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Lieutenant-Commander John Nethercott

JCSP 48

Service Paper

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CANADIAN FORCES COLLEGE – COLLÈGE DES FORCES CANADIENNES

JCSP 48 – PCEMI 48

2021 – 2022

Service Paper – Étude militaire

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HOW CAN THE CANADIAN ARMED FORCES ATTRACT GENERATION Z?

AIM

1. The aim of this service paper is to respond to the question: *Despite the CAF's increasing staffing gap, Strong, Secure, Engaged sees a growth in the CAF overall. How does the CAF transform to become an "employer of choice" for Gen Z to meet these staffing targets?* This question is too large to be addressed in the confines of this format, therefore the purpose of this paper is to provide Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) leadership 'food for thought' relating to the personal and professional employment motivations of individuals within the demographic known as "Generation Z" (Gen Z) those born between 1997 – 2012. The intent is to contribute to the existing body of knowledge and learn what we can from those motivations to align our efforts to recruit, train and gainfully employ this cohort of Canadians. To increase the utility of this effort, suggestions for further study will be provided as well as recommendations for actions-to-take.

INTRODUCTION

2. The Joint Command and Staff Program spends a great deal of time studying CAF component capabilities to understand how the services, singly or jointly, bring power to bear on the conflicts and concerns of the nation. Key among these considerations was "putting boots on the ground" in ways that will result in success. Whether transporting soldiers or special operators to their operating areas by land, air or sea, or maintaining their sustainment once in place, every phase of the plan involves humans. However, if the human chain fails, so too does the operation - "for want of a nail" as the proverb goes¹.

3. Currently the CAF, like most other organizations, is experiencing a crisis in talent acquisition. There exists a significant volume of work on this subject, both academic and professional so there is no intention to 'reinvent the wheel' as it is unlikely this paper will uncover new psychological, sociological or cultural phenomenon that has been missed by the research efforts of professionals in these fields. However, tapping into available quantitative and qualitative information in an effort to synthesize and summarize the prevalent views, opinions and conclusions may yield results useful to CAF organizations currently facing challenges connecting with young recruits from Generation Z in a meaningful way.

¹ The proverb has many variations. It describes a situation in where there is a failure to predict or correct a minor issue that eventually compounds itself into a major issue." For Want of a Nail - Wikipedia

DISCUSSION

Current Situation

4. The specific responsibilities of the CAF are spelled out in Canada's Defence Policy *Strong, Secure, Engaged* (SSE).² The bottom-line service we provide for Canadians is security in the form of ready, highly-trained individuals capable of skillfully executing sustained military operations across a broad spectrum of activities anywhere in the world, at any time, upon government direction. This is an occupation that demands an ongoing supply of practitioners with certain aptitudes and attitudes. Ideally they will stay with the organization long-term for the CAF to realize the return on investment it takes to train a member to the required proficiency.

5. Released in 2017, SSE states, "The Canadian Armed Forces will increase its ranks by 3,500 Regular Force (to 71,500 total) and 1,500 Reserve Force members (to 30,000 total)."³ Personnel generation matters are nothing new to the CAF. Attrition outpacing enrolments was highlighted in the 2002, 2006 and 2016 Auditor General of Canada's Reports on Canadian Armed Forces Recruitment and Retention.⁴ Despite the personnel goals spelled out in SSE, the numbers have seen only modest gains. For example in fiscal year 2019-2020, 5,172 individuals joined the Regular Force for a net growth of just 138 people.⁵ Since that time the situation has worsened, as noted by General Eyre in October 2021 the CAF is short 7,500 Regular Force trained members.⁶ Add the Reserve Force and the total shortfall is closer to 10-12,000 personnel, according to recent media reports.⁷

Strategic Context.

6. For context consider our adversaries. China's conscription law applies to around 400,000 inductees annually to supplement the two-million-strong People's Liberation Army. In Russia, as of 2021, all male citizens aged 18–27 are subject to military conscription. Open-source media suggests Russia spent the last decade investing in new equipment and maintaining forces at a high state of readiness and "they're configured to fight hard and win. There is no pretence (sic) of being diverse, equitable or inclusive."⁸ It is clear that Canada will never overcome such significant overmatch, nor should we strive

² Canada: *Strong Secure Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy*, 2017.

³ Ibid, p. 19

⁴ Canada. 2016 Fall Reports of the Auditor General of Canada, Report 5-Canadian Armed Forces Recruitment and Retention-National Defence.

