

Retention and the US Army Officer in Europe

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Retention of junior officers in the U.S. Army has been an increasing concern of military leadership. Many junior officers are choosing to leave the U.S. Army at the end of their military obligation (Naylor, 2000; Skelton, 1999). A 1999 Government Accounting Office (GAO) review reported that approximately 40 percent of the officers studied intended to leave the military when their obligation was complete. The popular press often discusses current retention deficits and possible contributing factors, but comprehensive research studies have failed to address the cause of low retention figures. Additionally, most of the studies that have been conducted focus on enlisted personnel.

The pace of military operations (i.e. Operations tempo; OPTEMPO), the job market, and the work environment have all been cited as factors that influence retention rates. The size of the military has decreased in the past ten years and yet the number of military operations has significantly increased during this same time period (Castro & Adler, 1999). Military units have been expected to support peacekeeping and combat missions, sustain mission readiness through training exercises, and still continue to support garrison duties. One consequence of this busy pace of operations may be the soldiers' increased desire to leave the military.

Sticha, Sadacca, DiFazio, Knerr, Hogan & Diana (1999) presented a comprehensive review of research studies that examine personnel tempo and retention. The review revealed inconsistencies in how personnel tempo impacts retention. Their data suggested moderate levels of personnel tempo increased rates of retention. This affect decreased at higher levels of personnel tempo. Results of studies that attempt to link increased OPTEMPO with decreased retention are inconsistent.

Adler, Castro, and Bartone's (1997) research on 1st Infantry Division (1ID) soldiers in Europe supported the OPTEMPO-retention link. In this study, soldiers who were deployed to Bosnia (July 1997) completed a survey that focused on deployment history, career intentions, cohesion, morale, family strain and job attitudes. Adler et al. (1997) reported that soldiers intending to get out of the military had gone on more deployments than soldiers who were undecided or who wanted to remain in the military. Frequent deployments were linked to the decision of soldiers to leave the military.

In a subsequent study (Castro, Huffman, Adler and Bienvenu, 1999), however, soldiers in garrison who had deployment experience reported a greater likelihood of intending to stay in the military than those with no deployment experience. The inconsistencies of the effect of deployment in these two Army studies suggest that there may be another dimension or a confounding factor influencing soldier career intentions.

Castro and Adler's (1999) model of the relationship between OPTEMPO and soldier and unit readiness may help clarify some of the inconsistencies. As can be seen in Figure 1, the OPTEMPO Readiness Model predicted that there is a level of OPTEMPO that maximizes soldier intention to remain in the military. Moderate levels of military deployments, training exercises, and garrison duties are hypothesized to be linked to maintaining soldier and unit readiness. It is only when OPTEMPO levels are either very high or very low that retention declines.

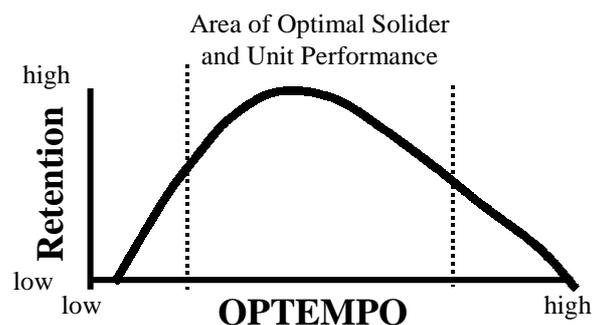


Figure 1. OPTEMPO and its relationship to retention

Presently, there is little information available on how OPTEMPO might affect the career intentions of junior officers. The goal of this study is to evaluate the impact of OPTEMPO on the intent of junior officers to remain in the US Army.

Method

This current report is part of a larger study (Castro, Adler & Bienvenu, 1998) examining the effects of operations tempo (OPTEMPO) and personnel tempo (PERSTEMPO) on soldier and unit readiness in the U.S. Army, Europe. This report is based on data that was collected from May 1999 to June 2000 and focuses on the effects of OPTEMPO on retention of junior officers.

Participants

The participants of the study were junior officers (N=88) stationed in Europe (Germany or Italy) who were participating in the OPTEMPO/PERSTEMPO study. All participants were Army junior officers (lieutenants and captains) with an average of 5.6 years in the military. The sample consisted of 18.2% female and 81.8% male officers. The largest ethnic group was white (81.4%), followed by African-American (5.8%), Asian (4.7%) and other (8.1%). In terms of marital status, 50.0% of the sample was married, 44.3% had never been married (single) and 6.6% was separated or divorced.

