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**First-Tour Employee Retention in the State Department, North
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First-Tour Employee Retention in the State Department, North California Office, CA

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Golden Gate University

EMPA 396 – Research Capstone Project

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Abstract

This research paper focuses on retention issues among first-tour employees of the State Department. Every new employee in the State Department must serve an initial directed two-year tour at one of the eight (8) Field Offices in the United States. Despite a lengthy hiring and training program for State Department employees, many first-tour (entry-level) Foreign Service Specialists decide to leave the State Department for other federal agencies or the private sector before the end of their first tour. Assessing why retention is an issue after so much time and resources spent during the selection and training process will help the State Department better understand the needs of first-tour employees. It can lead to different recruitment, training, and management approaches during employees' first-tour in their field office. For this paper, I used a combination of qualitative and quantitative data (Mixed-Methods Research approach). Five (5) research interviews with subject matter experts were conducted, and twenty-five (25) surveys were deployed, of which 16 were returned completed. The results confirmed that first-tour employees' initial training, management at the field office, and lack of professional development were seen as major factors affecting retention at the State Department, while the hiring processes successfully identified candidates motivated to stay for a full career.

Keywords: Retention, First Tour, Directed, State Department, Field Office, Foreign Service Specialist.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Background

The State Department is the lead foreign affairs agency for the United States. Headquartered at the foggy bottom in DC, the State Department is a federal agency with over 13,000 Foreign Service employees, 11,000 Civil Service employees, and 45,000 locally employed staff based at over 270 consulates and embassies worldwide (U.S. Department of State, 2022). The mission of the State Department is to protect and promote U.S. Security, prosperity, and democratic values and shape an international environment in which all Americans can thrive. (U.S. Department of State, 2022). New employees assigned to the Foreign Service Specialist category serve domestically at one of the eight field offices located around the US for an initial directed first tour (U.S. Department of State, 2022). The State Department faces many of the same recruiting, training, and management challenges that other federal departments face. These challenges involve a slow recruitment process, a lack of a training pipeline, and inadequate management during the employee's initial tour.

The State Department application and onboarding for potential candidates can take up to two (2) years. The agency job opening is only open once a year, for a two-week period on USA Jobs. Unlike traditional private sector jobs, the job application for DS consists of an online questionnaire, resume, and essay submission. These initial qualifications take months to review, and only upon completion are applicants notified whether they have passed and can move on to the next step. Even after this final offer, however, it may be several months before an applicant can begin job training as yearly budgeting determines when training classes begin. As can be seen from the above process, the government application and onboarding process is extremely time-consuming and rigid. Finding those applicants who are a good cultural fit is another

extremely important aspect of recruiting, as this job is unlike many other federal and private sector jobs.

Many new employees find that the job and lifestyle of constant traveling is a poor fit for their family lives and move on within the first year (Partnership for Public Service, 2021). In addition to recruiting and finding candidates who are a good cultural fit, the organization is expanding. As with many other federal agencies, our mission throughout the past few years has continued to grow, increasing the demand for the organization (Government Accountability Office, 2016). Employee burnout is high, and new hires are barely able to replace losses due to retirement and lateral transfers from other agencies. This recruiting and staffing tension leads to poor retention issues, which in turn affects recruitment. Years of low morale, resignations, and retirements have left the State Department in poor staffing shape (MacKinnon, 2021).

Statement of the Problem

This study investigated why first-tour employees decide to leave the State Department so early in their careers. Many employees believe that the State Department has retention issues because they see and hear about new employees leaving for other work. While the State Department as a whole may not have an attrition rate, first-tour employees are more likely to leave than those in the middle and upper job classes. This is extremely harmful to State Department staffing because of the time and resources needed to recruit and train new employees. This problem can be divided into three parts: hiring (P1), training (P2), and management (P3). For hiring (P1), the State Department's hiring process is too long and does not identify candidates who will be good fits for the unique aspects of work in the State Department. For training (P2), the State Department does not do an adequate job of training new employees to be prepared for field office work. For the management aspect (P3), field office management does

not successfully professionally develop new employees who are assigned to the field office for their first tour.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to understand the drivers of why first-tour employees leave the State Department and the reasons why changes can be made in order to get first-tour employees to stay. By studying the reasons why employees leave after years of time and effort spent to get into the State Department, we can better understand the drivers of why new employees leave, find solutions to those problems, and recommend incentives for getting new employees to stay.

Significance of the Study

By understanding the reason why first-tour employees leave, the State Department can better adjust its recruitment, training, and management strategy to address the drivers of employee resignations. By changing the way that new employees are recruited, trained, and managed during their first-tour, the State Department can better retain new employees to stay with the State Department for a full career.

Main Research Questions and Sub-Questions

The main question for my research paper is:

How could the State Department better hire, train, and retain first-tour employees at the field office?

The research sub-questions include:

1. Is there a retention issue for first-tour employees in the State Department?
2. What are the main drivers of first-tour employees leaving the State Department?

3. How can the State Department HR and Management better change to address retention issues?

Theory of Change and Assumptions

The theory of change for this research study is: IF the State Department better understand the drivers of why new employees leave during their first tour at the field office;

Assumption 1 (A1): THEN hiring could better identify candidates who are better suited for the unique work and department lifestyle.

Assumption 2 (A2): THEN initial training could be better tailored to prepare new employees for life at their field office.

Assumption 3 (A3): THEN supervisors at the field offices would be better prepared and trained in how to manage first-tour employees.

Limitations

This research study will be limited by the narrow job function of domestically assigned foreign service specialists in the State Department. Additionally, getting survey and interview responses from current and former employees will be voluntary and thus depend on whether these individuals will want to contribute to the research study. Lastly, this study will look at retention issues in the past 2 years, which may not cover all of the historical reasons why first-tour employees decide to leave.

Definitions of Terms

Hypothesis: If changes are made to the hiring, training, and management of first tour (two-year) employees, then retention of first tour employees would be better improved.

Retention: The action of employers to keep employees motivated and fulfilled so that they reduce turnover and keep employees in their current position/assignment.

First Tour: All new foreign service employees begin with two “directed” tours domestically or overseas. All first-tour Foreign Service Specialists are direct-assigned to their first tour of duty. These tours are usually 2 years each and must begin at one of the eight domestic Field Offices (FO).

Directed Assignment: The first two assignments are directed, in which the employee can rank their choices of where they would like to work but can be assigned anywhere.

Field Office: Eight (8) State Department offices throughout the United States, where initial entry employees work for their first tour. Offices are staffed with special agents, investigative analysts, and administrative staff, conducting the State Department’s investigative mission.

Foreign Service Specialist: A category of six (6) jobs in the Foreign Service that covers: administration, construction, operations, information technology, security, and medical services.

Expected Impact of Research

This study has the potential to identify gaps in hiring, training, and management of first-tour employees entering the State Department. State Department Human Resources (HR) can use this study and feedback to better tailor their hiring, training, and management decisions surrounding new employees.

Summary

The State Department has a retention issue for first-tour employees joining the department. If the State Department better understood the reasons behind why new employees leave so soon, it would better be able to adjust how it hires, trains, and manages new employees. This change can help lead to improved retention rates and new incentives for a better work-life balance in the department.

