

# Military Veterans' Transferrable Skills: An HRD Practitioner Dilemma

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## Abstract

### The Problem.

Military veterans face a number of employment challenges as they transition from military service to civilian employment. Although the American workforce has become much more diverse, there continues to be a lack of understanding and misperceptions about veterans' skillsets and military experiences which inhibits successful employment after military service. Veterans are a source of talent for civilian employers as they bring distinctive capabilities and valuable skills developed through real-world, high-pressure experience, but some human resource development (HRD) practitioners may not be aware of the vast array of skills, training, and knowledge that veterans bring to the civilian workforce in addition to supervisory and management skills acquired during their time in the armed forces. Given the civilian public's general lack of knowledge about military experience, HRD practitioners, in particular, may be less able to effectively evaluate and integrate veterans' military experiences, skills, and capabilities in the civilian employment sector. These misunderstandings are contributing factors impacting veterans' ability to transfer their skills from military to business cultures.

### The Solution.

It is imperative that HRD practitioners understand the potentially strong contributions and societal misperceptions regarding the business value of military veterans' skills and experiences. This article will explore distinctive capabilities of veterans that make them assets in the civilian workforce as well as some potential concerns and highlight HRD's role in recognizing and facilitating the development of veteran hiring and retention initiatives in civilian employment. Educating HRD professionals about how to integrate military veterans' skills, knowledge, and abilities in business cultures and

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mitigate concerns is vital to promote veterans' contributions to civilian organizations and is necessary for effective hiring and talent development.

### **The Stakeholders.**

Veterans, HRD professionals, scholars, practitioners, and policy makers interested in the HRD field, private sector, federal, nonfederal public sector, and U.S. Office of Personnel Management.

### **Keywords**

human resource development, military veterans, skills

As America draws down from more than a decade of military conflicts, the armed forces are expected to shed nearly 250,000 service members per year over the next 5 years (Deployment Health Clinic Center, 2011). Service members' transition out of the military will lead to their return to the civilian sector due to the end of their contracted service or through forced reduction of the services. As military veterans move into the civilian employment sector, there must be a focus on efforts to educate potential employers about veteran skillsets.

Unfortunately, the transition to civilian life is not always smooth for veterans as many fight battles against the stigmas that exist among some civilians about those who served in the military (Prudential Financial Inc., 2012). These misperceptions include beliefs that veterans are too regimented, inflexible, and unable to adapt to civilian work situations. In this article, we will identify the challenges that veterans face in the transition to civilian employment and demonstrate that they can be valuable assets to civilian organizations. Veterans are not asking for a handout but, rather, seek a fair evaluation of their skills and experience so that the transition to civilian life is coupled with a welcome to the civilian employment sector.

One of the significant challenges for military veterans is often the inability to translate their military skills to a civilian career following military service. In 2014, Minnis found that veterans had significant challenge articulating their skills gained and honed in military service to the civilian employers with whom they were seeking work. The veterans studied had little understanding how to translate the skills from their military work and tended to focus on their technical skills, which were not applicable to the civilian work they were seeking (Minnis, 2014).

Similarly, in their ongoing public policy research, the RAND Corporation (2015) has found that employers have a difficult time understanding how to translate veterans' military skills in a way that can be applicable and contributory in business. Beginning in 2010, the Society of Human Resource Managers (SHRM), Prudential, Monster, the RAND Corporation, the Center for New American Security (CNAS), and Pew Research, to name a few, all identified this gap in translating military skills to post-military service careers as either the number one or number two issue in effective military career transition. Indeed, effective skills translation is second only to the inability, both real and perceived, of military veterans to integrate effectively and quickly into a new corporate culture (RAND Corporation, 2015).

## **Understanding Military Skills**

Some of the difficulty military veterans have in translating their skills and experiences come from the difference between military and civilian work. Some of the military jobs, such as computer technicians, photographers, and medical laboratory technician, have similar technical skills to civilian positions, therefore, making the transition to, or back to, civilian careers somewhat easier. However, some military work is not comparable with that within civilian organizations, causing difficulty for those attempting to transition (Minnis, 2014). Enlisted, noncommissioned, service members are assigned to, or selected for, their military occupation specialty field of work based on testing and aptitudes. As Dillon (2007) states, “the military trains you to be technically proficient in whatever occupation you are assigned to. But you’ll also learn teamwork, perseverance, leadership, and other skills widely applicable in the civilian workforce” (p. 8). Service members receive additional training after their basic training and go to job training “schools” before, between, or after deployments to learn new information and strategies to become more effective at their jobs.

