



How Does Military Service Experience Shape Work Motivations Related to Social Impact Among Young European Professionals?

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Abstract

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As European nations reintroduce military service at a pace not seen since the Cold War, understanding what that experience does to those who complete it has become both topical and relevant. Existing research has focused on US veterans and skills transfer. This study asks a different question: how does military service shape work motivations related to social impact among young European professionals?

Thirteen semi-structured interviews were conducted across three participant groups: those who never served, those who completed optional or selective service, and those who completed mandatory service. Data was analysed using the Gioia Methodology, producing four aggregate dimensions. The central finding is clear: service does not create the desire for socially meaningful work. That desire exists across all groups. What military service does is reframe how that motivation is expressed. Military-experienced participants framed social impact as a collective obligation rooted in civic duty. Those who never served framed it as individual preference and fulfilment. That distinction is the study's primary contribution. Service also functioned as a professional development accelerator, producing resilience and a collective orientation that set military-experienced participants apart in professional environments.

The findings carry practical implications for organisations, military institutions and policymakers navigating a Europe in which more young people will serve than at any other point in recent memory.

Keywords: Military Service, Work Motivation, Social Impact, Young European Professionals, Gioia Methodology

Abstrato

Como a Experiência do Serviço Militar Molda as Motivações Profissionais Ligadas ao Impacto Social nos Jovens Profissionais Europeus?

Benjamin Jamie Jackson

À medida que a Europa reintroduz o serviço militar a um ritmo sem precedentes desde a Guerra Fria, compreender o que essa experiência faz àqueles que a concluem tornou-se atual e relevante. A investigação existente focou-se nos veteranos dos EUA e na transferência de competências. Este estudo coloca uma questão diferente: de que forma o serviço militar molda as motivações profissionais ligadas ao impacto social nos jovens profissionais europeus?

Foram realizadas treze entrevistas em três grupos: aqueles que nunca serviram, aqueles que concluíram um serviço opcional ou seletivo, e aqueles que cumpriram o serviço obrigatório. Os dados foram analisados através da Metodologia Gioia, resultando em quatro dimensões agregadas. A conclusão central é clara. O serviço militar não cria o desejo por um trabalho socialmente relevante — esse desejo existe em todos os grupos. O que faz é reestruturar como essa motivação se manifesta. Os participantes que serviram enquadraram o impacto social como uma obrigação coletiva enraizada no dever cívico. Os que nunca serviram enquadraram-no em torno da preferência e realização individuais. Essa distinção constitui a principal contribuição do estudo. O serviço funcionou como um acelerador do desenvolvimento profissional, gerando resiliência e orientação coletiva que distinguem os participantes que serviram.

As conclusões trazem implicações para organizações, instituições militares e decisores políticos numa Europa onde mais jovens irão servir.

Palavras-chave: Serviço Militar, Motivação Profissional, Impacto Social, Jovens Profissionais Europeus, Metodologia Gioia

Preface

This thesis would not have been possible without the guidance of Professor Carlos Azevedo, whose feedback, constant support and constructive ideas throughout the research process were invaluable. Sincere thanks are also owed to the thirteen participants who gave their time and spoke openly about their experiences, motivations and careers. Their willingness to reflect honestly created the foundation for any conclusions drawn. Finally, I express my gratitude to family and friends whose encouragement and advice during the writing process never went unnoticed.

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1. Introduction

In a world marked by growing geopolitical instability, military service is back on the European agenda in 2026. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 fundamentally revised the continent's and, more broadly, NATO's security assumptions. What followed was the realisation, throughout Europe, that in the face of a recruitment crisis, changes to military policy needed to be made and fast. In late 2025, Germany's Bundestag voted to reintroduce military service for eighteen-year-olds, reversing a suspension that had been in place since 2011. Croatia reinstated mandatory service the same year. France also announced a ten-month national programme (Patrick Jackson & Emma Brancatisano, 2025). Furthermore, the European Parliament identified conscription as a critical part of the EU defence strategy, noting mounting changing public opinions on this issue (Eleni Lazarou & Panagiotis Politis Lamprou, 2025). In modern times, some EU member states have operated compulsory service, and even more are actively debating it. This is a structural shift in how European societies think about citizenship, defence and the obligations of young people. This may seem an unusual subject for a business thesis. However, as more people complete service and enter the workforce, the organisations that recruit and manage, and society more broadly, have a growing stake in understanding how that experience shapes these individuals professionally.

The picture in 2026 is complicated. Not all countries feel the same threat level, which means that some countries will be more radical in their approach than others. Writing about this topic at this point in time has meant navigating an ever-evolving landscape. The topic is, like many geopolitical issues, dynamic and heavily debatable, even within the same political party (Sabine Kinkartz, 2025). What is clear, however, is that young Europeans will serve in the coming years more than at any point since the Cold War, and therefore, understanding how service changes an individual, beyond the obvious defence objectives, is a question that deserves examination. To understand the present moment, it is necessary to understand how Europe arrived at this point. This thesis, therefore, examines how military service experience changes work motivations related to social impact among young Europeans.

The following section traces the history of European military service, from its origins in the modern nation-state through its near disappearance after the Cold War, to its current and modern controversial revival.

1.1. Background to Military Service

Modern military service in Europe emerged in parallel with the establishment of the modern nation-state. Previously, medieval systems relied heavily on mercenaries; the birth of modern nation-states sought a new system of mass conscription that closely linked citizenship and soldiering (Lucassen & Zürcher, 1998). The French Revolution's 1793 introduction of 'levée en masse' can be regarded as the birth of modern military service (Govaerts, 2020). Conscription is among the most intrusive instruments of state power. Some view conscription as a means of contributing to society, whereas others will regard it as a burden imposed on individuals who have no desire or incentive to participate. Conscription is undoubtedly among the most invasive government policies, historically requiring primarily young men to serve in the military for time-specific periods (Jakobsen & Serritzlew, 2026).

By the twentieth century, it was common to serve; however, in practice, exemptions and 'substitution fees' meant that the heaviest burdens typically fell on the lower social classes (Lucassen & Zürcher, 1998). Mass conscription remained prevalent during the Cold War; however, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, many European nations slowly abolished conscription, favouring smaller, professional armies instead (Jonsson et al., 2024). Moreover, mandatory military service was branded as unsuited to modern warfare and society. The end of the Cold War was characterised as a reflection point, where a continued and gradual deactivation of military service was expected (Strand, 2024).

Nevertheless, not all countries embraced this 'peace dividend', especially smaller countries neighbouring traditionally larger and more aggressive nations. So military conscription never completely disappeared as a practice or in the collective zeitgeist of modern Europe. Recently, however, several states such as Sweden, Lithuania, Latvia and Serbia reactivated conscription, while Germany and France introduced new models of military service (Strand, 2024). Norway, Sweden and most recently Denmark also expanded conscription to include women (Strand, 2024). Current recruitment issues and broader systemic shortcomings are becoming harder to ignore in a politically dynamic and unpredictable world, and it seems increasingly likely that more countries will re-examine their relationship with national service.

The thesis opens with a literature review covering motivational theories and the evolving effect of military service on organisations and individual career choices. This is followed by the methodology, analysis and discussion, which includes theoretical and practical considerations

of the findings, limitations of the study and suggestions for future research. Finally, the conclusion summarises the study and answers the research question.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Work Motivation Theories

Motivation is a foundational concept in organisational research, with well-established links to a company's performance, employee commitment, and long-term organisational success. Mitchell (1982) defines it as "the psychological processes that cause the arousal, direction, and persistence of voluntary, goal-directed actions". Motivation explains why individuals vary in the effort they exert and the degree to which they persist in pursuit of goals, making it particularly relevant to understanding career decision-making and workplace behaviour. The following review examines the theories and organisational drivers most pertinent to this study. While influential frameworks such as Expectancy Theory (Vroom, 1964) and Goal Setting Theory (Locke, 1968) are acknowledged, they have been omitted on the grounds of limited direct relevance to the research question explored.

Perhaps the best-known theory of motivation is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), which posits that we are all driven by a specific order of needs, which must be met at each level before the individual can progress to the next. Maslow categorises five distinct levels of needs, starting with psychological needs, which are the most basic and include food, water and sleep. Followed by safety needs, love and belonging, esteem and finally self-actualisation, which is arguably the hardest to achieve. This final level is about achieving one's full potential, being creative and seeking personal growth. According to Maslow, individuals must satisfy their most basic needs first before they progress to more advanced goals. However, this theory rightly garners criticism; most obviously, because much has changed in both the world and the workplace since this theory was conceived. If a person is employed, one would presume their basic needs are already being met. Furthermore, there is no concrete evidence that an individual must follow the path outlined (Rojas et al., 2023); perhaps some levels matter more to certain individuals or cultures. It could be argued that the model overemphasises income and basic material needs, neglecting the importance of social and relationship requirements, especially for those at lower income levels (Rojas et al., 2023). For the purposes of this study, this is particularly relevant. Military service may accelerate an individual's progression toward higher-order needs by

providing structured belonging, identity and a sense of esteem. Whether this relationship exists and how it manifests is precisely what this research seeks to explore. Military leavers entering civilian employment may evaluate organisations primarily against self-actualisation criteria, for example, the wider purpose of the organisation and personal development, rather than just basic material incentives.

