Conference Paper

Finding Community Online as a Military Partner

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Abstract

This paper investigates the different ways in which Australian Defence Force (ADF) partners use informal Facebook groups to navigate the challenges of military life. These private groups have grown exponentially with the introduction of Web 2.0 technologies allowing ADF partners to share information, seek support and navigate military life away from official support systems. This paper also discusses the types of ways partners form community and the opportunities and potential risk involved in disclosure of sensitive information. A recent Defence families survey indicated that ADF partners see children's education, quality and location of housing and partner employment as their most important concerns and will go online to seek information from other partners when issues arise. There are a range of opportunities for official support channels to harness the power of these partner networks to educate and support military families.

Keywords

MilitaryLife MilitarySpouse MilSpouse DefenceFamilies ADFPartners

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People who begin a relationship with someone who works in the military suddenly enters a world quite unlike any they have previously known. While the serving military member has an established workplace, connections and community, often the civilian ADF partner has to establish his or her own network while frequently moving around locations following the serving member's military posting orders. The ADF partner needs to learn how to navigate

the various contributors in the Defence community space, get used to their own company due to frequent serving member absences, change jobs often, have plans interrupted and possibly learn how to manage extended periods of solo parenting. In recent years the formation of online ADF partner communities has grown exponentially. This paper will examine the way informal Facebook groups provide military partners with an invaluable online community that allows them to connect with others, share information about the unique nature of military life, and learn about official support mechanisms.

The 2019 Defence Census (Australian Department of Defence, 2020) identified that there are 58 476 permanent full time ADF members and 66% of ADF members had partners. Eighty percent of full-time members are male. According to recent ADF Families Research (Tan, 2020, p. 7) 92% of those that responded had civilian partners who were female. This research also identified that the most important considerations for ADF families are children's education, quality and location of housing and ADF partner employment. Finding a supportive community is crucial for military families in order to be able to manage the unique challenges that service life presents. Prior to the introduction of the internet and the ability to share and form online communities, military families would meet in person on bases. Often military provided houses were located in close proximity to other military housing, and organised events were held for families on bases, particularly for those new to the location. As the internet and associated Web 2.0 technologies grew so did the participation in virtual community networking for military families. These interactions comply with the definition of virtual community suggested by Chiu, Hsu and Wang (2006) 'Virtual communities are online social networks in which people with common interests, goals, or practices interact to share information and knowledge, and engage in social interactions.' (Chiu, Military partners form online communities to ask for advice, seek support and engage with others in similar situations.

These online communities help to bridge geographical challenges and allow ADF partners to connect with others across Australia, not just in their local community. The formation of private Facebook groups for ADF partners continues to grow as the needs arise. Several groups for partners in Australia have several thousand members, while smaller local groups have also formed to find connections in the geographical posting locations such as

Townsville Defence Partners or by services such as Royal Australian Navy Partners. When an ADF partner is moving to a new location, they will often seek advice as to what the new Facebook group is called in that location. These groups are moderated by ADF partners. Moderation styles are different depending on the group type. In these types of groups, the most common questions tend to centre around things like childcare and schooling recommendations, looking for medical practitioners, or organising in person meet ups in the local area. There has also been an increased level of partners sharing their own businesses in the groups as military families love to support other military and veteran owned businesses. More niche national groups such as Defence Families Plant Lovers, Australian Defence Pet Sitting, Careers for Defence Partners have also been formed from a desire from military partners with a common focus to connect with others from across Australia for that specific purpose. Burnett, (2000) describes virtual communities as not only a place for social settings but as 'information neighbourhoods' where participants can come to the community knowing others share similar experiences, where they can ask questions, expect answers and exchange information.

Wellbeing and mental health in the military space is of the utmost importance with the suicide rates of ADF members medically discharging being far higher than that of the general population (Australian Institute Health and Welfare, 2020). With this in mind, mental health of ADF partners and children is also of concern. Often it is the partner of the serving member that will notice the decline of mental health in the serving member and sometimes it can affect the partner and children as well. (Evans, Romaniuk, & Theal, 2021) Deployments and long absences from home of the serving member can leave the ADF partner feeling vulnerable and isolated, and it is vitally important that they are given support and provided with coping strategies if required. ADF partners often reach out for help and support in the Facebook groups from other partners, with others sharing their own experiences and offering advice on what works for them. Rea, Behnke, Huff, & Allen, (2015) discussed the importance that social media plays for military partners to connect with other partners particularly when the member is deployed, for personal insight, information and to gain comfort in knowing there were others that had experienced the same feelings. The military can place added strain on relationships and it's not uncommon for ADF partners to reach out in the Facebook groups wanting to know what is normal and what's not,

especially when the member may have returned from a deployment (Nichols et al., 2015). There is a potential opportunity here to create social media content on healthy relationships that could be shared into the Facebook groups and encourage ADF partners to seek additional support for themselves.

