



# RECONVERSION AS A MEANS OF INTEGRATING INTO THE CIVILIAN WORK ENVIRONMENT FOR INDIVIDUALS RELEASED FROM MILITARY SERVICE

Artur Dąbek

ORCID: 0000-0002-0412-3783

State University of Applied Sciences in Koszalin

e-mail: ardabek@wp.pl

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**Abstract.** This article on Reconversion within the Polish Armed Forces attempts to answer the question: How to use the knowledge and experience of former uniformed persons in the civilian market? Thus, Reconversion encompasses all activities concerning soldiers and ex-soldiers, allowing adaptation to civilian life and also on the civilian labour market. I believe that in a situation of decreasing participation in the labour market, cooperation between military institutions and civilian institutions, employers both within the public and private sector should be undertaken in the field of creating and developing competencies that are determined by the contemporary labour market or anticipated directions of its development. There is a need to acquire new competencies in order not to lose this huge potential of people. Therefore, it seems that such changes should be made in the training system, which will give them broader competencies, to be realized professionally also after leaving the service. It is also advisable to work out professional permeability by recommending a line that would guarantee a smooth transition from the labour market understood as military service to the labour market created outside the services, and largely determined by the economic as well as social needs of our country.

## REKONWERSJA JAKO SPOSÓB INTEGRACJI Z CYWILNYM ŚRODOWISKIEM PRACY DLA OSÓB ZWOLNIONYCH ZE SŁUŻBY WOJSKOWEJ

**Słowa kluczowe:** rekonwersja, środowisko pracy, kompetencje, formy pomocy rekonwersyjnej

**Streszczenie.** W artykule dotyczącym rekonwersji w ramach Polskich Sił Zbrojnych podejmuję próbę odpowiedzi na pytanie: Jak wykorzystać wiedzę i doświadczenie byłych osób mundurowych na rynku cywilnym? Zatem rekonwersja obejmuje wszystkie działania dotyczące żołnierzy i byłych żołnierzy, pozwalające na adaptację do życia w cywilu i na cywilnym rynku pracy. Uważam, że w sytuacji zmniejszającego się udziału liczby osób na rynku pracy należy podjąć współpracę instytucji wojskowych z instytucjami cywilnymi, pracodawcami zarówno w ramach sektora publicznego, jak i prywatnego w zakresie kreowania i rozwijania kompetencji, które wyznacza współczesny rynek pracy, czy też antycypowane kierunki jego rozwoju. Istnieje potrzeba zdobywania nowych kompetencji, by nie stracić tego ogromnego potencjału ludzi. Dlatego też wydaje się, że należy dokonać takich zmian w systemie szkolenia, które dadzą im szersze uprawnienia do realizacji zawodowej także po zakończeniu służby. Wskazane jest również wypracowanie drożności zawodowej poprzez rekomendację drogi gwarantującej łagodne przejście z rynku pracy ujmowanej jako służba wojskowa do rynku pracy kreowanego poza służbami, a w znacznej mierze uwarunkowanego potrzebami ekonomicznymi oraz społecznymi naszego państwa.

### Introduction

Professional soldiers undoubtedly constitute a distinct professional group due to the specific nature of military service. Like any full-time job, their service comes to an end with retirement. However, the conclusion of professional military service does not sever the ties between the former soldier and the army. In exchange for the specific conditions of their work (service), the legislator has introduced the possibility of early retirement. There is also the option of retraining for soldiers discharged from professional military service who have at least four years of work experience. However, there are circumstances that lead soldiers to lose their financial entitlements to assistance. These include renouncing Polish citizenship, a legally binding disciplinary penalty, dismissal from professional military service, a legally binding criminal sentence, or deprivation

of public rights. Simultaneously, they are expelled from professional military service or prohibited from practicing the profession of a professional soldier.

In this study, we address individuals entitled to this assistance, focusing on how it should integrate with the civilian job market. It should be noted that when it comes to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the assistance is not legally regulated, and these responsibilities lie solely with the Ministry of National Defence, specifically the Department of Social Affairs of the Ministry of National Defence.