Another motivation theory is Theory X / Y (McGregor & Cutcher-Gershenfeld, 1960). The theory proposes that a manager's assumption of human nature would determine how they lead. Theory X is the classical informal view, which is that most employees are inherently lazy and work out of necessity. An autocratic approach, which includes coercing and over-supervising and the 'carrot and stick' approach. Theory Y, however, is a more modern, humanistic approach whereby managers assume that employees will want to do a good job and will be self-directed in reaching their objectives. A manager who subscribes to this point of view might therefore have a more collaborative and participative management style, whereby they delegate responsibility and prefer open communication. Theory X is more likely to be embraced more readily in rigid institutional structures, such as the military. Research has shown that Theory X is preferred in certain types of environments. Highly structured and low complexity settings are one such example, and those who have completed military service will likely be familiar with both. Furthermore, many have argued that the theory ignores collectivist cultures where authority functions differently (Bobic & Davis, 2003). For example, many workers in Asia would expect hierarchical authority and directive leadership, viewing it as vital to maintaining group harmony and order. This raises a critical question in the context of this study. Would individuals shaped by Theory X institutional environments, such as military service, seek to replicate that structure in their civilian careers? Or does exposure to higher-order motivational drivers during service produce a preference for the autonomy and purpose more characteristic of Theory Y enterprises?

Finally, a further valuable motivation theory is the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Rather than viewing motivation simply as a response to external rewards, the theory argues that individuals are inherently inclined toward growth and psychological development when their basic needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are supported. In organisational contexts, experiences that foster a sense of self-direction, effectiveness and social connection are therefore associated with deeper engagement and sustained commitment. External goals can therefore become internalised as the work becomes more personally meaningful. Military service may be seen to simultaneously constrain

autonomy while enhancing competence and relatedness, creating a unique motivational profile that differs from traditional organisational settings. This theory also presumes that everyone will want autonomy; some employees may prefer direction and find autonomy stressful. The theory struggles in low-autonomy environments, such as assembly-line work, where opportunities for skill development may be severely limited (Deci et al., 2017). In the context of this study, this distinction is key: whether young people leave military service with motivation rooted in purpose, belonging, and personal growth or are primarily externally regulated will likely shape the kinds of civilian organisations and roles they find fulfilling, making SDT a particularly powerful theoretical lens for examining the career motivations and organisational preferences of this population.

2.2. Key Drivers of Work Motivation in Organisational Contexts

While the frameworks discussed above provide a solid theoretical context to view motivation, it is equally important to consider more concrete organisational drivers of motivation. Previous research has identified a range of drivers such as purpose, recognition, culture, learning, achievement, social relatedness, and a sense of meaningful contribution (Vo et al., 2022). Of these, purpose has attracted the most attention in recent research. Clegg et al. (2021) point out that, despite traditional thinking, employees often expect organisations to have goals beyond simply being profitable, despite old-fashioned thinking and the belief that motivation increases when individuals can connect daily tasks to a broader purpose. Purpose, therefore, is not a fixed organisational mission statement but something more fluid. Clegg et al. (2021) describe it as an "open purpose" that evolves continuously in response to people, values, and context within which an organisation operates. This matters for motivation because employees are not simply motivated by what an organisation says it stands for. What drives sustained engagement is whether they experience that purpose as genuine and personally meaningful in their day-to-day work. Recognition plays a concrete role in this: when employees see their contributions acknowledged, it reinforces both their intrinsic motivation and their sense of commitment to the organisation (Vo et al., 2022). Access to learning and development works similarly, satisfying the need for competence that both SDT and Maslow identify as fundamental to sustained engagement. Interpersonal connection and a culture of shared accountability, meanwhile, address the relational dimensions of motivation that neither financial reward nor job security alone can fulfil (Vo et al., 2022). What emerges from this body of evidence is that motivation is not simply an internal psychological state; it is shaped, sustained, or indeed undermined by the organisational environment an individual finds themselves in. In the context

of this study, this perspective is especially pertinent. Young Europeans transitioning from military service into the labour market may carry with them a deeply internalised orientation toward purpose, social contribution, and collective accountability, values cultivated through a modern form of military service. Their career choices may therefore be shaped not only by practical considerations such as financial compensation. The degree to which a civilian organisation's culture, mission and recognition resonate with the motivational foundations that military life has instilled matters equally. Organisations that align with these values may be better positioned to attract, engage, and retain military-experienced individuals as employees.

2.3. Impact of Military Service on Career Choices

New research highlights that modern conscription has broader aims such as nurturing societal resilience and fostering a shared sense of responsibility among young people (Jonsson et al., 2024). Nowadays, military service is viewed not only as a defensive instrument, but also as a means of political socialisation and life-course structuring (Bove et al., 2024). Service has evolved as young people increasingly desire more tangible benefits and ‘convertibility’ of military teachings to civilian life (Jonsson et al., 2024). There is an expectation that the experience will generate benefits that justify the time invested in it, in terms of unique skills and human capital developed. Interestingly, in Switzerland and Estonia, service is a useful socialising function that integrates ethnic minorities and linguistic diversity, for example, bringing together German, French and Italian speakers in Switzerland at a young age (Jonsson et al., 2024). Modern military service is often viewed as an important process of socialisation that shapes individuals’ identities, values, and behaviour from a formative age. Through structured environments, shared goals, and high-pressure situations, individuals often internalise norms related to discipline, responsibility, and group cohesion (Teachman & Tedrow, 2016). These studies suggest that military service functions as a socialising institution. It shapes not just what individuals can do, but how they think about work and their place within it. Empirical research demonstrates that such experiences can foster stronger pro-social preferences and civic engagement (Bove et al., 2024). This would suggest a shift toward motivations that extend beyond simple financial remuneration. This shift in motivational orientation is significant. It implies that the effects of service extend beyond skill acquisition into the domain of values and professional identity. Moreover, military service has been shown to produce lasting effects on individual behaviour and life trajectories (Teachman & Tedrow, 2016), bolstering the idea that these experiences can shape long-term motivational patterns. In particular, the emphasis on collective purpose and shared responsibility within military contexts

may cultivate a stronger sense of meaning and purpose in work (Peat et al., 2025). Overall, the literature indicates that military service can meaningfully shape individuals' work-related motivations. Particularly those oriented toward shared goals and championing motivations beyond simply financial remuneration. These motivational preferences would manifest through stronger commitment to collective goals rather than individual targets (Morris & Hanna, 2023). Additionally, greater tolerance for structured and hierarchical environments (Shepherd et al., 2021) could lead to an inclination for roles that provide a clear sense of purpose and contribution.

Research studies have found that military service as a young adult leaves an imprint that improves responses in high-pressure situations and reduces the propensity to engage in fraudulent activities (Koch-Bayram & Wernicke, 2018). Further research indicates that employees with a military background tend to hold stronger values around accountability, a trait that becomes particularly pronounced among those who progress into senior management roles (Pavićević & Keil, 2025). A strong ethical focus has become progressively more relevant to companies as they are urged by wider society and their employees to demonstrate their social purpose (Koch-Bayram & Wernicke, 2018). Those with military service backgrounds cited teamwork, communication, organisation, decision-making and leadership among their most relevant management abilities (Barnes et al., 2025). Individuals with military experience bring a distinctive human capital profile that enterprises can benefit from. Realising that value, however, requires deliberate role alignment, thoughtful integration and careful investment. Military service experiences will affect career choices later in life, as those who complete training will develop certain skills and competencies, such as real leadership training, especially in crisis management (Benmelech & Frydman, 2015). Empirical research has shown that individuals with military experience exhibit distinct behavioural traits, including greater risk tolerance and leadership orientation (Benmelech & Frydman, 2015), which would influence both managerial practices and wider career paths. Motivation is clearly an important determinant of career decision-making. Therefore, shifts toward purpose-driven motivation may increase the chance that individuals pursue careers aligned with social impact and broader societal contribution. This gives them a clearer purpose than a simple corporate objective might provide. Beyond motivational orientation, the literature also identifies a distinct behavioural and ethical profile among those with service backgrounds.

