

Chapter 2A – RECRUITING AND RETENTION OF MILITARY PERSONNEL: BELGIUM

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2A.1 AN INTRODUCTION TO RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION FOR THE BELGIAN MILITARY

The end of the Cold War clearly was the beginning of a new era for the Belgian Defence. When the iron curtain was torn down, the Belgian Forces were composed of roughly 100,000 men among which, many draftees. The Army was by far the largest service and most of the combat units were stationed in Germany. Its main mission was to defend a part of the inner German border against a possible aggression from the East. Besides the army, the forces encompassed the Air Force, a small Navy and a Medical corps. In addition, there was a Reserve mainly composed of ex-draftees who had to stay in the reserve for a number of years.

Since the beginning of the nineties, the progressive disappearance of the threat from the East, together with the popular claim for ‘peace dividends’, caused a series of political decisions downsizing the Forces.

The first important step was the decision to suspend conscription. The reasons were manifold: there was no longer a need for large numbers, the acceptance of a conscript army was fading, especially since less than one out of two boys had to serve and not the girls and finally, there was the problem that deployed units in peace-keeping missions couldn’t include draftees unless they volunteered. This plan called after the Minister of Defence Leo Delcroix was approved in 1992 and included the downsizing of the Forces to 47,000 personnel. The conversion from a conscript army to a professional one didn’t yield such a big recruitment problem since in the conscript army we already had about 18,000 professional soldiers and needed 20,000 in the new structure. At the NCO and officer level, there were too many professionals, but nobody was forced to leave. In order to reach the anticipated lower numbers, recruitment was slowed down but not stopped and the older military with less than five years to serve could leave in financially attractive conditions. In order to maintain an acceptable age structure of the Forces, it was made possible to enlist for a ‘short term’ of 2 to 5 years.

In May 2000, the Belgian government approved a new “Strategic plan for the modernization of the Belgian Forces (2000 – 2015).” This time, 39,500 personnel was set as a target to be reached in 2015.

In July 2003, a new government was constituted after elections. The new government decided to reduce the Forces further to 35,000 personnel.

This continuous downsizing has a number of consequences for recruiting and retention. First, the recruitment goals are quite low since the number of people leaving the organization can be larger than the number joining. Fortunately, recruiting was never stopped. Second, it is not considered appropriate to tell the population that

the Military is downsizing and at the same time launch advertising campaigns. This means that the effort to advertise for the Military is kept minimal. Third, the overall perception of the Armed Forces by the population is one of a continuously shrinking organization. This is not very appealing to many youngsters.

To appreciate the Belgian situation, it is useful to have some additional background information. One piece of information pertains to the lack of professional mobility on the labor market. Belgians are not very fond of changing work and lifetime employment is considered very valuable. Applied to the Military, this means that short-term contracts remain very unsuccessful and that the idea of forcing older professional soldiers to leave the Military is considered to be heretical. Since most of the military can stay until retirement age, this eases the recruitment problem. Another important thing to know is that the Belgian constitution states that recruitment for the Military has to be organized by law. This means that every aspect of the selection procedures needs to be written down in legal texts. It goes without saying that this is a major drawback when one attempts to implement a flexible recruitment system, able to adjust to a dynamic labor market conditioned by the changing economic conjuncture.

2A.2 RECRUITING PROBLEMS AND MAIN REMEDIAL MEASURES

2A.2.1 Problems

The primary objective of recruitment is the identification and attraction of potential employees. These outcomes are by no means easy to define or assess. Organizations are interested in attracting certain **numbers** of potential employees who have certain **attributes**. In other words, attraction has both quantitative and qualitative dimensions. Regarding quantity, recruitment is most efficient when the number of applicants attracted is neither too small nor too large. Small applicant pools give the employer few options regarding which applicants to hire. Very large applicant pools, however, place heavy burdens on the organization's administrative systems and are generally undesirable. Regarding quality, organizations may differ in terms of what characteristics, or what level of characteristics, they are seeking; thus, "successful" recruitment is best defined in accordance with whatever qualities the organization had in mind.

2A.2.1.1 Quantitative Problems

The number of applicants for the Belgian Military is very much depending on the current economical conjuncture. When the economy is booming, applicants are scarce and there are plenty of them when the economy faces recession. This rule sometimes applies differentially in the North (Flemish community) and the South (Francophone community) of the country. Although we are able to fill most vacancies at this moment, some specific occupations are still critically understaffed. In particular, there is an urgent need for NCO technicians, for NCOs with a college degree, for short-term contract personnel and for Infantrymen.

