

VOLUNTARY TURNOVER IN THE BELGIAN ARMY: UNMET EXPECTATIONS AND THE ROLE OF INFORMATION

PROVISION

Bert SCHREURS

François LESCREVE

Belgian Armed Forces – Personnel Division

Everestraat

B-1140 Evere

Belgium

INTRODUCTION

In the Belgian Army about 30% of the recruits leave during the initial training, not because they are obliged, but because they want to. The majority of these stops take place within the first two weeks, sometimes even after a few days. It seems that this figure is not very different from the voluntary withdrawal rate of most West European Armed Forces. In 1997 Hampson conducted a study for DERA (Hampson, 1997). She found a wastage rate from Phase I training in the region of 20-25%. In the Netherlands the voluntary wastage rate comes to roughly 25% (Ven van de, 2000; Flach, 2000).

The ultimate goal of the research done in this area is of course the reduction of the voluntary withdrawal rate. It saves the Army a lot of money and prevents applicants from a probable deception. To achieve this goal we have to know why recruits leave. The reasons vary. Expectations and the mismatch between an individual's expectation and reality is a strand that runs through much of the literature on voluntary withdrawal (Ven van de, 2000; Wanous, 1992; Meglino et al., 1988). A method that has proven useful in reducing employee turnover is the Realistic Job Preview (RJP). This method, which is intended to provide new or potential organisational members with accurate expectations of the organisation, has been widely used in both civilian and military organisations (Premack & Wanous, 1985).

The objective of the present study was to find out why recruits leave the initial training and whether the met-expectations hypothesis also applies to the Belgian Army. If so, we have good reasons to adjust the current recruitment process in the direction of a RJP technique. The method used in this study was the process of Exit Interviewing and Surveying (EIS), which was originally developed as a means of gathering data from employees who have been voluntarily or involuntarily terminated (Goodale, 1982). In the present study the EIS process is only implemented to evoke information from voluntary leavers.

BACKGROUND

At the recruiting station

Youngsters who want to join the Belgian armed forces are obliged to pay a preliminary visit to a recruiting station. The recruiters are trained to welcome the youngsters, to provide the necessary information and to answer additional questions. The recruiters are free to use several aids, such as pamphlets, job descriptions and video equipment. The information provided during the first contact is restricted to some general characteristics of our Armed Forces, including information about personnel categories, statutes and career possibilities. At the end of this session the person receives some brochures with job descriptions and career possibilities, through which s/he can go at home.

If the person is still interested after this first two-hour session, he is expected to pay a second visit within a few days. The second session is more extensive than the first one. More detailed information is provided about initial and practical training, future job content, military life, career possibilities, wages, selection procedure, etc. Now the person is well informed s/he's sent home to think things over and come to a decision.

The third visit consists mainly of administrative inevitabilities. After application the person receives some additional practical information (e.g. where and when to present). After this the recruiting phase has come to an end.

We assume that this overwhelming amount of information and procedures could lead to an overload. Instead of drawing a clear picture of the organisation, we risk to confuse visitors by aiming at completeness. In itself this shouldn't be a problem, but since the majority of our semi- and unskilled target group isn't very keen on reading material, and probably is not used to listen with great concentration for several hours, it's likely that a lot of input gets lost.

Consequence of unrealistic expectations: low satisfaction and high turnover

The occurrence of inflated expectations is mainly due to the traditional practice of 'selling' the organisation to outsiders. Specifically, this selling strategy involves two actions: (1) only positive characteristics are communicated to outsiders rather than those things insiders find dissatisfying about the organisation, and (2) those features that are advertised may be distorted to make them seem even more positive. This traditional approach is designed to attract as many candidates as possible, but is in conflict with the organisation's ability to retain newcomers (Wanous, 1992). This is because disappointment of initial expectations inflated by traditional recruitment will lead to a decrease in job satisfaction and as a result to an increase of voluntary turnover. This mechanism is well described in more detail in RJP literature (Wanous, 1992; Wanous et al., 1992; Irving & Meyer, 1994; Hom et al., 1998; Hom et al., 1999).