## Reconversion

The term “reconversion” is translated as the adaptation of something for different purposes or the change of a particular activity. The word “reconversion” in economics refers to the reestablishment (e.g., of industry) from a war footing to a peacetime one (Kopaliński, 2022). Similarly, in English, “reconversion” means “restoration”. In military terminology, the prefix “re-” signifies the return of current soldiers to functioning in a civilian environment.

Reconversion assistance in the Armed Forces of the Republic of Poland is provided by the following units:

- Department of Social Affairs of the Ministry of National Defence
- Central Vocational Activation Centre in Warsaw
- Vocational Activation Centres in Bydgoszcz, Gdynia, Krakow, Lublin, Olsztyn, Szczecin, and Wrocław
- Military Pension Offices in Bydgoszcz, Gdańsk, Krakow, Lublin, Olsztyn, Szczecin, Warsaw, and Wrocław
- Branch Offices of the Central Military Recruitment Centre located in provincial capitals.

Reconversion within the military services pertains to how to utilize the knowledge and experience of former uniformed personnel in the civilian market without losing that potential. Reconversion encompasses all activities related to soldiers and former soldiers, allowing them to adapt to civilian life and the civilian job market. It can be understood as a set of initiatives aimed at preparing Polish soldiers and their families for further professional activity in the civilian job market. However, it should be noted that reconversion assistance is provided within our country. Various forms of reconversion assistance can be utilized, such as career counselling, job placement services, vocational retraining, or engaging in professional internships in the future workplace. Regarding the issue of reconversion, which encompasses the mentioned group, vocational activation for those leaving the service and adapting

to often different realities is available to almost every professional soldier to an appropriate extent and can be implemented either after departure or with the commander's consent up to 6 months before leaving professional military service.



Figure 1. Structure of reconversion in Poland

Source: Reconversion in the military.

The legal acts concerning reconversion primarily include the following documents:

- Act of 11 September 2003 on the Military Service of Professional Soldiers (Journal of Laws of 2021, item 1131, as amended),
- Act of 11 March 2022 on the Defence of the Homeland (Journal of Laws of 2022, item 655, as amended),
- Regulation of the Minister of National Defence of 2 May 2022 on the Use of Assistance in the Scope of Career Counselling, Vocational Retraining, Job Placement, and Professional Internships by Professional Soldiers (Journal of Laws of 2022, item 978, as amended),
- Regulation of the Minister of National Defence of 29 August 2022 on the Use of Assistance in the Scope of Vocational Retraining and Career Counselling by Non-Professional Soldiers (Journal of Laws of 2022, item 1926, as amended),
- Regulation of the Minister of National Defence of 8 March 2023 on the Registration of Defence-Related Job Positions (Journal of Laws of 2023, item 548, as amended).

Forms of reconversion assistance include:

- Informational and training activities,

- Career counselling,
- Vocational retraining,
- Job placement services,
- Professional internships,
- Job fairs and employment exchanges.

These forms are further discussed in the subsequent part of the article.

## Information and Training Activities

Soldiers are regularly informed through ongoing briefings and training during their service. Seminars and training specifically addressing reconversion issues are also conducted. In each military unit, there is a non-permanent coordinator whose task is to explain the forms of reconversion assistance and provide guidance. The immediate superior plays a significant role in informing about retirement options and guiding the further course of action or establishing contact with vocational activation centres. Data compiled from the reconversion commission meeting indicate diverse trends in informational meetings, as presented in Figure 2. Unit commanders, together with the relevant territorially responsible director of the Central Vocational Activation Centre or the head of the Vocational Activation Centre, organize reconversion assistance sessions at least once a year as part of supplementary and advanced training for professional soldiers.

