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EMBRACING THE CHALLENGE: UNDERSTANDING AND IMPROVING RETENTION IN THE RCCS

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UNDERSTANDING AND IMPROVING RETENTION IN THE RCCS

AIM

1. This service paper outlines options the Royal Canadian Corps of Signals (RCCS), and by extension the Communications and Electronics (C&E) Branch, can assess for use in addressing current and future retention challenges. A thorough understanding of what is causing attrition is essential to improving retention consequently, in addition to proposing retention improvement options, consideration is given to what can be done to improve root cause understanding of member attrition given the current employment environment. Underpinning the work is an examination of relevant academic human resource management theory, and some of the approaches our allies' and the private sector are taking as they struggle with this challenge.¹

INTRODUCTION

2. In its Command Support and Signals Review the Canadian Army acknowledged retention of Signalers as a major issue for two main reasons: the ubiquitous use of technology in modern Command Support systems; and, employment competition.² This acknowledgement legitimizes retention issues the C&E Branch, and RCCS, have faced for years but which the Canadian Army (CA) should be better postured to manage given the Office of the Auditor General's (OAG) comment in 1990 of "the need for a long-term focus in managing military personnel."^{3,4} In spite of this early warning there is no evidence the CAF, or CA, adequately addressed personnel management and retention; or, at least none that the OAG could find based on further

¹ Tim Johnson, "The Real Problem With Tech Professionals: High Turnover," *Forbes Business Development Council*, 29 June 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesbusinessdevelopmentcouncil/2018/06/29/the-real-problem-with-tech-professionals-high-turnover/#53092d074201>

² Canadian Army service paper problem statement submission to CFC in fiscal year 2018-2019.

³ Office of the Auditor General of Canada. *April 2002 Report of the Auditor General of Canada to the House of Commons: Chapter 5 National Defence – Recruitment and Retention of Military Personnel*. (2002: Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada), 3.

⁴ Canadian Army service paper problem statement submission to CFC in fiscal year 2018-2019.

examinations of CAF recruiting and retention again in its 2002, 2006 and 2016 reports. In aggregate these reports indicate the CAF did not develop effective retention strategies in a timely manner and once developed it did not effectively implement those strategies, which has resulted in a failure to meet personnel requirements year over year since at least 2011.^{5,6,7} Although the 2016 report did not name specific trades as having retention issues, it did find the Army Communications and Information System Specialist trade as one facing lengthy wait times for training which was a source of demoralization and frustration for those awaiting training.⁸

3. The RCCS will always face retention challenges for most of its occupations, however the combination of an ineffective CAF retention program with the need for competent information technology professionals, which have the highest turnover rates of any industry sector,⁹ is a recipe for failure. To help avoid such an outcome the attrition problem will be examined first, using clinical psychologist and renowned business management researcher, Dr. Frederick Herzberg's, hygiene-motivation theory as an analysis framework.¹⁰ This theory posits that two sets of factors impact job satisfaction: factors for satisfaction (motivators/satisfiers) and factors for dissatisfaction (hygiene factors/dissatisfiers); and, most importantly it states that improving a dissatisfier does not mean the employee will be more productive (or motivated), just that they

⁵ Office of the Auditor General of Canada. *April 2002 Report of the Auditor General of Canada to the House of Commons: Chapter 5 National Defence – Recruitment and Retention of Military Personnel*. (2002: Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada), 12-13.

⁶ Office of the Auditor General of Canada. *May 2006 Report of the Auditor General of Canada to the House of Commons: Chapter 2 National Defence – Military Recruiting and Retention*. (2006: Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada), 63-67

⁷ Office of the Auditor General of Canada. *Fall 2016 Reports of the Auditor General of Canada: Report 5 Canadian Armed Forces Recruitment and Retention — National Defence*. (2016: Office of the Auditor General of Canada), 20.

