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Key Problems Which Must Be Solved in Order to Reinvigorate the Canadian Armed Forces

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Exercise Solo Flight

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Attraction, Recruiting, and Retention: Key Problems Which Must Be Solved in Order to Reinvigorate the Canadian Armed Forces

Introduction

"We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them "

*-Albert
Einstein*

In order to achieve and maintain the critical mass of personnel and retain the capabilities required to carry out its mandate, the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) must develop and implement modern military human resources initiatives. The institution must focus on the inextricably linked issues of attraction, recruiting and retention, within a framework that understands and takes advantage of the evolving demographics of Canadian society.

Rather than seeing shifting demographics in terms of age, ethnicity, and expectations as a challenge, the CAF must instead exploit these as an opportunity to reorient and develop new, creative solutions to age old problems. This includes considering an expanded target demographic for attractions, streamlining the recruiting process, and adopting new employment models designed to better retain members

There is also room to evaluate the challenges presented by the global COVID-19 pandemic and identify opportunities to use the great shift in attitudes towards employment as a catalyst for positive change in the CAF.

Context – Shifting Demographics and a Global Pandemic

“The times, they are a’ changing.”

-Bob Dylan

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented significant setbacks, having “...negatively impacted the CAF’s ability to attract, recruit, and train personnel.”¹ It also presents opportunities which the CAF must exploit in order to emerge from this global health crisis with renewed capabilities, ready to face the challenges of the future.

The pandemic has certainly been a catalyst for change within the labour market, sending a strong “bottom-up signal that multiple industries need to undergo a massive update in their employment conditions.”² Workers have seized the opportunity to reconsider their working conditions and seek alternatives. This is equally true for the CAF, who draw from the same labour market as all Canadian employers. This presents a twofold challenge to the CAF; rampant incidents of people leaving their jobs means there are more opportunities for CAF members to consider switching careers to fill the numerous vacancies; also, there is increased competition to attract those who have recently entered the job market. In order to set themselves apart, the CAF must adapt and embrace change.

¹ Canada. Department of National Defence. Performance Information Profile – Program 3.1 (Recruitment) – GCINFOBASE, <https://www.tbs-sct.canada.ca/ems-sgd/edb-bdd/index-eng.html#infographic/program/ND-BUP02/results>

² Kemle, Andrew. “The Great Resignation and why companies need to listen to workers.” Toronto Star, April 2, 2022.

Statistics Canada reports that job vacancies were high in the fourth quarter of 2021, with employers seeking to fill 915,000 jobs. This represents an 80% increase over 2019 and is 63.4% higher than 2020.³ Microsoft's annual work trend index report⁴ shows that 37% of Canadian workers are open to seeking new job opportunities. The CAF must leverage this opportunity to attract new members, particularly those who may be skilled or semi-skilled as it pertains to particular CAF trades. At the same time, the CAF must be wary that members are likely amongst those who are open to considering new opportunities, and act to retain them.

The demographics of Canadian society are evolving. This is prevalent in two key areas which are of interest to the CAF: age, and ethnicity. The Canadian population is aging, with the average age now being 41.7, increased from 37.5 in 2001. 33% of the population are aged between 40-65. While international migration was curtailed by impacts of the pandemic, it nevertheless accounted for 74.9% of Canada's population growth in 2020-21, a trend that is expected to continue.⁵

While the population may be aging, there is still a culture shift to be considered as it pertains to today's youth. "Generation Z," or post-millennials, born after 1997, have unconventional career expectations. They are not expected to be as loyal to an employer,, and will likely seek out jobs

³ Canada. Statistics Canada job vacancies, fourth quarter 2021.

⁴ A broad study of worker opinions across North America, accessed 7 May 2022 <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/worklab/work-trend-index>

⁵ Canada. Statistics Canada Annual Demographic Estimates 2020-21. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/91-215-x/91-215-x2021001-eng.htm>

which teach them universal, transferrable skills. They are also expected to value remote work, online collaboration, and be less concerned about hours and schedules.⁶

Attraction – Casting a Wider Net: appealing to an aging population, a culturally diverse population, and a younger generation with different expectations

“Measurement Strategy: to be determined.”

