

Officer Career Planning as a Sustainable Defence Solution in a Changing Security Environment

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Abstract

This article analyzes the career planning model for officers in the Lithuanian Armed Forces as one of the key instruments to develop human capabilities and ensure military readiness. The purpose of the study is to assess how the interaction between vertical and horizontal career paths is defined in officer career planning documents and what impact this interaction has on the development of officers' competencies, leadership continuity, and institutional resilience of the defence system.

The study used a qualitative content analysis of normative and strategic documents. It was found that the vertical career of officers in the Lithuanian Armed Forces is regulated systematically and consistently: evaluation of officer service, professional military education, and individual career plans provide the foundation for planned development of leadership competencies. Meanwhile, the importance of horizontal career development is only highlighted fragmentarily in the documents, more often treated as a preparatory measure for vertical advancement or a form of compensatory rotation, rather than as an independent mechanism for strengthening the professional experience, specialized competencies and institutional flexibility of the officers.

The results of the study suggest that the limited integration of horizontal career paths into the career planning system can narrow the spectrum of officer competencies and reduce the ability of the defence system to adapt to changing security circumstances. The article substantiates the need to strengthen the value of horizontal career paths in the officer career model in order to ensure sustainable human capabilities, the resilience of military leadership, and more effective implementation of defence decisions in the context of national security.

KEY WORDS: officer career, career planning, vertical career, horizontal career, Lithuanian Armed Forces, National Defence System (KAS)

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1. Introduction

Modern armed forces operate in an environment where the quality of personnel, as well as their ability to learn and adapt, have become essential prerequisites for the effectiveness of a military organization. In the armed forces, career planning and professional development processes are neither neutral nor purely administrative: they take place within a statutory, hierarchical, and risk management organization where authority, decision-making power, and professional status are linked to military rank, duties, responsibility, discipline, loyalty, and strong professional socialization [1-4]. Therefore, career planning for officers cannot be viewed merely as a set of procedures for assignment, rotation, or promotion. It is a strategic human resource management process that aligns national defence needs, military organizational capacity, and individual officer professional development.

From an organizational perspective, career planning is one of the functions of organizational career management. It can be defined as a conscious and formalized process of planning professional development, which establishes the career goals of an employee, the methods to achieve them, possible directions for career progression, and aligns individual career needs with the organization's human resources requirements [5]. In contemporary career theory, a career is increasingly interpreted not as a stable and strictly linear ascent within the organizational hierarchy, but as a dynamic sequence of work, learning, and job transitions in which both vertical and horizontal career movements become significant [6]. Research indicates [6-10] that changes in organizational structures and the work environment reduce the opportunities for purely vertical advancement; consequently, career success is increasingly associated with horizontal transitions, changes in roles, a diversity of experiences and the accumulation of resources throughout the entire period of professional development. Therefore, career planning is not only an individual's decision regarding their professional future; it is also the organization's responsibility to create a career development system that, through training, career information provision, a fair promotion system and competency development, would help the employee grow while ensuring that the organization's needs are met [5, 11].

In statutory organizations, especially the military, the need for career planning is more pronounced than in many civilian organizations, since the professional development of an officer takes place within a strictly regulated hierarchical system where authority is linked to military rank, roles are clearly defined, and organizational activities are based on subordination, discipline, loyalty, and the logic of risk control [2]. In such organizations, every assignment, rotation, stage of professional military education, or promotion is significant not only for the career of an individual officer but also for the military's ability to ensure leadership continuity, maintain the necessary competencies, and strengthen military capability [12]. Therefore, career planning for officers must encompass not only vertical advancement to higher positions or ranks, but also accumulation of horizontal experience: service in staff positions, leadership roles, professional military education, international missions, specialization, rotation, and activities in various organizational and multinational contexts. Such experiences in an officer's career are important because they help to foster broader professional, organizational, and strategic readiness for future duties, particularly within the NATO and intercultural cooperation environments [13].

The career context of Lithuanian officers and soldiers has been scientifically studied in the following aspects: shortcomings in the management of the career of the officer within the national defense system and opportunities for improvement [14], career opportunities for female soldiers and barriers to horizontal and vertical career advancement [15], as well as the development of officer training and professional development in the Lithuanian Armed Forces [16]. However, existing studies mostly analyze individual aspects of career management, legal regulation, professional training or equal opportunities, rather than how the logic of an officer's career is systematically constructed in the Lithuanian Armed Forces career planning documents and how vertical advancement, horizontal experiences, rotation, specialization, professional military education, and international experience are constructed. Therefore, the objective of this article is to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of career planning implied by the interaction of vertical and horizontal careers as enshrined in the officer career planning documents of the Lithuanian Armed Forces.

2. The Theoretical Background

Career planning within an organization is understood as a deliberate and formalized process of anticipating professional development, which defines an employee's career goals, possible ways to achieve them, career progression directions, and alignment of the needs of the employee and the organization [5, 7]. This concept allows a career to be viewed not only as an individual's personal choice, but also as the result of organizational career management, as the organization shapes the conditions for professional growth of an employee through career policy, training, evaluation, promotion, transfer, and feedback [5, 39]. The essence of career planning is not only to predict when an employee may be promoted, but also to determine what experiences, competencies, and learning stages they need to be able to perform future duties effectively.

In contemporary career theory, a career is increasingly rarely interpreted as a purely linear ascent within the organizational hierarchy. It is understood as a sequence of work, learning, job transitions, and professional experiences that can develop in a vertical, horizontal, or mixed direction [6]. A review of career research shows that changes in duties or professional roles involve not only formal movement between positions but also changes in decision-making, adaptation, professional relationships, and identity [17]. Recent research on careers and internal mobility concretizes this concept within organizations, showing that career development encompasses not only promotions, vertical career advancement, but also horizontal career advancement (lateral mobility), changes in functions, experience working in different organizational contexts, and the accumulation of competencies throughout the entire period of professional development [8-10]. This perspective is particularly significant in the career planning of military officers, as rotation, assignment to another military unit or headquarters, international service, or promotion signify not only a change in position but also a new level of responsibility, different reporting and collaborative relationships, new competency requirements, and a transformation of the professional role. Therefore, it is appropriate to analyze officer career planning as the interaction between organizational career management and the logic of a statutory organization, that is, as a systematic process in which assignment, evaluation, training, rotation, and promotion should be interlinked. In the military, the career system is inevitably hierarchical, and vertical career advancement is an essential part of it, since military ranks, duties, and leadership responsibilities form the foundation of military operations. Vertical advancement provides clear benchmarks for professional development, allows the planning of a leadership pipeline, and ensures organizational continuity.

