WINNING HEARTS THROUGH COMMUNICATION – A SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY FOR THE MILITARY

by **MAJ(NS) Tan Kok Yew**

Abstract:

According to the author, with the high social media penetration rate in Singapore, it would be beneficial if a model to engage military personnel through the Social Media could be promulgated to guide commanders, human resource managers and communication practitioners. This essay will combine a military retention framework derived from civilian employee retention models and gaps in existing military employee retention frameworks, applying it to Social Media strategies to devise a Social Media engagement model to propose an enhancement to military employee retention in the SAF. The POWERS framework proposed, together with a pilot study with six respondents, would serve to provide the first step towards an effective employee retention model for the SAF.

Keywords: Social Media; Social Presence; Communication; Employee Retention; Organisation

INTRODUCTION – APPLYING CIVILIAN THEORIES IN THE MILITARY

"The art of communication is the language of leadership."

- James C. Humes,
Author and Former Presidential Speechwriter.[1]

Conventionally, research on civilian employee retention theory has treated retention as an instance of motivated personal choice largely influenced by dispositions, attitudes and feelings.[2] Using these established norms, a military retention model (See *Figure 1*) based on distal predictors and proximal predictors were proposed by Capon, Chernyshenko and Stark in 2007 for the New Zealand military, revolving around these three main factors. After distillation, the distal predictors were classified as perceived organisational support; work-family conflict; dispositions; and (whether the job has) met expectations. The proximal predictors were community involvement; job involvement; organisational commitment; and work satisfaction. However, this model focused only on the intentions to remain in the military, as opposed to widely expounded models on intentions to leave.[3] Another research by Devi in 2009 emphasised that employee engagement is a 'two-way street' and elaborated that a key success in the modern globalised economy is the creation of a 'retention-rich organisation' that could attract, engage and build lasting loyalty among its most talented employees.[4] This further motivated the research to explore the means of introducing civilian or commercial employee engagement philosophies into the military, like the SAF, to create a 'retention-rich' military organisation.
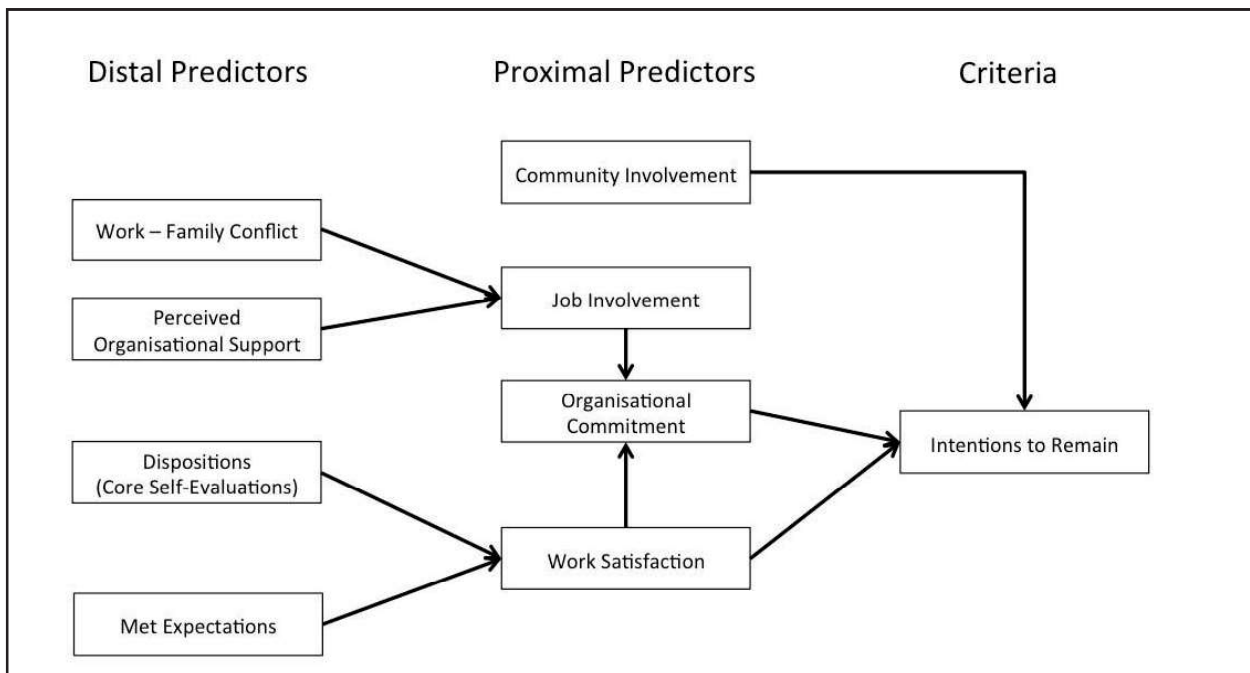
Figure 1: "Personal Choice" military retention model.[5]

