

The Role of Information Campaigns and Advertising in the Military Recruitment System

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ABSTRACT:

The article considers information campaigns and advertising as an element of the system for attracting service members to the armed forces. The role of information and the ways of its presentation are analysed, and their advantages and disadvantages in the current information system are identified. Based on the identified problems, a proposal is made to optimise the current system for providing information in order to improve the awareness of potential candidates for military service and promote the military profession. The results of the theoretical analysis can be used to improve the current model for attracting service members in terms of presenting information and advertising.

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Introduction

Recruiting candidates for military service aims to provide the armed forces with the necessary personnel. According to Prof. Stoykov, “Attracting people is the next principle, expressed in the understanding that people at all levels are the essence of the organisation and their full involvement allows their abilities to be used to the benefit of the organisation.”¹ This requires constant analysis and planning human resource needs in accordance with the plans for building the armed forces and acquiring the defined operational capabilities. The planning and analysis activities are carried out at the three levels of command and control in the Armed Forces and are united under the general leadership of the

“Human Resources Management” Directorate in the Ministry of Defence, as a body at the strategic level.

Recruiting trained and qualified personnel is a process related to providing up-to-date and timely information to the general public, aimed at attracting potential candidates for enlistment in the armed forces. This requires a number of activities to carry out the communication process between the military institution and civil society.

The research methods used in the article allow solving the research tasks to achieve the formulated goal and include: systematic analysis to study the complex set of information tools used in the system for attracting service members; scientific analysis to reveal the leading trends in the evolution of the approaches and methods for informing service members and identifying the problems that have arisen.

Information Campaigns and Advertising in the Military Recruitment System

The system for recruiting service members covers the processes of recruitment, selection, individual training and enlisting in the armed forces. Its legal regulation is described by the Law on Defence and the Armed Forces of the Republic of Bulgaria and the Regulations for its implementation.²

The purpose of the system formulated in this way is to attract, select, train and enlist the candidates for military service in order to staff the armed forces with trained and motivated personnel. To achieve this goal, the recruitment system is built of elements of strategic, operational and tactical level of management and is supported by the automated human resources management system. The elements of the system include:

- at the strategic level: the Minister of Defence, the Chief of Defence, the Permanent Undersecretary of Defence, and the MOD Directorate “Human Resources Management”;
- at the operational level: the personnel departments in the headquarters of the types of armed forces, the military educational institutions, the Central Office of Military Districts, the management of the Executive Agency “Military Clubs and Military Recreation,” and the Military Medical Academy;
- at the tactical level: the personnel departments in the tactical formations, military training centres, the military districts and the military clubs of the Executive Agency “Military Clubs and Military Recreation”;
- the automated human resources management system.

Internal Sources of Information

Service members’ recruitment is carried out through communication campaigns and advertising, organised in the media or through information exchanges and forums. The main responsibility for the implementation of this activity is in the Public Relations and Protocol Directorate in the Ministry of Defence in cooperation with the Central Office of Military Districts and its subordinate territorial

structures. Commanders of all levels, as well as their subordinate public relations structures, are also responsible for promoting the military profession. This is done by conducting military rituals, open days, various public initiatives, and presenting the need for an army, as well as its activities.

In the years after the termination of conscription, public awareness of the armed forces' activities decreased, and hence its empathy for it, after the abolition of the obligation of young people for compulsory service in the military. Many people are wondering, "Why should so much money be allocated for defence when there are no security threats, and we are a member of the North Atlantic Alliance?" It is, therefore, necessary to clarify the function of the military as one of the instruments of national power. Often, as a result of long peaceful existence, people forget about the need for armed forces. One of the ways to promote the military profession is advertising. Everyone knows the power of good advertising, so we need to recall how it works (see Fig. 1).