However, the modern concept of a career is not limited to linear advancement within the hierarchy. Recent career research emphasizes that a career is shaped as a dynamic sequence of work, learning, transitions, role changes, and contextual experiences, in which not only promotions but also horizontal transitions, accumulation of competencies, adaptation to new roles, and interaction between the individual and the organization over time are important [6, 17- 19]. Therefore, in the career planning of officers, vertical advancement should be complemented by a horizontal dimension, which allows the officer to acquire a wider spectrum of competencies. This is highlighted by Raudeliūnas and Valickas (2018), who argue that the issue of career management for Lithuanian officers must be linked to legal frameworks, career management processes, and individual officer factors, and that a career should be viewed not only as a system of duties and ranks, but also as a managerial process in which organizational and individual factors must be balanced.

A horizontal career refers to movement within the same or a similar hierarchical level, involving a change in position, function, unit, task content, or organizational context [8, 9]. In the career of an officer's career, this includes experiences such as service in different units, headquarters, training institutions, international structures, specialized functions, operations, or projects [2]. Its significance is supported by research on internal mobility: horizontal rotation can help acquire and demonstrate new competencies and, subsequently, increase the likelihood of promotion [9]. In the career of an officer, this means that staff, international, training, specialized, or rotational experience is not a 'career pause' or an administrative event but can serve as preparation for greater responsibility [17]. Campion et al. [20] found that lateral assignments can be attractive when they are associated with career development, learning opportunities, future promotion potential, and more significant responsibilities. Therefore, a horizontal career should not be understood as a 'career pause', as it can be a form of preparation for greater responsibility if it is planned purposefully and linked to the development of skills.

Professional military education plays a crucial role in career planning to ensure competency development and prepare for future duties. In career management research, learning and skill development are not considered an additional but an essential part of career development, as the organization can use learning to shape employees' readiness for future roles [5, 11]. Xie et al. [11] revealed that organizational career management can influence employees through 'empowerment' and 'energization': It improves employability and professional confidence while reducing the risk of burnout. In the careers of military officers, this logic implies that career courses and professional military education should not be formal career requirements, but tools for targeted preparation for duties and professional growth.

In military organizations, the importance of professional military education is underscored by the fact that higher-level positions require not only tactical preparedness but also strategic thinking, the ability to operate in conditions of uncertainty, international cooperation, and inter-agency coordination. Christoffersen and Krintel [21] found that officers view professional education as significant for their careers only when it is clearly linked to real career decisions and is not perceived merely as an external formal requirement. Another aspect of horizontal career development is related to the transnationalization of military leaders through the importance of international professional experiences and integration, and the multinational socialization process of officers [13]. This insight allows us to understand professional military education and international courses as part of a horizontal career: they do not necessarily immediately lead to higher rank, but they broaden an officer's professional horizons, networks, and ability to operate within NATO or other multinational structures.

Performance evaluation is another important element of career planning, as it links current performance results, potential, competency gaps, and future career decisions. Contemporary performance management research emphasizes that evaluation should not be understood merely as a review of past performance but must be linked to several functions: recording results, providing feedback, identifying development needs, making career decisions, and employee reactions to the evaluation process [22]. Schleicher et al. [23] also emphasize that performance management systems must be understood systemically: evaluation, feedback, development, compensation, and career decisions do not operate in isolation but as interrelated organizational mechanisms.

In the context of career planning for officers, performance evaluations can theoretically serve a dual purpose. First, they can serve as an administrative selection mechanism to help determine whether an officer is ready for a higher rank, a higher position, or career development courses. Second, the evaluation should serve an educational function, helping to identify competency gaps, training needs, the experience required for future positions, and directions for further professional development. This dual function is supported by performance management research, in which evaluation is understood not as a separate administrative event, but as part of a broader performance management system that includes goal setting, feedback, evaluation, development, and organizational decisions [23, 24]. Development-oriented performance management practices also emphasize that evaluation must be related to employee development, competency development, and future career decisions [25]. Therefore, the quality of an officer evaluation system depends not only on whether it determines the suitability for a higher rank, but also on whether it allows the identification of the cross-functional experiences necessary for an officer's professional development: staff, instructor, specialist, international, rotational, or training experiences. Research on developing work experiences shows that new, complex or competency-expanding experiences can contribute to professional development, but their impact depends on how they are planned and what psychological and organizational resources the employee has to overcome them [26]. Therefore, evaluation should not be used solely as a tool to select officers for higher ranks or positions. In a statutory organization, it must be clear and based on established criteria, yet flexible enough to allow for the assessment of different career paths for officers.

Individual career plans can theoretically serve as an important link between the organization's needs and the professional aspirations of an individual. Greenan [27], in his study of personal development plans, emphasizes that such plans can help not only to formulate goals but also to ensure more regular feedback and communication between the employee and the organization. This allows the individual plan to be understood not as a formal document, but as a tool for ongoing

career dialogue and professional development. However, given the specific nature of statutory organizations, it should be emphasized that in such organizations individual aspirations must be reconciled with strict institutional needs. Thus, the individual career plan is theoretically a suitable tool for managing this interaction, but its significance depends on whether it is used in decision making regarding appointments, rotation, training, evaluation, and promotion.

The specific nature of statutory organizations is also important as a factor in career planning, particularly when analyzing the relationship between the organization and an individual's professional aspirations. In the military, careers are planned not in the open labor market but within an organization characterized by a duty to serve, subordination, operational requirements, mandatory rotation, limited positions, and formal eligibility criteria. Therefore, an officer's individual career expectations cannot be examined in isolation from the organization's needs. However, modern career management emphasizes that organizational support for careers, clear career paths, learning opportunities, and a career outlook visible to the employee are important for motivation, commitment, and retention [5, 11]. In the officer career system, this means that the organizational need to assign an officer to a specific position must be balanced with transparency, feedback, competency development, and a clear logic of professional progression.

