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## Canadian Armed Forces Recruiting and Retention Strategy

Lieutenant-Commander Timothy Berryhill

**JCSP 48**

### Exercise Solo Flight

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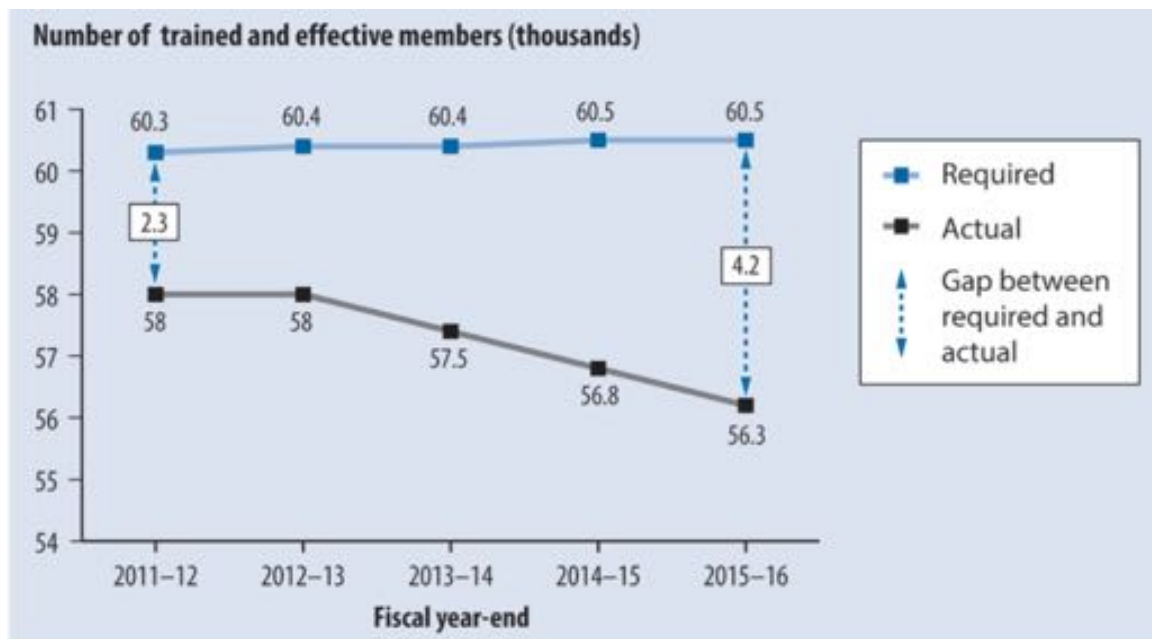
## **AIM**

This paper aims to analyze The Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) recruiting and retention strategy. What is the perception of the CAF by potential candidates seeking employment opportunities? What incentives is the labour pool seeking from an employer? What does the initial training cycle look like, does the path from recruit to occupationally functional motivate or deter retention beyond initial terms of service? What retention strategies does the CAF employ to keep talent from leaving, and has it been able to adapt to changing demographics in Canadian society? Finally, is the Canadian Military poised for success in the next horizon?

## **INTRODUCTION**

People are the most valuable asset to any company or institution. They are the face of the organization. An employee with positive job satisfaction can attract new employees to the organization. From personal experience, the motivation to join came from two sources: A father who served and, more importantly, a highly enthusiastic MCpl SAR Tech who shared many positive stories about the adventures he encountered at his job. Had these interactions been with someone who held negative attitudes towards their employment in the CAF, the decision to enroll might have been different. The CAF needs adequate resources today in preparation to accomplish future mandates. Recruitment and retention must be a top priority for the CAF to have adequate numbers of combat and support personnel. Reconstitution of the force is necessary to accomplish the Government of Canada's mandate post-pandemic in an evolving operating environment.

