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THE INFLUENCE OF MILITARY ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE ON PEOPLE'S MOTIVATION AND RETENTION

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Abstract:

Military culture has a big impact on how motivated service members feel and whether they choose to stay in the military. Unlike regular jobs, the military has a strict structure that focuses on discipline, duty, and teamwork. These values shape how soldiers see their roles, how dedicated they are, and whether they want to continue serving.

People in the military are motivated by different factors. Some are inspired by a sense of patriotism, strong friendships, and personal growth. Others are driven by rewards like promotions, good pay, and recognition. While these factors help keep morale high, staying in the military long-term depends on leadership, work-life balance, and career opportunities.

Keywords: *motivation; armed forces; military culture; efficiency; effectiveness.*

Introduction

Human resource management plays a crucial role in almost every organization worldwide, as it is responsible for developing policies and initiatives that support employees. This is because a company's workforce is its most valuable asset. Keeping employees motivated is a key component of this strategy, as motivation directly influences their efficiency and effectiveness. Furthermore, enhancing job happiness is critical for improved performance and productivity. In the armed forces, the importance of motivating personnel seems more important compared to civilians due to the unique nature of military service, which often involves high-risk situations, demanding physical and mental challenges, and long periods of separation from family and loved ones. Motivated personnel are more likely to perform their duties effectively and efficiently, even in adverse conditions (*Unlocking HRM Challenges: Exploring Motivation and Job Satisfaction within Military Service*, Dagher, Jean, Nada Mallah Boustani, and Chadi Khneyzer, 2024).

Military culture has a big impact on how motivated service members feel and whether they choose to stay in the military. Unlike regular jobs, the military has a strict structure that focuses on discipline, duty, and teamwork. These values shape how soldiers see their roles, how dedicated they are, and whether they want to continue serving.

People in the military are motivated by different factors. Some are inspired by a sense of patriotism, strong friendships, and personal growth. Others are driven by rewards like promotions, good pay, and recognition. While these factors help keep morale high, staying in the military long-term depends on leadership, work-life balance, and career opportunities.

At the same time, military life can be very demanding. Long deployments, frequent moves, and high-stress situations can make it difficult for service members and their families. Good leadership, strong support systems, and flexible career options are important for keeping people motivated and committed.



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Motivation within the military context is multifaceted, driven by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Intrinsically, service members often feel a deep sense of purpose and honor in serving their country. The military emphasizes values such as loyalty, bravery, and sacrifice, which resonate with personnel and foster intrinsic motivation. Extrinsically, factors such as promotions, awards, and benefits also play critical roles. The structured nature of military advancement provides clear pathways for career progression, which can significantly enhance motivation.

Retention in the military is heavily influenced by organizational culture. A positive culture that promotes respect, inclusivity, and recognition significantly enhances retention rates. When service members feel valued and understood, they are less likely to seek opportunities outside the military. Conversely, a toxic culture characterized by poor leadership, discrimination, or lack of support can lead to high attrition rates.

This paper focuses on **four key elements**: leadership and command climate, cohesion and brotherhood, work-life balance, and recognition, rewards, and benefits, that significantly contribute to motivation and retention in the military context. These elements have been selected based on their alignment with Self-Determination Theory. Leadership and command climate support intrinsic motivation by fostering autonomy, competence, and relatedness through supportive environments. Cohesion and brotherhood reinforce the need for relatedness, fostering a sense of belonging and mutual support. Work-life balance enhances both autonomy and well-being, enabling individuals to maintain a sense of control over their lives. Finally, recognition, rewards, and benefits contribute to competence by affirming individual contributions and reinforcing a sense of accomplishment.

Understanding how these four elements work together helps to see different sides of what motivates soldiers and keeps them in the military. Looking at how these factors connect makes it easier to create better plans to improve job satisfaction and performance, helping build a stronger and more dedicated military team.

1. Leadership and Command Climate

Leadership is a critical factor in shaping the motivation and retention of military personnel. Effective leaders inspire, guide, and support their subordinates, influencing their commitment to the organization. Poor leadership, on the other hand, can lead to low morale, decreased motivation, and higher attrition rates.

