

Downsizing the United States Air Force Security Forces: A Phenomenological Investigation

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Abstract

The United States Air Force has downsized an average of 10,000 personnel each year from 1990 to 2010. Despite this the mission remains the same, which causes an increase in workload to the remaining airmen. The results can be used by all leadership facing budgetary constraints and technology upgrades.

Problem

An average downsizing of 10,000 active duty personnel each year occurred in the USAF from 1990 to 2010. Furthermore, the USAF's leadership downsized the number of active duty military members from 535,233 to 331,700 within two decades, between 1990 and 2010. It is critical for an organization's leaders to assess the effects of downsizing to avoid the adverse effects of reducing personnel. Leaders and managers need to mitigate this problem because an incorrectly downsized organization can experience difficulty meeting its objectives, while the loss of experienced employees can compromise an organization's capabilities.

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the effects of the USAF's downsizing efforts from 1980 to 2013 through the lived experiences of USAF Security Forces members. The phenomenological design, through semistructured interviews, explored the lived experiences of those who have survived the USAF's downsizing efforts, have held a supervisory position, and retired in the last 10 years from the USAF Security Forces career field.

Research Questions

This qualitative phenomenological study explored how the USAF Security Forces career field's job expertise, skill level, and operations have changed between 1980 and 2013 in the midst of the USAF's downsizing efforts. I captured the effects of downsizing on the USAF Security Forces career field through the lived experiences of 24 USAF Security Forces members who have survived the USAF downsizing efforts and have retired in the last 10 years. I directed the questions toward significant milestones in the participants' careers, including deployments, times of change, and introduction of new technology. The main research question was: What are the effects of USAF downsizing efforts on the Security Forces' career field?

Relevant Literature

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Kleykamp, M. (2010). Where did the soldiers go? The effects of military downsizing on college enrollment and employment. *Social Science Research*, 39, 477–490. doi:10.1016/j.ssresearch.2009.09.001

Sharp, T. (2012). Down payment: Defense guidance, 2013 defense budget and risks of sequestration. Center for a New American Security. Retrieved <http://www.cnas.org/publications>

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Data Analysis

For this study I utilized the Moustakas modified van Kaam data analysis and a manual data coding process to analyze the content of the information gathered from the interviews. The van Kaam data analysis approach is a qualitative phenomenological research process that allows the researcher to explore a phenomenon in-depth through the lived experiences of participants and helped identify and create coding schemes to analyze the collected information.

Procedures

In this study, I used semistructured interviews and researcher observations to gather data. I conducted semistructured interviews face-to-face or through video calling (Skype or Facetime). A qualitative data collection method provided the basis for determining the perceived effects of the USAF downsizing efforts from the perspective of Security Forces members. Separate interviews with participants allowed participants to respond free from the influence and opinions of others. To collect qualitative data that provides detailed and rich picture about opinions and attitudes of the respondents, I initiated in-depth interviews with the participants, and focused on their personal lived experiences with downsizing with the possible advantages and disadvantages. I employed a qualitative method and a phenomenological design, which provided the advantage of facilitating the collection and analysis of data from participants' responses, voice inflection, and body language. Moreover, for this study, I gathered observations on the participants' body language and voice inflections during the interview, the nonverbal cues given were relevant for interpreting a participant's lived experiences.

Findings

The goal in the study was to explore and capture the effects of the USAF's downsizing efforts on the Security Forces career field. During the downsizing process, participants noticed changes to workload, and because of the merger of the career field. Furthermore, downsizing resulted in lowered morale, increased work hours, loss of specialization, mindset change, accelerated promotion rate, increased responsibility, and dependence on technology. The findings indicated that these factors negatively affected the Security Forces career field specialization and increased the workforce's dependence on technology. Despite the increased reliance on technology, the participant pool noted the lack of standardized technology throughout the USAF and training to use technology was absent.

Social Change Implications

Civilian and military organizational leadership may benefit from this study because they may observe the cultural changes that happen when choosing to downsize or perform a merger.

Limitations

There were potential limitations to this study. For this study I did not randomly select participants, and the sample size of 24 participants could have been too small to be representative of the population. If the participant pool was too small to reach theme saturation, I would have interviewed additional retirees. Due to time and budgetary restraints, such as travel limitation, the participants were all representative of the same Air Force Major Command region. Participants' answers provided limited information in qualitative research. To avoid this limitation, predetermined questions guided me as the researcher to avoid losing track of what information to obtain from the participant. Open-ended questions allowed for flexibility and assured semistructured interviews met the objective of exploring and capturing the effects of downsizing on the USAF Security Forces career field, with the focus between 1980 and 2013. Qualitative research is more vulnerable to research bias when compared to quantitative research, especially with the use of questionnaires or interviews. I minimized, if not eliminated, bias by preparing for all interviews. To avoid affecting the answers of the participants, the study contained clearly-worded, neutral questions, and avoided leading or suggestive lines of questioning.

Conclusions

I used a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of retired USAF Security Forces personnel concerning downsizing. This study is significant because it involves the USAF's three core competencies; (a) developing airmen, (b) technology to war fighting, and (c) integrating operations. None of these competencies can be achieved without the correct number of adequately trained Security Forces. Leaders should take the time to assess and mitigate all the factors affected by downsizing. Gathered data indicated that downsizing negatively affected mentorship and leadership, and that there is an increased dependency on technology due to downsizing efforts.

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