foundational to the development of a new Recruiter, but he is not alone. At the 3, 6, and 9-month mark from PAR training, a member of the RI shop will visit the RSS and conduct an independent evaluation of the Recruiter's progress, while also ensuring the SNCOIC is compliant with their training and development responsibilities (MCRC, 2024). This entire process reflects the collective nature of MCRC's training infrastructure, which is designed to maximize human performance and ensure that its organizational standards are maintained.

MCRC's success is partly built on a meticulously structured training and evaluation system that ensures consistent recruiter development through standardized onboarding, managed OJT, defined training commitments, and systematic oversight. This contrasts sharply with the Career Planning Program, where vague mandates for training and evaluation, an absence of formalized OJT, and no external oversight create a system reliant on variable local efforts rather than institutionalized standards. If retention is to be a strategic Marine Corps priority, the Career Planning Program must implement a more formalized and rigorous approach to training and evaluating its personnel, drawing lessons from MCRC's effective framework to ensure a consistently prepared workforce.

If the Marine Corps seeks to elevate retention as a strategic priority, then the individuals tasked with achieving that goal must be trained and evaluated with the same rigor applied to the recruiting force. The Recruiting Command model offers a proven blueprint for professionalizing talent management roles, one that the Career Planning Program could adapt to ensure its workforce is prepared, supported, and held to the standards required to sustain the force.

D. CHAPTER SUMMARY

The comparative analysis presented in this chapter demonstrates that while the Marine Corps has embraced retention as a critical component of its manpower strategy, the Career Planning Program lacks the structural support needed to execute that mission effectively. Across mission scope, leadership design, and training systems, Marine Corps Recruiting Command offers a model of centralized oversight, professionalized development, and institutional continuity. In contrast, the Career Planning Program remains fragmented,



inconsistently resourced, and limited in its ability to scale or adapt. These disparities suggest that strategic intent alone is not enough; organizational design must evolve in step with mission demands. Table 2 summarizes the key differences between these two systems, offering a foundation for the recommendations outlined in the next chapter.

Table 2. Organizational Comparison: Marine Corps Recruiting Command and the Career Planning Program

Category	Marine Corps Recruiting Command	Career Planning Program
Mission Demand vs. Personnel	-Accession output decreased from 2021–2024 -Recruiter force has increased since 2022	-Retention mission increased from 2022–2024 -Career Counselor manning has steadily decreased since 2019
Leadership Continuity vs. Rotation	- Dedicated 4804 billet MOS creates officer continuity - Officers often return to MCRC in future tours	- No designated retention-track officer MOS - MMEA-1 officers serve with no prior experience or return path
Training Structure vs. Informality	- PAR + MOJT process structured across 9 months - SNCOIC training & evaluation standards are well-defined - RI oversight ensures compliance	- No formal OJT structure - Vague training/evaluation guidance - No external oversight mechanism
Implication	- MCRC model provides a scalable, professionalized structure with clear standards and accountability	- Career Planning Program requires structural reform to align authority, continuity, and support with mission demands

Note. This table summarizes structural differences across mission demand, leadership continuity, training systems, and implications for organizational reform.



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VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

To succeed on tomorrow's battlefields, the Marine Corps needs more experience and proven performers in its formations. Career Counselors and the Career Planning Program serve as the cornerstone of this effort and bear the effects of its increasing demands. This research, therefore, pursued three objectives: (1) identify ways the Career Planning Program could be enhanced, (2) identify challenges Career Counselors were facing in the modern retention environment, and (3) identify capabilities of MCRC that may be able to help the Career Planning Program. To enhance the Career Planning Program, the Marine Corps should take immediate steps to improve the organizational design of retention management, reduce job demands through increased staffing and automation, and adopt a standard training and evaluation model for new Career Counselors.

A. TRANSFORM RETENTION MANAGEMENT

The Career Planning Program needs leaders who are invested in the long-term success of the program, and its Marines need an organizational design to achieve this. Using MCRC as a framework, the Career Planning Program should adopt an organizational leadership model that allows for continuity and expertise within the program, beyond what its Career Counselors can bring themselves. This research has helped identify several challenges Career Counselors are facing due to increased mission demands. Many of those challenges can be mitigated with increased leadership support and advocacy throughout the organization. To address these challenges and develop a Career Planning Program designed to meet the full demands of the Marine Corps' Talent Management objectives, the Marine Corps should fundamentally change its retention management structure.

