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WORK FORCE MANAGEMENT IN THE CANADIAN FORCES HEALTH SERVICES GROUP

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Exercise Solo Flight

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**WORK FORCE MANAGEMENT IN THE CANADIAN FORCES
HEALTH SERVICES GROUP**

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WORK FORCE MANAGEMENT IN THE CANADIAN FORCES HEALTH SERVICES GROUP

Like many employers, the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) is impacted by the changing demographics of the Canadian workforce. These changes can be based on shifts in regional distribution of the population, age, education, and other aspects such as religion, gender, and ethnicity. The Canadian Forces Health Services Group (CF H Svcs Gp), which provides the CAF health system is also impacted by these fluctuations and in some cases the impact is amplified by the long training times associated with medical professions. The Government of Canada defence policy “Strong, Secure, Engaged” (SSE) has outlined progressive goals to increase the diversity of the CAF while at the same time retaining the existing skilled workforce.¹ From the health services perspective this creates the dual role of attracting diverse personnel while meeting the needs of current members of the team, which can be described as “work force management”.² The Health Services also has a role in supporting the recruitment and retention of military members through the quality and availability of services that are provided.³ Additionally, the CF H Svcs Gp certainly has a role to play as a leader in supporting diversity such as through the historic inclusion of women.⁴ An important consideration for workforce management is the reality that people tend to want to live and work near their extended families. Increasingly the Canadian population is concentrated in large urban centres

¹ Canada. Department of National Defence, *Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy* (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 2017), 23.

² C.A. Figueroa, *et al*, “Priorities and challenges for health leadership and workforce management globally: a rapid review.” *BMC health services research* 19, no. 1 (2019): 239.

³ Canada, Department of National Defence, *Surgeon General's Integrated Health Strategy – 2017*, (Ottawa, Department of National Defence, 2017), 10.

⁴ Canada, Director General Health Services. *Canadian Forces Medical Service – Introduction to its History and Heritage* (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 2003), 20.

such as Vancouver, Calgary and Toronto with the largest increases in Western Canada.⁵ Incidentally, it is also in large cities where the greatest diversity tends to exist.⁶ However, military requirements have tended to place Canadian Forces Bases far away from large urban centres. At the same time, rapid increases in technology have created opportunities to construct organizations that are supportive of non-traditional work arrangements such as telecommuting or virtual workplaces.⁷ With this in mind, it will be shown that the use of “location-independent” postings would foster diversity and support the recruitment and retention goals of the CF H Svcs Gp. This analysis will be accomplished by examining the specific diversity goals of SSE, by recognizing the changing demographics of Canada, and by defining and understanding the realities, limitations, and policy implications of the virtual workplace.

Of primary importance is to define the meaning of a location-independent posting or virtual workplace. This type of work can be defined as groups or teams that are spatially divided who do not have the benefit of frequent “face-to-face” contact. Location-independent personnel may work in satellite, home, or other non-traditional offices, may experience cultural differences, and may potentially work across multiple time zones. In this context, technology is used to communicate and collaborate.⁸ In some cases a shift to location-independent workplaces can significantly change the way that work is conducted or conversely in many cases existing work is already virtualised and

⁵ Statistics Canada, “Canada at a Glance 2018, Population” accessed 21 May 2019.

⁶ Statistics Canada, “Immigration and Ethnocultural Diversity Highlight Tables, 2016 Census” accessed 21 May 2019.

⁷ Fredrick M. Nafukho, Carroll M. Graham, and Helen Machuma A. Muya. "Harnessing and optimal utilization of human capital in virtual workplace environments." *Advances in Developing Human Resources* 12, no. 6 (2010): 649.