Chapter II: Review of Literature

Introduction

For this research paper, I relied on a variety of sources to come up with the data and analysis to address the problem question and possible solutions. I utilized government studies and reports on the effectiveness of retention strategies in the State Department. These reports also highlighted historical retention rates throughout the past 10 years. Additionally, I looked at professional journals that published research on how the State Department could better modernize, retain employees, and do a better job at recruitment. During my literature review, I explored the following themes: Does the State Department have a retention and attrition issue, what drives employees to leave the State Department during their first tour, and how can the State Department change in order to address attrition and retention issues?

Theme 1: Does the State Department have a first-tour employee attrition problem?

Many employees believe that the State Department has retention issues because they see and hear about new employees leaving for other work. The *Partnership for Public Service* (2021) publication shows, that the State Department has an attrition rate of 4.4%, much lower than the government average of 6.1% (Partnership for Public Service (2021). While the State Department as a whole may not have an attrition rate, first-tour employees are more likely to leave than those in the middle and upper job classes. Additionally, Amy Mackinnon and Robbie Gramer (2021) cited a new survey in the *Institute of Public Diplomacy* (2021), that states that of approximately 3,000 State Department Foreign Service officers, nearly 1 in 3 employees were thinking about leaving. This large-scale analysis and discussion of employees leaving one of the major federal agencies has shown the need for a more in-depth look at why so many employees are leaving.

Theme 2: What drives attrition rates in the State Department?

While researching retention and attrition issues for this study, I tried to look at issues unique to the State Department versus normal retention issues. One of the main takeaways was that family stability is one of the main drivers for employees leaving the State Department. Constanza Castro writing in *“The Crisis in the State Department”* (2021) discusses how family issues, promotions, and the assignment process are some of the biggest drivers of retention issues in the State Department (Castro, 2021). Frequent moves and lack of family employment are some of the main issues that families deal with as employees of the State Department. Secretary Anthony Blinken addressed this issue in his speech *“Modernization of American Diplomacy”* (2021), noting that the State Department needed to change to be able to sustain a family-friendly workforce in the future (Blinken, 2021).

Theme 3: How can the department and office management change to address attrition issues?

For my last theme, I looked at research and literature relating to how the State Department can better change to address current retention and attrition issues. The American Academy of Diplomacy published a report *“Strengthening the Department of State”* (2019), which stated that only 40% of employees are happy with the information that they receive from their management (Karagiannias, 2019). Complaints about how new employees are managed are some of the biggest drivers of new employee retention issues. If management is better able to adjust to the work/life balance issues of new employees, retention could be better managed. The *Government Executive* (2016) publication shows how the US Secret Service failed to improve its management of new employees, leading to record attrition rates (Katz, 2016). Key to this study was the fact that before attrition rates could be fixed, underlying issues of management and

morale had to be addressed first (Katz, 2016). Ambassador Burns and Thomas-Greenfield, writing in *Foreign Affairs* (2020), discussed the solutions to retention problems through the importance of investing in employees and providing mentorship and coaching throughout their careers (Burns, 2022). They additionally argue for a more flexible HR system to better combat the rigid promotion and career advancement process of the State Department. Ambassador Burns and Grossman additionally discuss reforming the State Department culture, training, and promotions in the *American Diplomacy Project: A U.S. Diplomatic Service for the 21st Century* (2020), a Harvard Belford Center publication (Burns, 2022). The authors state the Department needs to innovate and modernize in order to be competitive in the 21st century.

Summary

The literature review discovered many articles in journals and publications discussing State Department retention issues, causes for these issues, and ways in which the State Department could address retention issues as an institution. The review found many good publications by former Ambassadors, high-level employees of the State Department, and surveys of current and former members of the State Department. While these articles addressed many of the larger institutional issues affecting retention at the State Department, there was not a good review of specific fixes for lower-level issues that affect more junior and entry-level employees.

Chapter III: Research Methods

Introduction

This research applied the Mixed-Methods Research (MMR) approach and collected data through qualitative and quantitative means. For the quantitative data, I used surveys that were sent out to current and former first-tour employees (those who have left for another job). I also utilized exit data from the past two years to see at what rate first-tour employees were leaving and why, if any reason, they did leave. Using the data from exit surveys, I looked at whether there was a retention issue among first-tour employees. Using the surveys and interviews, I gauged the main factors that were causing employees to leave and the main motivating factors that caused employees to stay.

Research Questions and Sub Questions

The main question for my research paper is:

How can the State Department better hire, train, and retain first-tour employees at the field office?

Research sub-questions:

1. Is there a retention issue for first-tour employees in the State Department?
2. What are the main drivers of first-tour employees leaving the State Department?
3. How can the State Department HR and Management better change to address retention issues?

Theory of Change and Assumptions

The theory of change for this research study is: IF the State Department better understand the drivers of why new employees leave during their first tour at the field office;

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Operational Definitions

Hypothesis: If changes are made to the hiring, training, and management of first tour (two-years) employees, then retention of first tour employees would be better improved.

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Foreign Service Specialist: A category of six (6) jobs in the Foreign Service that covers: administration, construction, operations, information technology, security, and medical services.

Population Sampling Strategy

For this study, the population includes current and former first-tour employees at domestic field offices in the US. The researcher found former employees in their new jobs in the private sector or other federal agencies to help give context to how their new employment was compared with the State Department. The goal was to reach at least 25 current and former first-tour employees through surveys online or through social media. For the interviews, it was planned to interview at least 5-10 current and former first-tour employees and managers.

Procedures

In conducting surveys and interviews, the researcher relied on internal means of communication with the State Department to send out surveys to current first-tour employees around the US. Also, the researcher sought approval through the chain of command to ensure that this does not violate any HR policies and engaged volunteers for interviews and individuals who have left in the past two years to see if they were interested in participating in the retention survey and possible interviews. For those that are located outside of the San Francisco Bay area, interviews were conducted over the phone or Zoom.

Data Processing and Analysis

The data for this research paper will come from interviews and surveys from current and former first-tour employees of the State Department. I will look at reasons why first-tour employees have left in the past and the things that current first-tour employees would say would keep them on the job. Interview and survey responses will analyze and identify the main causes for employees deciding to leave during their first tour, or reasons why first tour employees are thinking about leaving. Additionally, the data will identify changes to the hiring, training, or

management during their initial onboarding and first two years that would cause them to decide to stay on for a full career with the State Department.

Internal and External Validity

This study has various internal and external valid concerns. In limiting the study to first-tour employees, there may be a number of responses that are more general in nature and do not reflect the unique circumstances of retention issues in the State Department that this study is trying to collect. For external validity, there are a number of studies already published that discuss retention issues in the Federal Government. Again, I will try to combat these validity concerns by ensuring that the survey and interview questions narrow the study to first tour-specific retention issues.

Limitations

As discussed earlier, the limitation for this study is that all responses will be voluntary, and it is not clear how many respondents will give the full answers necessary to gather the data needed to recommend changes in the future. Additionally, finding enough former first-tour employees will prove difficult as many will have relocated. Narrowing the field down to the past two years will help limit who the study reaches out to and ensure that their knowledge and recollections will be current.

Summary

The State Department retention study will use a mixed-method approach to conducting data gathering and analysis. Using surveys and interviews, the study will gather information from current and former first tour employees and analyze how certain issues affect retention and what can be done to change hiring, training, and management strategies in the future.

