

## QUALITY OF WORK LIFE: A CASE STUDY

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### ABSTRACT

*Our department developed between 1995-1998 a questionnaire intended to measure the quality of work life of the professional soldier in the Belgian Armed Forces (VELMO). This questionnaire relies on a model that takes personal and situational aspects, as well as their interaction into account in determining work behaviour.*

*In the beginning of this year a battalion commander was complaining about the lack of motivation of his subordinates and the absenteeism at work. Some of his younger officers, remembering their courses of psychology at the RMA, suggested to ask the department for help.*

*To avoid "symptomatic" actions, we proposed to ask every member of the battalion for his collaboration by completing the VELMO to diagnose the causes of the dissatisfaction and suboptimal behaviour.*

*Participation was on a voluntary basis and the responses were anonymous.*

*We received 241 completed forms (out of a 340). This sample seems representative with respect to gender, category, rank and age. The results in an absolute sense as well as compared to the norms established for the Armed Services as a whole as at brigade level revealed several weak points. Among others: inequality in treatment, challenge in the tasks, efficiency in work organisation, information flow, role conflicts, inequity of income, appreciation and several professional values thought important cannot be realised. These factors lead (among others) to low job satisfaction and low satisfaction with respect to opportunities, resulting in high percentage of medical consultation, consumption of medication and "presenteism".*

*The results of the questionnaire allowed us for well-focused suggestions for remedial action.*

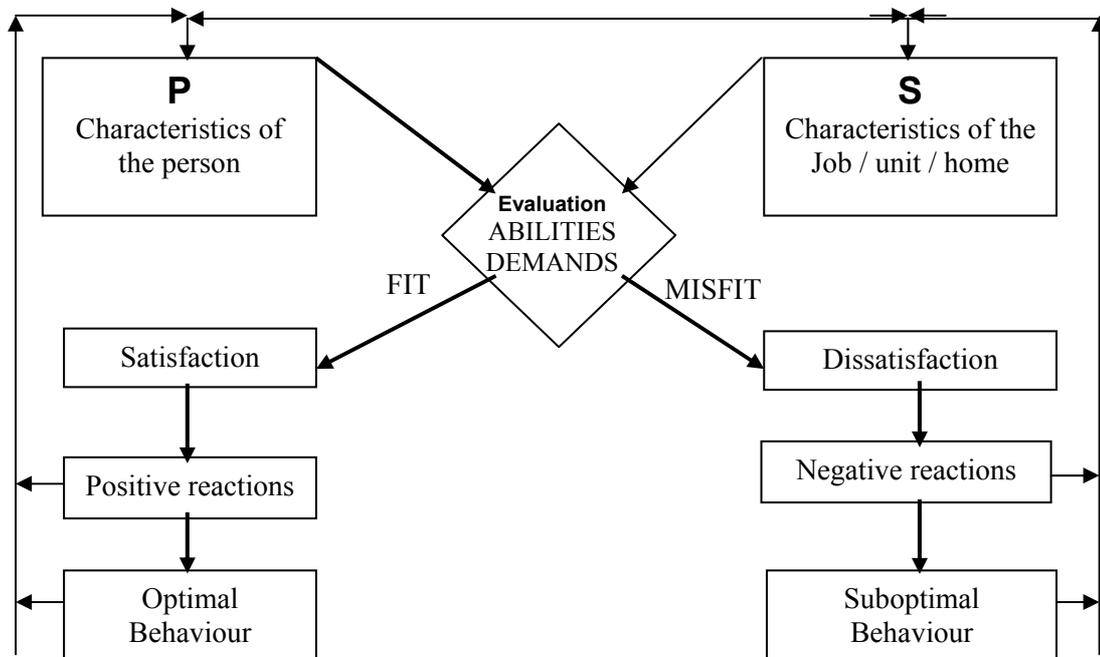
*Implementation belongs to the responsibilities of the commander who set up a "task force" with the assistance of a military psychologist, called "Counsellor in Mental Readiness".*

We believe that the quality of work life is an important determinant of optimal professional behaviour. Therefore, our department developed between 1995 and 1998 a questionnaire intended to measure the quality of work life of the professional soldier in the Belgian Armed Forces (VELMO<sup>1</sup>). In the following of this paper we will first describe very briefly this questionnaire, and second an application of it in a unit.