⁸ Diane Bailey, Paul M. Leonardi, and Stephen R. Barley. “The Lure of the Virtual.” *Organization Science* 23 no. 5 (2012): 1486.

there are few changes required.⁹ The ubiquitous use of technology throughout Canadian society combined with changing views on work-life harmony (or balance) has led to changes in what is considered a normal work day. In other words, employees today can have extreme flexibility in timing and duration of work considered “time-independent working” as well as flexibility in location which can be described as “location-independent working”.¹⁰ The combination of time and location independent working can be defined as “blended working”.¹¹ For the purposes of this analysis, the focus will be specifically on “location-independent” workplaces and the term virtual workplace will be used synonymously. Although some personnel quite successfully use virtual work to reduce commuting requirements, the flexibility and difficulties associated with greater distances will remain the primary focus. Within the CAF environment, location-independent workers can be described as individual military personnel working in traditional teams that would normally be collocated that use technology to collaborate while geographically dispersed.

Canada’s defence policy entitled Strong Secure Engaged (SSE) clearly articulates the requirement for the CAF to “reflect the diversity of the country we defend”.¹² One of the underlying goals of SSE is to recruit a diverse workforce “that looks like Canada”.¹³ To achieve this goal, the CAF is looking to attract, recruit, and retain more women and other minority groups into the organization. At the same time, SSE aims to retain skilled personnel within the institution through greater flexibility in career options within an

⁹ Dixon, Keith R., and Niki Panteli. "From virtual teams to virtuality in teams." *Human Relations* 63, no. 8 (2010): 1180.

¹⁰ N.W. Van Yperen, E.F. Rietzschel, K.M.M. De Jonge “Blended Working: For Whom It May (Not) Work”. *PLoS ONE* 9(7), 1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Canada. Department of National Defence, *SSE*, (2017), 20.

¹³ *Ibid.*

optimized work environment.¹⁴ Overall, the defence policy aims to review all aspects of CAF service to allow much greater flexibility and personalized professional opportunities.¹⁵ Increases to the Canadian population outside of normal CAF geographical centres, combined with the realisation that geographic stability is increasingly important for military members, may require changes in the way the CAF looks at posting or moving its personnel. The CF H Svcs Gp has unique challenges in recruiting of personnel but also has the ability to lead the CAF in encouraging a diverse workforce due to the expanse of equivalent civilian professions.¹⁶ It is also the availability of equivalent employment within the provincial healthcare systems that is forcing the CAF Health Services to be more competitive and therefore creative in order to recruit and retain personnel. Accordingly, it can be argued that policy changes that support career flexibility such as virtual work will also support the aims of SSE and the workforce management goals of the CF H Svcs Gp.

With the workforce management goals of SSE in mind it is important to ask the question: what are the underlying issues with retention and recruiting for the CAF? One significant issue is the shift of the Canadian population away from traditional CAF locations and sources of recruiting towards Western Canada. In 2016 the fastest growing cities in Canada were Calgary and Edmonton while much of Eastern Canada tended to maintain or decrease in population size.¹⁷ If it is assumed that personnel will generally want to live close to where their friends and extended families are located, a growing gap

¹⁴ Ibid, 22.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Canada, Canadian Forces Health Services Group. *Surgeon General's Report 2014* (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 2014), 31.

¹⁷ Statistics Canada, "Population and Dwelling Count Highlight Tables, 2016 Census" accessed 21 May 2019. Toronto is a notable exception in Eastern Canada and experiences similar distance from established garrisons.

in the CAF infrastructure and optimized work locations is developing. In other words, there are not enough Canadian Forces Bases near the locations where personnel want to live so therefore the CAF needs to create opportunities for personnel to work where they want to live. To compound this problem is the reality that the most desirable and expanding locations in Canada are also expensive locations to live and likewise costly locations to develop infrastructure. Additionally, large urban locations often have issues with cost of living, congestion, and transportation which can make it difficult to locate large military installations nearby. The established salary of military personnel compared to local costs of living may make it impractical for the CAF to locate a large garrison in close proximity to a city such as Vancouver without significant changes to benefits. Nonetheless, smaller groups of current and prospective members of the CAF who have roots or a desire to live close to a city such as Vancouver would likely accept the economic realities, particularly if long commutes were not required. Accordingly, updates to policies that encourage location-independent work will reduce the requirement for new garrisons while supporting the workforce management goals of the CF H Svcs Gp.

