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THE U.S. ARMY OFFICER EVALUATION REPORT;
WHY ARE WE WRITING TO SOMEONE WHO ISN'T
READING?

by

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Abstract

The format of the U.S. Army Officer Evaluation Report (OER) is examined against its utilization by promotion and command selection boards. Alternative reporting methods are studied for improving the effectiveness and efficiency of the report for both the report writer and selection board member.

A narrative evaluation report primarily utilized for promotion selection is ineffective and inefficient in identifying both performance and potential ratings. Alternative evaluation report formats utilizing a more quantitative format with ratings applied against performance standards will greatly improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the evaluation report. The purpose of this research is to examine the format of the U.S. Army Officer Evaluation Report in relation to how it is utilized by promotion and command selection boards. Over fifty percent of the OER is written in narrative format, however, selection boards consistently report that board members will read only three to four sentences of this predominately narrative report. I will examine the format of the OER and how it used by centralized promotion and command selections boards. With the basis of how selection boards utilize the OER I will examine alternative evaluation reporting methods for more effective and efficient reporting of an officer's performance and potential.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Where I would like to learn what I did, I learn only what I was thinking. They are loaded with opinion, moral thoughts, quick evaluations, youthful hopes and cares and sorrows. Occasionally, they manage to report something in exquisite honesty and accuracy.

—E.B. White

The United States Army's Officer Evaluation Report has become ineffective and inefficient in identifying both performance and potential to its' primary user, promotion, command, and school selection boards. The predominately narrative format of the Officer Evaluation Report (OER) makes it difficult and time consuming to identify objective and quantitative factors to judge an individual under consideration for promotion or command selection. In a large organization utilizing centralized promotion and critical job selection methods, such as the U.S. Army, it is imperative that the evaluation report provides concise information on performance and potential for rapid assessment by a selection board. Alternative personnel evaluation report methods utilizing more objective and quantitative formats would greatly improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the OER.

Competitive selection of individuals for any type of favored advancement, assignment, or training has historically been one of great consideration and debate. Most any individual can vividly recall the feeling of being competitively selected when they

were teenagers or even younger for a team by two kids acting as team captains for a neighborhood sports game. This method of selection, often called ‘choosing sides’ by children, is taught at the highest levels of education in human resource management but is formally categorized as Paired Comparison, Forced Distribution, or Ranking selection methods.¹ The method of selection used in the neighborhood game worked because the group under consideration was small and the team captains knew from personal experience the level of performance and potential of each selection candidate. As a group under consideration for favorable competitive selection grows the complications of implementing an effective and equitable selection system grows exponentially.² Evaluation methods to identify qualitative differences among a large number of individuals that will not be personally known to those conducting the selection must be carefully formulated to meet organizational objectives and continue equitable selections of those under consideration.³

The U.S. Army is one of the largest organizations in the world and, therefore, inherits with this size the problems of how to equitably conduct selections. To greatly complicate this issue the Army uses a personnel quality management system of “up or out” and a pension system of “all or none”. All Army personnel must either be selected for promotion within a defined number of years or must leave the service thus earning the informal name of “up or out”.⁴ The Army’s retirement pension is granted in whole after twenty years of service. No partial pension is awarded for completing any service less than twenty years. The “up or out” quality management system coupled with the “all or none” pension system place enormous weight on the importance of selection for

promotion, schools, and command. This in turn places enormous weight on the primary tool used to conduct selections, the Officer Evaluation Report.

Personnel management uses the accumulated performance evaluation reports of an individual as a database. The record of performance identified in these evaluation reports serves as the basis for any personnel action and, possibly, as the legal support for any adverse action should they be challenged in court. The Army has an even greater need for this personnel performance database because of the centralized officer promotion and command selection system.⁵ This requirement, common to any large organization with a centralized selection system, mandates that the recorded results of performance evaluation be in a form that can be easily graded or compared so that a selection board can rank order the individuals under consideration.⁶

In the case of the U.S. Army, the Officer Evaluation Report must provide a centralized selection board the information necessary to individually rank order a population under consideration that may in some cases exceed six thousand. The OER provides the only objective information available to the board yet the majority of the OER is written in a subjective narrative format.⁷ For an Army Major with fifteen years in service under consideration for promotion to Lieutenant Colonel the selection board's decision not only determines promotion but also de facto eligibility for a retirement pension. The majors that are not selected will not be continued in service and, therefore, will not be eligible for any pension benefits.⁸ Historically, only sixty percent of the 1700 majors under consideration each year will be selected.⁹ The forty-percent, or approximately 680 majors, that are not selected have in fact been issued a termination notice that does not include any pension benefits for fifteen years of continuous service.¹⁰

These critical selection decisions were formed based on an evaluation report that provides predominately subjective evaluation data.

Much study and development has been applied over decades on evaluation methods and reports. The U.S Military has been a leader in the research and development of evaluation methods and reporting forms.¹¹ Within the past three decades the civilian sector has also applied much effort to the development of different techniques of performance evaluation and reporting.¹² A review of the history of the military development of the evaluation report combined with the study of the evaluation methods and reporting forms in use in the private sector of evaluation will provide the background for my recommendation of a revised Army officer evaluation report that will provide selection boards critically needed objective evaluation data.

Notes

¹ George L. Morrisey, *Performance Appraisals for Business & Industry*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1983, 5.

² Frank J. Landy and James L. Farr. *The Measurement of Work Performance*. New York, New York: Academic Press, 1983, 151.

³ Kevin R. Murphy and Jeanette N. Cleveland. *Performance Appraisal: An Organizational Perspective*. Needham Heights, MA: Simon and Schuster, 1991, 98.

