



## Veterans to workplace: Keys to successful transition

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of the current research effort was two-fold: (a) determine what behaviors successful veteran job candidates perform during the job application process that distinguish them from less successful ones, and (b) identify the behaviors of successfully employed veterans that distinguish them from those that are less successful or unable to maintain civilian employment. To address these issues, a research initiative was undertaken by the City of Clarksville, TN; Montgomery County, TN; the Tennessee Department of Labor; and the Tennessee Department of Veterans Services. Researchers conducted a qualitative study in the environs of Nashville, TN and Clarksville, TN, where Fort Campbell a United States Army installation, is located. Hiring managers, human resource directors, and veteran employees at 10 private sector companies and 10 public sector organizations in the region participated in focus groups. In addition, spouses of transitioning veterans participated in focus groups. The results of this investigation involving over 300 people are described. Implications for practice are discussed and future directions for research have been presented.

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**What is the public significance of this article?**—Some military veterans experience difficulties succeeding in the private sector upon transitioning from the military. In this study, employed military veterans and hiring managers describe key behaviors and attitudes that enable veterans to obtain good jobs and to advance in those jobs.

There are numerous reasons why hiring veterans can be advantageous to civilian organizations (Haynie, 2016; Institute for Veterans and Military Families, 2012). These include veterans' advanced leadership skills, cross-cultural experience, strong work ethic, and integrity (Groysberg et al., 2010; Harms et al., 2011; Stone et al., 2018). Nevertheless, it is evident that numerous veterans face difficulties transitioning from the military to the civilian workplace (Agovino, 2020; Parker et al., 2019), which in turn complicates reintegration into civilian society (Resnick et al., 2012; Wewiorski et al., 2018). Various reasons have been suggested. These include (1) possible mismatch between work requirements and acquired skills; (2) mistranslation of military skills in resumes and interviews; (3) negative stereotypes about veterans, such as poor anger management, violence proneness, and rigidity; and (4) problems adapting to civilian work culture while simultaneously attempting to adapt to civilian society and reintegrate into a family (Adler et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2017). The media has contributed to the negative stereotypes

about veterans (Hipes et al., 2015; Kleykamp & Hipes, 2015; Pirkis et al., 2006; Sieff, 2003) especially by exaggerating the incidence and typical severity of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

A study from the Center for a New American Society (Harrell & Berglass, 2012, p. 6) sampled individuals ranging from human resource officers to chief executive officers of several US companies. Both positive and negative characteristics were attributed to veterans by decision makers. Although companies reported that veterans bring leadership, teamwork skills, dependability, and discipline to the civilian workplace, "the majority of companies in this study, even those that proactively seek to hire veterans, also report challenges or risks in doing so."

Moreover, there is a gap between employers' perceptions of veterans' qualifications and the veterans' self-perceptions. For example, Edelman (2017) and Vitalo and Lesser (2017) report survey results stating that employers are skeptical about veterans' soft skills, particularly their ability to communicate. "When asked which skills are most important for any job candidate to possess, 'be an effective communicator' was employers' top response. However, just 19% of employers feel veterans possess strong communication skills, a contrast to the 64% of veterans who believe they are effective communicators . . . only 38% of employers believe the skills veterans

acquire in the military are easily transferable to the private sector, while 62% feel veterans need more education and training before being qualified for non-military roles.”

Many veterans struggle with integrating into the civilian workplace (Black & Papile, 2010; Gati et al., 2013). Research on the factors contributing to the successful integration of veterans into civilian work life is relatively sparse (Burnett-Zeigler et al., 2011; Elbogen et al., 2012; Gonzalez & Simpson, 2021; Horton et al., 2013). Based on the issues noted above, the goal of this research effort was two-fold:

- Identify the behaviors of successful veteran job candidates during the job application process, compared to those of less successful ones.
- Determine how successfully employed veterans behave in the workplace compared to those who are unable to maintain successful civilian employment.

To address these issues, we conducted a qualitative study in the environs of Nashville, TN and Clarksville, TN, where Fort Campbell, a United States Army installation, is located. More than 400 soldiers and officers stationed in Fort Campbell leave the military each month and attempt to enter the civilian work force in the surrounding area of Montgomery County. Some are better prepared to obtain a job than others. Of those hired, some are better prepared to adapt to and thrive in civilian work life. While some acclimate well, others may be challenged or run into conflict with their nonmilitary peers. However, what differentiates the more successful from the less successful is not clear. Nor is it clear if the differences reside in the individual's skills and temperament or in the preparation for their changed roles. To the extent that preparation is the key, it would be possible to instruct the veterans to be better positioned to obtain and advance in civilian jobs. There are certainly myriad factors, none of which is necessarily prevalent, that could contribute to lack of success. These would include deficiency of relevant skills, poorly crafted resumes, meager interviewing skills, employer biases against veterans, substance abuse, PTSD, and domestic problems (Black & Papile, 2010; Edelman, 2017; McAllister et al., 2015; Stone et al., 2018). While some of these issues may be resistant to short-term solutions, others may be addressed quickly through training materials and in-person group or individualized guidance.

## Method

This research project was initiated by the Department of Human Resources of the City of Clarksville, Tennessee, and was greatly aided by significant funding provided by

the Tennessee Department of Labor. The Tennessee Department of Veterans Services was another highly enthusiastic supporter of this research, and Workforce Essentials and Montgomery County (home of Clarksville) also provided financial support.

