



STRATEGY, POLICY, OR CHECK-LIST? AN ASSESSMENT OF THE CANADIAN ARMED FORCES RETENTION STRATEGY

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STRATEGY, POLICY, OR CHECK-LIST? AN ASSESSMENT OF THE CAF RETENTION STRATEGY

INTRODUCTION

Employee retention has been a longstanding human resource challenge and consideration for organizations worldwide where employees exercise a right to participate in a free labour market. In these environments, organizations are challenged to meet organizational needs while fostering a climate where valued employees elect to remain within the organization. From a Canadian context, the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) are distinct from many other organizations in that the CAF talent management model does not typically consider external hires for military positions beyond entry level, and the CAF retains the unique responsibility for the majority of the training of its members. These distinctions necessitate a system where CAF members remain in the CAF both to minimize the costs to retrain new personnel and to ensure an adequate promotion pool to account for normal attrition. These factors place retention at the forefront of personnel factors necessary to maintain CAF readiness to respond to Government of Canada priorities.

The importance of and priority placed on retention for the CAF evolves constantly based on a number of policy and social factors such as Government of Canada priorities, CAF authorized personnel numbers, CAF operational tempo, and societal opinion of the CAF, among others. Based on Government¹² and external reporting,³ retention has emerged as a key theme throughout the past 10 years, particularly when contrasted against the 1990s where the CAF saw a reduction of personnel from approximately 89,000 to under 60,000.⁴ Evidence of this trend is observed through the current defence policy, *Strong, Secure, Engaged* (SSE) which directs retention initiatives, the development of a retention strategy, and that the CAF personnel system be “able to maintain a skilled force across a broad range of tasks while meeting requirements in critical occupations facing shortages.”⁵ This recognition of retention as a key issue is a significant shift from the 2008 *Canada First Defence Strategy* which has no mention of the word ‘retention’⁶ or any guidance to the Department of National Defence (DND) or CAF to advance retention initiatives.

In response to a task outlined in SSE to “develop and implement a comprehensive Canadian Armed Forces Retention Strategy”⁷ the CAF released a new Retention Strategy in the fall of 2022. This strategy proposes a “renewed approach to managing retention,

¹ “Parliamentary Secretary McCrimmon, Member of Parliament Alleslev Highlight Recruitment, Retention in Canadian Armed Forces.”

² McKay, “Modernizing Recruitment and Retention in the Canadian Armed Forces.”

³ Government of Canada, “Report 5—Canadian Armed Forces Recruitment and Retention—National Defence.”

⁴ Canada, “Canada First Defence Strategy,” 15.

⁵ Canada, *Strong Secure Engaged*, 20.

⁶ Canada, “Canada First Defence Strategy.”

⁷ Canada, *Strong Secure Engaged*, 22.

designed to flexibly respond to emerging and changing needs for today's CAF members and the CAF members of tomorrow.”⁸ Although the CAF Retention Strategy demonstrates considerable effort to research, frame, and address the CAF retention challenges, it merits additional refinements based on additional consultation and existing academic research. The current Retention Strategy lacks evidence of adequate consultation, falls short of stakeholder expectations, and is unclear with respect to a clear vision towards implementation of retention initiatives. This paper will provide an assessment of the CAF Retention Strategy, highlight examples where stakeholder expectations were not met, evaluate the communication strategy surrounding retention, and will offer additional retention considerations based on academic research for further consideration.

CAF RETENTION STRATEGY

The CAF Retention Strategy represents an acknowledgement by political and CAF leadership that retention is an issue that requires attention, and serves as a “culmination of research and analysis into how the CAF can better manage retention in a deliberate, sustained, and evergreen fashion.”⁹ This strategy explores retention along three key elements: problem framing through “exploring the strategic landscape of retention,” analysis of “the principles which guided the development of the Retention Strategy and the retention outcomes we seek to influence” and articulating a way forward through established lines of effort.¹⁰ This approach provides significant research to frame the problem, but struggles to articulate a vision in a way that can be understood and implemented by leaders and CAF members at all levels of the organization.

Problem Framing

Retention is widely understood to be a complex issue, of which Hausknecht et al. recommends be considered as a “critical element of an organization's approach to talent management.”¹¹ Roodt and Kotze also drew upon research to highlight an increase in employee turnover of 25% from 2001 – 2005 along with a growing trend of employees seeking to resign from their current jobs within the next two years.¹² These examples demonstrate some of the research on the importance and impacts of retention across organizations. This is particularly relevant for an organization such as the CAF which relies on internal promotions and progression to fill its more senior positions. The CAF frames its retention challenges citing common dissatisfiers as encompassing areas such as “job dissatisfaction, geographical instability, lack of career progression, undesirable postings, and dissatisfaction with senior leadership.”¹³ Conversely, Hausknecht et al. cites

⁸ Canada, “Canadian Armed Forces Retention Strategy,” 3.

⁹ Canada, V.

¹⁰ Canada, IV.

¹¹ Hausknecht, Rodda, and Howard, “Targeted Employee Retention: Performance-Based and Job-Related Differences in Reported Reasons for Staying,” 270.

¹² Roodt and Kotze, “Factors That Affect the Retention of Managerial and Specialist Staff: An Exploratory Study of an Employee Commitment Model,” 48.

