



Center for a
New American
Security

Veteran Pathways to Employment: Hurdles and Opportunities

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About the Military, Veterans, and Society Program

The Military, Veterans, and Society program addresses issues facing America's service members, veterans, and military families, including the future of the All-Volunteer Force, trends within the veteran community, and civil-military relations. The program produces high-impact research that informs and inspires strategic action; convenes stakeholders and hosts top-quality events to shape the national conversation; and engages policymakers, industry leaders, Congress, scholars, the media, and the public about issues facing veterans and the military community.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The issue of employment for post-9/11 veterans came to a head nearly a decade ago, when the national economy was ailing and a spike in veteran unemployment coincided with the height of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Following the first nine years of war in Afghanistan and Iraq, the well-being of the veteran community was a major public concern. This concern was heightened in the aftermath of the economic crash of 2008. The overall economy was reeling, but available data showed that unemployment was particularly high among America's post-9/11 veterans. This confluence of factors led to concerted efforts to understand and to rectify the challenges facing veterans seeking work.

Two notable efforts mobilized the federal government and the private sector to address the challenges of veteran unemployment. Then-First Lady Michelle Obama and Dr. Jill Biden established the Joining Forces initiative to mobilize public and private sector efforts to serve and support the veteran community, helping catalyze major corporate efforts around veteran employment. Meanwhile, within the federal government, Congress mandated the first revamp of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) since 1991 to update and improve support to transitioning service members. These government efforts coincided with increased philanthropic attention and commitments to address the needs of veterans.¹

Thanks to these initiatives and an improved economy, veteran unemployment has decreased significantly in the intervening years. Despite overall low veteran unemployment, however, there is emerging research indicating that many veterans are experiencing “underemployment” or facing challenges in finding meaningful, post-service employment. This alienation from the civilian labor market appears in numerous surveys indicating dissatisfaction with opportunities after service.

The 2019 National Defense Authorization Act has prescribed new changes to TAP to better prepare service members for transition and to better match them with civilian job opportunities. Given these changes, and the evolving civilian workforce landscape, this report seeks to review existing literature on the state of veteran employment efforts. Combined with interviews with leading academics, nonprofit leaders working on veteran transition issues, and civilian employers, this report seeks to identify the hurdles, and opportunities, currently facing veterans as they seek worthwhile employment. The focus of this report is not on government services, but on areas where civilian sector efforts can make a positive difference in veteran transition outcomes. This report offers several areas where coordinated efforts from the private sector could create stronger pathways to meaningful employment for veterans.

2.0 WHERE WE ARE: THE STATE OF VETERAN EMPLOYMENT

2.1 WHAT WE THINK WE KNOW: EXISTING RESEARCH ON VETERAN EMPLOYMENT

The rise of veteran unemployment following the financial crash of 2008, particularly among the post-9/11 cohort, spurred a number of studies seeking to identify whether employers value military service in prospective employees, and if so, what skills or attributes they most desire.² Landmark

studies outlined a job market in which military experience is valued by many employers, but may be difficult to translate into a job commensurate with a veteran's experience. Several trends emerged: On the upside, veterans in the aggregate appear to achieve greater economic outcomes than their nonveteran peers, and veterans are valued for the soft skills they acquired through military service. However, existing research also indicates that civilian hiring managers often struggle to translate and understand military service, creating an impediment both to hiring and proper placement within companies, and veterans are often challenged when moving to new fields.

2.1.1 POSITIVE ECONOMIC OUTCOMES: VETERANS TEND TO DO BETTER THAN NONVETERANS

Veteran employment rates over the past decade have improved such that they are generally lower than the unemployment rate of nonveterans.³ Similarly, the median annual income for veteran households is consistently higher than that of nonveteran households.⁴ In "The Recent Occupation and Industry Employment Patterns of American Veterans," RAND's David Shulker used American Community Survey data to analyze in which industries veterans are employed and their income relative to nonveterans employed in the same industries, finding that veterans make slightly more money than their civilian counterparts.⁵ He notes that transition programs that emphasize finding civilian employment similar to one's military specialty may better aid those for whom there is clear overlap or a compelling civilian equivalent. His research highlights the opportunities for new technologies and pathways to civilian employment to aid those whose military occupation may not have an obvious corollary in the civilian world, or an overlap of direct skills.