The goal was to interview and conduct focus groups at ten private sector companies in the general Clarksville and Nashville areas of Tennessee. A parallel set of focus groups were conducted with ten state governmental agencies in the area. One nonprofit organization, focused on veterans' affairs, was a last-minute substitute for the tenth private sector company. The goal was to conduct two ninety-minute focus groups at each company or public organization. The first focus group involved the hiring managers and human resources managers of the company or public organization, and the second focus group consisted of veterans who worked successfully for the company or public organization. “Success was defined as maintaining continuous employment with the organization or 2+ years. While each focus group followed a structured interview process, many sessions veered off into important and relevant issues. For a few of the organizations, the size, structure, or timing dictated that two focus groups be collapsed into one. Thus, a total of thirty-five focus groups were conducted with twenty work organizations. The names of the participating organizations are listed in Table 1. A total of 288 individuals participated in the focus groups. This included 124 hiring managers and human resource directors and 164 veterans employed by these organizations, numbers far exceeding what we had expected to achieve. It should be noted that because some of the hiring managers and human resource directors were also veterans, and because of the aforementioned collapsing of groups, it was not possible to categorize each focus group statement as having been made by a hiring manager versus veteran. For these reasons, we do not present distinct results for the managers versus veterans.

**Table 1.** Participating organizations.

PRIVATE/NONPROFIT	GOVERNMENT
Nissan	TN Dept of Human Resources
Caterpillar	City of Clarksville
Bridgestone	Montgomery County
Dollar General	TN Dept of Veterans Services
Trane	TN Dept of Children's Services
Akebono	TN Dept of Correction
CCA	Metro Nashville
Jenkins & Wynne	TN Safety and Homeland Security
Wounded Warrior Project	TN Dept of Economic and Community Development
Wyatt Johnson	TN National Guard

The original structured interview protocols provided the initial basis for categorizing the responses. As the focus groups and interviews were conducted, other themes and topics were brought to light and clearer categorizations emerged. The many statements and comments that were entered in the database were entered under one or more categories by research team members. The lead author then wove the statements into narrative form.

A parallel set of focus groups were conducted with the spouses of recently transitioned veterans. The goal was to better understand the transition from the perspective of the spouse and how successful families coped with stressors. Recruiting efforts included advertisements, flyers, e-mails, radio interviews, and word-of-mouth. For reasons that remain unclear and despite hundreds of veterans' spouses in the Clarksville area, recruiting was quite difficult. A total of six focus groups were conducted with spouses, with a total of 17 spouses participating (compared to a target of 24–40 participants). Despite the somewhat disappointing numbers, the participating spouses were extremely informative, and their responses appear toward the end of this report. The spouses' data was coded and analyzed separately from that of the hiring managers and veterans, and as described separately below.

## Results

### *Precursors to productive career decisions and job search*

Veterans in this study portrayed their job search as “soul crushing” and “a wake-up call.” Veterans who thought that they would be in high demand for significant, six-figure positions learned that they had to lower their expectations (Agovino, 2020). They expressed the wish that someone had provided them with a more realistic view of the competitive nature and significant challenges of the civilian job environment.

Veterans who had been military leaders found the transition most daunting, as they felt primed to take an immediate leadership role in the private sector. Often, succeeding in a civilian position required the ability to separate their identities from their previous ranks and status in the military. Conversely, statements by some civilian managers made it appear that they felt threatened by veterans whose leadership experience dwarfed their own.

For their part, the civilian managers professed a great deal of empathy for veterans and acknowledged that the veterans deserved their gratitude. Nevertheless, in the

current competitive work environment, the most important hiring considerations remain which skills and experience the transitioning veteran could bring to the company.

The factors that predisposed a veteran to approach job search, market research, and associated activities in a better fashion included:

### *Personal characteristics*

Some qualities were seen consistently as useful for productive job searches. These include:

- achievement orientation: intrinsic ambition and desire to succeed
- orientation to plan ahead
- persistence and ability to deal with rejection
- ability to interact well with others
- openness to networking and willingness to ask others for help
- empathy and humility
- valuing others and their culture (in this case, civilian workers and workplaces)
- ability to change identity from military to member of civilian society
- overcoming the military tendency to disguise or suppress emotions

### *Age and experience*

Length of time in the military could be a significant obstacle to successful transition for those who had been removed from the civilian sector for longer periods (Mael & Gingras, 2008). Those hiring managers who had negative impressions of veterans in their organizations mentioned age of the veterans as an obstacle.

### *Family background*

Hiring managers suggested that success in job search could also be related to upbringing and pre-military experiences. A veteran who grew up in a forward-looking family may have been actively encouraged to plan ahead. By contrast, the veteran who lacked role models (e.g., parents, siblings, coaches) with successful careers may have found it easier to stay focused on the moment and not plan for a post-military career. Some participants suggested that background is even more important than specific military experience in determining whether the veteran will take initiative.

### *MOS or branch*

Some military specialties require skills that are particularly relevant to civilian employers (Gonzalez & Simpson, 2021; Routon, 2014). These include: logistics, communications, maintenance, IT and cyber security,

intelligence and psychological operations, and accounting. Conversely, those coming from infantry, artillery, or other combat backgrounds needed to work harder to demonstrate the relevance of their experience. A study by McAllister et al. (2015) suggests that officers experience less stress than enlisted during the military to civilian workplace transition. They speculate that officers' greater financial and educational resources and greater managerial experience may help soften the transition.

