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Go Back to the Beginning: Career Development and the Challenges of Transitioning from the Military to Civilian Employment

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Abstract

This chapter examines the transition challenges facing military personnel to moving to civilian employment, a major issue for nations like the USA that have large armed forces. For such personnel, they seek to establish a career after a period of service and often without the credentials required for existing or future job vacancies. This chapter discusses the challenges of career transition from military to civilian employment, largely in the context of the US-based literature. The chapter proceeds to outline the range of obstacles to transition and then considers remedial measures to support transition ranging from pre transition to post transition support programs.

Keywords: transitional labour markets, career shift, transferable skills, military employment, civilian employment, career disruption

1. Introduction

Career development is not a linear and continuous process. Many workers face challenges and disruptions to their careers linked to the nature of their work (for example, seasonal work); the disruption caused by health, disability and caring for children and relatives; and the short duration of many careers that require a change (for example in professional sports). Whilst the general concept of a 'career' is currently undergoing significant change due to the implementation of new disruptive technologies and the emergence of a global 'gig' economy, it can be effectively captured in all its variations as 'the sequence of jobs that individuals hold during their work histories regardless of their occupations or organisational levels' [1]. The literature is conflicted about whether organisations or individual employees have the key responsibilities for career management and career development [2]. Disrupted and career re-development is extensive in the workforce. Mass layoffs associated with plant closures, technological change and global competitive pressures force many workers to search for jobs in new regions or industries, or to retrain for new occupations. Typical transitional challenges are from graduation to work [3], and from full time caring to work. The concept of transitional labour

markets [4, 5] captures the adjustment process of moving from one position to another where the shifts involve challenges and access linked to securing job entry and sustaining a career.

The transition from military to civilian life is a challenging one, impacting personal growth, life satisfaction, psychological well-being, and the physical health of many veterans after their deployment [6]. Many veterans struggle with managing their psychological health, and as such, returning to work can be difficult as mental health symptoms can influence individuals' abilities to gain or maintain employment [7]. Some research suggests a correlation between employment status and various mental health conditions, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety disorder, depression, alcohol and drug abuse [8]. While many successfully transition from military services into civilian employment, there remain a residual of ex-military employees that find accessing the civilian labour market difficult. In this chapter the obstacles and challenges to civilian employment are identified, rather than those who have successfully transitioned into civilian employment.

Military personnel returning to civilian life face an array of psychological, physical and social challenges that are not typically addressed during their service periods [9]. The Australian Senate Inquiry into the mental health of defence personnel [10] found that one of the key issues contributing to military personnel stress and anxiety was the difficulty of accessing a civilian job, with claims that the unemployment rate for veterans was around five times the national average, at 30% [11]. In combination with mental and physical disabilities, unemployment contributes to a vicious circle of social exclusion for veterans. Disabilities and other factors contribute to difficulties in accessing jobs, including employer stereotyping of ex-defence personnel [12], and in turn being unable to secure employment contributes to their stress. In this context, it is important that the relationship between military service and post-service access to suitable employment is evaluated, as the concerns facing ex-defence personnel are complex, and impact a multitude of different areas in civilian life (health care, employment, disability), and therefore they require more specialist case-management services [13].

This chapter discusses these transitional challenges from military to civilian employment, largely based on United States studies. Specific transitional challenges including health, skills recognition and employer stereotyping are identified. Then follows a discussion of the processes and programs that can potentially support the transition and the establishment of a civilian career.

2. What are the challenges associated with transition from military to civilian employment?

The processes and experiences of transition for veterans to civilian life and employment are not well understood, and it is often a transition with concomitant challenges related to identity, employment, and lifestyle [14, 15]. Veterans, especially those who have had extended periods of service or lack experience in job search processes, can experience numerous challenges when seeking post-service employment [16], and may create unrealistic expectations regarding salary and job search time-frames. Some veterans experience financial struggles, while others have relationship problems and/or substance abuse issues. When compounded with the challenges associated with securing post-military employment, these can lead to less overall stability upon return to civilian life [17].

