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RETENTION PROBLEMS AND THE USAF APPROACH

by

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Preface

This research grew from conversations among friends about friends. Like so many of us today, we have witnessed large numbers of our contemporaries decide to leave the service over the years, and we've heard their individual reasons. Many of these were great people, and their separations are truly a loss for the Air Force. There are many great folks still in the service who want to serve but are considering leaving. The Air Force will be worse off without a lot of these people. The selfish desire to keep these people in the Air Force is the seed of this study.

The authors would like to acknowledge the help of the Air University Library Staff for their expertise and genuine desire to make the resources as available as possible. In addition we would like to acknowledge the help of Major Mike Beamon and Captain Harold Brown of the Air Force Personnel Center for their help in obtaining retention data on non-rated and rated officers. Likewise, we would like to thank Lieutenant Colonel Lisa Firmin and Master Sergeant Tony Patterson of the Air Force's Retention Policy office for providing valuable assistance in finding available data pertaining to United States Air Force (USAF) officer and enlisted retention. We also appreciate the assistance of Lieutenant Colonel Nancy Weaver, Chief, Air Force Quality of Life, and Captain Scott Hopkins, Chief of Staff Survey Office, for their assistance in obtaining information on the Chief of Staff Survey. Finally, we would like to thank Ms DeeAnn Rothstein and Maj Paul Freeman for their insightful and timely manuscript reviews.

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Abstract

The United States Air Force (USAF) should implement initiatives to improve organizational climate and thereby improve low retention. Today's low retention presents the USAF with a serious challenge because retention plays a significant role in maintaining the right number and experience mix of people in the USAF. To date, the USAF has focused its retention improvement efforts on reducing personnel tempo and improving compensation. The effectiveness of these quality of life initiatives is difficult to quantify, but data indicate it may be less than desired. Despite United States (U.S.) Navy and USAF studies that point to various aspects of organizational climate as sources of dissatisfaction among their respective members, the USAF apparently has not attempted to improve organizational climate in an effort to improve retention. The USAF should implement initiatives to improve retention while taking steps to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the factors causing low retention.

Chapter 1

Background

> *What concerns me most – and what I am tracking most closely – is retention. Our retention rates are alarmingly low…it is clear our success depends on being able to retain good people to operate and support our high-tech machines.*
>
> —F. Whitten Peters,
> Acting Secretary of the Air Force

Introduction and Problem Definition

Low retention presents the United States Air Force (USAF) with a serious challenge to maintaining combat readiness today and in the future. This in turn impacts the USAF's ability to support our nation's current and future military commitments. The importance of the retention problem in the minds of USAF leaders is emphasized in the quote above from the Acting Secretary of the Air Force, as well as the general level of media coverage the topic receives. Today, it is quite common to find an *Air Force Magazine, Air Force Times* news article, or a *Stars and Stripes* newspaper with an article about the USAF's retention problems.

A variety of factors contribute to low retention. Contextual factors outside the direct control of the USAF can impact the perceptions of service members and may make retaining them difficult. Today, one of these factors is the United States' booming

economy and the resulting tight U.S. labor market.[1] This presents an attractive alternative to service members at reenlistment time. Other issues that affect USAF retention are within its authority to control. The USAF and Department of Defense (DOD) have focused their initiatives on improving service member's quality of life by reducing personnel tempo and improving compensation. The effectiveness of these initiatives is not yet clear. But studies point to another issue that may be negatively impacting USAF retention that, while within the service's control, isn't being addressed. This issue is the organizational climate of the unit.

Thesis

The USAF could improve retention in the future by implementing initiatives to improve the organizational climate for its work force. This does not imply efforts to improve the organizational climate are the *only* methods USAF leaders should implement in order to retain their airmen. There is no single point solution to improving retention. The current USAF focus is on improving airmen's quality of life and will likely increase retention somewhat. But ultimately, the best long-term solution to improving USAF retention rests in a combined approach; one that strategically considers airmen's overall well-being to include their organizational climate and quality of life.

Methodology

This paper will first highlight the significance of low retention for the USAF. Next, it will show indicators of low retention, both for officer and enlisted personnel. The researchers then present data indicating the major causes for low retention in the USAF. It continues by addressing the current initiatives to improve USAF retention. The study

points out that retention challenges are not confined to the USAF, but do exist in the U.S. Navy as well. The paper concludes with recommendations for improving USAF retention.

The data analyzed to determine the reasons for low retention came from a variety of sources: results of the 1997 Chief of Staff of the Air Force (CSAF) Quality of Life and Organizational Climate surveys, briefings and data collected from the Air Force Personnel Center (AFPC), statements of current USAF and DOD leaders, results of a U.S. Navy study of retention problems in their service, and other open source literature.

Significant Findings

There are several significant findings in this report. In recent years the USAF did not conduct surveys of those separating from the service to determine their reasons, except for a brief period in November and December 1998. It isn't clear the USAF has ever conducted surveys of those reenlisting to determine why. A recent U.S. Navy study reported that high personnel tempo and low compensation are factors in the retention decision of junior officers (JOs). This study also identified job content, sense of mission, trust in leadership, and career advancement as significant factors in JO dissatisfaction. Likewise, the 1997 CSAF Survey highlighted several aspects of USAF organizational climate that were perceived negatively, particularly leadership, unit flexibility, recognition, and general organizational climate.

There are three remaining significant findings with respect to USAF retention found in this report. USAF efforts to reduce personnel tempo may help retention. Likewise, USAF efforts to improve compensation may lead to better USAF retention. Finally, there

are apparently no major USAF organizational climate issues that are being addressed in order to improve the current retention problem.

Notes

[1] Air Force News, *Retention Remains Key Concern says Air Force Vice Chief of Staff*, 1998, n.p.; on-line, Internet, 20 January 1999, available from http://www.af.mil/cgi-bin/multigate/retrieve?u=z3950r://dtics11:1024/news!F6002%3a91…/htm.

Chapter 2

The Air Force Retention Problem and Its Causes

> *But the quality of the Air Force, whether in 1947 or 1997, is not measured in terms of new fighters, bombers, missiles, unmanned aerial vehicles or the weapons they carry. It's in the people who together have built the greatest air and space power team in the world. People are the strength of our past and the foundation of our future.*
>
> —General Michael E. Ryan

The Significance of Low Retention

The USAF cannot function effectively now or in the future without the proper number and experience mix of people in its force. As Gen Ryan, CSAF stated, "people continue to be our most vital resource—they are the most critical component of readiness."[1] There are various pieces to the manpower puzzle to ensure the need for quality people is met, including recruitment, training, promotion, and retention.