A leader sets the **command climate** through their actions and words. Soldiers look up to their leaders and follow their example. A strong leader **sets clear standards and enforces them**, ensuring that discipline and ethical conduct are maintained. Ignoring rule violations creates a negative climate, while promoting open communication builds trust within the unit. Leaders must be approachable and willing to listen, rather than discouraging bad news or hiding problems.

Establishing a **positive command climate** is essential for mission success and maintaining the moral high ground. Leaders must intentionally create an environment of **discipline, ethics, and trust** to ensure their unit operates effectively and upholds military values.

Effective leadership fosters motivation and retention by building trust, respect, and confidence among personnel. Poor leadership, including toxic command environments, can lead to dissatisfaction and higher attrition rates. Mentorship programs and positive role models contribute to career satisfaction and progression (Lt. Col. Joseph Doty and Maj. Joe Gelineau, *Command Climate*, 2008).



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Consistency and integrity further strengthen trust, as leaders who uphold their promises and treat all personnel fairly earn the respect of their teams. Encouraging teamwork and cooperation builds camaraderie by reinforcing a shared purpose and ensuring that success is collective rather than individual.

Army leaders must create conditions that encourage soldiers to continue their service. Senior leaders can enhance retention by focusing on leader development programs, incentivizing continued service, and effectively utilizing talent management.

Strong leadership plays a key role in retention. Effective leader development programs at unit, organizational, and strategic levels cultivate mentorship and trust. At the unit level, direct mentorship helps develop soldiers through training and feedback. Organizational leaders must foster a positive climate and implement team-building exercises. At the strategic level, policies should support long-term growth, ensuring leaders receive resources to train and guide Soldiers effectively.

Motivation drives retention. At the direct level, rewards and public recognition inspire soldiers. Organizational leaders must ensure fair recognition of performance to maintain morale. At the strategic level, leaders should align policies with long-term goals, including monetary incentives and bonuses for skilled soldiers. These measures encourage commitment and reduce turnover.

Leaders should develop soldiers' problem-solving abilities. Organizational leaders must provide career-enhancing opportunities and training. Strategically, the Army should refine promotion systems to offer constructive feedback and career guidance.

Improving retention requires investing in leadership development, incentives, and talent management. Building trust and fostering a culture of commitment ensures soldiers remain dedicated to the Army's mission, strengthening the organization's long-term success (*Improving Retention within the Organization*, MSG Jason G. Pickett, 2023)

2. Cohesion and Brotherhood

Military culture fosters deep connections among service members, creating a sense of belonging and loyalty that strengthens unit cohesion. The shared experiences of training, deployments, and hardships build strong bonds, reinforcing trust and mutual support. Soldiers rely on each other in high-stress situations, knowing that their teammates will always have their backs. This connection enhances morale and motivation, as service members push themselves not only for personal success but for the collective well-being of the unit. The brotherhood formed within military units often becomes a defining aspect of a soldier's identity, making it difficult to leave the service. Many remain because of the deep emotional ties and sense of purpose they feel within their teams. The camaraderie developed in the military extends beyond duty, as lifelong friendships often emerge from shared challenges and sacrifices. This close-knit culture plays a vital role in mission success, as trust and teamwork directly impact operational effectiveness.

Cohesion is the bond between team members that motivates them to work together. Cohesive teams develop trust, competence, and commitment, allowing them to overcome challenges. Cohesion can be categorized into two types: horizontal and vertical. Horizontal cohesion refers to the strong bonds formed among peers, reinforced through shared experiences and mutual support. On the other hand, vertical cohesion represents the connection between leaders and subordinates,



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which is built on trust, competence, and a shared sense of purpose. Both forms of cohesion are essential for fostering teamwork, resilience, and overall effectiveness within a group.

French officer **Ardant du Picq** and U.S. Army historian S. L. A. **Marshall** both emphasized the importance of cohesion in combat. **Du Picq** argued that soldiers fight better when they know and trust each other. He believed cohesion comes from shared experiences, discipline, and stable unit organization. **Marshall** reinforced this idea through his WWII research, concluding that soldiers rely more on their comrades than on weapons. He emphasized the need for communication (tactical cohesion) to prevent isolation and panic in battle. He criticized the U.S. Army for treating soldiers as interchangeable resources rather than fostering strong, cohesive units (*Lessons in Unit Cohesion: from the United States Army's COHORT*, Michael R. Kearnes, Major, US Army Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 2022).

