RETENTION IN CANSOFCOM: MOTIVATION TO STAY

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AIM

1.   Understanding why valued, low density and hard to replace members of a High Reliability Organization (HRO) suddenly leave is the critical question whenever a member of The Canadian Special Operations Forces Command (CANSOFCOM) decides to depart. [1] Investing large amounts of resources in individuals, the SOF career model is structured as a destination organization that is intended to have low rates of attrition.[2] Can the reasons be traced to a series of malleable variables or can there be intractable frictions between an institution and the type of person it attracts? Identifying the variables that drive individuals to leave SOF prematurely is the first step in developing a strategy to increase retention. This service paper argues that a comprehensive study of all operators within CANSOFCOM should be conducted in order to elucidate the issue of retention. Armed with key retention information CANSOFCOM can then better identify operator motivations and why some stay and others leave of their own accord.

INTRODUCTION

2.   There is a reason that "Humans are more important than hardware" is prioritized at the top of the five truths ingrained in SOF Culture for well over 30 years[3]. All SOF Truths have the individual at their core, valuing competency, quality, cooperation and the rigorous training of each member of the force.[4] Significant time and energy is spent recruiting all members of SOF through a lengthy, validated and defendable force generation process. [5,6] Although force generation in CANSOFCOM is challenging in terms of recruiting, selection, and training, these challenges are typically characterized by a linear relationship between inputs and outputs. Retention however is a non-linear issue that is impacted by a much greater number of variables over a longer timeline. Keeping operators in the long term must be treated as a wicked problem, a problem that is not simply difficult to answer but with numerous causes and without a single right answer, just measures of good and bad.[7] Professors in the Science of Design and City Planning Horst Rittel and Melvin Weber who coined the expression 'wicked problem" have

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[1]HRO is defined as an organization: "…where margins-of-error are reduced, tolerances are tight and the consequences of failure are high." Rouleau, Mike. Between Faith and Reality: A Pragmatic Sociological Examination of Canadian Special Operations Forces Command's Future Prospects. Kingston, Ont: Canadian Defence Academy Press. 2012, 1.

[2] Declan F. Ward, current Chief Instructor at The Canadian Special Operations Regiment, email with author, 14 October 2018.

[3] "SOF Truths." SOF Truths Page. Accessed October 11, 2018. http://www.soc.mil/USASOCHQ/SOFTruths.html.

[4] Collins, John. Congressional Research Service, "United States and Soviet Special Operations." House Armed Services Committee. 1987.

[5] Picano, James J., Robert R. Roland, Thomas J. Williams, and Paul T. Bartone. "Assessment of Elite Operational Personnel." Handbook of Military Psychology, December 2017, 277-89.

[6] The author's own experience as Chief Instructor running Assessment, Selection, and Training for CANSOFCOM supports this research from a Canadian perspective.

[7] Camillus, John C. "Strategy as a Wicked Problem." Harvard Business Review, 1 Aug. 2014, hbr.org/2008/05/strategy-as-a-wicked-problem. Accessed October 11, 2018.

identified 10 characteristics of these dilemmas, all of which are relevant but two of which will be prioritized in order to set goals as areas of focus for this study. The two of note are: "Every wicked problem is essentially unique" and "Every solution to a wicked problem is a "one-shot operation"; because there is no opportunity to learn by trial and error, every attempt counts significantly".[8] With the wicked problem set in mind and these two characteristics prioritized, this paper proposes a methodology to treat the retention of each individual as a unique task that is of critical importance, since acting improperly will add further complexity.

3.   In the context of an operation, the recommendations here will be analogous to the first phase of the intelligence preparation of the battlefield.   An orientation on the problem will first be proposed, with early goals set to utilize the right methods to fully appreciate the situation. To limit objectives and maintain simplicity of purpose, retention only will be considered for this start point. This will bound the initial problem set, allowing for incremental progress if the core concept is approved, validated and defendable. While the goal is to understand the retention of current members, there may be subsequent opportunities to look at recruiting.   Once a methodology is approved data can be collected and analysed, and where opportunity exists lay the framework for a cohesive strategy to retain the right people. The discussion will begin with a data-driven approach to propose collecting measurable variables, progressing to a logistic regression model to make sense of what is available and then potentially applying machine learning for those analytics that provide additional insight. Advances in data analysis and machine learning also present opportunities to understand trends in ways that were previously not possible. Establishing a culture of retention will be the metric of success; a metric that will be described further and the ultimate end goal of institutional strategy to create an environment that is self-sustaining.[9]

DISCUSSION

4.   <u>Determining a Start Point</u>.

        a.   <u>Silver Bullets</u>. Retention as a Special Operations Command has been looked at before by USSOCOM, at a time when talent required to prosecute multiple wars was being siphoned off to Private Security Companies (PSC) in 2003-2004.[10]   Citing high operational tempo and higher commensurate compensation in the private sector, measures were taken to increase pay and expand hiring practises to ease the burden on the individual, experienced operator. Far from a panacea, ten years later a sweeping study by the US Navy (of which US Naval Special Warfare is a part of) noted that "...retention in 2013 was tough and is forecast to become tougher. It marked the worst year in history for the special warfare community..."[11]. While CANSOFCOM is not equivalent to the immense US Military SOF service, parallels can be drawn, especially

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[8] Rittel, Horst W. J., and Melvin M. Webber. "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning." Policy Sciences 4, no. 2 (1973), 155-69.