Meeting retention goals is vitally important for at least three reasons. The first reason is that retention plays a significant role in achieving USAF required force strength. A second reason is that the USAF relies on experienced airmen who are already trained and ready. With every airman that chooses to separate from the USAF, the service loses that individual's experience, training, and mission preparedness. Another reason is cost. The loss of experienced individuals means the USAF must pay for the training of another member or recruit.

Retention is just one of the "pieces" of the manpower puzzle, but it is the focus of this study. This chapter will highlight the magnitude of the current USAF retention problem, and then identify causes for low retention. This process leads to a more in-depth investigation of issues related to retention that aren't being addressed by the USAF today.

The Indicators of Retention

The AFPC collects and analyzes retention data for the USAF, using a variety of retention indicators. Included in these indicators are Cumulative Continuation Rate (CCR), separations, man-years, Total Active Rated Service (TARS), and Aviator Continuation Pay (ACP) Take Rate, and retention rates.[2] (See Glossary for definitions of these indicators.) These tools indicate low retention for both officers and enlisted personnel.

Low Officer Retention

Currently, retention of USAF officers is low for various groups, including pilots, navigators, air battle managers, and communications/computer officers. Retention of USAF pilots is low by historical standards. In fiscal year 1998 (FY98), pilot separations increased 63 percent over FY97, moving from 632 approved separations in FY97 to 1032 in FY98. The ACP take rate for long-term commitments in FY98 was only 27 percent, the lowest total number of long term commitments since the bonus program began in 1988. And low pilot retention today means shortages are forecast for the future. For example, the FY98 6-11 year CCR for pilots declined to 46.1% from 71.3% in FY97. This figure, 6-11 CCR for pilots, forecasts the percentage of pilots in their sixth (6th) year

of service who will complete 11 years of service given existing retention rates. The AFPC estimates that by FY02, the USAF will be 2000 pilots below requirements.[3]

The current retention problem for navigators is less acute than that for pilots, but there is a problem forecast for navigators as well. There were actually slightly fewer navigator separations in FY98 (459) as compared to FY97 (504).[4] This figure may be a bit misleading, however, because of specifics related to the navigator group: a shut down of navigator training in the early 1990's, and the fact that the navigator force is today relatively senior in overall structure. Today the mix of company grade to field grade navigators is 43 percent to 57 percent (43/57), while the ideal ratio for career field sustainment is 65/35, according to AFPC. The net result is that when the senior navigators begin to retire the imperative to retain the small pool of company grade navigators trained in the early 1990's will become more acute.[5] The real problem here is that retention is forecast to decline for navigators. For example, the 6-11 CCR for navigators declined to 61.6 percent in FY98 from 73.1 percent in FY97 and a high of 86 percent in FY95.[6]

Retention indicators for non-rated officer career fields are below historical averages for FY98 also. For example, overall mission support officer retention rates were 42 percent, nine percent below the historical 51 percent norm.[7] Data for mission support officers indicates a future problem as well. For example, the 4-11 year CCR for Computer/Communication officers is 20 percent below desired levels. Finally, future retention is a problem for operations support officers. As an example, the Air Battle Manager 4-11 year CCR figure is 19 percent below USAF goals.[8]

Low Enlisted Retention

Retention is low among enlisted personnel as well. One indicator is overall enlisted manpower strength which is tracked relative to three retention goals: retaining 55 percent of the first-term airmen, 75 percent of the second-term airmen and 95 percent of the enlisted force who are career airmen.[9] The FY98 reenlistment rates for these three groups were 54 percent, 69 percent and 93 percent respectively.[10] These overall numbers only show small deviations from the AF goals. But there is a gap in the critical supervisory ranks at mid-career, and in certain career fields, the actual rates are significantly below USAF goals. For example, the second term reenlistment rate for USAF Air Traffic Controllers was only 51 percent in FY98.[11]

Though it certainly varies in intensity across rank and career field, it is hard to deny that retention is low within the USAF. The next section will highlight various causes of low retention in the USAF today.

The Causes of Low Retention

There are a variety of factors that contribute to low retention in the USAF. Some of these factors are contextual and cannot be directly changed by USAF personnel policies or initiatives. In some cases the effects of these contextual factors can be mitigated by USAF action. And in some cases, the services can address those factors internally.

One limitation to investigating causes is the lack of retention-specific data. Despite all the attention low retention is receiving, surveys intended to measure reasons members are separating or reenlisting apparently don't exist. The USAF did conduct a survey in 1997 of those pilots eligible to take the ACP but who chose not to. The survey population, pilots only, was considered too narrow for this study. In November and

December of 1998, the HQ USAF/DPRC (Headquarters USAF/Compensation and Legislation Division) directed a computerized, telephonic exit survey of separating officers and enlisted personnel. Unfortunately, only qualitative, summarized results of this study were available for this study.

Given these limitations, this section will briefly discuss current contextual factors contributing to low retention. It will then discuss the two factors USAF leadership consider the primary causes of low retention - high operations tempo and low compensation. Finally, this section will highlight a factor internal to the USAF that may be a contributor to low retention that USAF leadership is apparently not discussing, negative perceptions of organizational climate within the USAF.

Contextual Factors

Low retention in the USAF is sometimes attributed to a variety of contextual factors. One is the end of the Cold War and the choices the U.S. has made in response. This in turn has meant increased deployments for the U.S. military. The number of USAF personnel deployed has increased fourfold from 1989 to 1998.[12] Deployments are a significant factor in high operations tempo for the military. Another factor related to the end of the Cold War and operations tempo is the downsizing that has occurred. Since 1989, the USAF has reduced its overall strength from almost 600,000 airmen to less than 400,000 in 1998, a 33 percent decrease in end strength.[13] The smaller force combined with the higher operations tempo impacts the individual airman directly by increasing personnel tempo.