1. Establish a Service-Level Retention Lead

The first step in creating a sustainable leadership model for the Career Planning Program is the formation of a service-level lead for enlisted retention, drawn from the existing structure of MMEA-1. This would involve creating a distinct Enlisted Retention Branch within the Manpower Management Division (MM), separate from the Enlisted



Assignments Branch. This new branch would serve as the operational arm for total force retention and ensure strategic oversight and policy continuity for all Career Counselors.

The branch should be led by a Colonel (O-6) with prior experience in recruiting management or manpower operations. An alternative structure would be to house this branch within MCRC; however, given that MCRC has recently divested personnel to MMEA-1 in support of total force retention efforts, as discussed in Chapter 2, it would be more prudent to retain oversight within HQMC under MM.

As demonstrated in the comparative case study in Chapter 6, the Career Planning Program lacks a centralized advocate capable of securing resources and driving policy in response to growing mission demands. In contrast, MCRC was able to secure additional personnel despite facing a declining accession mission in an increasingly difficult recruiting environment. This success was made possible in part by its established command structure and the institutional authority vested in its leadership. As the Marine Corps shifts toward a ‘rebalanced’ force that emphasizes retention, the Career Planning Program requires a similar level of leadership and advocacy to ensure it is resourced to meet the challenge.

2. Introduce Retention Officers at the General Officer-Level

To further develop a comprehensive operational hierarchy, the Marine Corps should establish:

- Retention Officers at the five O-9 level Career Planning Programs (MEFs and MARFORs), and
- Retention Operations Officers at the approximately twenty-one O-7 and O-8 level Career Planning Programs (e.g., Division, Wings, and MLGs).

These billets should be filled with a screening and selection process similar to that used by MCRC for its Recruiting Station Commanding Officers and company-grade leadership. Officers selected for these billets should attend MCRC’s Operations or Recruiting Management Courses until an equivalent retention-specific training pipeline is developed.



Over the long term, the Career Planning Program should create a formal officer development pathway, modeled after MCRC's 4804 MOS, to build subject matter expertise and leadership continuity across assignments. These officers would be responsible for managing the retention program at their respective commands and advising their Commanding Generals, while enlisted Career Counselors focus on training, mentorship, and daily operations.

Phase I analysis revealed that much of the burden for program execution falls disproportionately on enlisted Career Counselors. While Commanding Officers and Commanding Generals play a critical role in fostering a retention culture, they are not typically involved in the day-to-day operational management of the program. By establishing a formalized officer leadership track, the Marine Corps would distribute ownership of retention outcomes across command levels and strengthen oversight, accountability, and long-term program continuity.

3. Reassign Career Counselor Oversight to Manpower Officers

At the O-5 and O-6 command levels, the direct supervision and evaluation of Career Counselors should be reassigned from the Executive Officer to the Manpower Officer (PMOS 0102). Given their occupational alignment, Manpower Officers are better positioned to understand and integrate with the Career Planning Program. This change would enhance the quality of supervision, allow for more informed evaluations, and support better alignment of manpower functions at the command level.

Additionally, as Manpower Officers advance in their careers and serve at higher levels of command, their accumulated experience in managing enlisted retention would contribute to improved institutional knowledge and program consistency, an outcome less likely under the current XO-based oversight model, where rotational exposure to the CPP is often limited. Though seemingly small, this adjustment has the potential to significantly improve daily integration and increase job resources for Career Counselors with minimal cost.



B. INCREASE PERSONNEL AND AUTOMATION

No resource in the Marine Corps is more precious than its Marines. To reduce workload demand on Career Counselors and support long-term program effectiveness, the Marine Corps should pursue a two-pronged strategy: (1) increase unit-level Career Counselor staffing, and (2) invest in digital tools and automation to streamline administrative tasks. These efforts would ensure continued retention success without requiring excessive personal sacrifice from those tasked with delivering them.

Through Phase I of this research and the Human Performance Drivers framework, a clear pattern of workforce strain emerged. Nearly every Career Counselor interviewed described how the continuous pressure from the new environment was causing burnout symptoms and other adverse outcomes. Marines reported having to sacrifice personal development, wellness, and even time with their families in garrison to meet daily mission demands. While this commitment underscores their dedication, it is not a sustainable model for the future.

The growing volume and complexity of reenlistment cases have placed a disproportionate strain on a workforce that has shrunk by 8% since 2019, despite a steady increase in retention goals. Any solution to these challenges must ensure that Marines assigned to this mission can meet expectations without compromising their health, morale, or long-term career viability.

