

The drop-out rate during training: in line with expectations?

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Introduction

Each year the Royal Netherlands Army, or RNLA, needs to take on approximately 3,000 personnel for the complement of privates/corporals with a fixed-term contract. This number will rise on the basis of the current Defence White Paper. To achieve this quota, a much larger group of interested people is needed in order to have enough candidates who maintain that interest during the application phase and to succeed in getting through the (demanding) physical and mental selection process. At the time that the candidate has completed the phase and is deemed trainable, he or she is of great value to the RNLA. This is due, on the one hand, to the investment already made in the potential fixed-term contractor and, on the other, to the need to fulfil the procurement requirement. The latter aspect is a particularly important factor in these times of a competitive labour market.

From the moment that the candidate is taken on, he or she attends a training course at one of the four school battalions of the Training Centre for Basic Training: Central, Airmobile, North or South. Following the three-month General Military Training, which is a few weeks longer at the Airmobile school battalion, the fixed-term contractors attend one or more functional training courses at the relevant training centres. Throughout the process, but chiefly during the General Military Training, personnel drop out of training. Among the 1998 intake group, the drop-out rate was on average below 15%. In 1999 this percentage is significantly higher, namely about 24%.

As holding onto personnel is increasingly the Achilles heel of the RNLA, the interim drop-out phenomenon is a problem for us all. This article devotes attention to the motives of fixed-term contractors for leaving training early, the increase in the drop-out rate during training and points for attention to reduce this drop-out rate.

Article structure

The article consists broadly of two parts: the theoretical part and the empirical part. The theoretical part comprises a description of research conducted in the past into the drop-out rate, resulting in a theoretical model. This theoretical model is then used as the basis for the empirical part. Here, the method of research is first looked at, followed by a description of the research results. The article ends with a few remarks and a conclusion.

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Part I:

The drop-out rate in a theoretical perspective

For the last few years, a great deal of attention has been devoted to the drop-out rate among personnel. The emphasis in most studies is on personnel voluntarily leaving the organisation, whereby the employee takes the initiative to leave; this is in contrast to personnel being obliged to leave the organisation, whereby the initiative lies with the employer¹.

In the research under discussion, we are faced with a specific form of the drop-out rate, namely that which occurs shortly after entry into the organisation, during training. The employee has therefore not yet become acquainted with his or her eventual job or function. The theoretical description will therefore largely concentrate on this form of the drop-out phenomenon.

Drop-out models

A model which was advanced in 1973 by Porters and Steers² assumes that employees have specific expectations on entering the organisation. If the organisation and the function do not meet initial expectations, dissatisfaction may arise, increasing the risk of drop out. Other researchers³ declare that dissatisfaction with work initially leads to the employee developing ideas about possibly leaving the organisation. These ideas lead in turn to estimating the expected value of looking for another job and the cost incurred by resignation. If these estimates are favourable, the employee will look for another job. In addition to the cost of resignation, what is to be gained by resignation⁴ and what is to be gained by staying on⁵ may also play a part in the estimate.

Any consideration of staying or leaving always includes the economy as a major factor⁶. In times of high unemployment and few vacancies, fewer people will resign from jobs, even if they are dissatisfied. Under more favourable conditions, if there are many jobs available, dissatisfied employees will show a greater tendency to leave than satisfied employees⁷. The relationship between satisfaction and the drop-out rate is therefore stronger in times of low unemployment than in times of relatively high unemployment⁸. An additional theory is that there are different determining factors for dropping out in times of high unemployment than in times of plentiful employment⁹. This means that, depending on the state of the economy, in this case the situation on the labour market, the weight applied to the determining factors may vary¹⁰.

Expectations

A meta-analysis of 31 studies relating to the non-realisation of expectations¹¹ resulted in the following findings: non-realised expectations have a strong influence on job satisfaction, involvement in the organisation, the intention to leave and the actual act of leaving the organisation. Incidentally, this

only applies to expectations concerning aspects of the job which are deemed to be important. In the case of non-realised expectations of irrelevant aspects, the reaction is surprise rather than disappointment^{12 13}.

Important aspects in a job

In her study into “Important aspects in a job”, Van Zijderveld¹⁴ put the following question to young people in 1999: What are the three most important things you (would) look for when choosing a job?