⁵ Canada. Main Estimates 2020-2021. National Defence Personnel - Canada.ca

⁶ Speech by Acting Chief of the Defence Staff, General Wayne Eyre, at the Kingston Conference on International Security, 25 Oct 2021 Speech by Acting Chief of the Defence Staff, General Wayne Eyre, at the Kingston Conference on International Security - Canada.ca

⁷ <https://nationalpost.com/pmnl/news-pmn/canada-news-pmn/military-dealing-with-more-than-10000-unfilled-positions-amid-growing-pressures>

⁸ Iverson: Canada's neglected military reaching point of being 'irrelevant' | Ottawa Citizen

to do so; diversity and inclusion are strengths to be leveraged in building a strong and professional military. Canada needs to limit itself to contribution warfare of the type we have seen over the past decades, and that for which the CAF is suited to perform, given doctrinal, capability and now personnel limitations we are years away from correcting.

7. Next, consider recent internal efforts to “transform the CAF” specifically with respect to harmful and inappropriate conduct. Operation HONOUR demonstrated that behavioral change can’t be forced upon people through orders. The resulting damage to the reputation of the CAF necessitated the formation of the Chief, Professional Conduct and Culture organization with the mandate to address culture change across a range of problematic areas within the CAF – racial, gender, sexual and cultural. As we saw from the six years of Op HONOUR, internal transformation is a challenging undertaking requiring commitments of leadership, time, willingness, expertise, money and attention from across the entire enterprise to achieve results. It will be necessary for these resources to be applied in developing a strategy to induce a massively diverse external audience, who don’t understand us and who we don’t truly understand, to join the CAF during a period of intense competition for talent across all sectors, and massive changes to the world of work brought on by the pandemic.

Who is Gen Z and What Do They Want?

8. According to international recruiting-support company Glassdoor Inc. what makes an organization an employer of choice, “is its ability to attract and retain the best candidates with a desirable company culture, leadership style, and employee engagement. It isn’t all about salary and terms.”⁹ A brief review of common observations about Generation Z reveals they are motivated to make an impact on society and prioritizes diversity — across race, gender, and orientation — more than any other previous generation, they are more embracing of change, adaptable, realistic, and highly driven.¹⁰ Their comfort with and reliance on digital technology has made Gen Zers eager to learn and be creative and highly independent. Gen Z form opinions of an organization on their ethics, practices and social impact.

9. To attract Gen Z, employers will need to highlight their efforts to be good global citizens. Studies have demonstrated examples of the disconnect between those doing the hiring and those being hired. According to research by Will Peterson, almost half of Human Resource (HR) professionals believed “instant gratification” was a key factor in attracting and retaining Generation Z employees. However, in the same study Generation Z respondents reported their primary motivations as opportunities for growth and

⁹Glassdoor Inc. How to be an Employer of Choice - Glassdoor for Employers accessed 21/01/2022.

¹⁰ Acheampong, Nana Amma A. “Reward Preferences of the Youngest Generation: Attracting, Recruiting, and Retaining Generation Z into Public Sector Organizations.” *Compensation & Benefits Review* 53, no. 2 (April 2021): 75–97. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886368720954803>.

development.¹¹ They are looking for, according to Peterson, “an organization that invests in their development and provides them with a manager who gets to know them before attempting to challenge and develop them professionally.” It stands to reason, according to Deloitte, “organizations that focus on investment in learning and skill/capability development” are more attractive to this cohort.”

10. According to a 2018 study conducted jointly by the US-based Network of Executive Women and Deloitte, Gen Z has “the opportunity to shift the ‘balance of power’ between the employer and the employee” wherein instead of workers trying to fit into a box called a “job”, organizations will need to tailor work around the curated skillset of a worker.¹² Accordingly, Deloitte suggests employers “need to understand the behaviors and tendencies of a generation that expects much more personalization in how they want to be treated by their employer and is seeking more than just filling cookie-cutter roles.”¹³ For the CAF, the importance of establishing a distinctive and attractive market position in a highly competitive talent acquisition environment can’t be overstated.

What the Data Tells Us.

11. According to a 2020 Earnscliffe Strategy Group survey regarding Canadians views of the CAF, the percentage of 18-24 year-olds who are very or somewhat familiar with the CAF sits at just 39%. Among that same demographic only 22% report having seen something about advertising and recruitment. Finally, less than half (48%) of these respondents were likely to favourably view a young person’s decision to join the CAF.¹⁴

12. A 2021 cross-cultural Deloitte survey of 22,000 Millennials and Gen Z in 45 countries produced some useful data points. Respondents are deeply concerned about climate change and the environment. Sixty percent see “systemic racism as very or fairly widespread throughout society, with more than half of the Gen Z group saying the same about the media, political systems, and police forces.”¹⁵ Data also indicates these groups make values-based career decisions. Over the past two years, 44% of millennials and 49% of Gen Zs said they have “made choices over the type of work they are prepared to do and the organizations for which they are willing to work based on their personal

¹¹ Peterson, Will. "What can Organizations do to Attract and Retain Generation Z?" Pepperdine University, 2020. <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/what-can-organizations-do-attract-retain/docview/2440875734/se-2?accountid=9867>

¹² Deloitte. [welcome-to-gen-z.pdf](#) (deloitte.com) accessed 22/01/2022

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Canada. Earnscliffe Strategy Group. Views of the Canadian Armed Forces – 2020 Tracking Study prepared for Department of National Defence: September 2020.