Chapter 4: Results and Findings

Introduction

The research focused on finding issues and solutions to the retention issue amongst first-tour employees in the State Department. A Mixed-Methods Research (MMR) approach was used to collect research through interviews and an online survey of selected employees. Surveys were sent out to 25 current or former first-tour employees, of which 16 were returned completed. The surveys were collected through emails to participants, and then data was analyzed through Microsoft Excel to better calculate the results of the data collected. Interviews were scheduled with two first-tour employees, two former State Department employees, and one current manager-level supervisor in the State Department. This spread was designed to gather a wide variety of participants' views on first-tour employee retention issues from those currently in a first-tour, those who have recently left, and those in charge of first-tour employees. The surveys and interviews contained questions that addressed three areas of interest: a) how issues affect retention and what can be done to change hiring, b) training of new employees, and c) management strategies in the future.

Assumption One (1)

If the State Department better understood the drivers of why new employees leave during their first-tour at the field office; then hiring could better identify candidates who are better suited for the unique work and department lifestyle.

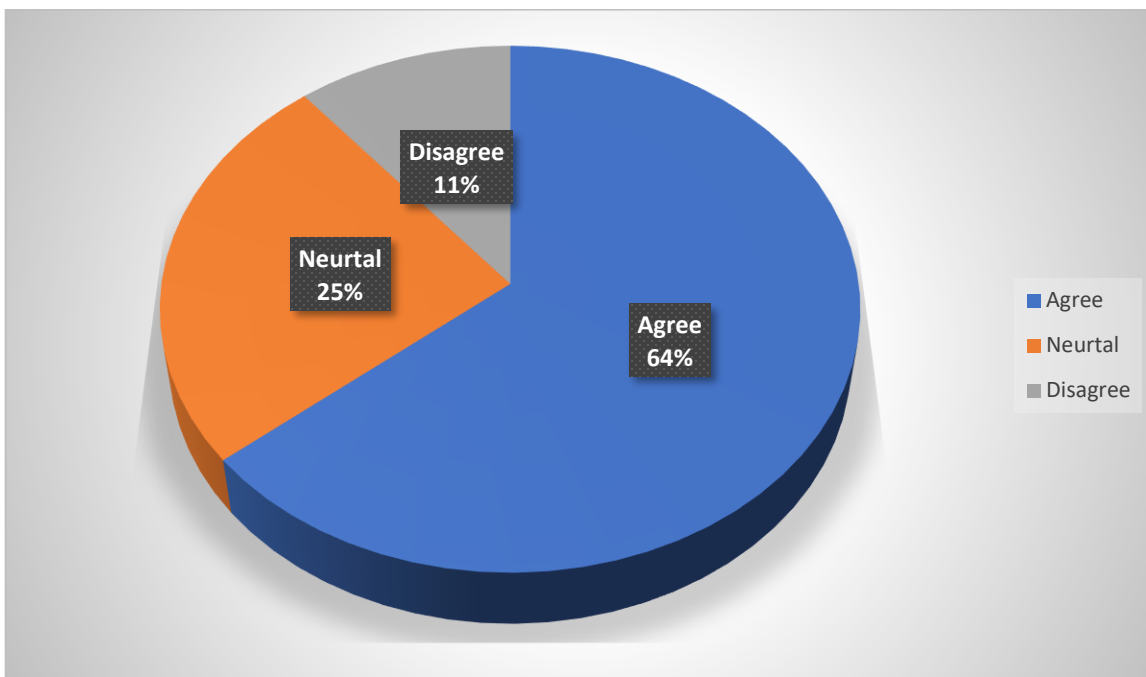
Quantitative Results

In order to validate assumption one, the surveys sent out to participants contained questions addressing retention issues in the State Department for first-tour employees. Two questions (Q8 & Q11) addressed the hiring process as a factor in retention issues. Q11 in the

retention survey asked participants whether the State Department hiring process contributes to retention issues. As discussed in Chapter 1's Statement of the Problem, the hiring process at the State Department is long and intensive, leading to candidates who are a poor fit for the job or losing candidates who otherwise have been good fits. The results of those surveyed were split between those who believed that hiring was part of the retention problem and those who thought it was not part of the problem (See Figure 1). 64% of survey participants agreed or strongly agreed that the hiring process was part of the retention issue. The majority of survey participants agreeing with this statement shows that the hiring process is indeed seen as a factor in retention difficulties within the State Department.

Figure 1

Q11. The State Department hiring process contributes to retention issues.

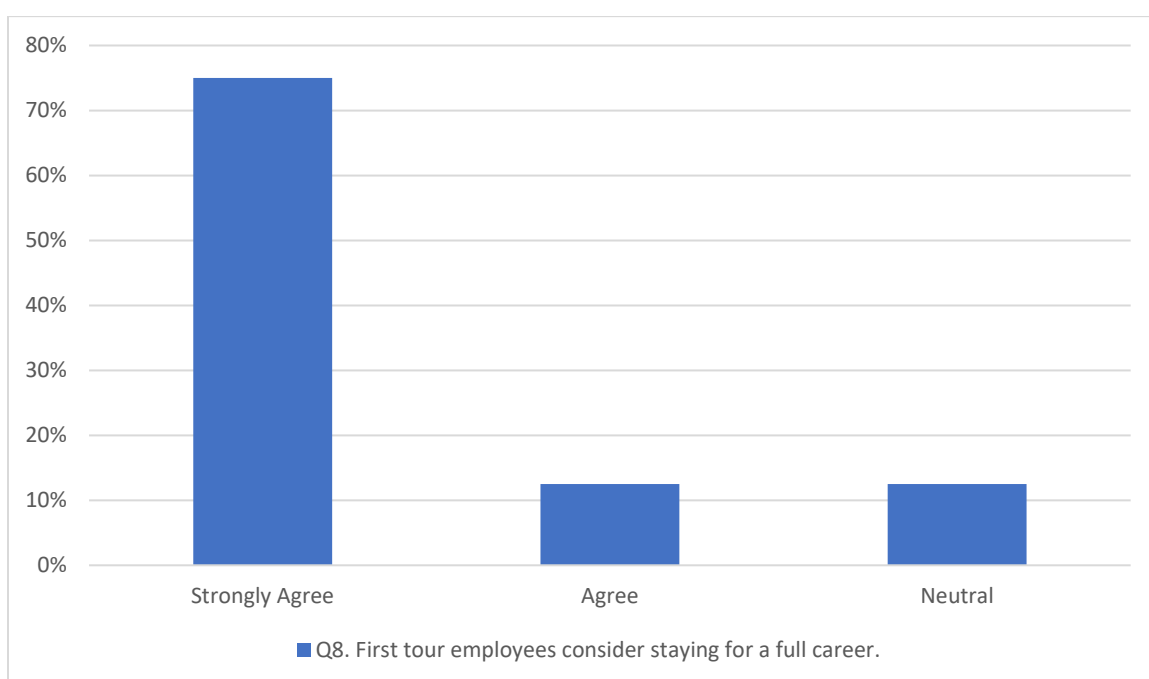


In addition, when looking at hiring, the survey results have shown that most first-tour employees planned to spend their careers in the State Department (See Figure 2). Q8 asked survey participants whether or not first-tour employees consider staying for a full career with the

State Department and 75% responded that they strongly agreed. This result shows that new employees that are hired plan of staying for a full career. This can be interpreted to show that while the hiring process is seen as problematic, the candidates selected are motivated to stay in the department until retirement age. A sign that the department is selected the right type of candidates despite the long and complicated hiring process.