In summary, it can be argued that career planning for officers should be understood as a system that combines vertical and horizontal career paths. A vertical career ensures hierarchical clarity, an increase in leadership responsibilities, and the transferability of duties; a horizontal career builds a foundation of experience, competencies, specialization, and organizational understanding. In a statutory organization, these dimensions cannot be separated: an officer's promotion to higher positions must be based not only on the length of service or a formal sequence of posts, but also on purposely accumulated staff, leadership, training, international, specialized and rotational experience. Therefore, the following study is based on an analysis of these key elements of the development of the career of an officer: the concept of a career as an officer, the expression of vertical and horizontal career paths, professional education, performance evaluation and alignment of the needs of the Armed Forces with the professional aspirations of an individual.

3. Research Methodology

Research method. To examine the interaction between vertical and horizontal career paths established in the Lithuanian Armed Forces officer career planning documents, a qualitative content analysis method was selected for this study. This method allows for a systematic examination of the provisions governing officer career planning established in normative documents, their interrelationships, and the perspective on the vertical and horizontal dimensions of an officer's career as enshrined in the documents. Document analysis is considered an appropriate qualitative research strategy when the aim is to examine institutional rules, policy provisions, organizational processes, and the premises for decision making enshrined in official texts [28]. Wood et al. [29] describe document analysis as a systematic method of examining documentary material that allows meanings to be extracted from documents and interpreted within the specific context of the study. Therefore, in this study, the content analysis of documents is applied not only as a method for describing formal legal provisions, but as an interpretive approach that allows for an assessment of the essence of the concept of an officer's career constructed in the documents: Is a career primarily perceived as a vertical ascent through ranks and positions, or as a broader process of professional experiences, competencies, rotations, learning, and evaluation?

The study sample. A total of 11 documents (~120 pages) were selected, which regulate the concept of an officer's career, career paths and levels, rotation, professional training and continuing education, performance evaluation, individual career planning, promotion, transfer, and contract or service extension. This set of documents allows for the analysis of career planning as a system rather than as an isolated procedure. However, in subsequent stages, six documents (all valid during the analysis period) were directly used and cited in the study (Table 1), in which statements or concepts corresponding to the problem under analysis were directly identified through text analysis. This selection principle aligns with the logic of qualitative document analysis, according to which documents are evaluated not by their quantity, but by their ability to reveal the phenomenon under study and the structure of institutional regulation [29].

Justification of the data analysis method. The analysis used a directed qualitative content analysis. It was chosen because the study is based on concepts defined in advance in theory: career planning, vertical career, horizontal career, rotation, competency development, performance evaluation, and individual career planning. Qualitative content analysis allows textual data to be systematically reduced, grouped, and interpreted, creating a structure of categories and subcategories related to the research question [36]. Nicmanis [36] emphasizes that reflexive content analysis is a flexible approach to qualitative analysis, allowing the description and reduction of textual material through a hierarchy of codes, subcategories, and categories. This logic was also applied in this study: the main categories were identified deductively, based on the concepts of career planning, vertical career, horizontal career, rotation, competency development, performance evaluation, and individual career planning, while the subcategories were refined inductively by reading the documents and identifying recurring normative formulations, criteria, procedures, and tensions. This alignment of theoretical categories with the content of empirical documents allows not only to verify how predefined career dimensions are reflected in the documents, but also to highlight specific problematic tensions that emerge in the documents.

The coding unit was defined as a document concept, paragraph, subparagraph, sentence, or a logical sequence of several related paragraphs governing an officer's career, career paths, career levels, rotation, training, evaluation, appointment to a position, promotion or individual career planning. In qualitative content analysis, it is important not only to identify codes but also to preserve the context of the text, as the meaning of a provision in a document is often revealed through its connection with other provisions and the overall regulatory objective [36]. Therefore, this study did not analyze

individual words, but normative statements and their interrelationships. During the coding, the following were recorded: which dimension of the career path is regulated, which procedure or criterion is established, whether the provision is more closely associated with vertical, horizontal, or mixed career logic, as well as what potential strengths or weaknesses it reveals.

Table 1.

Characteristics of the National Defense System (NDS) documents used in the study

No.	Document title	Document type	Length (p.)	Code in analysis	Significance for the analysis of the career system
1.	Officer Career Concept (2022-02-08, Nr. V-111) [30]	Strategic document	~12	D1	Defines the concept of an officer's career, the principles of career planning, the concepts of vertical and horizontal career advancement, career levels, and the career management system.
2.	Procedures for the Selection of Professional Military Personnel, Volunteer Soldiers and Other Active Reserve Personnel for Professional Training, Skill Development, or Education (KAM, 2022-08-23, Nr. V-652) [31]	Procedures approved by order of the Minister of National Defense	~12	D2	Regulates admission to professional military education, professional development, and training; links career planning with competency development.
3.	Procedures for the of Higher Military Ranks (KAM, 2023-10-18, Nr. V856) [32]	Procedures approved by order of the Minister of National Defense	~9	D3	Stipulates the criteria for promotion to a higher military rank, the requirements for vertical career advancement, and the conditions regarding length of service.
4.	Procedures for Enlistment in Professional Military Service, the Conclusion and of and the Extension of Service for Military Personnel who have Reached the Age of Discharge from Professional Military Service to the Reserve (KAM, 2025-06-26, Nr. V-572) [33]	Procedures approved by order of the Minister of National Defense	~22	D4	Regulates the continuity of professional military service, the extension of service, and decisions related to the duration of a career.
5.	Procedures for Career Management of Professional Military Officers (KAM, 2010-11-03, Nr. V-1173) [34]	Procedures approved by order of the Minister of National Defense	~9	D5	Regulates the organization of career management for officers, rotations, individual career planning, and career management procedures.
6.	Procedures for the Evaluation of the Service of Professional Military Personnel, Volunteer Soldiers, or other active Reserve Soldiers (KAM, 2015-07-21, Nr. V-738) [35]	Procedures approved by order of the Minister of National Defense	~22	D6	Establishes performance evaluation criteria and procedures, and links performance evaluations to career planning, professional development, and promotion.

Note: All documents were in effect during the study period, approved by the Lithuanian Minister of National Defense, and selected to illustrate how career planning for officers is integrated into the Lithuanian Armed Forces' human resources development system.