Table 1 Important aspects in a job

Top 3	Man	Woman	Total
1. Salary	88%	80%	84%
2. Atmosphere	52%	61%	57%
3. Interesting work	37%	43%	40%

Salary is spontaneously named most frequently, and more often by boys than girls. Girls seem to name this less frequently as they get older. For boys age makes no difference. People with a technical education name salary relatively often in contrast to those with a care/healthcare education.

Atmosphere (pleasant colleagues and working atmosphere) is named more often by girls than by boys.

Interesting work (variation, interesting, fun and a challenge) is named about as often by both sexes.

Young respondents name this more frequently than older respondents.

Van Zijderveld also reports on several other studies in which young people have been asked what they find important in a job. An initial measurement held in 1988 among students in their final year of further education highlighted the following job aspects, in order of importance¹⁵.

1. a good income (in first place for 75% of the young people; boys seem to be more strongly interested in income than girls);
2. communication in the workplace;
3. involvement in content.

A study of the social environment of young people was conducted by means of interviews with 500 young people in 1988. The young people formed a random selection of Dutch young people between the ages of 12-21. The following ranking was drawn up on the basis of importance¹⁶:

1. the nature of the work is pleasant, varied and fascinating;
2. good contacts between colleagues, good cooperation, pleasant atmosphere at work;
3. a good salary, earning money yourself, being financially independent;
4. a job must benefit well-being;

5. opportunities to develop;
6. bearing responsibility;
7. good working conditions.

Girls seem to have mainly intrinsic job expectations. These are expectations which relate to the nature and content of the job (such as variety in the work, good contacts with colleagues, independence and being appreciated). Boys have mainly extrinsic job expectations. These relate to job characteristics which serve as a means of achieving a goal outside work (such as a good salary, working conditions and having a career). Their own income is deemed important by more boys than girls.

With respect to what young people think important in their jobs, social milieu forms the basis for a clear difference¹⁷:

- a. Young people from higher social milieus are more development and career-oriented than those from lower social milieus. The higher the social milieu, the more frequently young people emphasise communication, involvement, management, status and career.
- b. Middle-class young people think that having a career is more important than those from a higher class, and they want to climb the social ladder via their careers.
- c. Young people from the lower class are more materiel-oriented and place a good income at the top of their list.

Young people who start work at a young age (these are often lower class) often have a fairly instrumental attitude to work, while those who start later are more interested in content¹⁸.

Important issues concerning the future, such as choosing a partner, may also influence what people think important in a job¹⁹.

In a longitudinal study held in 1988 in the school battalions, Roepers and Duel²⁰ investigated which characteristics of a job are seen as the most important. The table below gives these aspects and the point at which the fixed-term contractors were questioned.

Table 2 Most important aspects of a job at different points

week 1 (first day)	week 5	week 8
1. teamwork	1. salary	1. salary
2. camaraderie	2. camaraderie	2. camaraderie
3/ 4. gaining work experience	3. variety	3/ 4. teamwork
3/ 4. being able to become an indefinite contractor	4/ 5. getting the job you want	3/ 4. work experience

5. pushing back limits

4/ 5. teamwork

5. getting the job you want

The importance that one attaches to specific job characteristics is clearly related to the point, or the state of progress, at which they are questioned in the training process. In the first week, aspects related chiefly to the working atmosphere are found the most important (teamwork and camaraderie). A notable absence in the top 5 at this point is salary. From a certain point, which cannot be specified more closely using these data, the importance of salary increases (enormously) and, for the fixed-term contractors in training, this becomes the most important aspect of their job. Camaraderie is deemed the second most important at all three measurement points.

Psychological contract

In a study previously carried out into the drop-out phenomenon among the school battalion South²¹, in which salary is often cited as a reason for leaving, the importance of the salary is linked to the employees' psychological contract.

The psychological contract comprises the unspoken (often unconscious) expectations with respect to mutual obligations held by the organisation and the individual. The individual commits to making certain sacrifices and, in return, obliges the organisation to guarantee a good salary, social security and security on the duration of the work.

In psychological contracts a distinction is made between transactional contracts and relational contracts. Transactional contracts are chiefly economic and extrinsically oriented and are specified in time and time-related. This type of psychological contract is mainly found among employees who are taken on by the organisation for a specified period with a view to performing special tasks, for which specific expertise and skills are required. These employees are prepared to work hard in exchange for significant financial rewards. Relational contracts are both economically and non-economically-oriented, but otherwise have a more socio-emotional and intrinsic nature and are open-ended (in the case of contracts for an indefinite period)²².