1. Increase Unit-Level Career Counselor Staffing

The Marine Corps should increase its unit-level Career Counselor billets by 18% to reflect the growth in mission demand since 2019, as illustrated in Figure 5. Given that unit-level Career Counselors account for approximately 75% of the total 4821 MOS population, this recommendation would require an estimated 56 additional billets.

This increase would not only restore the workforce to pre-2019 levels but also provide much-needed relief in anticipation of continued mission growth in the coming years. Based on interview participant feedback, these additional billets should be prioritized for O-6 command levels to be used as ‘rovers,’ to support subordinate commands as needed during absences or other operational demands.



2. Accelerate Automation and Improve Data Systems

Interviewees frequently expressed a need for better tools to reduce administrative complexity in the program and enable more meaningful engagements with Marines. The Marine Corps has made an important first step towards providing better tools with the development of its future retention system, TFRS 2.0. According to the Manpower & Reserve Affairs website, TFRS 2.0 is an integrated digital platform that will provide first-term Marines with the ability to initiate, track, and accept reenlistment offers on any device (USMC, n.d.). This modernized system holds significant promise for streamlining the reenlistment process and increasing transparency for all reenlistment stakeholders by creating an entirely digital reenlistment process (USMC, n.d.).

However, in the near term, the transition to TFRS 2.0 may further complicate the already complex retention environment. Because its initial version is designed only for first-term reenlistments, all other retention actions will continue to be processed through the legacy RELM process as described in Chapter 2. This dual-system environment could increase administrative burden during the rollout phase and introduce inconsistencies in processing.

For these reasons, it is essential that the Marine Corps not only continue its investment in TFRS 2.0 but also begin planning now to support the workforce throughout its implementation. As outlined above, increasing Career Counselor manpower will be critical to preventing overload during this transitional period. Assuming the initial platform is successful, the Marine Corps should pursue additional automation tools that address the full spectrum of the retention process. Streamlining administrative tasks across all retention categories will enable Career Counselors to dedicate more time to their core mission of conducting quality interviews that drive long-term retention.

C. STANDARDIZE CAREER COUNSELOR TRAINING AND EVALUATION

The final recommendation emerging from this study is to establish standardized, structured training and evaluation systems for Career Counselors. This recommendation responds directly to the training and performance disparities identified in the interview data



and the comparative case study. While the current training pipeline includes formal schoolhouse instruction, the development of new Career Counselors varies widely before and after that experience. These inconsistencies lead to uneven performance, delayed readiness, and long-term gaps in professional development. To resolve these deficiencies, the Career Planning Program should formalize the OJT framework for untrained Career Counselors and adopt MCRC's model for training and evaluation of new personnel.

1. Establish a Formal OJT Framework for Untrained Career Counselors

The Marine Corps should immediately end the practice of assigning untrained Marines to independently perform the duties of a Career Counselor under the label of on-the-job training. Asking untrained Marines to either “sink or swim,” as expressed by one senior Career Counselor during an interview, does not serve new Career Counselors nor the Marines they interact with well. Instead, OJT must be a structured and supervised process with clearly defined objectives, milestones, and mentorship expectations. It should begin as soon as a Marine lateral moves into the 4821 MOS and continue until they attend their formal school. During this period, Marines should be assigned to a Career Counselor SNCOIC to ensure consistent and deliberate skill development.

As illustrated in Chapter 5, interviews described highly variable OJT experiences, ranging from thorough hands-on instruction to complete independence with little oversight. While each Marine ultimately earned the MOS, their divergent training experiences underscore a lack of standardization and reveal how heavily training quality depends on local command initiative. A formal OJT framework would eliminate this inconsistency and promote equitable development across the force.

2. Adopt MCRC's structured Training and Evaluation Model

To reinforce and sustain consistent development, the Career Planning Program should adopt the structured training and evaluation standards used by Marine Corps Recruiting Command (MCRC), outlined in Volume I: Recruiting Sub-Station Operations, Recruiting Sub-Station (RSS), employed at the RSS and RS level. This model provides detailed guidance on training frequency, content delivery, and evaluation procedures. It



also features a layered oversight system in which Recruiting Instructors validate trainee readiness. A similar framework, tailored to the needs of the Career Planning Program, would enhance accountability, consistency, and transparency in Career Counselor development.

In contrast, the current training guidance provided in MCO 1040.31 is overly vague and lacks the specificity needed to support Career Counselor SNCOICs, many of whom are managing subordinate Career Counselors for the first time. Without clear standards, SNCOICs are left to interpret expectations independently, leading to inconsistent training outcomes across units.