The coding and subsequent analysis of the data sought to answer the following research questions: How are the career and career planning of an officer defined in the documents?; How are the vertical and horizontal career paths (rotations) of the officers regulated in the documents?; How is professional military education integrated into career planning?; What role does performance evaluation play in career planning?; How do the documents reconcile the needs of the national defense system with individual career aspirations of an officer?

The reliability of qualitative research was ensured in the study through the following methods: clearly documenting the course of the analysis; forming categories and subcategories in accordance with coding principles and based on direct quotations from documents; comparing the provisions of different documents and identifying recurring regulatory principles within them. This approach allowed for strengthening the validity of interpretations, maintaining a connection between empirical data and the interpretation of the researcher, and ensuring greater transparency in the analysis [37]. The documentary citations presented in the Results section make it possible to clearly see the connection between the category, subcategory, and content of the document. The limitation of the study stems from the fact that the official normative documents analyzed reveal a formal established model of career planning for officers but do not allow for a direct assessment of the practical implementation of these provisions or the subjective experiences of the officers. Therefore, the study focuses on the logic of institutional regulation rather than on the analysis of practical career management.

4. Analysis of Research Results

The concept of a career of an officer and career planning in official documents. The primary objective was to determine how an officer's career and career planning are defined in official documents. The analysis showed that in key

career documents, an officer's career is perceived not merely as a succession of duties or ranks, but as a systematic and long-term process related to the management of human resources of the Armed Forces, the competencies of an officer, the evaluation of performance and the organizational needs (Table 2).

Table 2.

Empirical representation of career planning concepts in documents

Category	Subcategory	Supporting statements from the document
The concept of career planning	A career as a systematic process	<i>'The planning and implementation of an officer's career is a systematic, consistent, and ongoing process that begins at the beginning of an officer's service and continues until the officer is placed in the reserve.'</i> [D1]
	Career development as part of human resource management	<i>'Officer career management is an integral part of the human resources management of the Armed Forces, with the aim of ensuring that the Armed Forces have a sufficient number of officers with the appropriate military rank and the required qualifications.'</i> [D1]
	A career as a balance between organizational and officer opportunities	<i>'Career planning depends directly on an officer's performance, personal qualities, and professional skills acquired through service experience, as well as an assessment of potential opportunities.'</i> [D1]

These statements indicate that the documents establish a broad concept of career planning. A career is not limited to a single promotion or appointment to a position. It is defined as a continuous process in which service experience, personal qualities, professional skills, potential, and the needs of the Armed Forces are important. This is considered a strength of the system, as career planning in the documents is related to long-term human resource management and the readiness of the Armed Forces.

In analyzing the concept, it can be argued that the concept of career planning demonstrates a clear prioritization of the organization's needs. The purpose of career management is primarily related to the ability of the KAS to secure the necessary number of officers with the appropriate rank and qualifications. This is understandable in the context of a statutory organization, as the careers of officers are directly linked to the staffing of positions, the construction of a leadership reserve, the continuity of functions and the maintenance of military capability. However, this definition also reveals a potential tension: Although documents acknowledge individual aspirations, potential, and opportunities of an officer, its importance for career decisions must be assessed in relation to the needs of the Armed Forces. This tension is analyzed in greater detail when examining the category of balancing the needs of the Armed Forces with the career aspirations of an individual officer.

Regulation of vertical officer careers. An analysis of the documents revealed that the vertical officer career is the most clearly formalized dimension of the career. It is associated with higher military ranks, higher level positions, career levels, mandatory service experience, career courses, and the decisions of selection committees (Table 3).

Table 3.

Empirical representation of the concept of vertical rotation in documents

Category	Subcategory	Supporting statements from the document
Vertical career	Definition of vertical rotation	<i>'Vertical rotation is the assignment of an officer to a position higher than his or her current military rank.'</i> [D1]
	Career levels according to the degree system	<i>'Taking into account the system of military ranks for officers, as well as the requirements for training and service experience [...], the following career levels for officers are established: L1 [...], L2A [...], L2B [...], L3 [...], L4 [...].'</i> [D1]
	Criteria for promotion to a higher rank	<i>'The selection of officers for promotion to higher military rank is conducted [...] according to [...] the following criteria: education; minimum level of military training; required length of service; and a service evaluation not lower than 'good' [...].'</i> [D3]

The analysis shows that the vertical career progression is highly structured in the documents. An officer's advancement is linked to a rank system, career levels, and clear qualification requirements. This provides clarity to the career system and allows for the planning of a leadership reserve. This finding is partly aligned with the theoretical characteristics of statutory organizations. The military, as a statutory and hierarchical organization, inevitably relies on a clear structure of ranks, subordination, responsibilities, and duties. Therefore, the formalization of vertical career paths in the military is not a weakness in itself. On the contrary, it is essential to plan the leadership pipeline, ensure continuity of duties, and distribute responsibility. This is consistent with the hierarchical nature of military organizations and the need to clearly regulate the distribution of responsibility and authority, as emphasized by Soeters et al. [1] and Mayland [2]. This feature is very clearly evident in the documents under analysis: the procedure for granting a higher military rank establishes specific criteria: education, minimum level of military training, required service experience, service evaluation, proficiency in NATO languages, and health and physical fitness requirements. This is a significant advantage of the system, as it reduces arbitrariness and allows officers to see the formal requirements for career advancement.

However, this structure also reveals a potential weakness: the risk of career formalization. Robbert et al.. [38], in their analysis of the need to modernize career management for US military officers, emphasize that traditional officer career systems, based on a rank hierarchy, length of service, a sequence of duties, and standardized promotion requirements, provide clarity and procedural consistency, but at the same time, can limit more flexible talent management, the utilization of competencies, and individualized planning of officers' professional development. This is relevant in the context under

analysis because when vertical advancement is based on numerous formal requirements, career success may be understood as the ‘accumulation’ of requirements rather than as qualitative preparation for more complex duties. Therefore, it is important to assess whether the documents sufficiently clearly demonstrate how horizontal experiences, such as rotation, staff work, instructor activities, specialization, or service in different organizational contexts, not only become an additional criterion, but a real foundation for vertical growth and greater responsibility.

The concept of horizontal career advancement. In the documents, horizontal rotation is clearly defined as the assignment of an officer to a position corresponding to his current rank. This indicates that the logic of horizontal movement is present in the documents. However, the analysis revealed a dual significance of horizontal rotation.

