

Recruiting for the Military when the Economy is booming

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Introduction

This paper takes a closer look at the recruiting problems that many Armed Forces experience currently. After stating the problem, we try to analyze its underlying causes. In a following section possible actions to address the problem are described. Finally, a discussion puts these measures into perspective and some conclusions are drawn.

Problem definition

In the recent history of Western countries, the first oil crisis at the beginning of the seventies caused a major economic recession characterized by high levels of unemployment. High numbers of jobless youngsters made it relatively easy for the Forces to meet their recruiting goals. As the years went by, the economic situation improved only gradually and unemployment, especially of young people, tended to become structural.

After the fall of the Berlin wall and the end of the cold war, recruiting needs were reduced as a result of the downsizing of the Forces with possible exception of countries such as Belgium, France or The Netherlands where conscription was abandoned and an all volunteer Force had to be manned.

The last few years have been characterized by a fast growing economy in many Western countries. At the same time these countries seem to experience increasing difficulties in enlisting the required numbers for their Military. Although the situation may vary from country to country and for the different categories of personnel that need to be enlisted, one can easily state that the recruiting for the military is currently doing relatively poorly. The U.S. General Accounting Office recently put it in this way: *“The Department of Defense (DoD) faces a significant challenge in recruiting and retaining the hundreds of thousands of new recruits it enlists each year. The last 2 year in particular have been difficult for the military services as they have struggled to meet their recruitment goals. This difficulty, which some believe represents a recruiting crisis, makes the services’ problems with first-term attrition rates even more critical.”*²

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² *Military Personnel: Services Need to Assess Efforts to Meet Recruiting Goals and Cut Attrition*. Report to the Chairman and Ranking Minority Member, Subcommittee on Personnel, Committee on Armed Services, U.S. Senate. United States General Accounting Office GAO/NSIAD-00-146, June 2000 p.3.

Analysis

The booming economy in these countries creates large numbers of new jobs. This combined with an increase of the average age at which youngsters become available for the labor market and stagnation or decrease in demographic figures causes shortages on the labor market. For many countries, this is a new phenomenon unseen since the sixties. The struggle for attracting and hiring people is fierce. Lots of money is devoted to advertising, head hunting and many incentives to attract and retain people. As a result, youngsters that are interesting for the Services have options. They generally are well informed and willing to negotiate their contract rather than simply accepting it. Governments usually lack the flexibility of private companies and this is a handicap on a dynamic labor market. Many armies fail to keep up the pace of salary increase and become gradually less attractive. The contracts proposed by the Forces lack flexibility and have little or no room for negotiation.

Experiencing recruiting problems leads to the question whether the products we offer are sufficiently valuable. A careful analysis of the perceived positive and negative aspects of the different military jobs must be conducted in order to find ways to increase their overall attractiveness. Of course, financial aspects are an important element of the attractiveness, but it would be foolish to expect to solve all recruiting problems only by a reasonable increase of the salaries.

Traditional aspects of military life that attracted youngsters tend to become available in civilian settings with fewer constraints. Let's name a few. Outdoor activities with a thrill such as survival training, parachuting, diving etc. become more available and affordable to many youngsters. High technology is probably as much present in off the shelf mobile phones, personal computers and gadgets as in modern military equipment. The real feeling of driving a tank or firing live rounds tends to become less present in the Military, due to the extended use of simulators ... that are often less appealing than video games!

The perceived organization culture is another determinant of the propensity to enlist. Values like discipline, sustained effort, hierarchy and suppression of individuality aren't very motivating for the young generation.

Especially in Europe, the idea of having a lifetime career in the Military was very attractive during the economic crisis. This has changed. In an environment where many good jobs are readily available, the threat of becoming jobless is less frightening. Long-term commitment in the prospective of slowly building a full career and earning an easy retirement, is no longer appealing to youngsters who learned to live fast and expect immediate effect of their work.

