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Employers snap up army leavers at the exit



Richard Donkin

Last week, the government released figures revealing that the number of full-time trained personnel in the armed forces had fallen by a thousand since the start of the year. More worrying for those heading the services is that the figure has been accelerating.

But is it a cause for alarm? While low pay and casualty rates in Iraq and Afghanistan have been identified as persuading some to leave, they did not appear to be overriding issues for the leavers I met at the forces regional resettlement centre in Aldershot, Surrey, last week.

Arrange of factors were influencing people's decisions and most of them were highly positive. Some had come to the end of their term, some felt they had done enough with a number of arduous tours and

some were simply ready for a change.

Like other employers, the armed forces must come to terms with shorter time frames influencing career thinking. Those in the services, however, have always understood that they will be shifting to a second career at some stage. The difference today, perhaps, is that some are finding the lure of civilian job opportunities too attractive to pass over.

I didn't hear any stories of low morale or disillusionment, although some argued that the UK could do more to recognise those in the services. But there was a tacit acknowledgement that the risks associated with modern conflict are influencing decisions to a degree.

One officer I met had seen two of his troop shot in Afghanistan. Now, he was preparing to start a new career as a futures trader in the City. "I'm not sure how it will go, but I think I'm ready," he said.

"A lot of these people feel they have done what they came to do in the forces, have nothing left to prove to themselves, and want to move on," says David Duffy, managing director of

Career Transition Partnership, the organisation that prepares service people for civilian careers.

CTP is part of Right Management, the outplacement and human resources consulting company owned by Manpower. The CTP arrangement has been running since 1998, when Right Management won the Ministry of Defence contract to handle transitions from the services. I sat in on one of its workshops helping people to prepare CVs and covering letters for jobs.

One area where people were struggling was the requirement, found on many job application forms, to explain how they demonstrate a particular quality – what the HR profession calls "competencies" or skills and abilities.

A nursing officer was pondering over a box seeking information on "interpersonal sensitivity". She wasn't sure how to frame her words, yet here was someone who was used to handling the relatives of people who had suffered serious injuries in combat.

"They struggle with the 'I' word," says Mr Duffy. "I have never worked with a better

group of people but, at the same time, I have never worked with a group of people who undersell themselves so much. They do extraordinary things but regard it as part of the job, not something to shout about."

Our trainer explains that the covering letter that accompanies the CV is a sales document. Fortunately, most service people

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don't need to sell themselves. Some 15,000 people leave the services every year and 93 per cent of them find employment within six months.

"People are finding the jobs they want. Sometimes they will make a change after a year or two as all people do, but we're working hard to ensure that people are matched to the right careers," says Mr Duffy.

Sometimes people need to leave early through no fault of their own. Jack Scoffham, an officer cadet at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, had his hopes of a military career wrecked by a skin condition. "It's a real disappointment but at least I have my university degree, so now I am applying for graduate entry jobs just like any other university leaver," he says.

In contrast, Lt Col. Phil Hogan, of the Royal Engineers, has spent his whole career in the Army and recognises that today he must learn to understand civilian life. "There are different ways of thinking and I need to learn that".

His work in the Royal School of Military Engineering has proved a useful background for converting to a civilian training role. His main concerns are not so much about finding work but about lifestyle.

"I want to make a decision that's right for my family so need to consider various options," he says.

Most of those in the workshop were weighing up options – finding the right type of work in the right place. Emily Hughes, a

captain in the Army Air Corps, has spent much of her military career as a Lynx helicopter pilot. Now she is looking at consulting positions that reflect the kind of work she has been undertaking recently in leadership training at Sandhurst.

"I'm already going through a transition in my existing job. Converting to a civilian pilot would cost a lot of money. It's not something I aim to do. Flying in the Army was possibly the most exciting thing I could do. I don't think I would be challenged by flying elsewhere."

In the past, this has been a worry for some employers, concerned that they will not be able to match an active military career. But the chance to enjoy a quieter life seemed appealing for many in the workshop.

Charlene Brookes, the CTP regional employment and training manager at Aldershot, spent her early career in the military and understands the issues facing service personnel.

"The great thing today," she says, "is that more and more companies are taking interest in people leaving the services. We have a dedicated job site online

that is advertising 200 vacancies at any one time, specifically seeking military people.

"It's their experience that sells these people. Employers want people who have self-discipline and who can organise themselves. A little while back, HSBC came to me seeking service leavers to fill roles as financial planners and mortgage managers. Their target this year is to attract 50 service people in to these jobs. So far they have 12."

"Finding talent in the marketplace is getting harder. Companies come back to us time and again because leavers show what they can do very quickly."

You could forgive some military recruiters for grumbling that the leaving system may be working too well.

On the contrary, good prospects for converting military skills to civilian jobs can be an attraction in recruitment.

But balancing the flows of people through service careers remains a challenge. At least the door marked "exit" seems clear enough.

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