Since the Belgian Armed Forces have to contend with high voluntary turnover this led to the assumption that recruits' initial expectations are somewhat unrealistic. If so, this would be a major symptom of ineffective recruitment. Besides inflated expectations and high turnover rates, low job satisfaction would point to the same direction. Therefore, we tried to collect these three types of data in our research, and related them to each other.

METHOD

Sample

In the time span of data collecting a sample consisting of 132 Dutch-speaking and 88 French-speaking applicants for enlisted personnel completed the expectancy survey – which was part of the selection procedure and consequently administered pre-entry – *and* was admitted afterwards. 90 of them withdrew voluntarily during initial training *and* completed both the exit interview and the exit survey.

Measure

Initial expectations were measured by a 44-item survey administered during the selection procedure. Applicants were asked how important they perceive the items in order to join the Forces. The items were evaluated on a 1 to 5 scale ranging from 'insignificant' to 'significant'.

The voluntary exit survey consisted of two parts. The first part was identical to the above expectancy survey, asking for initial (pre-entry) expectations. For the second part the leavers were instructed to evaluate the 44 items on a 1 to 5 scale of dissatisfaction-satisfaction. So the same items serve both as expectancy and satisfaction items.

The voluntary exit interview was conducted to explore the reasons why recruits leave. Despite of this explorative nature the interview was rather structured since the questions were specified in advance. Fifteen issues, which were assumed to be potential reasons for dissatisfaction, were included in the exit interview by means of one or more questions. For example, leavers were asked how they perceived the quality of information provision in the recruiting station. Other questions referred to military attitude, perceived difficulty level of the initial training, satisfaction concerning the assigned job, etc. No formalised scoring guide was used, but since the answers often were the same it was possible to summarise the results by way of frequency tables.

All measures were developed by the Centre for Recruitment and Selection (CRS) of the Belgian Ministry of National Defence. Although the expectancy survey has been the subject of another recent research, we didn't hesitate to re-examine its psychometric characteristics.

Design and Procedure

A repeated measurement was used to find out whether the initial expectations remained unchanged after a brief period of ‘real life’ experience. The first measurement took place in the course of the selection procedure, so all applicants completed the survey. However, these results were not included in the final selection decision with regard to acceptance or refusal. The second measurement was part of the EIS process, which implies that only leavers completed the survey a second time. This practical restriction has important methodological drawbacks, which we are aware of.

Once recruits expressed their desire to leave the Armed Forces, they were invited to take part in the EIS process. The process began with an exit interview. The interviewer – an officer belonging to the Instruction Company – tried to make the dropouts feel comfortable and stressed the confidential nature of the exit procedure. Afterwards the recruits completed the exit survey. The exit survey contained the repeated measurement, which we described above, a measurement for job satisfaction and a third questionnaire, which will not be discussed here.

RESULTS

With the exit interview we didn’t had the intention to systematically map all potential reasons to leave, we merely wanted to find out whether recruits had complaints about the quality of information provision. Nevertheless this limited study taught us a great deal about the obstacles recruits have to cope with during the initial training.

Most important finding within the scope of this project is that 55% of the leavers were dissatisfied about the information they received at the recruiting station. The disapproval concerned both quality and quantity of the provided information. To illustrate some of the recruits’ complaints, we quote here a few judgements¹: “Disinformation”, “The provided information absolutely didn’t square with reality”, and “The recruiter represented the army as if it was a fantasy world”. It’s worth mentioning that the interviewers themselves confirm these judgements through their own comments: “It’s advisable to provide more accurate information about the initial training and the future job”; and “I suggest that during the recruiting phase the content of the initial training is better emphasised. Apparently the recruits have hardly any idea what training is alike, except maybe that they know about the physical aspect”. These results show that our initial hypothesis (unmet expectations) is still very plausible and that the survey study was entirely justified.

