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## GIVE PURPOSE FIRST: USING SELF DETERMINATION THEORY AS A TOOL FOR SOF RETENTION

Articles

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### Give Purpose First: Using Self Determination Theory as a Tool for SOF Retention

By Wes Dyson, Kyle Martin, and Shannon C. Houck

United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) is losing special operators via voluntary separation at an alarming rate, with some organizations manned at less than 50% of desired levels after key retention milestones such as O-3 to O-4. This is unsurprising in many ways; civilian life offers more time for family, new (and often less taxing) career opportunities, more money, and greater autonomy. While some attrition is inevitable, losing experienced operators is costly for USSOCOM. The specialized skills that operators acquire and develop during their careers require significant time and monetary investments. More critically, losing these high-value, experienced warfighters imposes costs on overall force readiness.

So, how does USSOCOM attract and retain warfighters among its ranks *long-term*?

Prior research suggests financial incentives as the simple answer.<sup>[1][2]</sup> The authors agree with the research that recommends increased compensation for special operations personnel, but a significant body of psychological research suggests that *money alone* is an incomplete solution. This article focuses on an empirically-supported framework within psychological literature that can inform ways to improve the military talent management system, and ultimately address the SOF recruitment and retention problem via the psychological concept of self-determination theory (SDT).

#### Motivating SOF to Stay: The Self-Determination Theory Framework

Self-determination theory (SDT) divides motivation into autonomous (intrinsic) versus controlled (extrinsic) incentives. Whereas extrinsic motivation drives behavior through gaining rewards or avoiding punishment, intrinsic motivation involves behavior that is its own reward – doing something because it is internally satisfying and aligns with personal goals and values.<sup>[3]</sup> Research suggests multiple positive effects of pursuing ventures that are intrinsically motivated

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through SDT.<sup>[4]</sup> Referencing these factors while analyzing SOCOM's organizational culture and talent management initiatives will aid in individual fulfillment, unit effectiveness, and ultimately retention.

SDT focuses on three universal components of intrinsic motivation: autonomy, competence, and relatedness.<sup>[5]</sup> Autonomy is to act volitionally, with a sense of choice.<sup>[6]</sup> Competence is the need to demonstrate existing capabilities or a clear advancement in pursuit of mastery. Relatedness is the connection to people and the network in your chosen career. Notably, the creators of SDT, Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan, stress that autonomy is *not* independence; independence is at odds with the three psychological humans' needs.<sup>[7]</sup> So while this suggests optimally motivating SOF operators should involve a personal choice, it does not encourage completely independent pursuits. Ackerman provides a useful visual depicting the SDT's basic needs below.<sup>[8]</sup>

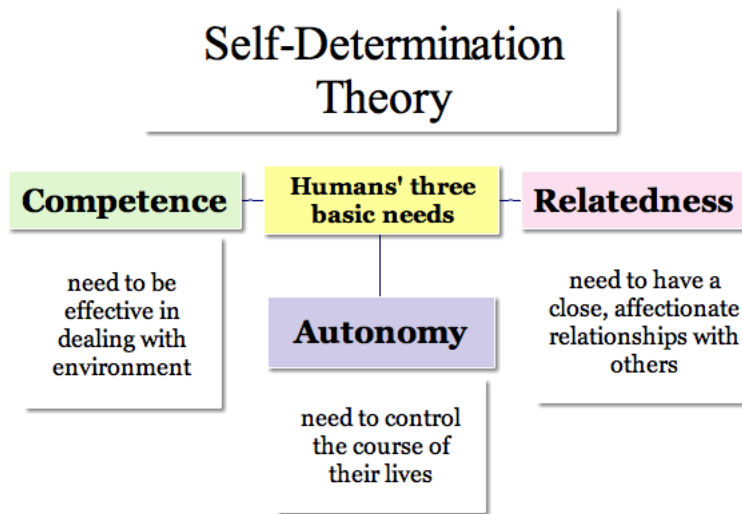


Figure 1 - Self-determination theory model graphical depiction

#### **Operators Need Better Motivation, Not More**

Dozens of experiments and decades of field studies demonstrate that “autonomous motivation has been associated with greater persistence; more positive affect; enhanced performance, especially on heuristic activities; and greater psychological well-being.”<sup>[9]</sup> Organizations outside of the DoD routinely incorporate SDT principles, with great success. For example, Google's efforts to encourage autonomous motivation ultimately improved employee satisfaction, retention, proficiency, organizational innovation, and overall effectiveness.<sup>[10]</sup>

What does this mean for SOF? Given its principle of “humans are more important than hardware,” SOCOM should develop a personnel management system that can satisfy the three characteristics of SDT. Understandably, all three factors cannot be maximized in every assignment; the needs of the services will always be priority. However, ultimately the services require dedicated and motivated warfighters, resistant to the lures of early retirement by a civilian market that is all too eager to benefit from SOCOM's rigorous selection and training.

