



Supporting employer and employee engagement in the Reserves Service

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Background

Future Reserves 2020 (FR2020) emphasises the key role that employers play in the Reserve service. Defence Relationship Management (DRM) have worked with organisations across the UK to promote corporate engagement and to provide support to organisations employing Reservists outlining the rights and responsibilities for both Reservists and employers and providing an HR example for companies to adapt. This briefing reports on findings from across the Future Reserves Research Programme and includes data from representatives from employers across the public, private and voluntary sectors who took part in either focus groups or interviews. The majority of employers who took part in research were recruited through, or had links with, the DRM, and were therefore engaged with the Reserve service.

The study

This briefing is based on the findings from the Future Reserves Research Programme and the four research projects led by Edinburgh, Exeter, Lancaster and Newcastle Universities to help identify and understand the range of issues affecting reservist personnel in relation to different parts of their lives – family life, civilian jobs and military life.

The research involved interviews and focus groups with Reserves, Regulars, employers and significant others and was carried out across the UK including Scotland, Wales and England. 218 people were interviewed and a further 143 took part in a focus group (FRRP summary sheet for further breakdown).

The interviews and focus groups explored: 1) Reservists' experiences, including how they balance Reserve service, and family and job commitments, and the impact of Reserve service upon family and civilian life; 2) Employer's expectations and experiences of employing Reserves, and how organisational perceptions and policies surrounding the Reserve service are played out in practice.

Key findings

- Employers mainly expressed a positive view of Reserves as well as their interactions with the Ministry of Defence. Employers in general considered Reserves to stand out from other employees in terms of their leadership, enthusiasm and effectiveness when working under pressure.
- Whereas some employers referred to themselves as Reservist-friendly and appeared to have developed specific policies to support Reserves, others are keeping to a standard set of policies for all employees and not making any special arrangements for Reserves.
- Many employers did not know how many Reserves they actually employed. The data suggests that this is because they do not have a way of tracking Reservist numbers, either at the recruitment stage or if an employee subsequently joins the Reserves. In some instances, Reserves are not confident in informing their employer of their Army role.
- In some instances, Reserves were encouraged not to share their Army experiences with their civilian colleagues because managers did not want to have to deal with other staff requesting flexible working arrangements.
- Reserves compartmentalise their military, civilian employment and home lives, reinforcing and preserving the boundaries between the domains.

Findings

Place More Emphasis on the Cross-transferability of Skills

Many employers felt that a key benefit of employing Reserves was the skills that they brought to the organisation, in terms of both specific qualifications (For example, Driver Certificate of Professional Competence (CPC)) and more generalist skills. Some employers perceived that Reservists “tend to be a bit more capable” (Employer Interview 123) and bring problem solving abilities, confidence, adaptability, reliability, leadership and discipline to the workplace due to their Army training, to the extent that they progressed more quickly within the company;

“When I kind of consider where he is in terms of his colleagues who joined at the same time, I feel as if he’s kind of gone ahead quite quickly, and I would put a lot of that down to the attributes and the skills that he’s gained from his Reservist experience”

Employer Focus Group 111

Although both Reservists and their employers perceived Army training courses as beneficial, greater transparency regarding the transferability of training to the civilian context is needed. The benefits of army training were not always obvious to the civilian context. As one Reserve champion within an organisation highlighted, he had to map key Reservist skills to specific company roles, because managers were unaware how army skills translated to the civilian environment. For those organisations who had less engagement with the Reserve service or DRM there appeared to be less understanding of how Reservist skills could benefit the organisation. Furthermore, some Reservists were unsure how their army training could be converted into their specific civilian context and suggested that this should be made clearer in all the training that they do.

Recommendation 1

- Greater engagement is needed with employers to highlight what Reservist training is available and how it can benefit civilian organisations. More context specific training should be considered to meet the needs of different industries.

Recommendation 2

- Many Reservists have a structured Reservist career plan but some may benefit from expanding planning to cover their civilian career aspirations, and how to achieve them. Service as a Reservist can benefit employees and employers through enhanced technical, organisational, interpersonal, and leadership skills. Yet some Reservists struggle to articulate these skills, or develop them in strategic and synergetic ways, to the benefit of both their Armed Forces and civilian employers.

Minimise the Impact of Training Scheduling

Reservists also raised the issue of training which may be cancelled, or moved with little notice, due to operational demands:

“Courses are constantly changing at the last minute”

Focus Group Reserves 341

This impacts upon Reservists’ ability to plan their time, for example, when requested by significant others to book holiday time in advance, which ultimately could cause tensions in their home life (see for example, Kossek & Lambert, 2005). Some Reservists also highlighted issues with booking training courses that they had to ‘bid for’. Attendance for such courses was only confirmed six weeks or so before the start date, and this was not always enough notice for employers. In addition, once leave was booked with their employers it was sometimes difficult to reschedule. Thus, if courses were cancelled or moved then some Reservists found that they still had to take their leave during that time, which meant that they were unable to attend the course at the rescheduled time. There is also a risk that Reservists perceive training events to be improvised rather than carefully planned:

“You get asked to a lot of sort of ad hoc things where suddenly there’s some sort of exercise and they need 100 Reservists [...] We’re not the Regulars: you can’t just chuck it in our diary and expect us to cancel our leave. [...] From that point of view... I mean that’s really [dictated] by the Regulars actually rather than the Reserves” Reserve Interview 351

Overall, our findings indicate that the Army needs to be mindful that cancelling or rescheduling training events with less than two months’ notice may have negative repercussions for Reservists in terms of family and employer commitments.