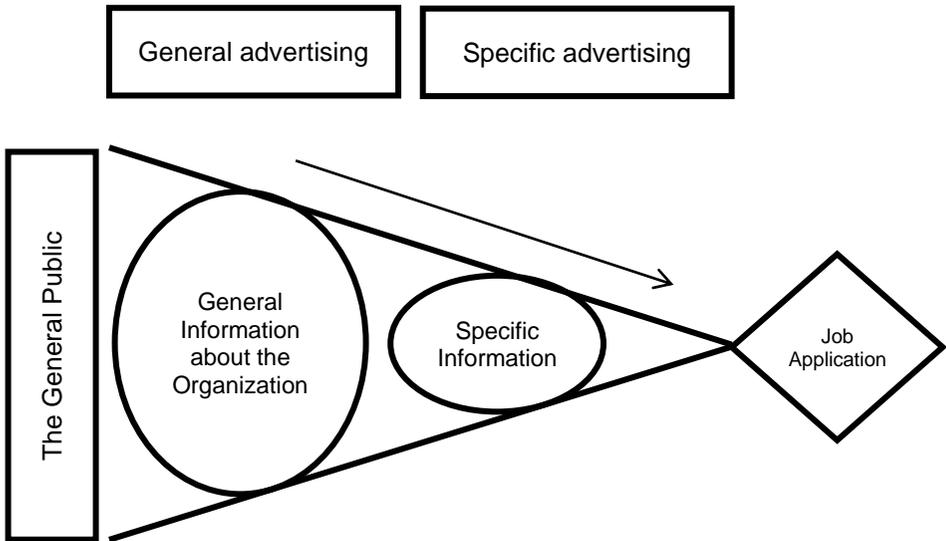


Figure 1: Influence of Advertisement.

Low-intensity general ads influence potential candidates by presenting organisations at random. In this way, organisations aim at more influence over those in need of work through general recruitment advertisements. They create awareness of the organisation and provide positive signals to job seekers through symbols, photos and visual images that require little processing effort. In this way, organisations can influence potential job seekers, even when they are not actively looking for information about jobs and careers or are not even considering changing jobs.

Specific high-intensity ads seek to provide more detailed information about organisations and/or jobs. Examples of this are detailed job advertisements and company brochures, which provide comprehensive information about specific jobs and company activities. This type of advertising requires more cognitive processing effort by the audience than general advertising because it contains detailed information about jobs or organisations. Due to the nature of the information they provide, highly engaging ads cannot be processed subconsciously or peripherally in the way that general ads can be perceived. People need to be motivated to look for these sources of information. For this reason, this recruitment approach cannot affect passive candidates but only those who are actively looking for job materials and are willing to process the information they contain.

One of the latest major recruitment campaigns (mostly soldiers and sailors) was organised under the name “Be a soldier.” In 2019, it was held in 31 Bulgarian cities and towns in order to raise the prestige of the Bulgarian Armed Forces and create positive attitudes among the public in areas where there are no traditional military units. Each event of the campaign included three components – a concert, a static or dynamic display of military vehicles, armaments and equipment, and an information exchange in seven tents about the types of armed forces and the main users of personnel.³ The general management and overall coordination of the events of the campaign was assigned to the Director of the Public Relations and Protocol Directorate in the Ministry of Defence.

The general impression of the campaign “Be a Soldier” is that it was fruitful and has led to an increased interest in the military profession. After it was held in Yambol, the Deputy Chief of Defence Lieutenant General Dimitar Iliev commented that hundreds of applications had been submitted for the announced vacancies: “Applications for 185 positions were submitted by 478 candidates – over 2.5 for 1 position. Last year, the ratio was 1 to 1.”⁴

The results of the campaign “Be a Soldier” so far show that the interest in military service is growing. After competitions in the first 9 months of 2019, 602 soldiers were enlisted, which is twice as many as in the previous year for the same period. Moreover, the average age of the applicants is 25.⁵

A possible aspect for increasing the efficiency of the campaign is a purposeful search for even wider pre-promotion of the planned events in order to attract the general public and even more potential candidates. In addition, exchanges providing information on job opportunities should emphasize the benefits and advantages of joining the military. Compiling a summary list of privileges but also restrictions imposed by the service would improve awareness and support informed choice.

The general procedure for entering military service applies to all service members but mostly to soldier positions. The conditions and the order for admission in the military academies, the higher military educational institutions and the vocational colleges have their specifics and are regulated by additional regulations of the Minister of Defence.

Attracting cadets for the needs of the armed forces is carried out by organising a candidate cadet campaign. It includes conducting information exchanges in a number of towns in the country, taking early admission exams, and providing information on the websites of military educational institutions.

The candidate cadet campaign at Vasil Levski National Military University also includes the organisation of information campaigns at schools in the country. According to a schedule agreed with the schools, promoting officers and cadets are sent to various towns and give briefings to the school graduates about their prospects in the military. Statistics usually show that more than 200 schools are attended in the country annually, and this number tends to increase. After the end of the campaign, statistics are kept on the number of applicants and those admitted by towns, which facilitates the efforts for further recruitment of candidates. The approach is good, it requires a lot of effort of the recruiters, but the goal justifies the means.

At the Vasil Levski National Military University, there is a feedback system in the form of a survey to assess the opinion of voluntarily leaving cadets. It is held in the sector of psychology and psychoprophylaxis at the university. Respondents point out as the main reasons for their voluntary leaving in the initial stage of training the discrepancy of expectations for military service, the difficulties in adapting to the military conditions, the impossibility to overcome the separation from family and friends, health problems, etc.