However, research by Dr. Meredith Kleykamp from 2013 and more recent analysis of American Community Survey data from 2017 indicate that economic outcomes of military service vary by race and gender.⁶ In keeping with this finding of varying degrees of success among various veteran sub-populations, the Pew Research Center notes that significantly more commissioned officers have secured jobs upon leaving the military than either noncommissioned officers or enlisted personnel.⁷ A recent RAND study focused on how to ease transition for enlisted soldiers by creating more robust tools to understand applicable roles after service. In "Helping Soldiers Leverage Army Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities in Civilian Jobs," RAND authors focus on the role of a service member's military occupational specialty in transition, and how to develop improved crosswalks to civilian occupations, as well as further examining other improvements to transitioning from active duty to civilian life, and also from active duty to the reserve component.⁸ And Pew recently has found that "veterans of prime working age generally fare at least as well in the U.S. job market as nonveterans, though there are some differences in the work they do and in which industries."⁹

2.1.2 HIGHLY VALUED FOR SOFT SKILLS

While the military provides a significant amount of education and job-specific training, several studies highlighted the importance to employers of soft skills, including leadership, integrity, and diversity. Surveys of employers conducted by CNAS, the Institute for Veterans and Military Families, and the RAND Corporation all emphasize the value placed by employers on soft skills that may be much more difficult to teach or train than the industry-specific skill sets a veteran may be lacking.¹⁰ The desire to have the soft skills of veterans in a company or industry may indicate companies are open to upskilling or reskilling veterans, and programs to this effect include Skillbridge, the Department of Veterans Affairs VET TEC program, and private sector efforts. In

“Revisiting the Business Case for Hiring a Veteran,” Dr. Michael Haynie recommends companies develop a “purposeful strategy to place veterans as a human capital resource in their first and best use within the firm.”¹¹

2.1.3 PERCEPTION ISSUES: CIVIL MILITARY DIVIDE

CNAS’s “Lost in Translation” discusses the role of the civil-military divide in veteran employment and transition, highlighting how the growing gap between the nation and those who serve in uniform may be contributing to difficulty finding a job after service, due to a “lack of knowledge, familiarity, and interaction.”¹² Employers may struggle to translate military experience into civilian job positions, and to support the necessary learning curve of transition into a non-military workplace. New colleagues also may be unfamiliar with military service and make assumptions about mental health issues or what they experienced while serving. In “Employing America’s Veterans,” interviews indicate that while an employer may want to support veterans, there may be underlying concerns, including effective skill-matching, future deployments for those still in the reserve component, and how to source veteran talent for its particular company.¹³

Employers also may be reticent to openly express their concerns with hiring veterans. Much of the literature surrounding veteran employment relies on survey data that may suffer from limitations, particularly given relatively small sample sizes and recent literature indicating that support for veterans and the military may be inflated due to societal pressures.¹⁴ Recently, researchers analyzed the database of LinkedIn, the professional networking company, and found that expressed interest and recruitment of veterans do not necessarily translate into actual hiring.¹⁵ These dynamics also are highlighted by Phillip Carter, Katherine Kidder, Amy Schafer, and Moira Fagan in “Lost in Translation,” and may indicate that in addition to any logistical barriers to connecting veterans and employers, significant cultural barriers remain that impede both recruiting and retention.

2.1.4 CHALLENGE OF MOVING TO NEW FIELDS

One of the most obvious factors that can make the transition to new employment easier is moving to a job similar to one held previously. In “Workforce Readiness Alignment: The Relationship Between Job Preferences, Retention, and Earnings,” IVMF notes that the three factors that contribute to workforce readiness alignment, and the positive outcomes associated with that alignment, are: if a job is in a veteran’s preferred career field, if the job generally matches the occupations a veteran was trained for while in the military, and if veteran status helped to secure the job.¹⁶ IVMF highlights that “veterans who secure employment in their preferred career fields exhibit longer average job tenure, higher salary, and greater perceived quality of life.”¹⁷

Another way to phrase the factors identified by IVMF would be preference, skills, and network. That better employment outcomes derive from the combination of these three factors seems intuitive, but what happens when one or more do not hold? After all, many military specialties do not directly translate to civilian occupations, nor is it always the case that a veteran will want a similar job in civilian life even if there is an occupational match. The recent LinkedIn study found that while more than half of surveyed veterans are interested in a new field, the reality is that they are most likely to be hired in a field similar to their military experience.¹⁸