¹³ Canada, “Canadian Armed Forces Retention Strategy,” 6.

factors such as “organizational commitment, organizational justice, flexible work arrangements, organizational prestige, and location”¹⁴ as key determinants in relation to employee retention. Although the CAF factors are worded differently from those of Hausknecht et al., the underlying themes speak to the necessity of CAF members to be satisfied with where they work, who they work for, and how they work. Although the CAF Retention Strategy demonstrates considerable research to understand the factors that impact retention, the wealth of external research on the topic of retention demonstrate that the problem is too complex in nature and requires a broad approach to consider factors and groups impacted that go beyond those articulated in the strategy.

Considering this complexity, the CAF Retention Strategy advocates for a holistic approach that must adapt to internal and external factors to address “factors influencing retention wherever they may reside.”¹⁵ As part of this approach, the CAF Retention Strategy recognizes the interconnectedness between retention and a myriad of other personnel related initiatives such as the CAF Human Resource Strategy, the CAF Offer, the Total Health and Wellness Strategy, among others.¹⁶ As these initiatives are generally CAF wide initiatives that apply to all members, this gives an impression of a blanket approach to enabling the necessary holistic approach. From a retention perspective, Hausknecht et al. argues that “blanket retention policies may be disadvantageous if they appeal to all employees, regardless of their level of performance.”¹⁷ From a CAF lens, this point of view is further articulated by Huddleston’s research which stipulates that:

Given the vast demographic spread within the CAF organization and the wider military family community, it would be difficult for one policy to work for all. The CAF consists of individuals ranging in age from 18 to 60+, in a variety of differing trades, and in the regular force or the reserves. Some members are married with families, or are empty-nesters as their families have grown, while others are single. Additionally, CAF members come from all over Canada, not to mention the world (newly recognized citizens to Canada joining the CAF), which brings differing perspectives and expectations.¹⁸

These opposing notions challenge the CAF as the bureaucratic structure, size, and scale of the CAF favour broad approaches but the necessity to address a myriad of retention factors requires a more focused approach. The CAF Retention Strategy refers to the concept of ‘targeted retention’ that will consider “specific occupations, at specific locations, at specific ranks, and at a specific time ... specific circumstances,

¹⁴ Hausknecht, Rodda, and Howard, “Targeted Employee Retention: Performance-Based and Job-Related Differences in Reported Reasons for Staying,” 272.

¹⁵ Canada, “Canadian Armed Forces Retention Strategy,” 11.

¹⁶ Canada, 11.

¹⁷ Hausknecht, Rodda, and Howard, “Targeted Employee Retention: Performance-Based and Job-Related Differences in Reported Reasons for Staying,” 270.

¹⁸ Huddleston, “Canadian Armed Forces Retention: A Wicked Problem?,” 91.

demographics, and other factors, as appropriate.”¹⁹ Targeted retention is mentioned in a few sections in the strategy, but beyond a few surface level examples the strategy has a lack of definition as to how targeted retention will occur. The only exception to this is with respect to the need to consider retention of underrepresented groups (women, Indigenous peoples, visible minorities, LGBTQ+ individuals, and persons with disabilities).²⁰ Retention of these groups is discussed in sections 2.1, 2.2, 3.1 (with specific datasets tracking attrition for these groups),²¹ and Annex A.²² Although retention of these groups is important, and was specifically mandated in SSE,²³ this focus on specific groups may create a perception where other social groups (such as specific occupations or specialists, or CAF members not identifying as belonging to underrepresented groups) may feel like the CAF Retention Strategy does not cater to their realities. The notions of commitment to an organization are emphasized by Roodt and Kotze in that “fair treatment, care/concern and trust, and better communication” contribute to employee wellbeing and their mindset of commitment and how it ties individuals to the organization.²⁴ Recognizing that underrepresented groups are fundamentally important to meeting *Employment Equity Act* requirements, and to promoting diversity within the CAF so too is the importance for further study (and potentially a more fulsome Gender Based Analysis Plus [GBA+] analysis) into what groups would benefit from targeted retention efforts and how these groups can be better considered.

Lines of Effort / Wicked Problem

The CAF Retention Strategy articulates six Lines of Effort (LOEs) with associated strategic objectives and outcomes. These LOEs focus on strengthening DND/CAF governance, leadership engagement, alignment of retention efforts, prioritizing communications and promoting retention activities, and addressing CAF member career, health and wellness, and family support requirements.²⁵ These LOEs represent logical responses to the areas researched and discussed in the earlier elements of the strategy, however the approach taken develops each LOE into logic models with action items assigned to various organizations with projected outcome levels (short term, mid term, long term).²⁶ The strategy also assigns performance management metrics focused on capturing and monitoring of data.²⁷ This data and metric focused approach will provide a more fulsome understanding of the success of various retention related initiatives however it can be difficult for CAF members at all levels to interpret tangible retention related changes from these annexes. This also provides an impression that a

¹⁹ Canada, “Canadian Armed Forces Retention Strategy,” 26.

²⁰ Canada, 7.

²¹ Canada, 16.

²² Canada, 36–42.

²³ Canada, *Strong Secure Engaged*, 20–21.

²⁴ Roodt and Kotze, “Factors That Affect the Retention of Managerial and Specialist Staff: An Exploratory Study of an Employee Commitment Model,” 50.

²⁵ Canada, “Canadian Armed Forces Retention Strategy,” 29–35.