Today's economy also contributes to USAF retention problems. As a result of the healthy economy, the unemployment rate is only 4.3 percent, a 30-year low.[14] The result

is competition for employees. One particular labor market where competition for employees is especially fierce has been the market for pilots. This market has been competitive because there has been a hiring boom by the airlines in recent years, not only because of the healthy economy, but also because of the need to replace a large number of airline pilots reaching mandatory retirement age.[15]

High Operations Tempo

The USAF leadership believes the most important reason people are currently leaving the service is because of the high operations tempo. Given the figures presented previously, there can be little doubt that operations tempo is high. USAF senior leadership at the February 98 CORONA conference identified this high operations tempo as the primary reason USAF pilots separate from the service.[16] And statistics show similarity in the number of hours worked per week between pilots (55), navigators (54), and nonrated officers (54).[17] Finally, USAF leadership also believes high operations tempo drives enlisted retention. Lieutenant General (Lt Gen) Michael D. McGinty, who retired in October 1998 as the Air Force Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, points to operations tempo as the "number 1 dissatisfier" for the USAF's enlisted members.[18]

High operations tempo is a primary driver of high personnel tempo. And operations tempo is up. As seen previously, the number of deployed personnel is up fourfold since 1989, and the end strength has become 33 percent smaller. Simply put, the force is being tasked to deploy much more with significantly fewer airmen.

It is easy to understand how high personnel tempo might increase strain on the service member as well as on the family members, thereby causing the member to consider separating. In general, a high personnel tempo increases the member's time at

work, increasing the strain on the member directly and taking him or her away from family. And being deployed places additional strains on both those who deploy and those who stay. Deployments take the deployers away from home and family, of course. But they also increase the workload for those in the unit who don't deploy because they must pick up the home station load for the deployed members.

Low Compensation

The USAF and DOD leadership believes that low compensation has a significant and negative impact on retention. As seen above, the healthy economy makes the option of separating from the service attractive. As Lt Gen McGinty says, "nobody joins the USAF to get rich," but current levels of benefits are important dissatisfiers to USAF members who decide to separate.[19] This echoes the beliefs of senior DOD leaders who believe the current compensation package the DOD offers to military personnel has a negative impact on service retention. The Secretary of Defense (SECDEF), William Cohen, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Henry Hugh Shelton, said recently to the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee: the "current level of pay and benefits is increasingly having a negative impact on retention, especially at the mid-career level."[20]

One aspect of compensation USAF leaders feel negatively impacts retention is direct pay. In September 1998, the Service Chiefs, including CSAF General Michael Ryan, testified to Congress that they were concerned that low pay relative to the private sector was hurting retention.[21] There is not universal agreement on the difference between military pay and private sector pay, but some estimates place military pay approximately 14 percent less than equivalent pay in the private sector.[22]

The leadership also believes the military retirement system is a contributor to low retention. In December 1998, Secretary Cohen announced: "the current retirement system is not an incentive for quality people to remain in the service, we need to change it."[23] He was referring to the military retirement system that applies to personnel who entered the service after July 1, 1986, popularly called Redux. Personnel who retire under Redux retirement will receive substantially less retirement pay at 20 years.

The Navy Retention Challenge

Retention is not an issue unique to the USAF. Acute retention problems in the U.S. Navy have focused attention on JOs, in particular pilots, surface warfare officers, and Sea/Air/Land commandos (SEALS). Because of the problem, Rear Admiral John T. Natter (now retired) led a 1998 study of JOs to uncover the reasons many are separating from the service. At the time, Admiral Natter was Deputy for Readiness, Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Naval Forces Europe, and Assistant Chief of Naval Personnel, Memphis. Admiral Natter and his team spoke with 688 naval officers, lieutenant and below.[24]

The results of this study are of interest for several reasons. First, though the study did not include enlisted personnel, it covered a spectrum of career fields and as such should be reasonably representative of the U.S. Navy retention problem as a whole. Second, the contextual elements highlighted above associated with the end of the Cold War and the healthy economy, such as high operations tempo, a down-sized force, and attractiveness of private sector compensation are part of the retention equation for the U.S. Navy as well as the USAF. Of the 688 JOs interviewed, 192 were aviators.[25] Thus, though the results were aggregated, unique aspects of retention applicable to pilots, in particular the

airline hiring boom, were factored into the study implicitly through the responses of the pilots. But most interesting are Admiral Natter's conclusions.

In his investigation of the retention problem, Admiral Natter highlighted significant dissatisfaction with various aspects of Navy life in the following areas:

1. Job Satisfaction (loss of job satisfaction in their current job)
2. Training (Self-inflicted Pain)
3. Trust (Micromanagement and the zero-defect mentality)
4. Compensation (Erosion of benefits)
5. Command aspirations (The perception that their commanding officers are not satisfied with their tours and are not having fun)
6. Leadership (Lack of confidence in leadership)26

Upon qualitative study of the content of these six areas, it is clear they contain themes similar to those the USAF has highlighted, operations tempo and retirement. This tends to support the reasons given by the USAF leadership. But there were also themes highlighted that don't correlate with expressed USAF views. One theme identified in the study is a "lack of warfighter focus" that the study relates to an overload of administrative duties. This impacts the JOs in two ways. First is the direct impact of a high workload. Second is the message many JOs perceive as a result of the amount of time they must devote to administrative tasks. That message is that Navy leadership values administrative work more than tasks related to warfighting. Another theme running through these areas listed above was the issue of trust, running both upward and downward. The JOs expressed that they don't feel trusted, saying they feel "micromanaged." At the same time, they expressed distrust of leadership, pointing to readiness reporting they feel is dishonest. The readiness is related to another issue bothering many JOs, the lack of adequate resources, especially spare parts. Yet another theme highlighted within the surface warfare community was lack of potential for career advancement. One overall barometer of dissatisfaction with a future in the military is that

of the 688 JOs, 88 percent do not aspire to command. Natter says this is because command doesn't look satisfying anymore.[27]

In summary, Admiral Natter points to issues such as satisfaction with job content, sense of mission, trust, and career advancement as being important in dissatisfaction among U.S. Navy JOs. These are not areas the USAF leadership has explicitly highlighted in the retention debate. Given the similarities in the services and situation, this investigation returned to the USAF to explore the satisfaction of members about themes such as these and their potential relationship to retention.

The USAF and Organizational Climate

The 1997 CSAF Survey of Quality of Life and Organizational Climate revealed USAF member perceptions of certain aspects of organizational climate that are significantly negative. This survey is described in Appendix A. Overall findings of the survey are presented in Table 1.