Figure 2

Q8. First-tour employees consider staying for a full career.



Qualitative Results

The interviews conducted with current and former first-tour employees, as well as management, revealed a number of themes in addressing the hiring of first-tour employees. Four of the five interview respondents brought up the theme of the long hiring process as problems in discussing problems in joining the State Department. This is supported by what I have researched on the topic of hiring in the federal government so far. Joe Theil writing in *Federal Times* states, “In our current tight labor market, poor speed of communication back to qualified

applicants in the hiring process reinforces stereotypes and often results in losing top candidates, who go elsewhere” (Theil, 2023). Interview respondent #2 stated that, however, things have gotten better in the past years, noting that “now hiring is more streamlined, there’s no applying through USA Jobs, and it doesn’t take an all-day panel for candidates to get hired” (Interview respondent #2).

While the hiring process was discussed as an inconvenience, it was not seen as a reason for those already in to leave by interview respondents. Interview respondent #4, goes on to state that if anything the department needs to “better explain what the agency does to new candidates” (Interview respondent #4). The entire hiring, training, and onboarding timeline was brought up in many interviews. The length of this entire process causes issues amongst new employees. Interview respondent #5 mentions that “timing is hard to predict for new employees, from application to the field office takes a long time. Personal lives change during that time, family dynamics change” (Interview Respondent #5). While the hiring process is only one part of this, the long timeline and new employee’s family situations play a large role in retention factors for new employees.

Findings

The qualitative and quantitative results have revealed that hiring practices and process at the State Department has not had a large role in causing first-tour employees to leave the department. As seen in the quantitative results, most survey respondents believed that the hiring process was a factor in retention but that most first-tour employees planned to stay for a full career. This shows that the department is recruiting and hiring individuals with potential and motivation to stay for a full career. While there may be more ways in which the department

hiring practices can be improved, the results have refuted A1 in determining that the department is already recruiting the right individuals for the job.

Assumption Two (2)

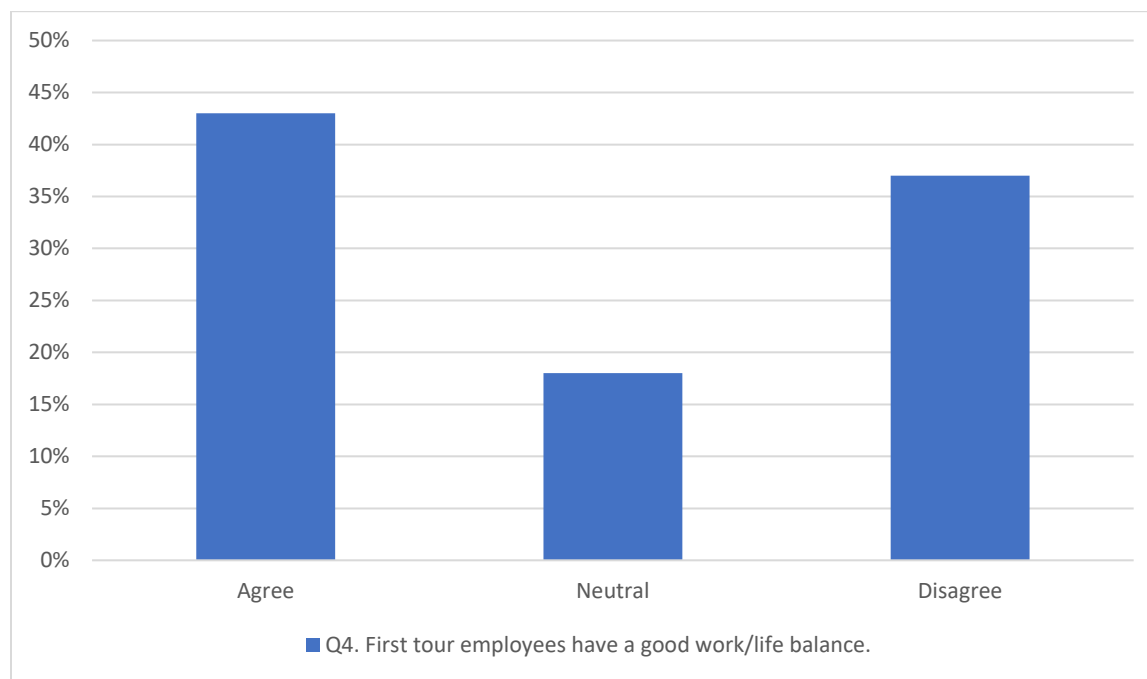
If the State Department better understood the drivers of why new employees leave during their first-tour at the field office; then initial training could be better tailored to prepare new employees for life at their field office.

Quantitative Results

The retention survey consisted of three questions (Q4, Q7 & Q12) that addressed training and preparing new employees for their work in their first-tour. Q4 of the retention survey asked whether first-tour employees had a good work/life balance. The work/life balance of first-tour employees can be linked to how prepared they were coming into the job as a new employee. The survey results were split evenly with 43% stating they agreed first-tour employees had a good work/life balance and 37% stating they disagreed with that statement (See Figure 3). Twenty percent (20%) of survey respondents stayed neutral, stating that they neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement.

Figure 3

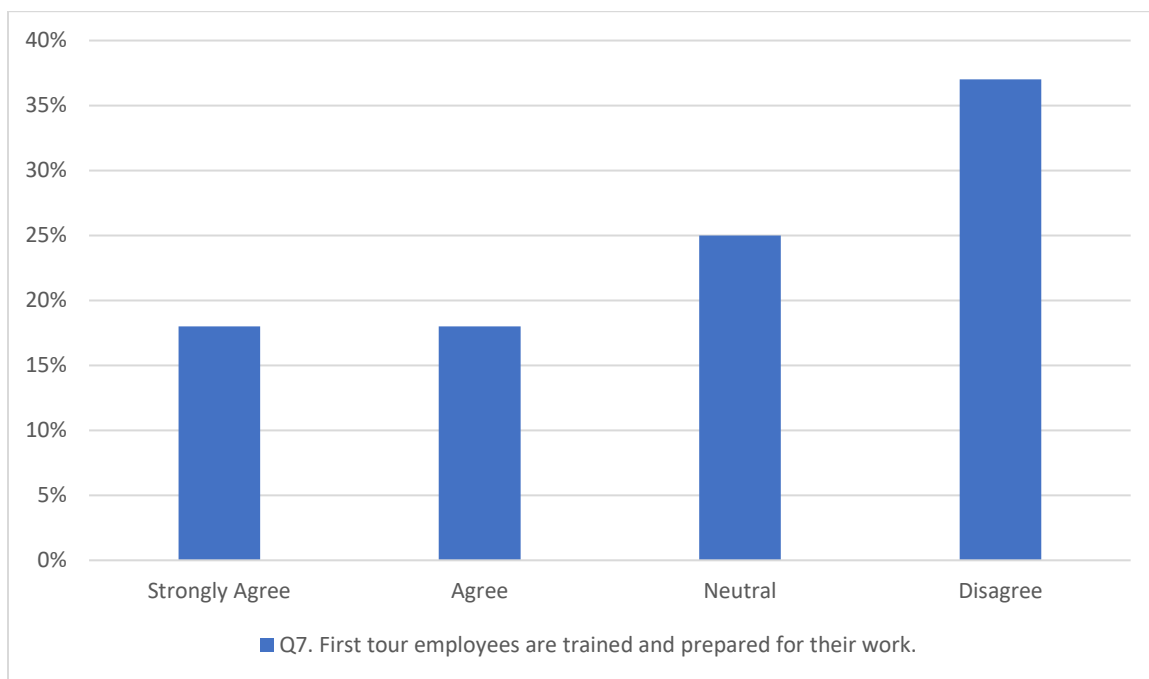
Q4. First-tour employees have a good work/life balance.