²⁶ Canada, 43–59.

²⁷ Canada, 60–64.

directive military approach is being taken to solve a complex and potentially wicked problem.

Developing further the idea that retention is a complex and wicked problem, Huddleston concludes that the CAF retention challenges meet the ten characteristics which Rittel and Webber have used to define a wicked problem.²⁸²⁹ As wicked problems do not have solutions, this would necessitate a different approach than the methodical and data measured approach envisioned in the CAF Retention Strategy. Huddleston recommends a “network-based cooperative approach” where regular inputs and feedback is sought from all stakeholders involved in CAF retention (to include junior CAF members and families)³⁰. Increased consultation would assist in identifying gaps in the problem framing, and better defining social group needs and expectations. Although increased consultation is a logical recommendation for any policy issue that impacts social groups, it is also an approach that requires a significant investment in time and resources from an organization that is currently struggling to fill all its necessary positions.

STAKEHOLDER EXPECTATIONS

Expanding on the notion that personnel resources in DND/CAF are scarce and must be allocated judiciously, evidence suggests that historical and current CAF efforts to address the retention problem have not progressed or produced results that meet the expectations of the Canadian Government, CAF members, and society. In 2016, the Auditor General produced an expansive report on CAF recruiting and retention, this report built on recommendations and observations made in the 2002, and 2006 reports which cited high attrition rates in specific occupations.³¹ The 2016 report noted that “The Regular Force had not implemented its most recent overall retention strategy, nor had it developed specific strategies to respond to the challenges of each occupation.”³² This analysis presents an external view submitted to the government that the DND/CAF has not adequately addressed the issues of retention between 2002 and 2016 or considered adequately a targeted approach to each occupation. As evidence, the report cites a lack of progress made on the 2009 retention strategy and provides the DND/CAF response committing to releasing a renewed retention strategy by during the 2017-2018 fiscal year (which ultimately was not released until late 2022).³³ Since 2016, the CAF has continued to observe challenges in retention which have recently led to the Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS) raising concerns in 2021 about the impacts of the CAF shortage in personnel. General Eyre specifically frames the issue in stating that “the military we have today is

²⁸ Huddleston, “Canadian Armed Forces Retention: A Wicked Problem?,” 90.

²⁹ Camillus, “Strategy as a Wicked Problem.” Note: Rittel and Webber’s 10 characteristics of a wicked problem can be found in this article, among numerous other sources.

³⁰ Huddleston, “Canadian Armed Forces Retention: A Wicked Problem?,” 100–101.

³¹ Government of Canada, “Report 5—Canadian Armed Forces Recruitment and Retention—National Defence,” 4.

³² Government of Canada, 22.

³³ Government of Canada, 24.

not the one we need for the future.”³⁴ As the CAF retention challenge gained more attention amongst media and in turn society,³⁵³⁶³⁷ the Standing Committee on National Defence released a report to Parliament citing that “Many of the CAF’s policies aimed at attracting, selecting, training and retaining personnel are outdated and, in some respects, are having the opposite effect.”³⁸ These internal studies and reports on the CAF’s retention efforts have been amplified by critics such as the Canadian Global Affairs Institute which argues the CAF would benefit from a refreshed personnel management policy framework and cites a lack of progress in HR and retention strategies.³⁹ The abundance of criticism surrounding the CAF retention problem and the actions taken by the DND/CAF and the perception of a lack of progress are evidenced to have raised doubts amongst society and the government as to the effectiveness of retention efforts to date. External to the CAF, Roodt and Kotze cite an extensive survey “spanning 50 countries and 300 companies revealed that 74% of dissatisfied employees feel that their company has no clear sense of direction.”⁴⁰ Such perceptions within a CAF context can be disadvantageous as they can contribute to a lack of confidence between CAF members and their management. With the release of the CAF Retention Strategy in 2022, critics from all spheres will inevitably closely monitor the DND/CAF for indicators of progress or inaction in the coming years. However, even the policy as written provides a cursory introduction to several initiatives which remain under development. Examples of these initiatives are the CAF Human Resource Strategy, the Adaptive Career Path, and the CAF Offer. This lack of progress provides an impression that leadership within the DND/CAF are not seized of the issues around retention and contributes to a lack of confidence between CAF members and leadership.

Of note, the CAF Retention Strategy was released several years after the retention problem was publicly known and some of the supporting initiatives such as the CAF HR Strategy and the CAF Offer and other programs listed in Figure 1 that remain in development.⁴¹ Publishing a large list of work in progress is positive in that it clearly articulates the efforts being worked on and ultimately serves as a policy document by which the government, and in turn the DND/CAF can be held accountable. However, it also gives an impression that the enabling elements of the strategy are not yet developed, and with no timeline provided sets the conditions for a continued lack of tangible progress with respect to retention. Historical evidence demonstrates that the 2009

³⁴ Brewster and News : , “Military Personnel Shortage Will Get Worse before It Gets Better, Top Soldier Says | CBC News.”

³⁵ Dyson, Journalist, and Contact, “Canadian Armed Forces Facing Member Shortage ‘Crisis.’”

³⁶ Pugliese, “Military Attrition Has Hit Its Highest Level in 15 Years, Warns Briefing Prepared for Generals.”

³⁷ The Canadian Press, “Military Dealing with More than 10,000 Unfilled Positions amid Growing Pressures.”