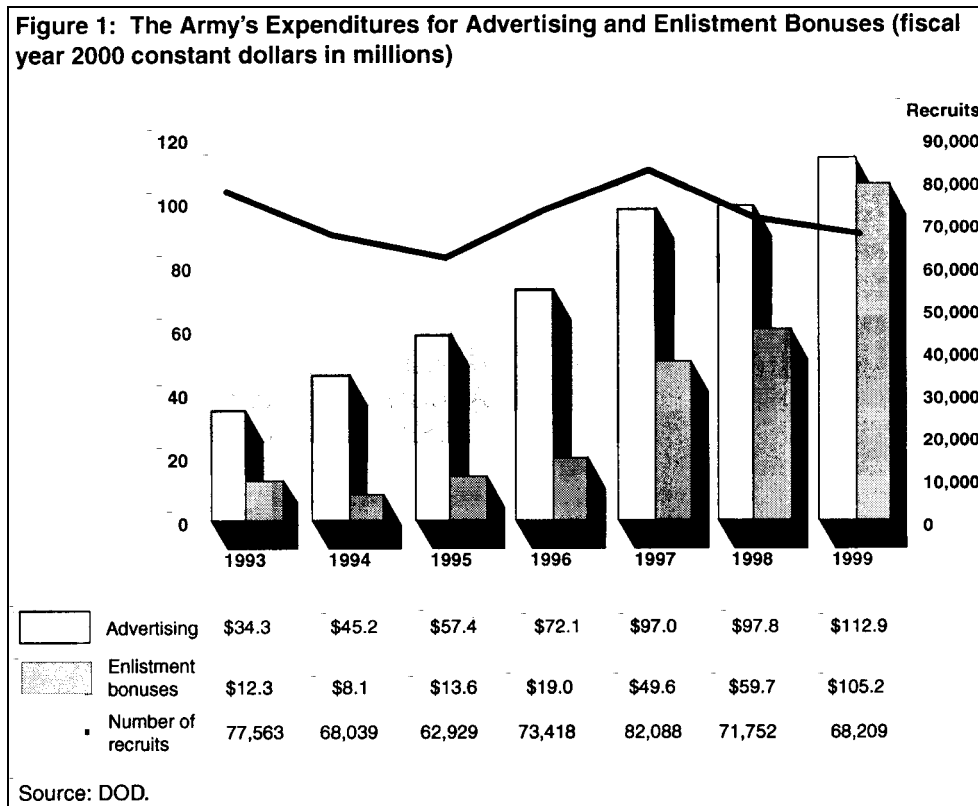
Measures to tackle the problem

Given that the Military cannot meet their annual recruiting goals, what can be done to about it? Different approaches are possible: the recruiting efforts can be increased, the products that are offered can be made more attractive, actions can be undertaken to lower the required numbers or to increase the number of potential applicants and smart selection and allocation systems can diminish the losses during the selection process. Let's look at these options in more detail.

a. Increase the recruiting effort

One of the obvious ways to increase the number of applicants for the Services is to augment advertising, number of recruiters, recruiting stations and enlistment bonuses.

The increase of these means as a reaction to difficulties in recruiting the required numbers is well illustrated with the next figure³.



From fiscal year 1993 through 1998, the U.S. Army increased its number of recruiters from 4368 to 6331⁴.

b. Product enhancement

New careful studies of the perception of the different facets of the military jobs by the youngsters need to be conducted⁵. These studies will identify which elements are attractive and which tend to withhold potential candidates to apply. Older existing studies covering that subject risk to be no longer valid given the fast evolution of the societal values. Such studies must not only lead to improve the advertising but in the first place to modify the content of the military jobs in order to make them more attractive and to reduce the cultural gap between the civilian and military world.

c. Diminishing the required numbers

Another way of resolving the recruiting problem at least partially is to diminish the numbers that have to be enlisted. Given that the Forces want to maintain their level of

³ Military Personnel: Services Need to Assess Efforts to Meet Recruiting Goals and Cut Attrition. o.c. p. 7

⁴ o.c. p. 6

⁵ Such as: Jerald G. Bachman, David R. Segal, Peter Freedman-Doan and Patrick M O'Malley, 'Who Chooses Military Service? Correlates of Propensity and Enlistment in the U.S. Armed Forces' in Military Psychology, Volume 12, Number 1, 2000 LEA Publishers, London

efficiency, two options are available: choosing for systems requiring fewer personnel and taking actions to reduce attrition.

In the process of developing or acquiring new weapon systems it becomes increasingly important to look for systems requiring few personnel to operate. The firepower of a traditional field artillery battery or a Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS) is quite comparable for instance. Yet the personnel needed to operate an MLRS is just a fraction of the people needed in an artillery battery. The US Navy develops 'smart ships' that require less than half of the people needed on board a similar classic ship. Systems requiring less personnel are often more expensive than their traditional counterparts. However, in times of difficult recruiting and retaining personnel, they might turn out to be the cheapest ones in the long run.

Reducing attrition is another way of reducing the need to recruit. Along with the experienced difficulties in recruiting the needed numbers of applicants, many Western Forces face the problem of increasing attrition during first terms. Both have probably the same cause: the youngsters have options. Leaving the Military earlier than planned is not such a big step when one can be confident to find (a more attractive?) job promptly. Reducing early attrition can be achieved by a series of measures.

- Extra attention can be given to recruits struggling during basic training. This can be done by remedial teaching, personalized physical training programs, allowing more time to reach the goals etc.
- Recruits failing to meet the standards during training for the trade they were assigned to, can be reassessed. Depending on the reasons of the failure and the motivation of the applicant, it can be worthwhile to give him or her a second chance in assigning him/her to another trade less demanding for the aspect s/he failed in.
- The transition from a permissive civilian society to boot camp represents a cultural shock causing many enlistees to quit. It's easy to make that transition more progressive.
- Training practice needs to be questioned. Many facets of current practice, especially during boot camp, tend to be obsolete and contrast sharply with the youngster's world and values. Principles such as '*break 'em down to build them up*', formal discipline, rising early without real purpose, lack of privacy and comfort etc. cause trainees to quit.
- Prepare the applicants better. Increased efforts in informing the applicants well will reduce attrition. The use of realistic job previews, familiarization with the military world through open doors, visits etc., providing physical training programs before enlistment and so on, need to be enhanced.
- Give the applicants what they look for. By paying more attention to the expressed preferences of the applicants concerning trade and geographic location of his/her unit during the allocation process, one might reduce attrition.

d. Increasing the number of potential applicants

Recruiting problems are partly due to the fact that the number of persons who are allowed to apply is artificially limited. Many countries still require that the applicants have the nationality of the country or that their age is between sharp limits. Moreover many countries restrict the access of women to certain specialties or even require such

obsolete things as being unmarried⁶. The question is whether these restrictions that are mostly based on historical grounds have to be kept.