Additionally, Q7 asked survey participants whether first-tour employees are trained and prepared for their work as a first-tour employee. The results were evenly split with 37% of participants disagreeing with that statement and 37% agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement. While the results were even between those agreeing and disagreeing, it is worth noting that of the participants agreeing with the statement, 18% strongly agreed with the statement that they were trained and prepared (See Figure 4). This shows that there is more strongly agreeing with the statement, in comparison to no answers that strongly disagreed with the statement.

Figure 4.

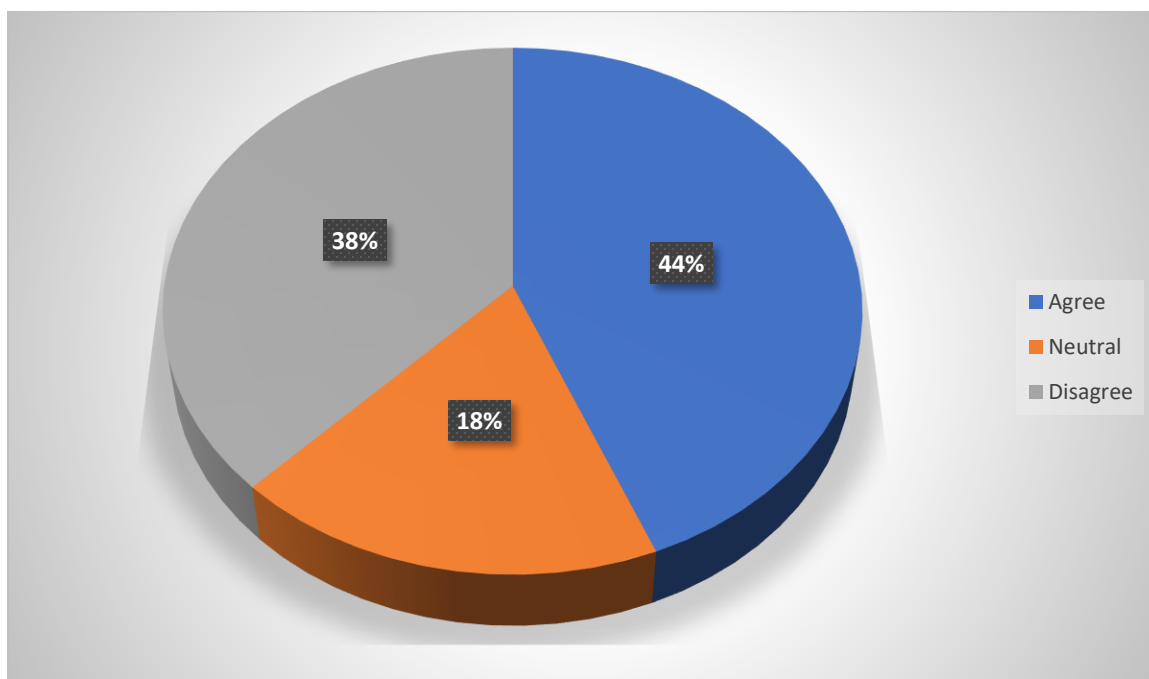
Q7. First-tour employees are trained and prepared for their work.



Finally, Q12 asked survey participants whether the State Department’s long training pipeline contributes to retention problems. Forty three percent (43%) of respondents answered that they believed that the long training pipeline did contribute to retention problems while 37% of respondents disagreed that the training pipeline contributed to retention problems. (See Figure 5) This survey results are in line with what recent research has shown as well. Writing in Federal news Network, Jory Heckman states that, “The department is looking at ways to reinvest in the training for its employees, Efforts include career mapping and zeroing in on training gaps and critically needed skill sets” (Heckman, 2022).

Figure 5

Q12. The State Department training pipeline contributes to retention issues.



Qualitative Results

The interviews conducted with current and former first-tour employees as well as management revealed a number of themes in addressing the long training pipeline for first-tour employees. Many interviews noted that the training provided, despite its long length, was not sufficient for new employees. Interview respondent #3 stated that new employees only get experience on one aspect of the job “the investigation program is lacking, there’s no experience in certain locations, and because managers have to move every 2-3 years, new employees can’t hone their skills” (Interview respondent #3). The interviews also noted that new employees were often not prepared for the amount of travel involved with the job. Interview respondent #2 states that “the field office is a shock to many first-tour employees; it’s a new environment and they are often gone on long stints for TDYs” (Interview respondent #2). Another respondent brought up that while new employees get good training in the hard skills, “there are concerns about the

training academy. New employees don't get enough State Department 101, they need better and more State Department knowledge" (Interview respondent #4).

Findings

The survey and interview results supported A2 in that the training pipeline and its length is a problem for retention of first-tour employees at the State Department. The training pipeline led to two major themes in retention issues for new employees. The first is that between hiring, training, and onboarding, the timeline for joining the State Department was over a yearlong if not more. This led to many issues with managing families and personal lives, with many being separated for months during the training period. This family separation and hardship was identified as major themes in the literature review in Castro (2021) and Blinken (2021).

Secondly, the training was seen as a driver for retention issues due to the fact that first-tour employees were not seen as prepared for their first assignment. While the training was seen as sufficient to be prepared for the hard skills and tasks in their first assignment, the lifestyle of traveling constantly led to many first-tour employees being unsatisfied with the work/life balance during their first-tour.

Assumption Three (3)

If the State Department better understood the drivers of why new employees leave during their first-tour at the field office; then supervisors at the field offices would be better prepared and trained in how to manage first-tour employees.

