



Best practice in employer support for Reservists:

The views of Reservist employees

July 2018

Background

Through the Future Reserves 2020 programme, the UK Armed Forces (UKAF) are undergoing significant structural changes. Among these changes is the increase in the proportion and professionalism of Reservists within UKAF. By 2020 Reservists will constitute around 25% of all armed forces personnel.

The majority of Reservists are in civilian employment¹. This brings a range of challenges and opportunities for the military, civilian employers, and the Reservist. The Reservist is essentially dual-employed, with the military and the civilian employer sharing the time, energy, and skills of the Reservist-employee. Understanding Reservists' experiences of combining civilian employment and military service is crucial so that both the Armed Forces and civilian employers can better support their Reservist-employees.

The study

The findings in this briefing are part of the 'Negotiating Civilian and Military Lives: Reserves, Families and Work' project. This project explored how Reservists and their families experience the overlapping domains of Reserve service, civilian work and family life.

As part of this study the research team analysed nominations for the Defence Employer Recognition Scheme (ERS) Gold awards for 2015 and 2016. The Ministry of Defence confers ERS awards to employers who have signed the Armed Forces Covenant and have demonstrated a high level of support for UKAF personnel, veterans, and military families in their workplace. Organisations can be nominated by individual employees or external organisations. ERS is managed by DRM (Defence Relationship Management).

Key findings

- Human Resource policies and practices which are specifically tailored to the needs of Reservists are highly valued by Reservists. Reservist employees particularly appreciate additional paid leave for annual training camps and flexible work options which allow them to combine civilian employment with Reserve service.
- Workplace culture determines whether Reservists feel supported by their employer. The attitudes and behaviours of line managers, as well as senior management, are crucial in shaping Reservists' positive experiences of combining civilian employment and Reserve service.
- Reservists feel supported in their dual employment when they believe that employers recognise and utilise the transferable skills that they gain through their Reserve service.
- Reservist employees feel supported by employers who promote Reserve service within the organisation, and who demonstrate wider general support for the Armed Forces.
- Supportive employers take steps to ensure that Reservist employees feel that their military service is valued and respected within the organisation, and that they do not need to minimise or conceal this aspect of their lives when they are at work.

¹RESCAS, 2017. 79% of Reservists are in civilian employment. 61% of all Reservists are in full-time civilian employment, 11% are self-employed, and 7% are in part-time civilian employment.

The research team analysed 143 Gold award nominations from Reservists. The nominations offered important insights into Reservists' views about civilian employer policies, practices, and cultures which were of most value to them in enabling them to sustain their civilian employment alongside their Reserve commitment. The analysis identifies best practice from civilian employers.

Research findings

Human Resource (HR) policies and practices which are specifically tailored to Reservists

In order to be eligible for a Gold award employers must have a range of HR policies which are specifically tailored to Reservists, and are well-publicised within the organisation. These policies must include at least 10 days of additional leave for training. Many Reservists cited their employer's HR policies in their nominations. The high value that Reservists place on these HR policies is reflected in the widespread references to them within their nominations. Yet, other research on Reservists shows there is often a discrepancy between official company policy, and its dissemination and practice (Giga, S et al 2018). In the cases of best practice, nominators described their civilian employer's Reservist policies as being effectively communicated throughout the organisation, e.g. via training/webpages/staff handbooks. Nominators particularly appreciated employers who ensured that line managers were familiar with corporate Reservist policies, and delivered those policies 'on the ground'.

Additional paid and unpaid leave for training

Additional paid leave for training stands out as being particularly highly valued by Reservists, and was cited by 55% of Reservist nominators in both years. The amount of extra paid leave for training offered by individual civilian employers varied, but was around 2 weeks of paid special leave.

"[company name] have a supportive policy which allows Reservists 15 working days extra a year paid leave, as well as providing support in the work environment."
Construction & land development company, 2015

"The organisation has a standing order in place that allows me 2 weeks additional leave per year in order to complete a 2 week continuous training course with the Army Reserve." Public sector organisation, 2016

A small minority of Reservists explicitly stated that they valued this additional leave allocation because it enabled them to fulfil their Reservist commitments without losing holiday time with their families. For those who did not have families, they were either able to dedicate more time to the Reserves, or engage in other pursuits and leisure activities.