Instruments

All of the officers in the OPTEMPO study completed an OPTEMPO survey. The survey included basic demographic questions and a section on OPTEMPO measures and career intentions. The OPTEMPO measures included number of deployments, hours of work per day, average hours of work on day-off, number of days on training exercise, days worked per week, and number of days on temporary duty. Each respondents' career intention was determined using the following survey question, "Which best describes your current active-duty Army career intentions?" The response options were: 1) definitely stay in until retirement; 2) probably stay in until retirement; 3) definitely stay in beyond present obligation, but not until retirement; 4) undecided; 5) probably leave upon completion; or 6) definitely leave upon completion of current obligation. Research by Hom, Caranikas-Walker, Prussia and Griffeth (1992) has found that turnover intention is predictive of actual career choice behavior.

The Career Decision survey contained items about the career decision and their promotion opportunities. Additionally, the survey contained 35 potential reasons that may affect an officers' career decision (see Table 1). The items were rated on a 5-point scale assessing how much those issues affected their career decision (big reason to leave; small reason to leave; no impact; small reason to stay; and big reason to stay). Officers were also given the option to identify other reasons that impacted their career decision.

The interview focused on determining career intentions and the officer's reasoning behind the decision to

Table 1

Description of Career Decision Measure

Items

Deploying a lot in recent years
 Expecting to deploy a lot in the future
 Going on a lot of training exercises
 PCSing a lot
 Job Satisfaction
 My likelihood of being promoted
 Military lifestyle/community
 Stability gained from military lifestyle
 Lack of stability from military lifestyle
 Being a dual military family
 Educational opportunities on active duty
 I want to pursue my education
 I want to pursue other interests
 Financial problems
 Base pay
 Health care
 Retirement benefits
 Reenlistment bonus
 Impact of high workload on family
 Spouse's educational goals
 Spouse's health needs
 Children's health needs
 Children's other needs
 Being a parent
 Being a single parent
 Travel/adventure
 Helping others
 Not doing the job I expected to do
 Needs of elderly parents
 Working conditions
 Work hours
 Living Conditions
 Never intended to stay beyond obligation
 Other

NOTE: Officers rated how much their career intentions were affected by various issues in response to the question, "How much does each of the following affect your career decision?"

either remain in the military or to leave. Interview questions included: "What is your career intention?", "Which factors would you say have influenced your decision?", "What would it take for you to remain in the Army?" (if they were leaving the military or were undecided), and "How much is the pace of operations or workload a factor in your decision?"

Procedure

Participants completed the OPTEMPO survey once every three months during the first year of the study. About a third (34.5%; n=30) of the participants were asked to complete the Career Decision survey. After completing the Career Intention Survey, a subset of officers (n=37) was interviewed. Of these, 12 (lieutenants) planned to stay in the Army, 9 (8 lieutenants, 1 Captain) planned to leave and 15 (14 lieutenants, 1 Captain) were undecided. Interview questions probed the respondent's main reasons for their decision. Those undecided and planning to leave were also asked about factors that may influence them to stay. All study participants were volunteers who provided their informed consent were briefed about the purpose of the study and the guarantee of confidentiality.

Results

Overall, there were few demographic differences by career intention categories. Years in the military ($F=7.14, p<.01$) and age ($F=7.20, p<.01$) were the only demographic variables that differed by career intentions.

In the total sample (N=88), 35.3% reported they were definitely or probably going to stay in until retirement, 11.5% reported they would stay beyond their obligation, 24.1% stated they would probably or definitely leave after their obligation, and 28.7% were undecided.

The OPTEMPO measures that were examined were number of deployments, hours of work per day, average hours of work on day-off, number of days on training exercise, days worked per week, and number of days on temporary duty. The majority (85.2%) of the officers had participated in a training exercise in the past six months. For those who participated in a training exercise, the average time on a training exercise was 40.7 days. About three-quarters (73.5%) of the officers had been on a temporary duty assignment in the last six months. The average days on temporary duty assignment was 34.3 days. Junior officers' career intentions were not impacted by either of these OPTEMPO measures, days on training exercises or temporary duty assignment.

Over half (57.5%) of the officers had deployment experience. Of the total sample, 29.5% had deployed once, 10.2% had deployed twice and 17.1% had deployed at least three times. A chi-squared test showed differences in officers' career intentions and their deployment experience. Officers with at least one deployment were more likely to report that they were staying in the military (60.0%) than officers who had never deployed (29.7%), $X^2(2, N=87)=9.07, p<.05$. Additionally, a one way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) revealed that the number of deployments was not different in an officer's career decision. Of the officers who completed the Career Decision survey, the majority (60.0%) stated that "expecting to deploy a lot in the future" was a reason to leave the military. Of the soldiers who have never deployed, 50.0% stated that "expecting deployments in the future" was a reason to leave the military. Of soldiers who had deployment experience, 71.4% said that "expecting deployments in the future" was a reason to leave the military.