³⁸ McKay, “Modernizing Recruitment and Retention in the Canadian Armed Forces,” 22.

³⁹ Duval-Lantoin, “People First.”

⁴⁰ Roodt and Kotze, “Factors That Affect the Retention of Managerial and Specialist Staff: An Exploratory Study of an Employee Commitment Model,” 49.

⁴¹ Canada, “Canadian Armed Forces Retention Strategy,” 11–12.

retention strategy had 40 projects identified which were never fully implemented,⁴² giving doubt as to the DND/CAF's ability to address the 27 initiatives in Figure 1 and others that are not listed in the current CAF Retention Strategy.

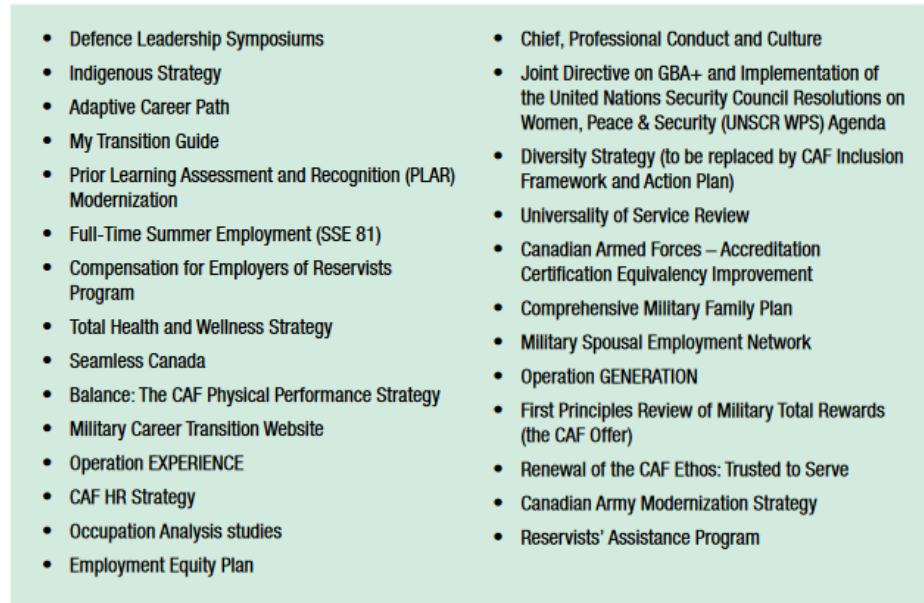


Figure 1 – Sample of current actions which support retention (underway or in development)

Source: CAF Retention Strategy, page 20

COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

In a large organization such as the DND/CAF, communication, messaging, consultation, and engagement across the organization present consistent challenges. From a retention perspective, the DND/CAF has struggled to communicate with their internal audiences and relevant stakeholders. Evidenced first and foremost with the CAF Retention Strategy which the DND/CAF Maple Leaf Publication refers to as being “for all CAF members”⁴³ a statement that is contradicted on the DND website which refers to it as a strategy that “provides direction to Level 1 and Level 2 organizations for the development and implementation of measures to improve retention within the CAF.”⁴⁴ This generates a lack of clarity as to the intended audience and purpose of the strategy. The frame of reference focusing on Level 1 and Level 2 organizations grounds the strategy as a document aimed at leaders within the CAF who in turn are expected to communicate the various initiatives within their organizations. As the majority of Level 1 and Level 2 organizations are headquarters which issue direction to Level 3 headquarters and Level 4 units, this demonstrates an implicit responsibility for commanders and

⁴² Government of Canada, “Report 5—Canadian Armed Forces Recruitment and Retention—National Defence,” 24.

⁴³ Defence, “NEW! The CAF Retention Strategy Is Now Online.”

⁴⁴ Defence, “The CAF Retention Strategy.”

headquarters personnel to communicate internal to their respective silos and relies on subordinate organizations having a detailed understanding of the strategy and a desire to actively communicate its tenants. This notion is in contrast to the desired “holistic approach” articulated within the CAF Retention Strategy.⁴⁵ In their recommendations for an update to SSE, Duval-Lantoine contextualizes the necessity for communication in personnel policies in recommending that:

It is imperative for the defence policy update to communicate that personnel policy is not a series of initiatives that Military Personnel Command and different agencies within environmental (i.e., air force, army, navy) headquarters need to undertake, but rather a complex, ambiguous and interconnected series of issues that impact every aspect of military life for service members, their families and the civilians who constitute the defence team.⁴⁶

The approach taken to leverage Level 1 and Level 2 headquarters along with the list of initiatives proposed in Figure 1 align precisely with Duval-Lantoine’s recommendations of how the DND/CAF should not communicate policy changes. Duval-Lantoine recommends instead a vertical and horizontal consultation system to connect with a wider array of groups to shape problem identification, implementation of best practices, and fine-tuning of policies to account for all impacted social groups and subcultures.⁴⁷

Hausknecht et al. asserts that organizations should strive to be employers of choice by “communicating and emphasizing the positive features of working for a particular organization to current and potential employees.”⁴⁸ Although the CAF Offer strives to provide a singular point where members can research the “programs, policies, and practices” that benefit CAF members and their families,⁴⁹ this program is largely passive in nature in that it relies on members seeking out the information. Active communication strategies that transcend the traditional chain of command approach are likely to enable a wider understanding of key initiatives. An example of the effectiveness of such strategies is evidenced with the media reporting on CAF retention⁵⁰ and other challenges and how this has permeated throughout the CAF and society. Hausknecht et al. advocated for the importance of ‘organizational prestige’ as a key tenant to retention and recognizes its importance from both a recruiting and retention perspective.⁵¹ Hausknecht et al. offers that the internal perception of an organization’s prestige can be reinforced through “marketing or branding campaigns” and that such campaigns “may enhance retention among high

⁴⁵ Defence, 11.