### **Leader attitudes**

A positive attitude by one's military leaders to career exploration and preparation was perceived as beneficial; their openness to the soldier's efforts in that direction was also seen as valuable. However, veterans stated that some leaders implicitly discouraged focusing on anything but the current mission and military needs (Agovino, 2020).

### **Beginning the transition and job search process**

#### **Time frame**

Some participants said that at least six months are necessary to prepare for transition, even though the norm may be three months or less. Others said that at least eighteen months are needed for methodical transition. Others went further, urging that at every step along the way, one should bear in mind that military tenure will not last forever and that one should be preparing for eventual civilian life and work.

The following attitudes are considered either useful for transition or as obstacles to successful integration:

#### **Openness to networking**

Participants stressed the importance of learning how to network and becoming comfortable with networking (Yate, 2018). They urged soldiers to begin networking as soon as possible and to use social media in their fields of interest. They advocated meeting people through volunteering and using previously acquired social skills to develop relationships with people who could introduce them to others in the companies or fields they wished to pursue. Recent retirees and professors/students from the transitional period are also perceived as good sources of contacts.

Participants acknowledged that networking may not come easy to some. Some veterans perceived a stigma against networking with senior officers within the military and that it was viewed as "brown-nosing." As a result of this perception and lack of experience, networking may be distasteful to many. This bias needs to be discarded if misapplied to the civilian world of work. Some may

require training, advice, and even role playing to become comfortable with it. It was stressed by both hiring managers and veterans that while networking is a learnable skill, it is hard work and is not a sign of weakness.

#### **Openness to information seeking**

Job fairs are a useful way to learn about relatively large companies. However, many mid and small size companies will not be represented at job fairs. Military transition experts said it was responsibility of the transitioning soldier to inquire from contacts about such companies and learn as much as possible about the organizations prior to interviewing. In general, the veterans were urged by hiring managers to research the companies and departments to which they applied and to seek out members of that company. Because the civilian workplace may be comparatively unstructured, taking a course on adapting to change and working in such environments could be useful.

#### **Sense of entitlement**

Some participants noted that a subset of veterans exuded a sense of entitlement (Forsling, 2015). They conveyed the message that because of their service to the country, they deserved a job regardless of whether they were prepared or qualified. They also believed they deserved a salary commensurate with their pay while in the military. This attitude repelled civilian employers. As one hiring manager said: "Sometimes not even knowing what the position is – just 'I'm here, and I'm entitled to the interview.' They had the expectation that they were owed something – they had a rank – that they should be higher in the chain – they ask us 'why we didn't get hired? You HAVE to hire us!' [But] it's a career change, not a direct continuation."

Others displayed impatience and expected to be promoted more quickly than what the system could allow (Agovino, 2020). One hiring manager said that some veterans felt that if they served as supervisors for two years, they would automatically be promoted to manager. However, civilian hierarchies are not as neat and dependable as certain military promotions may be. It was felt that the veterans needed to accept the need to start at the bottom and acquire the skills needed for promotion.

#### **Realistic job search preview**

The participants felt that others shared the blame for this sense of entitlement. It was felt that society, in trying to compensate for the previous lack of attention to veterans' needs, has bent over backwards and broadcast the message that all veterans deserve jobs and preferential treatment. Laws within state or federal governments



may benefit veterans, but they can also reinforce this sense of entitlement. Within the military, the message received by the transitioning soldiers in some instances is that all veterans are more qualified and better leaders than equivalent civilians.

Certainly, some veterans were not getting the message that they had to compete against legitimate civilian applicants with more relevant experience. Veterans said they would have preferred to have been given a realistic assessment of how hard and how competitive transition might be, rather than being lulled into complacency or false hope, thereby making the transition even harder. They felt it was an injustice not to provide transitioning soldiers with a realistic view of what civilian employment will look like. They also felt that even their strengths could sometimes be drawbacks. As one said: “If you’re a senior NCO or officer . . . you have so much more leadership skill than current managers . . . [but] you’re considered a threat *because* of your leadership skills.” The participants urged the veterans to stay aware that they are engaging in a tough competition.

### **Resume and interview preparation**

It is crucial to demonstrate that one’s experience lines up with a job’s requirements, especially for those coming from combat arms. Applicants need to “civilianize” their resumes and use appropriate keywords. Veterans may find it difficult to articulate the skills’ relevance. They were advised not to oversell themselves. Too much military jargon in the resume or cover letter (Yate, 2018) tended to cast doubt on the applicant’s written communication skills. They were also advised to have a currently employed civilian critique their cover letters and resumes. Hiring managers noted that military resumes are often too long and improperly formatted and that many veterans are unaware that they need multiple tailored resumes for each type of job or position. They were also advised not to begin applications with reference to disabilities.

### **Preparing to be interviewed**

The managers reiterated the need to research companies that are good at hiring veterans or for which the veteran is preparing to interview. LinkedIn was mentioned frequently as a good source of information. In preparing for a specific job interview, one should learn thoroughly both the job requirements as well as the company’s policies. Interviewers can sense the prior preparation, and it marks the applicant as motivated and resourceful.

### **The interview**

Hiring managers said that interviews with veterans could sometimes be quite rigid and almost robotic. Despite being nervous, the veteran applicant needs to exude calm confidence (Yate, 2018). An important skill is being able to relate one’s own specific role in executing a task, as opposed to the military tendency to relate everything to group accomplishment. The goal here is not to take false credit for others’ accomplishments, but to explain one’s own necessary contribution better. Veterans should be prepared to answer why he/she is targeting a specific company. If the answer conveys passion for the company’s mission, it can set the applicant apart from others.