⁴ Department of the Army. *Army Regulation 600-8-29, Officer Promotions*. Washington, D.C., 30 November 1994, 3.

⁵ Michael D. Mahler. "OER System: A Reality Check." *Army times* (December 16, 1996), 54.

⁶ Ibid. 54.

⁷ Nick Straffon. "Promotion Boards." *Army Reserve Magazine* (Winter, 1997), 19.

⁸ Department of the Army. *Army Regulation 600-8-29, Officer Promotions*, 3

⁹ United States Total Army Personnel Command. *PERSCOM Update, Fiscal Year 1997*. Alexandria, VA: PERSCOM, October 1996, 11.

¹⁰ Department of the Army. *Army Regulation 600-8-29, Officer Promotions*, 3.

¹¹ Kevin R. Murphy and Jeanette N. Cleveland. *Understanding Performance Appraisal: Social, Organizational, and Goal-Based Perspectives*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1995, 3.

¹² Ibid. 4.

Chapter 2

Historical Review of the Army Evaluation Report Development

A record will be kept in the War Department of the services, efficiency, and special qualifications of officers of the Army, including the condition of their commands and the percentages of desertion therefrom, and from further reports made for that purpose.

—Secretary of War Redfield Proctor, April 1890

The U.S. Army Officer Evaluation Report is the product of decades of research and development. The importance of the report in managing critical selection decisions directly impacting the careers of tens of thousands of the Army's corporate management body has few equals in the private sector based upon its size, complexity and application.¹³ It is not the intent of this study to review the entire history of the OER however a brief review of the historic development of the OER is important to understanding the current report format in relation to the formats utilized in the past.

It is of paramount importance that every officer understands the true purpose of the Officer Evaluation Report. Each report an officer receives is intended to provide useful information to a Department of Army centralized selection board. The report is in fact used as a message to communicate to board members a recommendation of some type on the evaluated officer. The information placed in the report becomes the basis for making

personnel management decisions on every aspect of an officer's career to include promotion, assignments, selection for advanced schooling, and retention on active duty.¹⁴

The current U.S. Army Officer Evaluation Report, DA Form 67-9, is the seventeen revision since World War I. The purpose of this form and its predecessors was to provide a more useful, accurate, and equitable performance reporting system. Many of the revisions were caused by the inability of selection boards to discern a quantifiable difference in reports due to rating inflation.¹⁵ Rating inflation occurs when an inordinately large population of officers are placed at the high end of a rating scale.¹⁶ The control of inflation has been the major goal of revisions to the OER in the past twenty-five years. As the sixtieth revision to the OER, DA Form 67-8, was introduced in 1979 then Army Chief of Staff Bernard Rogers cautioned that "officers should not expect the new OER form to cure the inflation scoring problems within the Army evaluation system."¹⁷ Although General Rogers was correct in predicting the eventual replacement of DA Form 67-8 due to inflation the report did last longer than the few years he predicted. The seventeen revision, DA Form 67-9, released in October, 1997, to reset the rating system due to rating inflation replaced General Rogers' DA Form 67-8 which had lasted eighteen years.¹⁸

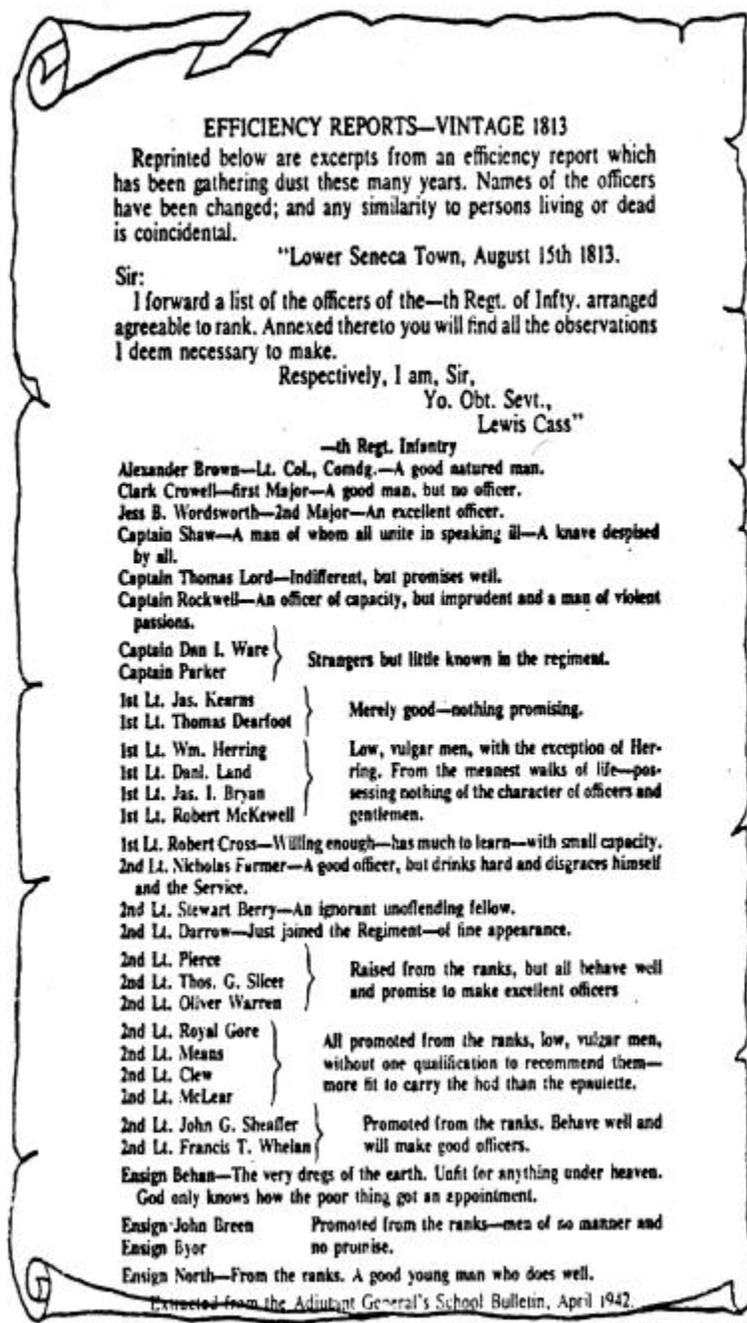
The year 1890 is considered to be the date when the U.S. Army first developed a permanent evaluation reporting system for its officers. There were earlier attempts to develop a performance evaluation system within the U.S. military. When General Washington took command of the Continental Army he sent out an order that evaluation reports be prepared by battalion commanders of all officers in the command. The evaluation reports were to be used to adjust the grades of officers within the battalion.¹⁹