⁴⁶ Duval-Lantoine, “People First.”

⁴⁷ Duval-Lantoine.

⁴⁸ Hausknecht, Rodda, and Howard, “Targeted Employee Retention: Performance-Based and Job-Related Differences in Reported Reasons for Staying,” 271.

⁴⁹ Defence, “The CAF Retention Strategy,” 10.

⁵⁰ Dyson, Journalist, and Contact, “Canadian Armed Forces Facing Member Shortage ‘Crisis’”; Pugliese, “Military Attrition Has Hit Its Highest Level in 15 Years, Warns Briefing Prepared for Generals.”

⁵¹ Hausknecht, Rodda, and Howard, “Targeted Employee Retention: Performance-Based and Job-Related Differences in Reported Reasons for Staying,” 285.

performers and non hourly employees.”⁵² As the CAF employs exclusively salaried members and has identified critical retention gaps amongst high performers (specifically mid-level non-commissioned officers which General Eyre refers to as the “backbone of the force in terms of experience and training.”),⁵³ the CAF could benefit significantly from a marketing or branding focused internal communication campaign to better convey retention related initiatives in ways that resonate with the various social groups and stakeholders internal and external to the DND/CAF team.

ACADEMIC RESEARCH ON RETENTION

Expanding on the notion that a strategy to deliver change with respect to retention must be adequately resourced, consider all perspectives, and align efforts onto a timeline that meets stakeholder expectations, additional consideration should also be given to existing academic research and theories on the topic. The CAF Retention Strategy cites 98 sources as having contributed to the strategy, with 55 of these originating from government reports and existing policies (i.e. Defence Research and Development Canada Reports, Office of the Auditor General, DND/CAF policies, Statistics Canada reports, etc.).⁵⁴ This wide array of sources represents considerable research to define the problem space based on relevant and available policies and existing reports, but does not provide evidence of in-depth academic research, stakeholder consultation or consideration of a wider array of social groups. Among other concepts that could be further researched, this paper proposes two concepts that merit additional consideration from a CAF retention perspective, the notion of embeddedness and consideration towards generational perspectives.

Job Embeddedness

Job embeddedness is a concept that “encapsulates the combined determinants that maintain workers stuck or embedded in their positions.”⁵⁵ Although a retention concept that invokes the word ‘stuck’ inherently goes against the notions of retention in a voluntary organization, it should be interpreted in such a way that the workers feel well entrenched in their positions which contributes to a desire to stay with the organization. Mitchell et al. defined the concept of job embeddedness as “the totality of forces that keep people in a job.”⁵⁶ This definition is broader but reinforces the theme that embeddedness requires a number of forces or determinants. Job embeddedness was an innovative concept in that it challenged the pre-conceived notions of money as a motivator for employees to stay and dissatisfaction as the main proponent for employees

⁵² Hausknecht, Rodda, and Howard, 286.

⁵³ Brewster and News , “Military Personnel Shortage Will Get Worse before It Gets Better, Top Soldier Says | CBC News.”

⁵⁴ Defence, “The CAF Retention Strategy,” 73–79.

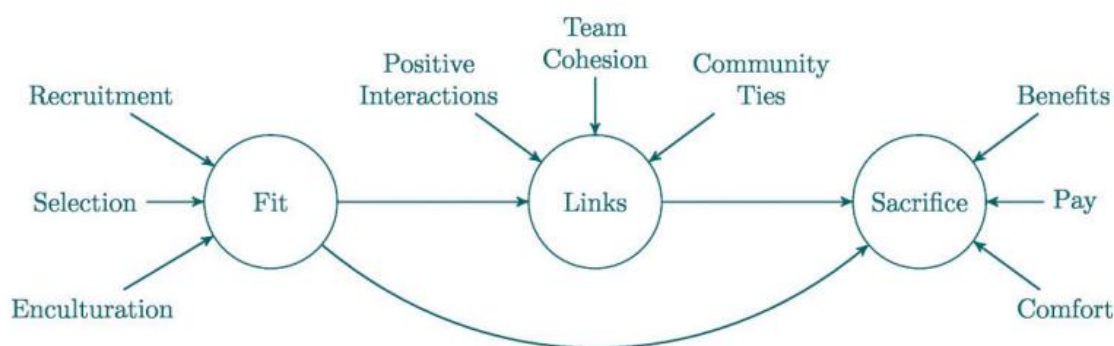
⁵⁵ Nica, “THE ROLE OF JOB EMBEDDEDNESS IN INFLUENCING EMPLOYEES’ ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT AND RETENTION ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS,” 102.