The desired persona on interviews is self-confident, yet humble, rather than overly assertive and aggressive. Hiring managers stated that while appearance (grooming, job-appropriate clothes) can sometimes be a problem, military applicants tend to be better dressed for interviews than their civilian counterparts. Once on the job, they are advised to dress comparably to fellow employees. It was believed by that some hiring managers have negative attitudes toward veteran applicants (especially those without military experience). There would be value in having these hiring managers learn from other managers what to expect from veteran applicants and if veterans are hired, how to best help them integrate into the organization to make their interactions as productive as possible.

### **Precursors to successful job performance**

Participants identified productive attitudes and steps that a veteran could take to improve the chances of succeeding once securing a job. These included the following:

#### **Patience and acceptance**

Participants stressed the need to be patient with the progress of one’s civilian career. Frustration with a first job that involves less pay and less responsibility should not spill over into complaining or sulking. The veterans were urged to be proactive in looking for opportunities within the organization. Veterans were encouraged to document everything they were accomplishing. Managers also stressed resiliency and optimism as key characteristics during the transition.

#### **Accepting loss of power**

This advice was directed primarily at veteran officers and senior NCOs. Moving from a position of significant power and authority to one with little or none may be demoralizing (Mael & Gingras, 2008). In the words of

one hiring manager, “Officers are used to giving orders and are out of place when they arrive in this setting.” The veteran may have to demonstrate great humility to accept what will hopefully be a temporary step backwards. Realistically, however, most civilian jobs will never compare to the scope of authority that mid-level officers and NCOs had in the military.

### **Adaptability**

Veterans were urged to become more adaptive and to accept change as the norm. This entailed shifting one’s identity from member of the military to full member of civilian society and one’s work organization. Numerous participants stressed the value of getting a college education; they felt that both hard and soft skills could be learned in the educational setting. They also believed that civilian employers put great emphasis on a college education, especially because it was more quantifiable than other skills. The veterans were also urged to take better advantage of the GI Bill.

### **All in**

Retirees who embraced the mind-set that they were embarking on a new career, rather than coming to work for short-term supplementation of their pensions, were more likely to succeed and be accepted in the workplace. Those simply wishing to augment their retirement funds were viewed as problematic or not taken as seriously.

### **Positive qualities veterans bring to the workplace**

Although broad generalizations do not apply to all veterans, both hiring managers and veterans in the workplace see incoming veterans as a group as having advantageous qualities. These include:

#### **Adaptability**

Veterans were perceived as more flexible and adaptable than their civilian counterparts. They were said to have a smaller learning curve and being easier to train. They were also viewed as moving through changes more quickly than civilians and as less resistant to change. The veterans were viewed as better able to multitask and prioritize among various work demands. In addition, being deployed one or more times increased adaptability to different cultures and environments. As one participating veteran said, “[Veterans] conform to the environment, whereas civilians want the environment to conform to them.” Veterans were also seen as having greater resiliency, being more self-reliant, and being better able to cope with constructive criticism. A related

perception is that veterans as more innovative and likely to bring an “outside the box” perspective. They were able to exhibit more confidence in ambiguous situations.

#### **Mission orientation**

Veterans were viewed as more likely to finish a job even if it meant working overtime. This was contrasted with the equivalent civilian who is viewed as carrying an “I’ll get to it when I can” and “punching the clock” mentality. Veterans have a greater sense of loyalty to the mission and a better definition of what it means to complete a task. One hiring manager said they exhibited a “mindset of public service, which is not teachable. There is an obvious passion to serve other people.”

#### **Discipline**

Veterans are viewed as highly disciplined, a quality that increases with length of service. This expresses itself in various ways: they are seen as better at structuring their work; in larger projects, they are better able to break the work down into smaller tasks that support the larger vision; and they can be depended on to attend work regularly. Veterans tend to be punctual and not to abuse sick leave privileges, if they take sick leave at all. They are also better at following instructions. When needing to be corrected, they need only to be told once and are less likely to get defensive. They are generally perceived as more mature than civilian counterparts.

#### **Work ethic**

Closely related to discipline is work ethic. Veterans are seen as having more intrinsic work motivation, and often seem to enjoy work more. Excluding older retirees, they are generally more open than others to working different shifts. They are viewed as continually seeking out challenges and ways to improve. They are also viewed as better at attending to details, and they are particularly adept at identifying small errors. They may be more stress tolerant and physically fit as a group, even after leaving the military.

They have also learned how to work as team members, despite occasional clashes of personalities. In the words of one veteran, “Civilians have a ‘me’ mentality – ex-military are looking more broadly at what we all are getting and how everyone benefits.” Consequently, they are more primed to embrace team commitment (Matthews et al., 2006).

#### **Accepting authority**

As an adjunct to work ethic and discipline, veterans seem more accepting of policies, protocol, and the legitimacy of authority. They are also perceived to be better than civilians at holding others accountable. Although they may seem to ask more than civilians why a certain

path was being chosen, it is more likely an attempt to gain understanding rather than a challenge of legitimacy or authority. These findings are consistent with previous research showing that veterans serving as employees and executives are perceived as more ethical and actually do act more ethically than their nonveteran counterparts (Benmelech & Frydman, 2015; Bouffard, 2003; Koch-Bayram & Wernicke, 2018; Law & Mills, 2017; Simpson & Sariol, 2019).