During the period prior to 1890 the Army was small and officers could expect to remain with the same regiment almost indefinitely. The capabilities of each officer were well known to all members of the unit and decisions could be made without the need for a formalized and centralized reporting system. Although the need for a centralized system was not evident efforts were made to develop evaluation systems that provided a foundation for the system the U.S. Army uses today. In 1813 the office of the military adjutant general sent a letter to the Army's regiments requesting a report be prepared and forwarded assigning a relative rank by grade of all officers of the command. This forced ranking system may have been the U.S. Army's first attempt at a centralized evaluation system. In response to the request Army General Lewis Cass submitted to the War Department in 1813 an evaluation of each of his men, shown in figure 1, using such terms as "a good natured man" or "knave despised by all."²⁰

From 1890 to World War I the evaluation report was developed by the Army into a systematic reporting system. Secretary of War Redfield Proctor in 1890 issued the following directive:

A record will be kept in the War Department of the services, efficiency, and special qualifications of officers of the Army, including the condition of their commands and the percentages of desertion therefrom, and from further reports made for that purpose²¹

Also in 1890 the Army withdrew officer promotion authority from regimental commands and created a centralized Army-wide promotion system. From 1895 to 1917 the standardized efficiency report grew to as much as twenty-four pages for an annual report. During World War I, the Army developed a one page two-sided form, probably as a result of the immense growth of the service during mobilization. The report became the forerunner of the two-sided form that has been used to date.²²



EFFICIENCY REPORTS—VINTAGE 1813

Reprinted below are excerpts from an efficiency report which has been gathering dust these many years. Names of the officers have been changed; and any similarity to persons living or dead is coincidental.

"Lower Seneca Town, August 15th 1813.

Sir:

I forward a list of the officers of the—th Regt. of Inftry. arranged agreeable to rank. Annexed thereto you will find all the observations I deem necessary to make.

Respectively, I am, Sir,
Yo. Obt. Sevt.,
Lewis Cass"

—th Regt. Infantry

- Alexander Brown—Lt. Col., Comdg.—A good natured man.
- Clark Crowell—first Major—A good man, but no officer.
- Jess B. Wordsworth—2nd Major—An excellent officer.
- Captain Shaw—A man of whom all unite in speaking ill—A knave despised by all.
- Captain Thomas Lord—Indifferent, but promises well.
- Captain Rockwell—An officer of capacity, but imprudent and a man of violent passions.
- Captain Dan I. Ware } Strangers but little known in the regiment.
- Captain Parker }
- 1st Lt. Jas. Kearns } Merely good—nothing promising.
- 1st Lt. Thomas Dearfoot }
- 1st Lt. Wm. Herring } Low, vulgar men, with the exception of Her-
- 1st Lt. Danl. Land } ring. From the meanest walks of life—pos-
- 1st Lt. Jas. I. Bryan } sessed nothing of the character of officers and
- 1st Lt. Robert McKewell } gentlemen.
- 1st Lt. Robert Cross—Willing enough—has much to learn—with small capacity.
- 2nd Lt. Nicholas Farmer—A good officer, but drinks hard and disgraces himself and the Service.
- 2nd Lt. Stewart Berry—An ignorant unoffending fellow.
- 2nd Lt. Darrow—Just joined the Regiment—of fine appearance.
- 2nd Lt. Pierce } Raised from the ranks, but all behave well
- 2nd Lt. Thos. G. Slicer } and promise to make excellent officers
- 2nd Lt. Oliver Warren }
- 2nd Lt. Royal Gore } All promoted from the ranks, low, vulgar men,
- 2nd Lt. Means } without one qualification to recommend them—
- 2nd Lt. Clew } more fit to carry the hod than the epaulette.
- 2nd Lt. McLear }
- 2nd Lt. John G. Sheaffer } Promoted from the ranks. Behave well and
- 2nd Lt. Francis T. Whelan } will make good officers.
- Ensign Behan—The very dregs of the earth. Unfit for anything under heaven. God only knows how the poor thing got an appointment.
- Ensign John Breen } Promoted from the ranks—men of no manner and
- Ensign Bjor } no promise.
- Ensign North—From the ranks. A good young man who does well.

Extracted from the Adjutant General's School Bulletin, April 1942.