It can therefore be assumed that young people in particular who are in service for a short period will develop a more transactional contract. An important expectation of this category of employees is that they are awarded reasonable financial compensation for their efforts. If this does not happen, they will either (try to) terminate the working relationship or reduce their effort to the level at which the employee believes the contract is once more properly balanced.

Two thirds of Dutch young people indeed estimate that fixed-term contractors earn a good salary. This has been proved by studies²³ into the interest of Dutch young people in a job, conducted in the

context of the Defence Labour Market Monitor 1999. About a quarter of the respondents had no clear picture of this and only a very small percentage thinks that fixed-term contractors have no good salary.

Orientation

Earlier research into the drop-out phenomenon in the school battalions shows that in particular the first week, and to a lesser extent the second week, is prone to the drop-out phenomenon. The initial period and in particular the first week therefore require additional attention.

The first week of entry into an organisation is known as the orientation period in the literature on the subject. This period is treated as a separate entity as this week goes hand-in-hand with a high degree of stress. This stress is caused by the large number of role changes experienced by the individual.

Changes which are known to possess a specific stress value and could perhaps occur in new recruits include: the first full-time job or new job, geographical move, earning an income or an increase or drop in income, serious limitation of social life and separation from the parental environment.

Furthermore, stress occurs due to the non-realisation of expectations and as a result of worries that one is incapable of meeting the requirements of the organisation.

Individual factors

A number of demographic and person-related variables may play a part in people leaving the organisation. Firstly, research has shown that the drop-out rate is higher among younger employees than among older employees²⁴. This relationship may partly be explained by other variables. A younger employee generally has more opportunities and fewer responsibilities than an older employee.

There is also a negative link between period of service and leaving the organisation. The drop-out rate is relatively higher in the early years of service than in later years. Demographic variables such as sex, education and civil status may also have an effect²⁵. No systematic links have been demonstrated between personality traits, interests, intelligence and capacities on the one hand and the drop-out phenomenon on the other. This has also been proved by previous research by the Behavioural Sciences Division²⁶.

Information

The adaptation of newcomers during the initial period depends partly on the precision and completeness of the information given to the individual before entering service²⁷. Incomplete and imprecise information can lead to non-realisation of expectations and a reality shock. The extent to which the newcomer has realistic, precise and full information at the time of entering service results in positive attitudes and a lower drop-out rate²⁸.

Job versus organisation

Earlier research into the drop-out phenomenon highlighted the fact that some of those who decide to leave the RNLA do so on the basis of not obtaining the function they wanted.

The choice of a specific job in a specific organisation is the result of a series of decisions made during the period of growth into adulthood: this is known as the exclusion process. During childhood, all or nearly all professions are a possibility for the ultimate choice. During puberty, this choice is reduced to the choice for a general professional sector, and in the young adult stage the choice of a specific profession is made. During adulthood, this choice is refined further into the choice of a specific job and the related organisation²⁹.

The essence is that people vary with respect to the image they have of their work. The most general image relates to a desired professional sector (military). A further refinement applies if people have already opted for a specific profession (military driver). Finally, people may already have made a choice of a specific job and the related organisation (military truck driver).

Research model

The principle of the theoretical description is that the extent to which the initial expectations can be met determines how satisfied people will be with their new job and ultimately may determine their decision to leave the organisation. This only applies to the expectations concerning job characteristics which are deemed important.

Salary is still viewed as *the* most important or one of the most important characteristics. The importance of salary increases the more people's profiles meet the characteristics given below:

