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Solo Flight

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**TELEWORK IN THE ROYAL CANADIAN NAVY:
A NECESSARY LEAP FORWARD**

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TELEWORK IN THE ROYAL CANADIAN NAVY: A NECESSARY LEAP FORWARD

INTRODUCTION

With the arrival of the SARS Co2 virus, the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) assumed a posture where the primary focus was to protect the force. Through these efforts, the organization was compelled to use as much telework as possible to limit in person interactions. Despite this new reliance on the virtual means, unit leaders and headquarters staff continued to carry out their tasks and responsibilities.

This situation has forced the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) to lean towards technology that enables remote work; tools which many private industry companies already had in place and that have been recently integrated within the defence ministry's firewalls. Our experiences from the last year offer the CAF a chance to consider how the institution will conduct its business when we return to more normal operations. With modern communication means available, the Navy would be remiss if it does not seize the opportunity to reshape its human resource management practices and take advantage of the knowledge gained throughout the pandemic response.

It is a forgone conclusion that industry will continue to use remote work tools given their notable benefits observed over the past year. Our decision makers should carefully consider the competitive nature of the labour market and the need to keep productive members within the Forces to address personnel shortages which are the lynchpin of the growing Attraction and Retention challenges. The current defence policy recognizes that our military has faltered with its retention goals and multiple studies have been conducted to understand the genesis and possible solutions. It is critical for the RCN

to evaluate innovative approaches in order to remain an appealing employer to our trained staff and an attractive option for prospective candidates. To this end, the Navy must take steps that enable flexible work arrangements, improve quality of life including family considerations, as well as initiatives that have shown a positive track record in the corporate sector. Telework is such an option that needs to be made available where feasible.

This paper will demonstrate that it is not only possible, but desirable, to maximize telework alternatives in a post-pandemic environment. The RCN should implement a policy that offers the opportunity for members posted in a headquarters position to remain in their current city, therefore avoiding disruptive and costly moves across the country. To accomplish this, we should take stock of what is done in industry as well as capitalize on RCN infrastructure on both coasts and nationwide with the Naval Reserve Divisions (NRD) to support the dispersed personnel. This paper will review the capabilities afforded by technological solutions, demonstrate the advantages of telework in the corporate world, illustrate the benefits to the RCN, and address the challenges of such a policy.

DISCUSSION

Technology

In September 2019, HMCS *Donnacona*, the Montreal NRD, initiated a pilot project to utilize Microsoft 365 cloud-based services for its routine operations. In March 2020, this small scope roll out was quickly broadened to the entire CAF. With this tool and the increased accessibility to the Defence Wide Area Network via remote connections, the Forces were able to continue their work while mostly remaining home

throughout the lockdown. In the word of the Lieutenant-General Eyre, the Acting Chief of Defence Staff, “one of the things from the pandemic is that it taught us to use technology.”¹ The platforms which were already widely exploited in the corporate sector offer capabilities such as video conferencing to replace in-person meetings.² They also put forward transformative methods to conduct business which are improving the way we cooperate on projects and address workflow in a manner best described as creating organizational agility. Large companies that were employing these collaborative systems prior to the pandemic, and have increased their use in the past year, are driving innovation and competition between the computer giants.³ The transition to cloud computing has accelerated dramatically since the lockdown and will likely not be rolled back when restrictions are eventually be eased.⁴ This focus by the private sector on the new tools offers an opportunity for the military to join the trend and restructure its own business model.

Corporate Advantages

With the large portions of the population currently working remotely, corporations have access to a massive sample size from which to draw their conclusions on the impacts of telework. A recurring result was surprising; contrary to initial belief, the efficiency of personnel markedly increased when working from home.⁵ Employees were found to feel more productive and they also stated that they fulfilled deadlines

¹ Lieutenant General Eerie, parliamentary hearing on sexual misconduct, 23 March 2021.

² John Koetsier, “Microsoft: 775% Increase in Cloud Services, 44 Million Daily Teams Users, 900 Million Meeting Minutes Weekly” Forbes Magazine, (29 March 2020.)

³ Evan Ellis, “The Current Pandemic Gives Cloud Computing a Needed Jolt,” Forbes, 22 May 2020.

⁴ McKinsey Quarterly, “Three actions CEOs can take to get value from cloud computing,” McKinsey and Company, (July 2020.)