Figure 1. Regimental Officer's Evaluation Report, 1813

The Army focused the development of personnel evaluations during the World War I period on a man-to-man rating form. U.S. industry provided the initial development of this type of evaluation using industrial psychologists concentrating their efforts on identifying the personality traits of successful workers. Man-to-man appraisals lead to graphic scales on evaluation reports known as the “totem approach”. The graphic rating scale increased in popularity and remains the predominant rating method in both the private sector and military today. During the World War II period, the Army again used psychologists to improve its rating system. “The United States Army embarked on a program of personnel research that had a major impact on the field of applied psychology. Some of the best measurement specialists attacked the issues that would directly aid in improving military efficiency. One such issue was the accurate and reliable measurement of task performance.”²³ The scientific research and development conducted in this effort produced the forced choice technique and the critical-incident approach to evaluation ratings. These methods became widely accepted and widely used in industry and are still prevalent today.²⁴ Based on the findings and recommendations of the research conducted the Army adopted, on 1 July 1947, a new reporting form for all officers of the service. Two relatively major innovations were introduced. The first innovation involved the use of a relative-score scale, which allowed comparisons among officers. The second innovation introduced forced-choice items on the new form as a method of evaluation.²⁵ An example of this rating system from the U.S. Army’s rating form WD 67-1 introduced in July 1947 is shown at Table 1.

Table 1. Rating Section from Army Form 67-1, 1 JUL 1947

Section VIII. OVER-ALL RELATIVE RANK	
The number of officers in this grade rated by me at this time is _____.	If these officers were arranged in order, considering overall future usefulness to the Army, from highest (No 1) to poorest, this officer would be No _____ of the total group rated.

Through the period from the introduction of Form 67-1 in 1947 to the change to Form 67-8 in 1979 the Army Officer Evaluation Report underwent a number of modifications. The seven revised forms introduced and superceded during this thirty-three year period attempted to correct deficiencies in rated officer acceptability, rating inflation, and lack of clarity on the rater's intention for ranking in a centralized evaluation system.²⁶ All of these forms contained some type of numeric rating system with many using a rating scheme that produced a total evaluation report numeric score. An example of this numeric rating system is shown in Table 2. The score from this rating section of Department of Army Form 67-7, in use from 1973 to 1979, was combined with another numeric rating section on the form to produce a total numeric score. This total score was shown in the final section of the rated officer's evaluation report next to the signature block of the rater. The main claim for the use of this type of evaluation was the capability of automating much of its data.²⁷

Table 2. Rating Section from Army Form 67-7, 1 JAN 1973

PART V. DEMONSTRATED PERFORMANCE OF PRESENT DUTY						
	Outstanding	Superior	Excellent	Effective	Marginal	Inadequate
SCORE	70-68	67-57	56-36	35-15	14-4	3-0
RATER						
INDORSER						

The main argument against using an evaluation report based on numeric scales, similar to the Army's Form 67-7 discussed above, was the complicated nature of understanding how to score the rated individual so as to rank him properly in the centralized evaluation system. The numeric score placed on the individual's evaluation report left little room for interpretation by the member of a centralized selection board. Therefore, the rater writing the evaluation report was faced with the difficult challenge of determining the score that would properly rank his rated individual against hundreds or possible thousands of individuals for who he had no personal knowledge of their performance. This issue led to a rapid inflation of rating scores by reason of the rater's desire to ensure he did not mistakenly underscore his rated individual due to a misinterpretation of appropriate ranking scores.²⁸ This rating dilemma was the main cause of the suppression of Form 67-7 in 1979, as it was for all previous Army evaluation reports.

In 1979 the Army released a new evaluation report designed to provide, as its major function, information from the officer's rating chain that could be used to execute Department of the Army centralized personnel decisions. The notable difference in the release of this form as opposed to the numerous previous forms was the advertised emphasis on the report providing useful evaluation data to a centralized personnel management system. This emphasis was different from previous editions that had placed the greatest weight on providing feedback to the rated officer. This feedback function of previous editions conflicted greatly with the needs of the Army's centralized selection boards for objective evaluation data.²⁹ Although the evaluation report's most important function in terms of impact on the rated officer has always been the selection process this

was the first time the Army overtly designed the form with centralized personnel management as the primary purpose.

Department of the Army Form 67-8 eliminated the total numeric scoring of previous report editions and replaced it with a forced distribution type system. The rated individual receives a relative ranking from the senior rater writing the report. This forced distribution-rating scheme from Form 67-8 is shown at Table 3 below. The inflation problem that rendered previous editions useless was addressed by adding a senior rater's profile to the report. This profile shows exactly how the senior rater evaluated all individuals of the same grade as the rated individual up to the time the report was written. This profile enables centralized personnel managers and selection boards to compare the report against the senior rater's normal rating tendencies. It also shows the tendency of the rater to rate hard or easy.³⁰

Table 3. Rating Section from Army Form 67-8, 1 SEP 1979

PART VII-SENIOR RATER		
a. POTENTIAL EVALUATION		
SR		DA USE ONLY
	!	3
X	!!	9
	!!!!	2
	!!!!!!!!!!!!!!	1
	!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!	
	!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!	
	!!!!!!!!!!!!!!	
	!!!!	
	!!	
	!	

SENIOR RATER'S EVALUATION HANDWRITTEN ON THE REPORT

}

SENIOR RATER'S PROFILE PLACED ON THE REPORT BY DA

}

DA Form 67-8 was a success. The report remained in use from 1979 until the recent release of DA Form 67-9 in October 1997. During the fifty-seven year history of the

Form 67 evaluation report series there have been nine versions, an average of just over six years of use per version. Form 67-8 lasted over eighteen years, twelve years longer than the 67 series average, because it was designed to provide the proper information to its primary user, centralized selection boards.³¹ Additionally, its successor, Form 67-9, contains only very minor changes. The only significant change on Form 67-9 was not to the rating method, but only in how the senior rater manages his profile. The senior rater's ranking block, as shown previously in Table 3, was only modified in how it is used. The new Form 67-9 restricts the senior rater to placing no more than forty-nine percent of his rated individuals in the top rating block.