2A.2.1.2 Qualitative Problems

The Belgian recruitment policy has been one of "filling all vacancies". When there are shortages in the labor market, the reflex action of many decision makers is to lower the selection standards so that generally more applicants will be eligible for employment. A likely drawback of this measure is that the overall quality of the accepted applicants will drop. Whether this happens or not, depends entirely on the characteristics of the applicant pool and on the kind of decision-making process that is used to assign applicants to jobs. Until January 2004, the Belgian Defence used an immediate decision-making model for its enlisted personnel, called "immediate classification". This method assigns an applicant as soon as all his relevant attributes are

assessed. In order to decide about his assignment, his “profile” is compared to a set of trade specific criteria. If the person meets the set criteria for his preferred job, he gets it. This system, also known as a “first comes, first served” system is widespread for enlisted personnel. The main reason for this is that it usually is considered to be important to tell the applicant immediately what job he will get. As from 2004, the applicants are assigned by means of “batch classification”. Contrary to immediate decision-making models, batch classification compares the eligible applicants before making decisions. From an organizational perspective, batch classification yields far better results than immediate classification.

Another problem is that a large proportion of the applicant population is willing to consider a military career, but is not at all appealed to the prospect of being part of a fighting unit for several years. In Belgium, within the framework of “lifetime employment”, it is common for new recruits to start their career in a combat unit. Most of them remain “fighters” until this becomes a too heavy burden from a physical or psychological point of view. As from that moment, they are “converted” to a more supportive or administrative unit. The drawback of this personnel policy is that potential applicants with non-fighting interests and qualities probably turn their back on the Military.

2A.2.2 Measures

2A.2.2.1 Recruitment and Selection

2A.2.2.1.1 Reduction of the Selection Burden

A first important measure is the reduction of the selection burden: In many countries the period of time between the first contact of an applicant with the organization and the actual enlistment in a unit is extremely long, sometimes up to a year. If these processes take so long, it is clear that in a tight labor market many applicants will have found a job elsewhere before the military organization has reached a decision on whether or not to hire. In 2001, the Belgian Defence Staff has taken a set of initiatives to speed up the application, selection, and allocation processes for enlisted personnel. Firstly, the initial screening test has been decentralized to the local career offices. This measure not only speeds up the selection, passing the test also causes the applicant to become committed to the organization. That is, after the first hurdle is taken, the likelihood that applicants continue to pursue employment increases. Within a week after their application, applicants are invited to take their tests (medical, physical, and psychological) at the central selection center in Brussels. Nowadays the selection procedure for enlisted personnel takes only one day instead of the previous two and a half days. Furthermore, the delay between application and entrance is shortened to one month, thereby reducing the voluntary withdrawal rate after a successful selection process. Finally, as from 2002 it became possible to enlist new recruits for most entries throughout the entire year. For some jobs, however, professional training takes place only once or twice a year. Previously, for these jobs there were limited enlistment dates, and few potential applicants were willing to wait until that time. Instead they continued searching for a job elsewhere. Nowadays, a type of general practical training is organized in order to bridge the waiting period between enlistment and professional training. Potential applicants get the possibility to sign up at any time.

2A.2.2.1.2 Lowering the Cut-Off Score

Secondly, it was decided to lower the cut-off scores of several tests. As mentioned earlier, this is an efficient operation in order to fill open vacancies. However, in combination with an immediate classification method it is pretty sure that this measure is carried out at the expense of applicant quality.

2A.2.2.1.3 Selection and Training of Selectors

Thirdly, the selection and training of interviewers was improved. In the past, an unstructured interview with the head of the selection department was sufficient to demonstrate one's motivation and capabilities to become an interviewer. Nowadays, a structured interview takes place before a selection board consisting of both experts and executives. In addition, after being selected, candidates go through a lengthy training program, containing theoretical courses (e.g., statistics, organizational psychology), practical courses (e.g., interview techniques, assessment center method), and a period of practical training. Also worthwhile mentioning is that we have raised the number of psychologists involved in the selection process in order to guarantee applicants a more professional treatment.

2A.2.2.1.4 Research and Technology

Since 2001, we also have put a lot of efforts in building out a research and technology program on recruitment, selection, and retention. In conjunction with several Belgian universities we are focusing on both psychometric and social dimensions of the recruitment and selection (e.g., test validity and reliability, reasons for voluntary withdrawal from the selection process).

2A.2.2.1.5 Replacement of Test Batteries

Fifthly, we took steps to replace the existing cognitive test battery. These tests are used to assess applicants' verbal, numerical, and spatial ability, and general intelligence at the career office (see above). A new test battery has been acquired and is planned to be put in operational use in Jan 2007. In addition, a new test battery for pilot applicants was bought and is used since Feb 2006.