A one way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) revealed differences in the OPTEMPO measures of "hours worked per day" ($F=27.17, p<.05$) and "days worked per week" ($F=3.60, p<.05$), and career intentions. A least significant difference (LSD) post hoc test indicated that those officers intended to stay in the military reported working longer hours (13.0) than those intending to leave (11.7) and those officers who are undecided (11.3). Those intending to stay also reported working more days (6.1) per week than those intending to leave (5.3). There were no differences in career intentions and hours worked on days off.

Junior officers who were interviewed provided thoughtful and clear explanations of their decisions, and their decision-making process. Nearly every officer was able to articulate both positive and negative aspects of their job and their view of Army life, regardless of their decision. The major themes that emerged from the interviews indicated that while there were some commonalities among the

three decision groups, some of the reasons for staying in the military for some could also be reasons to leave. For example, those planning to leave viewed deployments more negatively, while those planning to stay reported a very positive attitude toward deployments. Other factors that appeared consistently pertained to basic developmental trends. For example, many that joined the Army for the travel and adventure married and started families. For many of these officers, the yearning for travel and adventure has been supplanted by the need for stability and predictability.

Officers who completed the Career Decision survey and stated that they were intending to stay in the military (n=12) reported that “likelihood of promotion” (66.7%), “travel and adventure” (75.0%), and “helping others” (75.0%) were reasons they were remaining in the military. Tempo and deployments did not appear to have a negative effect; in fact, several stated that deployments were one of the more positive aspects of their assignments.

For officers who were leaving (n=10), “other interests” (100.0%), “expecting to deploy” (90.0%), and “work hours” (80.0%) were reasons to leave. OPTEMPO was an issue for many junior officers, particularly regarding deployments that were viewed as too long, too frequent and, for some, too unpredictable and poorly planned. For others, however, deployments were exciting and gave them opportunities to use their skills and lead soldiers. The OPTEMPO in garrison appeared to have a negative impact on several soldiers, one referring to it as "Army-induced OPTEMPO" and saw deployments as one way to get away from battalion-level taskings and focus on the mission and the jobs they were trained to perform. One said that this type of schedule gives him "only two and a half hours a day to live my life."

The officers who were undecided (n=8) stated that “work hours” (75.0%) and “lack of stability of military lifestyle” (75.0%) were reasons to leave, while “travel and adventure” (62.5%) and “helping others” (62.5%) were reasons to stay. OPTEMPO issues were cited as a major area of concern. Too many deployments, long hours and lack of resources have had a negative impact on several junior officers, despite their overall positive attitude toward the Army. OPTEMPO and uncertainty also played a role in the decision process. One lieutenant cited the chaotic schedule he has experienced in his current unit as a key reason for leaving. He said that he could not imagine "being 35 and not having my life set on a regular schedule." One lieutenant said she was "up in the air" about her intentions but that "I personally like the Army," and the "the Army has been good to me." She describes the uncertainty inherent in her unit as being a major concern. For example, the uncertainty about a planned deployment

"wore people down," particularly the married soldiers and those with children. Another officer said family is important to him and if high OPTEMPO is jeopardizing time with his family then he will “call it quits.” Still unsure about his career plans, a captain cites home and family as a primary concern. "I think it does come down to time at home. I don't feel like I am doing what needs to be done at home. I cannot keep in touch with family back in the states. My family has not heard from me in awhile." One lieutenant, who described his unit's OPTEMPO as "insane," went on to explain that this high OPTEMPO has been the cause of many marital break-ups and problems including problems in his own marriage. He

quoted his wife as saying that “the army uses him up and spits out the remains at her.” Yet another said that he has a young and growing family and wants more time with them than the unit's deployments allow.

Tables 2 and 3 show a more exhaustive list of issues that affect career intentions for officers who stated they were going to stay and for officers who stated they were going to leave.

Table 2 Officers' Reasons for Staying

Reasons to Stay	Percent who Intend on:	
	Staying	Leaving
Travel and Adventure	75.0	90.0
Helping Others	75.0	60.0
Likelihood of Promotion	66.7	80.0
Job Satisfaction	58.3	50.0
Military lifestyle/community	58.3	40.0
Stability from Military Lifestyle	50.0	40.0
Health Care	50.0	30.0
Retirement Benefits	50.0	50.0

NOTE: Percentages are reported for those items in which at least 50% who intend to stay in the military reported as reasons for staying in the military.