The success of the forced distribution rating system is clearly demonstrated by its long-term use. However, the Army continues to include a narrative evaluation in the report that covers seventy-five percent of the form. Evidence from the analysis of selection board results indicates that the narrative evaluation sections of the Officer Evaluation Report are of little use to the boards.³² Additionally, the report contains only one objective measure of the rated individual that can be used by a selection board as a discriminator. This measure is the senior rater's block as shown in Table 3. As the single discriminator on the evaluation report it may carry more weight than intended.

Additional methods for objectively reporting an individual's performance and potential have been developed and are in use in the private sector. The next chapter examines possible additional methods of objective evaluation that might be included on the Army Officer Evaluation Report to strengthen the report and provide more than one discriminator to the personnel managers and selection board members using these reports

to make critical career decisions. The use and value of narrative evaluation methods is also examined for its contribution in performance appraisal systems.

Notes

¹³ Allan C. Hardy and Keith B. Harker. *U.S. Army Officer Perceptions of the New OER*. Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School, December 1982, 10.

¹⁴ Straffon, 18.

¹⁵ United States Total Army Personnel Command. *The New OER Briefing*. 1 October 1997, n.p. On-line. Internet, 2 January 1998. Available from <http://www-perscom.army.mil/tagd/oers/brief/brief.htm>.

¹⁶ Hardy, 11.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ United States Total Army Personnel Command. *The New OER Briefing*, n.p.

¹⁹ Hardy, 15.

²⁰ Murphy, *Performance Appraisal: An Organizational Perspective*, 3.

²¹ Hardy, 18.

²² United States Total Army Personnel Command. *The New OER Briefing*, n.p.

²³ Landy, 283.

²⁴ Murphy, *Performance Appraisal: An Organizational Perspective*, 4.

²⁵ Hardy, 23.

²⁶ United States Total Army Personnel Command. *New OER Briefing*, n.p.

²⁷ Hardy, 26.

²⁸ Ibid. 28.

²⁹ United States Total Army Personnel Command. *New OER Briefing*, n.p.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² United States Total Army Personnel Command. *PERSCOM Update, Fiscal Year 1997*, 11.

Chapter 3

Private Sector Evaluation Methods

It is impossible to think of a man of any actual force and originality, universally recognized as having those qualities, who spent his whole life appraising and describing the work of other men.

—H.L. Mencken

While the U.S. Army has made a significant contribution in the field of performance evaluation research and development a review of the appraisal systems currently in use in the U.S. private sector is important to considering a change to the Army evaluation report. In examining the numerous performance appraisal systems in use in the business sector the key areas of consideration for this report are the systems' goals and applicability to a large organization such as the U.S. Army.

Many performance appraisal methods are utilized in the U.S. business and industrial sector. Of the many evaluation techniques that have been developed through decades of research and development only a relatively few have survived the test of time.³³ Although the evaluation techniques are often modified and renamed the overall approaches used to measure job performance have remained relatively the same. The evaluation techniques that have proven successful can be placed into five or six categories of performance measurement approach. These categories or methods of performance appraisal are: Goal or Objective Setting, Essay, Graphic Ratings, Critical Incident, Checklists, and Rankings.³⁴

The use of these performance approaches by private companies is reported in Table 4 below. It is interesting to note that the researchers that performed the survey of 585 companies to gather this data also reported that fully a third of the companies reported that they follow a goal setting approach when in fact their responses on the questionnaire show that they use a graphic ratings approach.³⁵

Table 4. Company Approaches to Performance Appraisal

Evaluation Approach	Percentage of Surveyed Companies Using Approach*
Goal/Objective Setting	51%
Essay	37%
Checklists	26%
Graphic Ratings	23%
Rankings	22%
Critical Incident	13%
*Percentages total greater than 100% due to companies reporting using multiple approaches.	

Source: Murphy, Kevin R. and Jeanette N. Cleveland. *Performance Appraisal: An Organizational Perspective*. Needham Heights, MA: Simon and Schuster, 1991.

Goal or objective setting is the most common form of evaluation used today in business. The goal setting personnel evaluation process involves creating explicit performance standards and later grading the rated individual's performance against these goals. The goal or objective setting often involves a process in which the employee proposes a set of standards or goals that will define performance on his job, the supervisor reviews the goals and suggests revision, and the two parties negotiate to reach a set of mutually agreeable goals. Research on goal setting suggests that participating in determining goals is critical to success. Goals have a greater impact on performance when the employee helps to determine the goals as opposed to having the goals imposed

from above.³⁶ The business administration system of management by objectives (MBO) not only uses objective attainment as the basis for personnel evaluation but also uses this method for overall company management. MBO is not a performance appraisal system, rather it represents a method for defining goals, objectives, and priorities. MBO does include an appraisal component in the sense that a person working under an MBO system is evaluated in terms of the goals and objectives he has previously defined.