### **Decisiveness**

Soldiers learn to make life and death decisions in real time, and the military values decisiveness under tight time constraints. Military veterans focus on who is going to make the decision and how long it will take to be executed. This compares favorably to perceptions of the civilian (especially corporate and government) sector, in which the goal is often to avoid making an unpopular or criticized choice by opting to delay or not decide at all. This decisiveness of veterans (especially those who were leaders) is generally valued and in some fields (such as corrections) it is crucial.

### **Concerns regarding veterans entering the civilian workplace**

Hiring managers and veterans in the workplace perceived incoming veterans as potentially having tendencies that could set them back in the civilian world, including:

#### **Rigidity**

Ironically, despite praise of veterans for demonstrated adaptability, veterans were also seen as demonstrating various rigid and conformist tendencies. This included difficulty coping with unstructured environments, being uncomfortable with chaos or lack of order, and attempting to reduce ambiguous issues into black and white.

The veterans were also perceived as too wedded to chain of command and to standard operating procedures. This could express itself as unwillingness to challenge orders, hesitation to improvise or bend rules as needed, asking permission too much, and expecting others to abide by rules that should have allowed for exceptions.

Those who had served longest in the military were most likely to be seen as inflexible and have the hardest time adapting to civilian norms. Not all veterans could accept that they now had to request rather than order a subordinate to perform, and officers and senior NCOs often had the hardest time adjusting to not giving orders (Mael & Gingras, 2008).

### **Misguided overwork**

Here again, the work ethic and discipline that is so admired has a dark side. Some veterans needed to be reminded that they were no longer in life-and-death situations. They were urged to by the hiring managers to get a better sense of the rhythm of the workplace, to identify the urgency level of various work issues, and to calibrate their efforts and those of their subordinates appropriately.

### **Dismissive attitude**

Unlike previous generations, the modern veteran may be more likely to enter a workplace community without a shared military cultural identity (Castro & Kintzle, 2014; Garamone, 2019). Some veterans viewed their civilian coworkers as soft and lazy and were (perhaps overly) willing to share that assessment. The veterans' responses to this lackadaisical behavior could come across as dismissive or condescending. In general, the veterans were often viewed as blunter and more direct than the organizational norm. They may fail to grasp the importance of being diplomatic. Veterans also struggle with the relative blandness and nonurgency of civilian work and the civilian workplace. Many express a sense of identity loss upon returning to civilian life (Brunger et al., 2013). Even veterans of relatively unpopular wars such as America's involvement in Vietnam report that they found a sense of belonging, sacrifice, and purpose in war that was difficult to recapture in civilian life (Kimball, 1987; Mael & Ashforth, 2001). Veterans who are used to facing life and death issues may belittle their coworkers' work-related concerns as trivial.

Several veterans did not see the benefit of investing so much effort in workplace relationships. Similarly, they expressed disdain for the need to constantly greet people or inquire about their weekends. However, this stance may set them apart from coworkers. As one hiring manager said, "Some of them are very reserved in their communication skills . . . It's like they don't really know how to express themselves."

### **Too decisive**

The ability of veterans to be decisive is sometimes at odds with the civilian corporate culture they have entered. They do not understand why problems worthy of straightforward, right answers require another committee or task force or delaying for months to resolve the issue. Said one veteran, "It is frustrating to know that we may know the solution to a problem but are not in a position of power to do anything about it." This leads to impatience and frustration with coworkers, who they perceive as stalling on decisions just to avoid responsibility.

### **Harsh language**

Both male and female veterans described the need to reduce their use of vulgar language and to learn what was acceptable in that organization. For some, this required very deliberate self-control. They also had to learn what was or was not appropriate workplace conversation, such as which jokes were acceptable, and they had to do so despite viewing the new norms as “politically correct.”

### **Impatience**

As mentioned, some veterans expressed impatience with the pace of civilian promotions and their progression through the organization.

### **Those who the military failed to reach**

Several participants described a type of person who was “a different breed.” They failed to be acculturated by their military experience and did not develop a military work ethic or self-discipline. They were called, among other things, “Type Bs” or “dirt bag soldiers.” There were estimates by various participants (both veterans and managers) that 25–35% of younger personnel fit this profile.

These individuals were least likely to avail themselves of career preparatory services such as Soldier for Life. They were also least likely to display any forethought about their post-military careers. They were typically unsuccessful employees in the civilian world and tended to reflect poorly on veterans as a group and reinforce negative stereotypes. For example, veterans were appalled by Type Bs who would try to regale civilian coworkers with boastful stories about dead bodies. Moreover, a small number of these “Type B” soldiers developed or retained addiction problems during their military careers or continued their involvement in gang activity or petty crime. What to do with them or for them prior to sending them out to society is an ongoing concern.

### **Integration into the civilian workforce**

Previous research has shown that individual differences affect the ease of reintegration into civilian life and the civilian workplace. For example, in a 2019 Pew Research Center study, combat veterans were significantly more likely to say that their readjustment was difficult (46% compared to 18% of those without combat experience (Parker et al., 2019)). Those who were married while serving in combat missions experienced more difficulty readjusting than their single counterparts. Conversely,

military personnel involved in religious services at least once a week had a significantly better chance of adjusting easily to civilian life. On the other hand, variables such as race, ethnicity, age, having young children while serving, length of service and number of deployments were poor predictors of reintegration (Norwich, 2020).

