Recruiting soldiers

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Introduction

The recruitment of soldiers in the year 2000 and beyond constitutes one of the main challenges for the Royal Netherlands Army (RNLA). In view of a number of recent developments, this will become even more of a challenge. Conscription was suspended only as recently as 1996. Initially, a substantial number of the new professional service personnel were being recruited among former conscript personnel. This 'pool' of recruits has now dried up. Demographics do not augur well - particularly in the short term - as the number of 18- to 30-year-olds will continue to decrease in the coming decade. Economic indicators point to an increasingly competitive labour market in the coming years, while sociological trends indicate that young people will be taking a longer time to complete their education and training. This means that school- leavers will be older and more highly educated. On the other hand, the participation of women in the labour force, although often on a part-time basis, is on the increase.

The study described in this paper aims to explain propensity for a job in the armed forces. It is assumed that a higher propensity leads to more candidates (applications). We are convinced that a better understanding of the mechanisms that influence propensity will ensure better control of such mechanisms.

Based on earlier studies, a model was developed describing mechanisms leading to propensity and the context in which the mechanism works (realistic evaluation). The central mechanism in the model is based on the theory of rational choice (Vroom, 1984 Fishbein and Ajzen, 1980). However, it also states that this mechanism only operates in specific contexts. Furthermore, the model states that the mechanism may differ between men and women and that the circumstances and the mechanism may differ between students and young people in jobs.

Several terms (hereafter referred to as Necessary Conditions) need to be met, before a choice can even be made. First of all, one has to be aware of the possibility of a job in the army. Also, the general attitude towards the army needs to be positive. And, of course, one has to be available for the labour market. Young people who are still at school are not available unless they will be completing their education in the short term (graduates). Young people who are employed are only available if they intend to change jobs in the short term. Finally, one has to believe in one's own fitness for the job (self-efficacy).

A process of rational choice only occurs once these terms have been met. In such a process, a comparison is made between the current job (or favoured job) and a job in the army. The more positive the outcome of the comparison for the military job, the higher the propensity and probability that people apply for a job in the army (or at least ask for extra information).

-Figure 1 here-

The model was tested using data from interviews.

Methods

Data was gathered through face-to-face interviews with a sample of 1,079 men and women. The sample is representative for young people (aged between 17 and 24) in the Netherlands. As the propensity

for a job in the army among university students is very low, this category was not included in the sample. The questionnaire was developed by the Behavioural Sciences Division of the RNLA. It consists largely of closed questions with fixed answering categories. Most questions were used in earlier studies and have proved to be reliable.

Respondents were interviewed in February and March 2000. The questionnaire covered the following subjects: demographics (gender, age), current status (school, work, family), future plans, educational level, rating of the current job (or favoured job), propensity (would you be interested in a military function in the army) , knowledge of military functions, self-rated efficacy, general image of the army, attitude towards military activities, relative rating of the military profession, image and judgement of financial terms (pay and additional benefits). Also, the attractiveness of several job benefits was gauged (would you be interested if…?). The interview finished with a closing question about propensity.

The conducting of the interviews, data entry and data cleaning were contracted out and performed by a professional market research company. Analyses were performed by the RNLA Behavioural Sciences Division using the SPSS programme.

Alpha factoring and reliability analyses were used in preparing the data. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, crosstabs, means) and graphs were used to describe the data and report on important indicators.

For the explanatory analyses (testing the model), regression analyses and the general linear models procedure (analyses of variance) were used. Five main groups of variables were distinguished: propensity, category membership, Necessary Conditions, job comparison and others.

Category membership
The model explicitly assumes that factors do not necessarily operate in the same manner in different contexts. Gender and current status were used to define the context for the comparison mechanism and the operating of the Necessary Conditions. Four groups were defined: Male students, female students, working men, and working women. The number of 'others' (not at school and unemployed) in the sample was too small for the purposes of further analysis.

Propensity
A composite variable for propensity was computed, based on the general propensity question, attitude towards military activities, rating of job options, rating of specific military job names and the closing question.

