



## The Potential of Branding: An Opportunity for the Canadian Armed Forces

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### JCSP 49 DL

#### Exercise Solo Flight

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# **THE POTENTIAL OF BRANDING: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR THE CANADIAN ARMED FORCES**

## **Introduction – The Challenge of Recruiting**

Over the past decade, the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) has struggled with a severe recruiting and retention challenge, which has progressively become worse and has been further exacerbated by the aftereffects of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>1</sup> This problem has become so dire that the Minister of National Defence (MND) recently described it as a veritable “death spiral” as the number of members leaving the CAF has outnumbered the amount joining the CAF during the past three years.<sup>2</sup> A variety of potential factors have been identified that could be contributing to this challenge. In 2019, the Standing Committee on National Defence identified a core issue stemming from a lack of diversity (underrepresented groups) within the ranks compared to the Canadian population.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, as the overall population continues to grow increasingly diverse, the CAF risks alienating itself from the population and not being viewed as an employer of choice by these underrepresented groups.<sup>4</sup> In 2022, the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) and Deputy Minister (DM) published a directive for CAF reconstitution indicating that the CAF’s personnel and staffing issues “have been compounded by the CAF’s heavy commitment to operations, the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and a culture crisis”.<sup>5</sup> Within each of these problem areas identified by the Standing Committee and the CDS/DM, there exist many potential additional ancillary and interrelated problems that could also be contributing factors such as the presence of right-wing extremists and racists<sup>6</sup>, a lack of diversity and numerous reports of sexual misconduct, harassment and intolerance at all rank levels<sup>7</sup>, and a general resistance by senior leaders to embrace change.<sup>8</sup>

With so many potential contributing factors and varying viewpoints on priority from different stakeholders, numerous potential solutions could be explored making this problem area highly complex. Under such circumstances, the recruiting and retention problem could meet the definition of a “wicked problem”, which generally manifests when a problem becomes dynamically complex, ill-structured, and has highly uncertain causes and outcomes.<sup>9</sup> From a policy perspective, wicked problems are extremely challenging to resolve as the process of defining them yields corresponding solutions to address them. However, as each solution is implemented, they will impact the environment resulting in a series of unforeseen consequences

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<sup>1</sup> (Government of Canada 2022)

<sup>2</sup> (D’Andrea 2024)

<sup>3</sup> (Standing Committee on National Defence 2022, 7)

<sup>4</sup> (Standing Committee on National Defence 2019, 7)

<sup>5</sup> (Government of Canada 2022)

<sup>6</sup> (D’Andrea 2024)

<sup>7</sup> (Standing Committee on National Defence 2022, 7)

<sup>8</sup> (Standing Committee on National Defence 2022, 7-8)

<sup>9</sup> (McMillan and Overall 2016, 36)

that might positively or negatively affect other interrelated problems, potentially changing the problem space entirely.<sup>10</sup> While diversity and culture-related matters, for example, may indeed be some of the root causes of recruitment and retention problems in the CAF, this phenomenon is also manifesting itself across the world in a variety of countries where these same root causes may not play as significant a role. General Wayne Eyre (CDS) recently commented in an interview “[w]e’re not the only ones facing the people crunch. I’ve had good chats with Australia, New Zealand, NATO counterparts — this is a phenomenon across the West – tight labour force, not as much interest in military service”<sup>11</sup>. In the United States, of the 34 million people that make their primary recruiting demographic (17- to 24-year-olds), 71% do not qualify for military service due to factors such as a lack of education, poor health, or a criminal record and only 1% of those who are eligible have expressed an interest in potentially joining the military<sup>12</sup>. While each country faces its own unique set of variables that might be affecting recruiting and retention, as this phenomenon is manifesting itself on such a global scale there may be some commonality found in the characteristics of the different generational demographics (Generation Y (Millennials) and Generation Z (Gen Z)) that make up the pool of potential recruits in Western countries. This paper will argue that, from a Canadian perspective, the CAF’s brand as an employer is not well understood by the Canadian population and thus does not resonate with Millennials or Gen Z as an employer of choice. An examination of perceptions of the CAF by Canadians will be explored to identify common themes as to why they might not be interested in enrolling. The potential power of branding and its impact on decision-making, from buying a product to selecting a career, will then be examined. This will be followed by an analysis of common characteristics of the Millennial and Gen Z populations and how these characteristics might influence career decision-making. Finally, this paper will provide recommendations as to how the CAF might leverage the potential of branding to set itself apart in a sea of competitors looking for talent.

