

Why Candidates Leave Belgian Defense during Initial Training

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Problem definition

From 1990 on Belgian Defense policy makers have been observing an increasing number of wastage problems during initial training. At first, this was the case for Air Traffic Controllers - a long, difficult and expensive training at the level of Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs)- and for soldiers (Ghilain, 1997; Hättig, 1991; Lejeune, 1991).

In order to tackle these wastage problems an exit procedure for soldiers was conceived which resulted in a succinct interview outline and three questionnaires. Basic guidelines were issued in an official document: regulation A42. Nevertheless wastage continued (Devriendt, 2001) and even increased, the problem became more and more pregnant and pressing for all categories of personnel. Different Departments used a variety of exit methods, and there was no detailed written procedure. Furthermore, there did not exist a coherent view on the matter between the Flemish and the Walloon part of Defense. Therefore it was decided to review the existing exit procedure and to adapt it to the problems of the three personnel categories, soldiers, NCO and Commanding Officers (CO). One objective of this decision was to reduce wastage by giving feedback to different Departments, such as Marketing, Recruiting, Selection and Training with the aim of detecting and eliminating factors that cause wastage. Another objective was to ensure a methodological sound background.

An important issue too was the need to operationalize the concept "exit".

There were three ways to come to a solution concerning a procedure: to continue with the existing procedure, to adapt the existing procedure, or to develop a totally new procedure.

Furthermore an important limitation was the need for continuity with the existing procedure, in order to keep in touch with the persons on the field.

In this paper the author gives an outline of the methodological considerations on which the new exit procedure is based. Recent results obtained with the described data analysis method are presented and discussed.

Method

Subjects

The subjects were male and female candidates having passed the selection procedures related to their respective personnel categories. They all stopped the Military Initial Training (MIT) on their own demand.

Material

Candidates were administered five documents. The first and second documents were meant to identify the candidate. The third document was composed of three questionnaires, conceived as Likert scales: a questionnaire about the importance of joining the Defense Forces, a

questionnaire about satisfaction at the moment of quitting the Defense Forces, and a questionnaire about difficult situations during military life. For more details about these instruments, see Schreurs and Lescrève (2001). The fourth document was the exit interview report. The last document was a feedback synthesis of the official reasons to stop.

Procedure and design

First of all it was decided that adapting the existing procedure was the best solution, because in that way it would be possible to introduce methodological changes and to ensure the continuity with regard to the existing procedures.

Three stages were planned, the adaptation of the exit procedure, the development of a method to analyze the exit data, and, the analysis of the exit results.

Adaptation of the exit procedure. As there were a lot of different forms and procedures used during the exit procedures at different levels and with regard to Flemish and Walloon candidates, there was a problem of standardization. All forms related to interviews and questionnaires therefore were made uniform within each language system as well as across the two language systems.

In contrast to the old procedure, which had been focusing on the problems of soldiers, the new procedure took, in addition, the reasons into account why NCOs and CO's had left the training.

Furthermore automation was applied: an e-mail address was created to centralize all the answers of the three exit questionnaires and the three questionnaires were transformed from paper-and-pencil instruments into computer tools.

Another change was the introduction of a restriction of the time dimension, only the period of MIT was considered as relevant. No exit procedure was started for candidates having stopped after the MIT.

The CO's of the six organisms, responsible for the MIT, were contacted in order to establish in each of these organisms a Point of Contact and a team of interviewers. Four of the organisms were Schools (Weapon School Air, Walloon NCO School, Flemish NCO School and the Royal Military Academy) and two of them were Centers for Basic Instruction (a Basic Instruction Centre for Flemish soldiers and a Basic Instruction Centre for Walloon soldiers).

So, out of these adaptations one can deduct that an exit procedure has to be instigated by a CO of one of the six organisms every time a candidate wants to quit the MIT on his or her own demand. Guidelines to implement the exit-procedure were provided. Most important factor for analysis in this context is the subjective combination of reasons why the candidate intends to stop and not the official reason(s) mentioned in the fifth document (feedback document).

Development of a data analysis procedure. For the development of a data analysis procedure a qualitative analysis was performed on 147 exit interview reports of male and female candidate soldiers, who stopped MIT in 2001. The manually performed content analysis has resulted in the seven main categories defined in Figure 1.

A kappa coefficient was calculated for the Walloon population using the method hereafter described (Cohen's kappa = .80).

After having studied the different categories an assessor had the opportunity to ask questions about the definitions and possible interpretations of the categories. Remarks were discussed. Next, the categories were studied again, until the assessor had the feeling of mastering the categories. The assessor then independently finalized the scoring.

