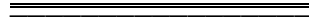


**The Bill Blackwood  
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**Time Limits on Assignments in Law Enforcement**



**A Leadership White Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
Required for Graduation from the  
Leadership Command College**



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## **ABSTRACT**

Law enforcement agencies face major issues with retention and job satisfaction, which can morph into staffing shortages, burnout, lack of opportunities to move, little or no development within the department, unethical behavior, and stagnation. Due to how long it takes to attract, hire, train, and get a fully functioning officer, this is a serious concern for all agencies. Time limits on all assignments will impact job diversity, leadership and officer development, job satisfaction, retention rates, burnout, movement opportunities, retention of skills and knowledge within the agency, and morale overall.

Time limits can be introduced through a systematic approach of using job rotation or succession planning. These processes allow for officers and supervisors to gain new perspectives, experience, and a further developed sense of the big picture. As a result of this same process, time limits also addresses those officers and supervisors who need a change to bring them back from the brink of burnout, stagnation, unethical behavior, and low morale. It is important to note that the time limits on assignments and positions is not limited to line level officers but can be utilized at all levels of the agency.

Ultimately, all agencies must balance the needs of their individual agencies against the needs of their employees. Agencies cannot function efficiently without retaining and developing their employees. No specific limits will be suggested, but it is the concept that should be embraced.

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## INTRODUCTION

Law enforcement agencies everywhere struggle continuously with retention rates and job satisfaction for their sworn employees. This can lead to shortages in staffing and can continue to compound the issue due to the length of time it takes to hire, train, and put forth a fully functioning base line officer. Some of the major issues agencies face are burnout, unethical behavior, limited opportunities for movement, and lack of development for their officers. There are several ways to tackle these issues and this paper will seek to combine and simplify methods into a more basic concept. As always, strong, ethical leadership can direct an agency and set the standards by which they operate daily and will be imperative to move forward. This includes facing issues head on and being proactive instead of reactive.

Law enforcement agencies should first understand that while they are unique in their culture they are still ultimately a business. They operate on a budget and have assets (employees) that need to be developed and retained. The more turnover a department faces, the more costly it is to continue operating in this manner. There are many different solutions and ideas that overlap but ultimately support time limits on assignments. Job rotation, succession planning, job shadowing, temporary assignments, and experience driven leadership development are all suggested strategies for developing future leaders and officers while increasing job satisfaction. All of these concepts have in common one main theme: time limits. Doing the same job day in and day out only hones a specific set of skills and can lead to complacency and even leave a person susceptible to unethical behavior. It can also leave gaps in

experience in an agency when someone who has done a specific job for years leaves with no prior plan in place to capture that knowledge.

While specialized assignments such as narcotics or detectives have been previously looked at individually as needing time limits, no one has looked at the overall benefits of time limits in all positions or assignments in a law enforcement agency. Line level officers that only work for one supervisor their entire career are susceptible to the good and bad traits they learn from their direct supervisor. If the supervisor is toxic, the employee will soon follow that route. Even if their supervisor is good, they should still be open to development under another perspective from a different supervisor. First line supervisors are also faced with the limits of only working for one supervisor. Command and executive levels of various agencies are not exempt from becoming stagnant or becoming burned out either.

Ultimately, however they choose to implement it, law enforcement agencies should place time limits on all positions or assignments from the bottom to the top of the organization. Time limits will allow for more job diversity, more leadership and officer development, more job satisfaction, higher retention rates, and less burnout. It will also allow for increased job movement or opportunities, potentially higher morale, and the assurance that skills and knowledge are passed on and not lost.

## **POSITION**

Time limits on positions provide for development of officers and future leaders (HR Focus, 2008). Employees that stay in one position or on one squad for too long are limited in their growth potential. Their views are narrowed by their lack of experience and are generally receiving their major influence from their direct supervisor.

Employees may not completely understand their role in the organization as it fits in with other divisions. This is why it is important for a mechanism to be put in place to allow for change. One way to implement time limits is through job rotation.

Job rotation is an organized process through which employees are moved between various positions in an organization over a set time period (Fiester, 2008) (Nalbantian & Guzzo, 2009). When an employee is faced with a time limit or a set period upon which they will be in a position before they must move, they are faced with change. Through this change, the employee will learn new ideas, new ways of approaching problems, and a new set of skills. Essentially, they will be expanding their knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSA) through diversity (Wilson, 2010). Once an officer has spent a sufficient amount of time in the new position and has gained these KSA's, they can rotate back to patrol or on to a new area. When this happens, the employee is now bringing the knowledge, skills, and abilities they gained through experience into their next position. This development of the employees also leads to increase in job satisfaction and an increase in retention rates (Brown, 2013).