In recent years the CAF has had a downward trend with a period of decline in the number of trained and effective members in the force (See figure 1 below) to where it stands today at approximately ten thousand people short. In the 2016 Auditor-Generals report, 21 of 85 stressed occupations were below 90% trained in effective strength<sup>1</sup>. To date, this trend has been consistent. COVID 19 has only exacerbated the situation and impacted the CAF's throughput of recruits. The recruiting strategy has not been successful in maintaining or increasing the size of the force. The CAF must attract and recruit and retain talented people. Long waiting times between basic and occupational training are a source of demoralization and frustration. This is a significant source of discontent that affected the CAF's ability to retain members during the initial training phase<sup>2</sup>.



**Figure 1 - The gap between the required and actual numbers of trained and effective Regular Force members increased from about 2,300 at the end of the 2011–12 fiscal year to about 4,200 at the end of the 2015–16 fiscal year**

Source: [https://www.oag-bvg.gc.ca/internet/english/parl\\_oag\\_201611\\_05\\_e\\_41834.html](https://www.oag-bvg.gc.ca/internet/english/parl_oag_201611_05_e_41834.html)

<sup>1</sup>Canada. Office of the Auditor General of Canada, "2016 Fall Reports of the Auditor General of Canada, Report 5—Canadian Armed Forces Recruitment and Retention—National Defence (2016).

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

## EMPLOYER OF CHOICE?

To understand what attracts or discourages potential employees from joining an institution such as the CAF, one must first understand their perception of the organization's values and if it is a good fit for them. Studies have shown that organizations can use salaries, their brand, a referral from current employees, and job security as crucial factors in welcoming and recruiting quality talents<sup>3</sup>. Additional findings indicated that quality talent is more attractive and more amenable to remain when equity, fairness, and appropriate compensation<sup>4</sup>.

Statistics Canada reported in 2020 that the median after-tax income for economic families and persons not in an economic family was \$66800<sup>5</sup>. According to the 2020 pay rates, the before-tax salary for a basic level Corporal is \$63840, and for a basic level Captain, it is \$83988<sup>6</sup>. Although the basic level of an officer is above the national average, a non-commissioned member must attain the rank of Sergeant to reach the national median after-tax income. Specialist professions such as doctors, dentists, lawyers, pilots, and NCOs in specialist trades have higher pay rates than generalists<sup>7</sup>. Recruiting Allowances for distressed trades have had little to no effect on recruitment. For example, from April 2019 to March 2022, only nine skilled and twenty-four semi-skilled cooks enrolled in the CAF. Only 213 people enrolled as cooks when

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<sup>3</sup>Oluyemi Theophilus Adeosun and Salihu Ohiani Adeku. "Attracting and Recruiting Quality Talent: Firm Perspectives." *Rajagiri Management Journal* ahead-of-print, no. ahead-of-print (2020): 116.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid

<sup>5</sup>Canada. Statistics Canada, "Canadian Income Survey, 2020"

<sup>6</sup>Canada. Compensation and Benefits Instructions, "Chapter 204 - Pay of Officers & Non-Commissioned Members" (2022).

<sup>7</sup>Ibid

approximately 310 were needed<sup>8</sup>. The CAF provides comparable salaries and benefits to that of other large organizations. Why is the CAF experiencing recruiting issues? For the most part, members are compensated equitably to their civilian counterparts. The CAF's salaries and benefits on their own have not been able to motivate potential candidates to enroll.

Over the past several years, the CAF brand has taken a beating. The Canadian military is struggling to align its culture with Canadian society. The Deschamps report highlighted that cultural change and strong leadership are required for cultural reform to occur<sup>9</sup>. Operation Honour had limited success in eliminating harmful and inappropriate sexual behaviour in the CAF. The current CDS announced that Operation HONOUR has culminated and is being gradually closed out. Many high-ranking officials, including the two previous Chiefs of Defence staff, have been removed from their positions and investigated for misconduct in the last couple of years. The September 2020 Evaluation of Diversity and Inclusion from ADM Review Services highlighted several deficiencies. First, there is a lack of shared understanding of diversity and inclusion's overall vision, objectives, and outcomes. Second, two Functional Authorities create challenges with the governance and clarity of roles, responsibilities and accountabilities. Third, data and performance measures alone are insufficient to evaluate the success of diversity and inclusion in the CAF<sup>10</sup>. Other initiatives like the Journey have failed and deemed unattainable<sup>11</sup>. Flawed mission statements or slogans such as "people first, mission

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<sup>8</sup> Heather Parsons, email conversation with Canadian Forces Recruiting Group Headquarters, 27 April 2022.