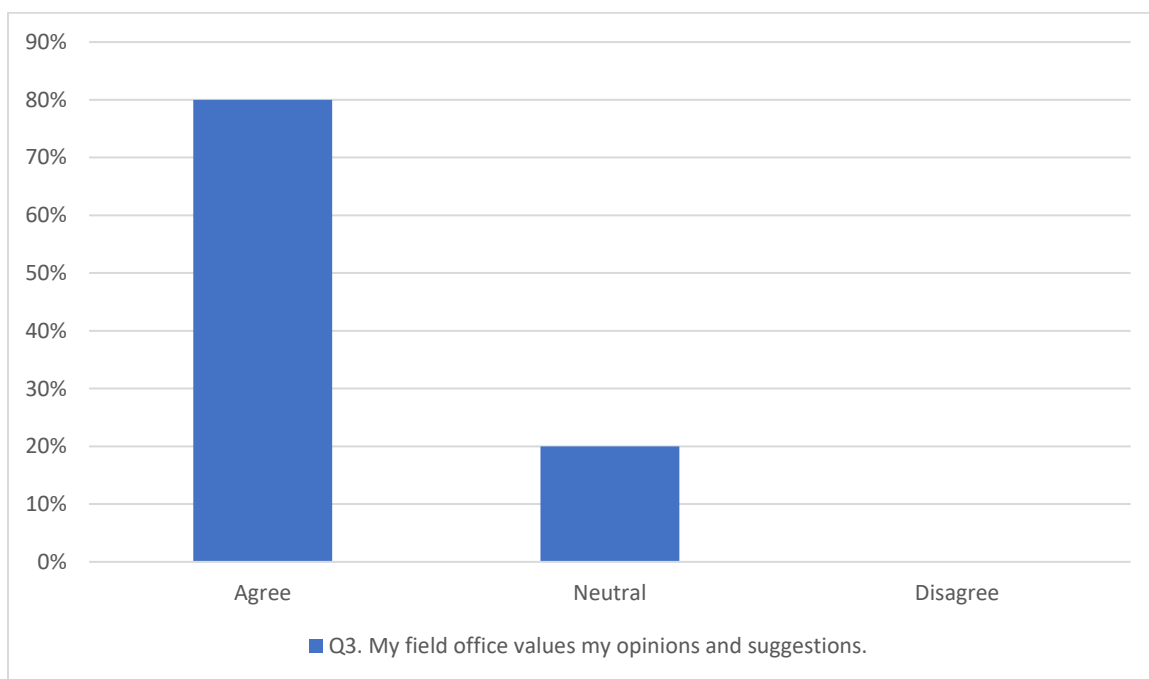
Quantitative Results

The surveys sent out to participants contained questions addressing management issues at the State Department for first-tour employees. The surveys contained three questions (Q3, Q6, and Q10) that addressed the management of new employees during their first-tour at the field

office. The first question, Q3, asked survey participants if they agreed or disagreed with the statement “My field office values my opinions and suggestions.” The survey responses resulted in an overwhelming 80% stating that they agreed with the statement. Twenty percent (20%) responded that they felt neutral on the statement, in that they neither agreed nor disagreed with it (See Figure 6). These results show that participants feel that they are being heard at the field office from their colleagues and managers.

Figure 6

Q3. My field office values my opinions and suggestions.

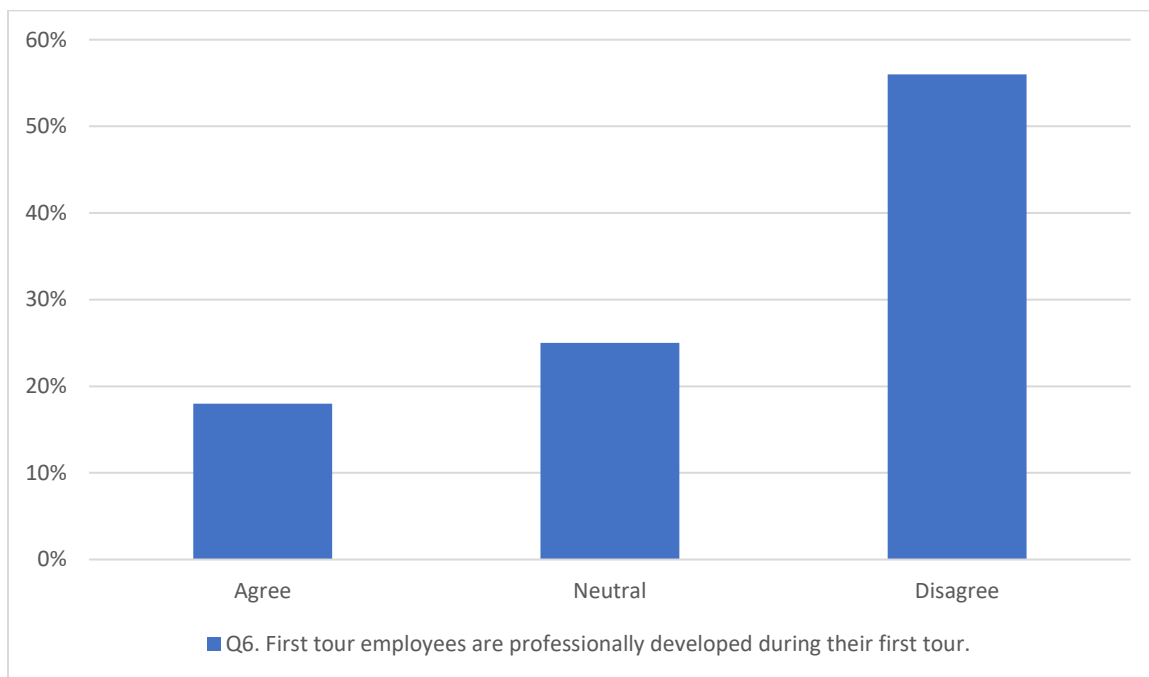


Question #6 additionally asked participants if they believe first-tour employees are professionally developed during their first two-year tour. Fifty six percent (56%) responded that they disagreed with the statement and 25% saying they felt neutral about the statement (See figure 7). That is over 80% of the survey respondents who do not agree with the statement that first-tour employees are professionally developed. This goes to show that participants

overwhelmingly feel that management does not do a good job of professionally developing new employees during their first-tour.

Figure 7

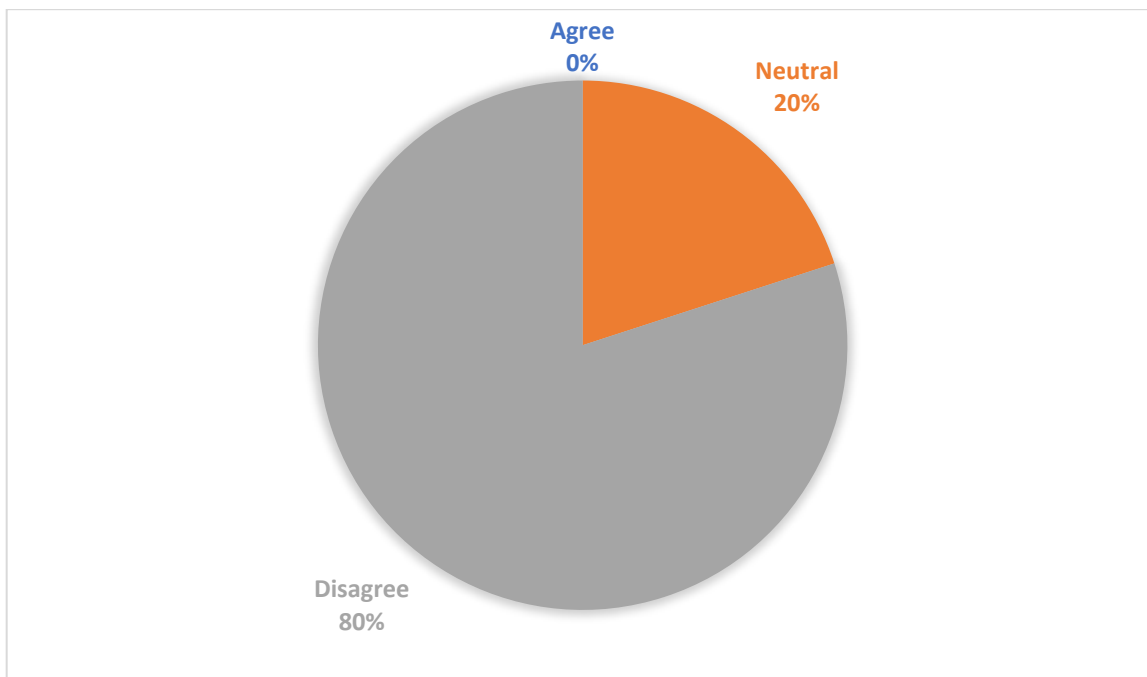
Q6. First-tour employees are professionally developed during their first-tour.



