

ABSTRACT

Retaining human resource, especially on which much has been spent to train and hone their skills has become today's biggest challenge for every field of profession. There is a misconception among many that emoluments matter most in retaining human resource. It is true that the Job satisfaction and working condition are better in the private sector than many of the public sector organizations and it is also the common view that due to the nature of the working environment in the private sector the employees are given the freedom to unleash their creativity and talents and also the employer never fails to appreciate the job well done. Too much of interference to work and bossing stifles growth and creativity and that too lead to employee dissatisfaction and frustration in the workplace. Finding themselves balked at every turn in the workplace, the motivation level of employees is terribly affected and if not for any other variable that motivate them to remain, they look for the exit. Distrust in the workplace among peers, between the employer and employee and work fatigue too could lead to employee attrition. It would also not be wholly correct to opine that long hours of work have no bearing towards employee attrition.

The situation of employee attrition is no stranger to defence services. It is witnessed that absenteeism and desertion has become a critical problem in the Sri Lanka Air Force at present. Apart from the periodical legitimate exodus takes place on expiry of obligatory period or the initial engagement of personnel, there is also a considerable number leaving the Air Force under illegitimate circumstances; absenteeism and desertion. The legitimate exit is pre-planned thus fresh candidates are recruited to fill the vacuum through new recruitment drives. However, illegitimate exits are unforeseen and are never planned for thus they have a direct bearing on the productivity of any organization. Military profession is very much different from many other civil professions where it involves training on firearms handling, combat training etc which would not be authorized for any other civilian organization unless other wise especially sanctioned by the Government. In this context, losing a military trained person due to absenteeism and desertion whilst incurring a loss to the Force he/she represents may also pose a threat to the society if he/she uses his/her military skills and abilities on undesirable schemes injurious to the society.

Undoubtedly, absenteeism and desertion has become a menace in the Air Force at present. In this context it was considered that carrying out a research on absenteeism and desertion in the Air Force was a prime need. As such the research was carried out focussing the Other Ranks segment which covers a 93% of the total strength of the Air Force. As per the findings and observations through the research the main issue surrounding the absenteeism and desertion is that of management. The indication given by most of the interviewees and the majority of those who answered the questionnaire was that the absenteeism and desertion in the Air Force mostly occur due to 3 main reasons. They are Leadership failures, employees fatigue through excessive work pace/effort and working hours and finally employee dissatisfaction due to unpleasant and uncomfortable working conditions. Apart from these three main reasons there are few other factors such as domestic disturbances, personal grievances on the job and alternative employment opportunities available too contribute to increase the rate of absenteeism and desertion in the Air Force.

There is a lot to be done by the leadership, especially by the junior managers of different ranks to reduce the level of desertion and absenteeism in the Air Force. It reflects that the junior leadership in the Air Force lacks adequate awareness of proper human resource management, perhaps due to lack of experience and maturity. The best course of action available to bridge this gap is to provide junior leaders with adequate training on human resource management which in turn will ensure better leadership and management styles.

In fulfilling the "Mission" setout in the Air Force that is "To establish an Air Force of high operational efficiency to preserve the sovereignty of Sri Lanka" it has the most precious commodity "the human resource" apart from the other resources such as aircraft and infrastructure. As far as the productivity of the Air Force, going by its main function, is concerned it is the amount of effort that is put in order to provide mission capable fixed wing and rotary wing aircraft to accomplish the given task.

The Sri Lanka Air Force is a technical force and its members often work as teams. In this context synchronizing every one's effort towards one aim is of utmost importance in achieving its mission. Personnel in the Air Force has a role of their own to play within the team they work for and as such it is appropriate to say that the task interdependence is an

important characteristic of group task, that is the degree to which the work of one member of a group influences the work performed by other members. In this exercise it is also important that cohesion within team members is maintained at the highest order.

However, it is very well identified that absenteeism and desertion in the Air Force create a situation that the team concept is compromised to a greater extent. When the team effectiveness is so compromised by the absenteeism and desertion the end result would be a negative effect on the overall productivity of the Air Force. To be more precise, the absenteeism and desertion force the organisation to loose experienced, trained and groomed workforce. The bottom line is that the vacuum created by the absentees and deserters can never be filled at no cost and within no time. Nevertheless, productivity is the ultimate victim of absenteeism and desertion.

The discipline mechanisms what is available in the Air Force at present appear to be needing further strengthening for them to be more effective against absenteeism and desertion. Yet it should not be forgotten that application of Air Force Law in disciplinary situations need to be carried out with utmost care and also with human factor being given highest consideration.