¹ Translated from Dutch.

We took the opportunity to ask leavers which elements they experienced as ‘unpleasant’, and which were as a result reasons to dropout. Table 1 presents the frequency scores for this question.

Table 1

Unpleasant Elements of the Initial Training and corresponding Frequency Scores

What did you find unpleasant?	Response Frequency
No time for hygiene, eating, relaxation (time pressure)	41 (37.3%)
Subject material was too difficult, theoretical (study matter)	21 (19.1%)
Undeserved reproaches, pestering (harassment)	12 (10.9%)
Too much discipline, drill, rules (discipline)	9 (8.1%)
Far from home, long period of separation (homesickness)	7 (6.4%)
No answer	7 (6.4%)
Other	7 (6.4%)
Physical difficulties, marching with backpack (physical)	6 (5.4%)

Note. *N* is 110 since each respondent (*n*=90) could give more than one response. The ‘Other’ category contains the remaining responses that could not be categorised.

Since the expectancy survey contained a large number of items (*n*=44), we conducted a principal components analysis in order to produce a smaller number of derived variables. This resulted in ten components with variances greater than unity regardless of the data we considered: both the pre-entry expectancy survey and the exit survey produced the same ten components. We will describe only the components here, which will turn out to be relevant to the presented topic.

In order to compare the perceived significance of each item we calculated their mean scores. With these means we were able to generate a mean score for each component. The average mean score was 3.30, the standard deviation 0.98.

Before they enter applicants expect *sportsmanship* to be of great importance in order to join the Forces ($MS_{entry}=4.35$). Above all they are looking for an energetic and sporty life. This component also contains all items referring to physical exertions. The second most important component is *peacekeeping* ($MS_{entry}=4.30$). Applicants assume that national and international peacekeeping assignments constitute an essential part of the military life. They’re looking forward to make themselves useful, even if this is difficult or dangerous. Then we find *self-development* ($MS_{entry}=3.92$), which refers to personal and professional

growth. Applicants believe that they will learn how to act autonomously. Besides this they expect to become full-skilled professionals. Having the right *military attitude* is also considered to be an important characteristic ($MS_{entry}=3.92$). The items of this component speak of organisational skills, discipline and military spirit. Of minor importance seems to be *social life* ($MS_{entry}=3.55$) (and others, which we will not discuss here). Social life refers to friendship, companionship, and team spirit. Apparently applicants don't have very high expectations about this component. The above figures refer to applicants who will eventually leave the initial training (N=90). In a preliminary study we did the same analysis for all applicants and found no significant differences between the two groups.

During the EIS process again we probed the perceived significance. The average mean score dropped to 3.21 indicating that the items were perceived as less important compared to the pre-entry measurement. However, the overall difference between the two measurements was not significant. For two components we noticed a significant change. When asked a second time leavers find both *peacekeeping* ($MS_{exit}=3.61$), $\chi^2(4, N = 90) = 33.42$, $p < .01$, and *military attitude* ($MS_{exit}=3.43$), $\chi^2(4, N = 90) = 24.46$, $p < .01$ considerably less important. *Sportsmanship* also was less important ($MS_{exit}=4.00$), $\chi^2(4, N = 90) = 12.57$, $p < .05$, although this shift was not significant at .01-level.

Table 2 presents the mean (pre-entry and exit) initial expectancy score, the Chi-squares, the Student's t, and an absolute difference score for each component.

Table 2

Pre-entry and Exit Mean Initial Expectancy Scores, a Difference Score, Chi-squares, and Student's t

	Pre-entry Mean	Exit Mean	Difference Score	Chi-squares	Student's t
Sportsmanship	4.35	4.00	0.35	12.57*	5.28
Peacekeeping	4.30	3.61	0.47	33.42**	5.67*
Self-development	3.92	3.84	0.23	3.73	0.70
Military attitude	3.92	3.43	0.50	24.46**	6.80**
Social life	3.55	3.68	0.42	1.05	-0.47

Note. The difference score is calculated as follows: $\sum (|MS_{exit} - MS_{entry} |) / N$

With MS_{exit} = Mean Item Scores for the exit survey; MS_{entry} = Mean Item Scores for the entry (selection) survey; N = Number of component items.

** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$

We then calculated the satisfaction score for each component and the overall correlation between these scores and the exit expectancy scores. We found that leavers were most satisfied by the experienced *social life* ($MS_{sat}=3.79$), which was significantly higher than the overall mean ($MS_{sat}=3.39$), $t(40) = 2.23$, $p<.05$, and least by *peacekeeping* ($MS_{sat}=3.19$) and *military attitude* ($MS_{sat}=3.29$).

The correlation between pre-entry expectancies and satisfaction ($r = .43$) was significantly higher than the correlation between exit expectancies and satisfaction ($r = .65$), $t(35) = 4.33$, $p<.01$, suggesting that the second measurement was strongly affected by what recruits have experienced during the training period.

DISCUSSION

What's beyond dispute is the difference in response behaviour between the first and second expectancy measurement. We would like to claim that real life experiences were responsible for this shift, suggesting that leavers had false expectations before entry. The high correlation between satisfaction and post-entry expectations seems to confirm this assertion. Especially applicants' ideas about peacekeeping and military attitude change in the course of the initial training period, at least, as far as it concerns leavers. What seemed to be important at the moment of selection turned out to be less weighty after a brief period of military training. The least important components also were the least satisfying. This fact is strong evidence in favour of the met-expectations hypothesis, mentioned in the introduction.

However, there is another plausible explanation for the expectation shift, namely 'social desirability'. Although the results of the first measurement were not included in the final selection decision with regard to acceptance or refusal, it's likely that applicants want to make a good impression. Besides this it's not clear whether the test instructions were sufficiently plain about the survey's purpose. Altogether this means that social desirability is a possibility we can't ignore and with which we have to deal in our future projects. Yet, the question remains why the change was only significant for peacekeeping and military attitude. We assume that the biggest disappointment of initial expectations occurred for these two components.

Unfortunately the used design doesn't permit us to say that these false expectations were actual reasons to drop out. As we said only leavers completed the survey a second time, as a result of which we had no control group. In the near future we're hoping to do a similar research that includes a measure for job satisfaction for both leavers and stayers. Because of our methodological drawback the evidence we found to believe that false initial expectations lead to voluntary wastage is mainly indirect. However, the exit interview results also point in this direction. Leavers complain about the discipline, the time pressure and about not getting the chance to make themselves useful. In these we recognise elements belonging to military attitude and peacekeeping.

The majority of listed complaints probably could have been prevented by real, concrete information. Therefore we plead for the use of a Realistic Job Preview design.

Authorities have to guarantee and control the quality and quantity of information in order that enlisted candidates have correct expectations and good motives. Besides this, the features of the training could be changed in order that candidates would find what they are looking for. The most obvious actions according to this research are lowering time pressure and making the transition between civilian and military life more gradual. A third measure has to do with the feeling of usefulness that applicants have. They joined in the hope that they could make a valuable contribution to their Armed Forces, but after a brief period of initial training they come to realise that peacekeeping or humanitarian assignments are not part of the program. On the contrary, the training program mainly consists of theoretical lessons, the one thing they finally hoped to be released from.

Although the majority of leavers indicate that their unfulfilled expectations were caused by poor information provision during the recruiting phase we do not know whether this perceived lack of quality is an actual cause of turnover or just a matter of external attribution. Therefore we have elaborated a new research project in order to examine whether it is interesting from an organisational point of view to improve the quality of information provision during the recruiting phase. The ultimate goal is to see whether the quality level is related to the attrition and retention rate².

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² For more information about this research project feel free to contact one of the authors:

E-mail: Schreursb@freegates.be or Lescreve@skynet.be

Tel: +32 2 7013502 Fax: +32 2 7016416

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