



army families federation

Title: Use of WhatsApp impacting on Army families work life balance
Date of issue: August 2018
Audience: Chain of command, MOD
Issued by: Michelle Alston, Researcher

Background

AFF invited Army spouses and partners to give their views on their soldier's work life balance and the impact it has on their family. As part of this survey, families identified significant issues with Service personnel's use of WhatsApp and the impact on work life balance.

Use of WhatsApp and inability to disconnect from work

Whilst the use of WhatsApp to conduct Army business is discouraged by the Army and MOD, AFF is concerned that, in reality, it is widely used; extending the working day and affecting work life balance.

The comments about WhatsApp was a surprise finding from the survey and therefore no question had been included to obtain quantitative evidence about the impact of its use on families. However, the survey did generate around 45 comments with spouses and partners expressing concern about its use.

1. Use of WhatsApp contributing towards lack of work life balance

- 1.1. Families reported that the Service person was constantly accessible, with WhatsApp messages frequently being received whilst personnel are at home.
- 1.2. This extended the working day, as personnel felt they had to respond instantly.
- 1.3. Families were concerned with the reliance on WhatsApp groups to complete routine work, often out of normal working hours.
- 1.4. Families felt that the use of WhatsApp was resulting in a loss of distinction between work time and family time at home; with families citing the impact of the Service person constantly being on their phone checking WhatsApp updates, rather than engaging with their family.
- 1.5. A few families expressed concern about WhatsApp groups being used to share inappropriate pictures or comments.

“Continuous work messages on WhatsApp groups put a lot of pressure on our family life. I spend a lot of time watching the children trying to communicate with their daddy but he's looking at his phone for work related purposes.”

“WhatsApp is the killer, even though there is a DIN out about, not to use it, it goes all night and starts again early morning every day. This is due to a sheer lack of planning and the responses seemingly cannot wait, the answer is needed immediately. Emails are used but very lightly, I can only assume this provides a paper trail and people can be held responsible, WhatsApp no responsibility and can clear up any unplanned events or issues quickly so people don't get into trouble. This forces people to work out of hours and subsequently they cannot switch off from work.”

“WhatsApp is now the bane of my life, although my husband is home often I get sick of his phone constantly beeping with WhatsApp messages and most of the time they are not urgent or that couldn't have been dealt with by either an end of day brief or a brief on the morning after.”

“My husband got shouted and humiliated right in his face by his boss because he was busy working while his boss sent a message in a WhatsApp group to see him. My husband has got less data in phone, so he opens it when he gets his break time. His boss could've called him or regular texted him but no, he put a message on WhatsApp.”

“He may not always be sat at a laptop but he is in daily contact with his young officers out of hours and is frequently contacted by the CO or other officers/his Sgt Major. Informal media such as WhatsApp have perpetuated the issue.”

2. Working hours and balance

- 2.1. 68%¹ of spouses/partners felt their soldier’s working hours had increased in the last two years, with 16% stating their hours had remained the same but they were unhappy with them.
- 2.2. 59%² of spouses/partners felt their soldier’s work life balance had worsened in the last two years, with 18% saying the balance had remained the same but they were unhappy with it.
- 2.3. 81%³ of respondents stated that the work life balance of their soldier has made them reconsider remaining as an Army family.
- 2.4. Worryingly, a number of spouses/partners suggested that their relationships and families were on the verge of breakdown due to the impact of a lack of a work life balance.

3. Out of hours working and inability to disconnect from work

- 3.1. The survey results clearly highlighted an issue with out of hours working and an inability to disconnect from work. Workload was also a significant issue and AFF believes that the combination of these factors have led to the majority of families stating that they felt their soldier’s working hours had increased and their work life balance had worsened during the last two years.
- 3.2. Two thirds⁴ of spouses/partners said their soldier works either regularly or occasionally from home out of hours.
- 3.3. This was particularly an issue for Officers, with over half regularly working from home out of hours. Being expected to work regularly out of hours and workload were two of the top three barriers to Officers maintaining a good work life balance.
- 3.4. Families were concerned that working out of hours at home is considered the norm and expected, rather than the exception.
- 3.5. Spouses/partners were asked to identify the top three barriers to a good work life balance. One of the top three most commonly identified barriers was not being able to disconnect from work. Many families cited the use of WhatsApp as a significant contribution towards this.

“Workload is such that, while no-one expects him to work from home, everyone knows that to do a good job you have to.”

“He is constantly working, even if we go out for the day; always emailing, taking phone calls. He is pressured to keep on top of everything.”

4. Conclusion

- 4.1. AFF is concerned that WhatsApp groups are being used widely in the Army to undertake routine work. As it is used frequently out of normal working hours, this prolongs the working day, resulting in a negative impact on work life balance for Army personnel and their families.
- 4.2. The current MOD policy instructing personnel not to use WhatsApp is not being adhered to.
- 4.3. AFF would like the MOD to implement clear guidelines on what WhatsApp should be used for (e.g. simple notification of information, such as change of time or dress for PT), what it should not be used for (e.g. undertaking routine work out of hours or sending inappropriate photos) and the clear penalties for breaching these guidelines.
- 4.4. It is crucial for the wellbeing, performance and retention of Army personnel and their families that personnel are able to maintain a positive work life balance.

¹ 1,395 respondents

² 1,274 respondents

³ 1,268 respondents

⁴ 1,274 respondents