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The Fight for Technical Talent

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AIM

1.   This service paper aims to present solutions to meet staffing targets for signals occupations to the Director of Land Force Development. The recommendations proposed through the analysis of relevant literature on talent acquisition and management seek to address the current challenges faced by the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) in recruiting technical personnel. Notwithstanding the significant demands for training and processing a surge of new recruits, novel solutions, such as those proposed in this paper, are required to transform the CAF into an employer of choice in the competitive workforce environment.

INTRODUCTION

2.   A common issue raised by the CAF's senior leaders throughout the Joint Command and Staff Programme 48 was the current personnel shortage. As aptly highlighted in Canada's Defence Policy, 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."[1] Amongst all CAF occupations, the health of the signals officer and non-commissioned member (NCM) occupations exhibit some of the most troubling conditions. The fiscal year 2021/2022 Strategic Intake Plan (SIP) identified nine occupations as priorities, which are defined as the most "difficult to recruit to and may not achieve SIP targets."[2] Five of these priority occupations are responsible for communications and electronics across the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN), Canadian Army (CA), and the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF).[3] Specifically within the four CA priorities, three signals NCM occupations are highlighted, while the signals officer occupation is listed as one of three threshold CA occupations.[4] As the gap between the trained strength and the preferred manning levels continue to widen for the signals occupations listed in table 1, there is no indication of a decrease in demand of personnel in these fields. Instead, the technological trends suggest a greater need for information technology (IT) specialists, increased dependency on technical talent, and tougher competition with other organizations in recruiting applicants. Therefore, the CAF is in dire need of a refreshed and focused strategy of attracting and recruiting signallers.

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[1] Department of National Defence, *Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy* (Ottawa: DND Canada, 2017). 20.

[2] Department of National Defence, *FY 21/22 Horizon-One Strategic Intake Plan (SIP)* (Ottawa: DND Canada, August 2021).

[3] *Ibid*.

[4] *Ibid*.

Table 1 – Comparison of Reg F Effective Strengths, Current as of 20 January 2022

	Trained Effective Strength (TES)	Primary Manning List (PML)	Current TES/PML (Strength)
Signal Officers and NCM	2,636	3,665	**73%**
Signals Officer	505	605	**84%**
Army Officer Avg	3,199	3,485	92%
Signal NCM	2,131	3,060	**71%**
- **Sig Op**	906	1,342	- **68%**
- **Sig Tech**	463	696	- **67%**
- **IS Tech**	407	607	- **67%**
- **Line Tech**	355	415	- **86%**
Army NCM Avg	14,487	16,546	88%
CAF Average	52,600	68,762	76%

Sources: Data from Canada. DND. "MCS Personnel Dashboard" accessed 23 January 2022.

3.   According to the Office of Auditor General of Canada's 2016 report on CAF recruitment and retention, one of the key issues that led to the under-enrollment and difficulty in recruiting some occupations was that the Canadian Forces Recruiting Group (CFRG) lacked in-depth knowledge on specialist trades and did not have consistent access to subject matter experts.[5] The report recommended that targeted advertising and marketing campaigns should be developed to attract applicants in stressed occupations, which included Signals Officers at the time of this report.[6] In 2019, modernization and digitization made the recruiting process more agile and competitive with the labour market.[7] The new recruiting website increased visits by 12%, the new mobile application enabled applicants to refine career selections by swiping and selecting images, and other digital technologies, such as virtual reality, were deployed to recruiting centres.[8] In 2019, the Director of Land Command Information prepared a briefing note (BN) for the Commander of the Canadian Army to re-establish the Army Signals Attraction Team (ASAT), which successfully addressed personnel shortages in 2010-2012. The BN proposed allocating $385k /year and temporary reassignment of five positions for three years to attract technical demographics for entry into the Royal Canadian Corps of Signals (RCCS). However, the ASAT was not created and the CAF continues to underachieve its targeted intake for the stressed occupations, as depicted in Figures 1 and 2.