-Performance Information Profile, Program 3.1: Recruitment, National Defence Departmental Results Report, 2020-21

The CAF must diversify their attraction efforts in order to appeal to an aging population who may be seeking a second (regular force) or secondary (reserve) career; in order to appeal to an increasingly culturally diverse population whose growth is fueled by immigration; and in order to appeal to a younger generation whose expectations and priorities diverge significantly from their predecessors.

Engagements with an older audience must take into account that they are more likely to be established in a community and raising a family and must account for their transferable skills as well as a reluctance to enter a new job at “entry-level.” The CAF must do away with the notion that everyone must start at the bottom – maintaining this obsolete belief effectively eliminates a vast portion of the available pool of potential applicants. This could be achieved by creating a class of service which acknowledges and accounts for skills and experience gained in the civilian

⁶ Holton, Tara and Fraser, Brenda. Scientific Report DRDC-RDDC-2015-R167: *Generation Z and Technology: Constructing Tomorrow’s Boundary Spanners*. Toronto: DRDC – Toronto Research Centre, 2015, P. 18

world, offering a rank or position which reflects this experience, and offering a commensurate compensation and benefits package. While this could require significant modification to the CAF rank structure, the resulting benefit derived from leveraging years of experience and knowledge would be significant. Attracting this age group could also be enhanced by many of the measures discussed later in the section related to retention, particularly concentration of forces in urban centers as well as a modernized force employment model.

Attracting culturally diverse applicants to the CAF could be achieved by creating units or sub-units which are organized around a variety of cultural identities. Canada is often referred to as a cultural mosaic which values multiculturalism and the distinct heritage of all citizens, having enshrined in law that “multiculturalism is a fundamental characteristic of the Canadian heritage and identity and that it provides an invaluable resource in the shaping of Canada’s future.”⁷ We have units who perpetuate foreign cultures which were integral in the building of Canada, such as Scottish and Irish regiments – why not pursue similar identities reflecting the other cultures who are well-represented in Canadian society and every bit as instrumental in the development of Canada? With millions of Canadians reporting ancestries rooted in China, East India, the Philippines, Italy, Ukraine, and many other ethnic backgrounds⁸, units or sub-units perpetuating unique aspects of their cultural heritage could be formed in communities identified as having a high concentration of a given ethnicity.

⁷ Canadian Multiculturalism Act, R.S.C., 1985, c. 24 – section 3(b) <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/c-18.7/page-1.html>

⁸ Canada. Statistics Canada Ethnic and cultural origins of Canadians: Portrait of a rich heritage. October 2017.

In order to attract a younger audience, the CAF must appeal to their priorities and expectations. It must reach them in the space they occupy – largely the virtual world they have grown up in where they are most comfortable communicating.⁹ Within this forum, the CAF must clearly articulate the skills and lifelong benefits that can be obtained from CAF service. An opportunity exists here to reinforce the success of the Full-Time Summer Employment initiative in which new Reservists are guaranteed full-time employment during their first 4 summers of service.¹⁰ In order to address the post-millennial's predisposition to frequent career changes¹¹, as well as appeal to their desire for education, a program could be developed which provides a full subsidy of their post-secondary education in concert with guaranteed summer employment, in exchange for a commitment to serve a number of years with their reserve unit upon completion of their studies.¹² Alternately, they could be required to remain on the Supplementary Reserve for a period – in an age of renewed great power competition, having access to a deeper pool of semi-skilled, proven personnel would be an enormous strategic asset.

None of the initiatives to attract a greater pool of applicants will result in any positive change if the CAF is not able to enroll new members, and so the CAF must consider improving the recruiting and enrollment process.