Participants in this study had mixed views about how successfully or quickly veterans were integrating into their companies and organizations. Although few saw it as a chronic problem, a number identified specific difficulties in integrating as part of the transition process.

### **Social integration**

One issue was social integration. Some hiring managers felt that veterans held back socially. They were open to making acquaintances, but not friends. They were also less likely to attend company social events. It seemed to take some time before they were comfortable enough to share information about their personal lives with coworkers.

### **The world of workplace friendship**

Attitude was also important. Some veterans said openly that friendships were never that important to them, given their constant relocations, and that they were not interested in new friends. They had a hard time relating to the civilian penchant for sharing life information with coworkers. They found “touchy-feely stuff” laborious. Conversely, one veteran used the word “bland” to describe civilian relationships in comparison to more intense ones with fellow soldiers. In the words of one veteran, “People keep telling me to build relationships, but to what end? I’m not resisting, but to what end does this further our relationship? We have an objective, but you want me to nurture and coddle? I don’t know.”

### **Individual differences**

To a certain extent, ease of transition depended on the veteran’s personality. Said one manager, “[Successful ones] are able to speak comfortably without too much formality. They aren’t overly stiff or aggressive . . . They learn to be ‘social chameleons’ and adjust their behavior accordingly in order to connect with a person.” Officers often took longest to integrate. One officer described the shock of going from being “Major Smith” to now being called “Jeff” by the janitor. The participants said that “letting go” of one’s military status was an important aid to integration.



### ***Mentorship for veterans in the civilian workplace***

Most, if not all, participating organizations in this study did not have a formal program geared specifically to mentoring veterans. Informally, experienced veterans in some organizations reached out to new veteran hires and served as mentors. In other organizations, the veteran might be assigned a non-veteran mentor they could emulate based primarily on presumed personality or job match. Mentors provided guidance on topics such as span of control, networking, and situational leadership.

In most participating organizations, there is no formal tally of how many employees are veterans, and the distinction was downplayed. Some organizations have Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) dedicated to veterans, but without a focus on integrating new veterans. However, a few ERGs have discussed more actively dealing with transition issues. Some veterans said they had wished someone had reached out.

### ***Generational differences***

Many participants saw the millennial civilians in their work organizations as having quite different work styles and work ethics from those of veterans entering the organization. They felt that “baby boomers” and “Gen X” employees had a more comparable work ethic and were also more committed to staying with an employer for longer tenures. Some veterans considered efforts to convince younger employees to take ownership of their work to be a prime, albeit challenging part of their managerial work.

### ***The role of spouses***

#### ***From the veterans’ perspective***

Transition can be a difficult stage of life not only for the veteran but also for his/her spouse. A spouse can be either a tremendous source of support or a further cause of stress and self-doubt for the veteran. Participants stressed the need for a partnership with open communication.

Divorce or marital discord during the period of transition is not uncommon. One concern is the soldier ceasing (at least temporarily) to play the role of the breadwinner, along with the loss of a steady paycheck. Loss of stature (moving from being a soldier to a “nobody”) and loss of focused purpose are other issues. Additional concerns include being at home all the time and attempting to reassert a daily role in the family. Some spouses who expected a “payoff” for years of self-sacrifice for a spouse’s military career are bitterly

disappointed to have their partner need to start again as a novice in a civilian career. The veteran’s distress at having to retrain and earn credibility in a new environment can add to the tension between the spouses.

Loss of benefits, relocation in some cases, and the resultant spouse’s need to find new employment are additional stressors. Deciding whether to stay in the same location or move to a hometown that may have less job opportunities can put strain on a marriage. In many cases the spouses are also struggling and could benefit from more support. All these issues can be handled poorly if not anticipated and managed.

Family supportive supervisor behavior (FSSB) consisting of emotional support and instrumental support concerning family demands has been found to be related to reduced work–family conflict, increased job satisfaction, and reduced turnover intentions (Hammer et al. 2011, 2009). The participants were not aware of any spouse transition training or support provided by the military, although they believed some nonprofit organizations serving veterans may do so. The veterans were receptive to receiving more support. In recent discussions with staff at the Fort Campbell Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and the Spouse Employment Center, it was reported that the Army provides significant resources to spouses of transitioning soldiers, to include financial planning, employment resources, and other services. However, TAP personnel are not allowed to reach out to military spouses directly, unless the spouse first makes contact or seeks assistance. TAP personnel use mass marketing to reach spouses through social media, newspapers, and family readiness groups.

Despite the hardships, many veterans in the study were deeply appreciative of the support they received from their spouses. They wondered how single veterans managed without someone to lean on and stressed that single veterans should be very proactive in developing a support system of family and/or friends.

#### ***From the spouses’ perspective***

The spouses’ focus groups focused on how the transition affected their relationships with their veteran spouse and with others, the financial, emotional, and physical toll of the transition, and the ways in which they did or did not manage to cope with the initial period of change. Therefore, their answers were more detailed, in-depth, and more personal than what the veterans shared about the role of their spouses in the transition. It should be noted that because all participants were spouses of veterans, it is not possible to deduce from their comments the ways in which single veterans have an easier or harder time with the transition process.

***Optimal time to prepare for leaving the military.***

One year seemed to work best for transition preparation, although some said six months was enough and others said that even eighteen months was not enough. Some felt that the higher the veteran's rank, the more likely he or she would be told that they had nothing to worry about. However, those were the ones farthest removed from civilian life. In addition, the belief that they had many options led some high-ranking veterans to greater indecisiveness.