The transition process is also often viewed as being difficult due to associated learning or relearning to live outside the highly organised, regimented and controlled way of life experienced during military service. Many veterans may have

begun their military careers immediately following high school, so another challenge in this transition process is gaining civilian employment for the first time and becoming familiar with the associated practices of job search [16]. They will need to seek employment in non-military fields and transferring their status can prove stressful [18]. They are not only leaving the military as a job, but also as a way of life. This can also lead to a higher rate of mental health disorders [13, 19], as there is a mismatch between veterans' expectations and reality. Many veterans will feel they are returning to a "normal" way of life, but in reality, due to the nature of military service and the emotional and physical scars veterans endure during their deployment, they can often feel isolated or alienated upon return to civilian life [20]. As such, the nature of the transition is far more complex psychologically than often recognised, and this needs to be considered when discussing the transition process [18]. Potential employer stereotyping that veterans are too regimented, inflexible, and unable to adapt to civilian work situations [21] further exacerbate their employment-seeking challenges.

Another reason why many veterans struggle to readjust to civilian life is in part due to the socioeconomic and educational challenges they may have experienced prior to individual military service [22], for example, entering military service without possessing any formal post school qualifications and because of the decline in direct supervision in post-military life. Many individuals do not have plans for employment post-military service; and may also lack a sustainable plan for living arrangements upon completion of their service given that accommodation is usually provided by the military, thus potentially leading to poverty and homelessness. Military establishments are often located in remote regions, placing a physical and financial barrier to accessing jobs in large urban areas with expensive property markets. In addition research suggests that some veterans have experienced challenges with anger upon returning to civilian life, strained family relationships, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). If not treated, these issues can lead to poor coping strategies that can result in an increase in substance abuse and which may have originated during active duty. According to the US Department of Defence Health Related Behavior Survey, 84.5% of active duty personnel across all military branches reported using alcohol and 25% reported moderate to heavy substance use, which is significantly higher than in non-military civilians (16.6%) [23].

3. The challenges of transition from military to civilian employment in the USA

The Pentagon has reported that around 1.6 million military personnel who returned from the Afghanistan war in late 2001 struggled to find employment [24, 25]. US soldiers aged between 22 and 24 years old were three times more likely to be unemployed when compared with non-US soldiers in the same age bracket [25]. Due to the young age of enlistment by military personnel, many do not have college degrees when they join the military, thus making it even more difficult to find employment post-service. For example, in 2008, the year with the highest deployment of US military overseas, 52% of military personnel were 25 years old or younger, and only 4.5% had a bachelor's degree [26].

Due to the hazardous and life-threatening nature associated with military employment, returning veterans may suffer either physical and/or psychological challenges, as indicated by the increasing rate of disability claims [27]. Many US veterans are also at risk of severe life-threatening issues, with data indicating that, in 2014 around 20 veterans committed suicide every day [28]. While some knowledge and skills possessed by military personnel are transferrable to the civilian workplace

(for example, administrative, computer and problem-solving skills), an inability to illustrate how these skills are transferrable is one of the primary reasons for veterans' unemployment. In addition, the current population is more educated today than ever before, and this has led to veterans having to face a more competitive marketplace when seeking employment [29].

In the following sections we briefly outline some of the key institutional and structural challenges that contribute to the veteran's post service career access in civilian employment.

3.1 Mental health and substance abuses

Several studies have examined veterans' employment outcomes when confronted with a primary diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), although primarily in the United States. Savoca and Rosenheck's study [30], for example, found that Vietnam-era veterans with combat-related PTSD were significantly less likely to be employed than those without PTSD, and a PTSD diagnosis was also associated with a lower hourly wage for those in a civilian job. Increased severity of PTSD was associated with a decreased likelihood of fulltime employment in another cross-section study of veterans with PTSD [31]. Resnick and Rosenheck's study [32] observed that veterans with PTSD were 19% less likely to be employed on discharge.