<sup>9</sup>Marie Deschamps. National Defence, "External Review into Sexual Misconduct and Sexual Harassment in the Canadian Armed Forces. (2015).

<sup>10</sup>Canada. Department of National Defence, Audit and Evaluation Reports "Evaluation of Diversity and Inclusion" (2020).

<sup>11</sup>Canada. Department of National Defence, Military Personnel Command "The CAF Journey"

always" have only created frustration among serving members. Senior CAF leaders publicly removed from key positions and public scrutiny of the lack of strategic direction do not endear trust in potential recruits. It leads to an increase in recruitment and retention issues within the CAF.

Figure 1 above demonstrates that the CAF number of trained personnel to accomplish the tasks assigned to the department has been decreasing steadily since 2012. Not reflected in this figure is the number of personnel away from the job for other reasons such as medical limitations, parental leave Etc. For example, while serving as the Base Halifax Personnel Services Officer, there was consistently 5 percent of the staff on parental leave at any given time. An additional 10-15 percent of the staff could not perform their primary functions due to medical employment limitations in a staff of 260. Meetings and conferences with other level 1 organizations indicated this as the norm across all Bases and Wings. Demands on employees are increasing as the force size is decreasing. HMC Ships are deploying with personnel shortages. It is becoming normalized that Officers and NCMs perform the duties of two, sometimes three people to make up for these shortages. Work-life balance is exceedingly difficult to achieve, and levels of burnout will only increase. This trend will likely lead to higher attrition rates and drastically increase negative sentiment from those serving and those who release. Building strong relationships with employees is needed to reduce high attrition levels and have an attraction for new employees<sup>12</sup>. Employees with high job satisfaction are more likely to promote their jobs as a career and become positive examples for new people that

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<sup>12</sup>Wildes PhD & Sara C. Parks PhD . Internal Service Quality, International Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Administration, 6:2, (2005): 18

might wish to join the organization. Contrary to this, when employee job satisfaction is low, the opposite occurs. Employee turnover has severe impacts on recruiting and retention. Dissatisfied employees are more likely to provide negative feedback to friends and colleagues instead of a positive referral to why someone should seek employment in the CAF.

Job security is a factor for people joining the workforce and remaining with that employer. In the CAF, job security for the serving member is very high, and subsequent terms of service are almost always guaranteed. In rare circumstances, service members get terminated when they have committed criminal offences or misconduct<sup>13</sup>. Personnel with medical issues are becoming prevalent, either mental or physical, that prevent them from performing their necessary duties are released using medical grounds<sup>14</sup>. Prior to a medical release, members are supported through the process. They receive necessary treatment plans, assistance with the transition to veteran's affairs, vocational rehabilitation, and a compensation package to assist them. CAF provides excellent job stability to the member, but what about the member's partner who has employment external to the CAF? Most households now require dual income earners to meet the median after-tax income<sup>15</sup>. The CAF employment model geographically moves personnel for many reasons, to gain a breadth of experience, the need for a specific skill set, compassionate moves Etc. Single-income families are becoming rare. A military member posted to a location in a new region often causes financial stress while their partner

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<sup>13</sup>Canada. Department of National Defence, Policies and standards " QR&O: Volume I - Chapter 15 Release" (2017).

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Canada. Statistics Canada, "Canadian Income Survey, 2020"



searches for employment. Job security in the CAF is excellent for a single person; however, retaining them can be challenging when they start a family and establish roots.