Although the definition of “Millennial” and “Post Millennial” are not always agreed upon, the reality is that regardless of birthdate, most recruits and personnel within the CAF will be heavily influenced by technology throughout their lives. It is reasonable to argue that many of the characteristics of technology enabled generations are optimum for supporting a virtual environment while simultaneously making employers that offer virtual workplaces more desirable to these employees. High usage of online communication and social networks indicates that many young Canadians are already

familiar with collaborating and connecting using technology¹⁸ and these traits can be capitalized upon within a military environment. Likewise, a desire to more readily combine work and leisure time or “weisure” time means that workplaces that offer more flexible workspaces are more desirable.¹⁹ It is important to note that Millennials may view outdated or ineffective technology extremely negatively,²⁰ therefore it is vital for CAF institutional credibility to not only invest in technology but also to maximise the use of technology. Overall, virtual workplaces can be considered a tool for the CF H Svcs Gp to improve recruitment and retention of technology enabled Canadians while potentially benefiting from the strengths of this demographic.

On initial review, it may seem that location-independent work is a futuristic concept at best used out of necessity to support unique and often temporary personal situations or for civilian companies with global supply chains. However, on further examination the current vast use of technology for communication has already created a deep level of virtualization within the CAF. In fact, it is important to question whether the traditional boundaries of teams really exist and to what extent is work actually done virtually by collocated teams.²¹ For example, it is not uncommon for a team to receive external specialised support through technology (such as phone or e-mail) nor is it uncommon for co-workers in the same office to use technology (such as SharePoint or e-mail) to collaborate or share info. Improvements in video and phone conferencing, file sharing software, and other collaboration tools vastly reduce the requirement for face-to-

¹⁸ Alan Okros, "Slide to Unlock: Implications from the Harnessing 21st Century Competencies Project." Report Submitted to DGMRA (August 2015), 16.

¹⁹ Ibid, 19.

²⁰ Ibid, 22.

²¹ Keith R. Dixon, and Niki Panteli, "From virtual teams to virtuality in teams." *Human Relations*, 63, no. 8 (2010): 1180.

face communication. The vast majority of CAF personnel use technology in performing their duties which has become the norm. In the United States which has similar cultural influences close to 20% of the adult workforce have worked virtually since 2005 and approximately 50% were very interested in working virtually.²² It is in fact possible for teams to train and interact within a completely simulated work environment.²³ For perspective it is also useful to consider that many CAF operations are successfully conducted by small geographically (internationally) dispersed teams with a centralised HQ structure that commands through virtual means (such as e-mail, video, phone, and e-documents). Interestingly, there is evidence that collocation or close “proximity” does not necessarily increase cooperation and coordination compared with dispersed teams and that team goals and identity can have greater impact on coordination.²⁴ Furthermore, face-to-face opportunities can continue to be developed and act as an extension to the virtual office, particularly if savings from retention and reduced cost moves are re-invested in travel. Overall, there already exists a significant level of virtualization within the CAF and accordingly policies that support location-independent opportunities are not actually a significant change from existing work practices. It is therefore reasonable for the CF H Svcs Gp to expand virtual workplace opportunities.

When considering the advantages of a virtual workforce it is important to reflect on some of the costs associated with the current CAF structure. For example, when the expense of Imposed Restriction (IR) is examined (personnel living away from their

²² N.W. Van Yperen, E.F. Rietzschel, K.M.M. De Jonge “Blended Working: For Whom It May (Not) Work”. *PLOS ONE*, 9 no. 7 (2014): 2.

²³ Diane Bailey, Paul M. Leonardi, and Stephen R. Barley, “The Lure of the Virtual.” *Organization Science* 23, no. 5 (2012): 1488.