2A.2.2.1.6 New Legislation on Military Recruitment and Selection

In 2004, a new legislation on military recruitment and selection became operative. One of the objectives of this legislation was to enlarge the applicant population. It was decided that as from 2004 individuals can apply until the age of 34 instead of the previous fixed age limit of 31. This was the second upward shift in a few years time. Furthermore, it was decided that the selection procedure should be more customer-oriented. According to the new legislation, all applicants always deserve a second chance and always have the right to lodge an appeal in case they fail. It was also advised to reimburse applicants' travel expenses, but unfortunately this suggestion was rejected. The new legislation also dictates that military service is not longer a privilege of Belgian citizenship, but that as from 2004 EU-citizens are admitted to the Belgian Defence too.

2A.2.2.1.7 Targeting Minority Groups

In the same vein, the Belgian Defence recently started to target "minority" groups. "Non-traditional" applicants, such as female and migrant applicants, were heavily neglected until a couple of years ago. Nowadays, all recruitment sources (e.g., brochures, internet, video, radio ads, television ads) explicitly focus on these unexploited applicant populations. According to the former legislation on selection, the same selection standards apply to male and female applicants. As a result, a high number of female applicants did not succeed in the physical fitness tests that were in use until 2001. These tests consisted of a pulling task, a shuttle run, a balancing exercise, and an ergometric cycling test. In particular, the pulling task (the applicant had to pull an isostatic device as hard as possible) turned out to be too hard for most female applicants. In order to cut back the number of female applicants failing the physical fitness hurdle it was decided to maintain only the ergometric bicycling test. In addition, since 2004 different sets of physical fitness standards are used for males and females.

2A.2.2.2 Organizational Changes

2A.2.2.2.1 Creation of an “Accession Policy” Section

One of the first actions our Minister of Defence carried out in order to improve recruitment and selection was moving the department of recruitment to a more strategic level. More specifically, in 2002 an “accession policy” section was created as part of the Defence Staff under the direction of a Full Colonel. Before that time, recruitment and selection were considered as matters of minor importance and the Commanding Officer of the selection center operated relatively autonomously without much external control or help. The lack of interest on behalf of the Staff negatively affected the quality of the selection process. Since the appointment of a Full Colonel various initiatives were taken to improve the situation (see above).

2A.2.2.2.2 Expansion of the Preparatory Division of the Royal Military Academy (PDRMA)

The PDRMA is a military institute that prepares youngsters for their entrance exam at the Royal Military Academy (RMA), the academy for future officers. The institute offers additional courses in mathematics and first and second language in order to cram the pupils for the initial exam at the RMA that is decisive for who may enter.

2A.2.2.3 Pay and Benefits

A whole set of measures are carried out with regard to pay and benefits. To begin with, since 2001 the wages of all military personnel are gradually increasing (see below). In addition, each personnel category is entitled to various kinds of bonuses (e.g., “educational bonus”, “mastery” bonus). For some categories specific measures were taken. For instance, in order to make the Armed Forces more attractive to potential applicants with a college degree or with a civilian university degree, it was decided that during training the former would receive a salary that would be equal to that of a Sergeant, and that the latter would receive a salary that would be equal to that of a Second Lieutenant. Finally, the statute of Air Traffic Controller is upgraded from the category of NCOs to the category of officers (see below).

2A.2.3 Effects

It is very difficult to attach a number to the effects of the measures taken. The main reason for this is that until now no steps were taken to examine the effect sizes. We do observe that the Belgian Armed Forces are becoming more popular lately. It is enticing to say that the “image” of the Military has improved, as a spokesman of the public relations recently did on television. It is also likely, however, that the economic situation stimulates more youngsters to search for a stable, secure job.

2A.3 RETENTION PROBLEMS AND THEIR MAIN MEASURES

2A.3.1 Problems

2A.3.1.1 Turnover during Initial Training

In the Belgian Armed Forces approximately 30% of the recruits voluntarily withdraw from initial training. The majority of these stops take place within the first month, sometimes even after a few days. It seems that this figure is not very different from the voluntary turnover rate of most West European Armed Forces. It is obvious that early turnover is very costly to an organization. Firstly, there is no return on investment.

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In addition, it is likely that turnover will have indirect and unintended effects on organizational outcomes. Disappointed withdrawals will disseminate their stories, and in doing so probably repel others from applying.