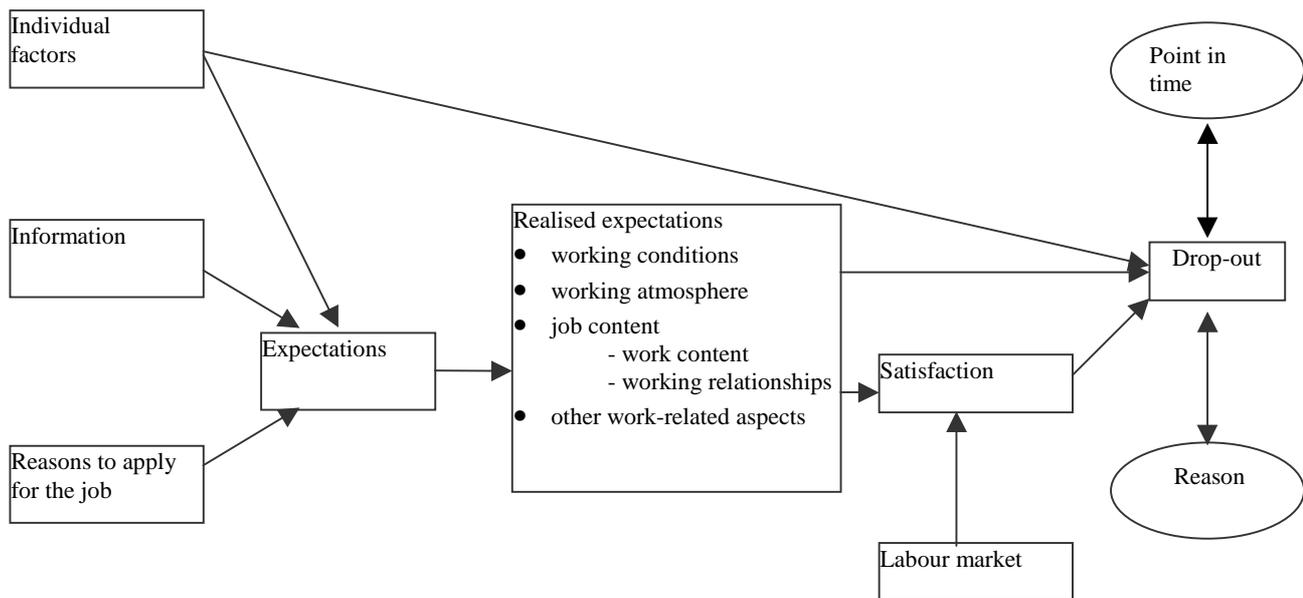
1. young people who come on the labour market at an early age (often the lowest qualified);
2. male;
3. young people from a lower social milieu;
4. people with a contract for a specific period.

In the case of a job as a fixed-term contractor, the fact that Dutch young people expect fixed-term contractors to earn a good salary is also added. This is a positive aspect for recruitment, but this may increase the drop-out rate in view of expectations on this aspect possibly being too high and therefore being impossible to realise.

Other aspects which young people in general and fixed-term contractors in particular deem important are a good working atmosphere (teamwork and camaraderie) and pleasant, interesting work (getting the function you want).

On the basis of the ranking according to importance of job characteristics (table 2), it can be expected that at the start of training reasons for leaving will chiefly be named which relate to the working atmosphere. Although disappointing experiences with respect to camaraderie are a possible reason to leave throughout training, (possible) disappointment about salary will have an even greater impact, with the exception of the period at the start of the appointment.

Figure 1 Research model for the drop-out phenomenon



Explanation of model (from right to left)

People do not leave training or the organisation simply for one reason or for clear reasons. People who leave training or the RNLA due to a reason which lies outside their sphere of influence or outside the RNLA do not want to leave the organisation due to dissatisfaction (in the model: satisfaction). Yet for these people, too, something has happened which is not in line with their expectations (in the model: realised expectations). In addition to the various reasons which may be the cause of resignation, the reason for leaving may also be (strongly) related to the point in time of resignation. During the orientation period, other reasons may also be decisive than those which apply in the period which follows.

Only non-realised expectations relating to important aspects of the job (salary, working atmosphere and nature of the job) will lead to dissatisfaction and possibly ultimately to leaving the organisation.

A (more) competitive labour market will result in an increased tendency for people to leave the organisation. This means that static job satisfaction in times of an increasingly competitive labour market leads to a higher drop-out rate.

The extent to which expectations can be realised goes hand-in-hand with how realistic these are. Expectations which are too high are difficult to realise and therefore lead to disappointment more quickly. Expectations can be aroused by recruitment and information, correspondingly unrealistic reasons to apply for other jobs, and individual factors.

Part II:

The empirical study

Study method

What are the motives for fixed-term contractors to terminate their training early? Can the increase in the drop-out rate be explained? What are the areas for attention to reduce the drop-out rate (in the short term)?

In order to be able to answer this question, the study model given earlier was developed on the basis of the theoretical description. The basic idea of the model is:

The drop-out rate, during the initial period of appointment, is determined by the extent to which initial expectations concerning relevant job aspects are realised.

This applies both if the initiative comes from the individual and if the organisation dismisses the person. Both parties, in principle, have a positive view of each other prior to the act of appointment. If the individual subsequently takes the initiative to leave, then there is something or several aspects which appear not to have gone as he or she had expected, otherwise the person would have stayed on. If the organisation dismisses a person, the organisation therefore experiences a discrepancy between the requirements and the skills of the person, i.e. the person does not meet expectations.