The results of this survey are significant for several reasons. The survey found that across the USAF, 30 percent or more of the active duty force perceived five of fourteen (36 percent) organizational climate areas negatively. The figure of 30 percent or greater negative responses chosen for analysis is not arbitrary. According to the CSAF Survey Guide itself, the figure of 30–35 percent or greater negative responses is the USAF's own recommended criteria that leaders should use as an indicator that corrective action should be taken. The five areas perceived most negatively were leadership, unit flexibility, recognition, unit resources, and general organizational climate within their individual units.[28]

Table 1. 1997 Chief of Staff of the Air Force Survey, Organizational Climate Results: Percent of Negative Responses

Theme	Aggregated Off/Enl	Officers	Enlisted
The Job	11	9	12
Unit Performance Measures	15	10	16
Core Values	19	11	21
Teamwork	19	9	22
Supervision	19	16	20
Training & Development	20	14	22
Communication	22	13	24
Participation/Involvement	23	14	25
Job Satisfaction	26	20	27
Leadership	30	19	33
Unit Flexibility	33	25	35
Recognition	33	20	36
Unit Resources	35	42	33
General Organizational Climate	38	26	41

Source: Department of the Air Force Center for Quality Management Innovation, *1997 CSAF Survey, Organizational Climate On-line Consulting Guide for Commanders*, (March 1998), 59.

A second reason the survey is interesting is that enlisted personnel generally perceived organizational climate more negatively than did the officers. Overall, the enlisted responses were 8.4 percent more negative than those of the officers. In thirteen of fourteen areas, the enlisted personnel responded more negatively than did the officers. The enlisted personnel perceived five of fourteen areas negatively, while officers perceived only one of fourteen areas negatively.

Officers and enlisted personnel were in general agreement about what the most negative aspects of their respective units were. The enlisted personnel perceived the same five areas negatively as did the overall active duty force. This is not surprising given the fact that 80 percent of the active duty force and the active duty survey respondents were enlisted. Aside from the fact that officer perceptions were much more positive in general,

four of the five of areas perceived most negatively by officers matched those of the enlisted personnel.

Finally, the USAF itself has highlighted the general importance of organizational climate areas. The direction then-CSAF General (Ret) Ronald Fogleman gave was that the 1997 survey should “provide commanders, at all levels, with valuable information for the purpose of improving their organizations.”[29] And as noted previously, the figure of 30–35 percent or greater negative responses is the USAF's own recommended criteria that leaders should use as an indicator that corrective action should be taken.

Despite its recognition of the general importance of organizational climate, the USAF leadership may not perceive a relationship between organizational climate and current retention problems. Indicators of this include a lack of significant public discussion or Congressional testimony about organizational climate by USAF leaders of the type seen on operations tempo, pay, and retirement, as well as lack of significant initiatives to address organizational climate. In fact, the only organizational climate "initiative" found is the biennial CSAF Survey and the resulting report. And as noted, the direction General (Ret) Fogleman gave was not focused on improving retention.

However, other evidence points to a link between good organizational climate and good retention. First, the CSAF Survey Guide itself points out that general organizational climate, or morale, does relate to separation. And as seen above, general organizational climate received the worst ratings on the fourteen areas overall and for enlisted personnel, and received the second worst rating for officers. In addition, the Natter study pointed to empirical findings emphasizing important factors in low retention among U.S. Navy JOs such as negative perceptions of job content, sense of mission, trust in leadership, and

career advancement were important factors in low retention among U.S. Navy JOs. Several in this list appear similar to areas within the USAF Organizational Climate survey. For example, trust in leadership appears similar to leadership from the USAF Organizational Climate Survey, and career advancement appears similar to recognition for the USAF.

In summary, this chapter indicated the significance of the USAF retention problem today. It then described causes of the USAF retention problems. In particular, it highlighted the role of contextual factors. It also highlighted the issues of operations tempo and compensation and related these to retention. It then investigated the findings of a recent U.S. Navy study of JOs that pointed to additional reasons for retention problems in that service. Finally, the chapter closed with a discussion of the results of a 1997 USAF survey that found negative perceptions of several aspects of organizational climate, including leadership, unit flexibility, recognition, unit resources, and general organizational climate, or morale. The following chapter will investigate the effectiveness of initiatives the USAF is implementing or supporting to address retention problems.

Notes

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[2] "Rated Retention," *Air Force Issues*, Fall 1998, n.p.; on-line, Internet, 11 November 1998, available from http://www.issues.af.mil/ratedret.html.

[3] Capt Harold Brown, "Officer Retention Analysis," *Officer Retention Analysis*, January 1999, n.p.; on-line, Internet, 3 February 1999, available from http://afas.afpc.randolph.af.mil/ora/98-endyear-ora.htm.

[4] Ibid, January 1999.

[5] Ibid, January 1999.

[6] "Rated Retention," 11 November 1998.

[7] "Retention (Non-rated and Enlisted)," *Air Force Issues*, Fall 1998, n.p.; on-line, Internet, 11 November 1998, available from http://www.issues.af.mil/retentn.html.

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[22] Tom Philpott, "Pay Gap Real Despite Rand Study Results, Pentagon Says," Montgomery Advertiser, 8 November 1998: 5C.

[23] Master Sgt Linda Brandon, "Defense Secretary Announces Significant Pay and Retirement Improvements for FY 2000," *Air Force News*, 23 December 1998, n.p.; on-line, Internet, 20 January 1999, available from http://www.af.mil/news/Dec1998/n19981222_981996.html.

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[25] Ibid, October 1998.

[26] Ibid, October 1998.

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[28] *1997 CSAF Survey, Organizational Climate On-line Consulting Guide* 1998.

[29] *1997 CSAF Survey, Organizational Climate On-line Consulting Guide* 1998.

Chapter 3

Initiatives to Improve Retention

Our ability to meet the challenges of the future is predicated on recruiting and retaining high caliber men and women, managing them with sound personnel management policies and practices.

—Lt Gen Michael D. McGinty

Addressing Quality of Life

There are a variety of USAF initiatives intended to improve aspects of quality of life and thereby increase retention. These initiatives are intended to address two of the reasons highlighted in chapter two, personnel tempo and compensation. This chapter will describe these USAF initiatives as well as how they relate to issues impacting retention. It will then evaluate their effectiveness to date and the future impact these initiatives will likely have on retention. Finally, the chapter will describe the potential benefits of organizational climate initiatives.