This recommendation is supported by both interview data and the comparative case study. Career Counselors frequently expressed frustration over unclear expectations and limited feedback during their initial development. Conversely, the MCRC model illustrates how standardized guidance, coupled with structured oversight, fosters a culture of continuous learning and professional growth. The Career Planning Program could replicate this approach with minimal structural change, provided that senior Career Counselors at the General Officer level are empowered to enforce training standards and oversee development across the force.

D. CHAPTER SUMMARY

Together, these recommendations offer a cohesive roadmap for transforming the Career Planning Program into a more structured, sustainable, and strategically aligned component of the Marine Corps' Human Resources Development Process. By strengthening organizational leadership, reducing excessive workload through staffing and automation, and standardizing training and evaluation, the Marine Corps can equip its Career Counselors to meet rising retention demands without compromising their well-being or mission effectiveness. These actions are not discrete fixes but interdependent components of a modernized retention system, one capable of supporting the broader *Talent Management 2030* vision.



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VIII. CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore how the Career Planning Program could be enhanced to meet the challenges of the post-*Talent Management 2030* environment. Through a grounded analysis of interviews with active-duty Career Counselors, I examined how recent changes in retention expectations have affected their work. These interviews revealed recurring challenges in workload management, staffing, supervision, training, and evaluation. To inform potential solutions, I consulted relevant literature and conducted a comparative case study of Marine Corps Recruiting Command, a sister organization within the Human Resource Development Process. This comparison highlighted several key practices, including stronger leadership accountability, standardized training pipelines, and structural oversight, which could be adapted to strengthen the Career Planning Program.

The most logical research to build from this research would be to test if adverse outcomes have been seen in the Career Counselor population since the mission increases and work demands have increased since fiscal year 2022. Researchers could examine the attrition rates of Career Counselors, the rates of medical discharges, medical encounter rates, and changes in survival curves (measures of length of service), as indicators of negative reactions to burnout. Such a study could provide valuable insight to military leaders when considering the human cost of change initiatives, given military personnel cannot simply leave their job when conditions change.

In addition to studying personnel outcomes, a broader review of the Career Planning Program from a systems and process perspective could yield further recommendations for improvement. This study briefly touched on recent incremental innovations such as TFRS 2.0 and the Commandant's Retention Program, which reflect a growing commitment to continuous improvement. However, a comprehensive audit of the program, potentially benchmarking against sister services or civilian sector retention models, could help the Marine Corps accelerate its departure from outdated, industrial-era practices and adopt a modern, data-driven approach to talent retention.



By all objective measures, the Marine Corps has made significant strides in transforming its enlisted manpower system in recent years. From the perspective of individual Marines, new programs and incentives have been introduced to streamline processes and make continued service more appealing. In *Talent Management 2030*, General Berger called for a system that not only retains more Marines but that prioritizes individual talents and “meets the Marine where they are” (Berger, 2021, pp. 12). The most recent update to this initiative reflects considerable progress, highlighting historic highs in first-term retention and a renewed focus on empowering warfighters (Borgschulte, 2024).

While the numbers mentioned in the updated and reflected in this study show success and policy has reached the fleet, more must be done to fully realize the potential of the Career Planning Program. If current trends continue, growing mission demands may diminish Career Counselors’ ability to identify talent and effectively advocate for continued service. At a personal level, sustained workload increases and organizational pressure risk accelerating burnout, threatening the long-term stability of an experienced, professional retention workforce. The Career Planning Program has performed admirably in adapting to change, but this research suggests further improvements are needed to ensure its future sustainability.

Ultimately, the enlisted retention mission relies on a small cadre of dedicated professionals who require institutional support to remain effective. This research indicates that increasing job demands, compounded by organizational pressures and limited structural safeguards, place the Career Counseling community at risk of burnout. In the long term, this could undermine the consistent execution of the retention mission and diminish the experience level of the Career Counselor workforce. Though this study focused on a narrow segment of the Marine Corps, its findings may have some applicability to other military communities undergoing sustained periods of operational or organizational change.



APPENDIX A. PARTICIPANT INVITE EXAMPLE

Good Morning [Rank and Name],

My name is GySgt Jim Stalker, a Career Counselor (MOS 4821) and graduate student at the Naval Postgraduate School. I'm conducting research for my thesis on how to enhance the Marine Corps' Career Planning Program.

