Tracking USMA’s Intellectual Capital – A First Step Towards Leveraging Institutional Talent Against Operational Problems

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Abstract: As the world becomes increasingly interconnected and unstable, the US Army’s mission becomes more complex. This reality, when coupled with a smaller force, is increasing the Army’s reliance on foreign partners and its need for non-traditional skills. Given these challenges, deployed units often offset capability gaps using “reachback,” the act of contacting external organizations for critical expertise. Based on recent support to the 1st Infantry Division in Iraq, the United States Military Academy (USMA) possesses considerable reachback potential; however, to fulfill such requests, USMA must first understand its capability and capacity. With this in mind, our research shows that although USMA’s faculty is quite willing to help deployed units, no formalized process exists to catalogue and leverage its collective intellectual capital. As such, we identify the requirement for an intuitive system to fill this void. In this work we develop and analyze several alternatives.

Keywords: Reachback, talent management, intellectual capital

1. Introduction

Established in 2003, knowledge management continues to grow as an Army discipline. At the 8th Annual Army Operational Knowledge Management Conference, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General (ret.) Martin Dempsey explained the availability of advanced military capabilities “requires us to dominate in what we should describe as the competitive learning environment...for it is in this dimension of conflict, and our ability to learn, where victory will be decided” (2012). To this end, Army organizations must have access to the right information at the right time, and knowledge management ensures that “tacit,” or learned knowledge, becomes “explicit,” or shared knowledge. This is evident in the objective of the Army’s knowledge management principles which is “to connect those who know with those who need to know (know-why, know-what, and know-how) by leveraging knowledge transfers from one-to-many across the Global Army Enterprise” (Department of the Army, 2008). The link, and systems to make the link, between those who “know” and those who “need-to-know” is important; however, understanding where in the Army organization tacit knowledge exists and how to track its discovery also demands consideration. An excellent source of this intellectual capital is the United States Military Academy (USMA) where Army officers are educated across a plethora of disciplines. Currently, USMA supports operational units in an informal, entrepreneurial way, and this serves as a useful case study to develop a more formal reachback system.

2. Literature Review

Providing domestic intellectual assistance to forward deployed units is not a new concept for the Army. Unit commanders and staffs regularly approach outside experts for advice on challenging problems (Neal, 2000). However, reachback, or “the electronic ability to exploit organic and nonorganic resources, capabilities and expertise, which by design are not located in theater,” only began to become formalized at the turn of the century (Neal, 2000, p. 39). As the Army has moved toward rapid deployments with decreased troop numbers, reachback has become more important, as increased “operational agility” has compensated for less troops. (Neal, 2000).

While informal reachback efforts may involve nothing more than a simple phone call, formal reachback is more coordinated and resource-intensive. Specifically, formal reachback occurs when a unit does not possess the resources or