Table 4.

Empirical representation of the concept of horizontal rotation in documents

Category	Subcategory	Supporting statements from the document
Horizontal rotation	The concept of horizontal rotation	<i>"Horizontal rotation is the assignment of an officer to a position corresponding to his or her current military rank." [D1]</i>
	Horizontal rotation as preparation for the next level	<i>'Horizontal rotation is used to ensure that an officer gains specific service experience in positions corresponding to his or her military rank, which is necessary for advancement to a higher career level'. [D1]</i> <i>'Lists of candidates for courses are compiled taking into account the needs of the Armed Forces and the evaluation of service members, individual career plans, education, military training, and experience of service members, their level of foreign language proficiency, age, and authorization to work with or access classified information". [D2]</i>
	Changing career paths and flexibility in professional specialization	<i>'An officer may be assigned several military specialty codes, and his or her career is planned according to one of them, taking into account the needs of the Armed Forces and the preferences of the officer.' [D1]</i> <i>'An officer expresses his or her preferences regarding further service and training [...] by indicating the desired career path, the positions he or she wishes to hold in the future, and the courses he or she wishes to attend. ' [D5]</i>
	Horizontal rotation as an alternative when vertical ascent is not possible	<i>'Horizontal rotation also applies in cases where an officer lacks the necessary training, does not meet the requirements established for a higher officer rank [...] and is therefore ineligible for a higher military rank.' [D1]</i> <i>'Officers who have not served as platoon or company commanders (or equivalent positions) but have served as staff officers in tactical, operational and strategic-level staffs / institutions can be granted a military rank up to and including lieutenant colonel (commander). ' [D3]</i>
	Limits on the repetition of duties	<i>'Under the horizontal rotation system, an officer cannot be assigned to the same position twice in a row.' [D1]</i>

An analysis of horizontal career progression (Table 4) shows that this dimension is not entirely secondary to vertical career progression in Lithuanian Armed Forces documents. In the documents, horizontal rotation is defined as the assignment of an officer to a position corresponding to his or her current military rank and its purpose is linked to the accumulation of service experience necessary for advancing to a higher career level. This suggests that the documents partially reflect the principle emphasized in contemporary career theory that horizontal transitions can serve as a mechanism for preparing for greater responsibility, as they provide opportunities to acquire new skills, broaden professional horizons, and prepare for subsequent vertical advancement [8, 9]. Therefore, it can be argued that the Lithuanian Armed Forces documents directly support the interaction between vertical and horizontal careers: an officer can be prepared for higher positions through horizontally accumulated experience in service, staff work, rotation, or specialized activities.

However, analysis of the results also reveals a significant tension. In theory, horizontal mobility is most often interpreted as a positive mechanism for accumulating career capital: it broadens competencies, social connections, organizational perspective, and the flexibility of professional identity [9, 17, 20]. Meanwhile, horizontal rotation is regulated in the analyzed documents not only as a positive means of accumulating competencies and experience, but also as a solution in cases where an officer lacks adequate training, does not meet the requirements set for a higher career level, or, due to personal characteristics and professional abilities, cannot qualify for higher-ranking positions. Consequently, horizontal career progression takes on a dual significance: on the one hand, it corresponds to the function of horizontal mobility as a means of accumulating career capital as described in theory; on the other hand, in the documents, it can also be understood as a compensatory mechanism when vertical advancement is not possible. This duality is one of the most significant problems that emerged during the analysis. It indicates that horizontal experience is recognized in documents as a prerequisite for vertical growth, but its independent career value is not fully established. Such language may undermine the prestige of horizontal career advancement, as a lateral transfer can be perceived not only as targeted professional development but also as a temporary pause or an alternative to a promotion that did not materialize.

An analysis of the accumulation of different types of service experience has revealed that the career path of officers in general military specialties is quite clearly structured around a balance of command and staff experience: *'An officer in the general military specialties career track [...] throughout his career [...] must be assigned alternately to the duties of a staff officer (instructor) and a commander.' [D1]*. This indicates that, in the documents, horizontal career progression is not understood merely as an administrative transfer but is considered distinct elements of an officer's professional development. This is considered a strength, as the preparation of officers for higher positions is based not only on rank advancement, but also on experience in different functional roles.

However, the analysis also revealed a limitation: experience gained in a staff position is not entirely equivalent to command experience. The logic behind the grant of higher ranks indicates that officers who *have not served as platoon or company commanders or in equivalent positions, but have served as staff officers, can only be promoted to a certain limit* [D3]. This indicates that, while staff experience is recognized in the documents, leadership duties remain the strongest aspect of vertical career progression. From a theoretical perspective, this is understandable in the military, since leading a unit is an essential part of an officer's professional identity. However, from the perspective of modern career and competency theories, such a model can limit the recognition of alternative career paths, particularly in the areas of staff work, planning, analytics, technology, logistics, or international cooperation.

Professional military education and career courses. In Lithuanian documents, professional military education serves as one of the most important links between vertical and horizontal career paths. The theory emphasizes that career planning must be related to the development of competencies, the stages of learning, and the preparation for future duties [3, 5]. In the concept of an officer's career, the professional training system is divided into levels L1, L2A, L2B, L3 and L4, and individual courses are linked to specific duties and the pursuit of higher ranks. This is considered a clear advantage of the system: courses are not separated from the career structure; they are regulated as part of the preparation for duties and rank. In this regard, the Lithuanian system aligns with the theoretical principle that learning must be integrated into career management.

However, the results of the study raise questions about the individualization of course planning. The documents governing course demand planning clearly regulate the institutional process of determining demand. *KAS institutions and major military units submit three-year course demand data; courses are ranked by priority and the rationale for their necessity is provided* [D2]. When selecting candidates, *consideration is given to the KAS needs, the evaluations of the soldiers, individual career plans, education, military training, experience, languages, age and the clearance to handle classified information* [D3]. This indicates that individual plans are considered but are not the sole or dominant basis for selection. In theory, organizational career management is understood as the alignment of organizational and employee goals [5]; therefore, the dominance of organizational needs identified in the document analysis is understandable, but its connection to the individualized career development of officers could be strengthened. This is also supported by the insight of Christoffersen and Krintel [19] that professional military education for officers becomes motivating when it is clearly related to real career decisions, rather than being perceived as a formal administrative requirement.