According to the above, there are just as many reasons for leaving as there are relevant job characteristics, or combinations of job characteristics. In order to generate usable data, it is therefore important to discover whether groups of individuals can be distinguished which experience comparable discrepancies.

The instrument for data collection

Using the study model and the job characteristics earmarked as relevant, a questionnaire was drawn up in which these aspects have been included. These exit questionnaires are given to all fixed-term contractors who leave training early by employees of the Total Quality Management Office of the relevant school battalions. The response percentage is therefore 100%.

Those who continue

In addition to those who leave training, a representative random selection is made from those who successfully complete training and they are also asked to complete the questionnaire. This structure was chosen in order to be able to relate and put into perspective the answers of those leaving training. This structure and the continuous nature of the study mean that the data are also highly suited to evaluating training (continuously).

Timescale

The timescale in which the data for this study were collected comprises the period from March 1999 up to and including February 2000. In total, the data from 601 completed questionnaires by those dropping out of training and 389 of those continuing were analysed*.

Study results

Fixed-term contractors do not appear to leave training early due to one reason or for clear reasons. In most cases, it is a combination of reasons, in which different motives play a part for different people. On average, a student has 2.6 reasons for leaving training early. The most frequently cited are 'military life does not suit me' (46% of all those who left named this as one of their reasons), 'homesickness' (28%), 'circumstances at home' (24%) and 'disappointing salary' (24%). A few clear differences can be distinguished between men and women. Women more often cite: 'medical reasons' (27% versus 14%) and 'physical load' (29% versus 12%). In contrast, men more frequently cite 'disappointing salary' (26% versus 7%).

The fact that fixed-term contractors have several reasons for leaving training creates the need to investigate whether there are common combinations of reasons for leaving, in order to provide insight and in the interest of practicality. The cluster analysis shows that those leaving training can indeed be classified into five categories or clusters. The following reasons for leaving are not included in the analysis: 'different function within the RNLA', 'dismissed', 'temporary stop' and the reason 'other'.

* The result section of this study was created by analysis of data input up to and including February 2000. Data for the whole of 2000 will soon be available for analysis. It should therefore be noted that measures already taken over the course of 2000 may result in a few alterations to the situation.

For the first three reasons, this is not a (definitive) loss for the organisation. The reason 'other' is too diverse to use as a variable in a statistical analysis.

Table 3 Clusters of reasons for leaving

Cluster 1 (n = 127)	Cluster 2 (n = 122)	Cluster 3 (n = 88)	Cluster 4 (n = 59)	Cluster 5 (n = 90)
homesickness	military life does not suit	circumstances at home	wrong function	disappointing salary
possible mission abroad	medical reason	homesickness	few career opportunities	military life does not suit
military life does not suit	physical load	possible mission abroad	starting studies	better job
posting to Germany	better job		few indefinite-term contract opportunities	few career opportunities
				starting studies

Each of the clusters is described below according to their characteristics.

Next, there is a discussion of the extent to which the entire study population's expectations were realised with respect to the most important job aspects, as well the extent to which this applies to the various clusters.

Cluster 1 Homesickness/mission abroad

Quotation from training drop-out: *"I am suffering from homesickness because the situation is good at home and not here."*

and

"I miss my home. I realise that I cannot cope with the six-month mission abroad. I do think that the RNLA is a good employer though".

In the first cluster, homesickness plays a central part. Of the 127 people in this group, 113 name this as a reason for leaving. Homesickness is often combined with the reason of the 'possible mission abroad' and/or 'military life does not suit me'.

Of the entire exit group, almost one third decides to leave training as early as in the first two weeks. Of this group, 40% come from this cluster. Within cluster 1 a distinction can also be made between two sub-clusters. The first does not mention homesickness in combination with a possible mission abroad, and those in the second sub-cluster do, as may be expected, name homesickness in combination with a possible mission abroad. The two clusters differ significantly with respect to the point at which they leave: of those who mention only homesickness (or in combination with another reason for leaving), two thirds decide to leave in the first two weeks, in comparison to one third of those who also mention 'possible mission abroad'.