Personnel Tempo Initiatives

The USAF is implementing initiatives to reduce the negative impact of personnel tempo on retention in an effort to mitigate the impact of high operations tempo. The service has three major initiatives intended to stabilize and reduce personnel tempo: restructuring into an Air Expeditionary Force (AEF), reallocating and retasking of

manpower, and mandating time off after long deployments. A brief description of these initiatives follows.

The USAF believes the AEF concept, which is to be implemented on October 1, 1999, will stabilize and reduce active duty personnel tempo by making deployments more predictable, and by spreading the task load across the broader USAF force structure. Predictability comes from giving AEF squadrons a reliable 15-month revolving schedule.[1] Because of the predictability, the USAF Reserve (USAFR) and the Air National Guard (ANG) will be able to play a larger role. Thus, the workload of deployments and operational taskings will be spread across the total force to reduce active duty USAF personnel tempos.[2]

Another USAF initiative, started in FY98, is intended to reduce personnel tempo in certain career fields. The strategy is to cross-train and reallocate 5,000 airmen from low tasked specialties to high tasked low density career fields such as Security Forces, Communications, and Air Traffic Control.[3] This action would reduce personnel tempo for many USAF members.

Finally, another initiative to reduce personnel tempo, this one begun in the first quarter of FY98, is guaranteeing its members time off upon return from their deployments. This initiative mandates 7-days off when returning home for every 45-days deployed for all service members.[4] In summary, while the USAF can't directly change the contextual factors driving the high operations tempo, they can and are taking steps that should help reduce personnel tempo.

Compensation Initiatives

The USAF is supporting or implementing several initiatives to improve compensation for its personnel and thereby increase retention. Two of the initiatives the USAF supports are intended to improve compensation for broad groups of its airmen. These two are the DOD initiatives to increase pay and change the Redux retirement system. Two other initiatives are intended to increase pilot retention. A brief description of these initiatives follows.

Th USAF is supporting DOD efforts to obtain approval for an increase in pay. In October 1998, both the SECDEF and the CSAF recommended substantial pay raises for military personnel when they submitted their FY00 budget proposal. The President's Budget submitted to Congress included a 4.4 percent direct pay raise for 2000 then 3.9 percent pay hikes for the next 4 years.[5]

The USAF also supports DOD efforts to change the Redux retirement system. Personnel who entered the service after 1 July 1986 will receive 40 percent of base pay for retirement when eligible after 20 years of service. This plan calls for less retirement pay than the 50 percent system in effect for those members who entered the military prior to that date. The DOD believes the expectation of reduced retirement pay under the Redux plan in comparison with the 50 percent pay under the previous system negatively impacts retention. Therefore, they are trying to increase Redux to a 50 percent system.[6]

The USAF continues to offer ACP, popularly known as the pilot bonus, an incentive pay program initiated in 1988 to encourage separation eligible pilots to stay in the USAF through their 14-year point.[7] The amount of payment ranged from $6500 to $12,000 per year, depending upon how long the bonus was to be paid.[8] In FY98, the actual payments were increased, topping out at $22,000 per year.[9]

Finally the USAF initiated the Phoenix Aviator program in FY98. Phoenix Aviator is a program intended to increase pilot retention by obtaining a commitment to a full 20-year USAF career. In exchange, the USAF guarantees the enrollees a flying assignment in their last tour prior to retirement. In addition, the USAF provides Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) training and related benefits to enrollees.[10]

These USAF initiatives indicate the service is serious in its efforts to improve retention. The next section will attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of these initiatives.

Evaluation of Initiatives

Effectiveness to Date

It is difficult to definitively assess the effectiveness to date of these USAF retention initiatives for at least two reasons. First, it is too early to expect to see improvement in the overall retention figures for several of the initiatives discussed. The most current retention data available is for FY98. Yet many of the initiatives had only just been implemented in that year. As seen previously, two of the three initiatives to improve personnel tempo were started on FY98. These are the reallocation of 5000 airmen and the mandatory post-deployment time off. Any improvement in retention from these initiatives would likely first appear in figures for FY99. The other major personnel tempo initiative, the restructuring to the AEF, won't actually begin to take hold until FY00. Similarly, the DOD initiatives to improve pay and change the Redux retirement, if approved, won't take effect until FY00. As such, they wouldn't be expected to impact retention significantly until approved by Congress sometime in FY99. Thus, any resulting

improvement in retention wouldn't appear until the FY99 retention statistics are available.

The effectiveness of the Phoenix Aviator and ACP programs is not clear-cut. As seen in chapter 2, pilot retention indicators declined from FY97 to FY98 despite the fact that the ACP program has been in place since 1988 and Phoenix Aviator was begun in FY98. Certainly these programs did not cause the decrease in pilot retention observed. But it is not clear what role these programs played in preventing even higher losses of pilots than those observed. To understand this would require additional data, namely, data on the reasons pilots in FY98 chose to separate or reenlist.

This brings up another reason evaluation of the effectiveness of programs is difficult, namely, the fact that the USAF does not have an on-going effort to measure the reasons members chose either to separate from the service or reenlist. In November and December 1998, the USAF did conduct a computerized, telephonic survey of those officers and enlisted personnel separating from service, and the summarized results do seem to support various quality of life issues for both officers and enlisted.[11] However, no details of the survey itself, including raw data, were made available for this report. But this example does point to the difficulty in evaluating the effectiveness of retention initiatives without causal data. In essence, without measured causal data, the USAF has no finger on the pulse of the retention problem.

Future Impact

It isn't clear how effective the USAF and DOD initiatives to reduce personnel tempo and increase compensation will be at increasing retention. First, it isn't clear how strong the relationship between personnel tempo and retention actually is. The

November/December 98 exit survey summary results are not clear on the subject of personnel tempo. Unfortunately, the only other data available is the 1997 CSAF Quality of Life Survey data, which apparently did not measure cause and effect directly. However, results of the survey call into question the importance of high tempo in the retention issue. As seen in Table 2, the survey results for officers indicate the strength of correlation between the average number of days TDY and intent to separate varies significantly, depending upon career field. This is also true for enlisted personnel, as seen in Table 3. This does not mean that reducing personnel tempo won't help in improving retention, but it does indicate that any improvement in retention will likely vary, depending upon career field.