I believe that the best way to improve this vital program is by directly hearing from the experts, Career Counselors like you. Your insights and experiences are crucial to understanding the challenges you face and identifying areas for improvement.

I'm inviting you to participate in a short interview (approximately 30–50 minutes) conducted via Microsoft Teams at your convenience. I understand your busy schedule and will work around it to find a time that works best for you.

By sharing your valuable knowledge, you will directly contribute to:

- Improving the effectiveness of the Career Planning Program.
- Making a positive impact on the lives and careers of Marines.
- Providing valuable data to Marine Corps leadership to drive meaningful change.

All interviews will be conducted confidentially and will be summarized without individual attribution. Your feedback will be aggregated and used to develop recommendations for improving the program for all Career Counselors.

This research has been approved by the USMC HRPP/IRB and the USMC Survey Control Office (USMC Survey Control Number: USMC-24-134 (ID#916) EXP: 13-Dec-27).

I would be honored if you would consider participating in this important research. Please let me know your availability for a brief interview by [1 week from email date]

Thank you for your time and consideration.

[Standard email signature]



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APPENDIX B. INTERVIEW COORDINATION EXAMPLE

Good Morning [Rank and Name],

I'm looking forward to our discussion next [interview date and time, stating their time zone].

Attached is the meeting link we will be using. This invitation is from my NPS Teams account and will require you to join from the link in this email instead of the "Join" option in your MCEN Teams account. If you have any issues joining through the link provided, please contact me through text, Signal or WhatsApp at [omitted] or over email [omitted].

Our interview will primarily focus on the following questions:

[Applicable interview questions from Appendix C-E included without adjustment.]

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this research. With your help I will be able to properly assess the Career Planning Program and provide actionable recommendation for senior Marine Corps Leaders.

This session will be recorded and transcribed, allowing me to summarize and analyze the main themes that emerge from it. I will not attribute quotes to you individually.

If you have any questions, please email me at [omitted] or reach me on my cell phone at [omitted].

I look forward to the session.

[Standard email signature]



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APPENDIX C. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: CAREER COUNSELOR

Disclaimer: Your participation in this interview is entirely voluntary. You have the right to stop participating at any time without giving a reason. If at any point you feel uncomfortable answering a question, you may skip it. All information you provide will be treated with the utmost confidentiality. Your anonymity will be maintained throughout the interview process.

Recent Change Impacts

- Over the past three to four years, please describe a service-wide program or policy that has had a positive impact on retention within your command?
- Over the past three to four years, please describe a service-wide program or policy that has had a negative impact on retention within your command?
- How would you describe the workload since you've become a Career Counselor?
- How have you managed the increased retention mission and associated workload in recent years?
- How would adding an additional Career Counselor(s) to your unit affect your work?

Training Evaluation

- Please describe the training you receive as a Career Counselor? How has it changed in recent years? For example, how has the process, focus, frequency or quality changed?
- How well did the Basic Career Planner Course prepare you to execute your duties?
 - Can you give an example of something that you were prepared to do?
 - Can you give an example of something that you were not prepared to do?
- Can you describe your OJT experience? How would you change the OJT process to improve your preparedness as a Career Counselor?

Authority/Responsibility

- Please describe the engagement of key command group members in the Career Planning Program (e.g. CO, SgtMaj, XO, Adj, Co Cmdr, Co 1stSgts, etc.).
 - How does the engagement of these roles affect how you accomplish your work?
 - What changes in these Marines' engagement might enhance your ability to do your work?
- Please describe a time your rank or authority within your command impacted your performance as a Career Counselor?
- What challenges have you had with advising your Commanding Officer and other key leaders on enlisted retention matters?

Supervision

- Who supervises you as a Career Counselor and your Career Planner Program?



- How are you evaluated as a Career Counselor?
- What has frustrated you about your evaluations?

CMC for the Day

- If you were CMC for the day, how would you change the Career Planning Program to improve enlisted retention? Feel free to provide more than one.



APPENDIX D. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: CAREER COUNSELOR SNCOIC

Disclaimer: Your participation in this interview is entirely voluntary. You have the right to stop participating at any time without giving a reason. If at any point you feel uncomfortable answering a question, you may skip it. All information you provide will be treated with the utmost confidentiality. Your anonymity will be maintained throughout the interview process.