### The questionnaire

The VELMO relies on a model that takes both personal and situational aspects, as well as their interaction into account in determining work behaviour and its outcomes. This means that a person checks if his abilities allow facing the demands of the task and of the environment. If this is the case, he will be satisfied – what can be derived from some positive “indicator behaviour” – and show an optimal professional behaviour. On the contrary, if the demands are too high, the person will be dissatisfied, show some negative indicator behaviour (for example sick leave) and the professional behaviour will be suboptimal. In turn, the (dis)satisfaction and its expression will influence the person’s characteristics (e.g. his motivation to work) and, eventually, the environment (e.g. a negative image in the mind of his superior). The model we use is thus a process model (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Model of the VELMO



Thus, the questionnaire is composed of a series of scales that measure important aspects of each of the components of the model. For example, at the side of the situation (S), there are scales that measure aspects of leadership, the work environment and so on (Table 4). At the side of the personal characteristics (P), for example, there is a scale aiming at the importance attached to professional values by the soldier and another scale to what extent the unit allows to realise these values (Table 3). The result of the evaluation process is measured by expressions of (dis)satisfaction (Table 2) as well as the reactions to this (dis)satisfaction in the form of "negative" behaviour (Table 1). The last part of the questionnaire asks for some biographical data.

Each scale contains of course a series of items to be reliable. Each item has to be evaluated by the respondent on a ten point scale (0 = does not apply at all, 10= applies totally). In total, the questionnaire has some 300 items.

<sup>1</sup> VELMO is the Dutch acronym for Questionnaire Experienced Quality of Work Life in Military Organisations

The raw scores tell something on itself about the “intensity” of an aspect but to make results of an arbitrary unit comparable to other other units, a norm is needed. Therefore, the raw scores of two validation groups have been standardised and deciles<sup>2</sup> have been established; namely at the brigade level and at the level of all services. For example, if a unit has a score of 5/10 on a particular scale, this result suggests an average intensity but if this score falls into the fourth decile, its means that this unit scores clearly below average as compared to the reference group.

### The case

In the beginning of this year a battalion commander was complaining about the lack of motivation of his subordinates and the absenteeism at work. Some of his younger officers, remembering their courses of psychology at the RMA, suggested him to ask the department for help.

In February, me and the Counsellor for Mental Readiness<sup>3</sup> belonging to the Operational Command of the Army, attended a meeting with the commander and the key personnel of the unit, representing the different categories of the personnel and subunits. This group has been set up as a “task force” to enhance motivation through some particular actions which had still to be determined. To avoid “symptomatic” actions, we proposed at the end of the discussion to ask every member of the battalion for his collaboration by completing the VELMO. The results should allow us to diagnose the causes of the dissatisfaction and of the negative reactions as well as their intensity. It was agreed that people should participate on voluntary basis and the responses would remain anonymous.

In the beginning of March, the questionnaire was submitted to the soldiers in a big room of the unit, on a day determined by the battalion commander. It was necessary for practical reasons to provide two time slots; i.e. one before noon and one afternoon. The reason why the questionnaire was submitted, was explained by one of my assistants, senior Captain Smets. He also gave the instructions. It took at most 90 minutes to fill in the form. At the end of the day we had 241 completed forms (out of a 340 possible respondents).

This sample shows sufficient variation with respect to gender, category, rank and age and seems representative for the unit. It consists of 88% male and 12% female soldiers. Mother tongue is for 89% French and for 11% Dutch. The partition with respect to the categories is 4.5% officers, 45.5% NCO and 50% privates. In general, the personnel of this unit is, relatively spoken, old: mean age is in the class 36/40 years; only 13% is younger than 30 years and 34% is older than 41 years. Some 80% are married or live together. Among these couples, about 75% work full time or part time. One out of five partners is soldier too. About 60% never participated in an operation in a foreign country, 24% fulfilled one mission, 9% two missions and 7% more than two missions. Some 30% of the respondents live within 15 kilometres of their work place live and a 40% others within 50 kilometres; this means that about 30% have to travel more than 100 kilometres each day.

A quick view at Table 1 through Table 4 reveals that the results in an absolute sense and the results according to the norms established for the Armed Services as a whole and at brigade level are in many cases clearly below average. With “clearly below average” we mean that the result of unit under consideration belongs to the decile 4 or a lower one, and above the decile 6 for “negative” scales. We used a double reference because the norms for brigades reflect more the specificity of the Army than then norms of all Armed Services together do.

<sup>2</sup> This means that a given frequency distribution is transformed in such a way that 10 new groups are constituted which contain each 10% of the total group. This implies that new bounds of the interval have to be determined, which are no longer observed scores. Moreover, given that the frequency is fixed, the width of the intervals vary.

When using deciles, the upper bound of the 5<sup>th</sup> decile and the lower bound of the 6<sup>th</sup> decile correspond to the median of the distribution; in other words, 50% of the answer are lower than this value and 50% are higher.

<sup>3</sup> There is a military psychologist – Counsellor Mental Readiness (CMR) - in the staff of each brigade, each division and at the level of the Operational Command of the Army. They are responsible, as their name shows, for the mental readiness of all the units belonging to the level his working at. Thus, the CMR of a brigade is responsible for all the units belonging to the brigade.