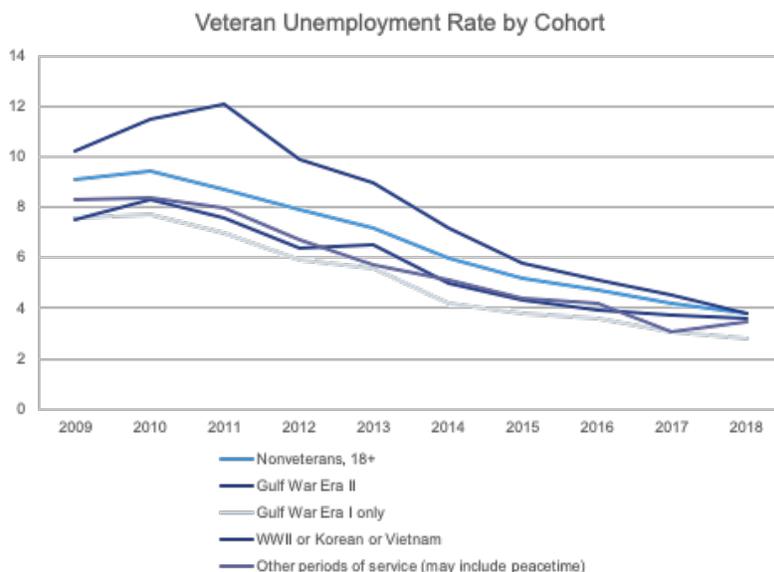
Pew Foundation research also shows that only one in four veterans has a job lined up after service, meaning that many may experience economic stress during the job search, possibly leading some to accept any job they can get instead of holding out for the type of job they might truly desire.¹⁹ Pew also found that a disproportionate number of veterans are employed by the federal government. Much of this is likely due to veteran preferences in hiring and natural exposure to government jobs, but whether these jobs were veterans' top preferences is unexplored.

Here the LinkedIn study points to a potential limitation in veteran job searches—the lack of strong networks. Despite focusing on those veterans on the platform who already possess bachelor's degrees, the study found that even these networks are somewhat limited in that veteran networks tend to be, unsurprisingly, composed to a large degree of other veterans.²⁰ This may limit the ability of veterans to explore new occupations and pathways to employment that are not already popular among other veterans.

2.2 FROM STUDY TO ACTION: THE CURRENT VETERAN EMPLOYMENT LANDSCAPE

The renewed focus on veteran employment over the past ten years, particularly among post-9/11 veterans, has led to a number of initiatives to address the issue. In 2011, then-First Lady Michelle Obama and Jill Biden created the White House “Joining Forces” initiative to spotlight issues facing the military community, one of which was unemployment among veterans and military spouses.²¹ The U.S. Chamber of Commerce began its “Hiring Our Heroes” program in 2011 as well, leveraging available federal, state, and local resources to focus on connecting veterans and military spouses with “meaningful employment opportunities.”²² Additionally, private sector companies worked together to launch the “100,000 Jobs Mission” to highlight their goal of hiring 100,000 veterans by 2020; having hired more than 500,000 veterans since launching in 2011, the initiative has since rebranded as the “Veteran Jobs Mission.”²³ Veteran employment initiatives also have expanded across the federal government, such as the Corporation for National and Community Service, which focuses on recruiting veterans for service opportunities. And as another example, the Small Business Administration has an Office of Veterans Business Development focusing on providing resources to veteran entrepreneurs, another avenue of post-service employment.²⁴

As these efforts have been under way and the economy has improved, unemployment among both veterans and the population writ large has declined. Furthermore, the veteran unemployment rates that exceeded those of nonveterans in the years following the crash of 2008 now have reverted to historical norms, with veterans generally showing lesser rates of unemployment than their nonveteran peers. However, the research suggests this declining veteran unemployment rate may be masking a significant veteran *underemployment* rate.²⁵ Though finding a job after service may have become easier, finding not just a job but “the right job” impacts future outcomes as well.



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The aforementioned LinkedIn report found that veterans on the LinkedIn platform have higher first-year retention rates than nonveterans and are more likely to be promoted earlier than nonveterans, which are all seemingly positive employment outcomes.²⁷ Yet, the report also finds one-third of veterans are underemployed and that veterans are more likely than their nonveteran peers to be underemployed.²⁸ Significantly, the LinkedIn study was limited to site members having a bachelor’s degree, potentially biasing the sample significantly toward those most likely to succeed in the job market. There also are reports from veteran-serving nonprofits of increased demand for employment assistance services among transitioning veterans.²⁹ This increase in demand could signal either dissatisfaction with current job prospects, i.e. the potential of underemployment, or simply an increase in awareness of such services.