The effectiveness of the goal setting method depends on the skills of both the rater and rated individual in defining appropriate goals and objectives. A major strength of goal setting is it allows the rated individual to perform the task using his own methods and techniques as only results are graded. This appraisal system provides excellent objective data for evaluating performance but is labor intensive to establish and maintain.³⁷

The second most popular method of performance appraisal is the essay evaluation. Using this system the rater describes the rated individual's performance in a written essay or narrative. The assumption is that candid statements from the rater are more concrete and just as qualitative as more formal and quantitative appraisal methods. Essay evaluations are an excellent method for capturing details and providing specific feedback to the evaluated individual. Their greatest disadvantage is that they are subjective in nature and are extremely difficult to use when comparing employees, especially medium to large populations. The greatest weakness of the essay method is its reliance on the writing ability of the rater. Rated individuals having raters with excellent writing skills may be judged as stronger performers than those with raters with poor writing ability.³⁸

The checklist appraisal system has a number of variants but the fundamental method relies on evaluation using a set of behaviors, adjectives, or descriptive statements. The rater selects the statements that he believes most clearly describes a person's performance. A score is associated with each statement and the completed form can be totaled to produce a final score.³⁹ The checklist is very effective when rating large numbers of individuals on the same criteria or tasks performed. Reports can be easily automated and compiled results provided for a large population. A significant disadvantage of the checklist system is the requirement for standardized and rigid evaluation tasks or criteria.

A majority of the performance appraisal studies conducted since 1950 have focused on the graphic rating method and have made it one of the most important issues in evaluation report development.⁴⁰ In this method the rater is supplied with a printed form that contains a number of job performance qualities and characteristics to be evaluated. The rater subjectively scores each item on a continuum from a low to a high degree for each factor being appraised. Graphic rating may not yield the depth of the essay or critical incident evaluation methods but they are less time consuming to administer, permit quantitative results to be determined simply, and can be used for comparisons among large employee populations.⁴¹ Similar to the checklist appraisal method, the graphic rating system has a significant disadvantage in its requirement for standardized rating factors. This limitation makes this system difficult to use as a stand-alone method for comparing a large population of evaluated individuals.

The ranking performance appraisal system requires the rater to place the rated individual somewhere on a scale from poor to good as compared to all other employees

under the same rating system. Usually, one global performance trait is rated rather than separate specific traits. This global trait seeks to identify the employee's overall effectiveness to the organization.⁴² Several different formalized methods of ranking are in use today. The prevalent methods are straight ranking, forced distribution and paired comparison. In the straight ranking method a supervisor must simply rank order his subordinates from best to worst. A forced distribution scale requires supervisors to sort subordinates into ordered categories such as upper 25%, middle 50%, and lower 25%. There are an infinite number of ways to structure the scale based on the appraisal's purpose. The forced distribution method is particularly useful if administrative actions, such as promotions, are associated with the ranking. The paired comparison method provides more precision in producing a rank ordering of evaluated personnel. Every possible pair of employees is compared, deciding which of the pair is better. After judging all possible pairs, the person with the most better-of-the-pair choices is ranked highest, and so on.⁴³ The resulting ranking is more precise and somewhat more objective than a straight ranking. The great advantage of the ranking performance appraisal system is the useful data produced for executing personnel selection decisions. A disadvantage of this system as a stand-alone method is that it provides little feedback to the rated individual.

The final significant performance appraisal system used in the private sector is the critical incident method. In this system actions or events that are seen as critical to job accomplishment are compared to the rated individual's performance. Critical requirements include those which have been demonstrated to have made the difference between success and failure in completing an assigned job. Critical incidents are reports

made by knowledgeable observers of employee actions that were especially effective in accomplishing their jobs.⁴⁴ These incidents are recorded as they occur for each employee by his supervisor. At the end of the rating period the rater is then able to provide a very specific behavior related performance appraisal report. The advantages of this method are the rated individual is given meaningful feedback and the incidents discussed are directly related to job specific tasks and actions. The critical incident system has several significant disadvantages. It is time consuming and arduous for the rater to record incidents for all assigned subordinates. Additionally, the critical incident evaluation does not provide quantified data.⁴⁵ Although the information provided is more specific and objective than the essay evaluation method the critical incident system is also extremely difficult to use when comparing any medium to large population of employees.

Many critical decisions are involved in selecting a performance appraisal system or combination of systems. Determining the purpose of the evaluation system and what and how to measure performance are the critical first steps in the development of an effective appraisal system. Once the determination of the purpose of the evaluation system has been made the selection of the evaluation reporting method becomes one of matching existing methods to organizational requirements.⁴⁶ A comparison of the appraisal methods most prevalent in the private sector are shown in Table 5. Selecting the proper performance appraisal system is crucial to an organization's long-term success.

Table 5. Comparison of Performance Appraisal Methods

	Providing Feedback and Counseling	Allocating Rewards and Opportunities	Minimizing Costs	Avoiding Rating Errors
Goal/Objective Setting (MBO)	Excellent	Poor	Poor	Good
Checklists	Average	Good-Average	Average	Good
Graphic Rating	Average	Average	Good	Average
Essay	Unknown	Poor	Average	Unknown
Ranking	Poor	Poor-Average	Good	Average
Critical Incident	Excellent	Poor	Poor	Good

Source: Milkovich, George T. and John Boudreau. *Human Resource Management*. Boston, MA: Times Mirror Higher Education Group, 1997.

Notes

³³ Murphy, *Understanding Performance Appraisal: Social, Organizational, and Goal-Based Perspectives*, 7.

³⁴ George L. Morrisey. *Performance Appraisals for Business & Industry*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1983, 5.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Murphy, *Performance Appraisal: An Organizational Perspective*, 123.

³⁷ Ibid. 303.

³⁸ George T. Milkovich and John W. Boudreau. *Human Resource Management*. Boston, MA: Times Mirror Higher Education Group, 1997, 110.