Question #10 asked survey participants if they agree that first-tour employees have a strong say in how their first-tour is managed. Again, an overwhelming 80% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement (See Figure 8). The other 20% were neutral on the statement, showing that no respondents believed they had any say in how their initial tour, or first two years in the office was managed.

Figure 8.

Q10. First-tour employees have a strong say in how their first-tour is managed.



Qualitative Results

The interviews conducted with current and former first-tour employees, as well as management, revealed a number of themes in addressing the management of new first-tour employees. Many interview participants had different experiences with their supervisors and management during their initial first two years. While many had positive experiences with their management, they knew of instances in the department of first-tour employees who were not managed well. "There are a lot of mid-tier employees that come back at unit supervisors, who have no idea how to do investigations and PRS. This frustrates new employees" (Interview respondent #2). Additionally, the managers that were interviewed discussed how they viewed retention of first-tour employees from the management side. "We try to ensure that employees get an overview of different aspects of the job. We give employees flexibility in a very inflexible

work environment (Interview respondent #3). This perspective on flexibility in the State Department is supported by research elsewhere. George Hovey, writing in *War on the Rocks*, discusses how flexibility affects State Department employees. “Foreign Service Officers often feel they are treated as interchangeable by the bureaucracy. Their abilities are underemployed, and their individual circumstances go ignored by the assignments process (Hovey, 2021). Many interviews discussed the policies and procedures in place levels above their initial management at field offices.

Findings

Data from the quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews shows that management of new employees during their first-tour is one of the bigger factors affecting retention. The results strongly support A3 in its connection with the larger problem statement. The quantitative data shows that none of the participants felt there was a professional development program in place for first-tour employees. Additionally, survey participants felt that there was no real control over how their first-tour was managed and what they did. This strong feeling of lack of control over their career path is a common theme that has been brought up in the literature review (Karagiannias, 2019) and during the qualitative interviews. Data from the qualitative interviews shows that flexibility in career is one of the biggest challenges to deal with from an employee and management perspective. While this is identified as an issue, management noted that some of these issues are institutional and not able to be changed at the field office level.

Summary

The data analyzed from current, former and management level supervisors in the State Department has helped better identify themes in retention issues for first-tour employees at the State Department. The qualitative and quantitative data from surveys and interviews looked at

retention themes through the lens of the three assumptions about hiring, training, and management of first-tour employees.

The data from surveys and interviews, when analyzed, showed that while the hiring process was seen as problematic, it was not the strongest cause for of retention issues for first-tour employees. The surveys were able to show that most respondents planned to spend their whole career in the State Department, showing that hiring has identified those with a strong desire to serve in the department. The second assumption, concerning training, was more strongly correlated with retention issues. Specially, the length of the training and hardship it put on those with families was seen as a factor in retention problems. Additionally, the training that is provided is seen as inadequate for first-tour employees to be successfully prepared for the pace and lifestyle of a first-tour employee.

Lastly, the third assumption, management of first-tour employees, was the strongest in relation to retention issues. The survey respondents answered overwhelmingly that the lack of control over their first-tours was a factor in retention. Additionally, the survey respondent overwhelming stated that they did not think the department was doing a good enough job at professionally developing first-tour employees during their initial tours at the field office. Lastly, interview respondents discussed how bad management can sap the morale and motivation of first-tour employees. While both employees and supervisors noted that they understood the challenges in managing first-tour employees, some of the changes necessary to fix issues can only be addressed at much higher levels in the department.

Chapter 5: Conclusions, Recommendations, and Areas of Further Research

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to understand the drivers of why first-tour employees leave the State Department and the reasons why changes can be made in order to get first-tour employees to stay. By studying why employees leave after years of time and effort spent to get into the State Department, we can better understand the drivers of why new employees leave, find solutions to those problems, and recommend incentives for getting new employees to stay. The main question for my research paper is: How can the State Department better hire, train, and retain first-tour employees at the field office? The research attempted to answer the following sub-questions:

1. Is there a retention issue for first-tour employees in the State Department?
2. What are the main drivers of first-tour employees leaving the State Department?
3. How can the State Department HR and Management better change to address retention issues?

The research evaluated retention issues from former, current, and management employees of the State Department. The surveyed employees and interview participants provided their opinions and input on how the State Department was handling retention and specially their opinions on hiring, initial training, and management during new employees first-tour. All surveys and interview data contributed to the research's theory of change and three assumptions. The data provided challenged the assumptions in assumption one (1) but provided enough support to successfully back up assumption two (2) and three (3).

Conclusions

The theory of change for this research study is: IF the State Department better understand the drivers of why new employees leave during their first tour at the field office:

Assumption 1 (A1) If the State Department better understood the drivers of why new employees leave during their first-tour at the field office, then hiring could better identify candidates who are better suited for the unique work and department lifestyle.

Conclusion: The assumption in A1 was challenged by the survey participants and interviews. Survey participants responded with 64% agreeing that the hiring process leads to retention issues. However, when asked about whether new employees planned to spend their entire career in the State Department, survey participants answered with over 75% agreeing. This shows that while the hiring process is problematic, the State Department still hires employees planning to spend a full career with the State Department refuting the aspects of A1 that pointed to hiring as one of the main drivers of retention issues.

Assumption 2 (A2) If the State Department better understood the drivers of why new employees leave during their first-tour at the field office, then initial training could be better tailored to prepare new employees for life at their field office.

Conclusion: A2 was validated by the survey responses as well as interviews with key participants. Respondents to the surveys and interviews were equally mixed on whether new employees were prepared for their work as a first-tour employees. The long training pipeline was seen as a contributing factor to retention issues, especially when added into the extensive hiring process as well. In addition to the hard skills learned in training, survey and interview respondents believed that training did not prepare new employees for the unique lifestyle of being a first-tour employee and the amount of travel it entails. The State Department does not

adequately use the time during the lengthy training pipeline to adequately prepare new employees to be successful at the field office, leading to retention issues in line with A2.

Assumption 3 (A3) If the State Department better understands the drivers of why new employees leave during their first-tour at the field office, then supervisors at the field offices would be better prepared and trained in how to manage first tour employees.

Conclusion: The surveys and interviews supported A3, in that management plays a huge role in first-tour employees' retention in the State Department. While respondents felt that they were contributing and being heard by their field offices, they overwhelmingly believed that they were not being adequately professionally developed. Additionally, the survey respondents felt that employees lack of control over their first assignment led to retention issues during their first two years. Interview respondents reinforced this data, providing additional comments on the inflexibility of new employees' first-tour in the field offices. The current method of managing first-tour employees is not sustainable and continues to contribute to retention issues, supporting A3.