²⁴ Michael Boyer O, Leary, Jeanne M. Wilson, and Anca Metiu. “Beyond Being There: The Symbolic Role of Communication and Identification in Perceptions of Proximity to Geographically Dispersed Colleagues1.” *MIS Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (2014): 1220.

families to support family quality of life) the potential advantages of location-independent work become apparent. In 2019 a member living in Esquimalt will receive \$816 as a Post-Living Differential (PLD)²⁵ allowance while the same member living away from their family in Ottawa would receive \$1,600 in IR allowance per month.²⁶ Additionally, posting a member from Esquimalt to Ottawa with their family would cost significantly more, especially when opportunity costs, personal expenses, and family impacts are considered. It is a common CAF practice for personnel to move from a tactical unit at one base to a higher headquarters at another base to gain/share experience and then to return to the original base. With increased virtual workplace options many of these postings could be avoided altogether, although there certainly would remain negative impacts to reduced exposure to alternate locations/experiences that would be very difficult to fully mitigate virtually. In situations where personnel are working from home or other suitable locations, the reduction on commuting costs and increased personal free time with the associated reduction in environmental pollution are significant. A secondary benefit exists in that senior personnel within the CAF tend to be centralized within the National Capital Region (NCR) and there is potential benefit to increased interaction with and mentorship of junior personnel and those dealing with tactical issues that could be supported through a more dispersed workforce.²⁷

There are some clear disadvantages to virtual work which must be considered within the overall discussion. The primary drawback is the inability to directly monitor

²⁵ Canada, Department of National Defence, Compensation and Benefits Instructions, accessed 21 May 21, 2019, 205.45. In many situations the PLD rate would be zero which would accentuate the advantages of location-independent work, while the costs for even short moves would remain very similar.

²⁶ Ibid, 208.997.

²⁷ It is acknowledged that in some cases the intermingling of HQ and line personnel could create the perception and/or the temptation for operational or strategic leaders to become overly involved with tactical issues, nonetheless this issue is manageable and the likely benefits would outweigh the difficulties created.

the work of virtual subordinates or likewise the difficulty for virtual leaders to directly impact, influence, and monitor the workplace. However, virtual collaboration tools, video and regular project updates drastically reduce this impact.²⁸ Similarly, mission command (communicating intent, while allowing flexibility in execution of tasks) is a skill and process that is encouraged within the military context that can counterbalance this issue.²⁹ Even so, it will be vastly more difficult within a virtual environment to deal with situations where there are serious disciplinary or administrative issues and travel or collocation will need to exist as options for supervisors. Ensuring the security of information (and to some extent personnel) must also be taken into consideration when communicating and storing information virtually. In a health services environment the protection of privacy through effective security measures becomes even more important. At the same time, there are significant risks to heavy reliance on technology which are compounded by dispersed worksites and home offices. Nonetheless, it is possible to argue that a shutdown of a local e-mail server or network would quickly show that even collocated personnel are heavily reliant on technology and most work would grind to a halt. There is some evidence that the anonymous nature of communication and interactions with virtual identities can actually increase discrimination, bias, and negative workplace interactions.³⁰ Likewise, virtual personnel are more likely to have “reduced contact and exposure to strong organizational structures and processes (including organizational dress, symbols, rituals, and ceremonies)” that would normally be

²⁸ Surinder S. Kahai, Rui Huang, and Rebecca J. Jestic. "Interaction effect of leadership and communication media on feedback positivity in virtual teams." *Group & Organization Management* 37, no. 6 (2012): 716-751.

²⁹ Canada, Department of National Defence, *Canadian Forces Joint Publication, CFJP 01, Canadian Military Doctrine*. Ottawa: Canadian Forces Experimentation Centre, 2009, 4-3.

³⁰ Natasha T. Martin, "Diversity and the Virtual Workplace: Performance Identity and Shifting Boundaries of Workplace Engagement," *Lewis & Clark Law Review* 16, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 609.

considered a part of the military culture.³¹ Overall it will be important to maintain systems and events that foster group cohesion and identity supported by clear policy to address security concerns and to develop SOPs to address IT difficulties and failures. The potential benefits of location-independent work places in support of retention and recruitment would compensate for the increased but manageable support costs.