These findings raise a number of dilemmas and questions that are difficult to answer with existing data. As the Pew Research Center found, transitioning officers are more likely than enlisted personnel to have jobs lined up before they leave the military.³⁰ Yet these officers are often the population under study in reports of underemployment among veterans, which raises many questions. Is underemployment among officers a matter of just having higher aspirations for employment, or have researchers not looked closely enough at the population of veterans who were enlisted?

The inability to answer questions around the scope and impact of veteran underemployment is part of a larger issue with existing data around veteran employment. While a significant amount of thoughtful and excellent research exists examining transition and economic outcomes of veterans after service, those studying the issue are often stuck between using the blunt instruments of government statistics or the more granular, but often unrepresentative, data provided by convenience sampling of available populations.

From the outset, the primary catalyst for studies of veteran employment has been unemployment statistics pulled from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.³¹ Unfortunately, the collection of these data follows a highly regulated process that provides continuity over time, but does not allow for refined looks at specific subsets of the population, particularly when attempting to parse out further divisions within the already-small veteran population (such as unemployment for female veterans by state, or post-9/11 veterans with and without college degrees). The government also conducts the comprehensive American Community Survey, which provides snapshots of the veteran experience, but government data on the veteran population as a whole is further limited by the fact that the 2010 Census did not capture veteran status, nor is there a plan to do so in 2020. After a recent attempt by Rebecca Burgess of the American Enterprise Institute to use existing government data to map out the national veteran population, she lamented that “the more one tries to piece together a clear picture of veteran demographics, the less coherent the data seem to be.”³²

On the other side of the coin, many of the most compelling studies on veteran employment paint nuanced pictures of the challenges veterans face in seeking employment, but are often focused on specific subsets of the general veteran population. Among the studies cited in this report, the LinkedIn study paints a rich picture of veteran networks, but only includes those who already have bachelor’s degrees (and are likely officers) and have opted into using LinkedIn. Similarly, the Call of Duty/ZipRecruiter report casts a broader categorical reach in that it does not exclude any veterans based on educational attainment, but remains limited to those who are on the ZipRecruiter platform. Both also implicitly rely on those veterans who identify themselves as veterans on job search and professional platforms.

As a result, much of our understanding of veteran employment is shaped by those we see: typically officers, those who are able to and choose to use online tools for finding employment, and those who overtly self-identify as veterans. Some research has suggested, for example, that women veterans traditionally were less likely to self-identify as veterans, though that has changed among members of the Post-9/11 generation. Data are also unavailable on the employment outcomes of certain subpopulations, such as LGBT veterans, because that status is not collected on any current large-scale surveys. Additionally, the unemployment rate does not capture those who have given up on looking for work, potentially masking a larger problem.³³

Opportunity: Expand Understanding

Given the status of data on veteran employment, one of the first opportunities for improving veteran pathways is to improve the availability of data related to the issue. The options for doing this range in difficulty from multi-year efforts to more straightforward actions that can be implemented with little cost.

Among the most difficult options would be to improve and, more importantly, connect government data collection efforts and databases. Bureau of Labor Statistics employment data, as currently captured, offer no information on the type or quality of current employment, nor do these data allow for assessing employment trends at the local level. Similarly, the number of veterans captured in the surveys does not allow for robust analysis of veteran sub-populations. These limitations make it difficult to truly understand where programming might be the most impactful. Yet a tremendous

amount of information on veterans is housed across the Department of Defense, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and the Social Security Administration. It is theoretically possible, although not bureaucratically easy, to precisely measure veteran employment with a synthesis of payroll tax data, DoD data, and VA data regarding veteran identification. Practitioners in the veteran employment space, such as Dan Goldenberg of the Call of Duty Foundation, have advocated specific policies to increase data sharing across government agencies in ways that would provide more actionable data on veteran employment while still protecting the identities and data of individual veterans.³⁴ While these issues are not immediately rectifiable and changing government regulations around data collection and sharing is no small task, veteran-supporting nonprofits interested in better data on veterans should be consistent in advocating for such changes.

One significant government-supported effort collecting better data is the Veteran Metrics Initiative (TVMI), an ongoing public-private partnership supported by DoD and the VA that since 2015 has tracked a cohort of veterans across the first three years of their transition to civilian life. This type of panel study promises to establish a rich understanding of employment (and other) outcomes while assessing the role of various programs in the success of veteran transitions. Future research must not only build on this study and the data it will make available, but seek to replicate the methodology, and develop new methodologies that can passively monitor outcomes and trends for large cohorts of veterans as they age and move beyond service. This, in effect, would replicate the enormously valuable data created by the National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study, but do so using 21st-century research methodologies.