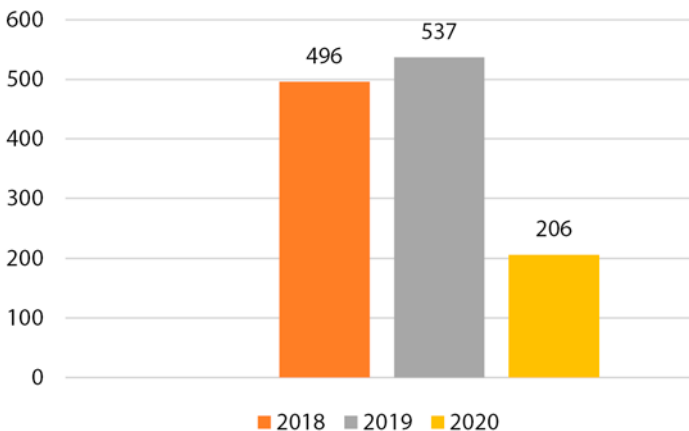


Figure 2. Information meetings in the years 2018–2020

Source: Prepared based on: Ministry of National Defence informational presentation.

## Career Counselling

The objective of career counselling is to provide information about the local job market and the various employment opportunities that arise from it. It also includes assistance in developing job application documents, motivational letters, and resumes, as well as substantive preparation for job interviews with prospective employers. Career counselling should be based on a coherent system that aims to provide former soldiers with support in making informed choices regarding skills enhancement, filling educational gaps, and selecting the necessary vocational competencies for continued functioning in the civilian job market. This is particularly important because informed choices are founded on proper information about educational possibilities and professional qualifications available within the formal and informal education systems, supplemented by industry-specific examinations.

In Poland, as part of a competitive project co-financed by the European Social Fund, “Preparation and Provision of Multimedia Resources Supporting the Career Counselling Process for All Age Groups”, e-resources for career counselling have been developed for various age groups, presenting comprehensive vocational information. This information is accessible not only to specialists but also for independent use by adults, including former professional soldiers. Figure 3 presents data on the number of counselling sessions within career counselling from 2018 to 2020, indicating a consistent increase in their numbers.

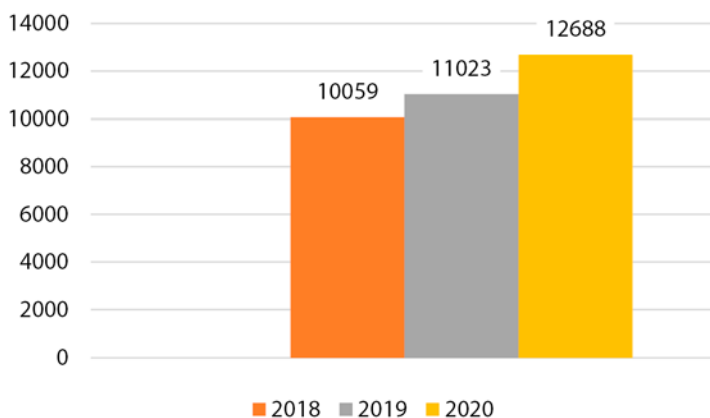


Figure 3. Number of consultations within Career Counselling in the years 2018-2020

Source: Prepared based on: Ministry of National Defence informational presentation.

## Professional Retraining

Vocational retraining in the civilian job market typically involves acquiring new qualifications or similar ones to those already possessed. As a professional soldier, it can be challenging to acquire qualifications similar to the ones already held. Today's job market is relatively receptive, but it requires readiness for change and continuous learning. In the case of soldiers, oftentimes there is the need for further education or even their changing of profession. It is important to identify vocational predispositions and obtain appropriate information, such as the possibility of starting one's own business, including entrepreneurial activities. Employment offices can provide assistance in this regard.