⁹ Holton, Tara and Fraser, Brenda, *Generation Z*, P. 15

¹⁰ SSE, P. 69

¹¹ Holton, Tara and Fraser, Brenda, *Generation Z*, P. 18

¹² The current model allows for a reservist to request release at any time.

The Recruiting Process: How to straighten the long and winding road

“The current system is too slow to compete in Canada’s highly competitive labour market and does not effectively communicate the exciting and fulfilling employment opportunities offered by military service.

-Strong, Secure, Engaged, P. 20

The recruiting system must be streamlined, and applications expedited in order to retain the interest of applicants and quickly engage them as members of the CAF.

Once an application is submitted, we can assume that the attraction plan has worked – failing to capitalize on that success is a wasteful failure. If the system was too slow to compete in Canada’s highly competitive labour market in 2017 when Strong, Secure, Engaged (SSE) was published, it must seem glacial within the context of the increased competition which has evolved in the labour market as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The first initiative detailed in SSE aims to “Reduce significantly the time to enroll in the Canadian Armed Forces by reforming all aspects of military recruiting.”¹³ However, the advisory report published by Assistant Deputy Minister Review Services [ADM(RS)] in Fall of 2019 suggests that the process remains cumbersome and slow, and the recruiting results indicate that there has been little improvement in accelerating the process¹⁴.

¹³ Canada. Department of National Defence. Strong Secure Engaged: Canada’s Defence Policy. Ottawa: DND Canada, 2017, p. 22

¹⁴ According to the most recent Departmental Results report, neither the Regular Force nor the Reserves have met their recruiting targets.

The ADM(RS) advisory sought in part to determine if enrolment times have been reduced.¹⁵ It considered all active recruiting files for enrolment in the Regular Force from Apr 2017 to Mar 2018. Military Personnel Command, responsible for processing recruiting files, had committed to processing 70% of “clean files”¹⁶ within 60-90 days, and the remaining 30% in under 120 days.¹⁷ The results were abysmal; a sample of 3,010 files found that only 10% were processed in less than 90 days, and an additional 11% in under 120 days. This suggests 79% of files took over 120 days to process.

“How long does it take to get hired from start to finish at National Defence and Canadian Armed Forces? Six months to two years”

-CA.Indeed.Com Q&A¹⁸

Further, the advisory noted that there are 112 tasks involved in processing an application from submission to enrolment. ADM(RS) categorized these tasks as value added (moves the application towards completion, such as interviews and medical assessments) and non-value added (fails to move the process towards completion, such as supervisory reviews.) It was assessed that 78% of delays were attributable to non-value added tasks. It was also assessed that the most significant delay was attributable to the medical assessment.¹⁹

¹⁵ Canada. Department of National Defence, Assistant Deputy Minister (Review Services). Advisory of the Military Recruitment Process. Ottawa: DND Canada, November 2019, p. 3

¹⁶ A file is considered clean if the applicant meets the entry standards and required eligibility criteria for the desired occupation, does not need follow up for reliability screening, prior-learning assessment or medical suitability, and there are no occupation-specific screening requirements or limitations.

¹⁷ Ibid, P. 12

¹⁸ While this result is taken from the job-seeking site Indeed.Com under the “National Defence and Canadian Armed Forces” section, a search of CAF recruiting communities across multiple such sites including army.ca, reddit.com, and glassdoor.ca consistently yields similar results.

¹⁹ Ibid, P. 14

A streamlined system for processing applications is essential if the CAF is to meet their recruiting targets and successfully grow the forces. To achieve this, the institution must demonstrate a willingness to accept some risk. This is particularly evident in the areas which take the longest; medical and security assessments. A preliminary medical and security screening should be conducted during the initial stages of the application by front-line recruiting personnel during the earliest engagements with applicants; applicants could then be enrolled conditionally and begin their training while a more fulsome medical and security assessment are conducted concurrently by specialists. This would no doubt result in some members being released due to irregular enrolment on account of not meeting the required medical and security standards; however, the risk is mitigated by the preliminary assessment. It can be presumed that the great majority of applicants who satisfy a simplified, preliminary screening will ultimately meet these standards, and the reward is a faster, more agile enrolment process that engages applicants quickly after an application is submitted, while interest and enthusiasm remains high, allowing them to begin their training and adaptation to the military lifestyle. By the time they are fully trained and are ready to be employed in their trade, these assessments should be complete.

