

Reconversion of the personnel of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Poland in the opinion of the retired officers of the Polish Army

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INFORMATION

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ABSTRACT

Reconversion is a set of projects aimed at soldiers who are being discharged or have already been discharged from military service. These actions also apply to family members of soldiers who died while performing the duties of their service. These projects are associated with retraining, career counselling, employment agency services and work placement. They are intended to assist people eligible for help in finding employment. Thanks to the results analysed, recommendations were presented regarding the reconversion of the personnel of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Poland, allowing the competence potential of soldiers at retirement age to be used. In order to be able to use the competence potential of retired officers on the civilian labour market, there is a need to improve solutions for developing their potential. This is justified by the aim of the work, which is as follows: the analysis of activities undertaken within the framework of the reconversion of the personnel of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Poland and the presentation of proposals for the development and use of the competence potential of Polish Army officers in the context of employment at retirement age. The research question was formulated in the form of a question: What measures should be taken in the course of reconverting the Armed Forces personnel in order to use the competence potential of officers after reaching retirement age? The research was carried out primarily with the method of analysis and criticism of the literature. Heuristic and comparative methods were also used, as well as equally important quantitative method – a questionnaire addressed to retired officers of the Polish Army was employed.

KEYWORDS

reconversion, the Armed Forces of the Republic of Poland, Polish Army soldier, competence potential



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Introduction

Officers who are or will be retiring are beginning to consider a further professional career in the civilian environment and therefore need to think about possible preparations for it. Frequently, the age at which officers leave the service is a factor influencing job search, and sometimes it is also the financial issue.

Between 2016 and 2018, more than 12,900 soldiers left the army. According to the Director of the Department of Social Affairs at the Ministry of National Defence (MON), about 5,500 did not have pension rights yet (42% of the discharged soldiers). By the end of May 2019, 2,722 soldiers had completed their service (798 held no pension rights – 29%). It can be noted that in 2017 and 2018 there was a similar level of redundancies – approx. 4,000 soldiers. In contrast, in 2016 more personnel were discharged – almost 5,000. In 2019, 4,400 professional soldiers left the army, including over 900 officers, 1,700 non-commissioned officers and 1,700 privates. In 2018, 3,976 soldiers left the service, among whom there were fewer officers and private officers (100 soldiers each), while more non-commissioned officers (approx. 300 soldiers) – compared to 2019. 2017 was a similar year, with “4,137 soldiers retiring from the military” (R.CH., 2020).

It is worth adding that the Polish state spends about PLN 1 million to train one soldier. In such a manner, investments are made in the security of the country. However, the state does not fully exploit the competence potential of the Polish Army officers, referred to as “skills, knowledge, attitudes or health, which, if used well, can be a valuable resource for the organization” (Rakowska, 2018, p. 134). Many officers leave the service at a fairly young age for a pensioner (Jaroń, 2021). Most officers of the Polish Army receive high retirement benefits, so the financial aspect is not a particular problem for them, but the lack of activity, the possibility of using professional knowledge and valuable experience is an issue.

1. Reconversion of the personnel of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Poland

A Polish Army soldier may benefit from reconversion assistance before retirement (this form of assistance is also addressed to already retired soldiers). Reconversion is referred to as a set of projects aimed at soldiers who are being discharged or have already been discharged from military service, but also in relation to the family members of soldiers (spouses and children) “who are dependants of professional soldiers who have been missing or died in the line of duty” (Ministerstwo Obrony Narodowej, n.d.). The main methods of reconverting the personnel of the Polish Armed Forces include (Wojskowe Centrum Rekrutacji, n.d.):

- occupational information,
- career counselling,
- employment agency services,
- vocational retraining,
- work placement.

These activities are aimed at preparing eligible persons to take up employment.

Career counselling is conducted “by specialists (advisers) of public employment services and vocational activation centres” (Zajac, 2019). It aims to present both the labour market and help in identifying professional predispositions, preparing documents to apply for given positions and in self-presentation.

In the case of professional retraining, there is “a change in the professional qualifications held by the eligible person for the purpose of performing in a new profession, acquiring new qualifications within the same profession, obtaining other professional qualifications necessary to function on the labour market, obtaining a certificate, license, passing an exam or obtaining an entry on the list of persons entitled to practice the profession” (Zajac, 2019).