Necessary Conditions
General image of the army, self-efficacy, knowledge about the job, and social norms were gauged with existing questions and scales that had been tested in earlier studies (e.g. *Wat wil de BBT'er*? (What do BBT personnel - i.e. personnel on a fixed-term contract - want? PRISMA)

Job comparison
The current job was rated on 17 different aspects. These aspects can be clustered into four categories (alpha factoring). The categories and aspects are shown in Table 1. The military job was also rated on these aspects (at a later stage during the interview). The initial rating was explicitly used as a standard. For each of the 17 aspects, a difference score was computed. These different scores were combined into four scale scores: Job Content, Job Atmosphere, Combination with Private Life and Financial Terms. Two aspects could not be assigned to any of these scales. They were used separately: impact on physical fitness, valued by society.

Model testing
For each of the categories described in the introduction (men/women/school/work) the model was tested separately. Finally, an overall test comprising all categories

was performed. Testing of the general linear models was done in a step-by-step approach. First, the labels of variables such as Necessary Conditions were entered, followed by the comparison variables. Finally, educational level and 'firmness of future plans' data was entered into the model.

Results

When asked explicitly, 7.3% of the respondents aged between 17 to 24 years stated that they were or might be interested in a military job in the army. Propensity was higher among men than among women and it was lowest for the highest educational levels (secondary education). The main reason for people stating that they were not interested was the danger and (mostly for women) the expectation that the job would be too tough or demanding (physically). 60 per cent of those not interested stated as reason that they already had an alternative (school or work).

Availability

Availability for the labour market (consequently for the army) is defined as 'being in work and having the intention to change jobs' or as 'still studying and not having the intention to pursue further education'. According to this definition, the results of our study and demographic statistics (Central Bureau of Statistics, CBS, 2000) the number of young people available for the labour market in the Netherlands would be 1,450,000. Propensity for a job in the army is highest (!) among the working young men willing to change jobs.

-Figure 2 here-

On the whole, the picture people have of the RNLA is positive (6.9 on a scale of one-to-ten). Almost 10% of the respondents however, cannot rate the general image (missing values), probably because they do not have the faintest idea. 48% agree on the statement to the effect that the army is a good organisation to work for.

The *picture* of the financial terms in the army is positive, 75% think that service personnel have a good or reasonable income. However, on being shown the actual pay, 60% rate it as good or reasonable. Only 30% state that pay in the army is better or a great deal better than their current income.
The assessment of the financial aspect does not have an important influence on propensity. It is only among working men whose current pay is lower than that they would have in the army that propensity is slightly higher.

People are generally well aware of the possibility of a job in the RNLA, although the same does not apply to the content of such a job. Familiarity has risen from 26% in 1994 to 69% in 1998 and 77% in the year 2000.

-Figure 3 here-

More detailed information about the job leads to a higher propensity. This is especially true of information obtained through personal contacts (family and friends).

Some 45% (men: 63%, women: 30%) of the sample feel that they would be accepted if they applied for a job in the army. Another 45% feel that they would not be accepted. The main reason for them to expect a rejection is insufficient physical fitness. This is especially true of women with little schooling who feel certain that they would not be accepted. As had been expected, we found a clear relationship between self-efficacy and propensity, especially among women. The opinion of Important Others (social norms) is also strongly related to propensity. The opinion of their parents was rated as neutral, but respondents expected their partners to be opposed to them accepting a job as a soldier (13% positive norms).
The military job was rated on a scale from 1 to 10 on 17 different aspects. Earlier studies have shown that these aspects are important for young people when choosing or comparing jobs (Van

Gelooven, R. Zevenbergen-Snel, B. 1998). The soldier's job scored highest on *the impact on physical fitness*. *Variation in the job* and *the people you work with* were also rated relatively high. Low scores (unsatisfactory marks) were assigned to *the combination with private life* and *commuting time*.

Table 2 summarises the results of the model testing in the four categories. If we take all categories together, 45% of the variance in propensity for a soldier's job in the Royal Netherlands Army can be explained.

-Table 2 here-

The effects of variables differ between contexts. Among male students, the effect of self-efficacy is not significant. In this group, certainty of future plans has a significant effect even after accounting for all other effects. Men indicating that they do not know what they want to do in the future, show a higher propensity.

Within the category of working men, knowledge of the job does not have a significant effect, nor do educational level and age.

