Enlisted Rating Modernization: What's Next for the Navy

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Earlier this month, Fleet Master Chief April Beldo and I travelled to the U.S. 5th Fleet area of responsibility to visit sailors operating on the Navy's front lines.

During the visit, sailors not only impressed us with their mission-focused, can-do attitude, but also with their initiative, creativity and thoughtful questions on some of our recent personnel changes -- including the Navy's enlisted rating modernization effort.

Two questions came up frequently: "Why do we need to change?" and "How will the new system work going forward?"

Throughout our 241-year history, the Navy has embraced change as technology has evolved. And while there is a need to balance history, culture and heritage, we must not shy away from adapting to meet the needs of a 21st century Navy -- including the way we manage our people. Our personnel system has not fundamentally changed since the 1970s, and just like our ships, aircraft and weapons systems, it needs updates to keep pace with a rapidly changing world.

The Design for Maintaining Maritime Superiority challenges us to think about how we will adapt to potential adversaries. Look at how our force changed during World War II, Vietnam, and Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom. We have rarely fought how we planned, and that has consequently driven real-time changes to how we organize, man, train and equip our forces. The Navy's rating modernization effort will put processes in place and provide us with the agility to retrain and repurpose elements of our force to meet rapidly changing threats. This is about warfighting readiness.

Additionally, this effort is consistent with Sailor 2025, which seeks to modernize our industrial-age personnel system by providing sailors choice and flexibility. Each year, the Navy brings in approximately 40,000 sailors and sends that same number of sailors home. This operating model assumes a near limitless supply of individuals that are willing and able to join the Navy each year -- an assumption that very few non-military employers use. The Navy's rating modernization effort will provide sailors the options and tools they need to stay Navy by allowing them to move to occupations that better suit their talents, or better meet the Navy's rapidly changing needs. This model will improve the sustainability of our personnel system, improve retention opportunities and enable better "fit," each of which also contributes to increased warfighting readiness.

To be clear, we will not require every sailor to change their occupation, nor do we expect sailors to become "generalists." Instead, this is about allowing interested and willing career-minded individuals to adapt and expand their skill sets.
So how do we think this new system will work?

Over the past several weeks, we've been working hard to map out what rating modernization will look like and how it will affect sailors as we move forward. We've also received some great feedback from the fleet and are incorporating some of those ideas into our efforts.

Today, there are 89 ratings in 12 career fields and many of those ratings have multiple career tracks. For example, within the "Hospital Corpsman" rating there are 29 different career tracks. Although that rating could be manned at 113 percent, 13 of those 29 career tracks could be undermanned. And even though we are short personnel in 13 specialties, overall advancement opportunity would be low. This is a perfect example of what can and does happen in many rates today.

Additionally, our current enlisted personnel assignment system is largely driven by rank and rate, which can cause units to have gaps in some critical skills even when it is 100-percent manned on paper. Neither does the current system capture the full spectrum of qualifications and experience like it should.

To address those challenges, we are looking at redefining Navy Occupational Specialties (NOS) along the lines of Navy Enlisted Classifications (NECs). Many ratings like "Hospital Corpsman" have multiple NECs grouped inside them. Of the 40 NECs a "Hospital Corpsman" might have, there are 29 different combinations of NECs that define the rating's various career tracks. For example, under this model those NECs that define the "Dental Technician" rating would form a NOS around that specialty. Another example would be an "Emergency Medical Technician," where the collection of that rating's NECs would form the NOS. This would help improve "fit," as well as advancement for sailors. When we are complete, there could be hundreds of NOSs, as compared to today's 89 ratings.

Our new Billet Based Distribution (BBD) system that came online earlier this year allows us to track each job by its unique combination of NECs. And as we continue to refine BBD and other Sailor 2025 initiatives like Ready Relevant Learning (RRL) and our "Detailing Marketplace" (a kind of "LinkedIn" for the Navy), we will be able to target the specific training and experience a Sailor needs to move to a particular assignment.

Then, as a sailor comes up on their detailing window, the conversation would not only be about the 50 or 100 assignments available in that current career track, but which ones might also be possible with additional training. For example, if you are a "Yeoman" today, you might be eligible for assignments in the "Personnel Specialist" or "Aviation Maintenance Administrationman" ratings going forward. Not only would this improve the number and type of assignments sailors could choose from, but it also might allow an opportunity for individuals to move to a career track that has better advancement opportunity.

To make this work, we will need to deliver on several things, including developing "progressive" NECs that capture experience and proficiency, as well as implementing RRL, which will help provide mobile, modular training during sailors' careers. We will need to complete the modernization of our integrated pay and personnel system, and create a single, authoritative database that captures a sailor's combination of NECs, experience and proficiency -- a snapshot of their "DNA." We'll also need to overhaul advancement exams and look to make them NEC-based, which will give us a better indication
of a sailor’s current skills and experience, and eliminate general rating material that does not directly apply to sailors’ real jobs. Last, we’ll need to develop more reciprocal agreements with the Department of Labor and state governments to expand our credentialing and licensing efforts for sailors.

Did we choose an easy path forward? Absolutely not. But I believe this change needs to occur, and now is the right time to do so.

We have a lot of work to do, and as you might imagine, these changes are going to take time to implement -- perhaps several years. As we go forward, you can continue to expect lots of discussion and we’ll give you plenty of notice before any changes are made.

We have also widely expanded the Navy-wide working group tackling this effort, and every fleet, force and command master chief and Navy counselor knows how to provide input. You also have a direct line to me in order to make sure your ideas are heard – send them to NavyRatingMod.fct@navy.mil.

The Navy’s mission has not changed and neither have the bonds that unite us. We are one Navy Team and our loyalty is to our nation and to our Navy. America is counting on us.