Employment agency services are intended to help in finding the right “employment after discharge from professional military service and assist employers in attracting employees with sought-after professional qualifications” (<https://wkugdynia.wp.mil.pl>, 2021). Job vacancies are disseminated, information about job candidates is provided to the employer and contacts between jobseekers and potential employers are organized. Cooperation with job centres regarding the exchange of information on employment and training opportunities.

As far as work placements are concerned, they are a form of assistance in finding a job outside the unit. An interested person can find a workplace where they will be able complete their work placement. "At that time, instead of working in a military unit, they will work for a possible future employer" (<https://wkugdynamia.wp.mil.pl>, 2021). Owing to this, a professional soldier can improve their qualifications and gain experience which is important for employment in the civilian market. It may happen that the company where the soldier had work placement, and where the employer was satisfied with the duties performed, would employ them on a permanent basis after the end of service.

Other forms of reconversion assistance are (<http://oazwroclaw.wp.mil.pl/pl/8.html>, 2019):

- trainings,
- information (information materials),
- reconversion advisors' office hours,
- careers fairs,
- supporting their own business,
- information on trainings co-financed from EU funds.

The commander of a military unit "is the first, basic and most important functional person" in the system of providing reconversion assistance to soldiers in active service, in particular to soldiers discharged from professional military service (Zajac, 2019). They are responsible for planning, directing, organizing, implementing and controlling reconversion activities in their own area and units subordinate to them. Reconversion tasks can be performed individually or by a designated person who will be responsible for the implementation of basic reconversion projects in a given military unit and will also be delegated to maintain contacts with the manager or specialists of the relevant Vocational Activation Centre or the Provincial Military Staff.

It is worth adding that during the research, there were regulations in force according to which a professional soldier receiving the consent of the military unit commander could benefit from professional advice after 3 years of professional military service. In the case of willingness to retrain and use employment agency services, it could be 2 years before discharge (condition: performing professional service for at least 4 years). The use of work placements was possible within the period of 6 months before discharge from professional military service (condition: at least 9 years of professional military service) (Ustawa z dnia 11 września 2003 r. o służbie wojskowej żołnierzy zawodowych, 2003, Art. 120, Pkt 3).

According to the new regulations, “a professional soldier, with the prior written consent of the military unit commander, may, at a written request, benefit from assistance in the field of:

- 1) career counselling, provided that they have performed professional military service for at least 3 years,
- 2) vocational retraining and employment agency services 6 months before discharge from professional military service, provided that they have performed this service for at least 4 years,
- 3) 3 months of work placement before discharge from professional military service, provided that they have performed professional military service for at least 9 years,

granted by the competent entities” (Ustawa z dnia 11 marca 2022 r. o obronie Ojczyzny, 2022, Art. 236).

At the central level, the Department of Social Affairs of the Ministry of National Defence is responsible for the measures carried out in the Armed Forces of the Republic of Poland within the framework of personnel reconversion. The following are also responsible for the reconversion: Central Centre for Occupational Activation, Occupational Activation Centres and Military Pension Offices (<https://www.wojsko-polskie.pl/rekonwejsja-szrp>, 2023).

2. Reconversion of the personnel of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Poland in the opinion of retired officers of the Polish Armed Forces – analysis of research

The study conducted over the years 2019-2021 involved the participation of 179 retired officers of the Polish Army. According to the acquired data, the largest group of the respondents were colonels and lieutenant colonels. On the other hand, generals constituted the smallest one. Figure 1 presents the percentage summary of the data received.

The respondents answered questions related to reconversion assistance. Figure 2 presents the number of retired officers participating in the study who took advantage of reconversion assistance.

Almost 70% of the respondents have not participated in a reconversion program. This may have been due to the fact that not everyone was positive about this form of assistance, having no faith in the effectiveness of such measures. This may also be evidenced by the fact that an over a dozen or

