

National Conversation about Work – New Zealand Defence Force (Navy)

Introduction

One of the main challenges facing the New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) is recruitment and retention, especially the high rates of attrition and the loss of trained personnel. There has been positive growth in the numbers of Regular Force personnel since 2005. Nevertheless, the rate of this growth has slowed recently, and shortfalls in critical trades still remain a concern (NZDF Annual Report 2008).

Despite positive morale, attrition rates are higher than expected. This reflects the fact that trained personnel, particularly in the technical trades, are in high demand outside the NZDF and are leaving to take up jobs at significantly higher levels of remuneration (NZDF Annual Report 2008).

The integration of women in the NZDF can be seen as a litmus test for how well diversity and in particular Equal Employment Opportunities (EEO) are being implemented. The NZDF compared to the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia has a high proportion of women, and in the New Zealand Navy gender representation is 77 percent men and 23 percent women.

The Burton Report 1998 recognised the need for a more comprehensive structural approach in the Navy to help create a safe workplace for women, remove barriers to accessing and succeeding in trade services and to introduce work-life initiatives (including provision of child care and school holiday programmes and flexible work arrangements).

In 2000 the NZDF removed all policy barriers to the employment of women in combat roles and since then there has been a steady increase in the number of women in senior ranks and a steady increase in the retention of women. The Hanson Burns report 2005 identified that initiatives designed to integrate women in the services also benefited 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).

While the NZDF and in particular the Navy have made positive gains in EEO there remains significant recruitment and retention issues that impact widely on the operational effectiveness of the Services.

Process of engagement

The Commission met with 23 personnel from HMNZS Philomel - Devonport Naval Base in Auckland. Three meetings were held with base Commanders, Officers and Ratings, 10 of whom were women and 13 men. These discussions highlighted a number of issues faced by the Navy around equality and fairness and general employment conditions.

Issues

The following issues were raised by all three groups alike. They have been grouped by themes.

- Gender integration
- Racial integration
- Retention
- Flexible work
- Remuneration, recognition and conditions
- Navy personnel numbers
- Employee representation
- Job security
- Childcare
- Pregnancy and solo-parenting
- Welfare

Gender integration

Since the Burton Report (1998) there has been greater promotion of women in the Navy. As of February 2009 there are 92 female officers in the Navy of which 31 are ranked Lieutenant Commander and above. While this is encouraging to other women, there is still an over preponderance of women in certain roles at lower ranks.

Intuitively the feel is that women are drawn to the Navy because of travel opportunities. However, this is not enough to retain women in significant numbers.

“The Navy tries to reflect society, you can’t deny [women] 50% of the population”.

Racial integration

Māori represent about 22% of naval personnel though are under-represented at senior level. This has been identified as a priority and steps towards solutions are being actively sought.

“We just had a noho marae to talk about [Māori representation] this”.

Retention

Retention is a major issue for the Navy. Emphasis has been placed on encouraging ex-Navy personnel back into the service with some success as

40 percent of the current volunteer reserve forces are ex-service men and women. There is the general perception that personnel do not necessarily want to leave the Navy but do so for family reasons. The attrition rate therefore is not because of systemic failing but rather issues of deployment and personnel's willingness to be deployed for the duration of their naval careers.

"We find that ex-personnel are coming back".

Flexible Work

Flexible work is much more common in the Navy today and some personnel are able to take advantage of these provisions, especially those with family commitments (i.e. parents with pre-school children). However, some are not able to access flexible hours as they cannot not make up the hours and others can only apply for flexible hours if they are in a job that allows them to, (e.g. you cannot get flexible hours while at sea). There is an indication of some resentment by those who cannot get flexible work arrangements that they are carrying the load for others and that personnel without children have to go back to sea when others with children chose not to.

"There is good flexibility for some in the Navy".

Remuneration, Recognition and Conditions

In the first 3 years of service, personnel do not have access to naval housing highlighting that there are different privileges available for different ranks. This is seen by new personnel as disadvantaging them and in some cases may lead to them leaving the force due to the increase of living costs in Auckland. Hospital, dental, medical benefits are seen as over and above what would be offered outside the armed forces. The recognition of skills gained outside of the Navy, if or when returning to the service was not regarded as highly as personnel would have preferred.

"The benefits are good. Things like medical and dental services".

Navy Personnel Numbers

The Navy is viewed as a "skinny" organisation, i.e. there are not enough personnel to do the job. The organisation is seen as so skinny that 1 Warrant Officer is doing the job of 3 people because of staff shortages and some mothers feel as though they have to go back to sea as soon as they can (normally when their child is 15 months or more). There is a perception that the workload has increased for everyone.

"This is a skinny organisation with too few people to fill the gaps".

Employee Representation

Section 45 (5) of the Defence Act 1988 states that nothing in the Employment Relations Act 2000 applies to the conditions of service of members of the Armed Forces (Non-civilian) and therefore some Navy personnel feel that they do not have the same employment rights as others. The Navy has its own complaints process including access to the Governor-General for Officers.

Job security

Contracts for the Navy are for 15 years and this is seen as guaranteed job security and a positive aspect.

“You get good job security in the Navy”.

Childcare

HMNZS Philomel provides on-site childcare. However, concern exists over waiting lists (currently 1.5 years) for a place in the childcare facilities. For those not able to access naval childcare they must find an external childcare facility until a place in the Navy facility is available. This is a big issue particularly for deployed couples.

“I think that the childcare provided by the Navy is great”.

Pregnancy and solo parenting

There appears to be a high preponderance of pregnancies within the Navy which brings with it a number of issues. When a female navy employee becomes pregnant she still has to perform duties (e.g. patrol, guard duties) however she is excluded from others such as active deployment and fire duties. In one example, a female at sea, who was almost about to qualify for her rank became pregnant and was withdrawn from active duty. She then had to re-join at the back of the line when she returned. There was no provision for her to re-join at the level at which she left. This is a wider policy issue regarding the safety of both the mother and unborn child in an operational situation. It would be irresponsible to continue to have a pregnant woman on a ship, given the range of operational activities she would be involved in, and which may jeopardise the health of the mother and child.

For naval couples whose partners are deployed the issue of becoming a soloparent and having to fend for themselves and their children is of great concern, especially for mothers with new babies.

“I do a straight 12 hours shift even though I’m pregnant. When my partner is away [on deployment] I’ll be left all alone”.

Welfare

For personnel deployed overseas there is no real means or provision to communicate with home and while at sea there is no provision for computer access (to do banking, emails, social networking etc.) The general perception is that land-based welfare is much better and more accessible.

“We should be able to get greater access to telephones to call our families when we’re away”.

Conclusions

The major issues for the Navy and wider NZDF exist around retention of personnel and the equal provision of rewards, recognition and conditions for everyone. The inability by new personnel to access housing and other privileges and active deployment represent potential factors to why personnel leave the Navy within the first few years of their service.

The Navy has a high preponderance of pregnancies which directly affects the ability to have an effective deployment force and places pressures on other personnel to carry the load. Access to flexible work arrangements is dependent on role and is easier for some than others, which creates some resentment.

The Navy and NZDF are actively working towards solutions to those issues identified above and to date have made considerable gains in the last 10 years.