What incentives is the labour pool asking for from employers? Recent studies have indicated that across all age groups, work-life balance and pay and benefits were the top two contributing factors to why people stay in a job<sup>16</sup>. In general, the emerging millennials who will soon become the majority of the workforce are looking for many of the same attributes as previous generations<sup>17</sup>. They seek professional development opportunities, good pay and benefits packages, health and dental plans, flexible hours and the option to work remotely. The difference with millennials entering the workforce is that they are more interested in quick wins and quick turnaround on projects and roles, need constant feedback and want more paid vacation time<sup>18</sup>. For most, organizational ethos needs to align with their values and principles. The CAF meets the pay and benefits and professional development incentives new employees seek. The same is not true about the CAF's Ethos or flexible work arrangements. Until the public perception of the CAF's culture improves, the CAF Ethos will hold little to no meaning for people who may consider joining the force. During the Covid 19 pandemic, the CAF proved that working from home was possible for some military personnel. The newest CAF Military Personnel instruction 01/22 guides to enable remote work options. However, it is

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<sup>16</sup>Marcie Zaharee et al, "Recruitment and Retention of Early-Career Technical Talent: What Young Employees Want from Employers, A Study of the Workplace Attributes that Attract Early-Career Workers Suggests that Millennials may not be so Different from Earlier Generations." *Research Technology Management* 61, no. 5 (2018): 54.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid. 51.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid. 54

somewhat restrictive and at the commanding officer's discretion. Only time will tell if it positively impacts recruiting and retention efforts as with any new policy.

What do the recruitment and the initial training cycle look like, does the path from recruit to occupationally functional motivate or deter retention beyond initial terms of service? The Strategic Intake Plans are adjusted to lower numbers of recruits entering the CAF due to limits on Basic and initial occupation training throughputs<sup>19</sup>. The CAF cannot reconstitute if the intake of new personnel remains lower than the attrition rates. Motivated people that choose the military as a career option seek other opportunities when confronted by long wait times in the recruiting process. These wait times can not be accurately determined since there are no transparent business processes that track in detail the reasons for the hold or delay of a file<sup>20</sup>. It becomes a vicious cycle; reduced throughput leads to fewer people to instruct the entry-level courses as time passes.

The ideal path for a person that joins the military is to accomplish trade, elemental and occupational training with minimum time awaiting training between them. The CAF benefits when it has occupationally functional personnel capable of assuming roles and performing designated functions. The person recruited benefits by having meaningful employment in the profession they chose. Wait times between courses are another area of frustration. Basic Training Lists are growing with people awaiting occupational training.

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<sup>19</sup>Canada. Department of National Defence, Military Personnel Command, memorandum "FY 22/23 horizon-One Strategic Intake Plan (SIP). March 2022.

<sup>20</sup>Canada. Department of National Defence, Audit and Evaluation Reports " Advisory of the Military Recruitment Process" (2019).

Lack of meaningful employment increases the likelihood they will find an alternate career path.

Recruiting and retention beyond initial terms of service need to include retaining personnel that have been serving for ten, twenty and even thirty years of service. Overlooking this demographic is costly to the CAF losing corporate knowledge and adds to the increasing shortages within the force. These individuals are essential to assist in the reconstitution of the CAF. Attempting to use “service before self” as a rallying cry and “not to retreat into retirement” as a motivation only demonstrated that the leadership does not fully understand the problem. Directors and Director Generals who espouse work-life balance then expect their staff to take on two or more jobs to compensate for shortages instead of rebalancing the work for the available resources. Losing talented employees becomes a loss of investment for the CAF and reduces the ability to achieve organizational goals<sup>21</sup>. When talented or high-potential members retire or are released, they take the knowledge and skills they have with them. As a result, it becomes costly and challenging to replace them<sup>22</sup>. Strategies that have the potential to motivate retention are to incentivize pay; additional output receives compensation, retention bonuses and flexible hours or remote work options<sup>23</sup>. Like the recruiting bonus, a retention bonus would require that the member fulfill a mandatory period of service or be required to reimburse it to the crown. Corporations that focus only on new customers lose sight of

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<sup>21</sup>Michael Craig. "Cost Effectiveness of Retaining Top Internal Talent in Contrast to Recruiting Top Talent." *Competition Forum* 13, no. 2 (2015): 204.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup>Margaret Deery. "Talent Management, Work-Life Balance and Retention Strategies." *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* 20, no. 7 (2008): 799.

the existing customers until they start losing them. The CAF is now going through a similar process in how it recruits new people and retains people that have experience.