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[5] Office of the Auditor General of Canada, "Report 5 – Canadian Armed Forces Recruitment and Retention – National Defence," *2016 Fall Reports of the Auditor General of Canada*, accessed 19 January 2022.
[6] *Ibid*.
[7] Department of National Defence, *Supplementary Estimates A 2019-2020 – Appearance of the Minister of National Defence Before the Committee of the Whole*, accessed 19 January 2022.
[8] *Ibid*.
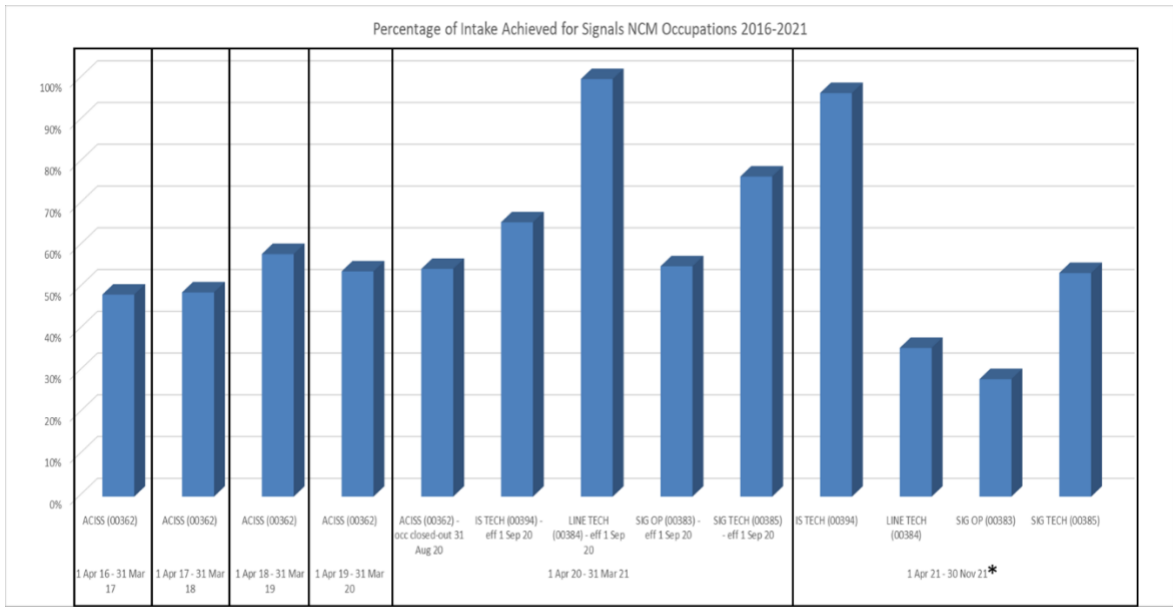
Figure 1 – Percentage of Intake Achieved for Signals NCM Occupations 2016-2021
Sources: Data from Canada. DND. "Scorecard – Reg Force Performance Results"
accessed 23 January 2022.
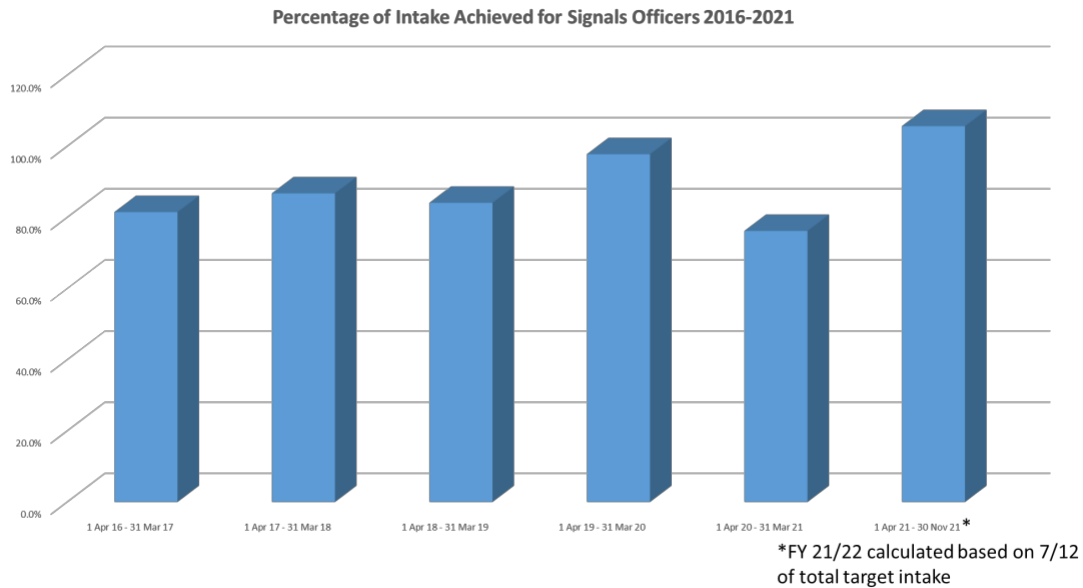
Figure 2 – Percentage of Intake Achieved for Signals Officer Occupation 2016-2021
Sources: Data from Canada. DND. "Scorecard – Reg Force Performance Results"
accessed 23 January 2022.