One often-heard explanation for this observation is that withdrawals have **inflated expectations** of military life. These unrealistic expectations would be attributable to the traditional “selling approach” of many recruiters. The “selling approach” involves two actions:

- 1) Only positive organizational characteristics are communicated to prospective applicants rather than those things insiders find dissatisfying about the organization; and
- 2) Those features that are advertised may be distorted to make them seem even more positive.

This traditional approach is designed to attract as many applicants as possible, but is in conflict with the organization’s ability to retain newcomers. This is because the disappointment of initial expectations will lead to a decrease in job satisfaction and as a result to an increase of voluntary turnover.

The role of inflated expectations is generally accepted. Admittedly, theoretically this is an interesting construct to explain a substantial proportion of the observed variance in turnover intentions and behavior. Withdrawals, however, when asked why they left, refer to more **concrete experiences**: Homesickness, problems with the instructor, problems at home, the prospect of a mission abroad, a disappointing salary, did not get the job he/she preferred, found a better job elsewhere, etc. Usually, more than one reason has led to the decision to leave.

As mentioned earlier, **lowering the selection standards** increases the likelihood of accepting “less qualified” personnel. Put differently, it is likely that the average Person-Organization fit of these newcomers will decrease. As a result, this group will be more dissatisfied, will be less committed to the organization, and will have higher turnover intentions.

2A.3.1.2 Retention Problems during the Career

Two major reasons lead people to leave the Military prematurely: The attractiveness of alternatives outside the Military and the dissatisfaction about the circumstances inside the Military. Of course, most decisions to leave are based on a combination of both reasons.

Among people leaving mainly because of the attractiveness of alternative employment opportunities we find pilots, ICT-specialists, aircraft technicians and air traffic controllers. These highly qualified persons can easily find a new job in civilian life when the economy is good. For pilots and aircraft technicians, we experienced a temporary standstill of their departure due to the worldwide recession of air travel after 9/11. The departure of these highly trained persons is a major problem for they are very expensive to recruit and train.

We also have military personnel leaving because of unsatisfactory working circumstances or perspectives. An important group consists of persons who were deployed several times. During the last decade, Belgian contributed quite extensively to many operations abroad. Because of the age structure of the Forces, many persons are considered too old and unfit to be deployed. As a consequence, the pool to draw from is rather small and the younger persons fit to be sent abroad are deployed several times. In a number of cases, their family no longer accepts this and forces the soldier to leave the Military.

2A.3.2 Measures

2A.3.2.1 Retention Bonuses for Computer Specialists

Computer specialists were paid according to their military rank only. As they can get much better offers in civilian life, large numbers (especially the good ones) decided to leave. It was therefore decided twice to grant them a significant retention bonus. It was the first time this was applied in the Belgian Forces and the way it was done was not perfect. First, it appeared not to be as simple as it looks to identify the computer specialists. Some of them, for instance, are very good, but had no formal training and hence no prove of being computer specialist in their file. Others were trained, but did no longer work as computer specialist (until they heard of the bonuses, of course...). In addition, the persons who received the bonuses did not have to commit themselves to stay with the Military and no effect measurements were done.

2A.3.2.2 Upgrading Air Traffic Controllers to the Category of Officers

Most of our air traffic controllers (ATC) were recruited and trained as NCO. They were paid according to their rank only. Attrition was high because of the length and difficulty level of their training, but mostly because of the existing opportunity to work as ATC for the civilian authority. To illustrate the discrepancy between the military and civilian wages, we mention the case of an NCO ATC with 13 years of experience who left the Military and started to do the same job for Eurocontrol. There, he earned more than the Chief, Head of Defence of the Belgian Forces! In an effort to reduce the problem, it was decided to upgrade the function of ATC to the category of officer. In practice, this means that the existing ATC will get the opportunity to become auxiliary officer (with a limited career) and the new ATC recruits will also become auxiliary officers.

2A.3.2.3 Pay Raise

A major effort to improve both recruitment and retention consisted of providing a significant pay raise for all military personnel. The following table illustrates the minimal and maximal pay raise between 2001 and 2005 for the different personnel categories. It needs to be said however that this pay raise rather reflects the overall evolution of the wages in Belgium. It cannot be considered an action to highlight the Military on the labor market.

Table 2A-1: Pay-Raise Belgian Military 2001 – 2005

Personnel Category	Minimal Pay Raise	Maximal Pay Raise
Soldiers	4.3%	17.9%
NCOs	3.7%	33.5%
Officers	10.7%	20.5%

2A.3.2.4 Possibility to Return after Leaving the Military

One of the possibilities a member of the Military has after leaving the organization is simply to come back (within one year). This is useful as it allows us to re-engage a person who did decide to leave, but found out that the grass not always is greener on the other side of the hill. As a drawback of course, this opportunity also lowers the threshold to leave.