The role of performance appraisal in career planning. The performance appraisal process is another important element of career planning. In theory, the evaluation of performance and potential is considered part of organizational career management, as it allows for the alignment of the capabilities, development needs and future career decisions of an employee [5]. In the documents analyzed (Table 5), this link is clearly established: periodic and objective performance evaluations of officers must create conditions for effective career planning, considering the needs of the Armed Forces, the capabilities of the officer, and career goals [D1]. In addition, evaluation includes personal qualities, professional abilities, self-improvement, value cultivation, and the need to develop competencies. This suggests that evaluation is not only understood as performance monitoring or formal certification but serves a planning function: Based on the evaluation, decisions are made regarding the directions in which an officer can proceed, the competencies they require, and the duties or training stages that could be planned for them.

Table 5.

The role of performance assessments in career planning as reflected in documents

Category	Subcategory	Supporting statements from the document
Service evaluation	Evaluation as a condition for career planning	<i>'The results of the performance evaluation are used to plan future careers of officers: opportunities to participate in selection processes for career courses or professional development training, to be promoted to a higher military rank or to assume specific duties, and to extend the term of their professional military service contract.'</i> [D1]
	Content of the Evaluation	<i>'The evaluation of an officer's service includes an assessment of personal qualities and professional abilities, self-improvement, and promotion and protection of the values of the Lithuanian Armed Forces.'</i> [D1] <i>The evaluation criteria include 'professional', knowledge and skills', 'organizational skills', 'cooperation', 'effectiveness', 'initiative', 'leadership and management', 'responsibility', 'determination', 'communication' and 'the' ability to express thoughts in writing'. [D6]</i>
	Identifying the need for competency development	<i>'The need for professional development and competency building measures is also identified, taking into account the personal preferences of the officer, the existing qualifications and competencies, the anticipated new duties or assigned tasks and the needs of the army'.</i> [D1] <i>The evaluation questionnaire is intended to provide recommendations regarding the soldier's referral to courses and a change in career direction. [D6]</i>
	Evaluation as a condition for higher-level qualifications	<i>'The performance evaluation must have been rated no lower than 'good' and must have been issued no earlier than 12 months ago, and the evaluation must include a recommendation for a higher military rank'. [D3]</i> <i>'Only those officers who have received one of the two highest evaluations from their commanders (superiors) during the last 12 months of service are eligible for higher positions, higher military rank, or career courses. ' [D1]</i>

The vertical dimension of career advancement has also become apparent, where performance evaluations are directly related to the opportunity to pursue higher military ranks, higher positions, and career development courses. This is

based on the provision that service must be evaluated at no lower than 'good' and the evaluation must include a recommendation to grant a higher military rank. Thus, the evaluation becomes not only an informational, but also a selection mechanism: It determines which officers are eligible for vertical career advancement.

The aspects of horizontal career development and rotation are also reflected in the evaluation system, though they are expressed indirectly. Evaluation criteria include evaluating an officer's professional competence, self-improvement, organizational skills, cooperation, initiative, leadership, responsibility, and other competencies. These criteria may be important not only for vertical advancement, but also for horizontal movement, for example, when assigning an officer to a staff, instructor, specialist, or other position of the same rank. The evaluation procedure document [D6] provides recommendations for sending a soldier to training courses, changing the career path of a professional military officer, granting a higher military rank, or extending a service contract. Recommendations on career path changes and referrals to training courses indicate that evaluation can function not only as a tool for vertical selection but also as a means of horizontal career planning.

However, it can be argued that the relationship between performance evaluation and vertical career advancement is more clearly defined than with horizontal career development. In other words, the assessment system creates the conditions for horizontal career development, as it records competencies, suitability, training needs, and potential career changes; however, these elements are not expressed as a separate mechanism for horizontal career planning. Therefore, it can be argued that in the documents analyzed, evaluation is defined more as a tool for vertical career selection and promotion, while the value of horizontal experience is recognized indirectly, primarily as a prerequisite for a higher career level. The vertical dimension is revealed through clear requirements for higher degrees, higher positions, and career paths. The horizontal dimension is manifested through the identification of competency development needs, course recommendations, the possibility of changing career paths, and the assessment of suitability for different types of position. The main problem is that these horizontal opportunities are not sufficiently clearly linked in the documents to specific rotation planning and the assessment of the value of different horizontal experiences. As a result, the evaluation can be used primarily as a filter for vertical advancement, although its content allows it to be applied to a broader planning of the professional development of an officer.

Aligning the needs of the Armed Forces with the individual career aspirations of officers. An analysis of the documents shows (Table 6) that it makes sense to analyze the alignment of the needs of the Armed Forces with the individual career aspirations of the officers, as well as the individual career plans, together, as the individual career plan serves as one of the main tools for achieving this synergy. Theoretically, this aligns with the concept of organizational career management, according to which career planning is not simply an individual employee's choice or solely the organization's appointment system, but a process to reconcile the interests of both parties [5, 7].

Table 6.

The reflection in documents of the alignment between the needs of the National Defense System (NDS) and the aspirations of individual officers

Category	Subcategory	Supporting statements from the document
Balancing the needs of the national defense system with the individual aspirations of officers	Career planning as a balance between the needs of the national defense system and the interests of officers	<i>'Officers are provided with equal opportunities to plan their careers and pursue their goals in accordance with their chosen career path.'</i> [D1] <i>'Decisions regarding an officer's career are made after a comprehensive assessment of [...] the needs of the Armed Forces, as well as the interests and aspirations of the officer.'</i> [D1] <i>'Planning for training course requirements is based on information provided by KAS institutions and major military units, which is necessary to determine requirements for a 3-year period.'</i> [D2] <i>'The Chair of the Commission, taking into account the quota limits and the needs of the Armed Forces for each military rank, determines how many officers will be selected for promotion to a higher rank.'</i> [D3]
	Incorporating an officer's preferences into career planning	<i>'An officer expresses his or her preferences about future service and training [...] by indicating the desired career path, the positions he or she wishes to hold in the future, and the courses he or she wishes to take.'</i> [D5] <i>During the evaluation process, an officer can express personal preferences regarding continued service and professional development.</i> [D1] <i>'During individual planning, an officer can specify the desired career path, future positions he or she wishes to hold, and courses he or she wants to attend.'</i> [D5]
	The individual plan as one of the selection criteria	<i>'Lists of candidates for courses are compiled based on the needs of the Armed Forces and the evaluation of service members, their individual career plans, educational background, military training, experience, foreign language proficiency, age, and authorization to work with or access classified information.'</i> [D2]
	The individual plan as a tool for balancing vertical and horizontal career development	<i>'Based on the evaluation results, the future career of the officer is planned: participation in career development courses, professional development, pursuit of a higher military rank, assignment to specific duties or renewal of contracts.'</i> [D1] <i>'An officer may be assigned several military specialty codes, and his career is planned according to one of them, taking into account the needs of the Armed Forces and the preferences of the officer.'</i> [D1]

