

ORGANISATIONAL COMMITMENT AND TURNOVER AMONG MILITARY PERSONNEL

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays in the Netherlands the economy and by that the labour market is picking up. This creates two major problems with regard to the staffing of organisations:

It's getting harder to get sufficient and qualified personnel.

It's getting harder to keep the present personnel.

Because the military personnel system is a closed system, i.e. personnel comes in at the bottom of the organisation and follows a career, unanticipated turnover is a threat for the proper functioning of the organisation.

This study focuses on the second problem, how to keep the present personnel. The leading question is - what can the organisation do to keep the young (younger than 40 years) military personnel.

Central concepts in the study are organisational commitment and intention to leave. The following research questions are answered:

How big is the intention to leave among young military personnel?

How big is the organisational commitment of the young military personnel?

What is the relation between organisational commitment, intention to leave and some personnel characteristics?

What is the relation between organisational commitment and intention to leave?

What (personnel policy) factors affect the organisational commitment and/or intention to leave?

Introduction

Over the past few years the labour market has been booming in the Netherlands. The demand for personnel is increasing, but the number of job seekers is declining. This has made it more difficult for organisations in the Netherlands both to find and retain qualified personnel. As it is easier to find a different (better) job, the turnover of personnel is rising. This is also the case in the Royal Netherlands Army. An additional problem relating to military personnel leaving the organisation is that it is not usual for military personnel to join the organisation at a senior level. Military personnel are brought in at the bottom and then follow a career within the organisation. As an example, if a major of 35 years of age leaves the organisation, it then takes about 15 years until the organisation has trained someone up to the same level.

Turnover is therefore a huge problem for the military organisation. Because turnover has increased over the past few years, the Army Council ordered a study with the aim of reducing the turnover. This paper describes that study.

Problem definition

The objective of the study is:

to give recommendations for reinforcing the bond between young military personnel with indefinite contracts and the Royal Netherlands Army

A strong bond restricts turnover and leads to motivated and satisfied personnel.

The relationship between military personnel and the RNLA can be described as a reciprocal relationship. If the relationship is perceived as negative by the military personnel (is unequal), this will lead to withdrawal behaviour. Military personnel will try to terminate the unequal relationship by redressing the imbalance between their investment and the result. Turnover is one of the methods of redressing the relationship which is perceived as unequal. Absence is an alternative method. The significance of the commitment is therefore greater than simply reducing turnover.

The central concepts in this report are *commitment* and the *intention to leave*.

The intention to leave can be translated into: thinking about leaving, application behaviour and expecting to leave.

When a person enters service, a specific commitment is created with the organisation. This commitment develops over time. It is the result of experience gained in the organisation. Depending on the experience of the individual and the expectations he/she has of the future, this will lead to a strong or less strong desire to remain a member of the organisation. The relationship between military personnel and the organisation may take various forms. A distinction is made between:

1. the *affective* commitment (this refers to the emotional attachment an individual feels towards the organisation, the employee's identification with and involvement in the organisation, i. e. the desire/want to maintain membership);
2. the *normative* commitment (this refers to the individual's feelings of obligation to remain with the organisation, i.e. an obligation to maintain membership);
3. the *continuance* commitment (this refers to the commitment of an individual which is based upon the perceived costs to the person if he were to leave the organisation)

The relationship may vary from purely professional to highly emotional.

A distinction is also made between the commitment to the job, the commitment to colleagues, the commitment to the unit, the commitment to the organisation (the RNLA as a whole) and the commitment to the values and ideals which the RNLA stands for.

The basic study questions were:

1. What is the intention of the young military personnel with respect to leaving the organisation?
2. What is the commitment of the young military personnel with respect to the organisation?
3. How do the intention to leave and the commitment vary with respect to the characteristic features of the tasks of military personnel?
4. What is the link between the commitment and the intention to leave?
5. Which factors influence the commitment and/or the intention to leave of the young military personnel?