[9] Sheridan, John E. "Organizational Culture and Employee Retention." Academy of Management Journal 35, no. 5 (1992).

[10] Spearin, Christopher. "Special Operations Forces a Strategic Resource: Public and Private Divides U.S. Army War College." Strategic Studies Institute (2006), 1-13.

[11] Snodgrass, Guy. "Keep a Weather Eye on the Horizon: A Navy Officer Retention Study" last modified March 20, 2014. www.dodretention.org/weather-eye.

concerning the risks in orienting on the wrong problem set with less resources or an incomplete solution that induces additional variables. Recent studies have found 18 past, present, and near-future factors that played a part in US special warfare retention; factors that may be deeply co-related, completely independent or somewhere between the two.[12] CANSOFCOM should do the same, seeking to explore and dredge the depth of this wicked problem set to avoid missing the collective "one shot" to create meaningful change.

      b.   <u>Grit</u>. By every estimation members of the CANSOFCOM community should score high in the measure of grit, explained by the psychologist and academic Dr. Angela Duckworth as "Defined as perseverance and passion for long-term goals".[13] According to Duckworth et al, those who complete a form of special operations selection and training are among those with the highest grit scores. Far from simply being confident that operators within CANSOFCOM have the right aptitude, there should instead be a determination to see what can negatively influence, erode or complicate the lives of those with high long term passion and perseverance. Situations change, there are new variables, or any other measure of complexity in the system that may change the dynamic for each unique individual. Additionally, once initial success is achieved by an individual and mid-term goals become reality, the amount of ongoing meaning and engagement derived from an activity or pursuit may vary leading to further nuance.[14] An initial survey of all operators within CANSOFCOM to determine the key variables that are internally and externally relevant would create a baseline to start further analysis. This could be conducted by asking questions to determine what matters to operators now and in the near future. There just needs to be a determination made to ask the right questions.

5.   <u>The Right Questions</u>. This paper is not proposing a repeat of selection phase, but instead taking a more holistic approach to the full operator and go beyond just looking at personality. The "Big Five" dimensions (agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, neuroticism, and openness to experience) and grit (as defined above) all provide data that should be relevant and informative, but should not be considered the whole picture.[15] Socioeconomic status and cognitive ability in longitudinal studies have shown strong importance to occupational attainment; in fact they are indistinguishable from personality as a metric.[16] If two of three major criteria are ignored there is a gap in understanding that must be filled. As an example of an external variable which has strong influence but may change rapidly is the context of family. This external variable may provide context and insight, potentially leading to the determination

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[12] Ibid.

[13] Duckworth, Angela L., Christopher Peterson, Michael D. Matthews, and Dennis R. Kelly. "Grit: Perseverance and Passion for Long-term Goals." Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 92, no. 6 (2007), 1087-1101.

[14] Culin, Katherine R. Von, Eli Tsukayama, and Angela L. Duckworth. "Unpacking Grit: Motivational Correlates of Perseverance and Passion for Long-term Goals." The Journal of Positive Psychology 9, no. 4 (2014), 306-12.

[15] Goldberg, Lewis R. "An Alternative "description of Personality": The Big-Five Factor Structure." Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 59, no. 6 (1990), 1216-1229.

[16] Roberts, Brent W., Nathan R. Kuncel, Rebecca Shiner, Avshalom Caspi, and Lewis R. Goldberg. "The Power of Personality: The Comparative Validity of Personality Traits, Socioeconomic Status, and Cognitive Ability for Predicting Important Life Outcomes." Perspectives on Psychological Science 2, no. 4 (2007), 313-45.

that equilibrium of internal and external factors should be coached through the span of a career.[17] While fundamentally this may be second nature to some in a small team environment, codifying a culture of understanding both internal and external variables will standardize best practice. The initial data driven approach should derive examples from personality, cognitive and socioeconomic factors in order create an illustrative cross-section of all the key pillars that make up the CANSOFCOM operator.

