

A more attractive selection procedure for the Belgian Armed Forces

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Problem definition

The last twenty years of the past century have been characterised by a lot of evolvments with regard to the political, economical and technological context. To-day traditions and values are questioned. Much has changed, not only for the civilians, but also for the military men.

On the international scene most Armed Forces are facing recruitment and wastage problems (Dacre, 2000; Huffman, et.al., 2000; Lescrève, 2000). The Belgian Armed Forces are not an exception to this rule (Devriendt, 1999; Lejeune; 1991).

Some of the possible reasons for those problems seem to be: wages, economical context, and differences in selection procedures in comparison to the private sector. For a discussion of some of these topics, consult Devriendt (2000), Lescrève (1994), Hardinge (1997), Pinxten (1995).

The wages are generally lower for military jobs comparable to civilian jobs. As for the economical context: traditionally when there are a lot of vacancies in the civilian sector, the Armed Forces have difficulties to attract candidates. In Belgium for the moment this seems to be the case. A third possible reason affecting negatively the recruitment and retention could be the time consuming and extensive selection procedures used by the Armed Forces in contrast to the procedures used in the private sector.

Now, what can be done about these problems?

First of all, let us look at the wages. If we observe the countries where the military occupation has a better image and where the military employees are better paid than in Belgium, then we see that these countries have recruitment problems too. It seems clear that, at best, solely raising the wages will result only in a partial solution. Additionally, the financial context in Belgium does not allow bringing much change in this situation. In the second place, we have mentioned the principle of supply and demand –the economical context. Being military psychologists, we cannot influence this variable and so, this idea will not be developed any further. The third factor, on the other hand, lies within the competencies of trained psychologists. Therefore we will enter into details concerning this matter.

In this paper the author will explain the philosophy of a selection procedure, freshly implemented at the Centre for Recruitment and Selection (CRS) of the Belgian Armed Forces. This procedure is the result of a project called: “One week, one day, one month”. Light will be thrown on the nature of the project and the three principles on which the new selection procedure is based. In addition, the author describes the basic testing, followed by a description of the extra instruments to select Non-commissioned officers (NCO’s) and CO’s. To end, conclusions will be drawn and the author gives some critical reflections concerning the newly developed procedure.

The main principles of the new procedure

The procedure “One week, one day, one month” is conceived around three principles:

- a client centred approach
- a computer-assisted testing (CAT) approach

- changes in personnel attitudes

In order to reduce waiting lines and –consequently- to reduce waiting times per candidate the selection was rethought from the point of view of the applicant. A second reason for this *client centred* attitude was that an individualised procedure was the aim;

Several reasons led to the conception of a *CAT*-system:

- the need for faster testing
- the need for faster availability of results
- the need for more flexibility in testing procedures
- the need for more individualised testing procedures

Thirdly, more flexibility and a more empathetic *attitude* were required from the personnel.

These principles were thought to be crucial in order to obtain a shorter testing time per candidate and a higher client satisfaction.

One way to understand better the advantages of the new selection procedure is to compare it to the old one.

Differences between old and new procedure

We shall compare the two methods using the criteria mentioned in Figure 1. In Lescrève (1994) the reader will find information in relation to the past selection procedure.

The new method is more *decentralised*. This means that it is possible to complete the first test battery in an so called “Infofermi office”. These offices are spread all over the country: there is one office in each province. Originally these offices were conceived to give information about the military service, which led to the name “Infofermi”.

The new method consists of one, *basic*, uniform test battery instead of three batteries, which contained redundant tests. So a problem appeared regularly for candidates applying for different personnel categories. In order to avoid a learning effect created by the completion of the same tests –which were part of test batteries for soldiers, NCO’s and CO’s- redundant tests were eliminated. A second advantage of eliminating the same tests was that the procedure became less time consuming.

For the *interview*, in the past there was also a comparable redundancy problem. Now there is only one semi-structured interview for all three personnel categories.

Until recently, *interviewers* were either NCO’s or CO’s. To raise the standardisation of the interview method nowadays, only CO’s are trained to exercise the job of interviewer and assessor.

Criterion	Old	New
Method	Centralised	Decentralised
Test battery	Three	One
Interview structure	Three	One
Interviewers	CO/NCO	CO
Automation	Semi	Full
Competition	Less	more

Figure 1. Differences between the old and new selection procedures

Almost all of the tests are integrated in a *CAT*-system developed by the *CAT*-team, a part of the Section for Psychological Research.

The new testing procedure is less extensive and less time consuming for the candidates, and as a consequence the members of the CRS hope to attract more candidates due to a more *competing* market position relative to the job market.