Among female students (17- to 24-year-olds) the effects of Job-comparison are marginal. The Necessary Conditions are more important in explaining propensity. In this category, as with male students, certainty of future plan has a significant effect.
Among working women, as was the case with working men, knowledge of the job does not contribute to the explanation of propensity.

Although the job comparison mechanism is not equally important in all contexts, comparison of job content, atmosphere and combination with private life have a certain impact on all categories. The comparison of financial terms, however, has no influence on any of the four groups.

Conclusions
With 7.5%, propensity for a job in the army is not high. This cannot be attributed to a strongly negative attitude towards the army, but rather to the fact that many young people simply have other preferences.

A situation in which there are increased labour market options, as we currently see in the Netherlands, results in a reduction in the number of recruits, regardless of any changes in attitude, image or propensity.

The general image of the army is one of the main influencing factors on propensity, not only because it is a Necessary Condition for considering such a job in the first place, but also because it influences the category of Important Others.

Personal contacts are an important source of knowledge about the military job. Soldiers, NCOs and officers in active service should be more aware of their recruiting potential. If the RNLA is to make the most of this potential, it must see to it that RNLA personnel are satisfied with their jobs.

A positive attitude towards military activities is almost synonymous with propensity. Unfortunately, we have yet to explain why some people like military activities, while others clearly do not.

The sociological trend of young people increasingly postponing job and career choices implies a major opportunity for recruiting soldiers on short-term contracts. It would be a very good thing if young people were to consider working for the army for a number of years as a transitional period in which they are enabled to improve their career prospects, thus making a useful step in the context of further career planning.
Many young people think they are not fit for the soldier's job. Women in particular tend to feel that being a soldier is (too) heavy and tough. They are not completely wrong about this. The question is,

however, if these young men and women know that initial training might enable them to overcome these obstacles.

Financial terms do not appear to be a major instrument in generating propensity. Other studies have shown, however, that pay and additional benefits have important effects on job satisfaction and retention rates of soldiers.

Discussion

The study described (in short) in this paper contains a great deal of valuable information.

There is a large group of young people who are not interested in working for the armed forces. If we were to succeed in identifying potential candidates, we would be able to target this group more directly and more efficiently. To date, however, not a single study has succeeded in determining what makes the essential difference between potential candidates and those not interested. Therefore, a general recruitment approach aimed at all young people would appear to be the most sensible choice for now. Nevertheless, starting from a realistic model (explicitly differentiating between context, mechanism and outcome) we were able to explain no less than 45% of the cases of variance in propensity. The conclusion must be that it is highly important to distinguish between categories (or in Realistic terms: contexts). This applies not only to research but also to recruiting practice.

The mechanism of job comparison resulting from the rational choice model is certainly applicable to the career or job choice situation. However, its explanatory power is restricted by the Necessary Conditions described above.
Other mechanisms need to be uncovered if we are to arrive at further explanations. If we take into account that it is (part of)

the general population that we are studying and that working for the army is merely one of the many options open to young people, the fact that 55% of the variance in propensity was not explained is not at all surprising.

Propensity is an important factor, but also -unfortunately- one that is very difficult to influence (at least at population level). Therefore, other mechanisms determining the number of soldiers actually recruited, such as selection, early retention, second and third-term contracts and the like, should be fully exploited to guarantee sufficient numbers of motivated personnel for the army to carry out all its tasks.

