

An Investigation into the Transferable Skills of Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) in the Defence Forces of Ireland (Army Only) on Retirement

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Abstract

The Irish Defence Forces currently employs approximately 8,750 personnel, with some 7,300 employed in the army. Approximately 3,139 Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) have changed career paths into civilian roles between the years 2000-2015. Many of these individuals found the transition from a military career to a civilian career challenging, despite having obtained some useful transferable skills. One of the most pertinent challenges has been the lack of any appreciation by employers of the range of transferrable skills that were gained by NCOs during their military careers. This paper aims to identify what transferable skills contribute to the transition from a military career to a civilian career from the perspective of a small sample of former army NCOs. The methodology consists of a qualitative study involving semi-structured interviews with key personnel who previously served in the Irish Defence Forces. The findings indicate that the range of transferable skills gained in a military career have important and timely relevance to careers in a civilian context. Recommendations are proposed in relation to how the Defence Forces might assist retiring personnel to target civilian employers and jobs.

Keywords: Defence Forces; Career Transition; Transferable Skills.

Introduction

Very little research has been carried out on career paths of Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) in the Defence Forces of Ireland (Army only) on retirement. The Defence Forces is a significant employer in Ireland and its training and structure develops and provides added value across a number of sectors in Irish society, including the business and voluntary sector. This research bridges the gap in this field particularly in the Irish context.

This research is important because it can establish a base line of skills and how individuals acquired them. Individuals should be capable of transferring these skills into other work places and into society at large. This paper will help to understand the experience of some NCOs transitioning from the military to civilian careers. Therefore, this research has significance because it will identify the skills gained by the individual that might be useful in transitioning to a civilian career. Military life differs from civilian life and the Defence Forces Strategy Statement (2017-2020) sums up this uniqueness through its mission statement, which states “to contribute to the security of the State by the military defence of its territorial integrity and to fulfil all roles assigned by Government, through the deployment of well-motivated and effective Defence Forces” (Department of Defence, 2018).

It is important to note at this stage that the word retirement is used as a common factor and includes all those NCOs who have left the Defence Forces. Consequently, the word retirement is used throughout this document to capture all those who are no longer members of the Defence Forces and are now civilians.

Background to the research

Between 2000 and 2015, an average of 210 NCOs retired from the Defence Forces each year. Little is known about the skills they brought with them into their civilian life or how these skills influenced their subsequent career choice. Data received from the Defence Forces clarifies why they retired in military terms, however, it does not state whether they have secured civilian employment. This research is an investigation into the experience of a small sample of NCOs in the Defence Forces of Ireland (Army only) arising from their retirement over the 15 year period 2000-2015.

The Defence Forces is a complex organisation consisting of three main formations: the Army, Navy and Air Corps, with a total establishment of approximate 8,750 personnel (all ranks). The Army is the largest formation with 7,300 personnel in all ranks. These formations consist of smaller units and sub units that hold specialist teams that allow the Defence Forces to function on a daily basis.

The Defence Forces of Ireland is similar to other organisations, in that it has a unique operating culture. However, it is very different in the way it operates and conducts its operations and day-to-day business. Every member of the Defence Forces receives training with the same ethos and every member must reach an acceptable standard to become a permanent member of the Defence Forces. A military career is full of adventure and the training for the Defence Forces is the same as all other military organisations across the world, in that it is designed to train the individual to think as part of a team in the most stressful situations and survive. The Defence Forces’ uniqueness is summed up in its mission statement: “to contribute to the security of the State by providing for the military defence of its territorial integrity and to fulfil all roles assigned by Government, through the deployment of well-motivated and effective Defence Forces” (Department of Defence, 2018).

In 2012, the Defence Forces underwent a radical restructuring process with the Army moving from a three Brigade structure to a two Brigade structure. The overall strength of the Defence Forces went from 11,500 to 9,500 across all three services.

Aim of the study

The primary aim of this study is to identify the transferable skills that the individual learns during their service with the Defence Forces. This involved interviewing former members of the Defence Forces and employers to identify the skills and skills gaps, if any. The findings from this research will be used to recommend further research in the area.

Learning in the Defence Forces

Whilst the theory works within the context of the Defence Forces and other organisations, much of the knowledge soldiers learn is through a process of observed behaviour. Vast knowledge is gained by NCOs both on overseas missions and on training courses. Some of this knowledge is captured in military manuals and passed on by other instructors. However, a lot of important information that is gained as tacit knowledge is information that can only be passed on by the individual sharing the experiential knowledge with another individual (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). Some of this tacit knowledge is learned through hard experience, for example, the individual may have come under fire so that shared experience is vital to the young soldier and the younger NCOs.