## **Current Perceptions of the CAF**

Each year, the Government of Canada spends tens of thousands of dollars on studies to survey the Canadian population and ascertain its views about the CAF. These studies, entitled *Views of the Canadian Armed Forces Tracking Study*, are then published on the Government of Canada Public Opinion Research Reports webpage.<sup>13</sup> The target audience for CAF recruiting are individuals aged 18 to 24 years old with a high school or college degree (job seekers) and 25 to 34 years old who are post-secondary students, college and university graduates, and career changers (job changers).<sup>14</sup> Consequently, tracking studies concentrate on these age groups and collect information via a series of focus groups and surveys of thousands of individuals from

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<sup>10</sup> (Morrison 2013, 2)

<sup>11</sup> (Gilmore 2023)

<sup>12</sup> (McMahon and Bernard 2019, 2)

<sup>13</sup> (Government of Canada 2023)

<sup>14</sup> (The Strategic Counsel 2023, 3)

across Canada.<sup>15</sup> An examination of tracking studies over the past decade reveals several common trends regarding the perception of the CAF by the Canadian population. In 2014, for example, only 9% of participants indicated they were very familiar with the CAF and only 34% could recall reading, seeing or hearing anything about it at all, which represented the lowest rates seen since 2005.<sup>16</sup> In 2020, awareness and familiarity of the CAF continued to be very low with only one to two participants per focus group vaguely remembering seeing a recruitment ad online.<sup>17</sup> In 2023, most participants continued to express that they were generally uninformed about the roles and activities conducted by the CAF and that they knew more about other countries' militaries such as the United States.<sup>18</sup> From these results, it is apparent that the target population for recruitment remains largely unaware of the CAF's day-to-day activities.

When asked specifically about the role the CAF should have on behalf of Canadians, the 2014 study found that the population was split between a focus on domestic operations (43%) and international operations (40%), which saw the highest numbers prioritizing domestic affairs since tracking began on this issue in 2005.<sup>19</sup> In 2020, most participants viewed the CAF as a peacekeeping and support force but expressed difficulty in naming locations where the CAF might be operating internationally.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, participants felt that domestic roles should be the priority with the CAF responding to natural disasters, search and rescue, and protecting Canada's sovereignty.<sup>21</sup> In 2023, participants indicated that the first thing that came to mind when thinking about the CAF was peacekeeping and humanitarian aid and that due to the lack of conflict within Canada, the primary role of the CAF should be to help other countries in need.<sup>22</sup> These views of the CAF as a peacekeeping and humanitarian aid-focused organization that should concentrate on domestic activities presents an interesting juxtaposition when compared to the role of the CAF as articulated in the most recent defence policy update, *Our North, Strong and Free*, which indicates “[t]he top priority of the Canadian Armed Forces is the defence of Canada and Canadians.”<sup>23</sup> The policy adds particular emphasis on “defending the Arctic and North and its approaches against new and accelerating threats through credible deterrence ... [and] develop[ing] greater striking power to deter adversaries and keep threats farther from our shores.”<sup>24</sup> While the majority of Canadians aged 18 to 34 years old may not have a strong awareness of the day-to-day activities of the CAF, their consensus of what the CAF should be doing on behalf of Canadians is largely aligned with the Government of Canada's vision for defence. However, the role as a peacekeeping force remains divergent as the CAF has

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<sup>15</sup> (Government of Canada 2023)

<sup>16</sup> (Phoenix Strategic Perspectives Inc. 2014, i)

<sup>17</sup> (Earncliffe Strategy Group 2020, 2)

<sup>18</sup> (Quorus Consulting Group Inc. 2023, 7-8)

<sup>19</sup> (Phoenix Strategic Perspectives Inc. 2014, ii)