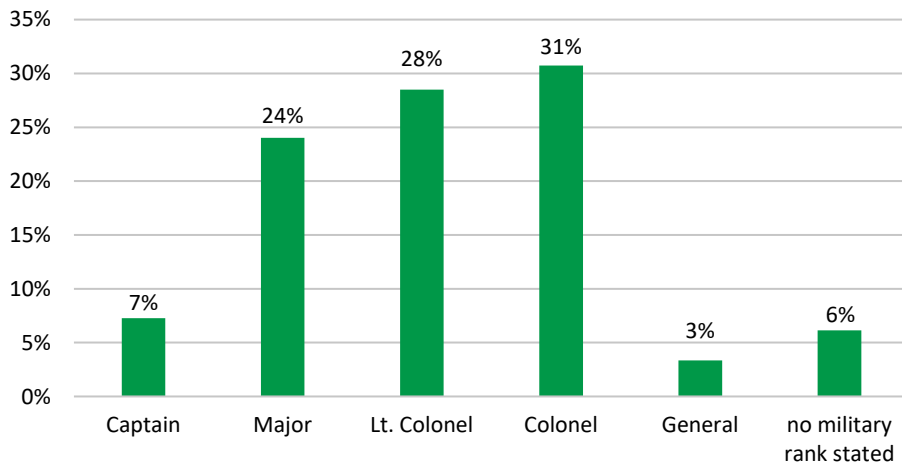


Fig. 1. Military rank held by the retired officers

Source: The author's own development.

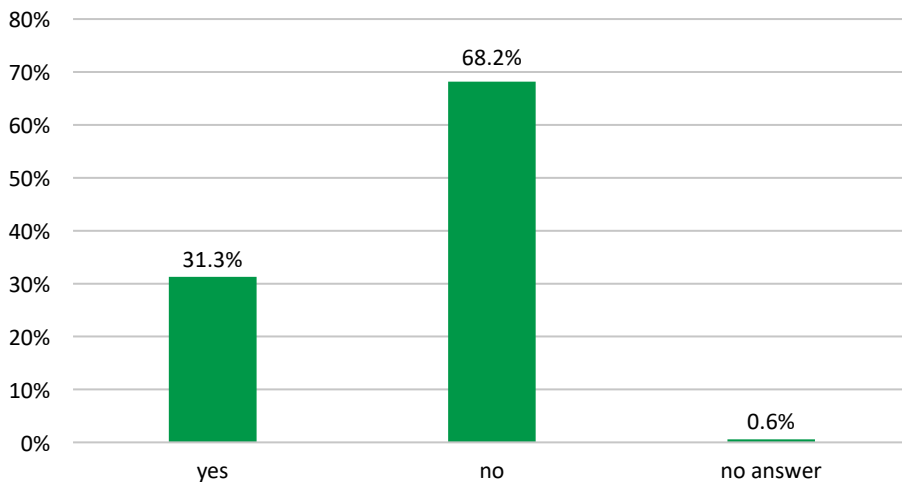


Fig. 2. Percentage of the respondents benefiting from the reconversion program

Source: the author's own study.

even a few years ago this form of assistance was not as extensive as nowadays. These days, reconversion and the opportunities of using it are reported relatively often and widely through many media. Institutions which are responsible for reconversion, are more open to potential candidates who would like to benefit from reconversion. Special meetings are organized for them, more offers, job proposals and opportunities for courses and training are prepared too.

Figure 3 presents the percentage share of participation in the reconversion program of the respondents divided according to the ranks held. In the case of generals, most of them have not participated in this program. A similar situation was among colonels, lieutenant colonels and majors. On the other hand, more than half of the officers with the rank of captain have benefited from reconversion assistance. The reason for such a situation could have been the fact that former officers with a higher rank did not have to supplement their qualifications or managed to find a job in retirement without any problems. Lieutenant colonels, colonels and generals are officers who are characterized by numerous skills and extensive experience, which have significantly helped them to find employment on the labour market during retirement. This assumption is supported by the previous results from answering one of the questions regarding the difficulty in finding a job after leaving the service. Most of the former colonels and generals definitely had no problem with employment.

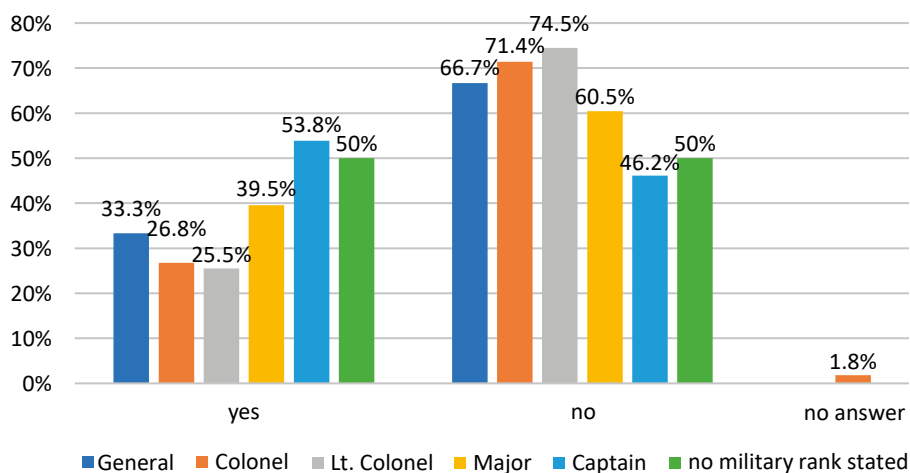


Fig. 3. The percentage of respondents benefiting from the reconversion program divided by military ranks obtained during service

Source: The author's own development.