2.4. Impact of Military Service on Companies

Young people will increasingly undertake military service as national service policies expand and normalise across Europe (Patrick Jackson & Emma Brancatisano, 2025). The impact on companies and broader careers, therefore, needs to be examined to better understand how these policies will influence business practice. Some companies will be better suited to utilise military experience than others. This will be particularly true in countries where military service is more deeply ingrained in their national culture. However, the transferability of these attributes is not universal, and misalignment between an individual's values and preferences may limit the extent to which such capabilities are effectively utilised. Individuals shaped by military service tend to place greater emphasis on purpose, shared goals, and structured environments, which can influence how they engage with organisational roles and responsibilities (Peat et al., 2025). As a result, organisations could benefit from recognising and aligning these motivational profiles with roles that emphasise teamwork, accountability, social impact and clear objectives. Those with a military background are more comfortable with training and development as they are frequently required to take part in and lead training sessions, something their civilian counterparts are not used to (Hardison et al., 2017). Hard skills such as organising resources, delegating, and monitoring performance are also trained capabilities practised regularly in military settings (Hardison et al., 2017). Despite these documented advantages, a gap exists between what the literature suggests military-experienced individuals bring and what organisations do with it. Many organisations publicly praise those with military service, in the form of public statements and symbolic gestures, but few concretely seek to understand substantive policies' impact on retention, promotion rates and general satisfaction (Peat et al., 2025). Furthermore, companies often underutilise the skills and broader experience of military service personnel due to stereotypes, narrow support mechanisms, and a lack of integration (Peat et al., 2025). Military leavers provide an abundance of unique human capital that is not always utilised effectively by organisations (Becker et al., 2023). This presents a challenge, where organisations often fail to provide purpose, direction, or opportunities for contribution, underutilising those who thrive with these dynamics. The research suggests that firms must move beyond viewing military experience solely as a set of soft skills, such as leadership and decision-making. Instead, organisations should consider how service shapes deeper motivational drivers and professional values. This aligns with research on person-organisation fit, which implies that alignment between individual values and organisational culture is a key determinant of employee satisfaction and performance (Clegg et al., 2021). The gap between

what military-experienced individuals bring and what organisations are equipped to receive represents both the practical problem this study seeks to address and the commercial opportunity that informed organisations stand to gain.

2.5. Research Gap

Prior research on military service has mostly focused on US veterans and their adaptation to the civilian job market. Little research has looked at young Europeans' experience in the military, as seen in (Barnes et al., 2025; Benmelech & Frydman, 2015; Henderson, 2024; Peat et al., 2025). A veteran with many years of service who experienced live combat is not comparable to a young European who served for a few months and saw no real combat activity (excluding Ukraine). Existing research has examined the skills and leadership capabilities developed through military service. Most of this work, however, focuses on transferable competencies such as discipline, teamwork and resilience. The longer-term motivations and specific organisational drivers that individuals bring to civilian careers remain largely unexplored. While the motivational literature reviewed above provides a comprehensive theoretical foundation, a gap remains in its application to military service as a formative organisational experience. Research on veterans' career transitions has tended to focus on skills transfer and reintegration rather than on how service shapes motivational orientation. Specifically, whether the clear purpose, collective accountability, and prosocial goals characteristic of military life produce a lasting preference for socially impactful careers. This study, therefore, aims to address that gap. It examines how military service among young Europeans shapes subsequent work motivations and career choices. The particular focus is on whether service fosters a disposition toward careers defined by social contribution and broader societal purpose.

3. Methodology

3.1. Why was a Qualitative approach was used?

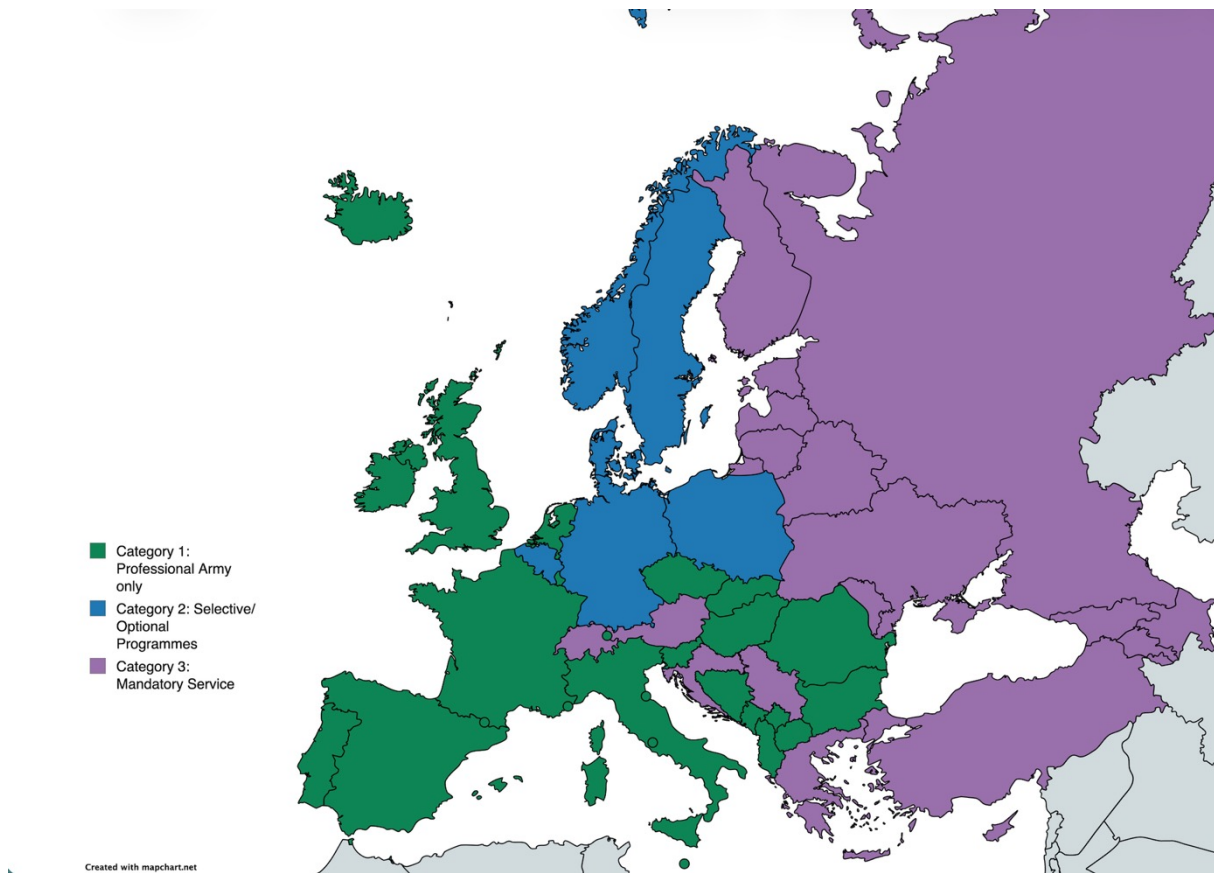
Due to the exploratory nature of the research question, a wholly qualitative approach was employed in this study. Qualitative research is particularly well-suited to niche and underexplored topics where information is hard to find and thus insufficiently discussed. Moreover, the study addresses a topical issue, namely how military service affects career choices and work motivations among young Europeans. The research focuses on participants' lived experiences, changing values and perceptions of social impact and meaningful work after

serving. Qualitative research is best placed to understand context-bound and somewhat interpretive studies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Qualitative data is preferred for understanding whether relationships exist and whether the dynamics between two variables are as expected (Eisenhardt, 1989). Given that military service and social-impact motivations among young Europeans sit in a current gap of pre-existing literature, the use of a quantitative framework at this stage would be premature, especially as it would require measurable variables and constraints, which have not been established yet. Moreover, qualitative research is preferred when research conditions cannot be controlled, and sufficient quantitative data does not yet exist (Yin, 2015). Both are true here. The motivations of young Europeans who have served in the military represent an underexplored area where measurable variables have simply not been established yet. A qualitative design instead allows the research to remain open to the complexity and nuance of individual experience, capturing if, how and why motivations shift. This is particularly important in a study where personal reflection and contextual factors are central.

3.2. Semi-Structured Interview Format

There are many methods of collecting qualitative data, such as case studies, semi-structured interviews, observations and other visual methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary method of data collection, as this format is best placed to balance theory with flexibility. The exploratory nature of the study required a method capable of moving beyond the pre-determined questions; therefore, optional prompts were embedded throughout the interview guide to allow the researcher to follow threads that emerged organically, leaning into some topics where possible. The interview guide was constructed around established pre-examined theoretical frameworks (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Maslow, 1943; McGregor & Cutcher-Gershenfeld, 1960), among other relevant concepts. Refer to Appendix 8.1 to see the interview guide. It was vital that responses across all participant groups remained grounded in recognised theories and were comparable. Eisenhardt (1989) also recognised the importance of adaptability in data collection, seeing it as a strength. The interview guide, therefore, serves as an instrument structured enough to enable cross-group comparisons among the mandatory, optional/selective, and non-serving participant groups, yet sufficiently open to capture the nuance and individuality that a purely standardised format would suppress.