In Lithuanian Armed Forces documents, this logic is reflected in the provision that officers must have the opportunity 'to *plan their careers and realize their aspirations according to the relevant career path, while career decisions are made through a comprehensive assessment of the qualities, abilities, compliance with requirements, the needs of Lithuanian Armed Forces, as well as the interests and aspirations of the officer*' [D1]. At the same time, career management is defined as part of the human resources management of the Lithuanian Armed Forces, whose purpose is to ensure that the system has enough officers with the necessary rank and qualifications [D1]. This indicates that the documents enshrine dual logic: an officer's individual aspirations are recognized, but they are balanced against the needs of the Armed Forces in terms of capacity, positions, and qualifications.

An individual officer's career plan is defined as *a document that sets out the officer's short-, medium- and long-term career goals, outlines the measures to achieve these goals, and specifies the timeline for their implementation* [D5]. In career development theory, such plans are interpreted as structured tools that help clarify professional development goals of an employee, outline actions, and align personal expectations with organizational objectives [5]. In Lithuanian Armed Forces documents, this idea is reflected in provisions stating that an officer may express preferences regarding continued service and professional development and that future career paths are planned based on evaluation results: participation in career courses or professional development, pursuit of a higher rank, performance of specific duties, or extension of a professional military service contract (Table 6). Therefore, individual aspirations are linked in the documents to specific elements of career planning, such as courses, duties, rank, professional development, and continuity of service.

However, analysis shows that this coordination is not an equal agreement between both parties: KAS needs often become the dominant criterion in career planning, against which the practical significance of an officer's preferences and individual plans is assessed. This is evident in the procedure for professional training, improvement of qualifications and education [D2], which regulates the identification of needs, the development and approval of course plans, and the assignment of military personnel to courses. When selecting candidates for courses, consideration is given not only to individual career plans, but also to the needs of the Armed Forces, the evaluation of soldiers, their education, military training, experience, foreign language proficiency, age, and authorization to handle classified information [D2]. This does not contradict the logic of a statutory organization, but it indicates that the individual career plan functions not as an independent basis for decision making, but as one of the elements evaluated in the organizational planning process.

From the perspective of the interaction between vertical and horizontal career paths, individual career plans offer clear potential, as they can be used to plan not only promotions or higher-level positions, but also changes in career direction, learning, professional development, changes in responsibilities and expansion of specializations. This aligns with the modern concept of career development, in which employee mobility and professional growth are linked not only to vertical advancement but also to horizontal transitions and the accumulation of competencies [5, 7]. However, in the documents, individual plans remain more of a coordinating tool than a decision-making one: they help incorporate an officer's aspirations into career planning, but their practical impact depends on how closely they are related to the needs of the Armed Forces, as well as decisions about assignments, rotations, training courses, and evaluations. Therefore, it can be argued that individual career plans are an important, but not dominant, mechanism to align the needs of the Armed Forces with the aspirations of an officer.

5. Summary of Research Data

An analysis of the documents reveals that the Lithuanian Armed Forces career planning system for officers is sufficiently formalized and encompasses the key elements of career planning: the concept of career, vertical and horizontal rotation, professional military education, performance evaluation, individual career plans, and alignment of the Lithuanian Armed Forces needs with the aspirations of an officer. This suggests that the documents provide a framework for consistent career management of officers. However, an analysis of the documents also reveals that these elements are not equally developed: The regulation of vertical career progression is clearer, stronger and more closely linked to decision making, while the mechanisms for horizontal career progression, individual planning, and competency assessment remain less concrete.

In summary, it can be stated that a clear vertical career structure stands out most prominently. In the documents, the advancement of an officer is linked to the rank system, career levels, duties, professional training, service experience, performance evaluation and criteria for promotion to a higher rank. However, this strength also creates a weakness: vertical career advancement becomes the dominant measure of career success.

Horizontal rotation is defined in the documents as the assignment of positions corresponding to the current military rank of the individual and is associated with the accumulation of service experience necessary to advance to a higher career level. This indicates that the documents recognize the interaction between vertical and horizontal career paths: an officer can be prepared for greater responsibility through staff, instructor, specialist, rotational, or other functional experience. This provision aligns with studies on internal mobility, in which horizontal transitions are considered an important means of developing skills and professional experience [8, 9]. However, it is precisely in horizontal career development that one of the greatest weaknesses of the system becomes apparent: horizontal rotation has a dual meaning in the documents. It is regulated both as a positive means of gaining experience and as an alternative in cases where an officer lacks adequate training, does not meet the requirements for a higher career level, or is ineligible for a higher rank. Consequently, horizontal career progression may not be perceived as a professionally valuable path but as a temporary pause or a substitute for a failed vertical advancement.

The documents have been established to provide for the combination of different professional experiences. The career of officers in general military specialties provides rotational assignments to the positions of commander, staff officer, and instructor. This indicates that an officer's career is not entirely restricted to direct command in the documents; the importance of staff, training, and other functional roles is also recognized. Nevertheless, this strength is also not fully developed. In the documents, command experience remains a stronger foundation for vertical career advancement than staff or specialized experience. This is evident in the provisions restricting the promotion of officers who have not served as platoon or company commanders or in equivalent positions, even if they have staff experience. Such logic is understandable within the traditional conception of the officer profession, but it may limit the recognition of alternative career paths.