TM2030 Impacts

- Since TM2030 has been published, please describe a service-wide program or policy that has had a positive impact on retention within your command(s)?
- Since TM2030 has been published, please describe a service-wide program or policy that has had a negative impact on retention within your command?
- How have you managed the increased retention mission and associated workload since FY2022?
- How would adding an additional Career Counselor(s) to your unit or subordinate units affect your work?

Training Evaluation

- Please describe your approach to training of your Career Counselors? How has it changed in recent years?
- Please describe the training you receive as a Career Counselor SNCOIC? How has it changed in recent years?
- How did the Advanced Career Counselor Course prepare you to execute your duties?
 - Can you give an example of something that you were prepared to do?
 - Can you give an example of something that you were not prepared to do?
- Please describe your approach to on-the-job training for new Career Counselors? How could it be improved?

Authority/Responsibility

- Please describe the engagement of key command group members in the Career Planning Program (e.g. CO, SgtMaj, XO, Adj, etc.).
- How does the engagement of these roles affect how you accomplish your work?
- What changes in these Marines' engagement might enhance your ability to do your work?



- Please describe a time your rank or authority within your command impacted your performance as a Career Counselor SNCOIC?
- What challenges have you had with advising your Commanding Officer and other key leaders on enlisted retention matters?

Supervision

- Who supervises you as a Career Counselor SNCOIC and your Career Planning Program?
- How do you get evaluated?
- What has frustrated you about your evaluations?

CMC for the Day

- If you were CMC for the day, how would you change the Career Planning Program to improve enlisted retention?



APPENDIX E. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: GENERAL OFFICER- LEVEL CAREER COUNSELOR

Disclaimer: Your participation in this interview is entirely voluntary. You have the right to stop participating at any time without giving a reason. If at any point you feel uncomfortable answering a question, you may skip it. All information you provide will be treated with the utmost confidentiality. Your anonymity will be maintained throughout the interview process.

TM2030 Impacts

- Since TM2030 has been published, please describe a service-wide program or policy that has had a positive impact on retention within your command?
- Since TM2030 has been published, please describe a service-wide program or policy that has had a negative impact on retention within your command?
- How have you managed the increased retention mission and associated workload since FY2022?
- How would adding an additional Career Counselor to your unit or subordinate units affect your work?

Training Evaluation

- Please describe your approach to training your Career Counselors? How has it changed in recent years?
- Please describe the training you receive as a General Officer Career Counselor? How has it changed in recent years?
- How did the Advanced Career Planner Course prepare you to execute your duties?
 - Can you give an example of something that you were prepared to do?
 - Can you give an example of something that you were not prepared to do?
- Please describe your approach to on-the-job training for new Career Counselors? How could it be improved?

Authority/Responsibility

- Please describe the engagement of key command group members in the Career Planning Program (e.g. CG, DCG, CoS, SgtMaj, A/CoS-G1, etc.).
- How does the engagement of these roles affect how you accomplish your work?
- What changes in these Marines' engagement might enhance your ability to do your work?
- Please describe a time your rank or authority within your command impacted your performance as a General Officer Career Counselor?



- What challenges have you had with advising your Commanding General and other key leaders on enlisted retention matters?

Supervision

- Who supervises you as a General Officer Career Counselor and your Career Planning Program?
- How are you evaluated as a General Officer Career Counselor?
- What has frustrated you about your evaluations?

CMC for the Day

- If you were CMC for the day, how would you change the Career Planning Program to improve enlisted retention?



APPENDIX F. PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

1. What is your PMOS?
2. What is your current billet?
[Career Counselor, Career Counselor SNCOIC, General Officer-Level Career Planner, Other]
3. What is your age?
4. What is your sex?
[Male, Female, prefer not to respond]
5. What best describes your race?
[American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, White, other, prefer not to respond]
6. What best describes your ethnicity?
[Hispanic or Latino, Not Hispanic or Latino, prefer not to respond]
7. What is your Marital status?
[Single, Married, Divorced/Separated, prefer not to respond]
8. How many dependents do you have?
[0, 1, 2, 3, 3+, Prefer not to respond]
9. What is your highest level of education?
[Less than HS Diploma(e.g. GED), HS Diploma, Some College, Associates Degree, Bachelor's Degree, Master's Degree or above, Prefer not to respond]
10. For how many years been a Career Counselor (time since graduation from Basic Career Counselor Course)?
11. What type of command are you assigned to?
[GCE, LCE, ACE, Headquarters, Installation, Training, other]
12. How many enlisted Marines are assigned to your unit?
13. What is the grade of your Commanding Officer/Commanding General?
13. How many units Career Counselors do you supervise?



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