## **STRATEGY WHAT STRATEGY?**

Moving forward, any military strategy for recruiting and retention must focus on an assumption of conflict as the core purpose of the CAF's existence. The Strategic Management of the forces must address the roadblocks to recruiting and retaining talented people. First and foremost, the CAF needs to take the necessary steps to improve its brand across the full spectrum of Canadian society. The CAF Departmental Plan FY 22/23 continues from previous plans to find opportunities to promote more diversity and inclusion in the recruiting process, update the current employment equity strategy with a renewed human resource strategy by the end of August 2022, enable the CAF training establishments to include initiatives to build on inclusion and diversity, and grow the number of women and other underrepresented groups such as indigenous people and visible minorities<sup>24</sup>. This plan is only possible if the CAF can make a Culture shift to adapt to the needs and wants of the changing Canadian demographics. A deep dive into our policies to evaluate where barriers are for new or second-generation Canadians. For example, immigrants from formerly colonized countries may see the CAF traditions as colonial and undesirable. The leadership must effectively resolve the multitude of sexual misconduct investigations that have plagued the military, especially within the leadership itself, if it has any chance to increase the number of women it wants to recruit and retain.

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<sup>24</sup>Canada. Department of National Defence, Reports and Publications " Departmental Plan 2022-23 Core responsibilities: planned results and resources, and key risks" (2022).

## CONCLUSION

Positioning the CAF for success in the next horizon is a wicked problem that requires collaboration and coordination with internal and external stakeholders. Adaptive leadership is needed to develop strategies that will improve retention while seeking to increase the size of the force. The CAF needs to shed the image of an institution of hyper-masculine sexualized culture of whiteness to become a more diverse representation of Canadian society. This plan requires a frequent review of policies to support the strategic plans and goals to increase inclusiveness and diversity in the CAF. The selection of senior leaders must be critical to choose those who espouse the CAF Values and champion them. It can not be a check in the box; strong leadership will influence and effect culture change.

Today's employees are looking for a better work-life balance and a good pay and benefits package. They want professional development opportunities, health and dental plans, flexible hours and the option to work remotely. Millennials entering the workforce are interested in short-term projects and a quick turnaround on projects and roles; they need constant feedback and want more paid vacation time. They want to work in an organization that has similar values. The CAF has competitive pay and benefits and professional development incentives for new employees entering the CAF. The CAF has initiated remote and flexible work arrangements to incentivize employees. Only time will tell if new strategies will positively impact recruiting and retention efforts. The management of these incentives requires continuous monitoring and adjusting when needed to enable their success.

The recruiting process and the initial training cycle from recruit to an occupational functional point must be completely overhauled and streamlined. There are gaps in its overall performance measurement of the recruiting process. Although data is collected to measure and adjust the strategies for diversity and inclusion, additional performance measurement indicators can assist in the creation of strategies that reduce wait times. Training establishments must develop ways to accommodate increased throughput and training delivery in the short term. The CAF cannot reconstitute if the intake of new personnel remains lower than the attrition rates. Prioritization and follow-through on recruiting and training are top priorities for the CAF; other competing priorities can be paused or cancelled to have the necessary resources.

Finally, the Canadian Military has a long road ahead to position itself for success in the next horizon. The problems with culture, recruiting, and retention are intertwined and form a wicked problem that must have strategies that adapt as society changes to respond to them. The government must understand the concept that conflict is the core purpose of the CAF's existence; the CAF senior leadership is responsible for continually messaging this to them. Building a more inclusive and diverse workforce will enhance the CAF's strategies on recruiting and retention moving forward by bringing many different lenses and points of view that can ameliorate the process. Strong leadership from people who genuinely espouse the values and ethos and who gain the buy-in from the team will be needed to affect the culture change that will improve the CAF brand as an employer of choice.

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