The respondents who benefited from the reconversion program assessed this form of assistance in a different way. Figure 4 presents the results of research on the opinions of retired officers as regards the measures taken during reconversion. Only one answer could be marked by the respondents – exactly one of the numbers from the following scale: 5 – high, 1 – low.

Over 44% of respondents rated reconversion assistance quite highly, while over 30% of people who have used reconversion – as average.

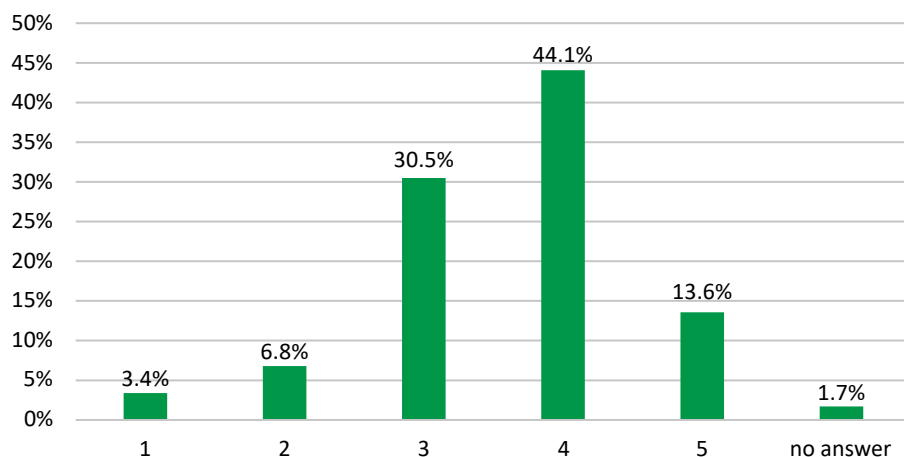


Fig. 4. Evaluation of the reconversion program according to the respondents who have received reconversion assistance

Source: The author's own development.

Figure 5 presents the assessment of the respondents' reconversion depending on the number of years in retirement. It can be noted that in the group of people who have been pensioners for the shortest period of time, 50% of the respondents rated the reconversion assistance obtained rather highly. 43% of retired officers who had been retired for 5-8 years rated the assistance definitely high.

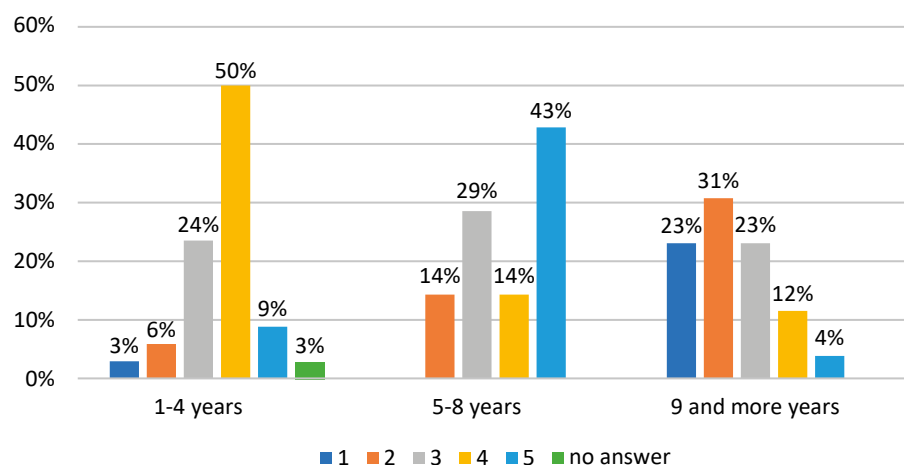


Fig. 5. Evaluation of the reconversion program by retired officers – by length of retirement

Source: The author's own development.

