



LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

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The Kaleidoscope Career Model

How to Address the Army's Recruitment and Retention Problems

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Last year, the Ministry of Defence revealed the extent of the challenges in both recruitment and retention across the Armed Forces (Candlin, 2024). During a session with the Defence Committee in November, Defence Secretary John Healey confirmed that for the past year the Armed Forces lost 300 more full-time personnel each month than they were able to recruit. He also acknowledged that morale was at record lows. Defence Quarterly Personnel statistics show a 5% reduction in trade trained Officers and a 9% reduction in trade trained Soldiers between January 2023 and January 2025 (MOD, 2025). The phenomenon is consistent across the UK Regular Armed Forces with c.15k people leaving and only c.13k people joining in the last year. This is a structural issue with 62% of service leavers departing voluntarily, more than three times the number leaving at the end of their engagement (MOD, 2025).

The Army has so far responded with initiatives like pay increase and targeted retention payments for selected Service Personnel. Work is also underway to streamline the recruitment process as evidence shows that many applicants abandon their applications due to delays and lack of communication. In fact, over last ten years, more than a million young people applied to join the Armed Forces, but over three-quarters gave up before reaching the point of acceptance or rejection (Allison, 2024). The overall picture is not encouraging.

While working conditions, pay and recruitment all have an important part to play in increasing recruitment and retention, this *Insight* argues that to attract and retain talent, it is essential to engage with the career expectations of the entire workforce. It suggests that the Armed Forces should adopt the Kaleidoscope Career Model to allow more flexibility and

adaptability. This may not only increase recruitment and retention but will also have a positive impact for the Army as an organisation.

Different Career Paths

The Army predominantly recruits personnel under the age of 30, which today it means primarily among Gen Z (those born between 1996 and 2012). The discourse on recruitment and retention across Defence often ends up focusing how 'Gen Z' are supposedly different from previous generations, usually in a derogatory way, as discussed in [Insight n. 52](#). Yet, discussions on the expectations or aspirations of different generations often ignore other factors such as their socio-economic background, knowledge, skills, and experience, their potential, and their aspiration to make a difference.

The Army has a successful record of being an inclusive organisation, enabling social mobility through the series of unique opportunities to serve, and with through-career training and development designed to stretch and challenge people. This is something positive and the Army should build on it and make it more widely known in its recruitment campaigns. The Army's career model values loyal service, it recognises seniority in rank, and it offers promotion based on perceived potential. In all traditional careers, commitment to the organisation is highly valued and the main effort is for people to climb the ladder (Baruch and Vardi, 2015). Army careers are managed through the series of objectives and annual appraisals written by the first and second reporting officers. Promotion boards are convened by the Army Personnel Centre, providing independent and objective oversight of the career management system to meet organisational requirements. In this context, careers belong to the individual, formed by their own unique blend of experiences and circumstances, and are managed by the organisation. Army careers follow a clear, logical and documented path that is understood by reference to peers and career milestones. In academic terms, Army careers align with the definition of organisational careers (one managed by the organisation) that were once commonplace.

Over the past twenty years, however, organisational transformation has changed the landscape of corporate careers, resulting in the creation of new concepts like 'protean paths'. These new career trajectories are more open and flexible, they are self-directed not organisation-directed, and they involve changes in employment and working patterns. They can include working experiences in other sectors to gain new skills and perspectives. These careers have been linked to higher job satisfaction and productivity rates (Reitman and Schneer, 2003). Yet, over the same period, Army careers have hardly changed. They remain 'organisational careers', people come and grow within the same linear career path. There is limited opportunity to gain experience outside the Army and return with the commensurate recognition.

Contemporary Career Theory: The Kaleidoscope Career Model

The Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM) may be particularly useful to re-think Army careers. KCM recognises that careers are socially constructed concepts and people create their own meaning through the exploration of new concepts with others and through different work experiences (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2006). While traditional organisational career theory – like the one we have in the Army – focusses primarily on meeting the needs of the organisation, KCM focuses instead on the career needs of the individuals and provides insight for organisations to reflect on how their model aligns with the needs of the individuals to foster a stronger sense of belonging and ultimately higher job satisfaction.