⁵⁶ Ma, Mayfield, and Mayfield, “Keep Them On-Board! How Organizations Can Develop Employee Embeddedness to Increase Employee Retention,” 5.

deciding to leave.⁵⁷ Job embeddedness looks at various other factors that contribute to retention that in many cases are unrelated to the actual job itself.⁵⁸

Job embeddedness is framed with three main attributes “fit, links, and sacrifice” which “work together to keep employees integrated with their surroundings, and this connection leads people to stay with an organization.”⁵⁹ Fit represents the “perceived compatibility or comfort of the employee with an organisation.”⁶⁰ Links focus on “formal or informal connections that employee holds with individuals, organisation, and community.”⁶¹ Sacrifice is defined as “the perceived cost of material or psychological benefits that are forfeited when quitting the organisation.”⁶² These attributes are further defined in Figure 2, which highlights the linkages between the attributes and examples of contributing elements to each attribute.

Figure 2 – A model of how to develop embeddedness



Source: Ma, Mayfield, and Mayfield, “Keep Them On-Board! How Organizations Can Develop Employee Embeddedness to Increase Employee Retention,” page 5.

From a CAF perspective, the elements of job embeddedness resonate considerably with the CAF employment model and concept. The CDS refers to the CAF Retention Strategy as having the aim to “improve the experience of all CAF members so that you and your families feel supported and empowered ...” and that these retention efforts are aligned with greater culture change efforts.⁶³ The notion of inclusion of military families into the retention analysis, strategy, and policy space highlights one

⁵⁷ Narayanan, “Talent Management and Employee Retention: Implications of Job Embeddedness- A Research Agenda,” 36.

⁵⁸ Narayanan, 36.

⁵⁹ Ma, Mayfield, and Mayfield, “Keep Them On-Board! How Organizations Can Develop Employee Embeddedness to Increase Employee Retention,” 5.

⁶⁰ Narayanan, “Talent Management and Employee Retention: Implications of Job Embeddedness- A Research Agenda,” 36.

⁶¹ Narayanan, 36.

⁶² Narayanan, 36.

⁶³ Defence, “The CAF Retention Strategy,” 99.

domain where links are important for CAF retention. CAF members also generally establish links within the CAF environments, geographical postings, local communities, and foreign military forces to name a few. From a strategy perspective, these links would benefit from being better understood and better leveraged as a key element to CAF member embeddedness. LOE 5 of the CAF Retention Strategy speaks to the ongoing CAF efforts to improve its talent management process recognizing the need for CAF members to ‘fit’ within the organization.⁶⁴ The mid-term outcomes of this LOE refer to “placing” CAF members in suitable occupations⁶⁵ whereas Ma et al. suggests companies should “use internal recruitment methods such as employee referrals and talent inventories to identify potential candidates.”⁶⁶ Leveraging voluntary applications, referrals, and talent inventories would enable increased perspectives to identify the best ways CAF members can ‘fit’ within the environment. Narayanan et al. propose that the “fairness regarding outcomes, procedures, and interactions in the talent management process along with perceptual congruity regarding talent status is influential in determining the effectiveness of talent management as a retention strategy.”⁶⁷ This highlights the need to balance CAF member perceptions with fairness in all aspects of organizational justice to foster a sense of trust and reinforce the ‘fit’ of CAF members within the organization. Although the CAF Offer speaks to the current comprehensive set of benefits afforded to CAF members and their families,⁶⁸ Ma et al. suggest that employee sacrifice can be increased through linking performance to salary increases or bonuses and that companies “should also offer valued benefits and work arrangements that employees find hard to give up.”⁶⁹ The current CAF model caters to specific instances such as postings to high readiness units or deployments on operations, but other than selection for promotion, performance is not considered with respect to compensation and salary bonuses are not accessible for the majority of CAF members.⁷⁰ This further perpetuates the ‘one size fits all’ notion and fails to cater to the younger generations which generally see jobs as “stepping-stones to the next opportunity”⁷¹ and are therefore more challenging to incentivize with the notion of sacrifice.

Overall, the concept of job embeddedness is one which considers some of the unique aspects for CAF members and their families. Some of the challenges that flow from the notions of fit, links, and sacrifice are identified in the CAF Retention Strategy but merit additional consideration to better align efforts with the importance of job embeddedness in an industry that relies heavily on its personnel and on internal talent management and progression models. Nica extends the relevance of job embeddedness

⁶⁴ Defence, 33.

⁶⁵ Defence, 33.

⁶⁶ Ma, Mayfield, and Mayfield, “Keep Them On-Board! How Organizations Can Develop Employee Embeddedness to Increase Employee Retention,” 5.

⁶⁷ Narayanan, Rajithakumar, and Menon, “Talent Management and Employee Retention,” 241.

⁶⁸ Defence, “The CAF Offer.”

⁶⁹ Ma, Mayfield, and Mayfield, “Keep Them On-Board! How Organizations Can Develop Employee Embeddedness to Increase Employee Retention,” 6.

⁷⁰ Defence, “The CAF Offer.”

⁷¹ Roodt and Kotze, “Factors That Affect the Retention of Managerial and Specialist Staff: An Exploratory Study of an Employee Commitment Model,” 48–49.

with respect to retention when it is harnessed to maintain “first-rate personnel”⁷² providing further benefits that could be leveraged should the CAF consider such concepts for succession planning of its personnel identified with the highest levels of potential.