The reasons for voluntary refusal are of different nature, some more common, others individual. A good approach is to use the established system for feedback and evaluation of the opinion of the leaving cadets at the Military University. It provides summarised and analysed information about the reasons for leaving, which allows their studying and taking measures to limit them. Not every cause pointed could and should be eliminated, but the study of causal relationships will provide opportunities to identify problems of the system, the solution of which can lead to overcoming groups of reasons for leaving. For example, the reasons for the “discrepancy with expectations,” “difficulties with the military order” and “restriction of personal freedom of action” lead to the conclusion that there is a problem with the candidates’ awareness of the nature of the military profession and the resulting hardships. The solution to this problem by providing up-to-date comprehensive information when applying may reduce the number of candidates actually recruited, but will undoubtedly reduce the percentage of those who voluntarily withdraw at the initial stage. This will simultaneously save the organisation’s resources, the time wasted by potentially withdrawing candidates, and reduce the level of negative “advertising” disseminated by voluntarily leaving cadets. A similar approach to feedback needs to be applied in all military units, with the information obtained being synthesized and sent to a higher level and used to identify corrective measures in the system for recruitment and retention in the army.

The overall recruitment system uses some of the principles in information and communication theory.⁶ Applied in the context of recruitment, communication can be presented as the transmission of a message to a target group of

(potential) candidates through a specific source or medium.⁷ The content of the message refers to information on available jobs (e.g. type of work to be performed, salary level) and the recruitment organisation (size, type of industry), which can play a crucial role in the decision-making process of people. The message is usually transmitted and controlled by the organisation as it tries to identify and attract new employees. In addition, people also receive information about the organisation from other sources (for example, word of mouth, the general public), and not all are under the direct control of the organisation. Ultimately, the personal choice depends on the decisive influence of personal characteristics, distinguishing individuals (values, needs, education, goals, etc.) and guiding candidates' behaviour.

A critical look at the sources of information about the organisation suggests that candidates' decisions to pursue jobs are based on their interpretation of various aspects of the recruitment and selection process (e.g. characteristics of the recruitment organisation, understanding of selection methods). In the absence of other information about the organisation, candidates interpret the information they receive in the application process to gain an idea of the work in the organisation.

The recruitment process is a series of logically related steps in attracting, applying for and accepting for a job. Each of them has its significance, but they are all related to the person's decision to intend and look for work. Sources of information are at the heart of informed choice and can influence job seekers' decisions. Through information, the organisation can influence the general public by attracting or repelling job seekers. This gives reason to consider information about the organisation as one of the main tools for influencing behavioural choices.

Depending on the place in relation to the organisation, we can classify the information sources into internal and external. The internal ones include: recruitment advertising (general and specific advertising), organisation's website, recruiters' behaviour and training, military career centres/military districts offices, ways to apply and select, site visit, reliability of job information, military training classes in schools. External sources include: information in the media, the Internet and the public; presence and coverage of military rituals; information transmitted by word of mouth.

Internal sources of information are largely under the control of the organisation and are used to disseminate official recruitment information to potential candidates. External sources of information are difficult to control by the organisation and generate information available to the general public. We will give a brief overview of some of the most important information sources.

As already discussed, advertising covers general and specific advertising. General advertising aims to create a positive attitude towards the organisation, while specific advertising is related to the specifics of the work. Given the capabilities of the Bulgarian Armed Forces to conduct expensive information campaigns for recruitment in the media, advertising decisions are limited to con-

ducting it with their own efforts and resources. The information campaign conducted by the Bulgarian Armed Forces is the campaign “Be a Soldier.” It combines both general and specific advertising, as far as possible, providing positive signals to the general public and specific information about vacancies.

An option for attracting the younger generation is the use of social networks, commercials on YouTube, Vbox and elsewhere. The video made by Private Stanislav Yotovski with the name “BULGARIAN ARMED FORCES 2017 – GLORY LASTS FOREVER!” after the NATO exercise “SaberGuardian – 2017” in Bulgaria gained wide popularity. It is necessary to create and use more such videos and promote the activities of the armed forces to the general public. The commercial for the campaign “Be a Soldier 2020” has aroused great interest, but its popularity and effectiveness have not yet been evaluated.

The next main source of advertising is the organisation’s website. Looking for a job on the Internet has long been nothing new. Traditional job postings in print have been replaced for years by job posting websites. The favourites among them in Bulgaria are jobs.bg, zaplata.bg, rabota.bg and the Employment Agency at the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (az.government.bg). The Ministry of Defence maintains up-to-date information for jobseekers, and each competition is published not only on the website of the Ministry but also on the website of the Employment Agency. Potential candidates can get an idea of the requirements for the position but not the specifics of the job. This requires providing a point of contact for feedback and questions in order to provide fast and accurate information to potential candidates.