⁵ Global Workplace Analytics, “The Business Case for Remote Work—For Employers, Employees, the Environment, and Society,” 2021, 7.

ahead of schedule. For instance, a review conducted with staff from an American online learning company, Chegg, determined that workers were quantifiable more productive.⁶ The improvements were the result of a reduction of meetings that tended to include unnecessary ad hoc participants; by limiting the audience to the intended people only, there were no adverse effect on outputs and excluded teammates were able to continue their normal routine. Similar conclusions were equally noted in several sizeable enterprises such as Cisco, Deutsche Bank, and Eventbrite.⁷ The suppression of obsolete, or superfluous tasks, previously done out of habit allowed for management to refocus on other objectives and offered the opportunity to reconsider what is essential. Harvard Business Review conducted its own analysis and found that productivity rose by 12% overall for staff working from home.⁸ This was further distilled, recognizing that the reduction of time attributed to large meetings accounted for a 9% amelioration, hours which were then reinvested in stakeholder interactions.

In the same vein, a sizeable Chinese study executed in a travel agency experienced similar improvements using a randomly selected test group of nearly one thousand employees. It was noted that after the ten-month evaluation, half of the participants elected to return to the office including most of those who had inferior ratings in remote work. This left only the staff which wanted to stay home to continue telework, from this reduced group, the productivity boost climbed to 22% compared to people in the office.⁹ This provides insight that any telework policy needs to be desired

⁶ David Gelles, "Are Companies More Productive in a Pandemic," New York Times, 23 June 2020.

⁷ *IBID*

⁸ Julian Birkinshaw, Jordan Cohen and Pawel Stach, "Research: Knowledge Workers Are More Productive from Home," Harvard Business Review, (August 3, 2020.)

⁹ Nicholas Bloom, et al., "Does Working From Home Work? Evidence from a Chinese Experiment," Quarterly Journal of Economics (March 2015), 170.

by the employee for the maximal benefits to be observed. The study's efficiencies were broken down with the largest gain being 35 minutes saved daily because of less frequent interruptions, it was also noted that half the time normally used for commuting was reinvested into the organization which is, of course, advantageous to overall output of a firm.¹⁰

Other identified positive effects of teleworking include a key decline in employee absenteeism and a generally increased motivation towards work.¹¹ More importantly, the flexibility bolstered retention through improved life balance and job satisfaction.¹² In a labour market that gives the employees the upper hand, retention of personnel is a key driver to keeping a business going, not to mention that turnover carries the costs of the hiring and training processes. The Chinese travel agency experiment concluded that attrition was reduced by half, demonstrating that the increase in employee satisfaction translated into enhanced loyalty to the company.¹³ With organizations competing aggressively to attract new talent with benefits that suit the current generation's aspiration, it is important for our policies to align, as much as practicable, to the corporate world if the RCN wishes to be competitive.

A further gain was the contraction in required footprint to house all the people. In a concept called Advanced Workspace Strategies, which include what is known as *hoteling*, companies like the international accounting firm Deloitte have given all their employees a laptop and a locker.¹⁴ No one has a desk of their own, not even the

¹⁰ Global Workplace Analytics, "The Business Case for Remote Work—For Employers, Employees, the Environment, and Society," 2021, 9.

¹¹ *IBID*, 15.

¹² Invest Northern Ireland, "Employees working from home—Advantages and disadvantages of employees working at home," Northern Ireland Business Info, (NiBusinessinfo.co.uk accessed 16 February 2021.)

¹³ "Does Working From Home Work? Evidence from a Chinese Experiment," 212.

¹⁴ Deloitte, "Advanced Workplace Strategies," 2015.

managing partner. This has diminished the corporate office space necessary to accommodate staff, and thus the costs of sustaining them.¹⁵ For their part, the Chinese travel agency denoted an annual savings of \$2,000 per head.¹⁶

The idea of Telework is not new in the public sector, back in 1999, the Canadian Treasury Board already had a policy supporting this trend and detailed many of the benefits listed in the previous section.¹⁷ Such a policy was drafted for knowledge-based employment, a type of member which is often found in our headquarters. The RAND Corporation did a review of American government agencies that deal with sensitive data that offer telework, they concluded that with certain security parameters in place the use of remote working has been advantageous.¹⁸ They noted that it generated flexibility and increased availability of personnel when handling with a crisis. A second RAND study showed that 40% of employers have some of their staff teleworking on a regular basis, including governmental agencies.¹⁹ In fact, in 2010 the United States Congress passed the “Telework Enhancement Act” mandating them to put such policies in effect.²⁰

Benefits to RCN

Let’s consider the impacts on an RCN headquarters environment if we were to take this public service model and include the previously discussed benefits from the corporate experience. What can be derived is that in addition to the productivity boost demonstrated with the application of telework, the RCN has opportunity to tackle some of its key

¹⁵ Alexander Soule, “In ‘hoteling’ concept, Deloitte says it has sufficient space for huge workforce,” Stamford Advocate (14 January 2015).

¹⁶ “Does Working From Home Work? Evidence from a Chinese Experiment,” 170.

¹⁷ “Telework Policy,” Canada Treasury Board, 1999.