Another way of broadening the segment of the population that can be interested in joining the Forces is the diversification of the proposed jobs. The Belgian example can clarify this point. In Belgium, most of the volunteers sign up for a lifetime career. In order to maintain an acceptable age structure in the combat units, the army decided to enlist soldiers for combat trades only. After a period of approximately 10 years, these soldiers will get the opportunity of a reconversion to physically less demanding jobs. This can be an appropriate plan for personnel management within the army but it also restricts the number of potential applicants to the very small group of youngsters interested in combat trades.

e. Use smart selection and allocation systems

A last major possibility to address the recruiting problem is to optimize the selection and allocation systems. We'll develop three facets: the selection process, the used methodology and the selection burden.

The selection process needs to be a fast one. Many youngsters apply simultaneously for different jobs. The company that is the quickest to process the applicant and eventually hire him/her has a clear advantage over the others since it is reasonable to assume that the applicant is less likely to continue his/her search for a job when s/he has a firm offer.

In times of shortage, selection systems should move from positive selection to negative selection. Positive selection aims at finding the best applicants whereas the focus of negative selection is to reject the weakest candidates. The inherent danger of positive selection systems is the use of multiple cut-off scores rejecting significant numbers of applicants. When the assessed qualities show low intercorrelations, such selection systems end up rejecting too high proportions of the applicant pool. The smart approach consists of assessing the applicant's qualities and rejecting only very few applicants. Once the competency profile of the applicants is determined, they have to be compared to the desired competency profiles for the vacant jobs. Modern classification models allow then capitalizing on the distributed qualities in the applicant group. An example might illustrate this. Imagine a selection system looking for the best ones. That probably will reject all applicants with poor results on physical fitness tests. The proposed approach will recognize the fact that an applicant performs poorly on the physical tests but won't reject him/her. It very well can be that this person performs well on other tasks and turns out to be perfectly eligible for jobs where physical fitness is of minor importance.

In order not to loose applicants, the selection burden mustn't be too high. Actions aimed at the reduction of the selection burden can include reimbursement of travel costs, providing free meals and lodging, reducing the time spent for selection activities, use of computer adaptive testing, use of the Internet, decentralizing the selection centers, opening them when the applicants are available (weekends, evenings, school holidays), not obliging the applicants to get documents for which they have to go to their school, city hall, police station etc. and using a tri-Service selection system.

⁶ This is the case for Italian officer applicants.

Discussion

A natural reaction to recruiting problems is to increase advertising, enlistment bonuses and numbers of recruiters. However, the effect of these measures is influenced by similar actions undertaken by other actors on the labor market. If all actors increase their effort in a proportioned way, the augmentation of the recruiting effort risks not paying off. Conversely, keeping the advertising budget constant while the competitors are increasing their effort will result in a loss of applicants. In this matter, the different Services are in competition with each other. In countries where the advertising is organized for each Service separately and not for the Forces as a whole, it is paramount to assess the effects of advertising for one Service on the propensity to apply for the other Services.

In order to react to the recruiting problems, the Armed Forces of many countries implement a number of measures simultaneously. It is of great importance also to monitor the effects of these actions. Their overall effect needs to be assessed but the individual contribution of a specific action also needs to be studied along with possible interaction effects.

All the measures to cope with the recruiting problem that were discussed in this paper intentionally avoided the easiest yet worst solution one can think of, namely lowering the standards. Lowering entry standards indubitably leads to lower personnel quality. In addition to all problems resulting from lower quality personnel within the Military, one has to be aware that the mere fact of having low quality personnel inevitably is perceived by the general public. And that perception refrains more qualified people to apply as they are not attracted to become a part of a 'low quality' organization.

A last remark in this discussion is meant to put things into perspective. This paper dealt with recruiting problems. To our opinion, this is a serious problem but not the most challenging one. Retaining the well-qualified personnel could very well prove to be the hardest mission for the Forces in the next couple of years. Once the personnel will truly understand that there are many attractive options outside the Forces, they will make choices and the Forces might better have convincing arguments why people should stay in the military or they will face a massive brain drain that will need decades to recover from.

Conclusions

The Armed Forces need good men and women to fulfill their mission. The booming economy in many Western countries causes a shortage of resources on the labor market and makes it increasingly difficult for the Forces to recruit the numbers of quality people they need.

This situation constitutes a challenge for the political and military authorities. If they consequently want effective armed forces, they will need to allocate extensive resources promptly to deal with the emerging recruiting problem.

There are no miracle solutions to the problem. Only a coordinated action including most of the enumerated means will be able to limit the damage to the Forces.