



Transition of defence force personnel to the WA public sector: **Information for the Minister**

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Introduction

Purpose of this report

The purpose of this report is to provide the WA Minister for Veterans, the Hon Joe Francis, with recommendations arising from an analysis of the challenges and opportunities experienced by a cohort of 146 current WA public sector (WAPS) employees when they transitioned from the Australian Defence Force (ADF).

The main aims of the project are to:

- discover the key challenges and opportunities faced by ex-ADF transitioning to WAPS employment.
- provide clear evidence for recommended strategies to more effectively attract and recruit former ADF personnel in the future.

The project was conducted between October 2015 and January 2016.

Background

In August 2015 the WA Minister for Veterans, the Hon Joe Francis called on the State Government to better recognise the skills and experience of former ADF personnel.

Public Sector Commissioner, Mal Wauchope undertook to explore the experiences of former ADF personnel who have joined the WA public sector, to better understand the challenges and opportunities in transitioning ADF members to the public service. The Public Sector Commission engaged former ADF officer, and current leadership consultant, David Deane-Spread, to assist in the design and delivery of the project.

This report describes the challenges and opportunities experienced by the 146 members; and makes recommendations based on all the data received from the survey responses, focus groups and interviews.

The supporting data, upon which this report is based, is contained in a document entitled 'Transition of defence force personnel to the WA public sector: Report data supplement'

Acknowledgement

The 155 ex-ADF members serving in WAPS who registered, completed the survey, attended the focus groups and interviews are acknowledged for their unselfish service and responsibility to help future ex-ADF members transitioning into the WAPS. We received an unusually high 94% response from registrants to the survey.

The Public Sector Commission is also acknowledged for their support and advice.

Challenges

The most notable discovery was that of all the challenges experienced, the least was concern about the physical and mental health of the transitioning member (see point 10 below).

This questions the validity of the idea that there are major employer concerns about ex-ADF members transitioning having PTSD.

It is also noteworthy that 19.6% of respondents had no issues in transitioning.

Challenges raised by the respondents in the survey:

The key challenges faced by ex-ADF members transitioning to the WAPS are listed in descending order of importance to the respondents, based on forced ranking questions in the survey:

1. Differences in leadership styles between the ADF and the public sector.
2. Differences between the ADF and the public sector in the way supervisors and subordinates/team members relate to each other.
3. Differences in workplace culture.
4. Differences between clearer 'chain of command' in the ADF versus the 'matrix' chain of command that can occur in the public sector.
5. Differences between training and development activity in the ADF versus lesser training and development in the public sector.
6. Negative assumptions made about capabilities. This related to a lack of recognition of prior learning and experience, and for transitioning females, an underestimation of their capability.
7. Differences in use of language to describe expertise between the ADF and the public sector.
8. Assumptions made about behavioural styles. The focus groups and interviews indicated this issue focused on an assumption that the ex-ADF members brought command and control styles. The participants in the focus groups and interviews felt actual performance did not bear this out.
9. Differences in adventure/challenge/variety. The focus groups and interviews indicated this was around purpose and meaning of work – mainly from conventional departments.
10. Negative assumptions made about physical and mental health. This low rating was supported by it not being raised in the focus groups and interviews.

Challenges raised by the respondents in discussion:

- Difficulties in job search and recruitment.
- Poor recognition of qualifications, skills and experience.
- Loss of teamwork, camaraderie and loyalty.
- Different standards of work ethic.
- Perceptions regarding attitude and expectations.
- Remuneration and benefits incongruence.

Comments about challenges

The primary challenge facing transitioning ADF members is during the career search and selection process – completing applications and the interview process.

It is during this interaction that the key differences between the ADF and the WAPS become apparent:

- difference in language and culture.
- ADF member's limited understanding of the public sector environment and how best to translate and promote their own skills, experience and qualifications into that environment.

It is at this point where the transitioning ADF member feels most disadvantaged.

The remainder of the challenges relate to adjustments needed following recruitment.

Opportunities

The opportunities identified by the respondents are personal qualities and skills developed during their ADF experience. There was consistency in responses to the survey, focus groups and interviews.

They are prioritised in descending order of importance by the respondents, based on forced ranking questions in the survey:

1. Ability to adapt.
2. Ability to use initiative.
3. Ability to work as a team member.
4. Self-discipline.
5. Ability to plan.
6. Ability to stay calm and centred.
7. Ability to focus on the challenge at hand.
8. Self-confidence.
9. Ability to observe.
10. Training and development experiences in the ADF.

The following four groups of qualities emerge:

1. Physical fitness and resilience – able to cope with fatigue, easily trainable.
2. Mental strength – able to handle stress, make decisions under pressure, analytical thinking, strong work ethic, professionalism.
3. A broad mindset – adaptability, learning, improvising, understanding.
4. Emotional intelligence – understanding of self, self-reliance.

The workplace/operational skills generally developed in the ADF include a wide range such as:

- computer skills, systems and processes.
- leading teams and positive cultural change.
- analysis and planning skills.
- firearms, command and control.
- training of others.
- precision; high performance and ability to excel.

Comments about the opportunities

The greatest opportunities are the personal qualities and skills ex-ADF members bring to the WAPS. These are applicable in any setting and are transferable.

Whilst the ex-ADF members are frustrated about the lack of formal recognition of prior learning and experience in operational skills and tools, they bring clear advantages and strengths in their defence skills whether applied to the uniformed environment such as WAPOL and DFES, or the non-uniformed such as TAFE and Department of Water.