DISCUSSION

4.   Similar organizations are also facing human resource shortages. For example, both the United States Navy and Army struggle to meet their recruiting targets, particularly in technology-centric occupations, such as advanced electronics and cyber specializations.[9] The recruiting challenges in the United States have been attributed to low unemployment rates and societal dynamics that result in only 1% of Americans being eligible and interested in military service.[10] These challenges have stimulated research on the approaches to attract the youngest generations entering the workforce. Issues surrounding the Australian Defence Force's human resource management will also be discussed to provide potential solutions for determining organizational fit while positioning the military within the competitive labour market. Literature on attracting Generation Z, particularly those with interests in technical industries, will highlight the unique nature of the talent that the CAF is competing for and the transformations required to become an employer of choice.

Generational Considerations

5.   There are crucial generational differences between the current leadership of the CAF and those who are entering the workforce. The Y and Z generation seek a dynamic career path and diversity of experience rather than long-term predictability; monetary compensation alone is inadequate as a motivator.[11] They have a greater desire for work-life balance than other generations, place marriage and parenthood above all else, are more tolerant of societal differences, seek a social and less structured work environment, and are driven to contribute to the greater society.[12] As true digital natives, they were born into a world with immediate and unlimited access to information through the internet, making them more critical of their government.[13] Many of the characteristics valued by Generation Y and Z, such as "professional freedom, personal growth, and family stability"[14] are not commonly associated with military service and CAF policies do not compete with these attributes readily available in the private sector.

Attracting Talent

Employer of Choice

6.   One deterrent for those interested in a career in the military is the long-term commitment to a specific organization and lack of agency over one's own career. Providing more career flexibility and freedom to change occupations entails adopting policies that reward accomplishments and experience outside of military service,

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[9] Christopher J. McMahon and Colin J. Bernard, "STORM CLOUDS ON THE HORIZON: Challenges and Recommendations for Military Recruiting and Retention," *Naval War College Review* 72, no. 3 (Summer 2019): 2.

[10] *Ibid.*, 2.

[11] *Ibid.*, 5-8.

[12] *Ibid.*, 5.

[13] *Ibid.*, 6.

[14] *Ibid.*, 8.

including re-enrolling prior service members at a higher rank based on the education and experience gained externally.[15] The lack of predictability in geographical postings and the frequent moves that place stress on military families also contribute to the CAF's recruiting challenge.

7.   With Generation Z's value placed on family stability, the CAF management of the annual posting cycle and the mobility of personnel are not only issues of retention but also impacts how it can market employment opportunities to applicants. While the X and Y generations are more educated and focused on their careers compared to preceding generations, the constant need to move from base to base may place constraints on career opportunities for themselves and their families.[16] This hinders the ability to attract Generation Z to join the CAF and adds to the difficulty in increasing diversity because of the burden placed on their familial and community networks.