In addition to the finding that people who leave training early are significantly younger than those who successfully complete training, those in cluster 1 are predominantly quite young. The average age is 18½ years, in comparison to the average of 19 years of the total exit population and 20 years of

those who continue (the latter are also, however, already a maximum of six months longer in service). As can be expected, the share of 17-year olds in this cluster is also greater than in the other clusters. Related to the above, cluster 1 contains a relatively high number of single young people and those still living with their parents.

In addition to the finding that those in cluster 1 are less positive about working hours, this indicates that the expectations of a large number of people in this cluster did not come true, or not fully, with respect to the working atmosphere. Those in cluster 1 particularly feel, more than those in other clusters, that they were awarded too little respect and appreciation and that there were too few opportunities for showing initiative (in a broader sense: being able to take decisions themselves and not be ordered around all the time). Of all the clusters, those people in cluster 1 experienced their period in service the least positively.

Cluster 2 Military/physical

Quotation from training drop-out: *“You have a totally different picture of this work and I realised that I cannot cope physically”*.

The most commonly named reason in cluster 2 is: ‘military life does not suit me’. This reason is chiefly combined with medical reasons and/or physical load. Proportionally speaking, it is often indicated in this cluster that the person involved has already found a better (or physically less demanding?) job.

Although 30% of those from cluster 2 had already taken the decision in the first two weeks, a relatively high percentage actually leaves in weeks 3, 8 and 9. These are the times during the General Military Training, or immediately after, that bivouacs take place and the physical load is increased.

Within the entire group of those who leave training, there are relatively more women than in the group of those who continue. Percentage-wise, most female training drop-outs occur in this cluster.

Viewed as a whole, the people in this cluster are satisfied with the various aspects of the job. They do, however, indicate having significantly more difficulty with the pace of the General Military Training, physical education and sport and field service/exercises.

Cluster 3 Circumstances at home

Quotation from training drop-out: *“I’m having problems at home with my girlfriend, she cannot cope with me being away from home all week”*.

The people within cluster 3 all indicate that they left training due to circumstances at home. This often goes hand-in-hand with feelings of homesickness and (problems with) a possible mission abroad.

Although it may be expected that the point of departure for persons in cluster 3 is evenly spread over training, a relatively higher number of people decide in weeks 5 and 6. The average age of cluster 3 is the highest of all the clusters and comparable to that of those who continue. With respect to previous

education, this cluster is characterised by a relatively large number of people with only lower education, as well as a relatively high number with an intermediate vocational education diploma. A relatively high number have already left the parental home. This cluster is also characterised by a high degree of work experience. Various work-related aspects are appreciated the most by people in this cluster, and they are also the most positive about the period in service. In contrast, they can rely the least on support from home with respect to the choice of a job as fixed-term contractor and the possibility of being sent on a mission abroad.

Cluster 4 Did not get desired function

Quotation from training drop-out: *“A great deal of fuss about functions which are available, but which are allocated with taking the persons themselves into account”*.

All those within cluster 4 give as a reason for leaving that they did not obtain the function they had expected or which they had opted for. The reasons of ‘few career opportunities’, ‘starting studies’ and ‘few opportunities to become indefinite contractor’ are also relatively common in this cluster.

No-one in this cluster took the decision to leave as early as the first week. The weeks in which people dropped out most were the weeks (7 to 9) in which function allocation was carried out. There are relatively few women in this cluster. The previous education of those in this cluster is typical. Within cluster 4 there are relatively few people with a general education (lower/higher general secondary education) and almost half joined up immediately after leaving school, compared to 29% in the other clusters. In comparison to the other clusters, appreciation of working conditions, with the exception of working hours, is lower. This cluster naturally scores poorly in the question of whether they had obtained the desired function.

Cluster 5 Disappointing salary

Quotation from training drop-out: *“The salary is far too low for the work you have to do here”*.

‘Disappointing salary’ is named by everyone in cluster 5 as a reason for leaving early. The disappointing salary is often combined with ‘military life does not suit me’ (or is that part of military life?). The reasons of ‘better job’, ‘few career opportunities’ and ‘starting studies’ are mentioned relatively frequently in this cluster.

The drop-out phenomenon in cluster 5 manifests itself in two periods. The first period is week 2, the point at which the salary official calculates how much the fixed-term contractors will earn after taxes etc., and the second is weeks 5 up to and including 7, the period in which the first bank statements reach the fixed-term contractors.