An important question is: whether extensive use of location-independent workplaces can reasonably be established within existing policy? The short answer is that through the use of Military Manning Overhead (MMO) and “Geo-Locked” positions it is already possible to adjust the geographic location of a position within the CAF.³² Likewise, CAF policies that support “telecommuting” are already in place and are actively encouraged in locations such as the National Capital Region (NCR).³³ Nonetheless it will be necessary to adjust and develop clear policies to support a CAF wide policy. It is therefore useful to examine some of the policy issues that the CF H Svcs Gp will have to consider if widespread support of location-independent positions is to be considered. It is clear that not all positions within the Health Services can be opened up to location-independent options yet it is likely that many positions could be. Consider that a physician in some cases needs to physically touch a body part to properly diagnose a patient, however in some cases video interactions could be suitable, while administrative work such as file review can often reasonably be done virtually. The same

³¹ Cristina B. Gibson, et al, “Including the ‘I’ in Virtuality and Modern Job Design: Extending the Job Characteristics Model to Include the Moderating Effect of Individual Experiences of Electronic Dependence and Copresence.” *Organization Science* 22 no. 6 (2011): 1484.

³² Canada, Department of National Defence, *Compensation and Benefits Instructions*, accessed 21 May 21, 2019, 205.10(4). Geo-locked refers to positions that have been temporarily moved to another geographic location.

³³ Canada, Vice Chief of Defence Staff, *DND/CAF Leadership Support For The Use of Alternative Work Arrangements (AWAs) Within the NCR*. National Defence Headquarters: file 6000-1(DGWM), 18 December 2017.

physician could potentially work a number of years in a location-dependent role (such as clinical work) then switch to a location-independent role (such as policy development) allowing the member to maintain their lifestyle without the disruption of a posting. Some changes in CAF culture and duties may be required in order to support significant shifts to a virtual workforce. For instance, secondary duties that require physical presence would be increasingly difficult as the number of personnel in physical offices in one location fluctuate. Conversely, desirable office locations could have to deal with the complexity of organizing and supporting a diverse and loosely connected group of individuals with the potential for conflict in prioritizing limited workspaces if demand is greater than supply. Nonetheless, many of these issues could be effectively addressed with properly developed command relationships, service level agreements, clear direction on allocation of workspaces, and policies on prioritization of resources. Location-independent work does not necessarily need to be time-independent, however when time zones are considered, overlapping of schedules becomes increasingly complicated and therefore standard hours of work may need to be reconsidered. Medical, logistical, and administrative support will need to be clearly defined and allocated appropriately to locations serving personnel working virtually. Likewise, domestic operations requirements and the ability of health services personnel to train and deploy must be taken into consideration. Accordingly, it may be necessary to limit virtual locations to those that are near existing CAF services such as Reserve Force Units or for some travel costs to be at the member's expense and to impose some regional quotas. The difficulties with managing inappropriate conduct or personnel who are not adequately performing have already been discussed and it will be important to have robust policies to support managing personnel from a distance. A formalized application and selection process for

approving suitable candidates for virtual work would be a potential aid and could be managed by the existing career management and succession planning systems.

The demographics of the Canadian population and therefore future CAF recruits continues to change and SSE has specific diversity goals designed to keep the CAF current with these trends. The ever increasing virtualization of existing workplaces combined with a technology enabled workforce means that it is an opportune time to reanalyse current organizations and policies. The many benefits of location-independent work can complement the other desirable aspects of the CAF and these advantages outweigh the legitimate difficulties and frictions created by virtual work. It is clear that virtual workplaces can be supported and approved within existing CAF policy and that policy gaps could be reasonably filled to optimise this type of work. It is therefore clear that the use of “location-independent” postings could foster diversity and support the recruitment and retention goals of the CF H Svcs Gp. Future policy development should focus on identifying specific positions within the CF H Svcs Gp that could be assigned location-independent status while also providing Career Managers with the flexibility to assign positions based on qualifications, merit, and support of the member’s lifestyle. These types of proactive measures have great potential to positively impact recruitment and retention and accordingly to strengthen the CAF, and should be energetically pursued.

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