Figure 1. Military Service Categories 2026



3.3. Stakeholder Mapping

Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory would suggest that any situation can only be fully understood by identifying all groups that affect or are affected by it, and, critically, by examining the relationships among them rather than looking at each stakeholder separately. Applied to this piece of research, the theory provides the groundwork for organising a multi-layered stakeholder map encompassing both the young Europeans who are the primary subjects of military service policy and the secondary actors such as recruiters, policymakers and employers. The study focuses on primary stakeholders, namely young Europeans, and intentionally excludes secondary stakeholders such as companies and governments. This reflects the study's focus on addressing the supply side of the problem. Groups such as company hiring managers were not included in the research due to the various complicated hiring norms and technicalities across countries; for example, in Finland, individuals cannot disclose whether they served in the military to reduce discrimination. This 360-degree approach ensures that attitudes toward military service are not looked at individually but are viewed within the broader

structural and relational context that produces them. For the purposes of this study, primary stakeholders, namely young Europeans who served and those who did not (to enable better comparison), were interviewed. European nations, therefore, were grouped in three broad categories to simplify the complex individual systems that each country currently implements in 2026, see Figure 1. Category One includes countries that currently have no military service and simply have a professional army. This category currently includes the UK, the Netherlands and Italy, among others. Germany recently changed their military policies and, therefore, from later this year, would be reclassified into category two. Category Two is a mixed system, where the countries employ a full, professional army; however, they also incorporate a voluntary and selective military service programme, whereby some young people join the military for a defined period. Norway, Sweden and Denmark are good examples of such countries. Finally, in Category Three, compulsory military service is enforced in Estonia, Switzerland, and Austria, for example. Each country's system will vary, and even nations within the same category will have different policies regarding how many people are trained and how long they must serve. Cultural norms surrounding the practice also differ considerably, as do ongoing discussions about whether women should be included, as they have been in Denmark since 2025 (Gaudiaut, 2025).

The three categories form a relational spectrum defined by two intersecting variables, such as the degree of state obligation imposed on young people and the degree of agency retained by the individual. This produces distinct relationships between the citizen and the institution. Category One represents maximum individual agency with no state compulsion, while Category Three represents maximum state authority with service legally enforced. Category Two occupies a more complex position, where agency is neither absent nor unlimited and where young people may actively choose to pursue service yet remain subject to institutional selection criteria that can exclude them regardless of their willingness. This triangular structure allows the research to move from a binary scale to examining how different configurations of state power and individual motivation produce measurably different attitudes toward military service across the three groups, which may subsequently affect their post-service work motivations and wider career choices, see Table 1.

Table 1. Stakeholder Categories. Based on Freeman's (1984) Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder group	Examples	State obligation	Individual agency	Role in research
Category 1 — No Service	UK, Netherlands, Italy	None	High	Primary control group
Category 2 — Selective / Optional	Denmark, Sweden, Norway	Partial	Medium	Primary
Category 3 — Mandatory service	Finland, Estonia, Switzerland	High	Low	Primary
<i>Secondary stakeholders (not exhaustive list) — acknowledged but beyond primary research scope</i>				
Government / Military	Defence ministries, national bodies, politicians	—	—	Designs the policy framework each country operates within
Companies	CEOs, hiring managers, management	—	—	Shapes labour market incentives and norms to serve or not
Society	Civil society, veterans and families	—	—	Transmits cultural norms and social expectations

3.4. Sampling Strategy

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, a strategy that Anderson (2017) advocates as a marker of rigour in qualitative research, in which individuals are recruited based on clearly defined theoretical criteria rather than just convenience. Nationality was central to this selection logic: each participant's country of origin determined not only which service framework they had grown up within, but the cultural norms, social expectations, and lived relationship with military obligation that shaped their perspective. This intentionally created diversity within each category. Participants were identified through academic networks and

targeted personal outreach, with 13 interviews conducted in total across the three categories via Microsoft Teams, fully transcribed, and each lasting under 30 minutes. Data saturation was assessed against criteria drawn from Anderson's (2017) themes: sufficient complexity of connections and the point at which further data gathering would add little to the emerging conceptualisation, with responses converging rather than generating new analytical material (Saunders et al., 2018).

Table 2. Participant Profile Overview

Participant	Nationality	Age	Highest Education	Current Occupation	Service Group	Service Duration	Role
P1	German	25	Bachelors (working towards Masters)	Student	Never Served	N/A	N/A
P2	Italian	27	Master's at Bocconi	Business Consultant Insurance	Never Served	N/A	N/A
P3	Dutch	27	Bachelors (working towards Masters)	Student	Never Served	N/A	N/A
P4	British	25	Masters in Maths and Physics	Research Software Engineer	Never Served	N/A	N/A
P5	Norwegian	28	Master's	Business Controller in hospitality	Selective/Optional	1 year (2017-18)	PT/ Fitness Soldier
P6	Norwegian	28	Master's	Auditor at Deloitte	Selective/Optional	3 years (2017-20)	Tank Driver
P7	Swedish	24	College (working towards bachelors)	Economics Student	Selective/Optional	9 months (2020-21)	Tank and Ammunition Platoon

P8	Danish	22	College (working towards bachelors)	Economics and Law student	Selective/Optional	4 months (2023)	Basic Training Cadet
P9	Estonian	25	College	Nurse	Mandatory	11 months (recurring)	Paramedic
P10	Austrian	26	Master's in management	Business Intelligence Analysis	Mandatory	6 months (2019-20)	Biological and Chemical Weapons specialist
P11	Swiss	25	Bachelors (working towards Masters)	Intern German Chamber of Commerce (Brazil)	Mandatory	4.5 months – recurring service (started in 2020)	Telecommunications specialist
P12	Finnish	26	Master's in management	Corporate Finance Analyst	Mandatory	3.5 months (minimum length served, 2018)	Administrative position
P13	Finnish	26	Bachelors (working towards Masters)	Development Engineer	Mandatory	11.5 months (2019-2020)	Signal Communications, Second Lieutenant

3.5. Analytical Process

The analysis of these interviews follows the Gioia Methodology, a systematic inductive approach that structures qualitative data into first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions, producing a transparent and traceable pathway from raw data to emergent concepts (Gioia et al., 2013). Refer to Appendix 8.2 for further information. The methodology focuses on simplifying complex phenomena (Magnani & Gioia, 2023). It is well-suited to exploratory research, understanding how individuals make sense of lived experience, guiding the use of constant comparison and abductive reasoning applied in this research. This approach was selected because it allows the motivations and experiences of young European

professionals to emerge directly from their own accounts, rather than being shaped by a predetermined theoretical framework, making it particularly well-suited to explore how different levels of exposure to military service may shape future professional orientations (Magnani & Gioia, 2023).

4. Analysis and Results

The 13 interview transcripts were analysed inductively, beginning with many first-order concepts, such as national identity, collective working, resilience, etc. These were then grouped into 11-second-order themes. These themes were then further grouped into four broad aggregate dimensions that encompassed the most consistent and analytically significant patterns emerging from the data. Rather than being imposed on the material, the dimensions emerged organically from what participants reported, with the never-served group providing a baseline for comparison.

4.1. Dimension One - Military Service as a Professional Development Accelerator

One of the most consistent and obvious finding across served participant groups (selective/optional and mandatory) was that military service produced a distinct set of professionally relevant and sought-after competencies that participants carried directly into their civilian careers. Unlike formal education or internships, military-service-experienced individuals experienced unique and sustained high-pressure environments where qualities such as discipline and resilience were developed and subsequently shaped how participants approached work after their service.

This was most tangibly illustrated by P6, who acknowledged that his academic performance was not exceptional, stating, "I had, like, okay grades, but it was not the best", yet credited getting a position as a direct result of their military background, "I used the army background for the whole interview, and then yeah, I think that got me the job". Beyond simply recruitment, P6 demonstrated how service built a professional durability that differentiated them from colleagues who had never served in demanding work environments, noting that during long and stressful days at Deloitte, colleagues would complain while P6 adopted a different mindset, "just do your job, man". This tolerance for professional pressure was also echoed by P13, who reflected that service taught him to trust in himself: "You learn that you can survive through hard things", a belief they later carried directly into their careers. P10 explicitly listed "discipline, organisation, structure and resilience" as key takeaways from service and added

that this spills “over into your civil life”. Similarly, P7 noted that service produced lasting behavioural change in a professional context: “today I’m more consistent and disciplined in how I approach work”. These accounts collectively suggest that military service operates as a form of early professional experience, instilling motivational traits such as discipline, resilience and self-reliance. It is worth noting, however, that not all served participants embraced structure and discipline uniformly. P10 reflected that service made them appreciate autonomy more once finished, explaining, “maybe it shaped me in the way that, once I got some autonomy after finishing my service, I enjoyed having autonomy,” suggesting the relationship between service and structure is not straightforward.

By contrast, never-served participants framed their professional motivations almost entirely around personal preferences. P4 prioritised “flexible time, being able to work from home,” while P3 described wanting structure precisely because he had never been exposed to highly structured environments. The never-served participants did not reference having been tested under pressure or having developed resilience through adversity. This absence is analytically significant as it would suggest that without a meaningful formative experience equivalent to military service, professional ambitions remain anchored to comfort and individual preference rather than being shaped through a broader service and system. Time in the military, therefore, appears to produce a distinct motivational baseline among served participants, which is built on proven resilience and self-reliance. It is this foundation that transforms how served participants subsequently approach their professional lives.