Generational Considerations

In addition to exploring how embeddedness contributes to retention and how this can be applied to the CAF, generational differences amongst CAF members should be considered in the CAF Retention Strategy and other complementary policies and guidance that are in development. The CAF employs personnel that range in age from 16 to 65 (in some cases) representing four distinct generations: Boomers, Gen X, Gen Y (also known as Millennials), and Gen Z.⁷³ Although there can be much debate about the accuracy of assigning generational labels and determining where the generational divides exist,^{74,75} the wide age range within the CAF logically necessitates an approach that caters to the experiential and social realities of the various groups. From a retention perspective, retention related strategies and initiatives should be designed in a way that can be adapted to consider researched and evidenced recommendations regarding the unique considerations that are likely to resonate with the majority of CAF members identifying with each of the generational groups.

Recognizing that retention strategies may be interpreted, accepted, leveraged, and applied differently to generational groups, it is worth highlighting some of the key findings that apply to common generational identities within Gen Y, Gen Z, and older generations. Gen Y are characterized as having been born between 1981 and 2000, although studies vary in their definition of the years for each generational category.⁷⁶ This group is characterized as “ambitious, creative, and goal-oriented with a strong sense of self-worth and confidence in their abilities” and as favouring an “inclusive style of management” along with mentoring and being empowered to make decisions.⁷⁷ This sense of self-worth and ambition leads to higher job turnover with a 2017 Deloitte survey finding that “one-third [of] Generation Y workers are planning to leave their employer and look for new career opportunities.”⁷⁸ Recognizing this reality should give cause to examine leadership styles and delegations of authorities within the CAF and how they relate to overall talent management and CAF member satisfaction. Naim and Lenka further argue that a social-exchange perspective resonates with Gen Y employees in that their social relationships exist based on mutual benefits and that “organisational initiatives to enhance employee competencies are reciprocated with high levels of affective commitment and intention to stay.”⁷⁹ From a CAF perspective, these

⁷² Nica, “THE ROLE OF JOB EMBEDDEDNESS IN INFLUENCING EMPLOYEES’ ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT AND RETENTION ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS,” 102.

⁷³ Brunjes, “Age Range by Generation.”

⁷⁴ Cohen, “Opinion | Generation Labels Mean Nothing. It’s Time to Retire Them.”

⁷⁵ Callaham, “Generational Labels.”

⁷⁶ Naim and Lenka, “Development and Retention of Generation Y Employees,” 433.

⁷⁷ Naim and Lenka, 433.

⁷⁸ Naim and Lenka, 434.

⁷⁹ Naim and Lenka, 434.

conclusions should drive policy analysts towards exploring how the current CAF training and support system meets the needs of Gen Y members to establish and maintain a beneficial social-exchange relationship. Gen Y employees also favour “multitasking, flexibility, and employability” over the older notions of job security and life-time employment.⁸⁰ This leads to an approach where Gen Y see themselves as being the drivers of their career management and professional development.⁸¹ This notion is at odds with the current CAF Talent Management system where career progression and management is largely driven by organizational requirements. Although initiatives such as the Adaptive Career Path is likely to appeal to Gen Y CAF members, additional research into generational considerations will enable the CAF to develop and refine policy to better cater to this significant demographic of the CAF workforce.

As the newest generation to enter the work force Gen Z employees (roughly characterized as having been born between 1994 and 2010) have become increasingly important to organizational longevity due to retirements of the Boomer generation.⁸² Gen Z employees have been characterized as having “much less loyalty towards being at one workplace” in comparison with other generations.⁸³ This notion is supported by research done within the CAF Retention Strategy which found unhealthy attrition amongst recruits in their first year⁸⁴ (of which Gen Z CAF members could be assumed to contribute towards based on their younger age). Gen Z employees are also generally understood to privilege “individualistic and independent” work compared to Gen Y.⁸⁵ This idea also requires deliberate consideration from CAF policy workers as it runs contrary to the team values the CAF strives to promote. Jayathilake et al. propose three concepts that resonate with Gen Z employees, “democratize learning, reverse mentoring, and entrepreneurship.”⁸⁶⁸⁷ Democratizing learning speaks to allowing employees to self-select areas to learn and teach that are important to them and their career while favouring the use of collaborative technologies to learning.⁸⁸ From a CAF perspective, it is unlikely that core skills would change but consideration could be given to developing optional skills in areas of a CAF member’s choosing (i.e. leadership and personnel management skills, GBA+, sentinel training, positive space ambassador, etc.). An increase in collaborative technologies such as Microsoft Teams could also be considered but this would need to be balanced with individual learning strategies. Reverse mentoring allows junior members the opportunity to mentor management and senior members to acquire new knowledge or skills.⁸⁹ This approach would help to bridge generational gaps by better integrating Gen Z members with CAF members from older generations while

⁸⁰ Naim and Lenka, 447.

⁸¹ Naim and Lenka, 447.

⁸² Jayathilake et al., “Employee Development and Retention of Generation-Z Employees in the Post-COVID-19 Workplace,” 2344.

⁸³ Jayathilake et al., 2344.

⁸⁴ Defence, “The CAF Retention Strategy,” 15.

⁸⁵ Jayathilake et al., “Employee Development and Retention of Generation-Z Employees in the Post-COVID-19 Workplace,” 2346.

⁸⁶ Jayathilake et al., 2345.

⁸⁷ Jayathilake et al., 2357.

⁸⁸ Jayathilake et al., 2346.