In the case of the respondents retired for the longest time, most of the former officers spoke negatively about the reconversion program. 54% of the respondents did not have a good opinion, 23% rated the assistance as average. Only 16% of this group gave it a positive rating. This situation could have been caused by the fact that over a dozen years ago, reconversion assistance was not very developed and there were not as many opportunities as there are now. Another disadvantage was the fact of poor information and communication.

The next question, to which retired officers replied, concerned their choice of the forms of reconversion. More than one answer was allowed to be marked by the respondents. There was a choice of: career counselling, retraining, employment agency services, work placements or other forms of assistance (Decyzja Nr 440/MON Ministra Obrony Narodowej, 2007).

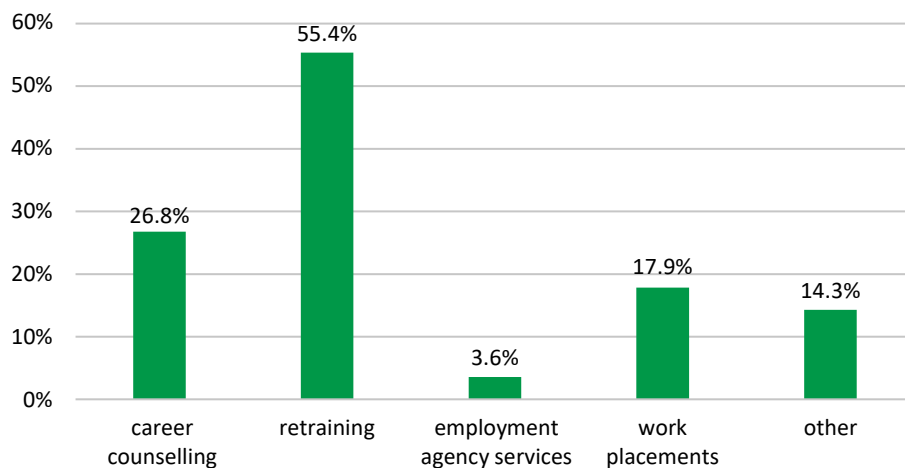


Fig. 6. Forms of reconversion used by retired officers

Source: The author's own development.

Most people benefited from retraining (over 55%), while almost 27% chose career counselling. The lowest number of respondents, less than 4%, indicated employment agency services. 14% of the respondents stated other forms of reconversion assistance. Retired officers gave answers such as: payment for language courses (e.g. English, Russian), funds for studying (including postgraduate studies) and for specialist courses, GDPR course or doctoral exam. The reason why most respondents indicated retraining could have been the fact that this type of assistance allowed for changing the professional qualifications held by the eligible person to other ones.

As a consequence, a retired officer could pursue a new job or acquire new qualifications within the same profession.

Obtaining additional qualifications for professions is sometimes necessary for functioning on the work market. Until 1993, graduates of the Higher School of Mechanized Army Officers obtained the title of battlefield engineer. However, such a title could limit applying for certain job positions or functioning on the labour market at that time. In order to be competitive on the current work market, competence gaps need to be filled. The competence gap is defined as “failure to adapt the competence potential of the organization to the requirements which are necessary for the implementation of the goals established” (Baskiewicz, Ożóg, 2015, p. 42).

As an example of the above competence problems, one can mention, for instance, operating specialized military software that does not function in civil organizations. Although the fundamentals of information technology may be the same, the differences must be supplemented. Another example is learning a foreign language – language courses conducted in the army, for example a Russian or English language course, respond to the current market demand. However, due to the fact that other languages are increasingly important, e.g. Scandinavian (Swedish, Norwegian or Finnish), the offer of reconversion should take this into account. One can also find information that people who know such languages as Arabic, Turkish, Japanese or Dutch are in demand (*Najbardziej potrzebne języki obce na rynku pracy*, n.d.). This is related to the increasingly new directions of the expansion of Polish enterprises into foreign markets, so it is worth considering learning these languages as part of reconversion programs.

In response to another question, the majority of the retired officers who have participated in the reconversion program (over 76%) stated that they would not like to change or add anything based on their own needs (e.g., courses, training) in the currently implemented programs.