Table 3 Officers reason for Leaving

Reasons to Leave	Percent who Intend on:	
	Leaving	Staying
Other Interests	100.0	41.7
Expecting to Deploy	90.0	41.7
Work Hours	80.0	58.3
I want to pursue my Education	80.0	16.7
Working Conditions	70.0	33.3
Going on too many Training Exercises	70.0	41.7
The impact of high workload on Family	70.0	41.7
Educational Opportunities on Active Duty	70.0	25.0
Deploying too much in Recent Years	60.0	25.0
Military Lifestyle/ Community	60.0	16.7
Lack of Stability from Military Lifestyle	50.0	33.3

NOTE: Percentages are reported for items in which at least 50% who intend to leave in the military reported as reasons for leaving the military.

Discussion

The current study examined OPTEMPO measures and how they impact officer career intentions. Elevated number of hours worked per day, number of days worked per week, and having been deployed were related to intentions to stay in the military. Average hours worked on days off, days on training exercises, number of times deployed beyond a first deployment and number of temporary duty assignments did not discriminate among career intentions for this sample.

One noteworthy finding was that junior officers reported that work

hours were a top reason for leaving the military yet those who intended on leaving actually worked fewer hours than those who intended to stay or were undecided. Additionally, the differences in actual deployments and attitudes about deployments were incongruent. Officers reported that expecting to deploy a lot in the future was a reason to leave the military service yet those with deployment experience actually were more likely to intend to stay in the service or were undecided. The difference between objective measures of OPTEMPO and subjective perceptions of the effects of OPTEMPO is evident and needs to be further examined. This phenomenon was also found in Sticka et al. (1999) research. They suggested that this was due to the samples' already high rate of retention. This may also be the case for the participants in the current study as the officers' career intention to stay is reported at a much higher rate than the total army population (that includes enlisted and noncommissioned officers).

From self-reported explanations of career intentions, two profiles of junior officers begin to emerge. Those who stay can be characterized as having found success and meaning in their career in military service. The military offers job advancement and satisfaction and it is these job benefits that appeal to a certain group of junior officers. For the second group, those intending to leave military service, OPTEMPO seems to be playing a major role in encouraging them to leave the service. Thus, the role of OPTEMPO in career decision-making appears limited to a subsample of junior officers. Why this subgroup is affected by OPTEMPO is unclear.

Reasons to leave the military extend beyond factors that push soldiers out such as those associated with job dissatisfaction. There is also the attraction of the civilian workforce. The current study focused on the impact of OPTEMPO on retention yet other themes emerged in the survey and interview data. The strength of the United States, economy, work environment variables, family issues, and the officers' original motivation for joining the Army may also impact junior officers' career intentions. For example, clearly, not all junior officers join the military with the intent of making the Army a career. Yet it is this initial expectation that may complicate the evolving decision-making process in the professional development of junior officers. To the degree that officers join the military in order to pursue short-term personal gain, such as educational benefits, these officers may be less psychologically available or interested in the appeal of long-term service. Perhaps the methods used to attract junior officers appeal to the very people for whom a long-term commitment to the military would be unappealing.

The OPTEMPO Readiness model is a complex concept for predicting readiness (Castro & Adler, 1999). The complexity is inherent in the fact that OPTEMPO and PERSTEMPO can be measured in several different ways. Workload can be defined by both daily work requirements as well as longer-range concepts such as the rate of deploying across a military career. Even the question of how deployments

themselves are measured can introduce important variations in the data. For example, the number of times a soldier has deployed does not take into account the subjective experience of how the deployment is managed. Issues around the deployment (e.g. amount of prior notification, time between deployments) may be more sensitive factors in predicting retention. Thus, comparisons across studies involved in OPTEMPO must consider the issue of how OPTEMPO is operationally defined.

Beyond the question of how OPTEMPO is measured, results from this study suggest several additional directions for future research. Specifically, the role of initial expectations of officers entering military service in influencing subsequent career development needs to be further explored. The link between these initial expectations, the actual rewards of military service (e.g., adventure and helping others), and career intentions need to be better understood. OPTEMPO itself, while a reason to leave the military for some, is not necessarily a major factor for all junior officers. Many of the officers choosing to stay in the military do so although they reported working more hours and a greater number of them have been deployed than those who intend to leave the military. This finding suggests that an emerging research model of OPTEMPO and retention must account for variables that moderate the impact of OPTEMPO and create an environment in which the rewards of the job are more compelling than the concerns about the workload. By studying these moderating variables, the military can move toward a more thorough understanding of career decision-making in junior Army officers.

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