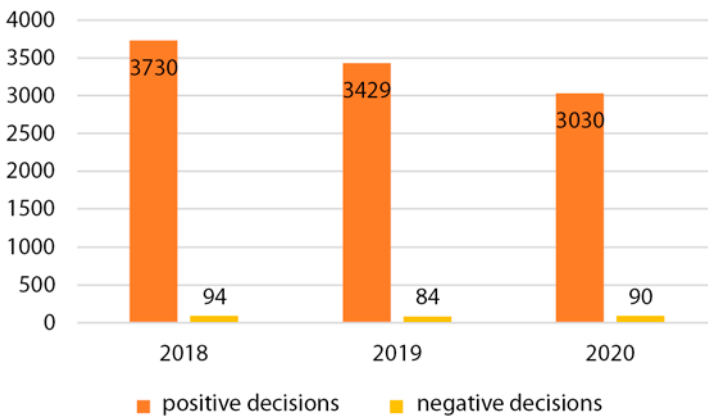


Figure 4. Overview of decisions made in the years 2018-2020

Source: Prepared based on: Ministry of National Defence informational presentation.

A specialist from the employment office provides the interested individual with information regarding the required documents, selection criteria for training programs, their implementation process, and the conditions that need to be met. The Ministry of National Defence provides financial support for the conducted training programs, which is determined by an annual limit. The value of the support depends on the length of service. For example, as of 23 April 2022, the maximum financial assistance for individuals eligible for vocational retraining is set at 100% of the limit, which amounts to 2736 PLN after 4 years of professional military service. It should be noted that there is the possibility of remaining in service. Vocational retraining is applicable within the military

sector. Professional soldiers transitioning into retirement can choose to remain within the military structure, taking on less demanding roles.

### Job Mediation, Courses, and Training

Employment intermediaries organize courses and training programs aimed at matching the supply and demand sides of the labour market. They acquire job offers from employers and direct them to potential job candidates. They ensure the proper selection of individuals for the job offers submitted by employers, in accordance with their preferences based on the profile of the desired job candidate. They match job offers to specific preferences and professional capabilities of job seekers who are unemployed or looking to change their current employment. Employment intermediaries utilize knowledge in the areas of the labour market, recruitment and selection, and vocational expertise. They apply principles of professional customer service, utilizing communication and negotiation skills. They strive for continuous professional development and update their knowledge of the labour market, occupations, and legal acts regulating employment intermediation. Being closest to the labour market, they serve an advisory role in the activities conducted by the VCC Foundation.



Figure 5. Overview of individuals receiving job offers and those employed in the years 2018-2020

Source: Prepared based on: Ministry of National Defence informational presentation.



## Professional Internships

Professional internships are relevant for soldiers currently serving on active military duty. The conditions for active military service are determined by the Act of 11 March 2022 on the Defence of the Homeland (Journal of Laws of 2022, item 655, as amended). Soldiers can apply for an internship by submitting an application and a statement expressing their intended plan to be discharged from professional military service. Upon a written request, a professional soldier may be assigned to an internship, subject to the approval of their unit commander. The decision regarding the assignment to a professional internship is made by the director of the organizational unit responsible for reconversion assistance. It is worth emphasizing that completing a professional internship provides significant opportunities for employment. The internship can last up to 6 months, provided that it is concluded before the day of discharge from professional military service. During the internship, the soldier remains on the records of their unit, receives the appropriate remuneration, and retains all the rights resulting from military service.

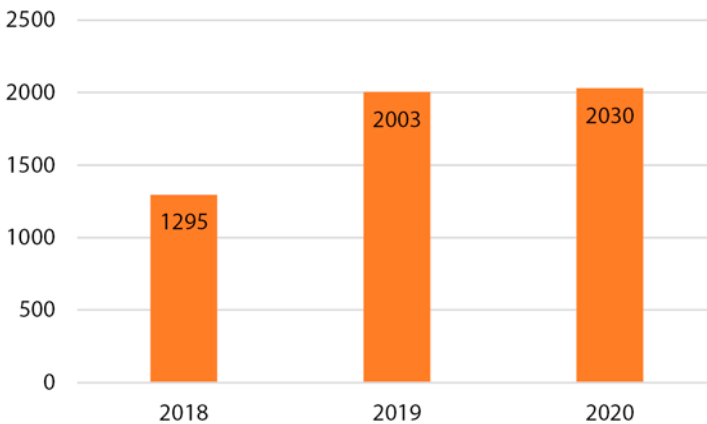


Figure 6. Overview of administrative decisions regarding professional internships/work placements in the years 2018-2020

Source: Prepared based on: Ministry of National Defence informational presentation.

