

WORK FUTURES RESEARCH CENTRE

How do reasons to leave the armed forces impact on the transition to civilian work and life?

In the United Kingdom each year, about 16,000 men and women leave the Armed Forces. The circumstances of leaving military service vary from regular retirement after twenty or so years of service, to early service leavers, medical discharge or taking advantage of voluntary severance schemes. Depending on the circumstances of leaving military service the experience of the transition to civilian work and life also varies. Thus circumstances of leaving the Armed Forces need to be taken into consideration when designing support structures and programmes for service leavers and veterans.

Key Points

- Priorities change over the life course and influence how life in the military is experienced
- Avoidance of institutionalisation and (mental) health issues are reasons to leave the Armed Forces
- The decision to leave is influenced by career opportunities in military and civilian spheres
- Financial aspects and work-life balance matter
- Transition support should take the circumstances under which the Armed Forces are left into consideration

Introduction

In order to understand the transition from military service to civilian work, it is important to consider the circumstances that led to ending a military career. This might be more or less voluntary. Some leave when they reach retirement age or are medically discharged, others leave after a shorter period of time or make use of voluntary severance options. Depending on experiences and skills obtained during

military service, service leavers are likely to have different needs. An anticipated and well-prepared exit from the Armed Forces promises a smoother and more successful transition to civilian work and life. The circumstances of leaving the armed forces must inform the design of support structures and programmes for service leavers and veterans.

The Study

The following findings are based on life history interviews that were carried out in the UK between May 2017 and July 2018 to investigate the pathways that led participants to join the UK Armed Forces and their skills acquisition experiences. Military service provides resources for personal growth and allows service personnel to acquire a wide range of skills. It is important to know, whether and how these skills can be transferred. Funding for this research project has been provided by the University of Southampton.

Research participants were recruited through personal contacts, word-of-mouth, flyers, advertisements in Soldier Magazine and a local newspaper, a Skills Fair at Tidworth Garrison, charities, and a military network in a large company. So far, sixteen white British men were interviewed. It is desirable to carry out additional interviews with women and men from different ethnic backgrounds. Research participants served in the British Army, the Naval Services and the Royal Air Force and included officer

and non-officer ranks. Ten participants had been officers who might have been more willing to talk about their experience than non-officer ranks. Perhaps they had a more successful transition due to access to more resources than lower ranking personnel. This will require further research.

The oldest participant was in his 80s and had served for two years in 1955 to 1957 (National Service). He was included in the sample because he was actively involved in his old regiment organisation and in supporting service leavers and veterans. The youngest participant was 27 and had served from 2008 to 2017. Only two participants had served less than five years, five had served between five and nine years, five between ten and nineteen years, and four longer than twenty years. Four research participants had left between 2015 and 2017, three in 2012 and 2013, nine had left earlier (between 1957 and 2005). This means that their transition experience reflects changes in services available to veterans.

Key Findings

Participants gave different reasons for leaving the armed forces. Priorities change over the life courses and respondents realised that they did not enjoy the work as much as before. Those who had progressed to higher ranks felt that they spent more time doing deskwork than

being with their regiment. Some also realised that it would be difficult or impossible to progress further in their military careers. Others felt that they did not have enough control over assignments. While it was ok to be posted overseas (or domestically) on short notice when one

was younger, this became frustrating when one was older, especially for those who had a wife and children. Some also had frustrating experiences with the chain of command.

"I always said I would do it as long as I was enjoying it, but as soon as the balance tips maybe would be a time to leave."

Officer, British Army 1997 - 2007

Postings

Respondents stated that early on in their careers, they found overseas posts and regularly changing assignments interesting and exciting. They were experienced as challenging and provided opportunities for personal growth. It is – of course – important to note that the same conflict could be experienced very differently depending on one's role, perspective and time of deployment. Overtime lack of control over postings was experienced as frustrating as it interfered with personal preferences and family life.

Institutionalisation and Health

A further reason was that the rules and discipline which initially were embraced became annoying and felt too rigid. This suggests, that the regimentation had served its purpose. Participants had experienced personal growth and development and were now ready for the next step – outside the military. One respondent explained that he wanted to

avoid institutionalisation. Another one had observed that there was a high suicide rate in his unit, which he wanted to avoid. Many respondents mentioned that they wanted to leave young enough to pursue a second career. While their army pension was not sufficient to retire, for some it provided them with enough financial security to try out a new career and establish themselves in it before they had to earn money.

Lack of Resources

Some respondents criticized the lack of quality of (outdated) technology. Budget matters not only concerned equipment, but also housing and pensions. Financial security and welfare were aspects that had attracted respondents to military service and most respondents felt that the overtime, financial remuneration and living conditions declined. However, one respondent who left the army in 2017 noted that in contrast to a decade earlier, individual housing was now available. However, this was not necessarily seen as beneficial, as communal living allows watching out for one another. For those who could take advantage of a voluntary retirement scheme, this presented a good opportunity to pursue a second career.

Work-Life Balance

Spending more time with the family (the youngest child, a new partner) was presented as another reason. In some way, the decision to leave and make use of severance opportunities was justified with spending more time with the family.

Policy Implications

Priorities change over the life course. Learning opportunities and challenges associated with frequently changing assignments and the associated change in location either domestically or overseas are one of the attractions of military service, especially at the beginning of a military career and at younger age. However, uncertainty and lack of control over postings can be burdensome later in life, especially if one wishes to spend more

time with one's family and manage dual careers. In order to assure successful and smooth transitions to civilian work and life, the widely differing circumstances of leaving the armed forces need to be considered when designing interventions for service leavers and veterans. Support should be tailored to the skills, experiences, interests and needs of service leavers.

Author

Dr Silke Roth

Department of Sociology, Social Policy
and Criminology

silke.roth@soton.ac.uk

Work Futures Research Centre

University of Southampton

[@Workfutures](https://twitter.com/Workfutures)

workfutures.southampton.ac.uk

November 2018