This same process of job rotation can be applied to current and future leaders to help with development (Nalbantian & Guzzo, 2009) (HR Focus, 2008) (Hezlett, 2016). Leaders are generally more effective if they have a broader knowledge base gained through experience (Hezlett, 2016) (Bean, 2009). These employees also have a better grasp of the bigger picture and can help counter the "Us" versus "Them" mentality that generally prevails between different divisions. In addition to job rotation, succession planning can be implemented with time limits to also help develop leaders. Succession planning is a process through which KSA's are retained to facilitate smooth transitions

when people leave a position (Rowley, 2013). Having this plan in place effectively ensures that even if an employee in a key or critical position were to suddenly quit or be killed, the person would be missed but would be replaceable. Without this plan in place, operations would not continue to the same level of service and valuable knowledge would be lost (Rowley, 2013). Since this is only succession planning and not an actual replacement at the time the training is occurring, there will also be a time limit.

Combating stagnation and burnout is another reason that time limits need to be imposed on all positions in law enforcement. Stagnation occurs when employees are left in a position for too long where they continue to do the same job day in and day out with no immediate indication of change. Their KSA's are a direct reflection of the limited experience they have received. One possible outcome of being left in a position too long can be unethical behavior. This is problematic at all levels in an organization (Johnson, 2016). Stagnation can occur anywhere in an organization and leads to a decrease in job satisfaction and morale (HR Focus, 2008). Burnout is also an issue and is best defined as the lack of motivation due to stress or extended periods of frustration. Sometimes the lack of opportunity for growth or movement in an organization can lead to stagnation and burnout. Most agencies allow officers to move out of patrol when a position opens in another division. Once in that division, employees tend to stay in that position until they promote, retire, or die. It is rare that an officer will voluntarily return to patrol from a specialized assignment. Due to these factors, growth and opportunities in an organization can be limited (Bean, 2009).

Stagnation and burnout can be addressed through the process of job rotation as well as helping to prevent unethical behavior (Johnson, 2016) (Bean, 2009). Putting

time limits on assignments forces a change in a systematic way. It ensures that employees know ahead of time what opportunities are going to be available and allows them a process through which they can become rejuvenated through work diversity (HR Focus, 2008) (Cook, 2013). In addition to helping the officer moving into the new position, job rotation also helps the more senior employee who may have been stuck in a rut to rejuvenate as well (Wilson, 2010). This movement and growth opportunity directly impacts job satisfaction and retention rates in a positive manner (Nalbantian & Guzzo, 2009) (Fiester, 2008) (Wilson, 2010) (Brown, 2013).

## **COUNTER ARGUMENTS**

Opponents to time limits on positions frequently argue that movement is not cost effective (Cook, 2013). They argue that moving a specialized person out of a unit to allow someone else to come in creates more costs than it is worth. The idea is that when a person first comes to a unit, they are provided with the training and certifications needed to be successful in that position. All of this costs money for each person that is moved to a new position. Generally speaking, training and certification costs usually range under \$5000. While this is certainly true, they fail to take into account the fact that most officers in specialized positions need to continue training to stay up to date with current practices and may need to recertify in their field. This also costs money. The cost to train a new person is mitigated since the previous costs to train the first individual are not being lost (Cook, 2013). That training and experience they gained will be returned to patrol and their KSA's shared with newer employees.

Opponents to time limits should look at the costs associated with training new individuals as an investment in the people of the organization (Brown, 2013). In



addition, as officers gain job satisfaction through development opportunities and stagnation and burnout are relieved, they are more likely to stay in the organization (HR Focus, 2008). As retention rates rise, the costs to train current employees in new areas are more than offset with the savings the organization receives by not having to constantly hire new employees. The costs to hire and train new employees generally rises over \$20,000 depending on if they need to go to an academy and if they are paid a salary while going. According to Recruiting and Training Officer Zachary Martin of the College Station Police Department (personal communication, April 24, 2018), the starting salary for a cadet at College Station PD is \$23.84/hour. The academy lasts 20 weeks and the cost of the TEEEX Academy where College Station cadets attend is \$4,725. The total cost for sending one recruit to the academy is \$23,797. Additionally, the cost is mostly seen through the initial staff hours required to hire the individual, equipment they are issued for the academy, and any field training costs incurred till they are released on their own. These costs are incurred every time a non-certified officer is hired and sent to the academy, effectively increasing costs when retention is low.

