

Original Article

Causes for airman trainees seeking discharge: An exit evaluation

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Thirty six airman trainees from Air force stations Jalahalli, Tambaram and Avadi who were recommended by Station Review Boards for cease training and discharge were subjected to clinically oriented exit interviews. The interviews were preceded by projective sentence completion test. Interviews revealed that 58% of the trainees sought discharge primarily due to voluntary unavoidable reasons. Certain background information such as first born, last born, higher per capita income and father in business, assumed significance. Also Kolmogorov Smirnov One Sample Test showed that some personality characteristics - sociability, confidence, decision making, resilience and perceived closeness to parents - were significantly related to the incidences of trainees seeking discharge. Implications of the findings are discussed.

Keywords : Airmen trainees, Voluntary withdrawal, Psychological factors

Personnel turnover problem is of immense importance to any organisation. Lelkowitz [1] has categorised the causes of turnover as (i) Involuntary Unavoidable: management initiated dismissals, (ii) Involuntary Avoidable: dismissals for causes that are potentially avoidable, (iii) Voluntary Unavoidable: employee seeking discharge due to illness, family problems etc. and (iv) Voluntary Avoidable: seeking discharge due to potentially avoidable conditions e.g., poor orientation, better job prospect outside etc. A few studies [2, 3] emphasise that a trainee may seek discharge if the job for which he is being trained as also the training atmosphere are significantly contradictory to his initial expectations. Gellerman [4] and Vroom [5] consider that personal attributes including educational and professional qualification lead one to believe in the availability of relatively attractive outside organisation

alternatives and may initiate personnel turnover.

A study related to the training in the Services [6] using trainees at the US Navy's Basic Under Water Demolition/SEAL 8 Training School as subjects concludes that some aspects of estimation scale of Physical Estimation and Attraction Scale and 4 out of 13 attributes assessed by Hogan Personality Inventory can differentiate between the graduates and the drop-outs when retested on graduation. In this case, the proportion of graduates in relation to drop-outs is quite low, being roughly 2:9. Review of literature [7] has already shown that the relation between aptitude, ability and personality traits on the one hand and the employees tenure on the other has exhibited promising relationship in some situations.

Specific changes in the training procedure so as to reduce anxiety and feeling of isolation render the training more

acceptable to trainees resulting in significant decrease in attrition rate [8,9]. Organisational structure which offers training procedure and job that are conducive to the individual in satisfying his needs for achievement, responsibility, autonomy, personal growth and advancement restricts the turnover to the minimum [10, 11, 12].

Burgeoning interest in human resource development and conservation in recent years as well as the efforts (inclusive of cost) involved in imparting training to recruits for technical trade in the Air Force make it imperative to have a fresh look at the problems faced by trainees in general, and to the causal dynamics leading to opting out of service by some of them in particular. Of course, vast majority of technical trainees complete their training and continue in service as the nature of problems faced by them is such that they can cope up with them. However, some trainees seek discharge during the training period itself for various reasons and under wide variety of circumstances. As attrition as such has a bearing on the development of trained manpower, the study of related causes and their nature assume greater importance because on the nature and magnitude of the problem depends the practicability of implementing the remedial measures. Therefore, the present study does not purport to go into very many day-to-day problems encountered by all the trainees in the training institutes. Instead an attempt is made to have an idea of the causal problems, personal or otherwise, faced by trainees seeking discharge in an effort to find out the causes (including nature) for their not opting to continue in the service.

Specifically, the study aims at :

- (a) exploring the causes and nature thereof for trainees seeking discharge,
- (b) locating the problem areas needing attention and
- (c) suggesting possible remedial measures to reduce the attrition rate.

Material and methods

The study was conducted by eliciting responses to projective semistructured sentence completion test consisting of a series of incomplete sentences open at the end from the trainees followed by a clinically oriented interview probing into the whole gamut of circumstances leading to the final impasse. The exercise was carried out once the trainee was recommended by Station Review Boards (SRBs) for cease training and discharge. This made the trainees feel free to come out with the facts that led to their seeking discharge as they were convinced that their fate no longer depends upon the evaluation by a psychologist. Therefore in the final analysis this may be termed as exit evaluation.

Subjects Thirty six airman trainees from Air Force Stations Jalahalli, Tambaram and Avadi on being recommended by SRB for cease training and discharge during the period from May to November 1994 were evaluated.