Following the above efforts, recommendations that would be comparatively easy to implement but would help immensely in piecing together an accurate picture of hurdles and opportunities in veteran employment would be:

1. Creation of a consolidated, publicly-accessible resource that includes existing veteran employment studies and the underlying databases used for each study
2. An agreement among major funders of efforts in the veteran employment space to require the implementation and reporting of baseline metrics on the efforts and outcomes of funded programs
3. More focus and funding directed toward those veteran subpopulations that might not participate in veteran-specific employment programs.

3.0 GOVERNMENT SUPPORT TO TRANSITIONING SERVICE MEMBERS

The Department of Defense Transition Assistance Program (TAP) was created in the early 1990s to help ease transition with the post-Cold War downsizing of the armed forces.³⁵ Efforts to reform the program began in earnest with the economic downturn and spike in veteran unemployment in the late 2000s. In 2011, the VOW to Hire Heroes Act mandated pre-separation career counseling for all transitioning service members, while concurrently the TAP curriculum was overhauled by the Veterans Employment Initiative Task Force and several agencies, including the Department of Defense and Department of Veterans Affairs.³⁶ The new curriculum, Transition GPS (Goals, Planning, and Success) is composed of a standard curriculum for all transitioning service members

and separate components focused on Accessing Higher Education, Career Technical Training, and Entrepreneurship.³⁷ Under the current TAP, all service members have a set of requirements to meet prior to leaving military service, ranging from attending briefings on benefits available after service to participating in career counseling sessions.³⁸

In an effort to further improve TAP, the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act prescribed new changes, such as changing the time line for TAP programming to start no later than one year prior to separation and the use of the MyTransition tool, which crosswalks military occupations with civilian employment opportunities.³⁹ In addition, the Air Force piloted a Women's Health Transition Training component of TAP that has since expanded to the other services.⁴⁰ These changes are an attempt to ameliorate prior issues, such as the "one size fits all" nature of TAP programming and short transition planning time lines. But support for transition opportunities such as Skillbridge, or even full participation in TAP, tends to be at the discretion of the chain of command, who have not experienced a transition themselves and are likely focused on operational requirements, leaving a mismatch between the demands of service and post-service career-readiness. Similarly, siloing each of the elements of TAP may make sense from an operational standpoint, but often leads to a piecemeal approach to benefits, employment, and counseling.

The increase in government services provided to transitioning service members over the past decade has been fairly dramatic, and represents a significant shift in institutional attitudes. However, there are limitations to the ability of the government to provide flexible and responsive services. First among these limitations is the fact that providing transition services and training for future employment is simply not the core mission of the Department of Defense. Every program added to assist a service member with future employment is likely to detract from a focus on current missions and training. There are therefore limitations to what we should expect from military leaders in terms of their direct engagement with transitioning service members. However, there are opportunities, via existing programs, to promote planning for transition and the acquisition of the education and skill sets integral to a successful transition to civilian employment.

Opportunity: The Power of Education

Continuing education is promoted across the military and extensively resourced, with \$561 million allocated in 2019 for service members to use for education and credentialing opportunities while still in uniform.⁴¹ While this is a tremendous benefit and opportunity, many describe a system that has sometimes been seen as a 'check the box' process with service members pursuing credits for promotion boards in an ad hoc manner that does not necessarily contribute to post-service educational efforts or employment. Many also describe a system dominated by for-profit educational and credentialing organizations that proactively market to service members, but may not offer the best services for acquiring marketable skills or credits that can be counted toward degree programs at other institutions.⁴² Fortunately, in recent years each of the military services has made an effort to consolidate resources for continuing education and to offer tailored counseling and academic planning to help service members decide how best to maximize their educational benefits and even to include post-service employment considerations in their educational planning.⁴³

This makes the military's continuing education systems an ideal entry point for discussions on how to think about, and begin preparation for, post-service employment. Because this is the first point at which many service members will think about post-secondary education, it is also a prime area for introducing the tools with which prospective students can learn to assess their educational options and begin to prepare for the post-service employment path best suited for them.

Opportunity: Planning for Dual-Income Families

A common lament among military spouses is the lack of transition resources and programs tailored for their unique needs. This is the natural result of a personnel system originally designed around the single-income families of past generations. Over the past several years there have been efforts to incorporate spouses into transition support services, but integration of spouses into transition services at the end of a service member's time in the military does little to support a spouse's career during that service. Thankfully, nonprofits are stepping in to support spouses navigating the frequent moves and resulting employment transitions that military life entails.