8.   Modern public sector recruiting communications should express the compatibility of the organizational mission and goals with the intrinsic values that attract Generation Z, such as programs that address gender differences. [17] Organizational change should be at the forefront of the CAF's marketing strategy, as potential applicants seek workplaces that best represent their own values rather than changing theirs to fit the organization's. To become an employer of choice, the organizational culture and the marketing strategy should promote "professional growth, entrepreneurship, autonomy, diversity, and inclusion."[18]

Attracting Technical Talent

9.   Beyond the unique aspects of the generations now entering the workforce, it is necessary to consider the distinct qualities for those seeking employment in technical specializations, particularly in areas that may diverge from traditional military norms. While the digitized world has been ubiquitous with Generation Z's environment, the gap between those who have adjusted to technological advancements, and those who grew up immersed in it, is even more prevalent amongst technology professionals.[19] A study of cyber officers at the Norwegian Defence Cyber Academy identified a chasm between young officers who recently graduated from their training and their superiors, who hold a different conceptualization of cyber, resulting in the senior leaders' technical competencies being doubted by the new generation.[20] Additionally, their natural curiosity and propensity to exercise autonomous judgment conflict with the military's

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[15] Christopher J. McMahon and Colin J. Bernard, "STORM CLOUDS ON THE HORIZON: Challenges and Recommendations for Military Recruiting and Retention," *Naval War College Review* 72, no. 3 (Summer 2019): 9-10.
[16] *Ibid.*, 11.
[17] Nana Amma A. Acheampong, "Reward Preferences of the Youngest Generation: Attracting, Recruiting, and Retaining Generation Z into Public Sector Organizations," *Compensation and Benefits Review* 53, no. 2 (2021): 90.
[18] *Ibid.*, 91.
[19] Hanne Eggen Røislien, "When the Generation Gap Collides with Military Structure: The Case of Norwegian Cyber Officers," *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 16, no. 3 (2015): 39.
[20] *Ibid.*, 38.

functionality.[21] Marketing the CAF's approach to empowering those with the technical expertise through concepts like *power to the edge* and *mission command* can excite those who may have apprehensions about their ability to innovate and apply technical capabilities.

10.   As demonstrated by the success achieved through the modernization of recruiting platforms, continuous innovation is necessary to attract talent. Failure to maintain pace with modern marketing and recruiting tools may have a greater impact on the RCCS due to the technical nature of the Corps and the potential applicants' interests, comfort, and dependence on information systems. Therefore, it is crucial to communicate the various transformational efforts and the diverse benefits available to employees using social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, LinkedIn, Twitter, and YouTube.[22] The majority of 18-34-year-olds have greater trust in organizations with leaders who communicate their values and mission openly and increasingly find their employment through social media.[23] Senior leaders have unique opportunities to interact with potential applicants and close the generational gap through these platforms.[24] However there may not be sufficient human resources to provide regular updates and continuous interactions desired.[25] Allegis Global Solutions, a company offering transformative data-driven talent solutions, recommends using artificial intelligence (AI) to match candidates with opportunities based on their skills and competencies while managing some of the communications through automation.[26] A digitized and technologically enabled recruiting process can assist CFRG in developing better relations with applicants and gaining more data on applicants. In other words, the potential recruits and the CAF may currently be speaking different languages. While those who are entering the job market communicate primarily through virtual media, the tools and initiatives aimed at attracting and recruiting future technologists, technicians, and technology managers fail to meet them on the same platform.

Talent Selection

11.   As the CAF endeavours to recruit more personnel, it must not lose sight of the importance of selecting the right talent and determining the member's suitability to the occupation. Altering the selection standards, such as aptitude, physical fitness, and education requirements, are often discussed as potential avenues to increase the eligible candidates. A recent example is a shift from Signals Officers previously requiring a science or engineering degree to now considering applicants with any bachelor's degree. There are often debates about the applicability of the CAF fitness standards for specialized jobs that are not physical in nature. When discussing recruitment and

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[21] *Ibid.,* 38.