With respect to personal traits, this cluster is distinguished by the very small number of women, the relatively high age and the correspondingly small percentage of 17-year olds. A relatively high number of them have had some other work experience prior to this. It is clear that in particular in this

cluster, expectations of working conditions come true to a lesser extent: 74% indicate that these expectations do not, or scarcely, come true. The same percentage indicates dissatisfaction with the salary and the average score is 4.1. Almost everyone in this cluster thinks that they can earn more outside the RNLA. With respect to the working atmosphere and the working relationships, a large number indicate that they are dissatisfied with the (respect and) appreciation awarded them. As far as training is concerned, a relatively high percentage say that they had difficulties with the study and evening workload.

Important job aspects

The most important job aspect about which the target group has expectations is a **good salary**. This is, however, also the aspect about which there is the greatest disappointment. Of those leaving training and those who continue, almost half think that expectations concerning the working conditions do not, or scarcely, come true. Women are, incidentally, significantly more positive about the extent to which this expectation is fulfilled (26% versus 49%).

With respect to appreciation of the salary, those who complete training are more negative than those who left training early (4.6 versus 5.6). Account needs to be taken here of the fact that about half of those who leave do so before the first salary is paid.

To the question of where fixed-term contractors expect to earn more, almost threequarters say outside the RNLA, only 5% think that they could earn more within the RNLA.

With regard to a **good income**, it is clear that all those in cluster 5 (*disappointing salary*) are highly disappointed and, as it were, forced out of the organisation. Disappointing salary is in this case a *push factor*. In view of the low appreciation of the entire group (those who leave and those who continue), but mainly the fact that a majority thinks it can earn more outside the RNLA, the more attractive salaries elsewhere act as a *pull factor*. It must not be forgotten here that it is precisely salary which is the most important form of reward for this group.

The second most important job aspect is a **pleasant atmosphere in the workplace**. Here there is a difference of opinion between those who leave and those who continue. One in three of those who leave early indicates that expectations of atmosphere did not come true, or not fully, compared to 14% of those who continue. The appreciation awarded is unsatisfactory to a relatively large number of people. Incidentally, the other aspects relating to the working atmosphere, such as colleagues and immediate superiors, were awarded high scores by both those who left and those who continued. Non-realised expectations concerning the **working atmosphere** are an important factor in leaving training for those in cluster 1 in particular (*homesickness/possible mission abroad*). Many experienced the strict military life as such a huge shock on entering service that they decided to leave as early as in the first week, or in the second week.

The phenomenon of homesickness can generally be sub-divided into two factors: difficulty in being away from the old, familiar (often parental) environment and difficulty in adapting to a new environment. In view of the low appreciation during this period and the non-realisation of expectations surrounding the atmosphere, the difficulty in adapting to the new situation is more crucial here. Furthermore, the more pleasant the old situation was and the more unpleasant the new situation is for these people, the more difficult it is to make the transition.

As stated earlier, a distinction can be made for cluster 1 between those with homesickness and *no* combination with a possible mission abroad and those *with* the combination of the two. Of those who only named homesickness as a reason for leaving, 67% leave within two weeks. They do not succeed in adapting.

Those with homesickness in combination with a possible mission abroad have succeeded to some extent in adapting to the new environment; they leave at a later point in training. The anticipatory idea of being sent on a mission abroad to a (possibly) stressful environment, whereby their separation from the familiar environment is irrevocable, makes them decide to leave training and the RNLA.

The third job aspect which is very important to fixed-term contractors is **the content side of the work**: it should be fun, varied and interesting. Although the training period is different from the combat-ready period, it is important here to investigate the extent to which there is possible dissatisfaction among the study population. Here a distinction has been made between work content and work relationship.

With respect to the work *relationship*, there are two main aspects which require improvements. The first concerns the respect and appreciation awarded. A considerable percentage of the exit group indicates an insufficient degree of respect and appreciation. Secondly, a large number believe that there are too few opportunities for showing initiative (and more broadly also to take decisions themselves and not be ordered around all the time). The most important aspect, being able to obtain assistance from NCOs/officers, is appreciated positively.

With respect to the important aspects relating to work content, almost everyone agrees that this is at least sufficient.

There is a strong relationship between job content and whether people are given the function they opted for. Among those who left training early, the percentage which indicates that it did not obtain the desired function is twice as high as among those who continue.

For cluster 4 (*not getting desired function*) the motive for resigning is clearly taken from disappointment about (future) job content. Military life and the RNLA as an employer appeal greatly, but the future function they have been allocated does not correspond with their expectations and is sometimes even viewed as a broken promise.