KCM suggests that individuals seek to obtain authenticity, balance, and challenge throughout their careers. They adjust their work trajectory to remain on track with their overall long-term career aspirations. Authenticity, balance, and challenge are part of a career journey, but they are not equally proportionate elements, they are fluid and reflect the changing career needs to enable people to align personal and professional values, to maintain work-life balance, and to attain a sense of achievement, self-worth or career advancement.

Research shows that these elements are of highly important to Gen Z (Barhate, 2022) as well as to most workers in the post-Covid era (Faragher, 2025). Therefore, if the Army is honest about wanting to increase recruitment and retention, we must engage with these demands and aspirations.

Authenticity

Authenticity is the sense of being true to yourself. It requires an in-depth understanding of your own values and priorities, and it allows the constructive alignment of values and priorities with career choices (Wood et al., 2008). The *Army Leadership Doctrine*, (2021) recognises the importance of 'knowing yourself', of being self-aware and of acknowledging your own strengths and weaknesses, underpinned by emotional intelligence to be your true self. To be truly authentic, people must act in line with their thoughts and feelings to make short and long-term decisions (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2006). Belonging is a key theme featured in our Leadership Doctrine as well as in all Army recruiting campaigns. It is at the core of what it means to be in service. It is about being part of a team, delivering a higher-level purpose and to be part of something bigger. Current and future members of the Army will be bound by the alignment of personal and organisational values.

In an Army context, belonging and authenticity also find concrete examples like visibly recognisable symbols of achievement with the rank and appointment, or trade badges worn on uniforms, the medallic recognition that offer extrinsic recognition coupled with the sense of loyalty to a regiment or corps. These are all elements that the Army can and must put forward to foster its appeal among potential recruits and younger members.

Balance

The concept of work-life balance recognises the complexity of conflicting pressures between our personal and professional lives. As a society, today we are more aware of the importance of healthy boundaries between work and home to reduce stress and to improve our physical and mental health. People are keen to ask for work adjustments that allow them to raise a family or to deliver care-giving responsibilities without compromising the quality of their work or their career trajectory. They expect the organisation to support them in finding the most appropriate solution as they do not want to repeat past patterns when people often had to take a career break or find difficult compromises with their partner (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2006).

Army careers can be demanding, a sequence of different roles and responsibilities to develop a portfolio of skills can result in little work-life balance. While the Army cannot certainly offer the same level of flexibility of other organisations, it is important that steps are taken to ensure that all Serving Personnel is allowed as much flexibility as possible to build a strong personal life that will support them in the toughest times that Service often imposes on them.

Challenge

In this context, 'challenge' refers to the need for personal and professional development, which allows individuals to remain engaged and to achieve a higher sense of accomplishment. Professional challenges require individuals to think creatively to solve novel problems and to face difficult situations, which form part of their journey of self-discovery. Mainiero and Sullivan (2006) suggest that professional challenge is the main reason people work. While salaries provide a measure of worth and perceived value of their contribution, challenge endures as a motivational factor. In this sense, Army careers are already challenging, with arduous courses, training and exercise as well as periods of separation from loved ones, living and operating in austere conditions and prioritising the needs of the service. What may be necessary, however, is to ensure that these challenges take place in a context in which Service Personnel feels truly valued and in which the learning and development that come as a result are contextualised and rewarded appropriately. In this context, the Army as an organisation has a lot of work to do.

Conclusion

KCM incorporates authenticity, balance and challenge as developing elements on a long-term career path that is non-linear. Their role and importance change at different stages of a career. For Army leaders, KCM is an important tool to identify the career needs of their team, regardless of age and beyond stereotypes. To be truly effective, leaders must understand the career needs and motivation of each individual and provide targeted support. For the Army as an organisation, KCM shows that career needs may change over time, people may want to exit organisations to seek opportunities elsewhere before returning with new skills and renewed motivation. Today, there are barriers that limit the opportunity to leave for a work experience elsewhere and to return to the Army. This is a missed opportunity and something the Army – and Defence – may want to consider for the future to increase recruitment and retention as well as to have an upskilled and more motivated workforce.

Questions

1. How can you make sense of your own career decisions within the KCM framework?
2. How do you understand the career needs of your peers, subordinates or even superiors?
3. As a leader, what changes can you make to improve the working lives of the individuals in your team?

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