The effective translation of military skills to business goes far beyond the technical job skills translators in use by a number of organizations assisting transitioning service members. Organizations offer a variety of services for military veterans to utilize such as the Military Skills Translator offered by Military.com (2016), the Military to Civilian Occupation Translator at CareerOneStop (U.S. Department of Labor, 2016a), and the Military Crosswalk Search used by O\*NET OnLine (U.S. Department of Labor, 2016b) are just a few examples available to military veterans, designed to help them identify appropriate civilian work based on their military jobs. Translators like these provide lists of opportunities based on the service members’ military job code.

What military translators lack is information for veterans about how to understand their nontechnical skills and identify employment opportunities in new career areas based on those skills. To be effective in the civilian employment marketplace, military veterans need to elucidate how the essence of skills such as planning, leadership, risk mitigation, decision-making, communicating, and military intelligence capabilities developed in the military can be utilized to make employers more successful. When the application of military frameworks to current business processes is done correctly, it creates a more viable, innovative, creative, and leadership-ready workforce that can more effectively respond and successfully adapt to today’s competitive, demanding, and ever-transforming business environment (B.D., 2014).

The inclination by some civilians to interpret military veterans’ training as combat-only skills is an incorrect, and unfortunate, but understandable mind-set. The American public has been exposed to little information about the technical capabilities and work of the U.S. armed forces due to the fewer number of Americans serving and the greatly increased security of information about technology and military work. Differentiation between the branches of the U.S. military also may not be well understood leading to lack of clarity and assumptions about the kind of work done by veterans. Indeed, there exist numerous duty specialties that translate well into multiple employment fields and are reflected in the different service branches, although the

nomenclature for identification among the services may vary. Given these challenges, it is not surprising that employers in the American marketplace may lack understanding of how returning veterans can be assets to their organizations.

Veterans' soft skills such as flexibility, decision making, leadership, persistence, and attention to detail often get overlooked when the focus is on their technical skills (RAND Corporation, 2015). Technical skillsets such as those used in technology, maintenance, engineering, and aircrew have application in the private sector while some military-specific skills can be much more difficult for employers to understand and appreciate (RAND Corporation, 2015). Adding an additional level of difficulty in transition is the confusion between jobs done by the different service branches and how those are translated to the civilian employment landscape. A main challenge for military veterans is how to identify the similarity of skills between the branches and translate those skills to a similar civilian position in industry.

## **Considerations for Human Resource Development (HRD)**

Due to the fluctuating economy, as well as global technology advancements, there are numerous changes occurring rapidly that impact the employment landscape in civilian organizations. HRD practitioners will need to continue developing their understanding of organizational effectiveness in onboarding and integrating employees making the military transition, as well as their overall positive influence on veterans in civilian businesses. Collecting rich data and utilizing metrics to determine effectiveness of identifying veterans' ability to contribute strongly with their skills from the beginning of their employment in civilian organizations creates an opportunity for HRD practitioners to show veterans' positive impact to the organization and contribute to HRD's role as a strategic partner to management (Javadin, 2008).

A major challenge facing managers is determining how best to use the skills, talents, and potential of diverse individuals and organizational innovations to accelerate business operations (Loughran, 2014). To achieve this goal, managers and employees must (a) use creativity, (b) enhance awareness, and (c) maximize potential of the business. As part of these actions, organizational leadership must also determine how to incorporate military veterans into the employee framework based on the ways in which their skills allow them to contribute. In other words, given awareness about the value veterans bring to organizations through their skills and capabilities, HRD professionals can be instrumental in informing managers about how to open up unique developmental opportunities and greater participation in decision making to veterans.

One of the most significant differences between the Global War on Terror (GWOT) and past wars is the recognition by both the military and civilians that post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is an illness diagnosed in around 20% of veterans (RAND Corporation, 2015). PTSD can develop after exposure to a terrifying event or ordeal in which grave physical harm occurred or was threatened and one continues to perceive potential for harm (Deployment Health Clinic Center, 2011; Collins et al., 2014). In addition, the signature injury of the GWOT is traumatic brain injury (TBI), which

occurs when a sudden trauma causes damage to the brain (National Institute of Health, 2016). Important to remember is that neither PTSD nor TBI are illnesses that impact only military veterans. Likewise, both are treatable and are recognized for accommodation under the Americans With Disabilities Act.

Acknowledging that PTSD, in particular, and TBI are concerns for some civilian employers, considering hiring veterans is crucial to the discussion about why veterans continue to find challenge when seeking employment following military service (Minnis, 2014). And while some situations exist in which veterans are less successful in acclimating to civilian employment cultures, most veterans do very well adjusting and are able to make significant contributions in the civilian workplace (Institute for Veterans and Military Families, 2012). It is the perceptions created by increased public recognition of PTSD that have fueled some concerns expressed by civilian employers about how they might expect veterans to respond to stressful situations (Minnis, 2014).

