



### **Building a Foundation for Continuous Improvement: Lessons from a Marine Corps Command**

The Marine Corp Network Operations and Security Command (MCNOSC) provides a vital service in protecting Marine Corps information systems. Among other functions, the command protects the enterprise system that supports deployed tactical networks, provides access to Defense Information Systems Agency (DISA) networks, and delivers IT and Internet services for Marines around the world.

The skills of the network administrators that operate the MCNOSC are an essential driver of the organization's performance. Unfortunately, identifying and tracking those skills has never been easy. While in his role as training officer for MCNOSC, Lieutenant Colonel Ken Beutel recognized the challenges of managing skills across a diverse IT organization.

"We needed a way to define jobs and measure performance capability in a way that was relevant to all of the employees, and to our superiors," he explains. "We needed to identify the critical skills for each job. And we needed to give employees and contractors a means of measuring, improving or acquiring skills."

"I didn't expect a single resource to address all of these needs," says Beutel. "Initially, we just wanted to rationalize job roles so that everyone understood exactly what was expected of them. That's what we sought. What we got was a much more effective learning capability—all through an online approach to skills measurement."

#### **Pre-defined Skills Accelerate Job-role Definition**

Of the 220 personnel in MCNOSC, about 80 are Marines and a further 18 are government employees. The rest are civilian contractors from a variety of companies and with contract-unique labor categories. "It was very difficult to define training requirements and proficiency expectations. One government employee may be classified as IT 2210 (Network Services)," says Beutel. "Another employee may come from a corporation in a 'security analyst' job role. Next to that person, you might have a Marine staff sergeant with a Military Occupational Specialty of 0689. How do you verify their qualifications? What are their competencies? Where are the opportunities for personal growth? These are the types of questions we needed to answer."

The idea of creating detailed skills requirements for job definitions is not new, particularly in the structure of the military organization. "Historically," according to Beutel, "it has taken a long time to build and implement a set of criteria that is workable for all involved in the command. Generally, there is a wide divergence on what should be the standard, not only within the Marine Corps, but also within other services' contractors as well. We were sensitive to that. After Brainbench guided us through an initial global job task analysis, we decided to use the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) IT-2210 series as a schema."

For MCNOSC, the adoption of an online skills measurement approach solved many skills definition issues up front. The system, implemented by skills measurement provider Brainbench, draws from a library of more than 450 established, predefined skills, supported by assessments that employees can take to measure their proficiencies. Drawing from that library, MCNOSC decision-makers and Brainbench experts were able to efficiently create sets of skills that applied to key competencies.

#### **Job Role Skills Requirements Accommodate Government and Civilian Employees**

Working with established skills definitions and with subject experts, MCNOSC developed a skills repertoire for 10 major job roles. Within each of those job roles, skills fell into entry, intermediate, and advanced categories. Finally, each job also entailed a corresponding management-level job role, with associated skills requirements.



Instead of trying to map every IT role that a government civilian could find themselves in, as found in the OPM IT2210 series, skills requirements were tailored to meet the specific needs of the MCNOSC. According to Beutel, “we defined our specific skills requirements with the knowledge that this skills measurement system would be extensible to other government and civilian organizations.”

“Considering the number of variables we had to deal with, defining job skills was a smooth process, because we had the definitions to draw upon,” says Beutel. “What we achieved with this modular approach to job task analysis was a system that accommodated professionals of all backgrounds while providing a detailed set of skills milestones for career advancement.”

### **Objective Skills Data Improve Training Assignments**

The online assessment system provided a unique opportunity to manage training for MCNOSC by eliminating unnecessary training and reallocating resources to provide more urgently needed education. As a training officer, Beutel sought an objective tool for identifying training needs, and just as importantly, for providing the assessment scores to support training requests.”

The MCNOSC skills measurement system delivers two advantages for trainers. First, it helps to identify staff members who already have the level of learning they need to use a required skill. As a result, people who don’t need training won’t be required to take it. Secondly, it helps to identify skills deficiencies and ensure that the people who need skills improvement receive the training they need.

“In the military, every time we field a new capability, we assess whether a job task analysis is necessary to ensure training is aligned to it,” says Beutel. “The online test bridges the gap between job requirements and training. We need the scores that come from those tests. We realize that the training dollar is money well spent. We won’t spend less, but we’ll spend better.”

### **Online System “Decouples” Assessments from Training Events**

From skills metrics and detailed competency definitions to continuous training support, online skills measurement is bringing about important benefits for MCNOSC. “But that is only part of the picture,” says Beutel. “The real benefit comes through human nature. People take an assessment and they want to improve, and now they can take an assessment anytime.”

“We’ve always had tests,” says Beutel. “They could be pre-assignment tests, or tests associated with training events. Whatever the event, the test was always connected with something. Suddenly, assessments were decoupled from the education and training process. Now you can find out exactly what you know, or don’t know, about your job skills at any time—not just at the end of a training program or in a job interview. That’s powerful.”

The ability to measure skills at anytime provides an unprecedented level of educational motivation for MCNOSC employees. “Our people have always been motivated, but the Brainbench tests are purposefully difficult,” says Beutel. “When people take them, they want to improve. It reinforces the notion that there is a continuous learning process, and it is a process that will provide a path of progress for every member of the MCNOSC team, regardless of background.

### **Forward-Looking Metrics Support Progress for a “Learning Organization”**

While Beutel was since selected for a different assignment within the Marine Corps organization (a C4 Training and Education Center of Excellence), he continues his involvement with MCNOSC’s unique program, tracking the progress of the skills initiative. “The MCNOSC is a learning organization,” he explains, “and learning drives performance.”

“We have always been able to capture performance data, just as any company does. We can map that data to products and services and come to valuation that way. But most of that data is only a rear-view mirror. It shows how we’ve done in the past, but it doesn’t show what we’re able to do today, or how we’re prepared for tomorrow.

“The scores of our employee skills assessments are different,” he explains. “They reflect our current ability to meet our present needs, and as a career development goal-setting tool, they give us specific data about our ability to meet future needs. If you want to leave the world of anecdotes and opinions about the capabilities of your work force, it’s the only way to go.”