Nearly 17% of the respondents would like to introduce some changes. The most important modernization measures proposed include the creation of a database of potential positions to be filled and, based on this, the preparation of suitable training programs (such as studies, courses, internships, etc.). Furthermore, there is a need for more job offers that would realistically align with the labour market demands, the incorporation of experiences from other countries, an increase in financial investment in training, an extension of the program’s duration from 2 to 5 years, as well as the removal of the unit commander’s consent for completing work placements (work placements should take place *ex officio* at the request

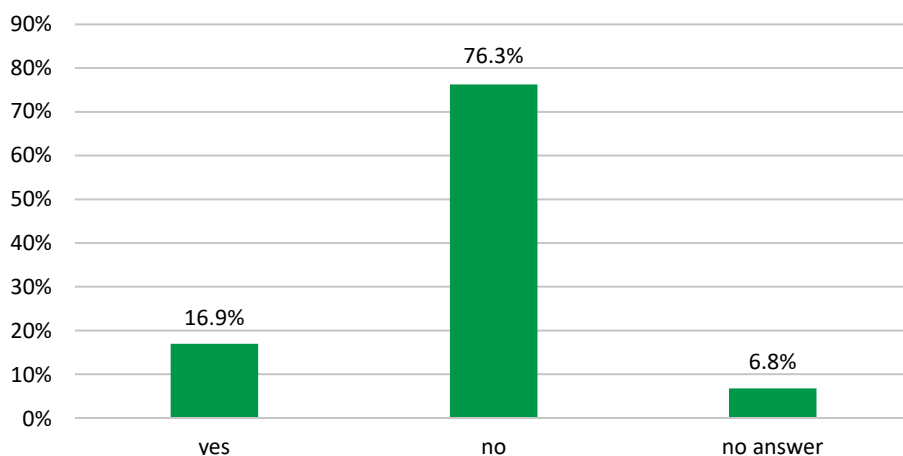


Fig. 7. Opinions of retired officers regarding changes according to their own needs (e.g., courses, training) in the reconversion program

Source: The author's own development.

of a soldier). Additionally according to the respondents, the reconversion program should be associated with ensuring a certain pool of job positions in the administration/public sector, specifically for retired officers/professional soldiers, such as positions related to crisis management. There should be more courses preparing for work in government administration and state administration in positions related to security issues.

As the respondents noted, employing people not affiliated with the military but knowledgeable about the functioning of the civilian environment should be considered. Individuals responsible for aiding former soldiers are not always adequately qualified for these positions. Experience also plays a major role, which in this case is very helpful. Another suggestion was to define a career development path and the date of ending military service (at least 2 years before discharge). There was also a reference to the reconversion period – reconversion should be accessible earlier than two years before retirement. Additionally, the opportunity to participate in the reconversion program should be available at any stage of service. The practical activity of the reconversion program should focus on specific cooperation with job agencies, which requires deepening and expanding current measures. The program could be reorganized to consider the specific needs of the labour market.

In the case of Polish Army officers – as the respondents highlighted – the continuation of self-education and formal education processes, such as in postgraduate and doctoral programs, should be taken into account. This

approach could aid in securing employment opportunities, for instance, at military academies or uniformed high schools, where the expertise and experience of former officers would be well used.

The next question answered by the respondents related to the necessity of establishing an Employment Agency for retired soldiers of the Polish Army (Fig. 8). This solution was supported by a considerable majority of the respondents (almost 60%). The result of this question is interesting, as previous analyses indicated that retired officers generally did not have difficulty finding employment, and their post-retirement work was closely related to the qualifications gained during their service, they usually did not require assistance in employment. A positive evaluation of the Employment Agency project may be dictated by the fact that it would assist retired officers in searching for and finding the most attractive job offers. Such an agency could also serve as a database of retired officers seeking employment. It would be similar to the initiatives taken by the United States Army, which utilizes an online information system tool for officers, units, and talent managers.

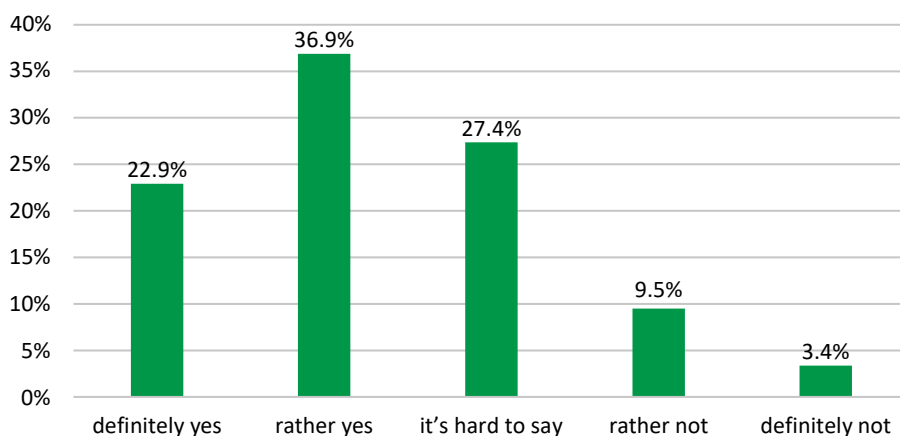


Fig. 8. The respondents' opinions on the need to establish an Employment Agency for retired soldiers of the Polish Army