Analysis The data being largely qualitative in nature and limited in number, a qualitative-cum-quantitative approach was adopted for analysis. Had the approach been purely statistical, much of the meaning of the responses would have been lost. The interview data, be they biographical,

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Age (yrs)
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attitudinal or causal, were classified under meaningful categories. The Projective Sentence Completion Test profiles were cast into categories of behavioural manifestation of personality traits, feelings and attitudes. In case of feelings and attitudes, the supporting evidence coming from interview was also considered while categorisation was done. Kolmogorov - Smirnov One Sample Test [13] was employed to analyse the psychological test findings. As the trainees themselves seek discharge, initiative invariably lies with them. Therefore, all the causes unraveled through this study fall under either 'Voluntary Unavoidable' or 'Voluntary Avoidable' categories [1]. Thus considering the nature of primary causes, they were classified under these two broad groupings only.

Results and discussion

Tables I-VII show the background characteristics of the sample and Tables VIII - X bring out the feelings/attitudes of the trainees towards the training set-up, guard duty as also physical training (PT), parade and health run. It may be mentioned that all these were elicited through interview.

Table I - Age distribution (n = 36)

Age (yrs)	Number	%
17-18	16	44
19-20	11	31
21-22	9	25

Table II - Birth order (n = 36)

Category	Number	%
First	14	39
Middle	6	17
Last	16	44

Table III - Parental status (n = 36)

Category	Number	%
Father dead	7	19
Mother dead	-	-
Both dead	1	3
Both alive	28	78

Table IV - Educational qualifications (n = 36)

Category	Number	%
Matric/X Std	6	17
Inter - XII Std	25	69
Dip. in Engg	4	11
B.Sc.	1	3

Table V - Per capita family income* (n = 36)

Income range (Rs)	Number	%
501-1,000	6	17
1,001-1,500	7	19
1,501-2,000	14	39
> 2,000	9	25

* Per capita income

Total income (excluding the trainee's)
Family members (inclusive of the trainee)

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Table VI - Employment of parent
(n = 28*)

Category	Number	%
Father in business	9	32
Father employed	16	57
Mother employed	1	4
(Father retired)		
Both employed	2	7

* Total number of cases is reduced because both the parent are alive in 28 cases only

Table-VII Initiation of application for employment (n = 36)

Category	Number	%
On his own	20	56
On friends advice	13	36
On family's advice	3	8

Table VIII - Feeling about training set up
(n = 36)

Category	Number	%
Satisfied	8	22
Dissatisfied	10	28
Indifferent	18	50

Table IX - Attitude towards guard duty
(n = 36)

Category	Number	%
Favorable	6	17
Unfavorable	9	25
Indifferent	21	58

Table X - Attitude towards PT, parade and health run (n = 36)

Category	Number	%
Favorable	7	20
Unfavorable	8	22
Indifferent	21	58

Table XI brings out the sample, standing in terms of personality traits, perceived closeness to parents, attitude towards team mates and superiors and also aspiration level. Table XII presents the primary causes for trainees seeking discharge in classified form.

Table XII - Classification of primary causes

	Number	%
I. Voluntary Unavoidable	21	58
(a) Personal illness (chronic)	7	
(b) Domestic compulsion		
i. Ill health of parent (s)	14	
ii. Family trauma due to recent accidental death of only brother	1	
iii. Recent demise of father	2	
iv. Trainee being the only responsible member to look after orphan younger sister	1	
II. Voluntary Avoidable	15	42
(a) Training atmosphere significantly contradictory to initial expectation	8	
(b) Better extra organisational alternative	4	
(c) Lack of aptitude/temperamental qualities	3	
Total	36	100

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Table XI - Psychological test findings (n = 36)