Basic psychological selection

The main purpose of the psychological selection is to test the intellectual and personal characteristics of the candidates, to make a prediction about their future functioning within a military context and to reject the candidates who do not meet the minimal criteria.

We invite the reader to find an overview of the different selection batteries in Figure 2.

Place of test taking	Aim	Personnel category
Infosermi offices CRS	Intellectual capacity Medical, Sport Personality Selection interview	Soldier, NCO, CO
CRS day NCO	Intellectual capacity	NCO
CRS day CO	Intellectual capacity Motivation/achievement Group behaviour	CO

Figure 2. Selection batteries for the three personnel categories

The first day, the candidate performs the basic intellectual battery in an Infosermi office. The second day the applicant comes to the CRS in order to perform the medical and physical tests. Furthermore an autobiographical form and personality measures have to be completed. A selection interview ends the day and the candidate is informed about his results and his prospects in relation to a military career.

Every candidate has to go through this basic procedure, consisting of two days.

For candidate-NCO's as well as for candidate-officers supplementary tests are planned.

Interview. The aim of the semi-structured interview is to test hypotheses about certain competencies of the candidate and to come to a synthetic view of the applicant's personality in relation to a military function. A psychologist, a NCO or an officer who received an appropriate psychological training conducts the interview. To get a certain standardisation and to ascertain a minimum level of objectivity there is a manual with definitions of acts and the corresponding interpretations and scores. The interview is structured according to these criteria.

Cognitive assessment. Here, the Belgian Armed Forces want to obtain an evaluation of the intellectual potential (PINP). Tests are being used, measuring non-verbal reasoning, spatial ability, arithmetic capacities and working memory. The PINP score results out of a combination of test scores and different coefficients are used in the calculation.

Personality assessment. The candidates are asked to complete a questionnaire concerning their past experiences, called an Autobiographic Form. Recently, an automated form of the full version of the CPI (California Psychological Inventory) has replaced a short form, which was formerly developed by the Belgian Armed Forces.

Psychological report and final decision. First of all, scores are given by the interviewer, in relation to the different categories of the military selection profile. A computer programme calculates next a final score.

In addition to this quantitative measure, the psychological report is completed with a description of the relevant characteristics of the applicant.

The interviewer gives a final mark from 1 to 9. Candidates obtaining a score of 4 or higher continue with an orientation interview, during which they are informed about their future military career. Applicants scoring lower than 4, are seen by a psychologist for a second opinion. Either the psychologist decides that the candidate stays in run for a job, either the candidate is definitively rejected. In the former case the candidate gets an orientation interview, in the latter case the psychologist informs the candidate about his failure.

The objective of this basic selection is to make the military jobs (especially for soldiers) more attractive by shortening the delays of the decisions. In Figure 3 the salient decision points are given. At time X the potential soldier takes the basic cognitive battery in one of the Infosermi offices. Within seven days –starting from time X- (= one week) the applicant is invited to continue the selection in the CRS, which takes no longer than one day (=one day). Within thirty days (one month) the candidate must know if he can start a training session.

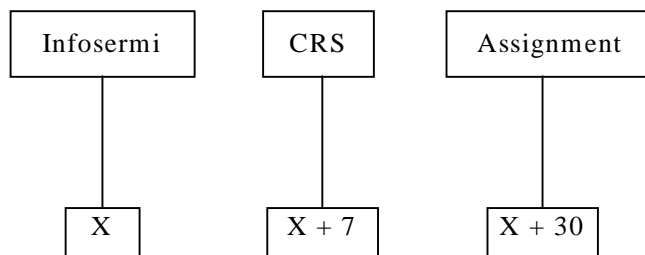


Figure 3. Project “One week, one day, one month”

Psychological selection for candidates-NCO

The total selection time for NCO’s takes three days, including the basic testing of which the reader finds an overview in Figure 2.

Because many jobs and training sessions are based on specific technical knowledge and skills, instruments have been constructed to get an idea of the capabilities of a candidate NCO. For this personnel category some cognitive, technical oriented tests are programmed: firstly, the Bennet measures mechanical comprehension; secondly, two tests measure a level of technical reasoning; furthermore, one test gives an impression about abilities in the field of electricity; and, finally, there is a test that determines the knowledge of the English language, used as a second language.

Psychological selection for candidate officers

The total selection procedure for a candidate-officer takes three days: two days of basic testing and an additional day during which intellectual and motivational tests are taken (CRS day CO). Besides, the candidate’s behaviour is assessed in group-situational tasks. An overview of the test sequences is shown in Figure 2.

Devriendt (1999b) en Van Beirendonck (1998) give a description of the selection tools for candidate-officers used by the CRS in former selection procedures.