6.   Data Analysis. Once a baseline is created it must be aligned to the goal of understanding why some operators stay and why some depart early. This step is critical for choosing the correct goal for the initial data collection and analysis of individual operators.[18] If the derived variables above are kept below 100, a logistic regression model could be used to make sense of the input variables.[19] Logistic regression could be useful to consolidate initial findings in that it will determine how one nominal variable and two or more measurable variables interact. In this case the nominal dependent value of retention in CANSOFCOM is influenced by independently measured variables from personality, cognitive and socioeconomic variables to determine the probability of short, mid and long term retention based on a confidence value that is representative of the data set.[20] This will give both a concrete and visual understanding of *y axis* nominal values in relation to *x axis* measureable values to give clues on where to invest time and effort related resources. If additional variables are required over 100, or if non-standard input variables such as interview transcripts or video were eventually used in a mature retention data collection system, there are machine learning protocols that can address both less structured and more complex data sets.[21] Both methods are beyond the scope of this paper to delve into in worthy detail, and should instead employ a respective expert in either the field of data science or machine learning depending on data set and requirements. It would make sense to start in the less complex area of linear regression and then gravitate to more intensive analytics once an interesting area of study is uncovered. This is an area for follow-up if a study on retention is deemed institutionally beneficial.

7.   Potential Options.

        a.   Emerging Trends. The data driven approach is being used in leading businesses for retaining innovators who are a good fit for the respective workplace culture. Competitive advantage is gained by using emotional and cognitive metrics from questionnaires and neuroscience gamification (cognitive tests via a practical computer based medium).[22] Machine Learning is then used to accurately predict outcomes – in this

[17] Duffy, Ryan D., and Bryan J. Dik. "Beyond the Self: External Influences in the Career Development Process." The Career Development Quarterly 58, no. 1 (2009), 29-43.

[18] Charles J. Hitch, "On the Choice of Objectives in Systems Studies" (Santa Monica, California: The RAND Corporation, 1960; P-1955), 19.

[19] "Logistic Regression." The SAGE Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Methods.

[20] McDonald, J.H.. Handbook of Biological Statistics (3rd ed.). Sparky House Publishing, Baltimore, Maryland (2014), 1-2.

[21] Kubat, Miroslav. "A Simple Machine-Learning Task." An Introduction to Machine Learning, 2017, 1-18.

[22] "How Tesla and LinkedIn Use Neuroscience-Based Games (Instead of Resumes) to Hire the Best Talent." Inc.com. Accessed October 14, 2018. https://www.inc.com/kevin-j-ryan/pymetrics-replacing-resumes-with-brain-games.html.

case retention. This is an area of immense growth and could be an area of further investigation.

      b.   <u>Existing Practices</u>.

          (1)   <u>Personnel Psychology</u>. Combining the above emerging practices such as data analytics and unconventional cognitive testing with existing personality based psychology the effects could be stacked to maximize outcomes.[23] The methods currently used CANSOFCOM subject matter experts could be leveraged for continuation beyond the recruiting and selection model. This will not be expanded further here for brevity and due to classification.

          (2)   <u>Professional Human Resource Methodologies</u>. CANSOFCOM should continue with the current mentoring, coaching, interviews and incentives, but updated with current data and methodologies from Human Resource professionals. [24] These best practices can then be incorporated into informal and formal engagements with subordinates as a regular occurrence during performance reviews, times of opportunity during routine training and in more structured interviews. Synchronization matrices and development plans are being pioneered and used by the US Military that account for key milestones such as military gateways, education gateways, broadening opportunities and family. [25] With decision points highlighted based on time and gateways, unique correlated branch and sequel plans can then be created. These should be simple but informative creating a conversation between the chain of command and the member, clarifying institutional expectations fused with member input.[26] Retention strategies can then leverage the power of interpersonal relationships to move toward a culture of retention mindfulness, asking what does the institution do or not do to make people want stay.[27]

CONCLUSION

8.   Retention in CANSOFCOM is of critical importance but represents a confluence of variables that are unique to each individual, may fluctuate over time, may be influenced by other complex systems and may not be superficially apparent until it is too late. Creation of a system to explore these internal and external variables could provide solutions. Internal investigation

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[23] Schmidt, Frank L., and John E. Hunter. "The Validity and Utility of Selection Methods in Personnel Psychology: Practical and Theoretical Implications of 85 Years of Research Findings." Psychological Bulletin 124, no. 2 (1998).

[24] "Performance Management As a Strategic Advantage." CPHR/CRHA Canada. April 05, 2017. Accessed October 14, 2018. https://cphr.ca/blog/2017/04/04/performance-management-as-a-strategic-advantage/.

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[26] "Individual Development Plan." Accessed October 14, 2018. http://www.riley.army.mil/Portals/0/Docs/Services/SoldierSvcs/SFL/IDP Unit Intro.pdf.

[27] Sheridan, John E. "Organizational Culture and Employee Retention." Academy of Management Journal 35, no. 5 (1992).

and external consulting on what motivates operators to stay or go could unearth a trove of actionable information to ensure that CANSOFCOM is optimized.

RECOMMENDATION

9.   A thorough study of each member of the operator community should be undertaken to identify risks and opportunities on operator motivations to stay or leave CANSOFCOM.   The first milestone should be to establish goals and parameters for data collection. Further work can then be conducted to use this information to optimize CANSOFCOM operator retention.

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