With the high social media penetration rate in Singapore, it would be beneficial if a model to engage military personnel through the Social Media (SM) could be promulgated to guide commanders, human resource managers and communication practitioners.[6] This essay will combine a military retention framework derived from civilian employee retention models and gaps in existing military employee retention frameworks, applying it to SM strategies to devise a SM engagement model to propose an enhancement to military employee retention in the SAF. The POWERS framework proposed, together with a pilot study with six respondents, would serve to provide the first step towards an effective employee retention model for the SAF.

TO LEAVE OR NOT TO LEAVE – CAN POWERS SOLVE THE PROBLEM?

In the literature of employee turnover, Krueger opined that a certain number of military personnel leave the organisation as they are unable to cope with the strenuous physical requirements as military jobs are naturally physically and psychologically demanding.[7] Due to the nature of military training, there is a sizeable number of personnel turnover caused involuntarily and these cases should be discerned from the voluntary resignations. Sucharski and Rhoades proposed that the perceived supervisor and organisation support for employees play a major role in employee turnover rate.[8] This is especially distinct in large organisations like the military as opposed to small and medium enterprises where perceptions of supervisors and organisations might be grey, coupled with the characteristics of the Gen Y population who have dominated the industries.[9] Another research by Eisenburger *et al.* also inferred that leadership styles that precipitate sour relations between military leaders and lower ranking members are a major contributor to military turnover.[10] This adds on to the interest to ascertain how and what kind of relationship or perceived supervisor support affects military turnover or retention rate. Eisenberger *et al.* further suggested that superiors, to the extent that they are identified with the organisation, contribute

to perceived organisational support and, ultimately, to employee retention. [11] This is particular apparent to the military, where the commanders are the organisation's reach to its men (or employees) by hierarchy and structure. Commanders are hence the advocates for the organisation and will have to be strong believers in the organisation's visions, and be a supernode in communication.[12]

With the factors listed in the various retention models, it is important for this essay to then address some of the problems the SAF might face when communicating the value of serving in the military to its own people. The level of employee engagement by the organisation and its corresponding effect on employee retention is one of the key aspects to examine in this SM-dominated era when referring to communications with employees. Social Presence, which refers to the degree of salience of the other person in the communication interactions and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationship, translates to how well the recipient feels the presence of the communicators, especially in this era when employee communication has moved on to SM

platforms.[13] While the conventional military settings might not augur well with trend-setting user-generated environment in the SM, it is inevitable that the military has to venture towards where the hearts and minds are in order to strike the right chord.

Drawing reference from the communication research by Wright and Hinson on how new communications media are being used in public relations, it is evident that SM is becoming increasingly important for organisations and public service entities, including the military, in its employee engagement and community identity campaigns. [14] Relating back to the Personal Choice Military Retention Model (PCMRM) by Capon, Chernyshenko and Stark, SM can help to influence Perceived Organisational Support, Community Involvement (or identity) and Organisational Commitment, covering both distal and proximal predictors. As this essay would aim to design a SM communication framework for military employee engagement, the three predictors mentioned will be transferred over to the envisioned framework and explained in detail.

P	**erceived Organisational Support**	*Am I important to the organisation?*
O	**rganisational Commitment**	*How much do I love the organisation?*
W	**ork Satisfaction**	*How happy am I in the organisation?*
E	**ngagement**	*Do I feel like I am part of the organisation?*
R	**ealisation of Expectations**	*Is the organisation giving me what I want?*
S	**ocial Involvement**	*Is my organisation well regarded by the society?*

Figure 2: The POWERS Framework and the probing question for each element – Perceived organisational support, Organisational commitment, Work satisfaction, Engagement, Realisation of expectations, and Social involvement.

Combining the key factors from models across literature on employee retention and military employee turnover rates, a conceptual framework examining both push and pull factors is proposed, which would serve as a useful model for military commanders' reference. The proposed framework, POWERS (See *Figure 2*), is a distillation of key factors for employee retention in the military context, with consideration for its application in various platforms including SM.