The data collected for this study are taken from two sets of telephone surveys. Each time about 300 young indefinite contractors (i.e. younger than 40 years) were questioned.

Results

Intention to leave

The intention to leave was determined by means of three different questions. The respondents were also asked to explain why they might expect to leave the RNLA.

Of those questioned, 57% occasionally *consider* searching for a job outside the RNLA. Almost a quarter (23%) indicate that they have *applied* for a job outside the RNLA within the past year.

Of those questioned, 64% *expect* to still be working for the RNLA in three year's time, 26% do not know and 10% *do not expect* to be working for the RNLA in three year's time.

Actual turnover

In 1998, 270 military personnel left before the end of their contracts out of a total complement of 11,000 military personnel. In 1999, 267 indefinite military contractors left service prematurely. The percentage is particularly high in the age group 30-34 (6% for officers and 7% for non-commissioned officers).

Commitment

The commitment is a major factor in turnover. Work satisfaction and motivation, however, also play an important part. Furthermore, it is a factor which protects against all kinds of escapist behaviour, such as absence through illness.

The commitment is the result of the experience people have of the organisation and of their colleagues during their period of appointment. The respondents in this study were between 18 and 40 years of age, almost no-one was younger than 25. They were all indefinite contractors. This means that most of those questioned had already worked for the RNLA for some time.

Scores for commitment

The commitment of an individual to the organisation in which he or she works may take several forms (simultaneously). We distinguish in this study between three forms of commitment: the *affective*, *normative* and *continuance* commitment.

The average scores (on a scale from -2 to 2) for these three forms of commitment were as follows:

- affective 0.48
- normative 0.09
- continuance -0.37

These scores indicated that young indefinite contractors do not feel obliged to the RNLA (normative commitment) and see virtually no professional or practical restrictions to leaving the RNLA (continuance). In summary: there are no restrictions on leaving the organisation.

The affective commitment to the RNLA (reason to stay) is poor. This is even the case if a direct question is put about the nature of the commitment (professional or emotional). On a scale of 0 (purely professional) to 100 (emotional), the indefinite contractors rate their own commitment to the RNLA as an average of 64.

The commitment may occur at various levels. Military personnel were asked to indicate how strongly they feel attached to various aspects of the organisation (scale of 0 to 100):

commitment to	score
values/ideals	67
the RNLA as a whole	64
the unit	65
colleagues	77
the job	76

It is not just the past or present situation which is important to the commitment, but also the expectations for the future. For a number of topics, questions were asked about the expectations for the future.

	increase	decrease	same
satisfaction with conditions of employment	8%	57%	35%
satisfaction with career opportunities	13%	43%	44%
satisfaction with content of work	23%	27%	50%
satisfaction with colleagues	8%	14%	79%
satisfaction with managers	9%	20%	71%
satisfaction with lower ranks	12%	20%	67%
pressure of missions abroad	57%	5%	38%

In the first telephone survey, the respondents indicated which factors they felt influenced the commitment. This resulted in a broad range of topics. In order to put these in sequence, in the second survey respondents were asked to indicate for each topic whether something urgently needed to be done about it.

subject	
personnel policy	97%
fulfil promises/agreements	95%
listen to shopfloor	93%
secondary conditions of employment	86%
respect when dealing with personnel	86%
taking the individual into account	85%
career opportunities	85%
function allocation policy	76%
salary	68%
missions abroad	68%
content of job	53%

It is worth noting that the ‘interaction topics’, the way in which the RNLA deals with personnel, can all be found in the top half of the table.

‘Personnel policy’ is at the top of the list of priorities among the young personnel.

Of all those questioned, 8.5% named it as a (possible) reason for leaving.

As ‘personnel policy’ encompasses a great deal, we explicitly asked what they meant by ‘do something about the personnel policy’. One third of the young indefinite contractors named the career policy and one quarter asked for a clear, unambiguous and fair policy.