To decide whether a candidate is sufficiently competent, different scores are calculated: a score indicating the intellectual potential (PINP), an interview score, a score based on the group situational tasks and a final score, which is given by a Selection Board.

Let us now briefly review the tools implemented for psychological selection of candidate officers. There are motivational and intellectual tests and also instruments to measure social interactions.

The motivational inventories include scales to evaluate military vocational values and the need to excel in a competitive and defying environment.

Intellectually an officer must be able to reason on a more abstract level than measured by the basic cognitive battery. This is especially the case for candidates wanting to enter the Royal Military Academy. Therefore, the applicants are tested on reading comprehension, flexibility in organising imposed activities and logical verbal reasoning.

Very important in the assessment of the personality of a candidate officer is the way in which the candidate performs in group-situational tasks. This is a pregnant issue because a future officer is supposed to be able to manage a group of approximately thirty persons. To evaluate group behaviour the applicants have to attain objectives in three group tasks. Groups are composed of 5 to 7 persons. The four tasks are the ROMAT (Role Modelling Area Task), a speech and the construction of an observation post.

For the ROMAT each applicant is responsible for the implantation of an installation following certain objectives and limitations. After preparing for their speech about an imposed topic, the candidates are asked to talk to the other participants and convey their message. Another kind of task is the realisation of a construction with metal tubes in order to build a frame of an imposed object.

The evaluation of the performances in these group tasks is the responsibility of a Selection Board, bringing together all the assessors.

Discussion

In order to recruit more candidates a selection procedure was proposed, based on client centred, computer assisted testing and a change in personnel attitudes. This shorter selection procedure makes it possible to inform candidates about the selection decision in much shorter time delays. As a consequence it is hoped that client satisfaction will increase. All these actions must be seen in the light of a more competing position of the Belgian Armed Forces on the labour market.

The BAF selects candidates using administrative, physical, medical and psychological techniques. The CRS is responsible for the physical, medical and psychological selection and partly for the administrative selection.

This paper has focused on the responsibilities of the CRS and has thrown especially a light upon the psychological testing procedures. Alan Jones (1991) discussed possible contributions of psychologists to military officer selection.

We will end with some critical remarks concerning the new selection procedures.

An important question is if there will be *more* and better *candidates*. In other words, will the vacancies be filled in a qualitative satisfying way? A second major problem concerns the matter of *validity*: most of the tests in the new CAT-system are former paper & pencil tests. Frequently it is the case that the transformation of paper and pencil tests into automated computer versions has implications on the validity.

In order to fight the *retention and wastage* problems, actions were taken. For instance, the TE-NCO – the test of English used in the test battery for candidate-NCO's – was developed. This test was introduced with the aim of detecting people having little or no chance to succeed in a training of Air Traffic controller due to a lack of knowledge of the English language (Devriendt, 1999a). Another example focused on the existence of three national languages in Belgium: besides the Flemish or Dutch speaking people and the Walloons or French speaking people there exists a German speaking community. To attract more German

speaking candidates a test battery for German speaking potential soldiers was created (Devriendt, 2001).

Other instruments could be constructed to reduce wastage, or to implement relevant principles of total quality management.

Another issue is the client satisfaction. Client satisfaction concerning the selection methods could be measured by means of inventories, such as SERVQUAL. During the recruitment of the year 2001, applicants filled in experimental versions of this questionnaire translated in Dutch and French.

In this domain much can be expected of the creation of a Department of Human Resources Management, with a section for applied research.

Furthermore the future observations must indicate whether more *decentralisation* of recruitment and selection procedures will be necessary or whether centralised alternatives will be preferable.

Although procedures used in the civilian context are taken as a point of reference by the Belgian Armed Forces, it is not clear whether selection techniques can be simply copied from the civilian world. Indeed, we agree with Hardinge (1997) that military selection differs from selection in the civilian sector.

First of all, military selection is a global selection: a candidate does not apply for one function, but for different potential future functions. Secondly much candidates start the selection procedure: the throughput on an annual basis for the CRS is about 6000 candidates. In contrast, many civilian selections are put up for a few applicants. These first two points implicate the use of classification and decision models.

A third difference is the context of dangerous and life threatening situations, typical for military life.

There is also a broader selection in terms of psychological, physical, medical and administrative criteria. The civilian sector stresses mainly the first two factors -the psychological and/or physical ones.

Finally, in Belgium there are three communities speaking three different languages: the French, the Dutch and the German. The military selection procedures have to be constructed according to the respective cultural backgrounds.

Nevertheless, changes in selection procedures are necessary in order to cope with facts of economical, political and competing nature and civilian techniques and methods can serve as a source of inspiration. Some of these changes were, indeed, what this paper was all about.

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