



LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

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Leaders and Team Productivity Focus on outputs not on working hours

By Dr Ellen Joan Nelson

Women in Defence series

My recent CAL Insight (No. 31) shared the findings from my doctoral and post-doctoral research, which focused on the experiences of women in the military. My research found that although most of the women I interviewed loved their time in the military, there were eight recurring gender-based challenges. There was poor representation of women in recruiting material and a lack of uniforms and equipment to fit women's bodies. Many women felt they could not be authentic, and that they faced higher degree of scrutiny when it came to their personal relationships. Many of the women I surveyed also experienced sexism and sexual harassment. Sexual assault was alarmingly common. Finally, women faced additional challenges relating to pregnancy and return to work, as well as logistical difficulties associated with managing work and children.

This CAL Insight explores this eighth challenge in greater depth and it provides some suggestions about how to tackle it. This applies not only to women but to all service personnel with childcare responsibilities. As I argue in my conclusion, I am aware that several of my suggestions cannot be applied directly to the military context. However, I hope that my comments will contribute to the wider debate about how to ensure that all servicepersons are put in a position to achieve their full potential.

Trying to square the circle

Following my PhD, I conducted further research based on conversations with 500 working parents from a range of roles and sectors in NZ, Australia, US, UK, Canada and Singapore.

Broadly speaking, I identified three recurring scenarios: (a) The parents could not manage the demands of childcare and work and, as a result, they left the workforce. (b) They worked full-time and missed their children. They felt guilty about their situation. They were stressed at work, often trying to arrange childcare from their desk. They felt equally stressed about unfinished work while spending time with their children. (c) They worked part-time for less pay but were almost always still required to complete the same workload. Yet, their career prospects and progression opportunities were limited.

In my view, the root cause of most of this distress is caused by the societal mismatch between the schedules of adults and those of children. Working hours often coincide – or at least significantly overlap – with the times that children are out of school, thus forcing working parents to choose between work and childcare. The office ‘9-to-5’ construct was cemented more than a century ago, when most households had a dedicated worker (a man) and a dedicated caregiver (a woman). The most common working pattern still tends to assume that workers have a dedicated stay-at-home parent. However, this assumption does not reflect the demographics of our society today, where it is often the case that both parents are in work.

As the school day is shorter than the office ‘9-to-5’, there is a substantial challenge for working parents and particularly for single parents. When the logistical challenge of balancing work and family – which is even trickier in the military – becomes too much, one parent is often forced to leave employment or to go part-time. As evidence shows that the burden of managing both a paid job and most of the child-related tasks still falls predominantly on mothers, it is women that are often more heavily penalised.

Military personnel face additional challenges. The parents I surveyed accepted that they would need to be away from home at times to meet the needs of the service. The acute and extraordinary challenge for them was the short notice or the lack of notice at all. There were multiple instances of parents being tasked to travel somewhere for the day, with a promise of being back in time to collect their child from daycare but then the requirements changed without sufficient warning. Crucially, the examples cited in my research suggests that these issues often arose more from poor planning and lack of communication than from the actual demands of the job. There were also plenty of instances where breastfeeding mothers were forced to suddenly deploy in the field, causing them and their baby a myriad of trauma and challenges. These instances require attention from leaders to avoid poor planning and to anticipate the needs of all members of the team.

The military parents I surveyed were on average 5-10 years into their service, meaning they had significant training and experience. When a highly trained member of staff with a wealth of experience leaves, this decision comes at a huge cost for their organisation. The cost can become crippling when it turns into a pattern among mid-career members of staff. This phenomenon carries additional challenges in the military, where there is no lateral entry and positions can only be filled by serving military personnel (i.e. a fully trained Major can only be replaced by someone already inside the organisation).