Table 2. Officer (Less Than 12 Years of Service (YOS)) Air Force Specialty Codes with Highest Percent of Members Intending to Separate and Average Number of Days TDY

Air Force Specialty Codes (AFSC)	% of Specialty Who Intend to Separate	Average # of Days TDY
11 – Pilots	55	121
45 – MD – Surgery	55	47
44 – Physician	39	56
38 – Manpower	38	49
71 – OSI	30	81
37 – Information Management	25	53
47 – MD – Dental	25	47
16 – Operations Support	24	72
48 – Aerospace Medicine	24	71
12 – Navigators	21	104

Source: Department of the Air Force Quality of Life Office, *1997 CSAF Survey, Quality of Life Report, Analyses and Report* (March 1998), 20.

Table 3. Enlisted (Less Than 12 YOS) Air Force Specialty Codes with Highest Percent of Members Intending to Separate and Average Number of Days TDY

Air Force Specialty Codes (AFSC)	% of Specialty Who Intend to Separate	Average # of Days TDY
7S – OSI	40	86
1C – Command and Control Systems Operations	33	112
4F – Biomedical Technicians	33	70
2E – Comm – Electronics	28	126
3C – Comm – Computers	28	112
1W – Weather	27	91
3P – Security Forces	25	125
1A – Aircrew Operations	25	117
1N – Intelligence	24	107
1T – Aircrew Protection	22	93
3S – Mission Support	21	93
2A – Aerospace Maintenance	20	137

Source: Department of the Air Force Quality of Life Office, *1997 CSAF Survey, Quality of Life Report, Analyses and Report* (March 1998), 20.

To the extent that improving personnel tempo improves retention, the USAF initiatives to reallocate manpower and provide post-deployment time off should help. The AEF restructuring has the potential of improving active duty personnel tempo as well. However, the experience of the U.S. Navy should not be forgotten. U.S. Navy carrier battle groups are organized in an expeditionary manner, and yet the U.S. Navy retention problems were highlighted earlier in this study. Admiral Natter pointed out that many of the complaints of JOs were related to high workload between deployments.[12] For the USAF to benefit from the AEF, it must ensure it doesn't repeat the mistakes of the Navy in this regard.

It appears that efforts to increase compensation will have a positive impact upon retention, though the results may not be as strong as desired. The military will likely never be able to pay more than the private sector and thereby induce people to stay based

upon pay alone. On the other hand, this may not be necessary. As seen previously, results of the U.S. Navy study indicate the erosion of benefits is one of the top factors in JO retention problems. Still, Natter concluded that benefits were really just a tiebreaker for those JOs who were sitting on the fence anyway.[13] As seen, he concluded that other factors are playing an important role in retention for JOs in the U.S. Navy, factors USAF initiatives aren't addressing.

Organizational Climate Initiatives

This research uncovered no real USAF initiatives to address organizational climate issues most negatively perceived in the 1997 CSAF Organizational Climate Survey. Recall the five areas most negatively perceived were leadership, unit flexibility, recognition, unit resources, and general organizational climate. Any speculation as to the effectiveness of specific initiatives designed to improve any of these areas is most difficult. There is no recent historical data on the effectiveness of USAF organizational climate initiatives because they apparently have not existed. In addition, there does not appear to be quantitative results from initiatives of sister services. For example, the U.S. Navy apparently has not yet implemented significant initiatives to address the reasons Natter highlighted of job content, sense of mission, trust in leadership, or career advancement. The U.S. Navy has taken action to address their retention problem among junior officers, however. Apparently concluding that compensation needs are significant drivers in the separation decision of its JOs, the Navy has implemented various incentive pay programs to address their retention problem. Based upon his study, however, Admiral Natter concluded that the U.S. Navy incentive pay programs are "treating the symptoms of the problem, but not the root cause."[14] Admiral Natter's overall assessment

was that the incentive pay programs won't cause a significant increase in retention among JOs, especially in the long-term.[15]

In summary, the USAF initiatives to improve retention appear to be addressing the reasons USAF leadership cite, personnel tempo and compensation. Many of the initiatives are quite recent or have not actually taken effect yet. As a result of this and the lack of an ongoing effort to measure the reasons members chose either to separate or reenlist, it is difficult to assess the effectiveness of the USAF initiatives to date. In general, it appears the USAF initiatives to reduce personnel tempo and improve compensation may help the retention problem. However, there is evidence that suggests the improvement may not be as great as might be hoped overall. The improvements may be varied depending upon career field, especially for the initiatives to reduce personnel tempo. The USAF has no real initiatives to address the organizational climate concerns highlighted in the 1997 CSAF Organizational Climate Survey. Because of the negative perceptions of certain aspects of organizational climate as well as the lack of USAF initiatives to address these issues, there is an opportunity to improve retention with initiatives that go beyond quality of life. The USAF could improve the serious problem of low retention in the future by implementing initiatives to improve the organizational climate for its work force.

Notes

[1] Gen Michael E. Ryan, *Commanders' NOTAM 98-4*, 28 July 1998, n.p.; on-line, Internet, 11 November 98, available from http://www.issues.af.mil/notam984.html.

[2] Sec F. Whitten Peters, "Acting Secretary Sets Sights on Retention, Future," *Air Force News*, 27 October 1998, n.p.; on-line, Internet, 20 January 1999, available from http://www.af.mil/cgi-bin/multigate/retrieve?u=z3950r://dtics11:1024/news!F6106%3a91…/htm.

[3] Ibid, 20 January 1999.

Notes

[4] Bruce D. Callander, "Talk with the Personnel Chief," *Air Force Magazine* 80, no. 12 (Dec 1997): 31-40.

[5] Master Sgt Linda Brandon, "Defense Secretary Announces Significant Pay and Retirement Improvements for FY 2000," *Air Force News*, 23 December 1998, n.p.; on-line, Internet, 20 January 1999, available from http://www.af.mil/news/Dec1998/n19981222_981996.html.

[6] Ibid, 20 January 1999.

[7] Colonel Daniel F. Crum, *Air Force Pilot Retention a Look at 1996*, Research Report no. AD-A223-312 (Carlisle Barracks, PA.: U.S. Army War College, April 1990), 36.