⁸ Ibid, 18-19

⁹ Michael Booz LinkedIn Talent Blog, "These 3 Industries Have the Highest Talent Turnover Rates," last modified 15 March 2018, <https://business.linkedin.com/talent-solutions/blog/trends-and-research/2018/the-3-industries-with-the-highest-turnover-rates>

¹⁰ Wikipedia, "Frederick Herzberg," last modified 26 September 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederick_Herzberg.

will be less dissatisfied, and vice-versa.¹¹ Herzberg and others have used the theory to explain employee productivity; however, it will now be applied to employee attrition based on the deduction that dissatisfiers can lead employees to depart an organization even if they do not make them less motivated or productive. Retention options will then be examined, to include efforts by the United States military and Australian Defence Force (ADF).

DISCUSSION

4. A variety of factors impact RCCS attrition and retention which are distributed along the spectrum of institutional control.¹² Some the CAF controls completely, such as internally generated career management policies and processes which can frustrate members and hamper adaptation to the rapidly changing contemporary work environment. Others, however, are generally outside the control of the CAF, such as technology advances, globalization and the multi-generational workforce.¹³ First attrition will be examined as a precursor to making retention recommendations.

Attrition - Understanding Root Causes

5. To improve retention, it is essential to first understand why members choose to leave the RCCS for alternate employment. Fundamental to understanding the factors causing attrition is the collection and analysis of data on those who are leaving, the primary mechanism for collecting this data is the exit interview. The 2016 OAG report found that retention surveys were conducted every two years in the Regular Force to evaluate members' perceptions, however no

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² No academic definition was found for the term "spectrum of institutional control". It is being used to describe the degree to which an institution can exert control over something affecting it. The degree of control can range from no control to complete (or full) control.

¹³ Nicholas Born and Elad Drori, "What Factors Will Transform the Contemporary Work Environment and Characterize the Future of Work?," *Cornell University ILR Collection Student Works* (Spring 2015): 2-3, <http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/student/78>

mention is made of exit interview results.¹⁴

6. Although there are undoubtedly uses for the information collected during retention surveys, they will not provide data about why members have chosen to leave. Additionally, the author¹⁵ has overseen the departure of numerous members employed in telecommunications and cyber security and has never been directed to conduct a standardized exit interview. It can be concluded that there is currently no general or occupation specific exit interview program in place within the CAF, CA or RCCS.

7. The research indicates unequivocally that exit interviews can serve as a critical tool to uncover underlying reasons for attrition, data which if used properly can lead to improved retention.¹⁶ Thus it is highly recommended that the RCCS work with Army G1, Military Personnel Command (MPC) and occupation employers to develop occupation specific exit interviews, ensure they are completed, and ensure the data is collated, analyzed and acted upon.

Attrition – Applying Partial Hygiene-Motivation Theory

8. The following section will use partial Herzberg hygiene-motivation theory to assess employee reasons for departure from information technology fields and identify dissatisfiers leading directly to attrition. Ideally the data would have come from CAF exit interviews, however as was previously identified this data is not available so other sources will be leveraged to provide an initial assessment.

9. A study conducted in 2010-2011, wherein 140 people were polled and 88 responded, found the following nine reasons were given by former U.S. military IT professionals about why

¹⁴ Office of the Auditor General of Canada. *Fall 2016 Reports of the Auditor General of Canada: Report 5 Canadian Armed Forces Recruitment and Retention — National Defence*. (2016: Office of the Auditor General of Canada), 21.

¹⁵ The author is a Signals Officer with twelve years of service split between CA signals organizations and the Information Management Group where he worked with the CAF Cyber Defence unit for two years.