⁸⁹ Jayathilake et al., 2348.

seeking opportunities to highlight Gen Z members skillsets. The traditional cases of reverse mentoring gravitate around use of technology⁹⁰ however there are many other contexts this can be applied in to give senior members a better understanding or perspective from the Gen Z (traditionally more junior) members. Intrapreneurship is defined as “entrepreneurship within an existing organization”⁹¹ and seeks to leverage ideas and initiatives that can help make the existing organization more efficient. There are existing DND/CAF initiatives that align with the idea of intrapreneurship such as the Innovation for Defence Excellence and Security (IDEaS) program⁹² however recognizing this as a generational factor that could influence retention amongst Gen Z members, initiatives such as these should be considered and applied throughout the organization. Jayathilake concludes that “good employee development practices will create a ‘talent magnet’ for the organization where that will help to retain workers ...”⁹³ As the DND/CAF largely control their training and development system, this is an area where efforts could be made to cater to generational realities and in turn contribute to retention of Gen Z CAF members.

Expanding beyond Gen Y and Gen Z employees to look at older employees (Gen X and Boomers), older employees also necessitate a focused approach particularly as this generation carries many of the employees with the most experience. From a retention perspective, “practices related to recognition and respect were the most important HR strategy for older workers.”⁹⁴ Flexibility was also found to carry significant influence in employees aged 45 and older.⁹⁵ Although the CAF actively promotes recognition and respect,⁹⁶ the current CAF talent management and employment model is not seen as being the most flexible.⁹⁷ Research conducted by Bentley et al. has also shown that age discrimination was a “stressor” and a negative aspect for retention of older employees.⁹⁸ From a CAF perspective, the hierarchical rank and progression structure has sustained a system where age or years remaining until compulsory retirement age are at times considered for promotion or selection for key positions. An example of this practice was analyzed by the Military Grievances External Review Committee and was found to be discriminatory.⁹⁹ Older generations generally respond positively to being valued within an organization and respond with “greater effort, dedication, vigour, and commitment.”¹⁰⁰ Considering these factors, the CAF would benefit from exploring ways to demonstrate

⁹⁰ Jayathilake et al., 2348.

⁹¹ Jayathilake et al., 2349–50.

⁹² Defence, “Innovation for Defence Excellence and Security (IDEaS).”

⁹³ Jayathilake et al., “Employee Development and Retention of Generation-Z Employees in the Post-COVID-19 Workplace,” 2356–57.

⁹⁴ Bentley et al., “Factors Influencing Leave Intentions among Older Workers,” 900.

⁹⁵ Bentley et al., 902.

⁹⁶ Canada, “Canadian Armed Forces Ethos - Trusted to Serve,” 16.

⁹⁷ Defence, “The CAF Retention Strategy,” 25.

⁹⁸ Bentley et al., “Factors Influencing Leave Intentions among Older Workers,” 903.

⁹⁹ Committee, “# 2011-047 - Discrimination, Selection Board , Succession Planning in the Canadian Forces.”

¹⁰⁰ Bentley et al., “Factors Influencing Leave Intentions among Older Workers,” 908.

value to older members, provide increased flexibility, and reducing perceptions around age discrimination.

Despite significant academic research that exists on the various generations and considerations that should be applied to each, the CAF Retention Strategy makes no mention of these generations, or the specific terms ‘Gen X, Y, Z, Boomer, or Millennial.’¹⁰¹ This provides a perception for an informed reader that generational factors were not considered within the CAF Retention Strategy and that once again, the strategy favours a ‘one size fits all’ approach. As recent articles estimate the CAF is facing a shortage of 16,000 members,¹⁰² CAF retention efforts should be adapted to cater to each generational group to retain the maximum number of employable CAF members as possible.

CONCLUSION

Although the CAF Retention Strategy represents a comprehensive review and analysis of the retention problem for the CAF while outlining future initiatives, areas to focus, and lines of effort by which to measure results this should be considered as the start state for the advancement of retention initiatives for the CAF. The strategy is a positive step towards framing the problem but leaves significant work to be done to improve consultation across impacted social groups. The strategy also needs to be championed by leaders at all levels to better communicate the ongoing retention initiatives such that CAF membership and external stakeholders are kept informed and are satisfied that meaningful progress is being made. Future amendments to the strategy should also consider additional academic research surrounding notions such as job embeddedness, and considerations towards the wide array of generations employed in the CAF. Such considerations will provide an approach that is grounded in research and designed to cater to additional stakeholders, social groups, and generations. The current strategy has adequately identified that retention is a complex issue, or a wicked problem (as characterized by Huddleston).¹⁰³ In this way, there is not a simple solution that can be implemented, nor can a list of lines of effort and tasks assigned to departments be sufficient to address the issue. Addressing the CAF Retention problem requires deliberate efforts to be made to incrementally, to continually improve the CAF experience in ways that resonate with the CAF population, families, and external stakeholders while balancing the realities that human resources to work through these problems are limited and that the CAF must concurrently continue to train, deploy, and operate in Canada and worldwide as directed by the Government of Canada.

¹⁰¹ Defence, “The CAF Retention Strategy.”

¹⁰² Dyson, Journalist, and Contact, “Canadian Armed Forces Facing Member Shortage ‘Crisis.’”

¹⁰³ Huddleston, “Canadian Armed Forces Retention: A Wicked Problem?,” 100–101.

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