<sup>20</sup> (Earncliffe Strategy Group 2020, 2)

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> (Quorus Consulting Group Inc. 2023, 9)

<sup>23</sup> (Department of National Defence 2024, 11)

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

significantly reduced its presence on traditional United Nations peacekeeping missions since 2001.<sup>25</sup>

When asked about their overall impression of the CAF, in 2014, a large majority of participants (83%) viewed the military as a source of pride and 89% held positive views regarding CAF personnel.<sup>26</sup> In 2020, most participants (82%) indicated that they held very positive views of CAF members and used words to describe them such as “brave, courageous, selfless, humble, loyal, prideful, dedicated, focussed, and highly trained.”<sup>27</sup> However, views of the CAF as a source of pride fell from 70% in 2016 to 66% in 2018 to 62% in 2020.<sup>28</sup> In 2023, the number of participants who viewed the CAF as a source of pride fell further to 49%.<sup>29</sup> Although the view of participants regarding CAF personnel in 2023 continued to be high (77%), it too had fallen since 2020.<sup>30</sup> While the view of the CAF and its personnel by Canadians has continued to fall over the past decade, the view of the CAF as an employer has remained largely unchanged with some diminishment. In 2014, 52% of participants indicated they would advise a young person close to them to join the CAF.<sup>31</sup> In 2020, 9% of participants strongly indicated they could see themselves joining the CAF but 43% strongly disagreed.<sup>32</sup> In 2023, few participants indicated that they would consider joining the CAF, but a majority indicated they would not discourage a friend from doing so.<sup>33</sup> From these results, it appears that only a small amount of 18 to 34 years olds (less than 10%) have consistently considered the CAF as a potential employer, regardless of the wider perception of the CAF as a source of pride, while around 50% consistently remain supportive of a friend or family member who considers a career in the CAF.

Overall, the public perception of the CAF as an organization has significantly eroded over the past decade, but the perception of its members continues to remain high. There are several potential reasons this could be occurring such as negative media coverage of inappropriate sexual behaviour and discrimination scandals, underfunded and aging equipment, and antiquated relevance.<sup>34</sup> While it does not appear that this erosion has significantly impacted the amount of Canadians who express possible interest in joining the CAF, which has always remained low, given the current recruiting challenges it is probable that this erosion is having an effect. Constant throughout the last decade, however, is a general lack of awareness of what the CAF does on behalf of Canadians day-to-day and where it operates internationally. As a result, this lack of knowledge of the CAF as a potential employer could be negatively impacting

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<sup>25</sup> (Department of National Defence 2023)

<sup>26</sup> (Phoenix Strategic Perspectives Inc. 2014, ii)

<sup>27</sup> (Earncliffe Strategy Group 2020, 2)

<sup>28</sup> (Earncliffe Strategy Group 2020, 4)

<sup>29</sup> (Quorus Consulting Group Inc. 2023, 12)

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> (Phoenix Strategic Perspectives Inc. 2014, ii)

<sup>32</sup> (Earncliffe Strategy Group 2020, 4)

<sup>33</sup> (Quorus Consulting Group Inc. 2023, 10-11)

<sup>34</sup> (Quorus Consulting Group Inc. 2023, 10-11)

recruitment as well. In such an information vacuum, Canadians will draw conclusions about the CAF based on the information they do have access to such as movies and television, which might be why participants in the studies felt they knew more about other militaries than our own. This creates a potential missed opportunity as the CAF's brand as an employer is going unrecognized.