Exit results for candidates during 2002. The population consisted of Flemish and Walloon candidate soldiers, candidate NCOs and candidate CO's from all over the country. They all stopped the MIT on their own demand during the year 2002. Analyses were based on data

Nr.	Category	Description
1.	Medical/ Physical	Problems of physical and physiological origin mentioned by the candidate which do not oblige the candidate to stop officially due to an official decision by a medical doctor
2.	Choice	The intentional choice of a function or training which does not correspond with the original wishes or perceptions of a candidate, or the realistic prospect of such a function or training due to a coercive force through which the candidate necessarily cannot get the originally wanted function
3.	Adaptation	Problems concerning maturity (individually and socially), perseverance, independence (self-reliance)
4.	Competencies	The non-conformity of capacities and ambitions with the level of military training, taking into account that the capacities and ambitions could be either too high or too low in relation to the level of military training
5.	Social environment	Relational, social problems having to do with people with whom the candidate lives together on a regular basis and with whom the candidate forms a family
6.	Job-Info	Documentation or communication, delivered by a representative of Defense, which causes a discrepancy between the perception the candidate has of a function or training and the actual reality factor of that function or training
7.	Instrumentality	Reasons in relation to work and study sphere (excluding competencies), financial aspects, attractiveness of the function, image, material advantages
8.	Nihil	The absence of an answer

Figure 1. Description of the categories used for qualitative analysis of the exit interviews

Table 1. Number of analyzed exit interview reports

Candidate	Flemish		Walloon		Total		Male and female
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Soldier	59	9	72	18	131	27	158
NCO	18	2	13	6	31	8	39
CO	15	2	13	0	28	2	30
Total	92	13	98	24	190	37	227

Table 2. Reasons for leaving Military Initial Training on own demand in Flemish and Walloon military freshmen during 2002 in percentages

Category	Soldiers	NCO	CO	Total
Medical/Physical	15	3	9	9
Choice	4	11	11	9
Adaptation	33	55	42	43
Competencies	3	8	9	7
Social environment	21	5	6	11
Job-Info	4	3	0	2
Instrumentality	20	16	23	20
Total	100	100	100	100

available on 20 Jan 2003. There were 37 females and 190 males. The data analysis procedure, explained in the preceding paragraph, was used to categorize the candidates' answers. In Table 1 an overview is given of the number of analyzed exit interview reports.

The reasons for stopping were the units of analysis, not the number of candidates.

An overview of the reasons for leaving MIT can be found in Table 2. The two main reasons why candidates of the three personnel categories stopped the MIT on their own demand were Adaptation problems and Instrumentality.

A third important factor for candidate NCOs and candidate CO's was the category synthesizing Choice problems.

A third and fourth group of reasons to stop (for the candidate soldiers) were problems related on the one hand, to Social environment, and, on the other hand, to Medical and physical problems.

Discussion

In order to reduce increasing wastage different exit procedures were developed. Recently a uniform and automated procedure for the three personnel categories saw the light. In addition, via content analysis a method for data analysis was conceived resulting in different categories.

Analysis of the results learns that in almost all the cases there is not one single reason to stop, but a combination of different reasons.

The most important reasons why candidates do stop MIT on their own initiative are stress, individual and group problems in training context, alternative studies or jobs, and, finally, financial and material factors. Differences between CO's and NCOs, on the one hand, and soldiers, on the other hand, are that the NCOs and CO's mention much more Choice problems. One possible explanation is that CO's and NCOs are incorporated in schools and so they have to be considered as students and they are focusing more on study and education. Consequently their choices are less definitive and maybe they have more alternatives than soldiers. Recently, however, an increase has been observed in soldiers with respect to job-related reasons to leave Defense Forces!

The categories of the evaluation system seem to be useful to detect the reasons why candidates leave the MIT on their own demand. This operationalization is the one currently used for the exit procedure in Belgian Defense. Of course other definitions or descriptions could be used. Practical considerations however put strains on what is possible in reality.

It could be interesting to compare with what is happening on the international front. Different exit interview en exit survey methods have been developed world-wide. Research results, for instance, are reported by the Canadians (Morrow, 2002) and the Dutch (van de Ven, 2001).

In order to assess predictivity of selection procedures test results related to the members of the exit group and test results related to those who continue could be compared. Castro and Huffman (2001) found some predictors for retention in their research on U.S. soldiers stationed in Europe.

In future it could be a good policy to interview all candidates during MIT, also the candidates who continue MIT. The data collected in this way could be compared to the data of the candidates who are leaving MIT. Unfortunately this is time-consuming, and a lot of personnel has to be involved.

Some future research should be targeted too at determining the psychometric characteristics of the different instruments used in the exit procedure: the interview and the three questionnaires.

On the long term new instruments and/or items should be introduced. New ideas could be generated on the basis of techniques such as in-depth-interview or focus groups. Nassar-McMillan and Borders (2002) explain how focus groups can be useful in generating items.

One of the problems with the current procedure is that it takes a lot of time. This is especially the case for the interview part. A possible alternative is to co-operate with an independent specialized organization, which can perform on-line exit interviews and employee satisfaction surveys. Some firms claim to be able to deliver turnover prediction systems.

Another promising feature seems to be prediction of job retention using projective tests. Raphael and Golden (1997) have done some research in this domain.

An important question to be answered also is, whether the wastage rate is high or low. To answer that question it is necessary to know the turnover rate of organizations comparable to the Belgian Department of Defense.

It should be stressed that the exit procedure is not only a method to collect data, but it is in the policy of Belgian Defense to show respect towards a candidate's decision to stop the training by means of this procedure. This must result in a positive image of Defense and in management tools for the decision-makers. Therefore exit procedures are important, not only in a statistical way, but also as a real human resources management tool.

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