The females interviewed expressed a common neutral observation that female civilian co-workers felt threatened by the ex-ADF female's ability to relate and work with males more easily. This can be seen as either a positive or a negative and will depend upon the emotional intelligence of those concerned.

In summary

The five main areas of concern for ex-ADF personnel seeking to transition to the WAPS are:

Lack of understanding

The shared difficulty experienced by both WAPS and the ex-ADF candidate at the point of recruitment in translating and understanding the requirements for the potential appointment and the skills, experience and qualifications of the ex-ADF member.

Lack of alignment of ADF qualifications with civilian context

The lack of alignment to, and validation of, qualifications of the ex-ADF member to civilian competencies at VET or University creates a credibility gap for the transitioning member. While it may be unrealistic to make recommendations about alignment, other suggestions have been made.

The lack of recognition of the ex-ADF member's prior learning

The lack of recognition of the ex-ADF member's prior learning by the WAPS provides significant scope for changes to be made if the WAPS and the ADF collaborate.

Loss of service credits

The loss of service credits on transition from the ADF to the WAPS, including long Service Leave.

The challenge of the new culture

The final primary area of concern is the challenge of the new culture in the WAPS including leadership styles, teamwork, language, work ethics etc.

For any progress to be made in making improvements in the transitioning process, three main parties need to take responsibility. These are:

1. The WAPS – because they can benefit from recruiting well-developed personnel.
2. The ADF – because they have a duty of care.
3. The individual transitioning – because they are responsible for themselves and have opportunities to benefit from their prior service in building their careers.

Recommendations

WAPS

1. The WAPS create a proactive ‘talent attraction product’ (TAP) that educates prospective ex-ADF members about:
 - the opportunities – promoting the values, the positive future and aspirations of the public sector and how the ex-ADF talent can contribute
 - challenges they are likely to face
 - culture and expectations
 - how to adjust to the public sector
 - how to effectively apply for public sector positions – terminology and processes.
2. The TAP is promoted to ADF national transitioning centres, and other services and NGOs that currently provide career development assistance.
 - the TAP can be promoted to all prospective candidates, not only ex-ADF members.
3. WAPS to offer a mentoring/coaching service utilising appropriately selected ex-ADF members currently serving in the WAPS.
4. WAPS in collaboration with the ADF, utilise VET/TAFE and universities where applicable, to create a pathway that recognises qualifications, prior learning and experience.
5. Allow service credits to be transferred to the WAPS if transitioning within a certain timeframe.
6. Improve the current WAPS induction process.
7. Allow skills badges earned in ADF to be worn on uniforms of WAPOL, DFES, DCS – currently depends upon the individual department’s policy.
8. Capture meta-data of ex-ADF members transitioning to the WAPS, to understand how these members can be better assisted to deliver their best and adjust to the WAPS more effectively.
9. Obtain data from ex-ADF members who transitioned to, and then left the public sector, in order to further deepen the understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing transitioning ADF members.

ADF

1. ADF transitioning centres and external partner services provide early access to TAP e.g. describe TAP in the ADF transitioning handbook.
2. ADF improve existing outplacement of transitioning members, mindful of TAP and other similar opportunities.
3. ADF collaborates with WAPS to enable recognition of qualifications and prior learning where possible, as in point four above.
4. ADF brief transitioning members about their personal responsibilities described below.

Individual transitioning

1. Engage with TAP at the appropriate time.
2. Access all transition education and support services, internal and external.
3. Develop a competency at managing own career and private life.
4. Recognise and accept the differences in leadership styles and culture and decide to work with and respectfully influence and assist their new workplace to achieve their goals in accordance with their values and purpose.

Conclusion

What became apparent to the consultant when analysing the data and particularly when interacting with the focus groups and interviewees, is that much depends on the quality of leadership within the parties transitioning and selecting, their next level leaders, and the self-leadership qualities of the member transitioning.

19.6% had no difficulties transitioning. The link between them and the leadership they experienced is worthy of further examination.

The other notable discovery was the lack of concern that transitioning members expressed regarding negative perceptions of their physical and mental health.

Female ex-ADF members experienced no real difference than male ex-ADF members except that their capabilities were underestimated and female co-workers in their new areas were uncomfortable with their ability to communicate and work with male counterparts.

Senior members transitioning agreed that they didn't want ex-ADF members to be given an unfair advantage over other applicants, nor be seen as disadvantaged.

Learning more about ex-ADF members who transitioned to WAPS then left could be valuable.

Based on the evidence, the recommendations which, if followed, would make the greatest difference and benefit to both WAPS and the ex-ADF member are:

1. WAPS create a proactive talent attraction product (TAP) that educates transitioning ADF members of the opportunities and 'how to' apply and articulate their competencies during the application and selection process.
2. WAPS promote their opportunities with the ADF transition system.
3. WAPS ensure there is a best practice induction framework for all new appointees.
4. WAPS collaborate with ADF to align and recognise prior learning and experience.
5. The ADF continue to improve its transition services as an expression of their values and duty of care.
6. The individual ADF member transitioning take full personal responsibility to plan prepare and learn how to adapt to their chosen workplace environment as well as the realities of life outside of the ADF.
7. That the leadership of WAPS, ADF and the self-leadership of individuals is mindful and responsive to the challenges and opportunities.