

Building the U.S. Army of the Future: Insights from Kate Kelley, Chief Human Capital Officer, Army Futures Command

By Michael J. Keegan



The creation of the U.S. Army Futures Command (AFC) marks one of the most significant Army reorganization efforts since 1973. Unlike its peer commands, which focus on today's readiness, AFC focuses specifically on forging future readiness. Its stated mission is to make sure soldiers

have what they need, before they need it, to protect tomorrow *today*.

According to the AFC's first Commanding General Mike Murray, "The AFC's incredible workforce is the foundation of our success." In its efforts to execute on the Army People Strategy, AFC has enhanced its use of Direct-Hire Authority to get the right talent hired faster. It has implemented several first-of-their-kind technology talent initiatives, establishing the first-ever Soldier-led Software Factory in Austin, Texas, and an artificial intelligence degree program for soldiers and civil servants in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

"AFC is charged with doing what some may consider impossible, and that is predicting the future," explains Kate Kelley, chief human capital officer at the AFC. There are no guarantees and likely many hits-and-misses when attempting to anticipate the future. But "the U.S. Army has a very honest assessment of itself and established [AFC] to do what it needs to do to be prepared for that future fight," she adds.

Kate joined me on *The Business of Government Hour* to discuss the AFC human capital strategy, its efforts to attract, reskill, and retain the right talent, and ways it is working to transform organizational culture. The following is an edited excerpt of our discussion, complemented with updated and additional research.

What are your specific duties and responsibilities as chief human capital officer of the Army Futures Command?

 First, my title is unusual in the Army context, however it is a very typical title and role within the private sector and in many federal government agencies. This was on purpose as part of AFC's continuing effort to challenge legacy thinking. My responsibilities are broad, spanning traditional human capital functions—such as hiring, compensation, managing, career-building—to being charged with thinking about and integrating modern innovative human capital practices into the Army.

I think of my role as trying to challenge the enterprise to get away from legacy human capital systems. My role is also to move the AFC as far as we can legally within the federal government toward practices that are more agile, modern, and more effective in attracting, keeping, and managing talent.



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What are some of the key challenges facing you in your role?

 One of the prevalent challenges we face is operating within the constraints of some very antiquated legacy systems that mark the current federal workforce hiring environment. The Army is doing a wonderful job of recognizing that its talent management must evolve for both its military and civilian staff. My challenge is how do you do that within the confines of the general schedule for federal employees, competition, and fair practice.

It has also been quite challenging, and somewhat surprising, in standing up this command over the past three years. AFC established this new command not on an Army installation but in an office building in downtown Austin, Texas, which is a high-cost urban setting. While establishing headquarters, we also had to merge the existing scientific and research communities across the Army, along with its analysis and data components and concept writers—all merging to be part of this new entity called Army Futures Command. It was a complex, difficult, and, quite frankly, lengthy process of simultaneously merging and acquitting existing entities, while also creating a startup in Austin all at once.

What are you doing to discover untapped talent?

 There is a prevalent narrative that the federal government must find ways to bring needed talent in information technology, network architecture, software, and data analytics, from the private sector. By canvassing our current workforce, we found that we had this talent in our ranks. When we brought them into the Army, we did not have data specific career models. We did not have software design career models. Instead, we assessed this talent into the existing legacy career models, even though this talent can do things like DevSecOps or big data analytics.

Today, we are pulling this talent from existing career models, creating an environment for those individuals with the skills

and interest in coding or software development to apply them in the Army. The exciting challenge for us is building new career models for talent that is being pulled from established career paths. The misconception has been that we need to go looking for this talent outside of the Army, when, a lot of it is exists in the Army family today. We are currently exploring options within the larger Army to expand career pathing for these participants so we can grow an internal capacity that attracts more of this talent and retains Army capabilities

Would you tell us more about the Army Futures Command Software Factory?

 This is our incubator and accelerator to improve digital competency. We create teams of individuals—cohorts—who have discreet roles on software development product teams that understand how to build, how to code, and how to develop viable applications that solve Army problems. These teams also have the requisite platform engineer and support structures to deploy these new tools in a secure way, onto networks. This is a very interesting model informed by a couple of learning campaigns we did.