¹⁶ Martha A. Stock, “Employee retention through the use of an exit interview” (master’s thesis, Iowa State University, 1996), 21-22, <https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rtd/16956>

they had transitioned to civilian employment: monetary compensation; quality of life; job variety; job training; career advancement; benefits; job recognition; geographic location; and, other. In addition to those reasons, the study also found the top three reasons for departing the military were, in order of priority: monetary compensation; quality of life; and, job variety.¹⁷

10. In applying the Hygiene-Motivation theory, the fundamental question is whether the factor is one that makes the employee want to work harder or not. If the answer is yes, then the factor is a motivator and is not likely the only reason they would have left. Applying this to the list above, the following departure reasons are assessed to be “hygiene factors” and are likely to be primary reasons for departure:

- a. Monetary compensation is already identified by Herzberg as a hygiene factor and remains so here. The RCCS should advocate for the ability to offer additional financial compensation for high demand professions.
- b. Quality of life does not affect the desire to work hard or be productive, but at a certain point if quality of life is too negatively impacted then one will look for employment elsewhere. For stressed occupations the RCCS should consider assessing postings and deployments on a case-by-case basis.
- c. Job training in the sense that waiting for training (as per OAG report) and lack of training can be significant dissatisfiers; however, advanced training is primarily a motivator. The RCCS must continue to work with the recruiting group and with the schools to minimize training wait times and should examine outsourcing much of the commodity IT training to colleges or universities.

¹⁷ Paul B. Warner, “Examining Military Retention Rates of IT Service Members: Research Towards Mitigating the Loss of IT Professional Service Members,” (master’s thesis, Regis University, 2011), 29, <http://epublications.regis.edu/theses>

- d. Benefits are a potential dissatisfier, however this study was conducted with U.S. military personnel and CAF benefits such as pension are considered to be superior to those of the U.S. military, so this is less a factor for the RCCS.
 - e. Geographic location is often closely linked to quality of life in that postings happen far too often which impacts family life and can be destabilizing to personal life. Like quality of life, the RCCS needs to be very deliberate in its approach to moves and their impact on members in stressed trades.
11. Although this was a cursory application of the theory to data that is not directly linked to RCCS personnel, there are clear trends between U.S. military IT professionals and RCCS members which indicates that this model is applicable and can assist in understanding the root causes of attrition.

Improving Retention

Train people well enough so they can leave, treat them well enough so they don't want to.

- Richard Branson, Twitter, @richardbranson, 27 March 2014

Improving Retention – The Contemporary Work Environment

12. To ensure retention efforts are going to be lasting it is important to examine the factors which are likely to impact retention now and, in the future. Three significant factors identified previously and applicable to all employers are: technology, globalization and the multi-generational workforce.¹⁸
13. The implications of technology advancements for the RCCS from a retention perspective are two-fold. First is the need manage the notion that increased on-boarding of technology will

¹⁸ Nicholas Born and Elad Drori, "What Factors Will Transform the Contemporary Work Environment and Characterize the Future of Work?," *Cornell University ILR Collection Student Works* (Spring 2015): 2-3, <http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/student/78>

result in Person-Year (PY) reductions, which can impact both recruiting and career management policies and actions. If not managed carefully this can lead to personnel departing the military only to return as contractors or public servants to do the exact same work. Second is the requirement to assess technology advancements as quickly as possible to determine if the force will need to and whether they are

14. Globalization has less of a direct impact to the RCCS as compared to the private sector, however the second-order effect of globalization on retention is the potential for outsourcing certain activities to achieve a cost savings. This can be beneficial to the RCCS in that it could allow re-allocation of personnel to stressed trades, however it can also lead to attrition if personnel are not willing to transfer. A deliberate assessment, to include personnel surveys should be conducted to assess the pros and cons so that leadership can make an informed decision.

15. The multi-generational workforce will impact all sectors, including the military. A study by Price-Waterhouse-Cooper of its workforce, which consists of two-thirds Millennials, found that they are less willing to make their work lives an exclusive priority, want job flexibility now, desire training and mobility, and want more frequent feedback and rewards.¹⁹ The RCCS needs to develop plans now to be able to retain employees of this demographic in the future.

Improving Retention – Internal Adjustments

16. The quote “you never get a second chance to make a first impression” is applicable to employee retention in that opinions about whether the military is truly a long-term employment option are formed the moment someone is recruited into the institution. To ensure it can retain

¹⁹ Nicholas Born and Elad Drori, “What Factors Will Transform the Contemporary Work Environment and Characterize the Future of Work?,” *Cornell University ILR Collection Student Works* (Spring 2015): 3, <http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/student/78>

personnel for as long as possible in such a competitive sector the RCCS must advocate for its uniqueness in this space to have flexibility to compete with other employers.