Cohesion and brotherhood are fundamental to a soldier's experience, shaping both their motivation and long-term commitment to military service. The bonds formed through shared hardships, trust, and mutual reliance create an environment where soldiers feel a deep sense of belonging and responsibility toward one another.

Beyond immediate battlefield effectiveness, cohesion significantly impacts retention. Many service members choose to stay in the military because of their loyalty to their unit and the relationships they have built. The military's unique environment fosters lifelong friendships, reinforcing a strong sense of purpose even after active service. Additionally, cohesive units help soldiers develop resilience, allowing them to better handle the mental and physical stresses of military life, ultimately reducing burnout and increasing career longevity.

In essence, cohesion and brotherhood serve as powerful motivators that extend beyond the battlefield, influencing career decisions and fostering a commitment to the military. By maintaining strong unit bonds and emphasizing team-oriented leadership, military organizations can enhance both individual soldier well-being and overall mission success.

3. Work-Life Balance

More than half of active-duty and reserve personnel have family obligations. Whether it's your partner, children, or aging relatives, most service members have loved ones who rely on them at home. As a team, you must cope with separations, relocations, unpredictable schedules, and concerns about safety. On top of that, military service is not just a career choice—it's a legal commitment that binds you for several years, making it essential to find a way to manage everything, even during tough times.

Given all these challenges, achieving balance can be difficult when the boundaries between your professional and personal life are blurred. This is particularly true for dual military couples and families. However, work-life balance remains a top priority for many in the military. For instance, one of the biggest concerns expressed by service members is the time spent away from their families. Work-life balance matters to the military as well, as it directly influences retention. A positive balance is linked to job satisfaction and commitment, while a negative balance is associated with increased turnover intentions.

A military career demands time, energy, and commitment, making work-life balance especially challenging during training and deployments. Military personnel often experience unpredictable work schedules, frequent separations from family, and high workloads. These factors



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contribute to work-life conflicts, which can impact job satisfaction and increase turnover intentions. Organizational support has been shown to mitigate these conflicts, improving retention and overall well-being (*Work-life balance among newly employed officers – a qualitative study*, Emma Oskarsson, Department of Security, Strategy and Leadership, Swedish Defence University, 2020)

I found the study that explores how newly employed officers in the Swedish Armed Forces (SAF) perceive work-life balance and its impact on their careers. Interviews were conducted with 34 newly employed officers (9 men, 6 women) and non-commissioned officers (17 men, 2 women), analyzed using thematic analysis. ages ranging from 23 to 45 years. The interviews lasted between 30 and 73 minutes and were conducted in private rooms to ensure confidentiality and openness.

The analysis revealed three main themes:

1. **Coping with Different Loyalties:** Officers faced challenges balancing their work responsibilities with personal life, often feeling torn between their commitment to the military and their relationships at home. Some officers tried to balance these loyalties, valuing their personal life more, while others prioritized their work role, even at the expense of personal relationships.
2. **Individual and Organizational Strategies:** Newly employed officers in the SAF face high workloads from the start, leading to stress and frequent overtime. Many officers are ambitious and take on more work than they can handle, leading to fatigue and burnout. At home, they mainly rest, leaving little time for socializing. Organizational strategies to help cope with these demands include mentoring and social events, but the lack of support in some units leaves officers feeling overwhelmed.
3. **Concerns about the Future:** Officers reflected on how their military career impacted their personal lives and future plans. Officers expressed concerns about managing the high workload and maintaining a balanced life, especially when it comes to family and career advancement. Some officers struggle with the demands of mobility and the impact on their personal lives. These concerns lead to doubts about their long-term careers in the military, with some thinking about leaving due to the stress and lack of recovery time.

In conclusion, the study highlights the challenges newly employed officers face in balancing work and life, driven by conflicting loyalties to the military and family. Organizational support is crucial to help officers manage these demands and avoid burnout. Clearer expectations and better work-life balance strategies could help retain qualified personnel in the SAF.