Recommendation 3

- The Army may be seen as a dynamic changing environment but many Reservists are unable to react to short term changes. Changes to training schedules should be kept to a minimum as they can lead to negative consequences on family and employer relations.

Promote Meaningful Reservist Policies in Organisations

The evidence suggests there is a gap between the public rhetoric of Defence Relationship Management (DRM) who highlight committed and supportive civilian employers and the actual reality for some Reserves struggling with civilian line managers who may be indifferent or hostile to the Reserves. Policies on leave varied from employer to employer with some organisations having specific policies or arrangements for Reservists and others keeping to a standard policy for all employees. In general, the more generous leave

packages tend to be provided by the public sector. Reservists who took part in our study highlighted large differences in leave allowance across employment sectors ranging from: no additional leave; a mix of between 2 to 5 paid days with up to 10 days unpaid; to up to 10 days extra paid leave. Some employers pointed out that allowing extra paid leave for Reservist activity outside of holiday leave could potentially cause resentment amongst colleagues.

“Some companies give paid leave and I think if it was paid leave there might be some resentment there”
(Employers Focus Group 311)

However, some employers gave discretionary paid leave that was informally arranged through negotiation and agreement. Some employers seemed to prefer an informal approach rather than through policies or contracts as they felt it would create less resentment amongst colleagues and could be withdrawn at their discretion.

“If they realised he was getting an extra two weeks’ paid leave year, it could cause a bit of resentment, but there is no need for them to know that. That’s an agreement between myself and {name}”
Employer Interview 423

Amongst those organisations that did have formal policies, decisions around Reservist leave requests were often down to line managers, who had to balance such requests against departmental demands. Even within the civil service which allows two weeks paid leave, one Reserve champion commented that he had to call upon more senior managers to put pressure on line managers to release Reserves. Furthermore, the Reserve Champion stated that line managers were sometimes given only a few days notice by Reservists, which tended to increase line manager resistance around giving leave. Line managers tend to be measured by the outputs of their staff, and held to account if key performance indicators are not met, thus they may have little incentive to release Reservists. However, one employer argued that by openly showing support for Reserves to the other members of the team, these tensions can be avoided. Some Reservists are aware they need to work around such tensions (Sanchez et al., 2004). One Reservist highlighted how sometimes the timing and frequency of extra leave requests need to be considered, and personal annual leave may need to be used:

“I’m expected to go to a week’s course in June, so there’s three weeks taken out doing Army Reserve work in a two-month period. Now, [...] I’ve decided it would be poor judgement of me to ask my line manager if I can have another two weeks off between now and then because I think that’d just be getting the balance wrong” Reservist Interview 151

Recommendation 4

- Employer engagement should not be geared only towards securing corporate level buy-in. Rather, it should be “cascaded” and directed towards lower-level line managers, who enable or hinder Reservists’ ability to satisfy their Reserve obligations.

Improve Communication with Civilian Employers

The employers who participated in this study tended to be positive about Reserve service and were aware that they employed Reserves. However, even so, many of the larger employers did not know how many Reservists they actually employed. In part, this was due to organisational record keeping, in that the information was kept at a departmental level, rather than a corporate level. In addition, findings from across the FRRP suggest that some Reservists are reluctant to inform their employers of their Reserve service in case it negatively affects their career. In general, the employers who took part in this study were aware that some Reservists were reluctant to do this, and could understand why this may occur:

“I’d imagine, if you sat people down who are Reservists and have been to half a dozen interviews and they haven’t got the jobs, and asked the question: ‘Do you think you didn’t get it because you told them you were a Reservist?’ I’d imagine a percentage of them might think that’s the case” Employer focus group, 411

For those Reservists who give their employer details to the army, there has been greater effort by the MoD to contact employers. In general, there was a perception that the notification process had improved with employers receiving more notice about Reservist deployment and training. However, as highlighted above information about Reservists is retained at a departmental level thus official correspondence from the MoD can get lost within senior management and centralised human resource offices. Employers who had developed good relationships with local units were able to make individual agreements so that letters were sent to the right person in the organization:

“...but I wrote to the Adjutant at the [unit] and says, ‘Send them to me.’ So I get them all, then I cascade them out to the relevant line managers”
Employer focus group 111

Other employers appeared to rely on Reservists informing them, or a combination of both the Reservist and MoD. The important issue appeared to be that communication about future Reserve commitments was timely and with the full knowledge of the Reserve so that employers could discuss with employees and plan for any absences:

“If I was a Reservist, and my Reserve regiment or squadron was writing to my employer to tell him I had to go away on camp, I might be a little bit disappointed about it. [...] People do like to be treated as adults and if there was a programme that came out to the Reservists saying this is all the opportunities that you have in the next 12 months or [...] a given period of time, go and sit with your employer and work it out [...] that’s far better than [...] the reserve forces engaging directly with employers”. Employer interview 224

Recommendation 5

- Mentoring and personal development plans should be created for Reservists to empower them to confidently approach their employers and family members to negotiate their absence from work/home while maintaining trust and support. Such a plan would also help Reservists deal with prospective employers in the case of seeking new employment opportunities.

References

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- Sanchez, R.P., et al., (2004). Predictors of job satisfaction among active duty and Reserve/Guard personnel in the US military. *Military Psychology*, 16(1): 19.

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