## **Job Fairs and Employment Exchanges**

Another specific form of obtaining assistance in finding employment is through participation in job fairs and employment exchanges (Job Fair for the Unemployed). This form involves direct contact between job seekers and employers, who specify the employment conditions and the required level of qualifications (Employment Promotion Act). An employment exchange is organized when an employer submits an offer for employment within their available vacancies for specific positions. The exchange can be organized by an employment office or another entity for one or multiple employers who wish to meet a larger number of candidates within a specified timeframe, rather than individually waiting for each candidate. Information about organized job fairs and employment exchanges is published on the Central Job Offer Database website under the “Calendar of Fairs, Exchanges, and Trainings” section (Job Offers).

Statistics from the Ministry of National Defence indicate that, between 2018 and 2020, out of 13,513 soldiers discharged from professional military service, 5,246 (39%) did not possess any pension entitlements. For these individuals, reconversion assistance was particularly significant due to the urgent need for retraining and finding new employment. The job market requires flexibility and openness to employers’ requirements. It is therefore worthwhile to acquire new qualifications to avoid the stress associated with unemployment. The offices are responsible for the financial aspects of vocational retraining for discharged soldiers—they issue administrative decisions and act as financial bodies. The final element involved in reconversion assistance is the Branch Offices of the Central Military Recruitment Centre, which carry out reconversion tasks for former soldiers and collaborate with Vocational Activation Centres in organizing informational meetings at military units. They conduct job placement activities, including positions related to national defence, and issue relevant certificates confirming the course of professional military service for former soldiers.

## **Directions of Activities**

Unfortunately, it is difficult to find a comprehensive database of the competencies possessed by soldiers that could be utilized in the modern job market. However, there is data available on the types of courses most commonly taken by professional soldiers, and here are some examples:

- Course for backhoe loader and excavator operators
- Course for forklift drivers
- Driver's license courses for various categories
- Course for candidates to become driving instructors for various categories
- Taxi driver course
- Personal and property security course
- Automotive diagnostics course
- English language course (individual and group settings)
- Computer literacy course and specialized computer courses

The mentioned courses and trainings primarily focus on hard skills, which are always necessary for performing specific professions or securing employment in certain companies. However, soft skills and social competencies also remain crucial for entering new jobs. According to reports from the Ministry of National Defence's Operational Centre, a total of over 52,000 soldiers bid farewell to their uniforms between 2010 and 2020 (Portal mundurowy). On average, over 5,000 individuals leave the military annually, ready to enter the job market.

The changes in today's labour market can be described as follows:

- “Work is a factor of economic growth and a condition for benefiting from its effects.
- The lack of work has a destructive impact on individuals and undermines the foundations of their existence and society. Unemployment is therefore a fundamental cause of poverty, although this does not apply to soldiers.
- The industrial revolution has led to a sharp increase in labour productivity as well as significant changes in the standard of living between countries and within them. The main cause of increased productivity is inventions and their increasingly faster implementation in economic practice. They have made humans independent from natural forces, multiplied the possibilities of mobility and communication, and increased the importance of organization.
- Changes in the realm of work, characterized as post-Fordist and post-industrial, include flexible working hours, teamwork, standardization of management procedures, customer and consumer orientation, as well as diverse and increasingly flexible organizational forms. These pose challenges for both employers and employees.
- Changes in employment structures have resulted in its growth in the services sector and a decrease in the production sector, primarily in agriculture.

- Changes in employment forms have led to a shift away from traditional full-time employment, dominant in the industrial era, towards non-standard or flexible forms of employment. Part-time work, fixed-term employment, task-based work, telework, and self-employment are becoming increasingly common.
- The transition to a knowledge-based economy and an information society has made the knowledge of employees employed in a company its primary capital” (Gerlach, 2012, p. 119).