4.2. Dimension Two - From Self to Team: How Military Service Reorients Professional Values

A noticeable observation across the served participant groups was that military service produced a shift away from individually driven professional motivations toward a more collective orientation rooted in shared responsibility and purpose. This shift was largely absent among the never-served group.

This collective reorientation was most clearly articulated by P11, who reflected that “in Switzerland, we are a very individualistic society...in the military it’s about the collective, it’s about team”, adding that this represented “an eye-opener... a good one, a much needed one” for some people. Military experience, therefore, seems to go directly against the grain of Switzerland’s highly individualistic culture. P12 corroborated this claim, stating “if it wasn’t for military service, then I would be more individualistic”. A self-acknowledgement that clearly

shows the reorientation of values, which would naturally impact professional expectations in the workplace. P5 framed this shift in terms of civic purpose, noting their motivation for serving was "to do my part, to be part of something larger," a motivation that continued to shape their professional outlook beyond the service period. P7 also noted that service "puts you in situations where you have to contribute to something bigger than yourself," suggesting that collective orientation was not simply a value held but more of a competency actively developed through sustained exposure to shared responsibility. P8 echoed these sentiments by saying "you don't want to disappoint anyone", highlighting the importance of shared responsibility in military contexts. P6 also picked up on this, stating "you're never alone on a task", underlining the structural reality of military service, whereby collective work was not a cultural preference but an operational necessity, one that shaped participants' approach to professional collaboration. P10 provides an important counterpoint, however, stating that collective purpose at work is "not too important for me...I just want to do my job and enjoy doing my job", an interesting reminder that military service does not produce a single orientation and that some individuals will always follow their own preferences and desires, no matter their experience.

By contrast, never-served participants consistently framed professional motivation in individual terms. P3 framed their professional motivation as primarily "a quest for knowledge," an individually oriented pursuit that stands in contrast to the collective sense of purpose that characterised the served participants' accounts. Furthermore, P2 described their day-to-day motivation as "finding something I enjoy", placing personal enjoyment firmly ahead of collective contribution, while P4 prioritised personal agency above all else, explaining, "I wouldn't want to be sort of taking orders". The absence of any collective mindset across the never-served group is analytically relevant as, without a formative experience that demands contribution beyond oneself, professional motivation appears to remain predominantly individually centred.

What emerges from this dimension is that military service functions as a significant reorientation process, shifting professional motivation away from individual gain toward collective responsibility in ways that persist into participants' civilian careers. This shift represents a clear difference in how served and never-served participants understand the purpose of work itself, illustrating how military service fosters stronger collective preferences and civic engagement among participants.

4.3. Dimension Three - Beyond Defence: Service as a Catalyst for Social Awareness

While the previous dimension established how service shifts professional motivation from individual to collective, this dimension examines a distinct but related outcome, namely that military service exposes participants to social diversity and civic responsibility in ways that broaden their societal awareness. This was particularly noticeable among mandatory service participants, for whom service functioned not merely as a defence obligation but as a formative civic experience.

The most vivid illustration of service as a social equaliser came from P13, who observed that "a brain surgeon and a gardener went to the same place...that levels out society, people have to relate to each other"; an interesting observation about how mandatory service breaks down social and professional boundaries that would otherwise remain unchallenged throughout a person's career. P12 agreed with this, explaining how service brought together "people from all different backgrounds" and that "from day one you just need to collaborate," suggesting that cross-socioeconomic exposure was not a coincidence, but is structurally embedded into how service operates. This artificially created social diversity appears to have produced a broader awareness of societal inequality. Beyond defence, several mandatory service participants performed roles that intersected directly with civilian life, an experience that appears to have strengthened their subsequent orientation toward socially meaningful work. P11 described being trained to assist in hospitals during the COVID-19 pandemic, reflecting that it "had a social element that I felt has value to society", underlining that service can also function as a vehicle for direct civic contribution entirely separate from its traditional defence objectives. A powerful example of this was P9, whose paramedic role during service led them to reflect, "I was starting to like it, then I decided that's what I want to do", ultimately redirecting their entire career toward nursing. P10 also mentioned military responsibility and corporate responsibility, stating that "military service is basically service for the people, you are responsible for your country", and connected this directly to their expectation that companies should similarly serve the communities they operate within. By contrast, never-served participants showed no equivalent civic formation. P1 admits that roles with a social element are "probably not the highest" priority, having "not thought about it too much". This reflection of motivations is based solely on education and individual preference, rather than any formative experience of shared civic responsibility.

What this dimension reveals is that military service operates at the intersection of civic and defensive institutions. Direct exposure to civic duty during service produces a measurably

stronger orientation towards understanding socially impactful work in participants' subsequent professional lives.

4.4. Dimension Four - Duty or Desire: How Service Reframes Social Impact

Motivation

The preceding dimensions have established how military service builds professional competencies, reorients participants toward collective thinking and broadens civic awareness. This final dimension, however, examines where these transformations ultimately manifest, namely, in how served and never-served participants fundamentally differ in their orientation toward socially impactful work. What the data shows is a clear and consistent divide: served participants frame social impact as more of a duty and collective obligation, while never-served participants approach it primarily as a matter of personal fulfilment and individual preference.

Across served participants, social impact motivation was framed consistently in terms of obligation and collective purpose. P8 stated that beyond salary, the most meaningful thing would be "making a difference for others", adding, "I would love to make a difference, to feel like I make a difference for others". P5 also reflected a similar civic orientation, expressing a desire to "have a positive impact on the community and people". This language shows the importance placed on social contribution. What distinguishes the served group further was the directness with which participants connected military service experience to social impact preferences at work. P7 provides an exception, however, reflecting that service had embedded such a strong feeling in the collective to the point where they felt compelled to correct it, stating, "I need to think of myself more than I do, I always set other people's seats before mine". This is a clear example that the collective orientation service instils is not always experienced as straightforwardly positive, and that its relationship with social impact motivation is more complex. P9, alternatively, did note that "seeing that it's somehow valuable to society keeps me motivated," a statement that gains particular weight given their trajectory from military paramedic directly into psychiatric nursing. P13 offered a clear articulation of where this motivation draws its limits, stating that it "would be hard, very hard for me to deal with clearly and explicitly anti-social companies like Big Tobacco", suggesting social impact orientation among served participants manifests not only as a wish, but as a professional boundary.

Among never-served participants, the picture was notably different. Whilst P2 reflected that ultimately "I want to feel like I've done something positive in my life", a sentiment that is genuine, but it is framed more as self-fulfilment and image rather than any outward sense of

civic obligation or collective duty. P1 admitted that they were not “actively looking for it [socially impactful work]”. P4 summarised it simply as wanting “to do good, to be useful”; however, this still seems to stem from a place of personal satisfaction, with social impact serving as a preference rather than an internalised civic obligation shaped by previous experiences. What this dimension ultimately reveals is that military service does not simply add social impact to a participant's list of career preferences; it reframes professional motivations entirely. It shifts it from a personal aspiration ‘to do good’, to a more internalised sense of obligation. Overall, the four aggregate dimensions paint a picture of how service shapes not just what young European professionals want from work, but also why they want it and, critically, what they believe work fundamentally brings in value.

5. Discussion

5.1. Principal Findings

This study set out to examine how military service experience shapes work motivations related to social impact among young European professionals. The central finding indicates that military service reframes work and social motivations. It can not be denied that the importance placed on social impact across all three participant groups was similar; the fundamental difference was in how social impact and broader work motivations were framed among the served groups. Participants with military experience consistently framed social impact as more of a collective obligation and duty anchored in shared experience and the importance of collaboration. In contrast, never-served participants framed the same social motivation as more of a matter of personal fulfilment and preference. This distinction in the framing of social impact from civic duty among those who served versus personal fulfilment among the never-served is the study's most significant finding. This aligns with Bove et al. (2024), who found that military service fosters stronger prosocial preferences and civic engagement, while extending that finding by demonstrating that the effect manifests specifically as a reframing of how social impact motivation is expressed rather than its creation. All groups demonstrated a baseline orientation toward socially meaningful work. This suggests that factors beyond military service, such as generational values, nationality or educational background, may also contribute to this disposition, though these fall outside the scope of this study.

Across the served participant groups, social impact motivation was communicated in terms that were not solely centred on personal preference. Served participants described wanting to make a difference to others, contribute to their communities, and actively avoid organisations whose

conduct contradicts their values. Served participants concretely connected military service to their professional expectations, with several rejecting roles or organisations they perceived as socially harmful. Among the never-served group, the orientation toward meaningful work was genuine but framed differently. The orientation was mostly based on personal fulfilment and enjoyment rather than any sense of obligation to their wider community. Crucially, this difference in framing appeared regardless of whether service was mandatory or optional, with the optional/selective group aligning consistently closer to the mandatory group than to the never-served group in how they articulated the framing of their motivation. This suggests it is the service experience of sustained exposure to collective responsibility, shared purpose and civic contribution that produces this reframing. This is consistent with Jonsson et al. (2024), who describe military service as a means of political socialisation and life-course structuring, and suggest that the service matters less than the quality and intensity of the experience itself.