***Sources of support.*** Family (parents, in-laws, siblings) and often lived far away and in any event frequently did not understand the issues of the transitioning couple. Unless they were themselves veterans, they were of minimal support. Moving back to family could add stress, especially if the family could not understand or empathize with the veteran and spouse. However, parents were often willing to provide short-term financial support.

Friends, especially recent retirees nearby, were more helpful. Some said most of their friends were current and former military spouses, who they felt better understood them. Some found relationships with current coworkers rewarding. By contrast, relationships with old friends who had never left home could be strained. The hometown friends could seem superficial and provincial to the military spouse, while the military spouses, especially those who had traveled widely, might evoke jealousy among old friends. Some were effusive about the support that church families provided.

Spouses mentioned their frustration with the inability of nonmilitary friends to understand their unique difficulties, such as dealing with medical boards. One spouse noted that like others, her family moved frequently while on active duty. This led her to keep her guard up and avoid deep emotional attachments as a self-protective strategy. However, this stance made connecting with civilian neighbors or other transitioning couples difficult.

***Helping the veteran spouse cope.*** Two main issues emerged. The first involved rebuilding the confidence of a spouse whose self-esteem and sense of self-worth had been shaken. Some said that their spouses harbored some sense of rejection and bitterness toward the military for having forsaken them. Yet, they were unwilling to admit their concerns to others. The spouses pushed their transitioning spouses to maintain relationships and to avoid remaining in the house all day. They also urged other non-veteran spouses not to take venting of frustration personally.

The second issue involved the proliferation of financial information and forms received by the transitioning soldier. Some felt unable to focus on these important things, partly because they were still on active duty. In addition, many had not dealt with such issues in years, if ever at all. The spouses want more direct access to the military's transitional information. As one spouse said, "Be prepared that your spouse will not always come home and tell you the answers, so find someone to help you find answers." One spouse said she could have provided extensive medical information about her spouse to the medical board, if only she had been included. These spouses felt that they should officially be a part of the transition process. Said one, "When you are dealing with someone with short term memory loss, they should not be relied on to remember info. The spouse needs to be involved." They urged spouses to seek out resources and to network themselves, to know where the library and Department of Labor are located, and to be aware of any emergency programs available in their city.

***Dealing with changed family relationships.*** Leaving the military can be hard on the rest of the family. Even transitioning from deployment to garrison can be disruptive for family dynamics and requires adjustment (Adler et al., 2011; Borus, 1973). Military Transition Theory (Kintzle & Castro, 2018) explains how certain factors, notably thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness, will exacerbate the veteran's transition and lead to negative outcomes at work and at home. Male veterans may be especially prone to trying to reassert a dominant or relevant role in the family. Similarly, the veteran may want to spend more time with family members, especially children. However, those family members may have their own circle of friends and activities that they do not want to relinquish for their father's newfound need for togetherness.

A strong marital relationship, a solid financial plan, and open communication are seen as essential to pulling through this initial period. As one wife said, "Watching (her transitioning husband) during the initial transition was painful. He finally found a job he loves through their personal network. I cannot imagine if we did not have a strong relationship if we could have survived the transition as we faced disappointment and lowered confidence every single day." Participants put an emphasis on staying healthy physically, to take care of themselves emotionally, and to recharge and stay involved with friends outside of the role of spouse.

**The veteran's new workplace.** Starting all over again at the bottom may evoke feelings of shame and defeat. The civilian job may be less respected, less heroic, and less meaningful than the veteran is used to. Said one spouse, "He went from 'changing the world' to 'Knock, knock, cable guy.' What a huge transition that was." One spouse working for a nonprofit spoke of retired generals who left well-paid defense industry jobs because the work did not give them purpose, leaving them feeling unfulfilled. Meaningful and purposeful work has shown to be especially important to veterans, with positive spillover to all parts of life (Black & Papile, 2010; Doenges, 2011; Schutt et al., 2003).

Veterans may have trouble relating to civilian coworkers who are not as disciplined as themselves. The spouse can help the veteran change his/her expectations of coworkers. Conversely, the veteran may be suffering from an undisclosed or undiagnosed condition that makes the pace of the civilian workplace difficult. Others prefer a frantic pace. One spouse talked of her husband working fulltime, attending college fulltime and constantly being on the move while still awaiting a diagnosis from the VA. Spouses were urged to be patient and encouraging.

**Spouse careers, jobs, and income.** Military spouse employment is problematic even while in the service. According to a 2018 study by the White House Council of Economic Advisers, military spouses will lose an average of \$190,000 over a 20-year period in the military. Military spouse underemployment is between 33 and 77%, according to the director of the military spouse program sponsored by the US Chamber of Commerce. Military spouse unemployment has hovered around 24% for a decade and is expected to rise because of Covid-19 (Agovino, 2020). Transition of the veteran can add difficulty for the nonmilitary spouse's career. Prior to finding a job, the loss of the veteran's steady income can put strain on the family's standard of living, including housing and child-care. This period could be marked by arguments about priorities in expenditures. The nonmilitary spouse may have to set aside education and career preparation, at least temporarily, to find work to support the family. Said one spouse, "I was still a graduate student when he started his transition. With no money coming in after I had just graduated, I was essentially forced to take the first job I could. I would have chosen differently had I had more certainty." If the family is relocating, the nonmilitary spouse may have to give up a promising or rewarding job in his/her field and try to find something comparable. If the couple moves back to a small town near family, that may not be possible. The resulting loss of income and career momentum can drag on even beyond the transitional

period and lead to resentment. These potential problems need to be considered when contemplating making such a move. As with most related issues, there is no substitute for open communication.