Perceived Organisational Support, as highlighted earlier in the PCMRM, supposes that there are socio-emotional needs of employees that they try to meet while determining the organisation's readiness to reward additional work effort. These lead to the development of global beliefs concerning the extent to which the organisation values their contributions and cares for their well-being.[15] It is deduced that this is an important piece of the puzzle to allow military employees to still hold the belief that their presence are valued, and continue to stay engaged with their commitment.

Organisational Commitment was defined by Steers as 'the relative strength of an individual's identity with, and involvement in, a particular organisation.'[16] Organisational commitment was also further broken down into more assessable components like affective, normative and continuance.[17] This essay focuses on the affective aspect as there is sufficient empirical evidence to establish that affective organisational commitment is a good predictor for intention to remain in an organisation.[18]

Work Satisfaction speaks for itself and is closely correlated with organisational commitment. But many studies have found that work satisfaction is less strong an indicator in predicting retention.[19] Work satisfaction is defined as one's affective attachment to his/her work role.[20] And, Griffeth *et al.* premised that work satisfaction is the best predictor of intentions. Hence it is important to include this aspect as it would have a substantial effect on retention or turnover.[21] This is particularly important in the military, a civil service, without high remunerations, which would require a lot more intangible rewards like work satisfaction to fuel the passion and commitment.

With each element of the POWERS framework defined, we see the importance and relevance of drawing reference from civilian employee retention models and adding context based on the military setting and demographics of the target audience.

Engagement is the level at which the employees are being engaged at work. It could be along the lines of openness to feedback, meaning or purpose of job, or development of the employees. Sunil reviewed the motivation theories of employees and derived a framework identifying critical factors among the respective motivation theories and the implications for developing and implementing employee retention practices.[22] Within the list of critical factors, employees' development and feedback stood out as key pillars supporting the aspect of engagement. The working environment needs to provide a challenge or offer new learning opportunities for employees to feel engaged. This is apart from the prospects of advancement and development of individuals, which are expected of an organisation. Engagement, in terms of employees' development and feedback hence become an important element within the POWERS framework which the SAF could consider in its employee retention strategies. In communication, it is important to profile human-interest success stories

With the platform chosen, and a framework to adopt, the approach will be a reverse-engineer of a qualitative content analysis—using key words and a coding list to categorise the standing of a communication effort using the POWERS framework.

and provide channels for employees to interact with career planners so as to make career development and planning a two-way conversation.

Realisation of Expectations combines the essence of the Expectancy Theory, Vroom's Theory and Porter and Lawler's Extension as nicely summed up by Sunil.[23] 'The expectancy theory holds that people are motivated to behave in ways that produce desired combinations of expected outcomes', hence the realisation of employees' expectations would be important to produce the desired organisational outcome.[24] Extending the Vroom's Theory, Porter and Lawler developed a model, which attempted to identify the source of people's valences and expectancies,

stating that employees should exhibit more effort when they believe they will receive their desired reward upon completion of task.[25] Relating to this research, the level of realisation for the individual's expectations would be a predictor of intentions as well. This is especially the case when there is a basis for comparison in a job outside the military. Whether or not SAF and its commanders can gather, effectively, the expectations of the employees, and match them, would very much determine how long an employee would remain in service. While instant gratification might not be possible in a hierarchical organisation like the military, other forms of rewards can be explored instead of tangible ones like promotion and pay rise.

Social Involvement as a factor for employee retention is crucial in the military due to the nature of the job being a civil service, and remuneration which might not match up to what the commercial world could offer. This would mean that society's regard for the military should instil a strong sense of purpose and pride in the military employees for them to continue their service. Increasingly, it can be

Figure 3: SM penetration in Singapore with FB amongst the top 3.[26]

seen that the SAF and MINDEF have been enhancing public awareness of its missions and role in Singapore's defence through community relations efforts and public engagement activities. These are the avenues which the servicemen could draw reference to their purpose in serving. Large scale events like the Open Houses, the Republic of Singapore Air Force's (RSAF) participation in the Singapore Airshow, and exhibitions in the heartlands also bring up the public standing of the Singapore military, fueling the intangible rewards for the soldiers.

With each element of the POWERS framework defined, we see the importance and relevance of drawing reference from civilian employee retention models and adding context based on the military setting and demographics of the target audience. The next step is to apply the framework to practice. The SM is one of the most powerful tools in communication, and with the more expressive and eloquent Gen Y dominating the main population within the SAF, it is useful to tap on SM to engage the military employees.[27]

The POWERS framework, in its current form, is a useful reference for military communication practitioners and commanders when designing communication messages for the military employees.