ADF partner employment is also an area of concern for ADF partners who move regularly with their military member and are frequently changing jobs. Unemployment and underemployment are often higher than in the civilian population (McCue, 2017). This can have a profound effect on the partner's financial and emotional wellbeing. Out of a need for community the unofficial Facebook group, Careers for Defence Partners was created by an ADF partner to specifically look at employment in the military partner space. Gee, Jones, & Burke, (2017) suggest that over 50% of jobs are sourced through a 'social tie'. The Careers for Defence Partners group has grown to over 2000 members who share online jobs advertisement links, training opportunities and advice for those looking for work. Some members of the page work in the recruitment sector or career development space themselves and will offer their own professional advice to other partners looking for work. Often links to official ADF partners employment support will be added in the group such as the Partner Employment Assistance Program (PEAP) offered by Defence to partners to help support employment prospects. The Facebook page of Defence Families of Australia (DFA), the independent advocacy body for current ADF families, indicates that the job posts that are shared to Facebook groups consistently receive a strong reach of numbers. This social network information sharing in a Facebook group has become invaluable to the ADF partner employment community.

Virtual communities are often considered places where alternative information is sourced and shared, compared with those of official channels. (Zha, Zhang, Yan, & Zha, 2015) Military virtual communities are no different. ADF partners in Facebook groups like to offer advice on anything from housing entitlements and policy, ways to cope with deployments to finding elusive phone numbers for duty officers on bases. With any online community there is always an element of risk with regards to the information being shared. In the military community this risk is known as operational security (OPSEC). This would include things like date and locations of deployments and other classified information. ADF members are well

versed on what to say and what not to say online with recent media reports advising members to ensure they obey the 'Defence Media and Communication Policy' (Greene & Oakes, 2020). ADF partners however are under no such guidelines and often left to work it out for themselves. Johnson, Lawson, & Ames, (2018) identified that partners do not currently receive any official guidance from Defence about what they can and can't post online and that it is largely left to the ADF member to advise or for the moderators of the Facebook groups to control the dialogue. DFA, published a blog post (Defence Families of Australia, 2020) on OPSEC and shared this to social media channels in an effort to inform and educate partners about what they can disclose online. Johnson et al., (2018) also identified that ADF partners have a deep sense of ensuring their ADF members remain safe and are committed to being safe online. There is opportunity here to educate partners to ensure OPSEC is adhered to. The moderators and groups do tend to self moderate posts that don't adhere to perceived guidelines and posters will be pulled up if they overstep the boundaries. The official support channels such as Defence Community Organisation (DCO) could seek to harness the power of the unofficial Facebook ADF partner groups to provide such support to ADF partners. This could be done by creating engaging content on official social media pages that can then be shared into Facebook groups by ADF partners who work in such organisations. This will ensure accuracy of knowledge sharing within those communities. This is especially important for new ADF partners that may be experiencing a deployment of their service member for the first time. This type of information sharing does not have to be limited to OPSEC but could include mental health directives and ADF partner employment information.

This paper has discussed the number of ways ADF partners join online communities with the increased use of Web 2.0 technologies such as Facebook groups. There are a number of specific 'information neighbourhoods' that form when the particular need arises within the ADF partner community. ADF partners engage with each other to seek support for themselves, offer advice to others and learn about the intricacies of military life from other partners. There are some risks associated with sharing information online with information pertaining to OPSEC inadvertently being shared online. There are opportunities to educate ADF partners on what they can and can't say online in relation to military security. ADF partners also seek support for employment and in managing mental health for themselves

and their ADF members. There is a large amount of trust placed in these groups through knowledge sharing and disclosure, and there are opportunities for official Defence support channels to create engaging educational content that could be shared via official social media channels and then by ADF partners who work within the official organisations across to the unofficial networks.

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