Beyond social impact framing, service produced a distinct professional profile across both served groups, built on resilience, discipline and a tolerance for demanding environments and situations. Military service could be thought of as a unique, accelerated form of professional development that formal education alone cannot replicate. It shapes not just what participants want from work but how they approach it. Served participants reported greater comfort with pressure, hierarchy, and greater challenges than their never-served peers. This suggests that the physical and psychological demands of military service produce professional toughness that persists beyond the service period itself. Participants who had been tested collectively under pressure were interested in making a difference and working towards shared goals instead of simply prioritising financial remuneration. The professional resilience that service builds, and the pro-social orientation it produces, appear to mix, producing a motivational profile oriented toward work that carries meaning beyond individual gain. Teachman and Tedrow (2016) note that military service produces lasting effects on individual behaviour and life trajectories, and these findings suggest that professional motivation is among the most durable of those effects.

However, the findings are not uniform. One mandatory service participant, for example, expressed professional motivations and social impact framing more similar to the never-served group rather than their served peers. This might suggest that service duration, role type and individual factors such as personality and family background all moderate the effect. Service creates the conditions for this reframing of motivation; however, it will not guarantee it. Individual variation remains a meaningful and relevant caveat to any broader conclusion.

5.2. Theoretical Contribution

The findings of this study both validate and challenge established motivational and organisational frameworks, and in doing so, make several contributions to the theoretical understanding of how institutional experience shapes professional motivation. This study broadly concurs with the Hierarchy of Needs (1943). Served participants regularly voiced motivations from the higher end of the hierarchy, such as purpose, belonging and self-actualisation. This aligns with the literature review's proposition that service accelerates progression toward higher-order needs by providing structured collective belonging and identity. Jonsson et al. (2024) support this, finding that modern conscription nurtures shared responsibility and societal resilience among young people. Qualities that sit squarely on the belonging, high esteem and self-actualisation levels. On the other hand, never-served participants often referred to pay, flexibility and individual enjoyment as professional drivers, suggesting a motivational profile that remains closer to Maslow's middle tiers. The rigid hierarchy, however, was not fully confirmed here. One mandatory service participant expressed motivational priorities closer to personal comfort and individual preference than their served peers. This shows that military exposure alone does not guarantee progression toward higher-order needs.

SDT (1985) argues that autonomy is a psychological need, necessary for persistent intrinsic motivation, a claim only partially supported by this study's findings. Among never-served participants, autonomy was expected. Some even expressed discomfort at the prospect of hierarchy and preferred flexibility and operational independence. Among served participants, however, the feeling was clearly different. Autonomy was not expected as a right from day one. Participants described earning it progressively in the military by demonstrating their reliability and competence, and many expressed comfort with hierarchy and clear direction rather than seeing it as something to fight against. Clearly, some forms of institutional experience fundamentally shape how individuals relate to autonomy. Teachman and Tedrow (2016) claim that military service produces lasting effects on behaviour, and this study suggests one such effect is a reconfigured relationship with autonomy. SDT's competence and relatedness dimensions do find strong support across served participants. The autonomy assumption, however, does require refinement when applied to military-experienced Europeans. This represents a meaningful contribution to SDT scholarship. The theory's assumption of universal autonomy-seeking has not previously been examined in the context of young Europeans'

shaping through military service. This study suggests that institutional experience fundamentally reconfigures the relationship between individuals and autonomy in ways SDT does not currently account for.

Theory X and Y (McGregor & Cutcher-Gershenfeld, 1960) is an interesting theory to compare to the study's findings. Military service is a typical Theory X environment; therefore, it could be presumed that individuals shaped by the military either replicate that preference in civilian careers or totally reject it in favour of Theory Y autonomy. Neither happened cleanly. Served participants wanted something in-between. They did want clear structure and accountability, but also meritocratic progression, real purpose and the ability to earn responsibility over time. Never-served participants favoured Theory Y from the outset, preferring autonomy and flexibility without any real appetite for hierarchy. However, served participants did not align precisely with McGregor's Theory X, but rather they appeared to be characterised by the desire for minimal micromanagement and accountability without authoritarianism. Ultimately, this binary framework does not accurately capture this middle ground. The interviews suggest a different motivational profile exists, one shaped by institutional experience, that sits between McGregor's two camps. This is perhaps the study's most theoretically original observation. McGregor's binary framework has no category for individuals who embrace structure voluntarily, seek meritocratic progression within it, and are simultaneously purpose-driven. Military service appears to produce exactly this profile, suggesting a third motivational position that existing theory has not yet named.

From an organisational perspective, Clegg et al (2021) found that purpose must be seen as genuine and evolving rather than performative to drive sustained professional motivation. This study supports that position. Served participants consistently favoured employers whose stated values matched their actual conduct and who enjoyed a positive reputation and would actively rejected organisations they perceived as socially contradictory. Vo et al. (2022) similarly identify collective accountability and recognition as central organisational motivational drivers, something that was often referenced by participants in interviews. Never-served participants did share a purpose-driven orientation but articulated it more aspirationally and from a more self-centred perspective. Peat et al. (2025) claim that those with military backgrounds demonstrate stronger commitment to purpose and social contribution professionally, and this study broadly concurs. Overall, these frameworks do explain much of what this study found. However, none fully anticipated all the nuances and variations that emerged in the interviews.

5.3. Practical Contributions

5.3.1. *Organisations*

This study's findings carry tangible implications for how organisations recruit, manage and retain young European professionals with military service backgrounds. These implications will only grow in importance as national service policies in Europe grow and expand as the world becomes increasingly volatile.

Recruitment of these professionals is a key area to reconsider. Standard application processes may value internships and academic grades more than wider experiences, such as military exposure. This will ring true in nations such as Germany, which had turned its back on conscription programmes abandoned decades ago. This study found that service backgrounds are usually valued in nations that never ceased the practice, such as Norway and Finland, for example. However, in nations that are reintroducing or expanding such policies, these benefits may not be fully understood. Peat et al. (2025) similarly found that organisations systematically underutilise military experience due to narrow recruitment criteria and stereotypes. Broadening the assessment scope to capture soft skills such as resilience and the ability to perform under pressure would be a concrete first step. These are qualities that military service develops, yet current recruitment processes often prefer internships and academic credentials over other attributes that may be equally, if not more, valuable in demanding professional environments.

Management style is another key consideration for organisations. Served participants want structure and clear expectations, but also meritocratic progression and earned responsibility. This has concrete implications for how organisations design roles and career pathways. Onboarding processes that throw new hires into highly autonomous and loosely structured roles may demotivate served participant groups who perform better under clearer direction (Peat et al., 2025). Equally, organisations that micromanage and offer no pathways to earned responsibility risk disengaging a group that is used to earning trust. Roles should be designed with a clear structure, visible collective contribution and a credible path towards greater responsibility. A structured and meritocratic environment produces better outcomes for this military-experienced group and ultimately the companies that employ them.

Finally, retention of these unique military-experienced professionals is another challenge. Served participants from this study explicitly rejected organisations whose stated values

contradicted their aspirations, with some even ruling out sectors such as the tobacco industry. Clegg et al. (2021) also found that purpose must be experienced as genuine and evolving to drive long-term motivation. Organisations that invest in authentic purpose and collective accountability are better placed to keep this unique talent pool. Many participants also cited continuous learning as a primary professional motivator. Organisations that offer structured development pathways and mentorship programmes will find this group more receptive to the effort than most. This makes military-experienced individuals a particularly worthwhile cohort to develop rather than simply chop and change.

5.3.2. Policymakers

Beyond enterprise, this study also highlights practical implications for military institutions and governmental policymakers alike. It could be argued that military institutions undersell the professional development value of service. After all, some participants in this study attributed their military experience to securing competitive employment. Jonsson et al. (2024) found that young people increasingly expect tangible benefits from services. Governments should highlight the real individual benefits of service, rather than just relying on civic or patriotic sentiment. Militaries around Europe have ongoing recruitment crises, underlining the need to rethink conscription. A clearer social contract is needed for young people. Financial incentives, universally accepted qualifications and wider societal advantages would make service a more appealing choice for many Europeans coming of age (Jonsson et al., 2024). For example, concrete benefits such as university deferral, continuous mental health support, discounted public transport, and even graduate scheme pathways to the private sector are all options governments could consider.

Military service, when properly understood, represents far more than a defence mechanism. It produces resilient, purpose-driven and collectively oriented professionals that businesses across Europe should recognise. The recommendations outlined here are not exhaustive; they are, however, grounded in the real experiences of young Europeans. As national service expands across the continent, the need for businesses and governments to effectively harness this talent pool will only grow.