Unaddressed associated mental health and substance abuse issues manifest themselves in several ways in relation to civilian employment [33]. Army veterans with health challenges (physical and psychological) may face employment concerns especially in finding and maintaining work [34]. Moreover, in some cases, the psychological effects of deployment tend to limit veterans' ability to work, and they are often hesitant to seek assistance, feeling that documented mental health issues may limit their employment options [35]. Further, due to negative pre-conceived notions of self-stigmas associated around their health, it becomes difficult for them to participate in employment preparation and screening processes [36]. Finally, physical and psychological concerns can affect veterans' access to education and training, thus further reducing the chances of employment [36].

3.2 Skills transferability challenges

The skills transferability of army veterans, in terms of equating military skills and experiences with civilian job qualifications, is reported as one of the most significant employment-related challenges [37]. For successful civilian employment army veterans are required to re-interpret the skills developed in their military jobs (e.g. planning, leadership, risk mitigation, decision-making, communicating, and military intelligence capabilities), and to articulate them effectively in the civilian employment marketplace [38]. The US Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM), Prudential, the RAND Corporation, the Center for New American Security (CNAS), and Pew Research, have all identified these gaps in translating military skills to post- military service careers as either the number one or number two issue in effective military career transition and career development [21].

3.3 Negative employer perceptions

Although many employment programs acknowledge the various skills gained by veterans during their army careers, there is disparity among employers regarding recognition of these skills [39]. As an example, a study by Harrell and Berglass [37] identified leadership and teamwork skills, character, discipline, expertise, resilience

and loyalty to be some of the reasons for hiring the veterans. However, the same study reported that skill transferability, negative stereotyping, skills mismatches, repeated deployments, and acclimatisation to the civilian world were listed as risks and challenges for hiring veterans. It is also noted in the literature that many employers perceive veterans as either a mismatch for civilian employment, and further, employers often considered veterans as being unsuited to civilian employment [40]. According to Castro et al. [40], post-9/11 veterans reported that civilian employers did not understand their needs, did not think military veterans have the necessary skills, considered veterans to be dangerous and physically broken, and did not want to hire them.

Employers were found to often hold false stereotypical perspectives about army veterans, their skills and experiences, and their estimated “employability” based on political ideology, assumptions of poor skills or presumptions of mental or emotional dysfunction [40]. There is a reported lack of research in understanding the difficulties experienced by employers and veterans regarding suitable positions in civilian environments and workplaces [37]. Moreover, given the employment problems experienced by veterans and many employers’ unwillingness to recruit them, few research studies have examined the factors that affect such hiring decisions [39].

3.4 Unpreparedness for civilian employment

Much extant literature has observed that the lack of preparation and understanding for finding civilian employment when leaving the military is a large contributor to veteran unemployment [40]. It has been observed that some veterans have unrealistic expectations of their civilian job prospects, and some employers are hesitant to hire them due to their poor interviewing skills and inadequate resumes [41]. This unpreparedness has been linked to limited initiative, lack of appropriate planning and lack of motivation, as observed by Keeling, Kintzle and Castro [42] - *‘The tools are there, the motivation is not’* (p. 67). In some cases, even the transition services provided by the military authorities either did not prepare them for what to expect from civilian life or are ineffective in providing opportunities for employment [40].

3.5 Role of military identity and cultural adjustment

Military identity and values (for example, duty, honour, loyalty; and commitment to comrades, unit, and nation) conflict with materialistic, individualistic and libertarian civilian values, which can create a ‘civil-military cultural gap’. These identity crises impact upon their chances of finding suitable employment, as veterans often maintain a continuity of “military identity” due to “military institutionalisation” which may adversely affect their transition to civilian life [43]. This further suggests that due to this institutionalisation, the skills many civilians are accustomed to using (the ability to conduct job searches or tailor communication methods) are under-developed in veterans [44]. Previous literature also indicates that to maintain their military identity, veterans tend to seek work within other “masculinised” and military like institutions (for example, prisons and security work) or prefer to travel around in order to relive the experience of temporary postings in the military [44]. Preconceived notions of differences in civilian and military organisational cultures may also be related to hiring decisions about veterans for civilian jobs [39].