## **The Power of Effective Branding**

The critical importance of branding is well understood and documented in marketing literature, which is reflective of the fact that half the market share value of many Fortune 500 companies is associated with brand recognition.<sup>35</sup> Examples of this can be seen in Apple, Microsoft, Google, and Amazon which each have estimated brand values between 308 and 516 billion U.S. dollars.<sup>36</sup> Brands embody the values and beliefs of an organization and resonate with the target population generating potential customers and employees.<sup>37</sup> Organizations risk obscurity and irrelevance if they fail to recognize that “people don't buy WHAT you do, they buy WHY you do it.”<sup>38</sup> In the context of an employer searching for recruits, similar principles can be applied to cultivate potential buyers (employees). Employer, or recruitment, branding can be defined as “the process of building an identifiable and unique employer identity, and the employer brand as a concept of the firm that differentiates it from its competitors”.<sup>39</sup> This identity is further subdivided into two key dimensions, instrumental functions and psychological (or symbolic) functions.<sup>40</sup> In the context of military recruitment, instrumental functions relate to tangible benefits such as pay and benefits, travel opportunities, and training and advancement opportunities.<sup>41</sup> Symbolic functions relate to abstract and intangible attributes of the employer representing characteristics such as sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness.<sup>42</sup> While instrumental functions influence the decision-making of potential recruits in selecting an employer and remaining with the organization instead of looking for better opportunities elsewhere<sup>43</sup>, the symbolic functions support employees in actualizing their self-identify and self-image.<sup>44</sup> As a result, recruits are more likely to be attracted to organizations that reflect symbolic functions similar to their own.<sup>45</sup> From a CAF recruiting perspective, while pay, benefits, opportunities to travel and helping people are important aspects of an effective brand, it is important to recognize that the symbolic dimension is equally important as these intangible

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<sup>35</sup> (North, et al. 2006, 160)

<sup>36</sup> (Statista 2024)

<sup>37</sup> (North, et al. 2006, 160)

<sup>38</sup> (Sinek 2009, 41)

<sup>39</sup> (Näppä, Farshid and Foster 2014, 133)

<sup>40</sup> (Kaur and Shah 2022, 801)

<sup>41</sup> (Lievens 2007, 53)

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> (Kaur and Shah 2022, 801)

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> (Lievens 2007, 53)

benefits greatly impact prospective recruits in their decision-making to join the CAF. Furthermore, if the symbolic functions being messaged do not closely align with the traits of the prospective recruit, access to increased functional dimensions such as pay and benefits may not be effective in encouraging recruitment.

In creating an employer brand, a compelling story based on personal experience illustrating what it is like to work inside the organization can be an invaluable tool in cultivating word-of-mouth, or viral, interest in working for an organization.<sup>46</sup> From a CAF perspective, this manifests itself in the Survey Studies where it is far more likely for the CAF to be recommended as an employer by those serving in the CAF or by family or friends who serve.<sup>47</sup> Marketing initiatives such as CAF recruiting videos and advertisements aim to leverage this concept in reaching a wider audience and have generally been positively received.<sup>48</sup> Of greater importance however is the concept of employer believability, how honestly the advertised story of work-life conditions matches reality.<sup>49</sup> Brands that can consistently deliver on their promises to employees are far more likely to create lasting value and retain their personnel.<sup>50</sup> Overselling or not being fully transparent with potential recruits can result in severe consequences to retention and brand credibility for future recruits.<sup>51</sup> This can be an extremely difficult conundrum for the CAF as the most compelling stories are often those pulled from times of action such as war or humanitarian crises. However, if these moments of action are relatively rare events the disconnect with regular day-to-day activities can paint a dishonest picture of the true life of service in the CAF and devalue its brand as an employer. Given the importance of instrumental and symbolic functions of employer branding and the need to create a compelling story to set the CAF apart from other employers in attracting talent, it will be essential to understand the characteristics of the demographic populations the CAF is seeking to recruit.

## **Millennials and Gen Z**

The target age demographic for CAF recruitment is individuals aged 18 to 24 years old (job seekers) and 25 to 34 years old (job changers).<sup>52</sup> These age categories closely align with two different generations, Millennials born between 1981 and 1996 (28 to 43 year olds) and Gen Z born between 1997 and 2012 (12 to 27 year olds).<sup>53</sup> Defining generations based on year of birth provides a generalized picture of “cohorts of people who have grown up in a specific social, economic and political context that can shape their view of the world.”<sup>54</sup> Depending on the

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<sup>46</sup> (Carey 2007, 21)

<sup>47</sup> (Quorus Consulting Group Inc. 2023, 47-78)

<sup>48</sup> (Quorus Consulting Group Inc. 2023, 16)

<sup>49</sup> (Carey 2007, 21)

<sup>50</sup> (North, et al. 2006, 163)

<sup>51</sup> (Carey 2007, 21)

<sup>52</sup> (The Strategic Counsel 2023, 3)

<sup>53</sup> (Statistics Canada 2022, 4)

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

characteristics of each generation there can be significant impacts for prospective employers, such as the CAF, regarding recruitment initiatives.