A military career is full of adventure, and the training for the Irish Defence Forces is the same as other military organisations across the world. The training is designed to ensure that individuals think as part of a team in the most stressful situations. The majority of personnel who enter the Defence Forces do so through the general enlistment process. Every member, regardless of his or her entry process, will have to successfully complete the initial training. The ultimate objective of all military training is to develop individuals, units and formations in order to ensure military success. Training reflects the ethos and doctrine to which the Defence Forces subscribes and is stimulating, rewarding, and inspires subordinates to achieve greater heights. A valuable by-product of good training is the fostering of teamwork and the generation of the force's confidence in commanders, its structures and procedures. It also underpins the core values of the Defence Forces, which are respect, loyalty, selflessness, physical courage, moral courage and integrity.

Career transition from the Defence Forces perspective

The prospect of leaving the Defence Forces and seeking a new career can be daunting and scary even for the professional career soldier. They have proven themselves against other soldiers across the world while on peacekeeping and peace enforcement missions and leading, training and managing our nation's youngest soldiers. They are beset with the notion they may fail as a civilian and need all the help and guidance that is available. Previous research has been carried out by former members of the military into the area of career transition of military personnel but this research was focused on the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (USA) armed forces. These previous studies discuss and analyse the preparation their individual military organisations undertake in order to transit the individual from the military to civilian career (such as that undertaken by Haynie and Shepherd, 2011). There is no

policy within the Irish Defence Forces in relation to preparation or transition of army personnel to a civilian career. The transition from any military organisation can be complex, the more preparation the military do to aid the transition, the greater the chance of the individual success (Haynie and Shepherd, 2011).

There are three vital strands to the circumstances surrounding the challenge of transition from the military to a civilian career. The first is that military personnel, particularly soldiers, train to kill or not kill depending on the operational situation. The second strand is that military life offers what the Defence Forces refer in their Defence Forces Handbook (2011) as “a life less ordinary” (pp.11-13). The Defence Forces offer the individual everything they could possibly need in life: food, accommodation, sports, friendship, travel and the opportunity to bring peace and stability to different parts of the world. However, dependency on the military system that provides everything can lead to its own challenges during the transition. The third strand is the length of time an individual spends in the military organisation. An individual could, in theory, spend his or her entire adult life in the Defence Forces. That notion or comparison would be difficult to find in a civilian career.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was used for this study. Interviews were conducted with five former NCOs and two employers who are currently employing former members of the Defence Forces. All interviews were conducted in private on a one-to-one basis and all participants were forwarded the interview template in advance to allow them to focus on the research question and prepare some of the answers. The pre-interview briefing also included a consent form, giving them the option of withdrawing at any stage and confirming the data protection requirements. The interviews were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed. All findings arising from the interviews were considered using a thematic approach. In addition to the interviews, the Defence Forces were contacted by the researcher to provide data in relation to NCOs leaving the organisation. Information received from the Defence Forces included reports and other data regarding organisational priorities. Exploring the research through the interview method was necessary given the unique nature of the content. This method has not previously been used in this context in Ireland, although it has been used in other countries.

Profile of interviewees

All of those retired Defence Forces personnel interviewed had extensive service within the Defence Forces. The average length of service was 20 years, and their experience of transition was very positive in that they all adjusted well into their new lives. During their military career, all had been overseas and had been involved in conflict situations, with the exception of participant number 5.

The two employers gave valuable information into the skillset of the former Defence Forces members they had employed or are currently employing. They identified some gaps in the required skills and discussed the difference between former members of the Defence Forces and their civilian counterparts.

Findings and Discussion

This study interviewed five retired members to ascertain what transferable skills were particularly useful arising from their military career. In order to appreciate these findings in context, Table 1 below shows each of the participant's current employment status and position:

Table 1: Current Employment Status of Participants

Name	Current employment status
1	Barrister
2	IT lecturer
3	Stunt man in the film industry
4	Head of security in an internationally-focused port
5	Recently retired from the Defence Forces and is starting a business

All participants agreed that the core skills they acquired were leadership, team working, self-discipline and self-motivation, and taking personal responsibility for their actions. Participant 3 added that a sense of pride and trustworthiness are two key skills in his current role that are vital skills learned both informally and formally in the Defence Forces. Participant 5 stated that networking and the ability to plan and organise were proving invaluable in her new start-up business. What they currently do had some bearing on the transferable skills they chose to discuss. All participants stated that the skills such as leadership came naturally and they did not have to think about the action they took. This supports Zarecky's (2014) findings that:

...all participants certainly came across as having a positive, "can do approach", and a strong work ethic. However, this was not something that they seemed to be aware of, perhaps because it is something everyone possesses in the military world, and as such is taken for granted (p.60)

Table 2 below outlines the specific transferrable skills cited as being relevant by all participants in this study.