	Number	%		Number	%
(a) Uptake (NS)					
Low Average	04	11			
Average	11	31			
High Average	09	25			
Above Average	12	33			
(b) Sociability (p<0.01)					
Socially bold, spontaneously mixing, warm, outgoing	04	11			
Generally adaptable, though takes time to settle down in new company	13	42			
Reserved, inhibited, attached to home and hearth	17	47			
(c) Sense of responsibility (NS)					
Highly dependable, trustworthy	02	06			
Normally responsible, accepts duties	31	86			
Easy going, half hearted	03	08			
(d) Confidence (p<0.01)					
Exudes confidence, self-assured	01	03			
Just confident	16	44			
Unsure of himself, dependent, worrying	19	53			
(e) Decision making (p<0.01)					
Quick and certain	07	19			
Workable decisions	14	39			
Ponderous, hesitant, wavering	22	61			
(f) Sentimentality (p<0.01)					
Extremely sentimental, touchy	10	28			
Somewhat sentimental, but tries to apply his mind	25	69			
Reasons out, applies his mind	01	03			
(g) Emotional Stability (NS)					
Emotionally stable, faces realities adequately	01	03			
Moderately emotionally stable	23	64			
Easily upset, low emotional stability	12	33			
(h) Stamina (NS)					
Very tough	02	06			
Physically fit	28	78			
Soft, easily fatigued	06	16			
(i) Resilience (p<0.01)					
Thrives under stress, unperturbed	02	06			
Can withstand normal stress and strain, toils	18	50			
Defeatist, excited, anxiety ridden	16	44			
(k) Perceived closeness to parents^a (p<0.01)					
Closer to father	01	03			
Closer to mother	23	78			
Close to both	11	31			
^a n=35 as in one case both the parents had expired					
(l) Attitude towards teammates (NS)					
High team spirit, always helpful	04	11			
Co-operative	27	75			
Conditional co-operation; doubts others	05	14			
(m) Attitude towards superiors (NS)					
Always respectful, obeys unconditionally	03	08			
Normally respectful and dutiful	29	81			
Doubts his ability/dislikes authoritarianism, carries out orders reluctantly	03	08			
Fear of superiors, feels threatened	01	03			
(n) Aspired goal (NS)					
High, very stilled	05	14			
High, nebulous	09	25			
Low crystallised	01	03			
Low nebulous	01	03			
Appropriate (to age and ability)	20	55			

An examination of the birth order (Table II) makes it apparent that more than one third of the trainees (39%) are first born while about half of them (44%) are last born. First born is likely to be more anxious under stress whereas the last born is supposed to be overprotected and more attached to mother because of preferential treatment expected to be received by them [14]. Considering the parental status, Table III shows that seven trainees have lost their father and in one case, both the parents have already expired. Their education (Table IV) varies from X Standard passed to Dip. in Engineering (four subjects) in one case and B.Sc. Considering the per capita family income (Table V), it is clear that two thirds of the trainees come from families with reasonable financial background as 39% of them is in the income range of Rs. 1,501/- to 2,000/- per month and 25% having more than Rs. 2,000/- per month as per capita income (exclusive of the trainee's income). Thus in 64% cases, there is something to fall back upon when not in the service. In 32% of the cases, father is in business (Table VI). The initiation of application for enrollment (Table VII) reveals that 20 of the trainees (56%) initiated on their own with inadequate information regarding the service. Initiation in 13 cases (36 %) was done on the advice of friends whereas three disinterested trainees had to initiate their application on the insistence of elder brother and/or father.

On examination of the feelings/attitudes towards overall training set-up and some adjuncts thereof, only 22% of the trainees are satisfied with the overall training atmosphere whereas 28% of them are dissatisfied with the same. As many as 18 (50%) are indifferent as they are preoccupied

with their own problems (Table VIII). The attitude towards guard duty and also towards PT, parade and health run (Tables IX and X) more or less follow the same pattern. In both the cases, 21 trainees (58%) shown indifference because either they have accepted these features as necessary evils or are too preoccupied with their own problems to give attention to or to feel concerned about. Percentages of trainees showing unfavorable attitude towards guard duty and towards PT, parade and health run are 25 and 22 respectively. They think that guard duty, PT, parade and health run are extra commitments, they have nothing to do with technical training. Health run results in no physical benefit, instead increases mental tension. They suggest that guard duty should be removed and other activities should be within limits for technical trainees.

A glance at table IX reveals that one third of them (33%) can be considered above average on the uptake being clear headed and having good grasp absorbing new impressions quite readily. Shades of average cover others. As many as 17 trainees (47%) of them are socially reserved, inhibited and attached to home and hearth. Vast majority of them (86%) are normally responsible and accept duties. Three of the trainees (8%) can be termed as easy going and half hearted, while only two (6%) are highly dependable and trustworthy. Majority of them (53%) are with low confidence being unsure, dependent and worrying and only one trainee is self assured and exudes confidence. More than half of them (61%) are ponderous, hesitant and wavering in making decisions. A sizable number of trainees (28%) are extremely sentimental and touchy whereas more than two thirds of them (69%) are somewhat

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sentimental but try to apply their minds too. Pattern of distribution of frequency to various shades of emotional stability is in consonance with that of sentimentality. One third of them (33%) are low in emotional stability, easily upset and about two thirds (64%) of the sample show moderate emotional stability and can adequately face reality. They are better placed stamina-wise, two of them (6%) being very tough and more than three fourth of them (78%) physically fit. Six trainees (16%) are soft and easily fatigued. When stress tolerance or resilience is considered, 16 of them (44%) are excited, anxiety ridden, feel defeatist under stress while 18 (50%) can withstand normal stress and strain as they are toilers.