In the following we will go from the observable indicator variables to the (unobservable) causes. This means a bottom up process in terms of the model. We consider first the last component in the model, i.e. the *outcome behaviours*. These are indicators for the lack of wellbeing. Four types of reactions will be considered: stress, workload, efficiency and flight reactions (Table 1).

Table 1. **Outcome behaviour (reactions)**

Scale	Score <sup>1</sup>	All services <sup>2</sup>	Brigade <sup>3</sup>
<b>STRESS</b>			
Psychological	3.8	5	5
Physiological	2.4	6	6
<b>WORK LOAD</b>			
Physical work load	4.2	5	5
Tiredness	4.8	6	6
Quality of sleep	4.7	4	4
Medic consultation	2.5	8	7
Lack of leisure time	5.2	5	5
<b>EFFICIENCY</b>			
Presenteism	4.6	7	7
Experienced own efficiency	6.1	5	5
<b>FLIGHT REACTIONS</b>			
Asking for another job/to leave	3.3	6	5
Preferring a (similar) civilian job	5.1	6	7
Alcohol Consumption	1.2	6	6
Consumption of medication	2.7	8	8

1. Score: mean of the absolute scores of all respondents
2. Decile of the mean of the battalion when using the norm established for all Services
3. Decile of the mean of the battalion when using the norm established for a brigade

The soldiers of the unit under consideration do not experience more *psychological or physiological stress* than others, consider the *workload* also as average, and do not feel particularly *tired*. Nevertheless, the *quality of sleep* is below average. The frequency of *medical consultation* is very high. Aside absenteeism (for medical reasons), presenteism is another negative reaction to the experienced lack of well being, particularly among the officers.

Notwithstanding all the negative experiences, the soldiers do not ask more than elsewhere to *leave* or for *another job*. There is no more *alcohol consumption* than elsewhere but the consumption of medication is far beyond average.

Second, let us determine the “domains” of *dissatisfaction* as a result of the evaluation of the relationship abilities/demands (Table 2).

Table 2. **Evaluation**

Scale	Score	All services	Brigade
<b><u>SATISFACTION WITH</u></b>			
Job	5.0	3	4
Life conditions in general	7.3	5	5
Evaluation system	4.8	4	5
Self (autonomy/performance)	5.4	4	5
Instrumentality of income	2.8	3	3
Opportunities	5.3	3	4
Image	5.9	4	4
Military aspects	4.5	3	4
Efficiency	6.1	5	5
Evaluation talks	3.7	4	4
Instruction	6.2	5	5

People – especially NCO's - are clearly not satisfied with their *job*, although they are moderately with the general life conditions (i.e. outside the military context). *Self-satisfaction* is low in all categories but most among the officers and least among the privates. This is due to an experienced lack of autonomy. *Instrumentality of income* is the scale with lowest absolute score. They believe that they do not get what they deserve. The move from a garrison in Germany to a garrison in Belgium is the most probable explanation for this fact because people lost a lot of financial advantages but have still to do the same job.

*Opportunities* for professional self-realisation score also clearly below average. The soldiers are not satisfied with the *image* they have in the mind of others. They are not satisfied with the *military aspects* because they have to fulfil a lot of (daily) routine tasks that are not vocational specific. The fact that the mean age in the unit is rather high might have a negative effect, although it are the “younger” ones (26–40 years) who complain most. People are dissatisfied with the *evaluation system* and the way *evaluation talks* are conducted. The latter is surely related to the general distant attitude of superiors (cf. infra: internal environment). In this case, the officers and the highest ranked NCO's gave the lowest scores (2-3/10).

As shown in the model, the *characteristics of the person* constitute one group of fundamental determinants of behaviour. Four aspects are evaluated: 1) some personality traits, 2) motivation, 3) social support and 4) professional values (Table 3).

Table 3. Characteristics of the person

Scale	Score	All services	Brigade
<b>PROFILE</b>			
Sociability	6.5	5	5
Self confidence	6.4	6	9
Introversion	4.1	5	5
Need for rules & structure	6.7	6	6
Stress liability	3.8	5	5
Time management	5.8	5	5
<b>MOTIVATION</b>			
Professional pride	5.9	4	5
Propensity to leave	5.1	6	7
Motivation for the military aspects	6.1	5	5
Accept specificity of the job	4.5	6	5
Sense of responsibility	7.9	6	6
<b>SOCIAL SUPPORT</b>			
Third persons	7.8	4	5
Partner	7.5	6	6
Work	6.0	5	6
Family	7.4	5	5
Appreciation of support	5.3	4	5
<b>PROFESSIONAL VALUES*</b>			
Regularity	7.2/5.7	6/6	6/6
Physical condition	7.2/4.2	6/3	5/2
Self-realisation	7.3/5.4	6/4	6/4
Team spirit	8.3/5.9	5/4	5/5
Prestige of the job	6.1/5.9	6/7	6/7
Sense of adventure	6.5/5.5	5/5	5/6
Financial matters	8.5/5.0	6/3	6/2
Task related information	8.6/4.6	6/4	8/2
Few physical efforts	3.1/4.1	5/5	4/7