Employers can keep in mind a number of recommendations to help make the transition easier for veterans. For example, veterans are accustomed to the military environment, in which hierarchy and the chain of command are clearly understood. Some veterans have difficulties working in companies with less hierarchical structures or organizations that lack a clearly defined career path for them. Veterans may be reticent to seek opportunities outside their focal area of work, limiting their ability to cross-train and obtain new skills. Others may be reluctant to engage with more senior leaders within the civilian organization as this is unacceptable within military structure. We should consider how remaining detached from organizational leadership might negatively affect veterans' overall career advancement. Moreover, some veterans have difficulty adjusting to an environment with less day-to-day urgency, fewer responsibilities, and less authority than they experienced in the military. Ultimately, these impacts may coalesce leading to veterans feeling frustrated with their work in civilian organizations (Minnis, 2014; Thompson, 2014).

#### What Can HRD Do to Create Opportunities for Veterans?

HRD professionals in organizations can make concerted efforts to educate veterans on services available to help veterans acclimate and perform well within their organization and advise managers about how to effectively evaluate veterans' skills during hiring and throughout ongoing employment. The Society for Human Resource Management (2012) surveyed members and found that 46% of those surveyed believed PTSD and other mental health issues in veterans posed a hiring challenge. Just 22% said the same about military service-related physical disabilities. Employers' realistic understanding of mental health and related challenges of veterans is necessary in order that organizations be able to effectively evaluate veterans based on their actual skills and talents rather than perceived concerns (Institute for Veterans and Military Families, 2012). Employers should focus on developing awareness of mental health issues and provide supportive programs for all employees (B.D., 2014).

## **Implications and Conclusion**

For veterans to be hired and retained within organization systems that account for their military experience, employers must engage training on military cultural competency

with a particular focus on the transferrable skills veterans bring with them. HRD practitioners, hiring managers, and organizational leaders need to learn how to effectively evaluate military work experience and ask questions about veterans' service so they can get a more informed perspective of military veterans' knowledge, skills, and capabilities.

Employers might consider implementing affinity groups for veterans within their organizations as the bonds of military service extend beyond service branch once veterans enter civilian employment. In addition to supporting the transition into organizations, veterans believe that affinity groups could provide a valuable source of knowledge for other employees as well. Veterans from affinity groups could be called upon to contribute in hiring processes and training around veterans' issues in organizations.

Veterans also want to be challenged in their work, based on the skills they bring with them, and given responsibility for tasks that will allow them to make strong contributions to the organization. Because they may not ask for such responsibilities, organizational leaders should be mindful of veterans' skills and offer opportunities when they are available. When veterans see that their skills are valued in this way, they will begin to seek new challenges. Effective leadership, decision making, and communication are all part of a veteran's past military work, and these skills should be utilized to benefit the organization at all levels. Employers who make use of these skills will support the veterans' effective transition (Boutelle, 2016).

Gaining a better understanding of veterans' experiences overall should aid employers in supporting the veteran population through career transition and help them make the most of their knowledge, skills, and capabilities in their civilian employment. Understanding the cultural divide and career transition needs of veterans should also provide a point of reference for policy and practice development and help hiring managers engage in more effective hiring evaluations of military veterans (Minnis, 2016).

Military veterans have been and continue moving into the civilian employment sector seeking work in a variety of industries making use of broad skills gained in service to our country. Veterans come to employers with knowledge, skills, and capabilities greatly in need throughout organizations, but those assets are sometimes not understood or are overlooked due to concerns about perceived challenges based on preconceived ideas. The objectives of military veteran transition initiatives or programs should be to create knowledge about how to effectively understand the skills and experiences veterans bring to civilian employment and facilitate a smooth transition for military veterans into the civilian workforce (Minnis, 2014). Having gainful and meaningful work is a vital aspect of life for many adults. A job provides employees essential life benefits such as income to maintain security and independence, a purpose for getting up in the morning, social interaction with others, self-esteem for a job well done, and personal growth through achievement. Maintaining fairness in hiring practices may include consideration of the potential benefit of accommodations along with a different understanding of knowledge, skills, and abilities the veterans' service brings (B.D., 2014).

This article in no way suggests, or attempts, to profile veterans as unfit for employment, unstable, or dangerous to themselves or others. Rather, it seeks to articulate that

employers can greatly benefit from the experience, discipline, and capability that veterans can offer to civilian organizations. However, employers must be aware of the disconnect between position qualifications and veterans' abilities and challenges to positively impact and integrate within corporate business culture (Harrell & Berglass, 2014). By putting the focus of HRD practices within civilian organizations on the evaluation of veterans' knowledge, skills, and abilities gained through military service, managers can learn to more effectively evaluate, support, and retain military veteran talent within their organizations.

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