Table 2: Transferrable skills gained in a military career

Competencies	Skill
Team Work	Loyalty Friendship Self-confidence Networking Change management
Planning and Organising	Ability to prioritise Responsibility for own actions Time management
Leadership	Ability to analysis the situation
Motivation	Self-motivation Sense of pride

The skills outlined by all participants and summarised above are similar to those reported by Robertson and Brott (2013) who found that:

Veterans regularly cited the tasks and skills learned on the job and the manner in which they currently use those skills either in their transition or on the job. Skills such as communication, training and leading others and characteristics such as hard work, loyalty and one's ability to manage change (p.73)

The profile of each interviewee shows that all of those interviewed were career soldiers. None of those interviewed reported that the skills they learned prior to enlisting had a direct effect on their ability to endure military life. In fact, most of them reported that they considered having a previous career as being a disadvantage.

Participant five worked as a personnel manager for a major retailer prior to her enlistment. She reported that she found adjusting to the military context harder than her fellow recruits and consequently had to repeat her recruit training. She considered this being a consequence of her previous experience and her age, which enabled her to question what she called "the nonsense stuff that went on during her recruit training".

Transferable skills that are learned informally

This study identifies a number of skills that participants identified as having been learned during their military career, but on an informal basis. Table 3, below, identifies these.

Table 3: Skills Learned Informally in the Military

Competencies	Skill
Team Work	Loyalty Friendship Self-confidence Networking Change management
Planning and Organising	Ability to prioritise Responsibility for own actions Time management
Leadership	Ability to analyse the situation
Motivation	Self-motivation Sense of pride

The Defence Forces instruction staff spend an enormous amount of time outside of normal duty hours with their students and this time is spent teaching and coaching the student in areas they may be weak in or areas they may need positive reinforcement. Most of this time is spent by telling stories and relaying events to show the student that the formal training actually works in a real-life situation. In a military environment, it is vital that the soldiers have a sense of pride in themselves and their unit.

The skills listed in Table 3 above are transferrable to any civilian organisation. The difficulty for the individual transiting to civilian life is identifying the informal and formal skills. Military training is based on core beliefs or values that the organisation is built on. Most organisations pride themselves on their core values and mission. This finding supports the work of Zarecky (2014) who observed that:

you can take a lot of the core values with you, they are so embedded as part of your psyche, and it's very difficult to change them. So these military values are good values, really good strengths to help you transition, transferable strengths that you can take to civilian life (p.59)

The informal knowledge and training binds the individual's belief in the organisation and their fellow soldiers. The core values of the Defence Forces (cited as being: respect, loyalty, selflessness, physical courage, moral courage and integrity) are underpinned by the formal and informal teaching and training.

The employers' perspective

The two employers interviewed had similar backgrounds but held different views in relation to what skills they required from all their potential employees. Both participants were asked questions in relation to the skillset they sought in candidates and if the skills of the former Defence Force personnel were suitable for roles within their organisations. Table 4 (below) details the answers to the questions.

Table 4: Skillset Identified by Employers during Interview

Question	Participant One	Participant Two
Are there skills that you have identified in former Defence Force personnel that you were not necessarily looking for?	No! Can't say that I have, however, this job needs a high degree of communication both written and verbal. I found the ex-military people excellent in communication and command and control	No! I know what I need from all my new employees. I do find that ex-military have a great capacity to learn very quickly and once you tell them something it's done. This is time and money saving.
Are there skills that former members of the Defence Forces were lacking or needed work on?	The one thing I will say about them is they can be very black and white in some cases. This is a product of their training. The benefit here to me is that the port is governed by international security protocols and this requires those rules and laws to be applied in a black and white nature. So what some people may call a "restriction" I see it as a positive.	I won't say they lack certain skills, more they apply certain communication techniques that take time to get used too. An example would be how they give instructions or direct the public. They can be very direct and lack the personal touch that would in most cases be normal for a civilian. To be fair I would have to say that once you say it to them they change and learn very quickly and most important they don't take it to heart and see it as a learning opportunity.
How did the former Defence Forces personnel interact with their civilian counterparts?	I don't or have never had an issue with the Defence Forces people mixing with their civilian counterparts. Irish troops have a great and long history on peace-keeping missions all over the world. This allows them to mix and get on with everybody	None at all, in fact they have very good social skills and seem to blend in and can be great to keep the team focused and have a laugh too.
What skills have you identified in the Ex Defence Forces employees?	Communication, organising and planning, their tact and their ability to deal with tricky situations. Teamwork and their adaptability skills	Communication, their ability to predict problems and then solve them quickly, very clear when taking and giving instructions, their leadership and command skills, their ability to change focus and they know how to impress with their presence including how to wear a uniform

Employers' perception of the Defence Forces is critical to their understanding of the calibre of the individual leaving. According to McDermott (2007):

knowledge of service life is limited to those serving and their immediate families, thus the world of the military is largely seen through media streams. This limitation extends

to potential employers who may not understand or have knowledge of the skills military have (p.4).