5.4. Limitations

5.4.1. Stakeholder Scope

This study focused on the perspectives of young Europeans themselves, addressing the supply side of the problem, a methodological choice that nonetheless brought notable limitations. The

study did not capture how secondary stakeholders (outlined in Table 1) perceive military service. For example, a hiring manager may assess a candidate's military experience very differently from how that candidate understands the value that it brings. Moreover, different military institutions may have different goals for civic and professional outcomes than initially understood. Without these perspectives, this study can only speak confidently to the motivations of primary stakeholders. The study cannot confirm how that motivation translates into tangible organisational outcomes or whether the civic outcomes participants described were deliberately designed into service programmes at all.

5.4.2. Sample Composition

The sample of 13 participants, while sufficient for qualitative depth, does limit the transferability of these findings. Thirteen interviews cannot support universal claims in a representative way, and this should be considered when drawing any conclusions. Another issue is the gender imbalance, with twelve male and just one female participant interviewed. While females still make up a smaller proportion of those who undertake military service, the nuances of how service shapes motivation and social impact among women may differ considerably from the male experience. The final problem with the sample is that it covers eleven countries and does not provide balanced regional coverage. Perspectives from the Iberian Peninsula and Eastern Europe were not explored, to name just a few regions. These combined gaps in sample composition limit how broadly the findings can be applied.

5.4.3. Social Desirability Bias

Podsakoff et al. (2003) identify social desirability bias as the tendency for participants to respond in ways they believe are socially acceptable rather than ways that accurately reflect their true attitudes and feelings. This is a concern here, as participants knew the study's aims before answering questions. Some may have presented themselves as more collectively oriented and purpose-driven than their everyday professional reality reflects, just to look good. Simply expressing support for social impact costs nothing. Whether that view is genuine and shapes career decisions is harder to verify and sits beyond what this study can confirm. This could have been mitigated by surveying colleagues of those interviewed to assess whether their secondary perspective of how their military-experienced colleagues differ.

5.4.4. Cross-Sectional Design

This study captures motivations at a single point in time. Professional values and priorities are not static. A participant who expressed a desire to have a social impact at twenty-five may hold

different views at thirty-five, due to financial responsibilities and family priorities, for example. A longitudinal design that follows participants over time could confirm whether the motivational profiles identified here persist or evolve throughout a career. This is a meaningful constraint. The findings of this study are best understood as a snapshot of how young Europeans feel about work and social impact now, rather than a definitive account of how service shapes motivation over a lifetime.

5.4.5. Rapidly Changing European Landscape

European military service policy is changing rapidly. Germany was classified as Category 1 in this study as its newly reintroduced voluntary programme had not yet run a single cohort at the time of writing, meaning there was simply no one to interview. Portugal, the country in which this study was conducted, is also actively reassessing its own model. These are not isolated cases. Writing about this topic presents an inherent challenge, as the landscape shifts faster than research can keep pace with. The three-category framework used here is an intentional simplification of a genuinely complex and constantly evolving reality in Europe. It should be treated as a working classification rather than one set in stone.

5.5. Future Research

This study examined the supply side of the research question, capturing how military service shapes the professional motivations of young Europeans themselves. The demand side remains entirely unexplored. Future research should address this directly. Interviewing hiring managers, HR directors, and organisational leaders across Europe would reveal whether the civic duty orientation, professional resilience and collective values identified in this study are recognised and valued by employers. Such research would also shed light on whether organisations are actively adapting their practices to account for the growing pool of service-experienced candidates. From their perspective, what unique skills and capacities do served individuals bring, and how can organisations utilise this effectively?

A second direction of research concerns the long-term consistency of the motivational profiles identified here. This study captured attitudes at a single point in time. A longitudinal study following the same or similar participants over many years would reveal whether the civic duty orientation and collective values developed through service, amongst other skills, persist as careers progress. It is plausible that participants gradually give way to more individually driven priorities, as financial pressures and professional realities hit them. If the study's findings were repeated long-term, it would considerably strengthen the argument made here. It would also

provide organisations with a more complete picture of the long-term value of hiring service-experienced professionals.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to answer the research question: How does military service experience shape work motivations related to social impact among young European professionals? The answer is not straightforward, but a pattern did emerge. Service does not exactly shape motivation; it rather reframes how motivation for socially meaningful work is viewed. Served participants approached social impact as a collective obligation rooted in shared civic experience. Never-served participants approached the same motivation as a matter of personal fulfilment and individual preference. This distinction is the central contribution of this study.

The findings that led to this conclusion were originally grouped into four aggregate dimensions. Firstly, that service functions as a professional development accelerator, producing resilience, discipline and a tolerance for demanding environments that non-served peers did not demonstrate. Secondly, those who complete military service tend to display more collectivism than their never-served peers. Thirdly, it broadens social awareness and cohesion through direct exposure to societal diversity and civic responsibility. Finally, and most importantly, it reframed how participants understood the purpose of socially meaningful work. Together, these transformations produce a motivational profile distinctly oriented toward work that carries meaning beyond individual gain. These findings are not entirely conclusive, as one mandatory service participant expressed motivations far closer to the never-served group than to his served peers. Moreover, only thirteen interviews were conducted, which can not encapsulate all European views entirely. Service can therefore be thought of as creating the conditions for this shift, but it does not guarantee it. Individual disposition, national culture, role type and service duration all moderate the outcome.

Military service is changing Europe. Slowly, unevenly, and not without controversy. As European nations reintroduce, expand and redesign national service programmes, the question of what service does to those who complete it matters. For organisations, it matters because this cohort brings a growing and distinct motivational profile that modern recruitment and management practices are poorly equipped to recognise and nurture. For policymakers and military institutions, it matters because the wider benefits of service are too valuable not to be communicated effectively, and military service is often undersold to young people.

The world is changing fast. If the trends shaping Europe in 2026 continue, this study's findings will matter more, not less, as the number of young Europeans completing military service and entering the workforce grows exponentially.

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8. Appendix

8.1. Semi-Structured Interview Guide

"How does military service experience shape work motivations related to social impact among young European professionals?"

Preamble (all scripts)

Thank you for agreeing to take part. This interview is for a master’s thesis exploring how military service shapes motivations for work and career choices among young Europeans. It will take 30 minutes maximum. Your responses will be used for research purposes only.

Groups 1–3: Young Professionals (aged 21–31)

Group 1 — Never Served (e.g. UK, Spain, Italy) | Group 2 — Mandatory Service (e.g. Finland, Switzerland, Austria) | Group 3 — ‘Optional’ Service (e.g. Norway and Sweden)

Background Questions — all three groups

Question	Why Relevant	Source
What is your age, nationality, and highest level of education?	Sets the demographic baseline for cross-group comparison	Qualitative research design
What is your current occupation?	Establishes the professional context for interpreting all subsequent responses	Qualitative research design

Group-Specific Questions — Mandatory Service only

Question	Why Relevant	Source
Which country and branch did you serve in, for how long, and what was your general role?	Captures service context needed to interpret all subsequent answers and compare across groups	Background
Do you feel employers genuinely value your military service and if so, how is that reflected in practice?	Explores whether organisations recognise and utilise military experience effectively addresses the gap between public praise and concrete integration	Becker et al. (2023)

Group-Specific Questions — Optional Service only

Question	Why Relevant	Source
Which country and branch did you serve in, for how long, and what was your general role?	Captures service context needed to interpret all subsequent answers and compare across groups	Background
What motivated you to put yourself forward for military service?	The choice to serve is itself a motivational data point surfaces whether esteem, duty, or self-actualisation drove the decision	Maslow (1943); Deci & Ryan (1985)

Question	Why Relevant	Source
Do you feel employers genuinely value your military service and if so, how is that reflected in practice?	Explores whether organisations recognise and utilise military experience effectively addresses the gap between public praise and concrete integration	Becker et al. (2023)

Core Questions — all three groups

Question	Why Relevant	Source
What motivates you most in your day-to-day work? <i>Optional prompt (served groups): Has that changed since your service?</i>	Identifies key motivation drivers e.g. belonging, esteem, purpose without leading the participant	Maslow (1943)
Do you prefer a structured work environment or one with more autonomy? <i>Optional prompt (served groups): Did the military shape that preference?</i>	Explores preference for structure vs autonomy central to Theory X/Y	McGregor & Cutcher-Gershenfeld (1960)
What skills or strengths have most shaped your career so far? <i>Optional prompt (served groups): Were any of those developed during your service?</i>	Targets SDT's competence need as a driver of sustained motivation and career direction	Deci & Ryan (1985);