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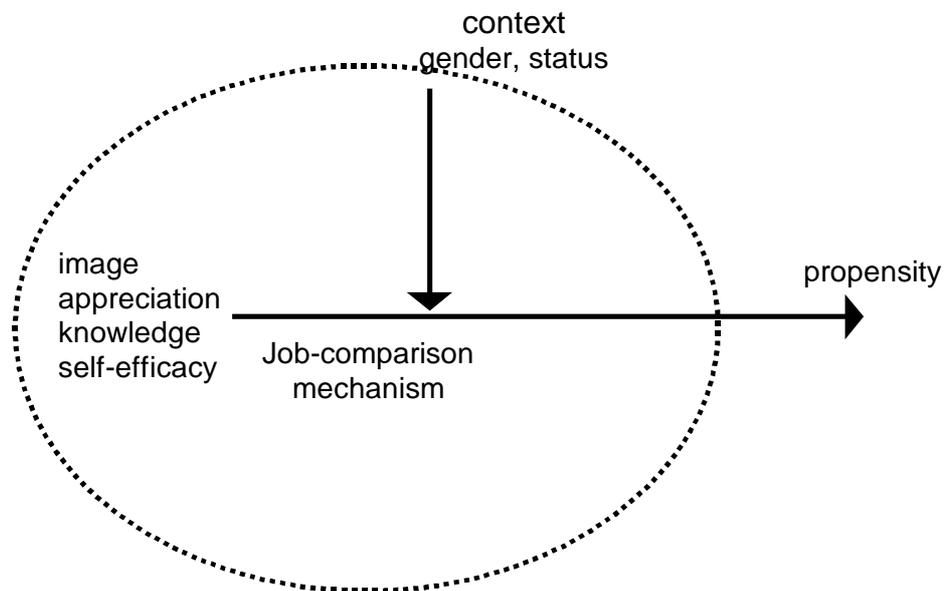
Figure 1, The working model

Table 1
Results of Job-comparison aspects (scores range from 1 to 10 for both the current job and the soldier's job).

	Current Job	*Soldier's Job*	*Difference*
Content			
Job content	7.75	6.89	0.87
Autonomy	7.84	6.62	1.21
Variety	7.75	7.65	0.09
Study facilities	7.82	7.69	0.13
Personal development	7.63	7.73	-0.11
Future	7.48	6.60	0.86
Atmosphere			
People you work with	7.99	7.27	0.74
Boss	7.40	6.5	0.84
Way of approaching personnel	7.77	6.99	0.76
Atmosphere	8.29	7.56	0.72
Combination private life			
Combination private life	7.48	5.38	2.11
Commuting time	6.79	5.63	1.11
Security	7.67	6.10	1.55
Financial terms			
Pay	7.49	7.41	0.07
Additional benefits	6.49	6.80	-0.27
Others			
Recognition in society	7.11	7.46	-0.36
Physical fitness	6.46	8.43	-1.97

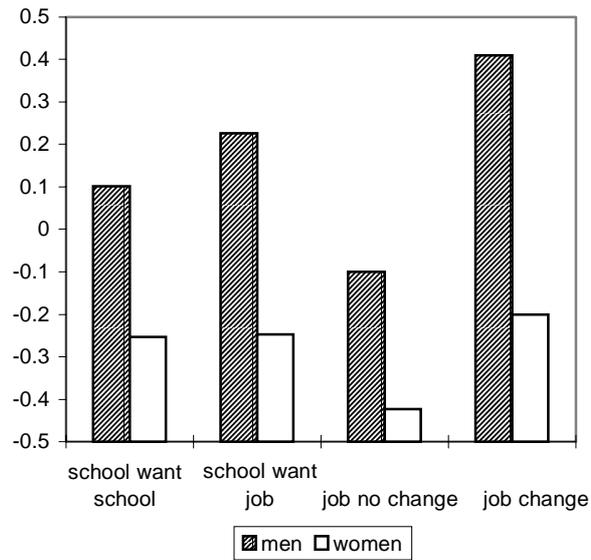Figure 2
Average propensity within categories of availability

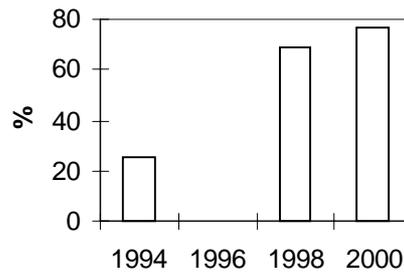Figure 3, Trends in Knowledge of the soldier's job (%)

Table 2 Summary of results of general linear models testing

Components	Men		Women	
	School	Work	School	Work
Necessary Conditions (NC)	21%	26%	23%	20%
Choice Mechanism (CM)	20%	22%	8%	15%
Personal Characteristics (PC)	8%	2%	4%	2%
NC+CM	27%	36%	30%	26%
NC+PC	24%	25%	26%	20%
NC+CM+PC	31%	37%	30%	27%