This is an important point as it's critical that the individual contemplating leaving the Defence Forces should understand their own individual skillset. It is equally important that the potential employer sees the potential in that individual. Both employers interviewed had a good knowledge of the Defence Forces and had some knowledge of the type of skills and training the military recruits receive and consequently they can see the value former Defence Forces NCOs can bring to their organisation. The research into this topic supports McDermott's statement to some degree. Ireland is a smaller country than the UK and so, whilst there is a lot of work to do in educating the potential employer about the skill, attitude and knowledge of the Defence Forces personnel, it is not a big a challenge as it would be in the UK.

Preparation the Defence Forces Undertake Prior to Departure of Staff

Prior planning to retire from any military organisation is a vital step in providing the knowledge for a successful transition to civilian life. All five participants were asked questions as to what the Defence Forces did to prepare them for the transition. Participants 1-4 all said nothing was available, while participant 5 could have availed of a transition course but chose not to.

The context of why the NCOs retired was also considered. The findings as to why they retired are outlined in Table 5 (below). All five participants had a variety of reasons for leaving; for example, participants 3 and 4 felt that the military system had let them down and participant 4 had challenges in relation to a promotion.

Table 5: Reasons for leaving the Defence Forces

Participant number	Reason for leaving
1	Had just been promoted and the overseas missions had stopped due to the downturn in the economy. Left and took the CS pension
2	The pay in the Defence Forces was poor at the time. I was 40 and felt I had the confidence and skill to make it in civilian life
3	I wanted to spend more time with my young children
4	Confusion in relation to a promotion and felt the system had let him down
5	Felt she had done all that was available and wanted a new challenge and had a young child to look after

The participants were asked what did they miss about the Defence Forces and there were a range of findings. All participants stated they missed some elements of their military life and the focus was on their friends and the good times they had.

In terms of the level of preparation provided by the Defence Forces to personnel planning on retirement, participants have some interesting views. These are summarised in Table 6, below.

Table 6: Defence Forces Preparation for Retirement

Question 1	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4	Participant 5
What did the Defence Forces do to prepare you for a civilian career?	Absolutely nothing - I prepared myself	Nothing, I had 3 months paid leave that I used to get a job	I think the skills I learned while serving were a great benefit to me	They didn't do anything in a formal way, however, they made me the person I am today	Nothing in a formal way, I was lucky that I had a lot of positions that gave me very good transferrable skills

The findings show that there was no formal structure to the retirement of each individual interviewed. The only official course is labelled a pre-retirement course, which lasts for 3 days and takes in a variety of topics including taxation, medical issues and pensions. It is not compulsory, nor is it targeted at the soft skills such as CV writing and interview preparation skills.

Conclusion

This study explored the transferable skills that are acquired both formally and informally, in a military career. The application and recognition of these skills remain important factors for success in transitioning to civilian life and career management. A number of recommendations emerge as a result of this study. These are detailed below. The research also concluded that the challenges facing the Irish Defence Forces members retiring are similar to those in the USA and UK military. The skills, knowledge and behaviour are similar in all soldiers, the society they transition to plays an important part in that transition process.

Recommendation 1: Structured Transition Course

The Defence Forces currently run two transition courses, each of which lasts for 3 days. Each course covers different modules. These courses should be combined to

deliver a cohesive and coherent course that can provide better focus for participants over a single five-day period.

Recommendation 2: Create a careers office to be located in each of the three services: Army, Navy and Air Corps.

This office, if structured correctly, could operate in the same way as any recruitment office. It need not be a separate, stand-alone office. It could be an added service provided within the Defence Forces. It would facilitate employers who seek former military personnel with transferable skills to liaise with a wider pool of potential recruits.

Recommendation 3: Open days and information events for potential employers

These could be run and companies invited in to meet potential individuals who are contemplating retiring from the Defence Forces. It could be run as a jobs and careers fair and would provide a showcase for the Irish Defence Forces training processes.

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