As to the nature of intra-family dynamics, particularly the interaction between the trainee and the parents, the group is generally characterised by attachment to and/or overprotection from mother (66%) [14]. Only one (3%) perceives his relationship with father to be closer. Remaining 11 of them (31%) perceives warmth and closeness towards both the parents. In the wider social matrix 27 trainees (75%) show cooperative attitude towards their team mates. Four of them (11%) show high team spirit and are always helpful. The rest of them (14%) cooperate conditionally or doubt others. Twenty nine trainees (81%) show respectful attitude towards superiors normally and are dutiful, whereas three of them (8%) are always respectful and obeys superiors unconditionally. Three (8%) doubt the ability of superiors, dislike authoritarianism or carry out orders reluctantly. Interestingly, the last one (3%) is afraid of the presence of the superiors as he feels threatened.

This study shows that aspired goal is appropriate (to age and ability) in 20 cases (55%). It may be termed high but crystallized in 5 cases (14%) whereas 9 of them (25%) show high but nebulous aspired goal set.

Finally, we come to the primary causes for trainees seeking discharge (Table XII). It is seen that the primary causes for opting out of the service unraveled through the exit interview from 58% of the trainees are of voluntary unavoidable nature. 42% of the trainees come out primarily with potentially avoidable causal conditions resulting in their opting out of the service. Intra-organisational remedies are possible for attrition due to causal conditions of this category.

It may be mentioned here that out of a sample of 36 trainees only five are having qualifications clearly more than the minimum required. Again out of these five, analysis of underlying causes for seeking discharge reveals that only one trainee having a Diploma in Engineering (Electrical & Electronics) opts out of the service because of perceived better prospect outside as he unwillingly joined the training due to his father's insistence and now he decides (with father's consent) to participate in his father's hotel and tanning business which yields a monthly income of more than Rs. 25,000/-. Other three trainees having Diploma in Engineering are seeking discharge due to "Voluntary Unavoidable" reasons such as personal illness, ill health of mother or sudden demise of father. The last one with a B.Sc. is temperamentally unsuited as airman. Thus it is clear that this study fails to give credence to the common notion that trainees who have qualifications more than the minimum required try to get cease training.

as better prospects awaiting outside the organisation barring a solitary instance where also seeking discharge is not on the strength of his professional qualification.

When the primary causes unearthed through this study are examined against the backdrop of background information and findings of the personality test, some personality characteristics, i.e., sociability, confidence, decision making, resilience and perceived closeness to parents coupled with a few background information assume significance. To be more precise they are: first born, last born; educational qualification; per capita income above Rs. 1,500 pm; father in business; socially reserved and attached to home and hearth; unsure of himself, dependent and worrying; wavering; excited, anxiety ridden, defeatist and attachment towards or overprotection from mother. The relation of these personality characteristics and background information with the causes for trainees seeking discharge, be they fall under 'voluntary unavoidable' or 'voluntary avoidable' category is obvious. Hence, there is a need for introducing an elaborate biographical information blanks and a personality test at the recruitment stage to reduce general attrition rate during training.

Of the 15 cases falling under 'voluntary avoidable' category 8 trainees found the training atmosphere was significantly contradictory to their initial expectation of the technical training which they thought to be in entirely civil set-up. Instead, their autonomy was curbed. They had to abide by stringent rules and regulations. These apart, they come to know that PT, parade, health run and guard duty are the regular features not only during training but also

throughout the service period and promotion prospects are restricted. They have to live life under stress and strain. None of their relatives being in the Services, they were misinformed and the lure of government service, and in some cases, family's insistence made them join the training. Providing a comprehensive picture of training atmosphere, making them aware of the reality and assessing their adaptability to the service situation at the time of intake as also proper initiation to the training atmosphere enhancing positive attitude towards maintaining group membership and inculcating in them the belief that they are trained primarily as soldiers serving a cause and not as just technicians, would have improved the situation.

Four of them were attracted by extra organisational alternatives. Two of them got admission in reputed colleges and two decided to participate in father's thriving business. Last three in the series, lacked aptitude, physically and/or temperamentally unsuited as airmen. It is here that the importance of development of trade classification tests as is done by Naval Psychological Research Unit [15] is evident.

Conclusion

Out of 36 cases studied, the nature of primary causes for seeking discharge for 21 trainees (58%) can be termed as "Voluntary Unavoidable". Causes advanced by remaining 15 trainees (42%) fall under "Voluntary Avoidable" category for which remedies could be explored. Also some of the background information elicited through interview and quite a few personality characteristics are found to be related to the causal problems resulting in seeking

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