## Discussion

Common and intertwined themes emerge from these focus groups. Miscommunication, often the result of well-intentioned messages, and lack of communication can exacerbate difficulties associated with veteran transition into the civilian workplace. The message that veterans are as or more capable workers and leaders than their civilian equivalents has some elements of truth. However, the message can dull the transitioning veteran's efforts to prepare a competitive resume, such as translating military jargon about accomplishments and skills into comparable civilian terms.

It is a justifiable position that society owes veterans both gratitude and help in transitioning. However, this can be misinterpreted by some veterans as a personal entitlement to desired jobs and rapid promotions, regardless of the norms of the civilian organization. Lulled into a false expectation of an easy job search, some veterans report being crushed by the effort required to find a job. Networking, which has a pejorative connotation within the military ("brown-nosing") suddenly becomes a crucial skill in career management. Taking credit for one's individual contribution to a team's successes may also run against the prevailing military ethos, yet it is an essential element of resume writing and interviewing in the civilian sector. The military as a whole may encourage early preparation for a soldier's separation and next career move. However, the individual soldier's leader may give the opposite message and dissuade such efforts. What is often needed but lacking is a realistic job search preview.

Obtaining a job does not solve all issues, and more adaptation is needed. Admirable skills that veterans bring to the civilian workplace need to be calibrated to enable the veteran to coexist within organizational norms. For example, the decisiveness that is crucial for the battlefield may seem like impatience in more deliberative corporate and government settings. Similarly, consensus-building may seem to the veteran like a shirking of responsibility rather than a method for better decision making. While veterans' following of rules and dependability are highly valued, "too much" adherence to rules becomes perceived rigidity. The strong work ethics of veterans are respected, but their questioning of coworkers' work ethics and mission dedication is not appreciated. Veterans' leadership skills,

especially under duress, may be highly valued, yet veterans need to avoid appearing dismissive of others' leadership experience. It was not uncommon for hiring managers to be intimidated by or harbor other negative stereotypes toward veterans.

Veterans entering the civilian workplace are often beset by expectations of socializing and friendliness with which they are uncomfortable. This is ironic and confusing to coworkers, given that veterans are valued for their comparatively strong team orientation. Veterans who decide not to participate in what they see as superficial rituals or relationships need to avoid conveying aloofness or derision. Veterans often struggle with the relative insignificance of much civilian work when comparing it to what they did in the military. They may be perceived as condescending toward coworkers while they are merely working out their own sources of meaning for the next stage of life. In general, those who were socially relaxed and able to set aside their previous military rank as the starting point for relationships were better able to integrate into the civilian workplace.

Many spouses harbor the expectation that immediately upon leaving the military, the veteran will enter a well-paid job commensurate to his/her experience and leadership skill. Moreover, the new income is expected to compensate the spouses for all the disruptions and sacrifices during the military career. Upon learning that their spouse will have to undertake more education and/or work at entry-level positions, thereby regressing in income, they may feel betrayed and misled. Initially upon separation, the veterans' families are likely to incur higher living expenses and loss of benefits. In some cases, the spouses will have to shelve their own long-deferred education and career plans in favor of lower-level employment needed to keep the family afloat.

The difficulty of receiving support from others, such as extended family, hometown friends, civilian coworkers, and friends whose spouses are still in the military, was noted and was reported as a source of frustration. They hoped others could understand them, but excluding fellow spouses of recent retirees, this desire generally went unfulfilled. Some spouses who had moved many times were reluctant to try to establish new relationships. Others had to deal with the veteran's diminished self-esteem and bitterness toward the military. The often-absent veteran trying to reassert his/her place within the fabric of the home and the parental decision structure is another source of tension. Solid communication between the couple and all family members was seen as necessary to survive the transition period.

In summary, many programs exist or are being created to improve transition. This study suggests that there is no substitute for clear communication of requirements for job search, realistic previews of the competitive work environment and what is needed to succeed, proper socialization into the workplace, and mentoring for navigating career progression within the organization. Both veterans and their spouses require clear communication about how transition may disrupt their income, their social world and support system, and their family dynamics. Finally, the couple must communicate openly with each other.

### Future research directions

There are several ways to extend the current research into more tangible areas. Replication in another state or region would be important. The qualitative methods used here should be augmented by quantitative measures that would also provide clearer differentiation of the views of veterans as opposed to hiring managers. A future study should capture not only the struggles of veterans (as seen by their spouses) but those of singles and single parents as well. Finding the equivalent of a spouse for single could be an interesting challenge.

Another worthwhile option would be to track new hires in a range of work organizations over a period of 6 to 12 months to determine the most common actual keys to integration in success. Another useful direction of research would be to determine the best practices being used for networking training and to adapt those programs to this population. A study detailing what veterans miss most about the military (e.g., camaraderie, patriotism), how veterans compensate in the civilian world, and what if anything is still lacking, provide veterans with guidance as to how to thrive without the source of meaning and social support that was so much a part of their lives.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### Data availability statement

Numerical data is not applicable for this study, but qualitative information on the focus group transcripts may be requested from the authors.



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