

National Conversation about Work - New Zealand Army

Introduction

The recruitment and retention of trained personnel is a significant challenge facing the New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF). There have been positive growth in the numbers of Regular Force personnel since 2005 but the rate of growth had slowed more recently (NZDF Annual Report 2008). However, the full impact of the global economic recession on the New Zealand labour market is only now starting to show and it can be anticipated that more trained personnel will stay put while employment is tight.

The composition of personnel in the New Zealand Defence Force shows that the Army is the largest employer of the three Services and has more than twice as many personnel as the Navy or the Air Force. As at July 2008 there were 4,754 in the Regular Force, 1,690 Non-Regular, 689 Civilians with an Army total of 7,133 (NZDF Annual Report 2008).

The integration of women, Māori, Pacific Peoples and other ethnicities is a litmus test for how well diversity and in particular Equal Employment Opportunities (EEO) are being implemented. The NZDF has a higher proportion of women personnel than Australia and the United Kingdom with an overall gender ratio of 17%.

The Army has the lowest gender ratio of the three forces at 14%, compared with the Navy at 23% and the Air Force at 17%.

The Army has the highest proportion of Māori with over 20% compared to the general population at 14.9%. The Chief of the Defence Force, Lieutenant General Mateparae is the second Māori to head the New Zealand Defence Force since Major General Brian Poananga who served in the position from 1978 until his retirement in 1981.

The recruitment of Pacific Island peoples to the Army is acknowledged as a concern given their low representation by comparison to their representation in the population. The low numbers may reflect the absence of army and army traditions in some Pacific island nations. The Army waived part of its uniform requirement to ensure a Sikh individual could wear his turban at work.

In 2000 the NZDF removed all policy barriers to the employment of women and all occupations are now open to women. The Army has a policy of allowing women to be deployed where men are deployed and women are increasingly performing key leadership functions in peacekeeping. Between February 2007 and January 2008 there was an increase of over 40% of women serving in peacekeeping roles. Currently the NZDF contributes to US missions in Timor-Leste, Afghanistan, the Sudan, the Middle East, Iraq and Korea.

The Hanson Burns report 2005 identified that initiatives designed to integrate women in the services also benefitted other minority groups. The NZDF is building on this integration with a new diversity strategy which aims to optimise performance, including

developing the differences that each individual brings to the organisation team. As part of this, project teams have been working to develop a military remuneration system that will recognise and reward people in a way that allows greater choice and equity across the services (NZDF Annual Report 2008).

The traditional reasons advanced for the lower representation of women in the Army relate to the majority of roles in the Army being such things as riflemen, tank operators or gunners, involving physically robust and dirty work considered not to be attractive to many women. Women are better represented in more administrative and medical type roles.

Legal and policy barriers to women's representation in the Army have been progressively removed. The fundamental issue that needs to be addressed is the pervasiveness of masculinity in the military culture and the pressures put on women to conform to a masculine set of values and standards (EEO Trust Work Life Awards, 2007).

Currently in the Army there is one female Brigadier, two women at Colonel Rank and five others at Lieutenant Colonel. A number of women including four officers have gone on parental leave in the past 12-18 months and these career breaks and family obligations influence career patterns, particularly operational deployments and where and when women are posted.

Equity training

Every unit in the Army receives an equal employment opportunities briefing each year and there are moves to train more trainers so the number of those able to undertake the work increases. The Army also contributes to the NZDF Ongoing Attitude Survey which is a valuable source of information to monitor organisational health as an aid to human resource development. It is also one way the NZDF uses to monitor harassment or bullying. The Army's equity advisor is also hoping to have equity included as a briefing issue in the new Army Leadership Framework. There is a growing acknowledgement of the move away from equity compliance and reporting to recognising equity at all levels of a diverse army.

Process of engagement

Two groups of army personnel based at Waiouru were involved in National Conversation focus groups. The groups were organised by the NZ Army's equity advisor Major Geoff Fox. The first group comprised nine officers with seven men and two women and ranging in rank from Lieutenant Colonel through to 2nd Lieutenant. The second group of two women and four men comprised other ranks from warrant officers through to privates.

The discussion started with the question, "what do you like about your jobs?" and then moved to a general discussion about what personnel felt could be improved in relation to equality and fairness and general employment conditions. The questions were much

the same as those conducted previously as part of the Commission's National Conversation with Navy personnel at Devonport.

What army personnel like about their jobs?

All of the Army personnel spoke with enthusiasm about aspects of their jobs that they liked.

The variety of the job with lots of different activities every day, the pay and job security, and the attraction of travel through operational deployment were listed as major attractions of life in the Army.

"My pay is pretty good and I'm well ahead of my peer group from school", said one junior officer.

The wider Army "family" was a strong feature in retention.

"What keeps me in the Army are the people. For me, it's not the pay. I wouldn't even know if I could earn the equivalent in civvy street."

Posting to Waiouru, an Army town located in subalpine conditions in the middle North Island on the perimeter of the Tongariro National Park, led to a variety of perspectives.

"This location is in the middle of everywhere and the middle of nowhere. The paradox of Waiouru is that it is both somewhere you can't go anywhere from and yet it's the gateway to an adventure playground."