Career

A concrete part of the personnel policy is the career. The career, particularly the lack of prospects, is often *explicitly* named as the reason for wanting to leave the RNLA. Of all the personnel questioned, 13% thought their career a reason to leave. The career is often named by those who expect to leave (15%) and those who are in two minds (22%).

Of those questioned, 43% expect satisfaction with career opportunities to decline in the future, 13% expect an increase in satisfaction.

The indefinite contractors were also asked what should happen about the topic of careers. In addition to creating opportunities, they particularly ask for more tailor-made work. The length of function appointment is too strict (should be possible to stay in a function for longer). Insufficient account is taken of the wishes of the individual for specific functions (no choice, they are posted). There are also renewed pleas for fairness and transparency in the function allocation process.

Dealing with personnel, perceived fairness

Dealing with personnel is often named as a reason for leaving and as a suggestion for reinforcing the commitment. It is also frequently mentioned during explanations of other topics (conditions of employment, missions abroad, personnel policy etc.).

The aim is to take the individual into account, listen to personnel, show respect and appreciation. Personnel also often ask for promises and agreements to be fulfilled.

All these points are high on the list of priorities of young personnel.

Salary and conditions of employment

In particular those who are currently in two minds as to whether they will still be working for the RNLA in three years' time, conditions of employment are often cited as a reason for leaving.

As many as 57% of those questioned expect to be less satisfied in the future with conditions of employment. It is noticeable that they often say that the situation must not get any worse.

For the topic of conditions of employment, too, the respondents were asked to indicate what needed to be done.

Finance, in particular travel allowances and salary, is the most frequently mentioned item.

Missions abroad

Missions abroad are the most often cited reason for leaving. However, missions abroad are not high on the list of priorities about which something needs to be done. It is chiefly those people who are currently in two minds as to whether they will still be working for the RNLA in a few years who name missions abroad as a possible reason for leaving.

More than half of the respondents expect an increase in pressure of missions abroad. This is explained by the reduction in size of the RNLA and an increase in the importance of missions.

Respondents refer to the frequency of missions abroad (too many and too often) in combination with family life as a reason for leaving. Missions abroad are also often named under the topic of personnel policy. People call the division unfair (some personnel never go) and plead for earlier notification of postings (not at the last moment) and attention to aftercare (for example, that there is a function waiting for them on their return and not that they are left out in the cold) and the home front.

Work content

Work content plays a major role in the commitment for the military personnel to the RNLA.

The assessment of the content of the job was also measured by means of closed questions. In general, young indefinite contractors rate their jobs very positively. They are varied, they have sufficient autonomy and clarity about what they have to do and the feedback is more than satisfactory. The job content is a major positive factor for the commitment and restricting turnover. The perception of the work content determines the affective commitment.

Conclusions

Of all those questioned, 10% expect not to be working for the RNLA in three years' time. One quarter is in two minds. There is a strong link between the commitment to the RNLA and the intention to leave.

The emotional bond of the personnel with the RNLA is poor. Young personnel do not perceive any obstacles to leaving the RNLA.

Young personnel feel more strongly bound to the job and to the people in the workplace than to the organisation as a whole.

There is a multitude of reasons at the root of the intention to leave and the commitment. We will confine ourselves here to a few important observations:

The most important point for attention for the young indefinite contractors is dealing with personnel. The organisation is not always a trustworthy contract partner: agreements and promises (explicit or otherwise) are not always fulfilled, and policy (also in the form of promises) is inconsistent. Furthermore, the personnel perceive unfairness in the execution of policy. They also perceive a lack of tailor-made work and respect for the individual.

The perceived unfairness is expressed in the assessment of the (personnel) policy in general and the career (policy and opportunities) in particular, perceived fairness also plays a part in missions abroad.

Missions abroad are a risk factor. It cannot yet be said that negative influences can be observed. The military personnel themselves indicate clearly that missions abroad could be an obvious negative factor (reason for leaving) in the future.