Somewhat related to the role of military identity and the presence of a ‘civil-military cultural gap’, veterans may face cultural adjustment issues in civilian jobs. Previous research reports on challenges faced by army veterans suggest that

transitioning veterans experience a “culture shock” when re-entering civilian life [15], and the major reason for this is related to the army culture of selfless service [45]. The career transition involves moving away from not being in charge or making decisions (or being the subordinate) and requires changes in mindsets, adapting, and in what may influence persistence, effort, interest, and career goals [46]. Employers expect that veterans must bring the ability to demonstrate adaptive performance, employability, adaptability, functionalism, and flexibility – often capabilities they do not possess.

It has been observed that military service can decrease civilian wages, and the longer the duration in the military, the greater the wage differential faced by veterans relative to civilians [47]. Finding acceptance in a new organisation can be a challenge for veterans to adapt to a career change and a new kind of organisation. There are suggestions that the realities of the military-to-civilian career transition may become fraught with adversities, frustrations, inequities, and setbacks in the workplace with supervisors or co-workers.

3.6 Educational attainment challenges

Complementing academic knowledge with veterans’ skills developed in the military through educational attainment is one effective way of making a transition from army service to civilian employment [48]. Previous research has linked educational attainment to employment mobility [49]. However, veterans face additional challenges that make it difficult for them to succeed in higher education - for example, understanding what benefits they are eligible for, finding campus administrators who understand government support/assistance complexities, obtaining academic credit for military training, and finding services on campus that support their integration into civilian student life [50]. Moreover, veterans as students are different from traditional students and may be raising families and maintaining full-time employment or part-time enrollment, which may result in a higher risk for course non-completions [49, 50]. Another challenge is the difficulty in meeting academic expectations (for example, balancing work and family while studying; independent study and analysis; relating to fellow students; meeting lecturers’ expectations) that are significantly different from what veterans have encountered in military courses [50].

Further, for educational attainment, it is important for the veterans to seek academic credit for coursework and training received in the military. This poses a strong challenge for educational institutions, as military transcripts in the US context consist of indecipherable acronyms—the “military alphabet”, rattling off a list of numbered and lettered forms and courses—and some are even officially classified – so the knowledge or participation could not be acknowledged or certified [48]. Difficulties lie in maintaining consistencies in credit transfers [50, 51] and determining whether given credit applies to unit requirements, general education or graduation requirements, or major and major preparation requirements [51].

3.7 Physical disability

While most studies of the difficulties facing veterans in the transition to civilian employment have highlighted mental disability, many veterans also face physical disability. Serving in the defence forces, especially on active duty, involves facing potential life-threatening risks on a daily basis. Veterans who suffer physical disability are able to access rehabilitation, counselling and welfare support services during and post service. However, many disabilities are permanent or have associated effects such as pain, disability and limited attention spans [52]. There is also

an interaction between physical and mental stress [52]. Having a permanent injury may contribute to anxiety and impacts on the ability to engage in effective job search activities [48]. As with mental disability, there are also many documented barriers to those with physical disabilities in accessing employment and workplaces [53].

3.8 Job search challenges

In the case of job search for ex-service personnel there are a number of distinct challenges. The first is spatial, that is being removed from locations where there are jobs. Job search requires access and resources. Many military establishments are located outside capital cities, often in remote regions, and this imposes physical and financial barriers to effective job search. In addition, military personnel often have limited networks that support job access. Many nations, including the US, Australia, UK and New Zealand, have special services and outplacement arrangements for ex service personnel [54]. There are several job search support services available for Australian ex-military personnel to support job search – these include The Career Transition Access Scheme (CTAS) [55] and the Veterans' Employment Program [56]. Linked to physical separation are the associated costs and disruption of physical relocation. This may involve new schools for children; job search for spouses; and accessing accommodation in expensive capital cities. For those ex-servicepersons with families the challenges and disruption are collective; the transition to civilian life presents problems for the entire family, often moving from a military town dominated by the military, and moving to multi-cultural and cosmopolitan cities with diverse populations, industries and networks [48].