One of those campaigns focused on learning how the private sector does application and software development. We've leveraged the plethora of software companies that are in Austin and elsewhere. We have also consulted existing U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) assets such as the U.S. Air Force's Kessel Run Experimentation Lab, the Defense Innovation Unit, and a host of other entities across the DoD.

We visited and worked with them to build the model here at AFC. We are asking and trying to solve crucial questions: How can we impact our generating force and solve problems at the garrison level? Can we put these software development teams in a future deployed environment where they are able to do agile software development, diagnose, and provide solutions on the spot that can help a commander on the ground make better and faster decisions? The experiment is not only to create the talent to build these teams, but also to determine how to employ them across the Army.



How important is it to change culture?

 *Fail early, fail often* seems to describe innovation cultures, especially in the private sector. It runs absolutely counter to our Army culture, which is in many ways: *do not fail ever, and make sure you deliver*. We try to create new ways of operating to anticipate the future needs of our soldiers. It is impossible to get this right 100 percent the first time. AFC is working towards that culture shift where it is okay for one of our cohorts to come up with two or three ideas, and only one of which turns out to be viable. The point is, the Army identifies a viable solution even if two of three ideas fail. If we can put a viable idea into production and scale accordingly to support the Army, that is a win.

As a command, we need to know when to challenge the status quo, and at what level and degree to do so. This balancing act keeps AFC from just becoming a thorn in the side of the larger Army. When you are trying to get people to do things differently, to think differently, to shift their mindset, every small conversation becomes significant. Transforming how things are done never happens overnight.

To what extent is the Army enterprise moving to a hybrid work model—and how important is it to strike the right balance of work productivity, work location, and flexibility?

Regarding hybrid work models, the most important thing we can do is strike a balance that enables flexibility for the workforce but also gets the mission done. Prior to COVID-19, it is safe to say that we were less flexible about allowing distributed work environments. Telework has been available by permission. The COVID environment has challenged us to test some assumptions and assess whether parts of our workforce and their jobs can effectively be done in a distributed way.

Right now, we are piloting for Army Futures Command a strategy that allows for telework and is flexible about when and to what degree. It also seeks to create work environments where teams can come together, collaborate, and then go back into those distributed work patterns to produce the next round of the product. It's an exciting time, but the effort continues to evolve to ensure that we find the right balance. Important, we recognize that being more flexible on work location improves our chances of getting a better pool of candidates interested in working in Army Futures Command.



How are you working to make the U.S. Army an employer of choice?

It is important for us to communicate how much the Army has to offer. When people think of the Army, they may envision the requisite infantry soldier. We are that and much more. At AFC, we hire scientists, engineers, information specialists, and data scientists, to name a handful of professions.

We want to be an employer of choice. We have existing partnerships with universities across the country. These partnerships provide us with student interns who work in our labs during the summer alongside our scientists and researchers, focusing on real problems. The experience exposes these interns to all the Army has to offer, in terms of employment opportunities. It also builds a pipeline of relationships that make it easier to recruit and attract the right person, with the right skill, for the right job—and in a timelier manner.

Using direct-hire authority—or our science and technology lab authorities—we can offer a job to that engineering graduate who may have also interned at our lab. Having these authorities enables us to compete for talent and shrinks the time for getting the right candidate on board.

What are the characteristics of an effective leader? What leadership principles guide your efforts and how you lead?

Leaders must be authentic. You must present your real self to your teams, colleagues, and across your organizations. Authenticity is a crucial characteristic, especially when you are engaged in difficult work. People you lead must believe in you—but also in your vision and mission. Leaders must cultivate credibility. This is garnered not simply from technical expertise, but more from a willingness to do the hard work and to put in the effort yourself.

I think good, effective leaders can be both authentic and credible if they take the time to do that. Leaders must also avoid micromanaging. You want to empower your team, so they can achieve the vision you have set forth.

To learn more about the U.S. Army Futures Command, go to armyfuturescommand.com/.

To hear the interviews from *The Business of Government Hour*, go to businessofgovernment.org/interviews.

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