

YourAirForce

Building on language skills

Leaders want a corps of language-proficient airmen

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Airmen with skills in languages other than English could find themselves on the promotion fast track in the Air Force of the future.

Whether it's fighting in Afghanistan or delivering aid to Haiti, Air Force officials say the service's need for more airmen who speak and understand other languages and cultures is only going to get bigger, even as budgets get tighter.

That means the smart money is building and maintaining a cadre of airmen with a variety of language skills, but only paying for the ones that are most urgently needed.

Fewer bonuses

Air Force officials took a strong position in favor of airmen who speak a second language in 2011 by adding a section for foreign language skills to the Officers Selection Brief.

The service is in the process of revising its policy on offering foreign language proficiency bonuses, and the days of paying a bonus simply because someone has expertise in a language appear to be coming to an end.

"The policy that the Air Force had prior to this worked for a different time," said Christian Passch, chief of the Air Force language, region and culture policy program and budgeting. "We've found that, essentially, we were paying airmen...a bonus for languages that they either weren't using, or the Air Force didn't need anymore."

Passch said the policy is still a work in progress, but it is moving toward more incentive for airmen with skills in languages that are more diverse and critically needed, and away from incentives for those who have skills the Air Force believes it has enough of to meet its requirements.

"We said we've got to adjust this and make it relevant to today's world, and quite frankly where we think we're going to go," he said.

He said the changes could save the service about \$11 million a year.

Language skills shift

Passch said that means aligning Air Force policy and resources with an increased focus on the Pacific, the Middle East and Africa, without losing the ability to work with established foreign partners in other parts of the world such as Europe and South America.

He said the future policy also would likely give more incentive to airmen who are considered Air Force language professionals and need to maintain their proficiency levels to do their jobs.

Passch cautions that the policy won't preclude airmen who take on short-term assignments that require language skills from getting bonuses, but those bonuses would likely be tied to the duration of their assignment. The service is reviewing these positions to make sure that the right people are in the job, and that the jobs are needed, he said.

"I think everyone knows that the world is getting smaller every day, and as the world gets smaller, our resources become more valued, more restricted," he said.

Fewer resources mean a greater reliance on foreign partners to conduct missions that the service might have taken on solo in the past, Passch said. And to work effectively with these partners, more airmen have to understand their languages and their cultures, he said.

Language-proficient officers

The Air Force considered increasing the knowledge and understanding of other cultures and their languages by tying commissioning to having a working proficiency in a second language. Rand Corp., an Arlington, Va.-based think tank, studied the issue in 2009 through its Project Air Force initiative.

Researchers surveyed more than 3,500 officers, the majority of whom had some limited second language skills, mostly in Spanish, German



COURTESY OF CAPT. HUY TRAN

Capt. Huy Tran interviews a witness in Vietnam during a search and recovery mission in the summer of 2012. Air Force officials say the service's need for more airmen who speak and understand other languages and cultures is only going to get bigger, even as budgets get tighter.

and French. Those languages are the most commonly available languages at many U.S. universities, but not considered critical national security languages, nor are they aligned with Air Force needs, according to the report.

Officers reported that they believed that language proficiency was necessary for mission success, but only around 40 percent to 60 percent of those surveyed believed it was important for their individual careers.

Researchers said because of the lack of emphasis on foreign language education in the United States, even officers who had exposure to a foreign language in college couldn't achieve the level of proficiency that the Air Force might require. They also found that implementing such a requirement could hurt the diversity of personality, technical background and demographic of the officers corps.

Researchers recommended the service tailor its commissioning policies to its desired outcomes, maintain some flexibility and variety in how it offers incentives and craft policies that help airmen maintain their proficiency.

"Given the clear consensus that language skills are important, there is little argument that a language-proficient officer force is a worthwhile aim for the Air Force," researchers wrote.

Willingness to learn

Though researchers determined that it wouldn't be feasible for the Air Force to require a language proficiency requirement for all officers, the service could tap into the pool of officers it already has who would be interested in learning a second language.

Chaitra Hardison, lead researcher on the Rand report, said many of the officers surveyed in the Rand sample indicated they would volunteer to learn another language if the Air Force would pay for the courses, give them duty time to develop skills and not penalize them at promotion time for working toward proficiency.

"I think it bodes really well for the Air Force," she said. "What it says is that...[there] are people who are already out there who are willing to learn. They just need the support, resources and time to do it."

"I think one of the things that became clear is everybody is not aware of the language opportunities that are there," she said. "There are a lot of interested people, but they don't know who to call."

Hardison said what she would not recommend is that the Air Force rely on programs aimed at language proficiency, which can be expensive and laborious, as a way of developing cultural competency. She also would caution against the idea that learning any language other than English better prepares someone for learning an additional language faster.

She said while some studies show that those with second language proficiency can pick up some languages faster, they still struggle with languages like Arabic, which are traditionally harder for English speakers to learn.

Hardison said the Air Force should have multiple policies that support airmen who are starting out in a second language in addition to rewarding and providing opportunities to maintain those skills once they're acquired. She said current policy rewards people

who have certain proficiencies and in fact penalizes those who are learning a harder language.

Immersion program

The Air Force wants to develop more second language proficient officers and enlisted airmen. Even as Rand was studying the question of whether the service could make a second language proficiency requirement part of commissioning, the service was standing up its Language Enabled Airman Program to help airmen with some language skills to build and maintain those skills throughout their career.

Airmen in the program have an opportunity to participate in four to six weeklong immersion experiences abroad or at a Defense Language Institute school and practice their skills on a weekly basis with an e-mentor.

Zachary Hickman, language division chief for the Air Force Culture and Language Center at Air University, said LEAP, along with other cultural training programs for deploying airmen, are part of the service's efforts to help airmen become more culturally aware and to prepare those with language skills to be able to do their jobs in a foreign language.

There are more than 1,100 people in the program, and this year is the first year the program has been a part of the Air Force budget, Hickman said.

"We're starting down the road to get people to speak the terminology of their Air Force Specialty Code in French if they speak French," Hickman said. "That means if you're a civil engineer who speaks French, we want to get you to a point where you can speak civil engineering in French." □