4. Strategies for overcoming the challenges of transition and developing a civilian career

Where there are barriers to career transition and to developing a new career, addressing the challenges requires informed, flexible and complementary remedial measures. In the case of the transition from university and college graduation to a career position, there a range of stakeholders who have an interest in ameliorating the identified problems that prevents transition. These include students/graduates; employers; universities and governments [3] since there are large private and public investments in education that a predicated on the ability to transition from graduation to employment and generate private and public returns from the investment [3]. Responses range from better informed course and institutional selection; education programs that incorporate required job skills; improving job search processes; public funding of university programs on the basis of successful job placements; and providing articulation arrangements, such as traineeships [3].

In the military transition context the challenges are more profound than in the case of the education transition. Veterans are seeking to transition from one career to a different career; they often have few formal qualifications; they have not been preparing for the transition and in many cases they have personal attributes such as health problems that further limit their employability. In terms of the barriers, policy responses have to encompass the multitude of challenges discussed above, and the different market and non-market sources of these challenges [48–51]. The articulation of 'process' and the holistic approach to resilience, acculturation and identity also allows us a deeper understanding of the different assistance programs countries have in place to address these challenges. In the UK, the Ministry of Defence formulated a Strategy for Veterans and Armed Forces Covenant [54]. In the USA, Congress established a Transition Assistance Program (TAP) [56].

The transition experiences of veterans are often complex, and a successful transition requires a portfolio of supports and programs, encompassing action from many stakeholders, including the military, government, employer groups, non-government organisations such as veteran’s associations, education and training institutions to address potential risks and protective factors [57]. As with education to employment transitions, the remedial process is not homogeneous in terms of the personal characteristics of those transitioning (education, skills, age, years of service, disability, location) [3], and requires co-ordination across many authorities and stakeholder groups. The following table (**Table 1**) shows the different challenges and some of the potential strategies that have been outlined in the literature, along with the intervention time-frame (before, during or after transition).

The strategies included in the table include the US transition assistance programs (TAP) which support veterans by providing pre-separation counselling and transition assistance workshops to aid in the transition from military service to civilian life; career assessments (regarding career interests, self-efficacy, and career resilience); and in Australia, the ‘Career Transition Assistance Scheme - CTAS which provides phased benefits, tools and services in support of this obligation [55]. The CTAS [55] supports the career transition of members from the service to suitable civilian employment, with the minimum involuntary break in continuity of employment; enhances the ability of members to competitively market themselves for suitable civilian employment; and attempts to make the best use of members’ existing skills gained from ADF service.

In response to the transition challenges identified in the above discussion, there are six key complementary imperatives which might be provided by human

	Challenges	Potential strategies	Time phase
1	Mental health and substance abuse	Counselling and social support	During transition and afterwards
2	Skills transferability	Certification for skills; preparation for civilian employment	On-going
3	Employers’ perceptions	Educate HR professionals and employer associations	On-going
4	Preparation for civilian employment	Transition Assistance Programs (TAP)	Before and during transition
5	Military identity and cultural adjustment	Realignment and adaption of new behaviours	Training workshops during transition and afterwards
6	Acceptance challenges	Industry orientation workshops	Training workshops before and during transition
7	Educational enhancement	Recognition of prior leaning/training to higher education community/education assistance programs Formal accreditation procedures for training programs.	On-going
8	Physical disability challenges	Reserved positions for disabled veterans in federal jobs	On-going
9	Job search challenges	Job search support programs	Ongoing

Table 1.
Identified transition challenges and potential responses.

resource management (HRM) professionals for the mutual benefit of veterans and their organisations. First, in order to overcome the stereotyped beliefs and self-adopted stigmas of veterans [36, 39], one important strategy is to alter these preconceived notions of employers [39]. Human resource professionals might take the lead in providing career development, learning and development, and hiring support to create a better understanding about veterans in the civilian workplace [15]. They need to consciously understand the application of military frameworks to current business practices and develop an understanding how the skills of veterans can be utilised to create a more viable, innovative, creative, and leadership-ready workforce [58]. Moreover, recruiters need tools and associated training to help them understand the benefits of hiring veterans [59].