Recommendation 1:

The State Department needs to invest in a better pipeline for hiring candidates into the federal government. A lateral entry program is already in the works for this year, as the *Federal Times* reports, "In an effort to build opportunities for seasoned professionals looking to join the State Department, officials unveiled a pilot program to recruit 35 future diplomats who may be looking to make a mid-career switch." (Weisner, 2023) Onboarding pipelines are an efficient and effective way to cut down on bureaucratic tape and slow processes. One such pipeline is the one from the military to the State Department. The State Department is composed of almost 20% veterans (White, 2022). Veterans are a natural fit for service in the State Department as they are

already familiar with the government lifestyle, benefits, and can adjust to constantly moving every couple of years in the State Department. In addition, members of the military already have security and medical clearances, helping to cut down on the time it takes to onboard new applicants. The military already has a number of transition pipelines to private sector placements, however there is no specific military-to-State Department pipeline program. To overcome this timing issue, the State Department should take advantage of the successful Hiring Our Heroes (HoH) Fellowship program. The HoH Fellowship allows transitioning active-duty service members to spend their final 90 days on active duty working for a company and receiving on-the-job training and firsthand experience in the industry that they are trying to join. The State Department should take advantage of this program and time before service members leave the military to provide internships and work programs. This would help smooth the transition from military to federal government and provide the State Department with a pool of diverse candidates from across the different military branches and locations.

Recommendation 2:

The State Department should extend first-tours for new employees at the field office from two years to three years. After a lengthy hiring and training pipeline, participants in the research interviews and surveys find that the lack of stability is a major contributing factor to new employees leaving for other opportunities. First-tour employees spend two years at a field office trying to master multiple new skills and competencies. Being in this new environment as well as all of frequent travel, adds to the stressors of being a first-tour employee. Adding a year to new employees' first-tour would help ensure that new employees can hone their skills at the field office as well as provide some stability in their personal lives as well. Providing an extra year

allows new employees to address the uncertainties of moving around constantly and gives them a successful opportunity to get an overview of different aspects of their new job.

Recommendation 3:

The State Department needs to implement a more structured professional development program (PDP) for first-tour employees. “To show people there is a future for them at the department, training to advance them is the best way” (Bubl , 2021). Results from the interviews and surveys all pointed to issues over the lack of professional development provided by the department and field offices. Providing a structured PDP for new employees during their first tour would allow new employees to feel better prepared for their work in the field office. A PDP would also allow for new employees to be able to provide some input into how they would like their first tour to evolve as well. Giving new employees a say in their development as part of the PDP will help alleviate the concerns that first-tour employees are not getting a say in how their first-tour is managed. An option for a successful PDP can be taken from another federal agency or even adopted from the military.

Table 1: SMART Criteria for Each Recommendation

	Recommendation 1	Recommendation 2	Recommendation 3
Specific	Implement the Military to State Department pipeline through opportunities in Hiring Our Heroes (HOH).	Extend first-tours for new employees at their field office from two years to three-years.	Create or adopt a more structured professional development program.

Measurable	Partner with military bases located near the eight (8) first tour field offices to provide opportunities for new fellowships.	Extend first-tours from the mandated two-years to provide an option of extending for a third year.	Solicit feedback from new employees and managers on the implementation of a professional development program.
Achievable	Partnership between the State Department and the military fellowship program at HoH to ensure implementation.	There is historical precedence for this application, as it was done previously before the Entry Level Specialist Bidding (ELSPEC).	Utilize structured programs from the military and other federal agencies to provide a template for a successful program.
Relevant	Supports Assumption 1 (A1) of this research.	Supports Assumption 2 (A2) of this research.	Supports Assumption 3 (A3) of this research.
Time-bound	Establish a pilot program for a case study within the next 12 months following the implantation of	Establish a study to identify the costs and benefits of extending new employees' first tour within the next 18 months.	Within 18 months, begin testing the new leadership development program at the field offices.

	the lateral entry program.		
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Areas of Further Research

The State Department has undergone reforms before, starting with the Rogers Act in 1923. The State Department faces many of the same issues it did a century ago that the Rogers Act tried to combat, “It sought to reduce political appointees, create fair standards for advancement, and structure the Foreign Service for flexible staffing.” (Brown-Heidenreich, 2023) While advances have been made in many different areas of working at the State Department, recruiting and retention have been common themes into issues that continue to this day. The State Department has recently rolled out a new “Retention Unit”, that will “look for avenues to convince employees to have long-term careers at State.” (Katz, 2023) Studying the effects of how a new retention unit will address many of the issues currently affecting the State Department’s recruiting and retention will be a topic for further investigation. Having a separate retention unit, not will help separate specific retention issues from more overall human resource department problems. Studying the effect of this new organization will show how retention can play just as large as a factor in personnel management as recruiting.

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Appendix A: Gantt Chart

Gantt Chart (Milby)								
Activity	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 7.5
Submit Surveys								
Analyze results								
Conduct Interviews								
Start Research paper								
Review and analyse trends								
Further Literature Review								
Refine Paper and Presentation								
Submit Paper and Presentation								

Appendix B: Survey Questions:

Questions for surveys to first tour and former first tour employees.

Qualitative:

#	Core Questions	Follow-up Questions
1	What made you seek a position in the State Department?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What were your expectations of the work / life balance? • Were you in the Federal Govt/Military beforehand? • How would you describe the hiring/training process?
2	What made you considering leaving the State Department?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you left during your first tour, what were your reasons for leaving? • If you could have stayed and served longer, would that have affected your decision to stay? • What reasons would make you less likely to leave the State Department?
3	If you considered leaving, but decided to stay, what were the reasons you did so?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did you weight the pros/cons of staying in the job? • What are some of the biggest pros/cons of the job?
4	Do you feel that you were trained and prepared for your work as a first tour employee?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are some of the key elements to create cohesive teams? • How well did you feel that you were professionally developed at your first office?
5	What would you recommend to the top leadership of State Department about first tour retention?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Would you recommend any changes in the hiring practice? • Would you recommend changes to the training pipeline? • Would you recommend any changes in the management of new employees?

Quantative (Likert Scale):**Gender:** Male / Female**Age:** Please select the one that best describes you: 30 and below 30-40 40-50 50-60 60 and above**Race:** Please select the one that best describes you. American Indian or Alaska Native Asian Blank or African American Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander White**Ethnicity:** Please select the one that best describes you. Hispanic or Latino Non-Hispanic or Latino**Education:** Select the one that best describes you. Undergraduate Graduate Postgraduate**Number of Years at State Department:** Select the one that applies to you. 03 or below (First Tour)

___ 03-05 (Second Tour)

___ 11-15 (Mid-level)

___ 16-20 (Senior)

___ 21 and above

Position:

___ Non-Supervisory

___ Supervisor

___ Other

Nature of the position: ___ Part-time ___ Full-time

Professional inputs

1. Yes or No questions.

Are you a first tour employee? Yes / No

Did you leave as a first tour employee Yes / No

I have an influential role in my field office Yes / No

My field office values my opinions and suggestions Yes / No

2. Likert's scale questions.

1: strongly disagree 2: disagree 3: neutral 4: agree 5: strongly agree

Please check the appropriate number that reflects your team, teammates, and organizational teams.

Statements	1	2	3	4	5
The State Department has a first tour retention problem					
First tour employees have a good work/life balance					
First tour employees are satisfied with their first assignments					
First tour employees are professionally developed during their first assignments					

First tour employees are trained and prepared for work in their first tour					
First tour employees consider staying for a full career with the State Department					
The State Department provides excellent benefits					
First-tour employees have a strong say in how their first tour is managed.					
The State Department hiring process is too long					
The State Department training pipeline is too long					
First and Second tours in the State Department should be longer					