Question	Why Relevant	Source
How important is it to you that your work has a broader social purpose? <i>Optional prompt (served groups): Did your service shape that view?</i>	Directly operationalises the social impact dimension of the research question	Clegg et al. (2021); Bove et al. (2024)
Would you actively seek to work for a company with a social impact, not necessarily an NGO and why? <i>Optional prompt (served groups): Do you think your service influenced that preference?</i>	Tests whether social impact orientation translates into concrete organisational preference key link between motivation and career choice	Morris & Hanna (2023); Peat et al. (2025)
What kind of role, company, and industry do you see yourself in long-term? <i>Optional prompt (served groups): Has service influenced that direction, e.g. NGO, public sector, mission-driven company, specific industry?</i>	Captures career choice as the dependent variable e.g. whether participants are drawn to socially impactful roles, companies or sectors	Morris & Hanna (2023)
When considering a new job, beyond salary, what matters most to you? <i>Optional prompt (served groups): Has your service shaped what you look for?</i>	Surfaces concrete organisational and role preferences, links motivational drivers to actual career decision-making behaviour	Clegg et al. (2021); Deci & Ryan (1985)
Have your work motivations changed since starting your career? If so, how? <i>Optional prompt (served groups): Do you think service played a role in that shift?</i>	Allows all groups to reflect on motivational change, helps isolate whether shifts are tied to service or broader trends	Deci & Ryan (1985); Teachman &

Question	Why Relevant	Source
		Tedrow (2016)
Do you think companies have a responsibility beyond profit to perhaps their employees, communities, or society? <i>Optional prompt (served groups): Has your service shaped that view?</i>	Probes CSR orientation and how personal background shapes expectations of organisations	Clegg et al. (2021); Peat et al. (2025)
Chance to ask about final reflections	Standard reflection	N/A

8.2. Gioia Methodology Process

8.2.1 Stage 1: First-Order Concepts

First step: reading all 13 transcripts and capturing concepts in the participants' own words. No interpretation was applied at this stage. The goal was simply to identify what participants said and label it. The table below shows a selection of first-order concepts drawn from across all three participant groups. Some relate directly to the research question. Others emerged from the data more generally, illustrating the breadth of the initial coding process.

Participant Quote	First-Order Concept	Participant	Group
"Just do your job, man"	Professional durability under pressure	P6	Optional
"You learn that you can survive through hard things"	Resilience as lasting personal trait	P13	Mandatory
"I absolutely hate working in a void"	Intolerance of ambiguity; need for task clarity	P13	Mandatory
"Structured but idea meritocratic"	Preference for structure with merit-based progression	P13	Mandatory
"If it wasn't for military service I would be more individualistic"	Self-acknowledged shift from individual to collective mindset	P12	Mandatory
"The first time I actually had to use Excel professionally was in the military"	Service as site of practical professional skill development	P12	Mandatory
"In Switzerland we are a very individualist society... in the military it's about the collective"	Military as counterforce to dominant cultural individualism	P11	Mandatory
"feeling of making a difference"	Social role military plays in CH	P11	Mandatory
"A brain surgeon and a gardener went to the same place, that levels out the society"	Military as social equaliser across class and education	P13	Mandatory

"I was starting to like it as a paramedic, then I decided that's what I want to do"	Service role directly shaping career direction	P9	Mandatory
"We were singing Estonian songs every day, some patriotic thing"	National identity and patriotism reinforced through service	P9	Mandatory
"I used the army background for the whole interview and I think that got me the job"	Military background as competitive professional advantage	P6	Optional
"You're never alone on a task"	Collective working as structural reality of service	P6	Optional
"I don't care about what other people think about me, I'm just doing my thing"	Psychological independence from social judgment	P6	Optional
"It was never the money that was driving you, it was always like learning"	Shift from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation attributed to service	P6	Optional
"I wanted to do it to do my part, to be part of something larger" "take ownership"	Civic purpose as motivation for voluntary service. Be part of something larger	P5	Optional
"I would not know that I wanted to be a leader before I was in the military"	Service as site of leadership identity discovery	P8	Optional
"I was a bit tired of all the school, I needed to get out"	Service chosen as break from academic routine	P8	Optional
"I would love to make a difference, to feel like I make a difference for others"	Social impact framed as civic and collective obligation	P8	Optional
"I wouldn't want to be sort of taking orders, autonomy and agency is important"	Autonomy as default expectation from the outset	P4	Never Served

"To do good, to be useful"	Social impact framed through personal satisfaction	P4	Never Served
"There's a lot more to life than work "	Work-life balance as primary professional driver	P4	Never Served
"Finding something I enjoy"	Personal enjoyment as central motivational criterion	P2	Never Served
"My motivation is more intrinsic now"	Shift toward intrinsic motivation over time; not attributed to service	P2	Never Served
"When I have too much autonomy I kind of feel a bit lost"	Discomfort with excess autonomy; but no structural formation to draw on	P3	Never Served
"Having great and talented colleagues who are eager to work with me"	Colleague quality as individual motivational criterion	P1	Never Served

8.2.2. Stage 2: Second-Order Themes

Once lots of first-order concepts had been identified across all 13 transcripts, patterns were seen more easily. Concepts were grouped into broader second-order themes using theoretical language. This is where the analysis moves from the participants' framing to the researcher's interpretation. After a lot of time and deliberation, 11 themes were identified through this process of constant comparison across all three participant groups.

Second-Order Theme	First-Order Concepts Feeding into This Theme	Participants
Resilience and psychological durability as professional competency	"Survive through hard things" (P13), "Just do your job, man" (P6), "Discipline, organisation and resilience spill over into civil life" (P10), "More consistent and disciplined in how I approach work" (P7)	P6, P7, P10, P13 (all served)
Military experience as professional currency	"Used army background for whole interview and got the job" (P6), "High percentage of my managers did reserve officer school" (P13), "Back in the day it was like an MBA , a real career booster" (P11)	P6, P11, P13
Shift from individual to collective professional orientation	"Would be more individualistic without service" (P12), "It's about the collective, it's about team" (P11), "You don't want to disappoint anyone" (P8), "Never alone on a task" (P6)	P6, P8, P11, P12
Military service as social equaliser	"Brain surgeon and gardener went to the same place" (P13), "People from all different backgrounds and from day one collaborates" (P12), "14 men from different cantons and different social backgrounds" (P11)	P11, P12, P13

Service as direct civic contribution beyond defence	"Trained to help in hospitals during COVID" (P11), "Was starting to like it as paramedic, decided that's what I want to do" (P9), "Military service is basically service for the people" (P10)	P9, P10, P11
Social impact framed as civic duty, among served group	"Make a difference for others" (P8), "Have a positive impact on community and people" (P5), "Seeing it's valuable to society keeps me motivated" (P9), "Hard to work for anti-social companies like Big Tobacco" (P13)	P5, P8, P9, P13
Social impact framed as personal fulfilment, among never-served group	"Want to feel I've done something positive in my life" (P2), "To do good, to be useful" (P4), "Not actively looking for it" (P1), "If I feel like I'm doing something good for society" (P2)	P1, P2, P4
Structural work preferences shaped by service	"Structured but idea meritocratic" (P13), "Earned autonomy progressively" (P5, P6), "Direction without micromanagement" (multiple served), "Flexible time and working from home" (P4)	Served vs never-served contrast
Autonomy as default expectation, among never-served group	"Autonomy and agency is important" (P4), "I wouldn't want to be sort of taking orders" (P4), "When I have too much autonomy" (P3)	P3, P4
Shift from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation	"Never the money, always like learning" (P6), "Motivation from success has mostly faded" (P2), "Now thinking of the learning part more than money" (P6), "Continuous learning mostly describes my highest motivation" (P12)	P2, P6, P12
Career direction shaped by service	"Decided to become a paramedic through service" (P9), "Did not know I wanted to	P8, P9

be a leader before the military" (P8),
"Service gave me a sense of where I
wanted to go" (P9)

8.2.3. Stage 3: Aggregate Dimensions

The final stage involved grouping the second-order themes into four overarching aggregate dimensions. They capture the most consistent and analytically significant patterns across all three participant groups. The never-served group provided a comparative baseline throughout, which sharpened the distinctions between groups at this stage.

Aggregate Dimension	Second-Order Themes Feeding into This Dimension	Key Participants
Dimension 1 - Military Service as a Professional Development Accelerator	Resilience and psychological durability as professional competency Military experience as professional currency Structural work preferences shaped by service Shift from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation (served group)	P6 (Optional) P7 (Optional) P10 (Mandatory) P13 (Mandatory) Contrast: P3, P4 (Never Served)
Dimension 2 - From Self to Team: Service Reorients Professional Values	Shift from individual to collective professional orientation. Autonomy as default expectation (never-served contrast). Civic purpose as motivation for service psychological independence from social judgment	P5, P6, P8 (Optional) P11, P12 (Mandatory) Contrast: P2, P3, P4 (Never Served)
Dimension 3 - Beyond Defence: Service as a Catalyst for Social Awareness	Military service as social equaliser. Service as direct civic contribution beyond defence. Career direction shaped by service National identity reinforced through service	P9, P10 (Mandatory) P11, P12, P13 (Mandatory) Contrast: P1 (Never Served)
Dimension 4 - Duty or Desire: How Service Reframes Social Impact Motivation	Social impact framed as civic duty among served group social impact framed as personal fulfilment, never-served group Service as professional boundary (rejecting anti-social employers) Work-life balance as primary driver (never-served contrast)	P5, P8, P9, P13 (Served) Contrast: P1, P2, P4 (Never Served)