¹⁵ Deloitte. The Deloitte Global 2021 Millennial and Gen Z Survey accessed 18/01/2022

ethics.”¹⁶ Not unsurprisingly, more than half see older generations as “standing in the way of progress.”¹⁷

13. Essentially, our key recruiting demographic is unaware of us, is not interested in learning about us, thinks poorly of their peers who join us and, because of our systemic cultural problems would likely not consider us a good values fit.

14. The CAF must determine how they want their employment offerings to be perceived by the target demographics via a thorough analysis of both the external competitive environment and the organizational needs, as well as a clear understanding of the conditions in which the organization operates. Glassdoor Inc offers the following advice to employers, “Recruiting is costly so be transparent about your organization and the role from the start. It can be all too easy to oversell the role, inevitably leading to disgruntled employees who will jump ship once reality hits.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid. Glassdoor.

CONCLUSION

15. The data makes it apparent organizations are required to adapt to the needs of this generation and not the other way round. There are HR, training and employment decisions that are completely within our control, and those that aren't. To attract and retain Gen Z recruits the CAF must exercise more personalized, control over what we can, in order to be prepared for those decisions we can't. These include: attraction, processing, course scheduling, housing, postings, work-hours, mentoring and coaching, and family supports. Gen Z is a cohort poised to represent a significant portion of the working population; if the CAF is to actively compete we need to holistically change our approach to talent acquisition.

RECOMMENDATION

“Tell Two Friends”

16. One attraction approach shown effective is word-of-mouth marketing or more commonly in the private sector “referral marketing”. As posited by David George from Greatrecruiters.com, this approach is an under-utilized strategy that provides benefits for organizations including better-qualified candidates, shorter recruiting times, lower costs, and decreased employee turnover.¹⁹ Data from a 2005 Canadian study supports this approach reporting that 37.7% of job seekers used family and friends as part of their search strategy.²⁰ LinkedIn data from 2020 reveals that employee referrals are four times more likely to be hired, 82% of employers rated employee referrals above all other sourcing options to yield the best return on investment, and 45% of employees sourced from employee referrals stay for longer than 4 years.²¹

17. It is recommended the CAF consider developing an employee referral campaign across the organization with the following points provided as an initial strawman for further study and development.

- All-level leadership buy-in for the initiative and encouragement for all employees to do the same;
- Make employee referral a “top-of-mind” priority with CAF members and other members of the Defence Team, while making it clear what we are looking for in a referral;
- Regularly reinforce the importance of referring quality candidates at meetings, informal Q&A sessions, town halls etc.;

¹⁹ What is Referral Marketing and Why Your Company Needs it | Great Recruiters

²⁰ Catano, V. et al (2005), Recruitment and Selection in Canada, 3rd ed., Nelson-Thomson Canada, Toronto.

²¹ LinkedIn. (3) Employee Referral Statistics You Need to Know for 2020 (Infographic) | LinkedIn

- Communicate the initiative across all platforms – Social Media, websites, videos explaining why and how to make referrals, posters, signage, etc.;
- Add a “Member Referrals” option on intranets, and the CAF recruiting website that provides tools, resources for members to make quality referrals;
- Meaningfully recognize employees who refer high-quality candidates;
- Make clear to employees that quality of referrals is more important than quantity. Define what a good referral looks like.;
- Commit to members that each referred candidate will be seriously considered. If members don’t see follow-through they will lose trust in the project and stop referring people.
- Mandate recruiters to focus on referred candidates. Referrals are one of the best sources of hire, so they should be prioritized.

18. One point to note, referral efforts via CAF social media may face criticism as noted in recent media reporting on efforts to communicate with Canadians via social media influencers. These objections focus on potential misuse of these platforms by CAF members, “distributing government-approved messages on their personal social media accounts” and concern such activities could “lead to abuses, including military staff intentionally misleading the Canadian public.”^{22 23} Care will need to be exercised in this domain.

²² Military's COVID-19 influence campaign sparks investigation, development of new rules to govern information operations | Ottawa Citizen

²³ Government quietly seeks influencers to push out good news about troubled shipbuilding program | Ottawa Citizen

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