It is evident from these changes that former soldiers possess great potential, which needs to be utilized effectively.

## **Integration with the Civilian Work Environment**

The civilian work environment comprises numerous diverse material and psychosocial factors. The material factors encompass the physical, chemical, and biological aspects. In my opinion, the psychosocial factors are particularly intriguing, as they constitute the main difference between the military service environment and the civilian work environment. Soldiers, accustomed to functioning within a hierarchical setting throughout their professional lives, are oriented towards following orders, with superiors serving as a source of authority. Consequently, they fulfil commanding roles that stem from the leadership process. Commanding is a process through which a commander imposes their will and intentions on subordinates, supported by their staff, as they plan, organize, coordinate, and direct the actions of subordinate forces using standard procedures and all available means of information dissemination (Regulations for Land Forces Operations, 2006).

In the civilian work environment, psychological and social requirements set by employers define the work environment. Typically, interaction with people is expected, such as maintaining contact with stakeholders or company clients. In this environment, interpersonal relationships, the atmosphere at work, and the need to fulfil professional duties significantly impact the well-being of employed individuals. Possessing the necessary social competencies for the civilian work environment, which involves two-way communication and teamwork, becomes essential. Due to the specific nature of the military profession, difficulties arise in developing such soft skills, leading civilian entrepreneurs to seldom seek former soldiers as employees.

I believe that in the context of a shrinking labour market, it is crucial to establish cooperation between military institutions and civilian organizations, both in the public and private sectors, in terms of shaping and developing the competencies demanded by the contemporary job market and its anticipated future directions. Currently, attempts are being made to define desired employee competencies in a catalogue format. However, I believe that a centralized database accessible to both employers and job seekers would be beneficial. This would undoubtedly facilitate the process of finding suitable job opportunities

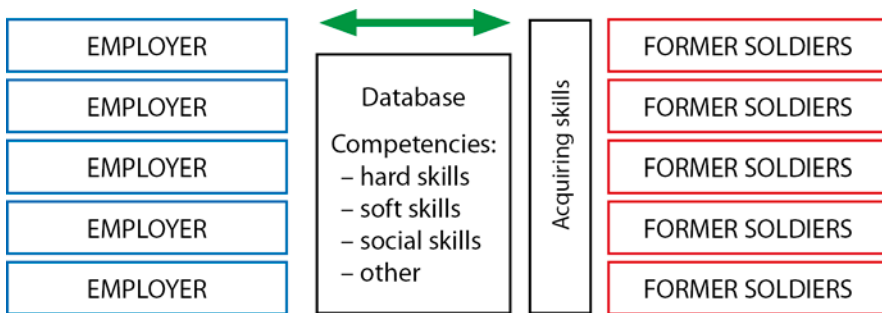


Figure 7. The concept of a database connecting employers with potential employees who are former soldiers

Source: Own study.

## Conclusions

The qualifications possessed by soldiers rarely help them find employment in the civilian job market. The civilian perception of military tasks must deviate from commonly known principles, even though human resource management functions, such as planning, organizing, motivating, and controlling, are fundamentally the same. The imaginations of outsiders and persistent stereotypes further complicate this process. It is a fact that the competencies gained through military service are not crucial for the contemporary job market. Moreover, habits acquired during years of service can exacerbate this situation, as former soldiers operated within a command-based reality. However, the current emphasis is largely placed on the need for soft skills, essential for the process of co-creation and collaboration within professional work. This is not just an individual problem but a societal one as well, as the group of soldiers who have completed

their service is quite sizable, comprising individuals of working age who should contribute to the national income. Therefore, it seems necessary to implement changes in the training system that will grant them broader professional opportunities even after their service ends. It is advisable to develop career pathways by recommending a smooth transition from the job market represented by military service to the market shaped outside the armed forces, primarily driven by economic and social needs.

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