HRM professionals can assist veteran recruits to transition to new civilian work identities by addressing the three phases that every individual making a transition encounters: (a) letting go of old ways and old identities, (b) moving out of a “neutral zone” and experiencing psychological realignment, and (c) exiting the transition and beginning anew with a new identity and sense of purpose. HRM professionals can design strategies to support veterans in their psychological realignment and establish a new identity with a clear sense of purpose [48, 50].

Through recognition of prior learning (RPL) mechanisms, veterans might be given academic credit for coursework and training received in the army [49]. The nature of military expertise and the knowledge accumulated while in service may have different connotations in course curriculum. Although some veterans have completed academic qualifications and applied training during their military service, some educational institutions do not award credit for military training [49]. Bergman and Herd [60], for example, strongly advocated assisting veterans with academic credit for prior learning in the military and recommended a program of portfolio development for prior learning assessment (PLA) method provided by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning [CAEL] in 2010. Veterans tend to be of mature age, and consequently their success often depends on their ability to make rapid progress and build on the knowledge they have established in the services. Establishing consistent credit transfer guidelines and transparency about those guidelines can go a long way to help veterans attain education for smoothly transitioning into civilian employment.

As many higher education providers do not understand military cultures or the challenges veterans face when transitioning to an academic setting [61], it is imperative that higher education personnel develop awareness of the complex and multiple identities of students so that they can introduce effective programming initiatives [49]. Providing training to faculty and staff about military culture and veterans’ unique needs and transitional issues [62] can help improve the situation. These initiatives could be complemented with educational assistance programs that can prevent the unemployment of veterans, assist their adjustment to civilian life, reward their military service, and make education affordable [63]). The GI Bill (US Education and Training Benefit), for example, provides monetary aid to help cover college tuition, housing, books, and other educational fees for vocational training, on-the-job training, flight training, correspondence training, licencing, national testing programs, entrepreneurship training, and tutorial assistance [63].

Finally, and most controversially, in the US veterans are given preferences in appointments to federal government jobs [64]. Public policies in the US have also attempted to boost the demand for veteran labour through federal hiring preferences and private employer tax credits [63]). Veterans who are disabled or who serve on active duty in the US Armed Forces during certain specified time periods or in military campaigns are also entitled to preference over non-veterans both in federal hiring practices and in retention during reductions in force [63].

5. Conclusion

The concept of a single career with linear and sequential development, and long periods of tenure with a single employer has been disrupted by technological and structural changes that undermine the marketability of skills, qualifications and experience [1]. Career development is for many a disrupted process, involving transition challenges and shifts in career orientation, and often involving structural and institutional barriers [5]. Moving out of military to civilian employment captures many of the structural, institutional and market barriers that those who seek to change careers face, but as indicated the challenges and the barriers to the transition process are systemic and considerable [40]. This chapter reports on the challenges faced by army veterans in their transitions into civilian employment, largely in the US context. The main challenges that have been highlighted in extant research are based around mental health and substance abuse; skills transferability; negative employer perceptions towards veterans; the lack of preparation for entry into the civilian workforce; the negative military identity (and stereo-typing); the cultural challenge of civilian employment; insufficient educational attainment; physical disability; and job search challenges [29–34]. The challenges are not homogenous and require tailored support programs to assist veterans. These may range from job search and training programs; through to rehabilitation programs to assist those with physical and mental health challenges. There is need for multiple stakeholder responses that include support for transition while in military service; and support from a range of stakeholders across the range of identified impediments from NGOs, through to governments and employer groups in the post transition phase. Developing a career is challenging when you enter the civilian workforce at an age where existing participants have civilian employment experience and recognised skills and credentials.

Further research could examine the differences in the transitional challenges across countries and across different defence services such as the navy and air force. Here contextual factors such as the conditions and forms of service in different countries, and the skills required to perform different service tasks could affect the ability to transition to civilian employment. Moreover, studies that examine successful transition can identify those conditions that contribute to supporting the transition and career development process.

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