

Psychologist studies ways to improve soldiers' work-life relationship

November 25 2008

The U.S. military provides its members with policies to help balance their work and family commitments. But a researcher at Kansas State University has found that simply providing programs might not be enough to maintain a supreme equilibrium.

Satoris Culbertson, assistant professor of psychology at K-State, and colleagues have been studying how soldiers' perceptions of a family-friendly environment relates to their physical fitness, confidence in task performance and intentions to remain in the military.

"Given the especially difficult circumstances surrounding military obligations for U.S. soldiers -- for example, an increased threat of deployment due to the current wartime context -- a better understanding of how family-friendly perceptions can benefit soldiers is increasingly important," Culbertson said.

Culbertson and colleagues examined survey data and performance measures of 230 U.S. Army personnel who were stationed in Europe in units with high deployment loads in 2001.

Work environments are considered family-friendly when they help employees manage family time and responsibilities, Culbertson said, adding that the U.S. military has policies in place like on-site educational classes and support groups for family members to create this ideal environment.

"The issue we were concerned about was not merely the availability of such programs, but the perceptions of the workplace as being family-friendly," Culbertson said. "Perceptions of a family-friendly organization can differ among employees because much of the perceptions are formed through policies, culture of the organization, and the attitudes and behaviors of the most direct supervisor or work group."

Some military personnel might not perceive the environment to be family-friendly if they have a superior or peer who is unsupportive or disparages them for taking advantage of a particular policy, Culbertson said.

The study's results indicated that a perceived family-friendly environment benefited both the individual and the organization. It increased the individuals' intent to remain in the military once they completed their obligation, and it increased the soldiers' feelings of their unit's capability of successful performance.

To better create a family-friendly culture, Culbertson concludes that the military's local leadership needs to foster and support the policies.

Culbertson worked in collaboration for the project with Ann Huffman, assistant professor of psychology at Northern Arizona University, and Col. Carl Castro, chief of military psychiatry at the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research.

"Family-Friendly Environments and U.S. Army Soldier Performance and Work Outcomes" was published in the October 2008 issue of *Military Psychology* and details the researchers' findings.

Culbertson has performed numerous studies focusing on individuals' work-life conflicts. She said studies show that individuals who report higher levels of work-life conflict also report lower levels of general well-

being, lower levels of job satisfaction, higher levels of burnout, more alcohol use and lower levels of performance. They also are more likely to leave an organization.

"Ideally, we can balance these responsibilities so that we are effective in each of these roles," Culbertson said. "Or, even better, we can somehow make the participation in one role benefit another role."

Source: Kansas State University

Citation: Psychologist studies ways to improve soldiers' work-life relationship (2008, November 25) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2008-11-psychologist-ways-soldiers-work-life-relationship.html>

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