¹⁸ Cortney Weinbaum, et Al., “Understanding Government Telework.” Rand Corporation, 2019. 57

¹⁹ Stephan Dalzell et Al., “Manpower Alternatives to Enhance Total Force Capabilities,” Rand Corporation, 99.

²⁰ United States Congress, Public Law 111–292—“Telework Enhancement Act of 2010,” (Dec. 9, 2010.)

personnel challenges. One such challenge is retention; a 2019 Defence Research and Development Canada (DRDC) study about reservists showed that 40% of this population elected not to transfer to Regular Force stating that they do not want to be forced to move.²¹ This concern from the part-time side of the organization is also echoed in the Regular Force. A 2008 DRDC review analyzed exit surveys from the previous seven years identifying that the main factors leading to releases were family issues and posting dissatisfaction owing to separation from, or causing instability too, families.²²

On both accounts, the theme that can be surmised is that geographical stability is important to members as a part of their life balance, particularly as more and more service spouses have careers of their own. The CAF approach of moving its people from base to base comes from a time where the standard home situation was that of a housewife as a full-time parent, this must be reconsidered through a Gender-Based Analysis lens and the present-day context. In the twenty-first century, it is the norm to see two parents working, which adds an extra hardship for the civilian partner to acquire a new employment after every posting, in addition to the administrative burdens such as finding a physician. DRDC identified that 60% of reservists have a spouse on the job market and a similar ratio can be expected of their regular force counterparts.²³ This figure is below the general public proportion of families with dual incomes which it's at

²¹ Sean Pearce, "The 2019 Primary Reserve Force Retention Survey," Defence Research and Development Canada,, Department of National Defence, 2020, 31.

²² Nancy Otis, "Review of Attrition and Retention Research for the Canadian Forces," Defence Research and Development Canada—Center for Operational Research and Analysis, Department of National Defence, 2008, 13.

²³ "The 2019 Primary Reserve Force Retention Survey," 20.

77%, indicating that our paradigm is having the effect of limiting spouses from being on the labour market and probably causing financial strain.²⁴

By offering the option to telework rather than relocating sailors from the coasts to a knowledge-based positions such as can be found in most headquarters, we would address this area of friction, for a part of our demographic, and reduce attrition in our more senior members. Postings in Ottawa and Québec are regularly conducted between tours aboard ships for our officers and NCOs, this causes the uprooting of families twice in a matter of a couple of years. Should we allow these members to carryout their duties from Halifax or Esquimalt, using telework concept while being sustained by infrastructure already existent, the RCN would generate a major benefit on retention. For reservists, the distribution of headquarters jobs across the country would also open up the potential talent pool to more Anglophones who elect not to move to a unilingual Francophone city by employing them from their home towns. The RAND Corporation has suggested a Defence solution in this vein would be to go forward with a *Teleserves* model, thus empowering sailors to work from where they are while supporting the department by breaking down location barriers and facilitate contributions of reservists through technological enabled options.²⁵

When considering the current defence policy, *Strong Secured Engaged*, the document denotes an unmistakable inclination to place our people at the centre of our efforts.²⁶ It is outlined here that the intent is to develop novel ways to address retention,

²⁴ Statistics Canada, "Single-earner and dual-earner census families by number of children—Table:11-10-0028-01," Government of Canada, 2018.

²⁵ "Manpower Alternatives to Enhance Total Force Capabilities," 123.

²⁶ Canada, "Strong, Secured, Engaged—Canada's Defence Policy," Department of National Defence, 2017, 22.

training and attraction. The policy also identifies the hardship family's face with the recurring requirements to move their household.²⁷ Support by loved ones is said to be critical as the buy-in from those families is recognized as an essential enabler for members to serve their nation. To this point, when our sailors are on the coast they spend large amounts of time at sea, then we often relocate them inland to a staff position and induce additional turmoil as discussed previously. Telework offers an opportunity to leverage technology to meet part of the policy objective by offering a means to reduce the friction during those shore posting cycles. It would be a positive step to provide sailors the time to reconnect with their loved ones while continuing to contribute to the organization. Further, a 2017 Auditor General report quotes Lieutenant General Lamarre recognizing that retention of our personnel at various gates in their lives is a challenge that can only be lessened by making the CAF more attractive.²⁸ The recommendation offered consisted of facilitating a smoother transition between Reserves and Regular Forces to allow members to connect with loved ones. This is a consideration that has its merits and may be beneficial in certain circumstances to keep talent in the long term. Telework, however, proposes an alternative to the same problem; by creating flexibility for those who choose to work remotely and enjoy a better work-life balance, we stand to impact attrition without sacrificing any short term output those sailors could still provide and we reduce the risk that they will start a civilian career which will lead them to never returning to serve.