[22] Nana Amma A. Acheampong, "Reward Preferences of the Youngest Generation: Attracting, Recruiting, and Retaining Generation Z into Public Sector Organizations," *Compensation and Benefits Review* 53, no. 2 (2021): 90-91.

[23] "Employers, It's Time to Grow Up: Engaging the Millennial and Gen Z Workforce": Allegis Group. https://www.allegisgroup.com/en/insights/millennials-and-genz. 27.

[24] *Ibid.,* 27.

[25] *Ibid.,* 24.

[26] *Ibid.,* 24.

retention strategies for sustained success in the ADF's human resources management, Thomas and Bell emphasize the need to strike a balance between selection standards and the training system.[27] Adjustments to the selection standards must be accompanied by changes to training practices.[28] Any considerations to change aptitude or education requirements for the RCCS occupations with the aim of increasing the selection pool should be closely coordinated with the army's training authorities to maximize successful candidates rather than transferring the burden of selection to the training system. There are advocates in the United States for reducing physical standards for those who "fight from their keyboards" and away from the physical battlefield because fitness standards are the most significant barrier of potential recruits.[29] The argument for decreasing the minimum fitness standards is relevant for those employed strictly as technicians. However, insufficient evidence was available to determine whether it would subsequently enhance the pool of applicants for the signals occupations. If the FORCE fitness test acts as a significant barrier for those who would otherwise be a good fit for signals trades, a more in-depth analysis should be conducted on whether the current physical fitness standards are still relevant. Additionally, if technical positions across the RCCS do not necessitate members who meet the physical requirements, further analysis should also be conducted on whether those positions ought to be filled by uniformed members.

Beyond Attraction and Recruitment

12.   Even with a successful recruiting campaign that achieves the SIP, the limited capacity at the Canadian Forces School of Communications and Electronics (CFSCE) may not be able to manage the surge of new recruits. Considering all reasonable opportunities to bypass the training pipeline chokepoints, such as recruiting skilled applicants, will alleviate some of the burdens on the individual training system. In addition to granting military equivalencies for technical diplomas, degrees, certifications, and work experience, a proactive recruiting campaign for skilled recruits would also fill some of the voids in the junior leadership or middle management positions. A mechanism to allow lateral entry for applicants with experience outside of the CAF would entice those hesitant to join the CAF because of a significant reduction in responsibilities and pay. It could potentially increase the pool of talent at the mid-management level with the appropriate military and leadership training to augment their previous technical and management experience. Through the CAF reconstitution, the training establishments must also be resourced to training the intended increase of intake.

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[27] Keith Thomas and Steve Bell, "Competing for the Best and Brightest: Recruitment and Retention in the Australian Defence Force," *Security Challenges* 3, no. 1 (2007): 117.

[28] *Ibid*., 107.

[29] Christopher J. McMahon and Colin J. Bernard, "STORM CLOUDS ON THE HORIZON: Challenges and Recommendations for Military Recruiting and Retention," *Naval War College Review* 72, no. 3 (Summer, 2019): 13.

CONCLUSION

USMC Talent Management 2030 – A Model to Consider

13.   *Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy* confronts the CAF's challenges in the competitive labour market and offers optimism in creating efficiencies, increasing diversity, and retaining the future workforce.[30] Since 2017, there have been multiple studies and recommendations to optimize recruitment. Meanwhile, the current strength of signals occupations has remained critically low, and the current projections indicate underachievement of the recruiting targets. Therefore, the CAF should fundamentally re-envision talent management and promulgate the leadership's vision of transforming talent management. The recent document developed by the United States Marine Corps (USMC), *Talent Management 2030*, should be considered a model. Some key changes being considered are:

   a.   They will establish an online recruiting cell exclusively focused on recruiting and assessing individuals with critical specialized skills, similar to cutting-edge companies.[31]

   b.   Considering the rising significance of the cyber domain, the USMC will consider lateral entry at appropriate rank levels for experienced, educated, and talented Americans into specific occupations.[32]

   c.   To encourage Marines who left active duty to return to service, the USMC is reviewing options to "return at a rank commensurate with their qualifications."[33]

14.   Rather than relying on traditional recruitment strategies and incremental changes, the Commandant of the USMC has opted to lead the transformation initiatives by challenging the systems that have created barriers for effective talent management. This document addresses the challenges for recruiting technical Generation Z talent raised throughout this paper. As the CAF faces similar challenges, it is recommended that *Talent Management 2030* be reviewed with rigour and applied to the CAF's overall talent management strategies.