³⁹ Evelyn Eichel and Henry E. Bender. *Performance Appraisal: A Study of Current Techniques*. New York: American Management Associations, 1984, 39.

⁴⁰ Murphy, *Performance Appraisal: An Organizational Perspective*, 298.

⁴¹ Eichel, 42.

⁴² Ibid. 35.

⁴³ Milkovich, *Human Resource Management*, 111.

⁴⁴ Thomas L. Whisler and Shirley F. Harper. *Performance Appraisal: Research and Practice*. New York: The University of Chicago, 1962, 432.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 433.

⁴⁶ Milkovich, *Human Resource Management*, 109.

Chapter 4

Consideration for a Revision to the Army Officer Evaluation Report

Data is what distinguishes the dilettante from the artist.

—George V. Higgins

The question of whether the U.S. Army should revise its Officer Evaluation Report to reduce or eliminate the predominate essay format could generate a great debate among any individuals subject to this form of evaluation report or among any personnel management professionals. In considering this question an interesting point to note is the fact that the Army's predominately essay OER has survived nineteen years of use without major revision. Does this fact provide such strong evidence that the OER is properly formatted to negate any consideration for significant revision? A formidable argument to counter the strength of the legacy of the Army's current OER can be found in an analysis of the purpose of the OER. This analysis provides the basis for my argument to reduce the narrative evaluation portion of the OER and to add another significant data point similar to the senior rater's block shown in Table 3. This assessment of the Army's OER also provides an argument for performance appraisal reporting methods applicable to any large organization.

Historically, information from performance appraisals has been used as a basis for administrative decisions. However, in the past three decades the purposes of appraisal

have expanded considerably. Beginning early in the 1960s significant emphasis was placed on providing feedback and developing employees as part of the performance appraisal system. Proponents of management by objectives advocated using appraisals for organization planning. Over a century of research and development in the field of performance appraisal methods in both the private sector and U.S. Army has focused on two fundamental uses of appraisals, administrative decisions and employee feedback.⁴⁷

The two purposes of performance appraisal, administrative decisions and employee feedback, are often in conflict. The conflict occurs when appraisals are used to satisfy both organizational and individual purposes. An example of these two purposes is an evaluation report used for both promotion decisions and employee feedback. When an organization uses information from performance appraisals to make both promotion decisions and to provide developmental feedback to employees the evaluation report rater is presented with a significant conflict. The rater must somehow weigh each of these purposes and then decide what appraisal ratings to provide. When faced with this conflict a rater will select the purpose with the greatest consequence and ignore the other purpose.⁴⁸ This is especially true in the case of the Army OER which has potentially career ending consequences in its use for promotion selection.

In identifying the intent of the Army Officer Evaluation Report it is clear that both the purposes of administrative decisions and rated individual feedback are included in the report. Clearly the administrative decisions made based on the information provided in the OER are the most significant and consequential use of the report. The OER provides the most significant assessment document and the primary tool for centralized decisions for all officer promotions and selections for major career enhancing schools.⁴⁹ As

discussed in the article “Promotion Boards” from Army Reserve Magazine, the evaluation report is the clincher for promotion board decisions.

The last items the board looks at are the most important documents in your file. These are your evaluation reports, and other forms or recognition. Your performance as described in your evaluation reports is the primary basis for selection.⁵⁰

The feedback function of the OER is provided in the narrative write-ups that fill the second page of the report. As discussed in chapter three, essay evaluations are an excellent method for providing feedback to the evaluated individual but are extremely difficult to use when comparing employees, especially in medium to large organizations.⁵¹

Although the OER has a dual purpose of supporting administrative decisions and providing performance feedback to the officer the only truly consequential affect of the information provided in the report is in its administrative decision purpose. Raters preparing the OER understand the dual-purpose nature of the report and know there is a conflict between these purposes. Dual-purpose performance appraisals are only possible when the purposes are compatible. Providing a performance evaluation for centralized promotion selection and providing developmental feedback for the rated individual on the same form are not compatible.⁵² To place any constructive criticism or developmental feedback for the rated individual in the essay write-ups of the Officer Evaluation Report would conflict with a recommendation for promotion in the graphic rating and ranking sections of the same OER. Given this conflict in the two purposes of the Officer Evaluation Report the rater must provide an evaluation to support the administrative decision purpose and ignore providing developmental feedback to insure the rated individuals OER is competitive for centralized selection.

The primary purpose of the Army's performance evaluation system is to provide a database for personnel management. The record of this performance is the basis for any personnel action, either favorable or adverse. The Army has an even greater need for this personnel management database because of its centralized officer promotion system. This unique need mandates that the recorded results of performance evaluation be in a form that can be easily graded or compared so that a promotion or selection board can rank order the performance record in the files made available.⁵³ The only quantitative information on the OER that provides a discriminator for this grading is the senior rater's block, Part VIII, Section b. of DA Form 67-9, shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Senior Rater's Rating Section from Army Form 67-9, OCT 97

PART VII-SENIOR RATER	
b. POTENTIAL COMPARED WITH OFFICERS SENIOR RATED IN SAME GRADE	
	ABOVE CENTER OF MASS
X	CENTER OF MASS
	BELOW CENTER OF MASS RETAIN
	BELOW CENTER OF MASS DO NOT RETAIN

Shown in Table 7 is the analysis of the results of a centralized promotion board considering over 1800 Majors for promotion to Lieutenant Colonel. This analysis shows that board members utilize the senior rater block as the only true discriminator for the vast majority of those under consideration. Additionally, the analysis shows that the only portion of the narrative sections that take up over 50% of the DA Form 67-9 that may be utilized by a selection board is a sentence or two in the senior rater's narrative that discusses potential.⁵⁴

Table 7. U.S. Army Personnel Command Analysis of Lieutenant Colonel Selection Board Officer Evaluation Report (OER) Discriminators

<p>Army OER Indicators That <i>WILL</i> Put You At Risk:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -One OER with a below center of mass senior rater block as a field grade officer (Captain promotable and above) -More than one center of mass report (2nd block on senior rater’s evaluation) as a field grade officer -Very center of mass file -Center of mass (2nd block on senior rater’s evaluation) in branch-qualifying positions (company command and battalion execution officer or operations officer) -Weak write-ups on senior rater narrative portion of OER.