Output v Input

Evidence shows that there are productivity gains that can be made by focusing on outputs and not on the number of working hours. The work of Andrew Barnes on the 4-day-week model proves that the same amount of work can be done in fewer hours when workers are more focused and well rested. Barnes argues that teams and leaders should move to a system based on outputs. According to this model, leaders plan the requirements for their staff for the day, week, month, year ahead and they communicate clearly what they want to be achieved. Leaders specify the required outputs and the deadlines and allow their team to execute.

If teams are told at the start of the day that they need to achieve X, Y and Z tasks for the day, they will take the full workday to achieve them. As Parkinson's Law famously states, work expands to fill the time available for its completion. However, if staff are told they can go home after X, Y and Z tasks are completed, it is likely that they will increase their efficiency and complete their tasks faster. Workers will be more motivated and efficient. Interestingly, research shows that firms with a large part-time employment share are more productive than firms with a large share of full-time workers. For example, a 10% increase in the part-time share is associated with 4.8% higher productivity.

In this context, the conversation becomes less about, 'did the unit come to work between 9 and 5?', and more about, 'did the unit complete its required outputs?' This approach is of course based on trust between the leader and their team and on a system that allows leaders to monitor progress and to identify problems and delays at an early stage.

My own research confirms these findings: parents feel guilty for leaving work to collect their children from school. If, however, it became normalised to finish work in line with the school schedule, the guilt would be removed. This would likely have a huge impact on the morale, performance and retention of working parents. Crucially, this approach may have a flow-on effect on non-parents, too. All members of staff would have more time to pursue their personal goals, hobbies and interests, as well as to improve their wellbeing. They would be able to pursue their interests and get new ideas and skills that they could then feed into their work. From a recruitment and retention point of view, this approach promises to attract high-caliber candidates and to retain talent. It is therefore not surprising that the 4-day-week movement is getting global traction. In Iceland, a 4-day-week trial has been so successful that 80% of the country now has adopted it. Trials have started in the UK in 2022 and it has just been announced that all firms in the 4-day week trial have decided to make it permanent. France too has been implementing it for more than 10 years with good results.

The #workschoolhours model that I propose builds on these findings. It is a movement that addresses this issue by focusing on the mismatch between the '9-to-5' pattern and school times. It aims to reduce the work schedule to align it with the school schedule, without however reducing salaries. This is not an idea just for working parents but for *everyone*. This proposal focuses on outputs (what it is we want staff to deliver) as opposed to their inputs (the number of working hours and the location of work), as well as flexibility and autonomy.

Conclusion

Reducing the challenges associated with raising children while managing a career is one of the most impactful things the organisations can do to meaningfully increase retention of working parents and to boost morale and job satisfaction. More broadly, it empowers all

members of staff with care responsibilities, thus having a positive impact on a wide range of employees and on society as a whole.

It is obvious, of course, that the military is unique. It is not a '9-to-5' job and this is especially true when it comes to field exercises and deployments. In these settings, #workschoolhours and flexible working patterns are not realistic and can only be implemented in a handful of cases. What is important however is for leaders to become more aware of these tensions and to take them into account when leading their team. How essential is it that units start work before the school drop-offs in the morning? Is there really a pressing operational reason to prevent the working day from starting or finishing in line with school?

Leaders must also strive to provide their staff with adequate notice when they need to be away from home. If military personnel are required to finish later, to start earlier than normal, or to be away overnight, it is essential that they are given the opportunity to make appropriate arrangements. This courtesy should of course be extended to all staff, not just parents.

Evidence shows that when leaders clearly articulate the outputs required for the day and provide motivation to leave work once these are completed, it is highly likely that work will be completed more efficiently. If it is normalised that 'in-camp' routine is aligned with the school day, parents – and indeed all staff – benefit significantly and so does the entire organisation.

Questions

1. How much do you know about the care responsibilities of your colleagues? How much do you think they know about your own responsibilities?
2. What steps are you taking as a leader to ensure that your team members have sufficient notice before sending them away?
3. What changes could you make to structure the workday or week schedule to fit in with the care responsibilities of your team?

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