"So that I didn't miss valued family time [the company] have extended my paid leave period so that I can go to annual camp with the Army and still have time left for my family." Construction & land development company, 2016

"...the 10 days annual leave is of particular benefit as it saves my holiday for my family which is very important to allow me to have the balance I would like."

Banking corporation, 2016

In the 2016 nominations, 10% of Reservists mentioned that their employers granted them additional unpaid leave for training, if required, on top of their additional paid leave. This represents an exceptional level of civilian employer support.

Employer flexibility

As dual-employed individuals, Reservists' time and energy is shared between the Armed Forces and their civilian employer. This requires flexibility. Civilian employers that offered such flexibility were greatly appreciated by Reservists, who recognised this in their nominations. This flexibility took two main forms:

First, granting leave at short notice to accommodate training.

"My line managers have been very flexible when I submit additional requests for leave which are sometimes at quite short notice."

Banking Corporation, 2016

"My line management team actively support me by allowing time off at short notice."

UK Government department, 2015

Second, flexible work arrangements which enabled Reservists to combine civilian employment with Reserve service. This includes flexi-time, shift-swapping, or simply leaving work early on training evenings:

"Personally I am provided the flexibility to manage my Reserve commitment around my day job, which I could not do without the support of my line management"

Defence contractor, 2015

"[Company name] fully understand my Army Reservist commitment, and provide a shift pattern that allows me to meet all my drill nights, training days, and exercise weekends." Recruitment Agency, 2016

Supportive workplace culture and attitudes towards Reservists

The majority of Reservist nominators indicated that their civilian employer's support for Reservists went beyond specific HR policies to encompass a wider supportive culture within the organisation. The spread of such a culture had a very positive impact upon Reservists' overall positive experiences of combining civilian and military employment. Nominators offered a range of specific examples of the ways in which their civilian workplace culture led them to feel supported.

Supportive line managers

Line managers' personal supportive attitudes and proactive stance towards Reserve service were identified by nominators as being as important to them as official HR policies:

"My line management are second to none and really value my involvement with the military."

Banking corporation, 2016

One way in which line managers conveyed support for Reserve service was through recognition of the range of transferable skills acquired by their Reservist employees from their military roles – for example, in leadership, team-working, management and communication. In some cases the skills developed in the military led to recognised qualifications, which Reservists believed were of benefit to their civilian employer:

"The benefits of these experiences to me as an individual is increased confidence and resilience. To the [company] teams I manage I am much improved leader and for [the company] I bring a diversity in style, experience and commitment that certainly sets me apart from my non-Reserve peers. This in turn makes me a valuable asset for ... client facing engagements."

Audit and accountancy firm, 2016

Internal groups / social networks for Reservists

Some employers supported Reservists in their organisation through the creation of an internal group or social networks specifically for employees who were associated with the Armed Forces. In 2015, 17% of nominators reported that there was such a group within their organisation. This had risen considerably to 28% of nominators in 2016:

"[My employer] has created a network of staff who are also in Reserves to share best practice and provide support" UK government department, 2015

"[Name of company] now has a military support network which means that Reservists and veterans can share openly any issue they may have as well as serving as a social group" Banking corporation, 2016

Support during deployment

To be eligible for a Gold award, employers must have demonstrated support for Reservist employees who are mobilised. This support is important to Reservists: almost a third of nominators in 2015 referred to support from their employers before, during and after deployment:

"They were very proud of my call-up and made the process of leaving and transition back to employment simple and supported. In addition they honoured all my performance-related pay incentives from before my deployment and have even offered to honour incentives which would have been earned during deployment" Automotive corporation, 2015

"the support received from all levels of the service prior to mobilisation was outstanding. The whole process from the perspective of my employer was discussed

and I was made to feel at ease with job security ensured. During my mobilisation my position was kept open, my career development was not hindered and lost courses were booked for my return at a financial loss to my employer." Public service organisation, 2015

Promotion of Reserve service within the organisation

Many nominators claimed that their employers encouraged their participation in the Reserves, and had actively created opportunities to promote Reserve service to other colleagues within the organisation:

"On Reserve Forces Day 2015, [company name] arranged for representatives from 170 Engineer Group to visit two Manchester offices. [The company] provided lunch for employees to encourage good attendance. I attended both presentations in uniform and helped explain the benefits of Reservists' training for the organisation"

Engineering & technology corporation, 2016

Reservists who had been invited to share their experiences with colleagues, or who had been personally recognised for their military service in other ways by their employer, expressed a sense of being valued by their employer. Some nominators stated that their current civilian employer was the first workplace in which they did not feel that it was necessary to conceal their involvement in the Armed Forces. This explicit support for Reserve service, both on corporate and interpersonal levels was an aspect of workplace culture that was greatly appreciated by Reservists.