Source: The author's own development.

Conclusions

Competence potential, namely skills, knowledge, attitudes, and health, utilized in a skilful way, can become a valuable asset for an organization. This holds importance primarily from social, economic, and demographic

viewpoints. Officers retiring from service are relatively young for a person with pensioner's status. Being in their prime, still active, and above all, well-educated and with rich experience, they should easily find employment after completion of service and in positions where their potential would be fully exploited. Therefore, it is important to assist them in job seeking by organizing additional training, courses, and special programs to enhance their already acquired competencies. Paying attention to improving foreign language skills is also crucial.

Participation in personal development courses and interpersonal motivational training during service can help improve soft skills. It is essential for a retiring officer to create a post-employment plan, conduct a SWOT analysis of their skills and opportunities on the labour market, identify their expectations regarding future employment, and perform a labour market reconnaissance. Creating an account/profile for retired officers on a specialized website and developing a database for their potential employers/supervisors could be an interesting solution. It is worth providing additional assistance to former officers in establishing their own businesses. The potential enhanced by additional competencies or qualifications becomes even more desirable in the civil environment thanks to various measures. An individual approach to each soldier being discharged, especially an officer of the Armed Forces, is noteworthy. This is intended to provide assistance in adjusting to the civilian labour market (by conducting an early analysis of one's skills and understanding the realities of a non-military environment) as well as in finding a satisfying job.

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Rekonwersja kadr Sił Zbrojnych Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w opinii emerytowanych oficerów Wojska Polskiego

STRESZCZENIE

Rekonwersja to przedsięwzięcia skierowane do żołnierzy, którzy są zwalniani albo już zwolnili się ze służby wojskowej. Działania te dotyczą również członków rodzin żołnierzy, którzy zmarli podczas wykonywania swoich obowiązków służbowych. Przedsięwzięcia te związane są z przekwalifikowaniem, doradztwem zawodowym, pośrednictwem pracy oraz praktykami zawodowymi. Mają one pomóc w przygotowaniu uprawnionych do znalezienia zatrudnienia. Dzięki przeanalizowanym wynikom zaprezentowano rekomendacje dotyczące rekonwersji kadr Sił Zbrojnych Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej umożliwiające wykorzystanie potencjału kompetencyjnego żołnierzy w wieku emerytalnym. Aby móc wykorzystać potencjał kompetencyjny emerytowanych oficerów na cywilnym rynku pracy istnieje potrzeba doskonalenia rozwiązań w zakresie rozwoju ich potencjału. Uzasadnia to cel pracy, który brzmi następująco: analiza działań podejmowanych w ramach rekonwersji kadr Sił Zbrojnych Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej oraz przedstawienie propozycji dla rozwoju i wykorzystania potencjału kompetencyjnego oficerów Wojska Polskiego w kontekście zatrudnienia w wieku emerytalnym. Problem badawczy został natomiast sformułowany w formie pytania: Jakie działania są lub powinny być podejmowane w ramach rekonwersji kadr Sił Zbrojnych, aby móc wykorzystać


potencjał kompetencyjny oficerów po osiągnięciu wieku emerytalnego? Badania przeprowadzono głównie metodą analizy i krytyki piśmiennictwa. Zastosowano również metodę heurystyczną oraz komparatystyczną, a także istotną dla prezentowanych badań metodę ilościową – użyto kwestionariusza ankiety, skierowanego do emerytowanych oficerów Wojska Polskiego.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE rekonwersja, Siły Zbrojne Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, żołnierz Wojska Polskiego, potencjał kompetencyjny

Biographical note

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Conflict of interests

The author declared no conflict of interests.

Author contributions

The author contributed to the interpretation of results and writing of the paper. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Ethical statement

The research complies with all national and international ethical requirements.