For cluster 2 (*military/physical*), too, there is a discrepancy between the expected job content and the reality. This is, however, different from that in cluster 4 with respect to the future function. Those in cluster 2 have difficulty with the current job content. Aspects of training are either too difficult or the pace is too high.

Other work-related aspects

Those in cluster 3 (*circumstances at home*) also have a number of actual expectations which did not come true or a number of incidents occurred which were not in line with expectations. In most cases, however, these were beyond the sphere of influence of the RNLA or of the person involved. These often concerned deaths, divorces, illness in the immediate family or the partner not agreeing with the choice of a job as fixed-term contractor, with the corresponding possibility of being sent on a mission abroad for a long period. All these reasons are directly or indirectly related to the RNLA, but in particular to the characteristics of a fixed-term contract job: a 24-hour a day job which is sometimes difficult to combine with a family life.

Training

Although the general assessment of General Military Training and Functional Training is satisfactory, there are number of aspects which may aid the drop-out rate. For instance, more than a quarter of those leaving training indicate that they found the pace of General Military Training too high, compared to 5% of those who continue. The study and evening workload is experienced as considerably higher by those who leave than by those successfully complete training. With respect to the physical load during General Military Training, those who drop out indicate more frequently that the aspects in question are 'too difficult', or 'too fast'. The greatest difference concerns 'field service/exercises': 24% of those who leave training find this too difficult compared to 3% of those who continue. The acceleration in training is viewed as 'too fast' by 21% of those who leave compared to 10% among those who continue.

Students are confronted with a busy schedule from the beginning. Although it is clear that it would be desirable for several reasons to start more slowly, especially in the early stages, in view of the content of General Military Training and the ultimate goal, there is simply not enough time for this³⁰.

The consequences of this strict schedule are that an increased number of people leave due to physical complaints (including many female fixed-term contractors) and too high a mental load. In addition, this busy schedule offers no room for acclimatisation (reality shock) to the new living and working environment. In particular during the first week (known as the orientation phase in the literature on the subject) activities should be aimed at assisting the newcomer in conquering the stressful new situation. But after the first week, too, the lack of time means that there are too few times of rest and free evenings in which a pleasant working atmosphere can develop.

Increase in the drop-out rate

If the labour market is becoming increasingly competitive, static job satisfaction leads to a higher drop-out rate. This also applies to the RNLA, even if nothing has changed in comparison to 1998, and an increase can be explained by the large(r) number of vacancies elsewhere. It is clear that the economy is a difficult factor to influence. In order to even neutralise the drop-out rate due to this reason, job satisfaction needs to be increased.

Notes

The study results clearly show that life and work in the military organisation has many positive aspects and is appreciated as such. Even within the group of those who leave training, a large number are highly positive about their period in service. Work content aspects and collegiality are particularly experienced as positive by almost everyone. The aim of this study, however, is to highlight the problems. This inherently means that little attention is devoted to positive aspects, but these are clearly present during training.

Although the expectation is that the drop-out rate can be reduced with a number of (radical) measures, it is not realistic to assume that it can be brought down near to zero. There are too many factors of influence on the drop-out rate which cannot, or only to some extent, be influenced, including home-related aspects.

It must be remembered for all the measures that problems experienced by one person may be normal for another. When taking measures, it is therefore important to ensure that the solution for one problem does not create any problems for another.

To recap

The extent to which initial expectations concerning relevant job characteristics are fulfilled determines to a great extent the (job) satisfaction and the corresponding drop-out rate. This relationship is stronger the more jobs are available on the job market. This means that static job satisfaction in the event of an increasingly competitive labour market results in the drop-out phenomenon. The non-realisation of these expectations and the resulting reasons for leaving are based on a number of bottlenecks. Removing these bottlenecks can raise (job) satisfaction and thus reduce the drop-out rate among fixed-term contractors in training.

The areas for attention are: *working conditions*, these lead to dissatisfaction and cannot compete with salaries in civilian society; *function allocation*, this should be carried out more in conjunction with the fixed-term contractors themselves, and *training*, the ultimate goals and the time reserved to achieve

them do not correspond well. The pressure of time which is thus created leads to a number of undesirable developments, including: a reality shock at the start of training, too high and fast an increase in the physical and mental load and too few rest periods to allow a pleasant working atmosphere to develop.

On the basis of these and other study findings, the RNLA has already taken a number of measures, and others still need to be implemented. A follow-up study will soon prove whether, and to what extent, the measures already implemented have had an effect.

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