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[11] Investing in new, empirically-supported motivational frameworks is not at odds with the military's objectives. Today's challenges require the recruitment and retention of exceptionally talented personnel. Further, rapid technological and doctrinal innovations require equally agile and innovative personnel to lead their development and implementation. A primary focus on the people is required in the contemporary arena that commands nuanced and politically sensitive missions. Among the changes required by a strategic shift to Great Power Competition is the management of the force's personnel. To make changes, we must understand the current system and how can it be improved by incorporating SDT.

#### **Out with the Old: Impersonal Assessments**

All the services use a similar standard evaluation form, and while it is an effective tool to communicate performance and promotion potential, it often promotes those who want to stay in instead of the top talent. An often-heard phrase is "not wanting to waste a top rating on a guy who is getting out." The evaluation tool can then become a self-fulfilling prophecy, and thus skew an organization's ability to determine the level of talent lost. The Army Talent Management Task Force (TMTF) seemingly concurs with these limitations and are pushing for an adoption of a "culture of assessments" to obtain a more accurate determination of talent. Major General (MG) McGee, director of the TMTF says, "we don't know whether we're retaining talent or not because we don't know what we want to measure."<sup>[12]</sup> Simply put, and to reiterate MG McGee, we know we have a retention problem; we don't know if we have a *talent retention* problem because we do not know who our talent is.

#### **In with the New: SDT-Informed Evaluation System**

With a primary objective of investing in autonomous motivation, various services are taking steps to remove barriers to autonomy and better place talent. Progress is slow in such large organizations. For instance, the Army Talent Management Task Force (TMTF) spearheaded a new placement system that seeks to both match Knowledge, Skills, Behaviors and Preferences (KSB-Ps) and instill more autonomy into job selection by introducing the Army Talent Alignment Process (ATAP). Under this system, specifically in the use of the Assignment Interactive Module (AIM 2.0), the Army created a "Monster.com-style" marketplace where all available jobs are listed. From there, Officers can screen the available jobs, rank preferences, and apply/interview with the gaining unit to best explain why they would fit the job. Within this process is a more robust resume document that highlights non-traditional skillsets that benefit the unit, and otherwise would not be readily available in the old system. Afterwards, both the Officer and the gaining unit rank order their preferences, hoping for a "1-to-1" match. This marketplace offers a framework in which more data can eventually be utilized, such as psychological evaluations and peer reviews<sup>1</sup>. Yet this initiative is currently only specific to the Army.

The promising news is that there are untapped resources that can be allocated to these efforts, and SOCOM should lead the way in innovating new talent management products for the larger services. Specifically, SOCOM assessment, selection, and training pipelines should use

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its massive amount of observational data to develop personalized “Talent Profiles” that better place and develop its people.

US SOF organizations are staffed with professionals such as operational psychologists, strength and conditioning coaches, cognitive performance coaches, nutritionists, and physical therapists. Both in their training pipelines and at their units, SOF elements have the tools and funding necessary to develop a qualitative continuous evaluation of their people through the data they already collect during years of training. During their assessment and follow-on training pipelines, a host of psychological, academic, and performance evaluations create a mountain of data on each individual operator. Most organizations would jump at the opportunity to have this amount of data on their employees. After a student graduates their training course, this data (frequently over 100 pages) is often archived and never used again; most SOF officers previously endured 12 years until another holistic evaluation for O-5 Command. SDT offers SOF Commanders a framework for how to utilize this data beyond the initial training pipeline.

SOCOM should leverage this information into an understanding of the force at the individual level. SOCOM could easily conduct billet assignments and mentorship programs within the SDT framework that is personalized and matched to the individual operator. By utilizing already-collected data to more deeply understand *who* its personnel are, SOCOM units can then enact agile talent management solutions that put its operators in the most suitable billets, and on the right teams. This effort would maximize the individual operator’s relatedness and competence by placing them in a billet/team that suits their unique talents, and connecting them to a community of similar mentors who can help develop their observed strengths and weaknesses.

Happy operators make for unhappy adversaries. SOF personnel are poised to take the next step in military talent management. It’s time to continue moving forward as an organization.

*Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of Defense, Naval Postgraduate School, or the U.S. Government.*

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