²⁷ "Strong, Secured, Engaged—Canada's Defence Policy," 28.

²⁸ Auditor General of Canada. "Report 5, Canadian Armed Forces Recruitment and Retention—National Defence—Fall 2016 Reports." Report of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts. June 2017, 13.

Strong, Secure, Engaged also addresses the necessity for improvements in recruitment.²⁹ Considering this aspect of the policy, we must recognize that the environment has changed. As we progress further into the twenty-first century, the labour market is facing the growing challenge of attracting and motivating the millennials. This group is different from previous ones, it is described in a DRDC paper as “the most demanding generation in history.”³⁰ Types of employers that attract them are stable organizations such as government and large corporations. Compared to baby boomers who also migrated to the safety of these employers, a stark contrast is that millennials ask for incredible flexibility, including telecommuting as a part of their exigencies for a better work-life balance.³¹ The RAND Corporation also noted that the new generation is challenging the status quo and showing an unwillingness to accept the traditional job arrangements.³² If the RCN wishes to attract and retain this necessary segment of the labour market, we must adapt to be competitive.

A further benefit of teleworking to be considered is financial. In addition to the potential reduction in office costs associated to each employee, every year the CAF spends significant amount of capital moving its members around the country. For a fraction of the money relocations entail, the sailor can be flown in to Ottawa multiple times for person-to-person meetings and work sessions.

²⁹ “Strong, Secured, Engaged—Canada’s Defence Policy,” 22.

³⁰ Leesa Tanner, Michele Straver, “Who Are the Millennials?” Defence R&D Canada—Center for Operational Research and Analysis, Department of National Defence, 2010, 44.

³¹ “Who Are the Millennials?” 45.

³² Cortney Weinbaum, et al. “Understanding Government Telework.” Rand Corporation, 2019, 2.

Challenges to Implementation

While studies clearly demonstrate the increased productivity of telework, one of the risks identified is a potential breakdown of cohesion.³³ There is a link to the office which fosters the sense of belonging of individuals. Because *Esprit de Corps* is the bedrock for a military force, loss of cohesion and of attachment would adversely affect the fighting spirit. However, the RCN is uniquely positioned to mitigate this risk due to the emphasis on morale and infrastructure spanning the nation including its messes. Further, to address the challenge, regular in-person team meetings would be essential for building and sustaining group dynamics. The RCN's footprint across Canada, with our two dozen reserve units, our two headquarters and our costal bases, provide us multiple nexus to support members to maintain their connection on a weekly basis. In-person work does not necessarily need to be in the same office as one's boss, a hoteling concept at one of our infrastructure would offer the teleworkers a place to interact with other sailors and generate the fraternal bonds and sense of belonging to the institution which would mitigate the biggest risk of telework. It may also provide the benefit of having the headquarters better tied into the ground truth.

A final issue that merits mention, employees do not all respond well to telework, it was noted earlier that those that elect to work from home tend to succeed at it, but some are not able to adapt to this model and underperform. Thus for such a policy to be effective, members must willingly choose this option and the output must be monitored.

³³ Stephen Dalzell, et Al., "Manpower Alternatives to Enhance Total Force Capabilities," Rand Corporation, 2019, 133.

CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated the important benefits seen in the corporate world that come with telework policies for their employees. It has also shown that it is not only private enterprise that use them, government agencies equally resort to these practices in an evolving labour market confronted with a demanding generation.

Strong, Secure, Engaged has mandated the Forces to improve attraction and retention of its members. It also signals that quality of life and family support is key to these issues. Data has shown that one of the main reasons for people leaving the Regular Force and for reservists not transferring over is the geographical instability that comes with the service. The RCN must find ways to create attractive work alternatives for sailors where possible, such as for knowledge-based roles. Options that limit the uprooting of families and the issues caused by recurring moves during posting cycles to and from the coasts would permit loved ones to utilize the lower tempo moments to build bonds and improve the work-life balance which is a precipitator of attrition.

The model adopted since the onset of the pandemic has forced the RCN to employ a telework framework thereby demonstrating its feasibility. This model is not new, the corporate world as well as other government agencies have been using this approach for quite some time. These methods provide partial solutions to some of the aspects of the wicked problem that is maintaining an engaged and effective workforce.

To this end, the RCN should pursue a policy in which it offers a choice to its members; an option between moving for a headquarters position or to telework from their current location. Because the RCN has a foothold on each coast and twenty-four reserve units across the country, there are multiple support nodes to facilitate administration and

ensure a sustained connection to the RCN, thus enabling a successful telework policy. By doing so, retention would be ameliorated as we have seen that these are major contributors to members releasing. This approach would also increase the population base of Class B personnel who are willing to work full-time but are not ready to move.

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