COMMUNICATING WHERE IT CLICKS – A SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

It is undeniable that Singapore has high internet penetration and SM penetration rates. According to a marketing research firm, Hashmeta's statistics, 79% of Singapore's population are internet users and the SM penetration rate is 84% – almost doubling the global average of 42%.[28] To communicate where it clicks, the SAF should continue to use Facebook (FB) as it is one of the better received SM platform in Singapore (See *Figure 3*).

Coding List for POWERS
Receptiveness to ideas, Leadership and management style, Rigid policies, Clear direction or guidance, Continuity and leadership renewal, Empathetic superiors, Perceived performance level, and Recognition. *(8 codes)*
Duty to country, Transparency of performance ranking, Career prospects, and Obligatory service. *(4 codes)*
Job satisfaction, Career progression, Work-life balance, Friendship at work, Manpower strain, and Conducive working environment. *(6 codes)*
Meaningful job, Engagement by senior management, Development opportunities, and Comprehensive system of performance measurement. *(4 codes)*
Remuneration, Mandate to command, Fulfilment of aspirations, Meeting personal expectations, Opportunities for growth, Childhood dream, and Realisation of potential. *(7 codes)*
Social responsibilities, Public impression, and Ambassador for defence. *(3 codes)*

Figure 4: The coding list for POWERS lists the keywords from a pilot study interviewing six respondents in the SAF across three services. The codes should be used to measure the strength of each communication effort (e.g. FB post), measuring in context the score across each element. For example, a post might score 75% or 0.75 when it covers 2 out of 4 codes for Organisational Commitment when it profiles a personnel who rose to rank in the career through his commitment to serve the country, highlighting the achievements.

With the platform chosen, and a framework to adopt, the approach will be a reverse-engineer of a qualitative content analysis—using key words and a coding list to categorise the standing of a communication effort using the POWERS framework. While a standardised coding can ensure uniformity in its application across the six elements of POWERS, it is inherently impossible for a single communication effort to score across all six elements uniformly. The context of each communication effort would vary, and POWERS framework has to be applied with the context in mind. It is also important for practitioners to use the guiding questions (as listed in *Figure 2*) and coding list (See *Figure 4*) to measure the strength of each element for each communication tranche, and balance the engagement as required. Real-life situations will also, inevitably, cause the levels for each element to rise and fall.

When the public standing of SAF and the commitment to defence by individuals could be affected, it is important to design communication messages to bring up the Organisational commitment and Social involvement. The means of using FB as a communication tool in 2011 might not have served its purpose better than internal communication through the commanders as the SAF's use of SM platforms like FB only took prominence after 2011. With the current followership of the MINDEF/ SAF FB pages (See *Figure 5*), FB will continue to be a platform for the SAF to engage both the internal and public audience.

RECOGNISING THE LIMITS – LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

While SM trends might change with innovation and shifts in technology, the internal engagement framework which POWERS could offer would be more enduring if it is further developed and put through rigorous validations. Market experts have already speculated the decline of FB by 2020, hence it is important that the military continue to ride on trending platforms to reach out to its intended audience.[29]

The POWERS framework, in its current form, is a useful reference for military communication practitioners and commanders when designing communication messages for the military employees. This is especially the case when Gen Y is beginning to dominate the population in the military. With the higher thirst for information and need to express themselves, the POWERS framework becomes an emergent framework for internal engagement and employee retention. The POWERS framework's matrix and code list could be further developed to enhance its application in various contexts, and provide an easy scale for measuring the effectiveness of SM posts or communication campaigns.

MINDEF/ SAF FB Page	Followership	Managing Agency
Cyberpioneer	120,846	MINDEF Communications Organisation
The Singapore Army	140,355	Army Information Centre
Republic of Singapore Navy	143,082	Navy Information Centre
Republic of Singapore Air Force	220,343	Air Force Information Centre

Figure 5: The current followership of the four main FB pages from MINDEF/SAF.

CONCLUSION

Without effective communication, employees will be disengaged and misaligned from organisational objectives. The well-established civilian employee retention models are the closest references the military would have, and the application would have to be contextualised to the military, a non-profit organisation. Recognising the characteristics of the military employees and the opportunities and medium SM platforms offer, the POWERS framework is a distillation of key factors of employee retention in the military context from existing military and civilian employee retention models, with consideration for its application in various platforms including SM. There is room for further research and investigation to advance the POWERS framework into a prescribed framework for military communication practitioners and commanders.

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