It is acknowledged and assumed that professional military education is not separate from career planning and is an essential prerequisite for a career. Career courses are linked to career levels, specific duties, and the pursuit of higher ranks; therefore, learning is not separated from career planning in the documents. This aligns with the theory of organizational career management, in which career development is linked to learning, competency development, and preparation for future roles [5]. However, a weakness is that institutional needs dominate course planning. In the selection process for courses, the individual career plan is mentioned only as one of several criteria alongside the needs of the Armed Forces, evaluation, education, training, experience, language proficiency, age, and clearances. Therefore, professional military education is clearly regulated, but its connection to the career path of an individual officer is not sufficiently strong. Consequently, courses can function more as a formal requirement for career eligibility than as an educational tool specifically linked to a particular officer's professional development. This risk is particularly significant in light of research indicating that professional education for officers must be clearly linked to career decisions; otherwise, it can be perceived as an administrative obligation [21]. An analysis of the aspects related to the integration of performance evaluations into the career planning system revealed that this is related to career development courses, professional development, promotion to a higher rank, the performance of specific duties, and the renewal of employment contracts. The content of the evaluation covers not only performance outcomes but also professional skills, self-improvement, the need for competency development, organizational skills, collaboration, initiative, leadership, and accountability. This creates the conditions for the use of evaluation as a career planning tool. However, a weakness is that the link between evaluation and vertical career advancement is significantly clearer than with horizontal experience. Assessment becomes a formal criterion for selecting candidates for higher ranks and positions, but the documents do not clearly elaborate on how experience in staff, instructor, specialist, international, rotational, or cross-unit roles is evaluated. Therefore, evaluation has the potential to strengthen horizontal career development, but in practice it functions more as a factor in vertical career advancement.

Career planning is significantly influenced by aligning organizational goals with individual employee aspirations. Therefore, when analyzing the alignment of KAS needs and individual officer aspirations, it was found that the documents state that officers can plan their careers and express preferences regarding further service, training courses, or career paths. This is an important aspect, as it recognizes the active role of the officer in career planning. However, the analysis shows that the needs of the Armed Forces often become the dominant criterion in career planning, against which the practical significance of an officer's preferences and individual plans is assessed. In a statutory organization, this is understandable, as the careers of the officers must ensure the filling of positions, a reserve of commanders, and military capability. However, such logic may undermine the importance of individual career planning if the aspirations of an officer remain merely advisory information rather than a real part of the decision-making process. It has also been established that the career planning system utilizes individual officer career plans. However, an analysis of the documents shows that the individual plan is not the central instrument for career decisions. It functions as one of the elements under consideration, but its practical significance depends on the needs of the Armed Forces, the results of the evaluation, the qualification requirements, the need for training courses, the structure of positions, and the decisions of commissions. Therefore, while individual planning is enshrined in the documents, its impact on career decisions is not clearly defined.

Thus, the career planning system for Lithuanian officers has a solid regulatory foundation, but its strengths are often also a source of potential weaknesses. A clear vertical structure ensures order but may encourage formalism; horizontal rotation is recognized but has an ambiguous status; professional military education is integrated into the career path but is not sufficiently individualized; evaluation is linked to career decisions but is more focused on promotion; individual plans are provided but have limited practical significance. Therefore, the main direction for improvement should not be the creation of new procedures, but rather the qualitative integration of existing elements: clearer recognition of the value of horizontal experience, refinement of its evaluation criteria, strengthening the practical significance of individual plans, and integrating professional education, rotation, evaluation, and appointments into a more coherent officer career development system.

6. Conclusions

From a theoretical perspective, career planning for officers in a statutory organization should be understood as a process of balancing vertical and horizontal career development. Vertical career advancement in the military is necessary due to the structure of ranks, duties, subordination, and leadership responsibilities; however, the modern concept of a career indicates that hierarchical advancement alone is not sufficient. An officer's professional development must also include horizontally acquired experience, such as rotations, staff work, instructional activities, specialization, professional military education, international service, and activities in different organizational contexts. Therefore, effective career planning for officers should ensure not only a clear progression through ranks and positions, but also the targeted development of competencies, experiences, and readiness for future responsibilities. An analysis of the documents revealed that the Lithuanian Armed Forces career planning system for officers has a solid regulatory foundation: The documents establish the concept of a career as a systematic, consistent, and long-term process, defining career levels, vertical and horizontal rotation, stages of professional military education, the importance of performance evaluations, and individual career plans. This

suggests that in these documents, an officer's career is not limited solely to promotion or appointment to a position but is related to the broader process of human resources management and ensuring the military's capabilities. The study revealed that in the Lithuanian Armed Forces documents, the vertical career path is the most clearly regulated aspect of career development. It is linked to military rank, higher positions, career levels, mandatory service experience, professional training, performance evaluations, and the criteria for promotion to higher rank. This provides clarity to the system and allows for the planning of a leadership reserve, but at the same time highlights the risk of career formalization: Career success may be overly linked to meeting formal requirements rather than to qualitative readiness for more complex duties.

Horizontal career advancement is recognized in official documents as a necessary means of gaining professional experience and preparing for higher career levels. However, its status remains ambiguous: horizontal rotation is regulated both as a positive means of professional growth and as an alternative in cases where an officer is ineligible for a higher rank or position. Consequently, horizontal career progression is not fully established as an intrinsically valuable path for the professional development of an officer, and its importance may be undermined by linking it with failed vertical advancement.

Professional military education, performance evaluations, and individual officer career plans are key elements of the interaction between vertical and horizontal career paths. Career tracks are linked to career levels, positions, and the pursuit of higher ranks; performance evaluations are used to plan training, professional development, assignments, promotions, and career continuity; and individual plans allow for the establishment of short-, medium-, and long-term officer career goals, desired positions, training, and career direction. However, these elements are not fully utilized: they more clearly serve vertical career progression, while horizontal experiences are not sufficiently detailed as independently valuable objects of career planning and evaluation. Furthermore, the individual career plan is not established as a central tool for career decisions; it functions as one of the elements under evaluation, whose practical importance depends on the needs of the Armed Forces, evaluation results, qualification requirements, the need for training courses, the structure of positions and the decisions of committees.

The main direction for improving career planning for Lithuanian officers identified in the study is not the creation of new procedures, but rather a clearer integration of existing elements. To better balance vertical and horizontal career paths, it is recommended to more clearly define the value of horizontal experience, establish criteria for its qualitative evaluation, strengthen the practical significance of individual career plans, and more closely link rotation, professional military education, performance evaluations, and appointments into a coherent system of professional development for officers.

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