With very few exceptions, personnel will not be exposed to information requiring a security clearance during their initial training, and those few trades for which this is an exception can be treated on a case-by-case basis (and could perhaps then be a priority for pre-enrolment screening.). And while there is risk inherent in subjecting trainees to the rigors of military life without a fulsome medical assessment, this could be further mitigated by not transitioning members to the CAF Health Services spectrum of care for chronic conditions until such time as

their screening is complete (essentially having them remain under the care of their provincial system until that time, with exceptions for injuries suffered in training.)

Once a member is enrolled, it becomes critical to retain them for a reasonable period in order to derive maximum benefit from their soon to be acquired (or existing, for semi-skilled and skilled applicants) knowledge, training , and experience.

Retention: Maintaining Capabilities, Retaining Personnel

“If we are always challenging our people to think outside the box, perhaps it is time to re-define the box”

-Unknown

“The Reserve Force portion of the CAF Establishment is being developed in order to progress into a One CAF Establishment Model”

-Performance Information Profile, Program 3.2: Individual Training and Professional Military Education; every year since 2018.²⁰

In order to retain critical capabilities, the CAF must devote considerable effort to retaining personnel. This will require new and creative initiatives to retain valuable skills, knowledge, and experience.

National Defence measures whether the CAF has “the required number of “qualified” personnel”

by examining the trained effective strength against the trained effective establishment for the Regular Force in order to work towards a goal of 95% by 2026, while essentially examining

²⁰ This is given as the explanation each year for why no result could be reported; in essence, the department is “planning” to report on something it knows it is unable to measure. And if it can’t be measured, how can it be controlled, influenced, improved?

nothing to measure the same indicator for Reserves, citing a vague concept of a “One CAF Establishment model”²¹ which is purported to have been in the works since at least 2018 without yet leading to an effective means of measuring whether the Reserves have sufficient qualified personnel. While this indicator is a measure of how successful the CAF is at training and educating personnel, it provides some insight into how well we are maintaining and retaining capabilities.

To retain members of the workforce who may be evaluating their options in the face of current labour trends, the CAF must consider rapidly implementing a revised employment model which affords better work-life balance, and better support to families (and particularly spouses in terms of employment opportunities). It must consider modifying the “universality” of “universality of service,” and must consider some wholesale changes to the force employment model and CAF infrastructure writ large.

There are many jobs in the CAF which do not require a level of fitness equal to an Infantry soldier. In fact, there are many jobs which will routinely be conducted in an office or office-like setting. And yet the CAF releases personnel who are deemed to be physically and medically unfit, and requires them to leave the service, taking their years of experience and knowledge with

²¹ PIP 3.2, IT&PME, “Actual Results,” GCINFOBASE – the result for qualified Reserve personnel has always been “unavailable.”

them, and relieving them from the performance of a duty which they were entirely capable of continuing to perform. The CAF also releases people based on an arbitrary age limit.

This could be addressed by developing a true “One CAF Establishment” as alluded to in the departmental plans, with a tiered employment model for all CAF members, in four distinct tiers: full-time unrestricted, full-time restricted, part-time unrestricted, and part-time restricted.^{22 23} The concepts of full and part-time are self-explanatory; the notion of restrictions pertains to deployability and postings. Each tier of employment would have benefits and compensation commensurate with the level of liability being assumed by the member. Critically, it must be simple to transfer between the tiers for fixed periods at various stages in a member’s career.

Should a member’s fitness diminish due to age, illness, or injury, thus rendering them unable to satisfy the requirements of universality of service, they could still be retained in a restricted position, thus prolonging the CAF’s access to their knowledge and experience.