17. “The Canadian Armed Forces should develop, implement, monitor, and evaluate measures to optimize retention for each occupation.”²⁰ The RCCS should establish a dedicated team to develop and implement this recommendation based on its unique needs and pursue opportunities to work with experts in MPC to develop targeted retention programs for each of its occupations.

18. To try and prevent attrition before it happens the RCCS should advocate for policy allowances that would empower commanders and career managers with options to retain personnel who have indicated a desire to retire from the CAF. These could be financial benefits, the ability to alter postings, alternate work-hours that enable a better work-life balance, and number of these possibilities.

19. Promote the RCCS as an employer of choice and create an environment that will draw the most talented individuals then provide them with the opportunity to excel. The RCCS needs to re-examine training generalists as it does not lend itself to producing technically competent soldiers, which as the second order effect of lowering our credibility with allies and our equivalents in government and the private sector. Additionally, as generalists progress in rank the time available to become experts in something diminishes, so without a solid technical foundation we run the risk of producing senior leaders who do not understand the technology they are supposed to be leading people to employ.

Improving Retention – United States Military

²⁰ Office of the Auditor General of Canada. *Fall 2016 Reports of the Auditor General of Canada: Report 5 Canadian Armed Forces Recruitment and Retention — National Defence*. (2016: Office of the Auditor General of Canada), 22.

20. The Department of Defense attempted to make dramatic changes under Secretary of Defense Ash Carter, under the moniker of “The Force of the Future”. This concept closely reflects the significant proposals in the CAF concept called “The Journey”. Unfortunately, Congress did not fund the majority of the proposals in “The Force of the Future” so Canada will not have the opportunity to assess its effectiveness before pursuing its own major changes. However, they have made investments to support retention by focusing on the military family through expanded parental leave, nursing facilities in DoD facilities expanded daycare hours to reduce strain on military families.²¹

Improving Retention – Australian Defence Force

21. The ADF have pursued monetary bonuses in an effort to retain technical trades and research has been produced recommending significant human resource management adjustments to allow them to be a competitive employer.²²

CONCLUSION

22. For years the CAF failed to dedicate sufficient resources and effort to the critical issue of retention. With the exponential growth of the technology sector, competition for the human capital needed to operate and excel in this domain is fierce so the RCCS must advocate for the necessary flexibility needed to compete.

23. The RCCS faces significant internal and external challenges to its ability to retain its skilled members, and the contemporary work environment is not conducive to traditional military careers and career management practices. This cursory examination of the issue has

²¹ Ash Carter, “What I Learned from Transforming the U.S. Military’s Approach to Talent,” *Harvard Business Review*, (Spring: 2017): 6, <https://hbr.org/2017/05/what-i-learned-from-transforming-the-u-s-militarys-approach-to-talent>

²² Keith Thomas and Steve Bell, “Competing for the Best and Brightest: Recruitment and Retention in the Australian Defence Force,” *Security Challenges* 3, no. 1 (February 2007), 116-117.

identified two broad categories of work that can be pursued, attrition analysis and retention programs. Both will come with resource bills and challenges, however if the intent is to maintain a relevant, capable and competent force then it is essential that priority be placed on addressing these challenges. The RCCS must identify its personnel as vital ground and be true to “People First” by pursuing solutions that support their development and well being while ensuring it is seen as an employer of choice.

RECOMMENDATIONS

24. To improve attrition understanding work with Army G1, MCP and units to develop and implement exit interview processes for all RCCS members and invest in personnel resources to ensure the long-term success of attrition analytics.
25. In line with Strong Secure Engaged initiative 5, pursue investment in resources to examine the recommendations herein, and to develop and implement retention strategies and programs tailored to the RCCS.
26. Consider establishing a dedicated team that consists of RCCS military professionals and either contracted or public servant subject matter experts in human resource management to oversee all attrition and retention efforts.

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