Another recommended requirement is to make sure that the information on the websites of military units is up-to-date and accessible via a smartphone. Heavy websites with a lack of mobile applications deprive many people who are looking for a job using their mobile phones. Smartphones are increasingly used as the new information tool, so websites need to meet their maintenance requirements. The rest of the organisational information also needs to be up-to-date in case the candidate wants to learn about the functions and structure of the future job provider.

The next level of the military information system are career centres and military districts offices. Usually, military career centres serve to establish the first contact with potential candidates. Their purpose is to consult and attract the required number of candidates for service members. The staff at the centres should present reality, not a distorted view of it. The Bulgarian Armed Forces do not have a network of career centres in all units, and there are such only in the larger garrisons. Where they do not exist, their function is taken over by the territorial centres of the Central Office of Military Districts. Military districts offices are evenly distributed throughout the country, where interested candidates can obtain the necessary information about the military profession, vacancies and ways to apply. In addition, assistance is provided at these places to complete all the necessary documents and send them ex officio.

Visiting the place is an excellent way to get acquainted first-hand with military orders and get a general idea of the specific military unit and the military

as a whole. Visits to military formations are organised on open days on military holidays, as organised visits for educational purposes and during military rituals of the troops. The specificity of them is that only positive information is presented and what is planned to be seen. With them it is difficult to note some negatives of the service, unknown to a civilian. Therefore, they should not be accepted as the sole source of information, based on which the decision is made to enter the service.

Military training classes in schools began after the adoption of the Armed Forces Reserve Act in 2013. The conduct of these classes aims to acquaint students in 9th and 10th grade with the obligations and ways to organise the country's defence. In addition, they can be used to attract graduates to the ranks of the Bulgarian Armed Forces.

The reliability of the information offered in each of these ways is crucial to the recruitment process. Providing only positive information and saving the negative one leads to an unrealistic view of the work, which contributes to the increased rate of voluntary resignation due to a discrepancy with expectations. Undoubtedly, the information presented should create a good impression and positivism, but information should also be provided about the other side of the coin in an adequate way.

When up-to-date and timely information is provided on the entire application and selection process, future service members will see the complete picture of the preparation of the necessary documents and skills for the competition. This will lead to relief of the candidates and reduction of the percentage of those who voluntarily give up due to impossibility for personal preparation and submission of documents.

External Sources of Information

External sources of information are not under direct organisational control, which is why they are increasingly taken into account by job seekers.

Word-of-mouth information sharing is in most cases more valuable than reviewing organisational characteristics on the organisation's website or through other official sources. The information provided through social contacts (friends, relatives, acquaintances) is perceived as positive and more reliable than the rest, and in addition, the influence of live contact on behaviour is unequivocally more influential. Guided by these findings, military leaders are increasingly using military personnel for word-of-mouth information. When service members are sent to their hometowns to participate in recruitment and candidate cadet campaigns, the effect of this approach is quite good. Getting first-hand information through a respectably looking service member has a stronger impact than any other advertisement. When this method is applied in combination with an attractive display, the effect of informing is even stronger. This requires the more extensive use of this approach in order to win the hearts and minds of potential candidates.

Public advertising and publications in public electronic and print media help build the organisational image, but they may also have a negative impact. The

media are not under organisational control, which is why they need to be approached carefully. The Bulgarian Armed Forces traditionally present their capabilities and take part in solemn celebrations of holidays with rituals of the troops. In such cases, informing the media in advance by the public relations officers about the expected actions is a good approach to minimise incompetent statements and comments.

Undoubtedly, frequent public appearances have a positive effect on the attitudes of the general public towards the military. Therefore, it is necessary to use every potential opportunity for its realisation in order to promote the military profession.

Conclusions

The information campaigns and advertisements discussed in the article reflect the main ways of providing information and attracting candidates for military service, through which the process of recruiting military personnel is influenced. There are many job seekers, but each of them has individual requirements, abilities and ambitions. The activity of the military in the whole process is, through its tools for providing information and influencing human behaviour, to attract the maximum number of candidates with the necessary skills to fill the large number of vacancies. The motivation of these candidates needs to be maintained from the moment of the first contact until entering the military service by providing them with up-to-date and timely information.

The different motivational models show that the economic condition of the country is directly related to the demand for work. In today's world, devastated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Bulgarian Armed Forces have a real opportunity to return to the labour market in the role of a desirable employer. Whether they will be able to use this opportunity, time will tell. However, it is necessary to try, using all possible ways of informing and advertising in order to promote the military profession and replenish the armed forces with trained and motivated personnel.

Acknowledgements

The results of the present work can be used to improve the existing information approaches of the armed forces and integrate with the system for attracting and motivating people to join the army. In addition, the means and tools for information and advertising can be applied in any civil organisation in order to promote its activities and attract candidates for work in it.

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