[8] Ibid, April 1990.

[9] "Disturbing Trends in Resources and Personnel," *Air Force Magazine*, n.p.; on-line, Internet, 20 March 99, available from http://www.afa.org/library/issues/trends.html.

[10] "Phoenix Aviator 20," *Phoenix Aviator Homepage*, n.p.; on-line, Internet, 9 November 1998, available from http://www.afpc.af.mil/assignments/teams/phoenix/phoenix.htm.

[11] Compensation and Legislation Division, Department of the Air Force, Challenging Environment Why People are Leaving, staff briefing, 22 February 99.

[12] John T. Natter, Alan Lopez, and Doyle K. Hodges, "Listen to the JOs: Why Retention is a Problem," *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings* 124, no. 10 (October 1998): 58-62.

[13] Ibid, October 1998.

[14] Ibid, October 1998.

[15] Ibid, October 1998.

Chapter 4

Conclusions

Summary and Conclusions

The USAF could improve the serious problem of low retention in the future by implementing initiatives to improve the organizational climate for its work force. The USAF is implementing several programs that may affect retention. These are intended to address the quality of life issues of high personnel tempo and low compensation. However, a U.S. Navy study and results of the USAF's own 1997 CSAF Survey point to another area that is a source of dissatisfaction for U.S. Navy and USAF personnel, and that is organizational climate.

It is difficult to definitively assess the effectiveness to date of the USAF and DOD initiatives. First, it is too early to expect to see improvement in the overall retention figures for several of the initiatives discussed. The most current retention data available is for FY98. Yet most initiatives to improve retention are either very recently enacted, such as reducing personnel tempo with mandatory time off after long deployments, or have not yet been implemented, such as the pay raise. In addition, the USAF does not have an ongoing effort to measure the reasons members chose either to separate from the service or reenlist. The biennial CSAF Survey is intended to measure member perceptions of quality of life and organizational climate issues. However, no USAF survey instruments

are intended to directly measure causes for separations. The resulting lack of data on actual causes for separations or reenlistment makes it difficult to assess the effectiveness of current retention initiatives or to identify areas of dissatisfaction that may point to potential opportunities for other initiatives to improve retention.

The future effectiveness of the USAF and DOD initiatives to reduce personnel tempo and increase compensation is not clear. Data indicate the impact of those initiatives may not be as strong as desired by policy makers, in particular the initiatives on reducing personnel tempo. Based upon the 1997 CSAF Survey, TDY days don't correlate strongly with intent to separate from the service for either officers or enlisted personnel. In addition, implementing the AEF concept may not be effective in improving personnel tempo if mistakes made by the U.S. Navy aren't avoided.

USAF leadership apparently does not recognize organizational climate as an important factor in retention. It isn't clear if USAF leadership believes the relationship between organizational climate and retention is never important, or if they simply believe it currently isn't as important as other factors. In either case, the 1997 CSAF Survey indicates several aspects of organizational climate that were seen as negative by a substantial portion of the respondents. Empirical evidence from the more recent U.S. Navy study indicates aspects of organizational climate viewed negatively by JOs were significant factors in their separations decisions. The conclusion is that the USAF may be missing an opportunity to improve by not explicitly emphasizing good organizational climate.

Recommendations

First, USAF leadership should immediately begin efforts to improve the organizational climate within USAF units at all levels. These efforts should focus on the areas perceived negatively by USAF personnel. These were leadership, unit flexibility, recognition, unit resources and general organizational climate. These efforts will not enjoy success unless supported and implemented by leaders and service members at all levels. Improving organizational climate will not be easy. It will often require changing attitudes, and looking for opportunities to improve the work-place environment. Perhaps, this may sound as if this is a single, large campaign. It is actually a series of campaigns and battles as numerous as there are units within the service. Improving organizational climate is a unit task that requires the commitment of leaders and members both, at all levels. While it does take commitment, it doesn't have to take a lot of extra work or money. This initiative is truly about attitude, teamwork and commitment.

The USAF should implement the planned survey to measure the reasons members separate and reenlist. Such surveys would offer the best understanding as to why members are separating and reenlisting. In addition, the USAF should structure the biennial CSAF Survey to gauge not only the sources of dissatisfaction among the troops, but also the relationships of those sources to the decision to separate. Making personnel policy without such information is the functional equivalent of fighting without reconnaissance. The USAF leadership must commit to conducting these surveys even in times when retention does not seem to be a problem in order to better anticipate and deal with potential problems in the future.

In the future, USAF leadership should focus on balanced and complementary initiatives that address the spectrum of reasons for low retention. Implementing organizational climate initiatives will address an immediate source of dissatisfaction that may be impacting retention, and it will complement the personnel tempo and compensation initiatives. However, the correct balance of initiatives to optimize retention will likely shift over time. Measuring the reasons members separate and reenlist will help the USAF better understand the reasons for low retention now and in the future. Still, it is important to stress that there is not a single best solution to retention problems, especially when one considers the size and demographics of the USAF. But, if USAF leadership balances their approach, the chances of improving retention will increase.

There are at least two areas highlighted during the course of this research, which merit future research. First, future research into the relationship between retention and recruiting in the USAF would be interesting. This study, though primarily focused on retention, did not reveal any explicit links between retention policies or goals, and those for recruiting. Recruitment and retention are in fact closely related. For one thing, recruiting today defines constraints on retention in the future. In fact, retention and recruiting are just two aspects of the overall management of personnel within the USAF. Comparative analysis of the USAF strategic approach to manpower and those of other successful organizations would also be of interest.