Source: United States Total Army Personnel Command. *PERSCOM Update, Fiscal Year 1997*. Alexandria, VA: PERSCOM, October, 1996.

Clearly the analysis conducted by the U.S. Army Personnel Command of the tools used by the Army’s centralized selection boards to rank order large populations of candidates verifies that the forced distribution rating contained in the OER provides the critical discriminator. Furthermore, this same analysis clearly shows that the narratives on the OER are of no use for the centralized boards.

Notes

⁴⁷ Murphy, *Understanding Performance Appraisal: Social, Organizational, and Goal-Based Perspectives*, 88.

⁴⁸ Murphy, *Performance Appraisal: An Organizational Perspective*, 88.

⁴⁹ Straffon, 19.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 18.

⁵¹ Eichel, 40.

⁵² Murphy, *Understanding Performance Appraisal: Social, Organizational, and Goal-Based Perspectives*, 107.

⁵³ Michael D. Mahler. “OER System: A Reality Check.” *Army Times* (December 16, 1996), 54.

⁵⁴ United States Total Army Personnel Command. *PERSCOM Update, Fiscal Year 1997*, 12.

Chapter 5

Conclusions

Why are centralized selection board members not reading the narratives that predominate the Officer Evaluation Report? Why do the narrative sections of the OER fail to serve the traditional purpose of an essay appraisal of providing developmental feedback to the rated individual? These are the questions that this research paper answered and are summarized below. Armed with an understanding of why the essay appraisal method is not working on the OER a recommendation is made for properly aligning the purpose of the report to the method of evaluation.

The Army's centralized selection boards do not utilize the narrative sections of the Officer Evaluation because essay appraisals are poor instruments for comparing rated individuals in large populations. Given that the OER's narrative sections are not utilized by selection boards the analysis of the function of these narratives turns back to the OER's secondary purpose of providing developmental feedback to the rated individual. This individual feedback purpose is used to justify the inclusion of narratives in the evaluation. Essay appraisals are an excellent means of providing specific feedback to the evaluated individual.⁵⁵ The examination of this developmental feedback purpose, as discussed in Chapter 4, revealed that the consequential impact of the predominate selection purpose of the OER causes the subversion of the feedback purpose of the

narrative write-ups. The rater, aware of the significant consequences of the selection purpose of the report, will write the narrative sections to support the centralized selection purpose of the evaluation. This negates the advantage of utilizing an essay appraisal for specific individual feedback. The critical selection evaluation is, therefore, provided only in the OER's forced distribution evaluation section. This forced distribution appraisal is executed in the senior rater's block of the OER.

The conflict in purpose between selection recommendation and developmental feedback, and the resulting subversion of all evaluation sections of the OER to serve the centralized selection purpose causes the narrative appraisals to serve little utility for developmental feedback and, therefore, are of no constructive use to the rated individual. Board members serving on the Army's centralized selection boards have previously served as senior raters and understand that the narratives in the OER are written to support the senior rater's forced distribution block and, therefore, do not give any attention to the narratives as a selection discrimination tool.

This assessment of the U.S. Army's current Officer Evaluation Report confirms that the essay write-ups that predominate the evaluation report serve no utility for centralized selection boards as a selection discriminator or for rated individuals as a developmental feedback tool. The two intended purposes of the OER, organizational selection decisions and developmental feedback to the rated individual, are not compatible on one evaluation report system.⁵⁶ The conflict of the two purposes for the OER can only be eliminated by exclusion of the secondary purpose of providing feedback to the rated individual as a function of the OER.

With the removal of the developmental feedback purpose the use of essay narratives should be eliminated. Essay appraisals serve as poor formats for identifying the performance and potential discriminators needed for a centralized organizational selection system.⁵⁷ The essay narratives on the Officer Evaluation Report should be reduced to a limited number of one or two line bulletized comments that provide additional selection data for centralized selection board members. The use of three bullet comments provided each by the rater and the senior rater would be utilized to identify unique traits or strengths of the rated individual. One bullet would address performance and two bullets would address potential. These same bullets would be utilized by centralized board members to identify the more minute discriminators needed to identify details not provided by the forced distribution ratings on the report.

Table 8. Proposed OER Bullet Comments Section

PART VII-SENIOR RATER
c. COMMENTS ON PERFORMANCE/POTENTIAL
-Flawless performance as a joint special operations communications officer
-Assign as an Executive Officer or S3 immediately following resident CGSC
-Promote now; he is a future battalion commander

Notes

⁵⁵ Gordon C. Anderson. *Managing Performance Appraisal Systems*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1993, 37.

⁵⁶ Murphy, *Performance Appraisal: An Organizational Perspective*, 898.

⁵⁷ Anderson, 37.

Appendix A

Department of Army Form 67-9, Officer Evaluation Report

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