The CAF continues to maintain a significant number of bases and infrastructure in remote locations, locations where, frankly, people do not want to live and raise families; and where the

²² This is an oversimplification to introduce an idea, but would of course require a near total re-write of several sections of the National Defence Act, as it would essentially do away with the idea of the regular and reserve force and simply have a “One CAF Model.” There would also be significant considerations regarding access to CF Health Care vs. provincial health care which would have to be addressed. It is also understood that there would need to be control measures regarding the amount of time a member could be “restricted” vs. “unrestricted.”

²³ It must be noted that the author did not develop this model – it evolved in conversation with many staff officers over the course of many luncheons where a rotating group of Majors opined over challenges facing the CAF and attempted to argue their way towards solving all of the problems facing the institution, while the author was employed in the performance measurement cell under the Chief of Military Personnel

prospects of meaningful employment for spouses are abysmal at best. Researchers at Defence Research and Development Canada have observed that “CAF retention research clearly indicates that the effects of military service on families is one of the main issues influencing the retention and attrition of CAF members.”^{24 25}

While some infrastructure is simply unsuited to urban environments, and some footprint must be maintained in remote locations, the vast majority of CAF employment could take place in or near major urban centres. This would alleviate many of the stressors on members and their families, who have consistently indicated that they are “concerned about the location and frequency of postings, having to live far from their circle of family and friends, and the availability of support services related to relocations.”²⁶ This would allow for better access to services and amenities²⁷, spousal employment, housing, education for dependents, and much of the infrastructure which has been ubiquitous in the upbringing of the post-millennial generation (and the absence of which may prove to be a significant dissatisfier.)

Researchers at DRDC have also observed that attrition during the first year of service is high – 1 in 7 members release within their first year, and half that number within the first three months.²⁸

²⁴ Otis, Nancy, et Al, External Literature DRDC-RDDC-2021-P155: *Basic Training Satisfaction and Early Retention in the Canadian Armed Forces*. Ottawa: DRDC – DGMPRA, May 202, P. 13

²⁵ Nearly every CAF member has an anecdote about a colleague professing that they will release before accepting a posting to whichever particular remote location for which they have the greatest disdain.

²⁶ Ibid, P. 14

²⁷ And would alleviate the burden upon the CAF to provide access to basic services and amenities in equal measure

²⁸ Ibid, P. 3

This represents an extraordinarily poor return on the investment made to attract and recruit these members. Some consideration could be given to the notion of whether or not every trade must undergo the same basic training. Modified (shortened) versions of basic training are already delivered to medical doctors, members of the chaplaincy, and both army and naval reservists. Perhaps other trades or class of service which exist or could be developed which simply do not require the same introductory training as others.

It is of course understood that there will always be a need for young, fit men and women to perform certain tasks within the CAF. Some trades do not lend themselves well to the transfer of civilian skills and advanced placement upon recruitment, nor to restricted service arrangements, nor to hybrid work models in urban settings. However, there are many occupations which do. The CAF must move away from imposing a one-size-fits all approach to attraction, recruiting, and retention, and begin tailoring their approach in a manner which gets the right people for the right jobs with the required capabilities.

Conclusion

*“We’ve got the same challenge we had in World War One, World War Two”
-General Wayne Eyre, Chief of the Defence Staff*

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has ushered in a new era of great power competition, and the future has never been more dangerous or uncertain. In order to meet the challenges inherent in this new global reality, the CAF must develop and maintain the capabilities necessary to carry out the full spectrum of operations in which it may be called upon to engage. This requires that the institution quickly solve the problems of attraction, recruiting, and retention. Doing so requires that all options be laid on the table – no unnecessary

limitations, no sacred cows. The organization must fully embrace and adhere to the first principle of war as it is taught at Canadian Forces Leadership and Recruit School – “selection and maintenance of the aim.” Any resources which are expended in efforts which do not lead to the development and maintenance of required capabilities are lost, and any loss in this regard is unconscionable under the current paradigm.

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