(\*) The figure before the slash refers to the importance of a value, the figure behind the slash refers to the extent to which the unit allows for the realisation of this value

Nearby all scales of the *profile* show more or less average scores except for stress liability. It is also noteworthy that most of the respondents feel a high need for rules and structure. This may explain partly the dissatisfaction with the internal environment (cf. infra).

The answers with respect to *motivation* show some problems. People do not feel very pride with what they are doing. A lot would leave the Armed Forces if they could do the same job in a civil environment. Acceptance of typical military tasks is rather low; this is perhaps not so surprising given that that primary mission of the unit under consideration has a technical character.

*Social support* is experienced as sufficient but a lot do not feel well appreciated for what they are doing; this especially the case for NCO's.

At the level of *professional values*, we observe a discrepancy between the importance attached to some values and the extent to which the unit offers opportunities to realise them. This is particularly the case for physical condition, self-realisation, team spirit, financial matters and information about the task. These values are considered as very important but there are insufficient possibilities to realise them. Especially younger soldiers are complaining about these aspects.

Finally, we consider the *work situation*. Five particular aspects are taken into account: 1) labour relations, 2) leadership style, 3) the internal environment, 4) the interpersonal relations, and 5) workload.

Table 4. **Situational aspects**

Scale	Score	All services	Brigade
<b>LABOUR RELATIONS</b>			
Relations superior-subordinate	5.0	4	5
Experienced inequality in treatment	6.9	6	6
Experienced indifference w.r.t personnel	5.8	8	6
Participation in decision making	3.7	3	5
<b>LEADERSHIP STYLE</b>			
Relation oriented	5.9	5	5
Task oriented	5.8	6	5
Corrective	5.1	4	4
<b>INTERNAL ENVIRONMENT</b>			
Experienced importance of the task	6.7	4	5
Clarity of the task	7.1	4	4
Challenging task	4.0	4	5
Efficiency of the work organisation	3.7	3	5
Openness to innovation	3.7	4	5
Obstruction in task execution	4.9	6	5
Information flow	3.6	3	4
<b>INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS</b>			
Co-operation	4.1	4	4
Dealing with emotions	3.8	4	5
Hot tempered personnel	4.7	6	6
Role conflicts	5.1	7	6
Competition	3.9	4	4
Authority of the superior	6.3	6	6
Group feeling	5.2	5	6
Social climate	3.5	4	5
<b>WORK LOAD</b>			
Psychic work load	5.3	6	5
Physical work load	4.8	4	4

*Labour relations* are not good. There is a big psychological distance between superiors and subordinates. People complain about unequal treatment, a strong experienced indifference of the superiors and a serious lack of participation in decision making. It is beyond doubt that this has a demotivating effect.

The *leadership style* is considered as average or just below on the classic dimensions. Given that “corrective *leadership*” is to be considered as negative in itself, the unit scores in fact good on this scale (decile 4).

The *internal work environment* is evaluated as unsatisfying. Although the experienced importance of the task at hand seems good in absolute values, just as the clarity of the task does, they are both clearly below average when compared to the norms. Most of the tasks are not challenging enough. There seems to be a big problem with the organisation of work, which is by and large not efficient. Superiors are not innovative enough. Moreover there is a serious problem with the information flow irrespective of the category (Off, NCO, private).

*Interpersonal relations* are in general not sound. More than 50% of the sample complains about a lack of co-operation but at the same time there is not much competition (that, if moderate, creates cohesion). It is not allowed to express emotions. Role conflicts are often present; this means that people are often forced to fulfil a task in another way, as they would like to do. In short, the social climate is rather poor.

*Workload* is considered as average and is thus not a cause of dissatisfaction.

### **Conclusion**

The questionnaire allowed us to determine the weak points and to formulate well-focused suggestions for remedial action. The negative reactions that have been observed can be avoided to a large extent. Going back to the motivation theory of Herzberg, environmental factors are causes of dissatisfaction but factors that are intrinsically related to the task are causes of satisfaction. Thus, actions can/must be undertaken in the two domains simultaneously. Satisfaction must be enhanced by changing in priority the negative evaluated aspects of the work environment that are intrinsically related to the job, and in the second place the other aspects. The factor “personnel” must be considered as given and is thus not subject to major changes. The implementation belongs of course to the responsibilities of the commander, with the help of his “task force” and with the assistance of his “Counsellor in Mental Readiness”.