Limitation and Further Research

15.   A greater understanding of the demographics entering the workforce is required. While the retention surveys may provide a broad knowledge of the CAF's retention challenges and provide some comparative analysis between occupations selected

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[30] Department of National Defence, *Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy* (Ottawa: DND Canada, 2017), 20.
[31] Department of the Navy, *Talent Management 2030* (Washington, D.C.: Commandant of the Marine Corps, 2021), 9.
[32] *Ibid.*, 9.
[33] *Ibid.*, 9.

annually, detailed data on the Signals trades are not collected or disclosed yearly. A greater issue for recruiting the current or next-generation applicants is the lack of data focused on the newest recruits. Expanding the CAF's knowledge of the motivators, interests, and aspirations of the latest recruits could inform the recruiting strategies, including the branding and the media employed to advertise and communicate with potential applicants. Focused research on the youngest generation of CAF members and determining differences amongst the distinct occupations and specialties will also prove invaluable for developing strategies to retain talent and potentially setting the conditions for re-enrollment of skilled talent in the future. Receiving feedback from recently recruited signallers, amongst those that are successful in meeting the baseline standards, of what form of media attracted them to the CAF, the CA, and their respective occupations would assist in the development of targeted recruitment strategies and improvement in branding the stressed occupations to be more attractive to the public.

RECOMMENDATIONS

16.   Career Flexibility – Allow lateral entry for experienced applicants and grant ranks and positions commensurate with their experience, education, and skills.

17.   Technology Enabled Marketing and Recruiting Tools – Continue to modernize and digitize recruiting platforms, including social media communications, AI-driven job-matching, automated file updates to candidates. Use social media to communicate how the CAF offers family stability, autonomy, diversity, inclusion, and growth opportunities.

18.   Training-Selection Balance – Consider selection standards (aptitude, fitness, education) for RCCS members, but they must be balanced with the training and development.

19.   RCCS Focused Attraction and Recruitment – Establish a cell or a network of subject matter experts who can relate with Generation Z to support signals recruiting.

Annex: A. Signals Strategic Intake Plan Scorecard Data for 2016-2021

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Signals Strategic Intake Plan Scorecard Data for 2016-2021

DATES	FY SIP TARGET — EXTERNAL							FY SIP TARGET — INTERNAL						TOTAL FY TARGET	INTAKE — EXTERNAL							INTAKE — INTERNAL								FY Intake All Sources	DELTA			Incoming from SPHL	% Intake achieved FYTD
	CEOTP (External)	DEO	DEO CT(T)	DEO CT(U)	CEOTP CT(U)	ROTP	ROTP CT	SCP	CFR	SRCP	UTPNCM	CEOTP (Internal)	OT (In-Svc)		CEOTP (External)	DEO	DEO CT(T)	DEO CT(U)	CEOTP CT(U)	ROTP (& ALOY)	ROTP CT - SEELM	SCP	CFR	SRCP	UTPNCM	CEOTP	VOT(T)	VOT(U)	COT (T/U)		External	Internal	Overall Delta		
1 Apr 16 - 31 Mar 17	0	15	1	7	0	19	6	2	16	5	3	1	6	81	0	18	0	5	0	15	6	1	15	3	0	0	0	2	1	66	4	11	15		81.5%
1 Apr 17 - 31 Mar 18	0	23	2	2	1	35	0	3	10	5	0	0	2	83	0	23	2	2	1	24	0	2	5	3	0	0	0	5	5	72	11	0	11		86.7%
1 Apr 18 - 31 Mar 19	1	18	10	0	0	30	0	0	20	5	2	0	2	88	0	16	3	2	0	24	6	0	14	3	2	0	0	0	4	74	8	6	14		84.1%
1 Apr 19 - 31 Mar 20	1	33	7		0	24	0	0	12	3	7	0	2	89	0	33	2	2	0	21	3	0	12	1	4	0	0	2	7	87	4	-2	2		97.8%
1 Apr 20 - 31 Mar 21	0	52	2		0	12	0	3	8	0	4	0	3	84	0	9	1	1	0	15	2	3	14	0	4	0	0	3	12	64	38	-18	20		76.2%
1 Apr 21 - 30 Nov 21	0	58	4		0	24	0	1	5	0	3	0	4	99	0	23	1	2	0	22	1	1	4	0	3	0	0	0	4	61	37	1	38		61.6%