4. Recognition, Reward and Benefits

Recognition, rewards, and benefits play a significant role in motivating military personnel and influencing their retention. These elements collectively contribute to fostering a high level of engagement, commitment, and job satisfaction within the armed forces. The following discussion outlines how each of these factors plays a pivotal role in sustaining a motivated and retained military workforce.

Recognition within the military serves as an essential tool for reinforcing individual performance and achievement. Public acknowledgment of contributions, such as awards, commendations, and ceremonial honors, generates a sense of pride, purpose, and value among service members. Such recognition contributes not only to enhancing morale but also to cultivating a deep sense of commitment to both the mission and the organization. Through consistent



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acknowledgment of effort and achievement, personnel are motivated to maintain high standards of performance, which, in turn, strengthens overall unit cohesion.

Both monetary and non-monetary **rewards** serve to incentivize exceptional performance and maintain high levels of motivation among military personnel. While the military is not primarily driven by financial incentives, strategic rewards such as bonuses, pay increases, and special allowances are effective in recognizing specialized skills, critical assignments, and leadership roles. Additionally, non-financial rewards, including opportunities for career advancement, additional leave, and special privileges, provide personnel with further motivation to excel.

Comprehensive **benefits** packages are among the most compelling factors for military personnel considering long-term service. The military offers robust healthcare options, including medical, dental, and vision care for service members and their families, which contribute significantly to the well-being and job satisfaction of personnel. Furthermore, the military’s pension and retirement plans, which provide substantial financial support after a designated number of years of service, serve as powerful incentives for retention.

The found research explores motivation and job satisfaction among service members in the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) amidst various challenges. Using a mixed-method approach, the study involved interviews with 42 service members, a focus group with 12 experts, and a survey of 3,880 LAF members. Study found that monetary rewards and praise are key motivators, with salary being the most important factor in job satisfaction. Economic challenges, like declining purchasing power, and health issues, such as rising medical costs, negatively affect motivation. Security challenges had no significant impact. The study recommends offering competitive salaries, recognition programs, fair compensation, regular salary reviews, and support for physical and mental well-being to improve motivation and job satisfaction (*Unlocking HRM Challenges: Exploring Motivation and Job Satisfaction within Military Service (LAF)*, Jean Dagher, Nada Mallah Boustani and Chadi Khneyzer, 2024).

Recommendations:

Based on my paper's discussion on the importance of HRM models within military establishments, here is a list of recommendations considering the opportunities and limits of these models.

Military organizations can improve motivation and keep their personnel by using flexible HRM models that support work-life balance. Policies like flexible working hours, remote work when possible, and family support programs can help improve well-being. However, the tough nature of military work, including long deployments and high-pressure situations, may make it hard to fully apply these changes.

Leadership training that focuses on emotional intelligence, mentorship, and trust can create a more people-friendly management style. While helpful, challenges within the system and resistance from senior officers may slow down its adoption. Similarly, recognizing achievements beyond just money—through praise and public appreciation—can boost motivation. But this must be combined with clear career growth opportunities and mental health support to truly make a difference.

Stronger team bonds can be built through organized team-building activities and casual social events. However, frequent moves and high turnover can weaken these efforts. Mental health support, such as counseling and stress management programs, is also important, but stigma and concerns about privacy might stop some people from seeking help.



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Clear career growth plans with mentorship and professional development can improve job satisfaction, but military career paths are often strict, which may limit flexibility. Open communication about job opportunities and welfare programs can build trust, but military hierarchy may slow down or filter information, leading to frustration among lower ranks.

Policies that support military families, such as flexible deployment schedules and help with relocations, can make life easier for service members. However, the unpredictable nature of military service may limit how effective these efforts can be. By finding the right balance between these opportunities and their challenges, military HRM practices can better support motivation and long-term service.

Conclusion

Motivation and retention in the military are shaped by leadership, unit cohesion, work-life balance, and recognition. Effective leadership fosters trust and commitment, while strong bonds among service members enhance morale and a sense of duty. Work-life balance remains a key challenge, requiring organizational support to reduce stress and improve career longevity. Additionally, recognition, rewards, and benefits play a crucial role in maintaining job satisfaction. A strategic approach that integrates these factors can enhance motivation, reduce attrition, and strengthen military effectiveness, ensuring long-term success in personnel management.

References:

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