2A.3.2.5 Providing Daycare for Small Children

It has been understood that finding adequate daycare facilities for young mothers in the Military was a problem. It was therefore decided to open daycare centers in the larger garrisons. Daycare centers are only open from 7 AM till 6 PM. As a result, mothers who have night shifts or are called up for exercises still have to look for other solutions.

2A.3.2.6 Providing Psychological Support and Family Care

Since it gradually became clear that deploying persons could be stressful both for them and for their family, a comprehensive system of psychological support for the member of the Military as well as for his/her family was set up. This was primarily done as responsible employer behavior, but undoubtedly has beneficial effect upon the retention of the deployed personnel.

2A.3.2.7 Extension of Short-Term Contracts

As mentioned before, when conscription was suspended it was decided to introduce short-term contracts to maintain an acceptable age structure within the Forces. These contracts are available for the three personnel categories: volunteers (soldiers), NCOs, and officers. At the outset, applicants had to sign a two years contract. They could extend their contract three times for one year if they hadn't reached the age of 25. In order to make these contracts a bit more attractive and to allow more people to apply, it was decided to allow the applicants to apply until the age of 30 with the possibility to extend their contract for a total of seven years if they hadn't reached the age of 34.

2A.3.2.8 Youth Camps and Pre-Enlistment Camps

One of the major reasons for early turnover resides in the lack of realistic expectations. Two actions were decided: the organization of youth camps and of pre-enlistment camps. Youth camps are meant for youngster around 15 – 16 years old. During these camps, they live in military units and follow a program intended to learn them more about Defence (showing equipment, doing sports, getting first aid training...). All activities are lead by volunteering military personnel. The pre-enlistment camps were held the week before enlistment and were a very realistic preview of what they would experience once they signed their contract.

2A.3.2.9 Attaching More Importance to the Applicants' Preferences when Assigning them to Vacancies

During the classification process of the applicants, one has to balance the relative weight of the applicants' aptitudes for the different trades and their preference for these trades. During the last few years the importance of the preferences has been increased. This results in having more applicants to be assigned to the trade they prefer. It is assumed that this will lower early turnover.

2A.3.2.10 Using Older Instructors

One of the reported causes of early turnover is related to the hard approach of the enlistees by drill sergeants. Usually, these drill sergeants are quite young and prone to display macho behavior. Therefore, an experiment was conducted in which older instructors trained soldiers only. The instructors could easily have been the fathers of the recruits. Their attitude seemed to have been quite different. As a result much less turnover occurred during that experiment.

2A.3.2.11 Bonuses for Deployment

This measure does not need much clarification. Obviously, the willingness of being deployed would drop enormously if there were no bonuses.

2A.3.3 Effects

Again, it is very difficult to speak out about the effect sizes. No steps have been taken to examine systematically the results of the measures. And as with recruitment, we believe that the economic climate plays an important role: In times of recession, jobholders are less likely to job-hop unless they are certain of a new position.

2A.4 RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN RECRUITING AND RETENTION

In this paragraph we outline recent developments in recruitment and retention without going into much detail. We'll first discuss a new initiative aimed at better recruiting medical doctors and then discuss the project called: 'Mixed Career Concept'.

Recruiting medical doctors (MD) isn't currently easy. The reason is simple: when we recruit a MD, he or she is essentially paid according to his or her military rank which is second lieutenant at the beginning of their career. The financial gap between what they earn in the Military and what they could earn in civilian life is too large, so applicants are very scarce. A new recruiting possibility was created to solve the problem. It is called the *lateral recruitment of MD's* (also applicable to dentists, veterinarians, and pharmacists). To be hired in that system, the applicant can be up to 49 years old and must prove a professional experience of at least five years. The selected persons get the rank of captain immediately and are promoted to the rank of major as soon as they complete their training that, according to the professional experience the MD have, can be reduced to only six weeks.

The Mixed Career Concept (MCC) is a project that is intended to profoundly modify the human resources management in the Belgian Defence. Two of its goals are keeping the age structure of the Military healthy and increase the proportion of military that are deployable. In order to do so, the principle of lifetime employment as military is given up for most military. According to the MCC, applicants will be recruited and become military. After a period of ten to twelve years of service, these military will reach a so called 'orientation point'. There, three options are considered: staying in the Military until the age of retirement, becoming a civil servant in the Department of Defence or returning to the labor market. Both the preferences of the individual and the needs of the Military will be taken into account to decide which option applies to the individual. This very ambitious project is planned to be effective before 2010.