"Even at the interview stage, I felt that my Reserve service was not only understood, but that it was also seen as a positive thing. This is not something I have encountered at previous companies, where Reserve service is often - at best - not understood"

Project management consultancy, 2015

Analysis of employee nominations indicates that workplace culture, expressed through the everyday attitudes and behaviours of managers and colleagues towards Reservists, is as important to Reservists as official HR policies tailored to meet their particular circumstances.

"There is a genuinely supportive culture that recognises the value to the firm in the military connection. This is reinforced by an active Forces in the Firm network that is actively sponsored and supported by [the company]"

Audit and accountancy firm, 2016

"The culture within the [the organisation] from the most senior position within the organisation, through to the most junior is unified in support of the military, and specifically of military Reservists"

Public service organisation, 2016

“My line manager and [the company] in general are extremely supportive of my work with the military and I can’t thank them enough for affording me the time and opportunity to join the Reserves.”

Construction company, 2016

Invictus Games, continue to support Uniform to Work Day for Reservists, and launched a new training scheme for ex-military personnel to help tackle high unemployment among former service personnel”

Automotive corporation, 2015

“The company has been an active supporter of Army sport and indeed a sponsor of Team Army since its inception and also recently committed to gold level sponsorship, place it within a small group of companies to show this significant level of financial support” Industrial manufacturing company, 2015

General organisational orientation towards Armed Forces/defence

Nominators frequently referred to ways in which they perceived their employers to be supportive of the Armed Forces more generally. Employer actions such as fundraising for military charities, offering joint leadership training with the army, sponsoring the Invictus Games, and signing the corporate covenant, all contributed to an organisational context in which employees felt comfortable in identifying themselves as Reservists.

“After a deserved silver award in 2014, [company name] has this year gone further to show its support for the Forces. They have signed the Corporate Covenant, been the lead supporter of the inaugural

Many of the organisations that were nominated for the Gold award were allied to the defence industry, large multi-national companies, or public sector organisations. These organisations might be expected to be generally favourably disposed towards the Armed Forces. Private Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) were under-represented in the nominations. This suggests that the MoD should give careful consideration to ways in which SMEs can be supported in their employment of Reservists.

Recommendations

- Continue to assist companies to develop bespoke HR policies which are designed for Reservists, and support strategies to help civilian employers enact these ‘on-the-ground’ to ensure there is not a gap between company policy and practice.
- Encourage flexible working practices. Small flexibilities on the side of civilian employers (for example, flexi-hours, or allowing their Reservist employees to finish early on training nights/weekends) make a considerable difference to how Reservists feel they are being supported by their civilian employer.
- Highlight in specific ways the transferable skills that individuals gain through their Reserve service. Such a strategy could increase employers’ willingness to recruit and support Reservists which then creates a positive feedback loop. Once employers recognise the skills that Reservists contribute to their organisation, they often become more willing to employ more Reservists.
- Create opportunities for civilian employers to become more engaged with the Armed Forces. This may include support packages with advice on raising money for armed forces-related charities, support Uniform to Work Day for Reservists, co-sponsored training, seminars, co-sponsoring the Invictus Games, Team Army, and other displays of support.
- Develop new strategies and resources to assist SMEs, who may not have the organisational flexibility or capacity of larger companies to support the needs of Reservist employees.

References

Giga, S at al (2018) Future Reserves Research Programme Themed Briefing 3
Supporting employer and employee engagement in the Reserves Service

Authors and Acknowledgements

This Briefing was written by Laura Airey, Wendy Loretto, Scott Tindal and Sarah Cunningham-Burley (University of Edinburgh), Zoe Morrison (University of Greenwich) and Vince Connelly (Oxford Brookes University). The study was part of a wider programme of research – The Future Reserves Research Programme (FRRP) funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and the UK Ministry of Defence.

www.future-reserves-research.ac.uk