The members of Gen Z have just begun entering the workplace and consolidated perspectives regarding their characteristics are still being developed, but in general they appear to share many of the same characteristics as Millennials.<sup>55</sup> The members of the Millennial generation are now fully in the workplace and by 2025, it is expected that Millennials and Gen Z will make up 75% of the global workforce.<sup>56</sup> Millennials are characterized by being the most highly educated generation in Canadian history, prioritizing work-life balance, a willingness to trade stability for professional fulfillment, preferring workplace cultures with transparency and communication over hierarchy, and requiring frequent feedback and encouragement in comparison to previous generations.<sup>57</sup> Both Gen Z and Millennials value organizations that commit to their development and are strongly motivated by a desire to feel valued and make a positive contribution to a purpose greater than themselves.<sup>58</sup> A recent study of employees from Canada, Ireland, the United Kingdom, and the United States found that meaningful work, where employee day-to-day activities were aligned with the organization's vision and the employee's values, represented the most important factor in job selection.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, 88% of those surveyed indicated that if their values aligned with the organization they would be likely to recommend the employer to a friend.<sup>60</sup> Given these generational characteristics of the target recruiting population and perceptions of the CAF by this same population, an examination of potential employer brand considerations can now be explored.

### **Creating an Employer Brand for the CAF**

The values and professional expectations articulated in the CAF's ethos highlight the importance of leadership, inclusion, teamwork, courage, and readiness.<sup>61</sup> Given these characteristics and the unique requirement of accepting unlimited liability, the CAF should be an attractive employer to Millennials and Gen Z given the importance they ascribe to professional growth opportunities and working toward a common goal greater than themselves. However, as this same population largely does not understand the true day-to-day activities of the CAF or its employment around the world, these potential employment opportunities are likely being unrealized. Instead, the CAF's brand is being supplanted by a constant barrage of war and conflict movies and television series that predominantly depict tough, masculine, and muscular army soldiers as protagonists.<sup>62</sup> As result, rates of expressed familiarity by Millennial and Gen Z

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<sup>55</sup> (Dougherty, Clarke and Spasevski 2020)

<sup>56</sup> (McMahon and Bernard 2019, 3)

<sup>57</sup> (Jezer-Morton 2019)

<sup>58</sup> (McMahon and Bernard 2019, 5)

<sup>59</sup> (Benefits Canada 2019)

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> (Canadian Defence Academy 2022)

<sup>62</sup> (Mayer 2020, 5)

Canadians have tilted toward the Canadian Army (45%), followed by the Royal Canadian Air Force (33%), and then the Royal Canadian Navy (27%).<sup>63</sup> To build an effective employer brand, the CAF should develop a coherent story that will penetrate the collective awareness of its recruiting demographic and focus on generating symbolic dimensional factors with functional dimensional factors as a secondary line of effort. This story and corresponding dimensional factors should not only articulate the missions the CAF is involved but must also describe the true day-to-day activities experienced by serving members to build a credible and believable narrative of life in the CAF. While each element within the CAF shares a common ethos, the specific roles and day-to-day activities can be wildly divergent due to the different environments of employment (Army, Air Force, Navy). As such, the CAF should consider the potential benefits that might be realized in creating specific stories and employer brands for each element. This could help bolster improved recruitment effectiveness, specifically in the Air Force and Navy, which need to compete with a saturated environment filled with army-focused movies and television. While many competing and interrelated factors are contributing to the wicked problem of CAF recruitment, the power of branding represents a potential missed opportunity that should be considered for prioritization as a primary line of effort in attracting talented Canadians to military service.

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<sup>63</sup> (Quorus Consulting Group Inc. 2023, 11)

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