Appendix A

1997 CSAF Quality of Life and Organizational Climate Survey Description

"The "1997 CSAF Survey" was administered during October and November 1997. The computer-based survey was made available to all active-duty Air Force and civilian members. Over 206,000 personnel participated for a response rate of 39%. Results accurately represent the Air Force population with a confidence level of 99% and margin of error of less than 1%.[1]

"When the responses are broken out by officer, enlisted, and civilian categories, the participation rates are 16%, 63%, and 21% respectively. These numbers represent a statistically valid sample at the Air Force level.[2]

"The organizational climate section consists of 14 major themes addressing Air Force members' perceptions about their jobs and their work environment. Seventy-two questions comprise the organizational climate themes. These questions were pre-tested and selected from a statistical analysis ensuring reliability of measurement. Results are reported for: Job Characteristics, Unit Resources, Core Values, Leadership, Communication, Supervision, Teamwork, Training, Recognition, Participation/Involvement, Unit Flexibility, Job Satisfaction, Members' Perceptions of Unit performance, and a summary measure of General Organizational Climate.[3]

"Survey participants used a 6-point rating scale to answer all climate questions: Strongly Disagree (1), Disagree (2), Slightly Disagree (3), Slightly Agree (4), Agree (5), and Strongly Agree (6). The scale also included a "Don't Know" response for individuals who felt they did not have enough information to answer a question. Results in the organizational climate section are generally presented as, "Percent Positive Response." All responses from "Slightly Agree" through "Strongly Agree" (4-6) were counted as a positive response."[4]

Notes

[1] Air Force Center for Quality Management Innovation, *1997 CSAF Survey, Organizational Climate On-line Consulting Guide* (CSAF Survey Office, 1998), 59.
[2] Ibid, 1998.
[3] Ibid, 1998.
[4] Ibid, 1998.

Glossary

aviator continuation pay take rate. The percentage of pilots accepting Aviator Continuation Pay upon completion of their Active Duty Service Commitment incurred from Undergraduate Pilot Training.[1]

commitment. The state of being obligated or emotionally impelled.[2]

compensation. An equivalent or return for something accomplished.[3] For the purposes of this paper, this generally includes a service member's pay as well as benefits such as housing, health care, and retirement benefits.

contextual factors. Factors that potentially affect retention but are usually beyond the direct influence of the USAF personnel policies or initiatives. This concept is analogous to the "Contextual Elements" of Weaver and Pollock in the Air Command and Staff College Campaign Planning Model, from which it is derived.[4]

cumulative continuation rate. The percentage of officers entering their fourth (4th) or sixth (6th) year of service that will complete 11 or 14 years of service given existing retention rates.[5] There are four possible combinations that can be tracked, 4-11, 4-14, 6-11, or 6-14.

man years. The average length of time an officer is available in the inventory. The start time for this statistic is the commissioning date. The end time is computed when separated, retired, or advanced in rank to Colonel. This is the equivalent statistic to TARS for nonrated officers.[6]

mission support officers. Those officers, Lt Col and below, not possessing an aero rating code of pilot or navigator and excluding nonrated operations and nonline officers.[7]

morale. The mental and emotional condition (as of enthusiasm, confidence, or loyalty) of an individual or group with regard to the function or tasks at hand; a sense of common purpose with respect to a group: Esprit de Corps; the level of individual psychological well-being based on such factors as a sense of purpose and confidence in the future.[8]

nonrated ops officers. Those officers, Lt Col and below, possessing an old AFSC of air weapons director (17XX), missile operations (18XX), operations management (19XX), or space operations (20XX). Those officers, Lt Col and below, possessing a new AFSC of Space, Missile and C2 (13XX), Intelligence (14XX), Weather (15XX), or Operations Support (16XX).[9]

operations tempo. The workload of the unit or organization. It is an important factor in personnel tempo. An example indicator would be the number of unit deployments per year. In the USAF, this normally defined as doing more with less.[10]

organizational climate. Collective USAF member perceptions about their jobs and their work environment. It is measured by the USAF in the organizational climate section of the biennial CSAF Survey. For the 1997 CSAF Survey, organizational climate was the sum of measured member perceptions for 14 themes. These were: job

characteristics, unit resources, core values, communication, leadership, supervision, training, teamwork, participation/involvement, recognition, unit flexibility, job satisfaction, unit performance measures and general organization climate.[11]

personnel tempo. The workload of the individual. It is the workload that impacts the member and his/her family. It is distinct from operations tempo. Operations tempo plays a substantial role in personnel tempo, but other factors are important as well, such as how the unit distributes its workload among its personnel. An example indicator would be TDY days per year.

pilot separations indicator. The actual number of USAF pilots who leave the USAF after their Active Duty Service Commitment is complete.[12]

policy elements. Elements that affect retention and can, to varying degrees, be influenced by USAF personnel policies or initiatives. This concept is analogous to the "Operational Art Elements" of Weaver and Pollock in the Air Command and Staff College Campaign Planning Model, from which it is derived.[13]

quality of life. The sum of the group of 10 survey themes of the Quality of Life section of the 1997 CSAF Survey. These quality of life themes are: general well being, career intent, operations/personnel tempo, community programs, pay and benefits, retirement issues, housing, health care, educational opportunities, and civilian career issues.[14] In other words, it is the sum of the members' perceptions about the DOD- and USAF-level factors listed previously.

relative enlisted manpower strength. The percentage of enlisted personnel retained at a given separation opportunity, i.e., first-term, second-term, and career.[15]

total active rated service. Expected man-years of utilization as a rated officer for the average pilot or navigator after completing initial flying training, given existing retention rates. The start time for this statistic is the day wings are pinned on. The end time is when separated, grounded, retired, or promoted in rank to Colonel.[16]

Notes

[1] Capt Harold Brown, "Officer Retention Analysis," *Officer Retention Analysis*, January 1999, n.p.; on-line, Internet, 3 February 1999, available from http://afas.afpc.randolph.af.mil/ora/98-endyear-ora.htm.

[2] Webster's new Collegiate Dictionary, G. & c. Merriam Co, 1981.

[3] Ibid, 1981.

[4] Lt Col Larry A. Weaver and Maj Robert d. Pollock, Campaign Planning for the 21st Century: An Effected-based Approach to the Planning Process," in *War Theory, Vol. 3*, Air command and Staff College, Maxell Air force Base, Alabama, September 1998.

[5] Brown, 3 February 1999.

[6] Ibid, 3 February 1999.

[7] Ibid, 3 February 1999.

[8] Webster's new Collegiate Dictionary, G. & c. Merriam Co, 1981.

[9] Brown, 3 February 1999.

[10] Ibid, 3 February 1999.

[11] Air Force Center for Quality Management Innovation, *1997 CSAF Survey, Organizational Climate On-line Consulting Guide* (CSAF Survey Office, 1998), 59.

[12] Brown, 3 February 1999.

[13] Weaver, September 1998.

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[14] *1997 CSAF Survey, Quality of Life Report, Analyses and Report* March 1998.
[15] Brown, 3 February 1999.
[16] Ibid, 3 February 1999.

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