Opponents of time limits also argue that this systematic approach to movement in the organization will substantially decrease productivity and increase workload (Fiester, 2008). The fear is that this process will increase the workload on the new unit the individual is moving to while they are being trained and that productivity will decrease since fewer people are doing the same job. The reverse is also applied to the employee leaving that position to return to patrol. There will be a learning curve as they adjust to any new technology or procedures that have changed since they were last on patrol. This would be especially true if too much mobility occurs through short tenures

in positions (Nalbantian & Guzzo, 2009). However, these concerns are challenged and addressed through preparation (Fiester, 2008). Having the support of the administration in this venture is key to the success of a smooth implementation for the program. With strong leaders preparing and effectively managing the process, the negative effects will be minimized. Employees can plan for the loss of an employee and the gain of a new one with a proper set of guidelines. Proper planning will also ensure that movement only occurs after the objectives of the movement have been met so that there is not too much movement. Generally speaking, rotations should be at least a minimum of a year in length (Fiester, 2008).

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Every law enforcement agency should implement time limits on all positions in the organization. A law enforcement agency should establish a policy by which time limits can be introduced into the department with a systematic approach. This approach needs to encompass time limits from the base line officer up to the top of the organization. The base line officer needs to be given the opportunity to move throughout the department and develop (Wilson, 2010). The movement can be as simple as moving from one squad to another to gain a different set of ideas and KSA's from a new supervisor. More extreme movement can come in the form of a rotation system that will move an officer from patrol into a specialized assignment. This would necessitate that an officer will have to come out of the specialized unit and return to patrol or move to a different assignment. It is possible that agencies can allocate a couple of positions that will be more short term in a specialized unit to allow for more movement from patrol while still retaining more senior officers in that specialized unit.

Movement within the specialized unit can also occur. For example, there could be time limits on detectives within their division. Detectives could rotate from property crimes to persons' crimes to further grow and develop while still staying inside the unit. How this process is implemented or in what way it is implemented will be up to the individual agencies. Smaller agencies may have more difficulty with this application just due to their size.

Aside from line officers moving laterally, supervisors also need to have movement. Having the same boss for long periods of time again gives you only the one perspective. Moving throughout the agency helps develop our leaders and allow them to establish relationships and think of the bigger picture (Nalbantian & Guzzo, 2009) (Hezlett, 2016). Leaders who have only been line officers are limited in their experience and have more issues than leaders who have gained KSA's through diversity in the department. Even executives in an agency should not be exempt from movement through time limits. If an executive has only ever been in charge of one bureau they may not be clear on the inner workings or abilities of another bureau. Movement at this level also creates a well-rounded executive who is better poised to take over any bureau as needed. Succession planning should also be remembered for critical positions in an organization to ensure that transitions are smooth as individuals leave an organization (Rowley, 2013).

A thorough implementation of time limits will also ensure that stagnation and burnout are addressed through movement. These two issues can occur at any level in a department and are not limited to line level officers. Stagnation and burnout lead to low morale and low job satisfaction which directly affect retention rates (Nalbantian &

Guzzo, 2009). They can also lead an officer to become susceptible to unethical behavior when they have been in a position for too long (Johnson, 2016) (Bean, 2009). These issues can be compounded when no process is in place to prevent officers from moving to a specialized position and never leaving until they die, retire, or promote. This only adds to the frustration employees feel when they see no opportunities for movement. When a program or policy is put in place that addresses time limits, officers will be able to look forward to growth opportunities and diversity in the workplace and can renew their perspective on the job (Wilson, 2010). Combatting stagnation and burnout is a positive outcome for the department and the community that is served by these officers (Fiester, 2008).

Although there are some opponents to time limits based on the costs associated with the systematic program, the argument has been answered effectively. The costs to train an employee in a new position is mostly mitigated by the raised retention rates through job satisfaction that the program brings to employees. The cost to replace an officer that has left a department far outweighs the costs to invest in and train a new officer to take over a new task (Cook, 2013).

Additionally, there are opponents to time limits who fear that productivity will be decreased substantially and workload increased for officers who must pick up the slack for the employee while they are learning the new job (Fiester, 2008). This is a concern both in the position a new employee is going to and in the position where a more experienced employee is returning to patrol after being gone for a period of time. The concerns are addressed through a strong leader who has set out a systematic approach

to the time limit process (Fiester, 2008). Leaders must ensure that the process is equitable and that movement does not occur too much (Nalbantian & Guzzo, 2009).

Ultimately, a balance must be struck between the needs of the department and the needs of the employee. Exact time limits in positions will not be suggested in this forum as it will be dependent on the position being discussed, the size of the agency, the employee's KSA's, and the purpose or objective behind the movement. Time limits on positions is a concept that can be carried out by various means and potentially achieve many positive outcomes for law enforcement. These positive outcomes are strongly dependent on clear communication and support from the leadership in an agency. Mobility through time limits is only one approach to combatting multiple issues facing law enforcement today and it should be used in conjunction with strong leadership and other approaches which address organizational and employee needs.

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