Sources: Data from Canada. DND. "Scorecard – Reg Force Performance Results" accessed 23 January 2022.

DATES	OCCUPATION	FY SIP TARGET EXTERNAL: External (Direct Entry)	CT(T)	CT(U)	INTERNAL: CT/OT	Total FY Target	INTAKE EXTERNAL: Skld & Semi-Skld	Unskilled	CT(T) / ME(E)	CT(U) / ME(N-E)	INTERNAL: VOT(T)	VOT(U)	COT (T/U)	Relinquishment	FY Intake All Sources	DELTA EXTERNAL	INTERNAL	OVERALL DELTA	Incoming from SPHL	% Intake achieved FYTD
1 Apr 16 - 31 Mar 17	ACISS (00362)	207	18	6	50	281	6	108	15	3	2	1	1	0	136	99	46	145	3	48%
1 Apr 17 - 31 Mar 18	ACISS (00362)	306	10	3	8	327		139	11	1	0	3	5	1	160	168	-1	167	0	49%
1 Apr 18 - 31 Mar 19	ACISS (00362)	314	10	7	8	339	7	171	10	2	1	1	3	2	197	141	1	142	2	58%
1 Apr 19 - 31 Mar 20	ACISS (00362)	385	17		4	406	4	186	16	0	0	4	8	1	219	196	-9	187	0	54%
1 Apr 20 - 31 Mar 21	ACISS (00362) - occ closed-out 31 Aug 20	22	6		5	33	4	9	2	0	2	0	0	1	18	13	2	15	0	55%
1 Apr 20 - 31 Mar 21	IS TECH (00394) - eff 1 Sep 20	35	0	0	0	35	0	23	0	0	0	0	0	0	23	12	0	12	0	66%
1 Apr 20 - 31 Mar 21	LINE TECH (00384) - eff 1 Sep 20	5	0	0	0	5	0	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	0	0	0	0	100%
1 Apr 20 - 31 Mar 21	SIG OP (00383) - eff 1 Sep 20	58	0	0	0	58	1	29	1	0	0	1	0	0	32	27	-1	26	0	55%
1 Apr 20 - 31 Mar 21	SIG TECH (00385) - eff 1 Sep 20	30	0	0	0	30	0	23	0	0	0	0	0	0	23	7	0	7	0	77%
1 Apr 21 - 30 Nov 21	IS TECH (00394) – **mid-FY**	84	5		5	94	1	45	1	0	3	0	3	0	53	42	-1	41	0	56%
1 Apr 21 - 30 Nov 21	LINE TECH (00384) – **mid-FY**	70	2		5	77	2	14	0	0	0	0	0	0	16	56	5	61	0	21%
1 Apr 21 - 30 Nov 21	SIG OP (00383) – **mid-FY**	250	12		6	268	1	39	1	0	0	1	2	0	44	221	3	224	0	16%
1 Apr 21 - 30 Nov 21	SIG TECH (00385) – **mid-FY**	54	5		5	64	2	18	0	0	0	0	0	0	20	39	5	44	0	31%

Sources: Data from Canada. DND. "Scorecard – Reg Force Performance Results" accessed 23 January 2022.