"As an Army training ground it is fantastic but the opportunities are limited in terms of a host of family things such as choice in schooling and the employment of spouses," said one officer who was on an unaccompanied posting without his family to Waiouru.

Younger officers and ratings had mixed views about life in Waiouru.

"You don't meet a lot of women here", said a young male officer. Others said Waiouru offered unrivalled opportunities for tramping, climbing, hunting and fishing.

"Off duty I socialise, go to the bar, to the gym, there's the mountain and all the outdoor stuff. It's not far to Taupo and Palmerston North.

Issues

The following issues were raised in two groups. They have been grouped by themes.

- Changing attitudes to women
- Pregnant servicewomen
- Operational deployment
- Provision of child care
- Transparency of pay, conditions and career progression

Changing attitudes to women

The highest ranking female officer in the group said that throughout the Army there was more acceptance of women and that the career management structure within the Army was identical now for men and women. "When I was commissioned women could only join certain branches. I wanted to be an infantry officer but I couldn't as combat trades were not open to women then."

Another woman who had first joined the Army 27 years ago believed that it had moved ahead significantly in that time. When she had first joined women were in restricted roles and old school male attitudes dominated. She had left the Army for 15 years while she had her family and in the past three and a half years since she'd been back she had never experienced any barriers to women's advancement.

Male officers spoke of junior female officer colleagues who were just as successful as men in terms of promotion early in their careers. However, when they took time out for families then inevitably they lost time with their peers who superseded them in training and experience.

One of the male personnel said he considered the Army's family friendly policies to be aimed mainly at women. However, other men said it had extended to them and to solo parent fathers.

The Army is currently considering the new legislative requirements relating to provision of facilities for breastfeeding in the workplace. Approximately 20 women are on paid parental leave at any given time.

Pregnant servicewomen

A female officer from Defence Forces said she appreciated well written guidelines on how to manage pregnant servicewomen. Early in her career she commanded a number of pregnant females and she also gave birth to two children herself.

"Without clear guidelines, it was difficult to manage pregnant servicewomen fairly and safely back then, especially considering the amount of time the unit spent on field exercises. I had my first child 5 weeks early because I was carrying a pack on a field exercise the day before."

A woman who had five children and had been in the Army for over 20 years said she had received considerable support when she was pregnant and coming back after having given birth, even down to the Army's uniform requirements taking her pregnancy into consideration.

Operational deployment

While operational deployment is an attraction for many in the Army, there was concern from both groups about the "leanness" of the Army which manifested itself in repeat

tours of duty for some personnel. One officer spoke of six deployments to Timor-Leste and spoke of the exhaustion and fatigue that repeat postings entail.

“It’s too lean a machine to allow manning relative to the operational tempo. This means the Army has to rotate the same people on multiple missions. If 100 people are away at any given time, this means there has to be 100 behind them and 100 more on post-deployment. This leaves operational gaps that have to be covered in units.”

Provision of child care

The provision of child care for army staff who were deployed in the field, were solo parents or who were attending training in another location was a difficulty cited by officers and other rankings. There appeared to a general view that if a particular commanding officer was “family friendly” then this made life easier for those with children because informal support was likely to be extended. A female officer gave the example of babysitting the children of two staff sergeants so they could be deployed in the field. She had also enabled a Lance Corporal to take a pre-school child with her when her specialist skills were needed in Auckland. “As a commanding officer I do that sort of thing regularly.” Others said that at the local level the degree to which personnel were able to accommodate their families depended on which unit they belonged to and commanders’ attitudes.

The Army’s recruitment is now attracting older applicants and many of them require provision for children or child care. The issue of child care expenses, the availability of transit housing so children can accompany soldiers on courses are issues for some soldiers and potential army candidates.

The noticeable number of married couple recruits has accompanying welfare issues. Many more are in their early 30s with well established families and the Army will have to have modern policies to accommodate people under training if it wishes to attract the best quality candidates.

While child care was available in Waiouru, there was a lack of choice compared with Trentham, for example, that had five proximate child care facilities.

Transparency of pay, conditions and career progression

Several soldiers in the group of ratings said they felt the Army needed to be more transparent about pay and conditions. They indicated that recruitment advertising listed rewards that included optimal exposure to allowances that some of them did not receive.

“The lesson to be learnt is to be up front and tell us the facts”. Explanations about pay needed to include the impact of allowances and of deductions.

One male soldier believed that the Army’s career management was reactive and not proactive and that advice of a posting with only three months notice was unhelpful for families who needed to plan children’s schooling or changed employment for partners

and spouses. He acknowledged that some strategic postings were by necessity “hush hush”.

Conclusions

Those we spoke with at Waiouru were enthusiastic about their Army roles, and all of the women believed there were no longer legislative or policy barriers to career advancement. Like the Navy, pregnancy of personnel requires careful consideration and impacts on operational deployment. The stresses of repeated deployment for some reflects the leanness of personnel numbers in the Army.

In addition to formal policies, access to flexible work and family/friendly ways of working are dependent on roles and also on managerial attitudes. All of the officers and ratings had realistic expectations about the Army’s ability to accommodate individual requirements given the outputs required of the service. The diversity policy of the New Zealand Defence Force underpins the challenges of recruiting and promoting quality candidates across genders and diverse communities in the future.