As these efforts are implemented they should focus primarily on the specific challenges facing military spouses, but also do that which transition services have generally failed to do, which is to place transition challenges in the context of dual-income families. By looking beyond just the service member, or the military spouse, to the family unit, these programs will be better suited to provide military families the planning skills and resources to successfully navigate employment transitions both during and after military service. The benefits of habitual joint career planning will expose service members to the realities of finding civilian employment prior to their own transition and will enable families to better prepare financially for the transition period.

4.0 THE CIVILIAN EMPLOYMENT ENVIRONMENT

4.1 THE CHANGING LABOR MARKET

As government efforts have evolved to support departing service members, so too has the civilian employment environment that they are entering as veterans. In today's job market, automation threatens to disrupt traditional employment sectors, and the demand for trained technical workers continues to outstrip demand. An estimated 14.7 million jobs are at risk of disappearing over the next decade due to automation, hitting the employment prospects of 18–34 year old workers, and therefore the bulk of transitioning veterans, especially hard.⁴⁴ And those manufacturing jobs that do remain increasingly will require higher degrees of education and training than in years past.⁴⁵ The landscape of employment also is changing, with projected employment growth consolidated around major cities, while America's rural counties will have the worst employment prospects.⁴⁶ Taken together, these trends imply that veterans will find unskilled, entry-level jobs difficult to obtain. Considerations of where to live also will take on increased importance; for veterans, who are disproportionately drawn from rural communities, going "home" may not be the best choice for post-military employment prospects.⁴⁷

A silver lining to this rapidly shifting job landscape is a flood of available jobs in the tech sector—for those qualified to hold them. According to a recent Council on Foreign Relations report on innovation and national security, “U.S. universities are currently projected to produce fewer than 30 percent of the required number of graduates to fill the 1.4 million computer specialist job openings.”⁴⁸ Despite increased emphasis on the employability and importance of STEM degrees and education, there is still a significant talent gap in the United States, with far more technical roles available than qualified talent. In keeping with this shortage of tech talent in the private sector, the problem is also acute within the defense community.⁴⁹

This means there is an enormous opportunity to provide a service to the nation by increasing the pipeline of veterans employed in the technology sector—helping to close the civil-military divide, providing employment to those who have served, and providing an influx of talented individuals with essential soft skills to American companies. Similarly, while establishing pipelines for veterans to fill these technology talent gaps within DoD would require the same educational efforts as training veterans for the private sector, veterans would be prime candidates due to their familiarity with government employment and the fact that they are more likely to already possess the clearances the government often requires for such work. A number of programs offer veterans training or credentialing on various IT platforms. However, many of them have narrow eligibility requirements or are limited in location; broadening these would expand the number of veterans able to benefit.

4.2 THE PREVALENCE OF DYSFUNCTIONAL PERCEPTIONS

As veterans enter the civilian workforce they not only must navigate a changing employment landscape, but the perceptions that the public has about those who have served in uniform. The U.S. military occupies a unique place in the minds of most Americans. It is consistently rated the most respected institution in the United States.⁵⁰ Veterans, however, often are seen as being prone to post-traumatic stress disorder and needing additional assistance in civilian life. This hero-victim dichotomy has spawned literally thousands of charitable organizations during the years since 9/11, but can be unhelpful in setting veterans up for a successful transition to meaningful post-service employment.

While admiration for the military can lead to open doors for veterans and a willingness to support them that other groups do not receive, the “hero” label actually can be harmful in shaping the expectations of veterans. In interviews with civilian employers and nonprofit leaders serving veterans in transition, a frequent lament is the perception among some veterans that they are “owed” meaningful employment. In a similar vein, after being lauded for leadership and management capabilities, many veterans in transition demonstrate an expectation for employment that is directly commensurate with the level of responsibility they held while in the military. There also is a tendency among veterans to conflate managing larger numbers of personnel with greater responsibility, when that might not be the case or be part of the path to senior management in technology companies. While the extent and relevance of these sentiments are untested, they are likely contributing factors to veteran feelings of underemployment.

The detrimental effects of the “victim” label are more straightforward in that the prevalence of messaging about veteran suicide rates and post-traumatic stress disorder can negatively shape the

views, and willingness, of employers to seek out veterans for employment. While these are real and pressing issues, they can play an outsized role in shaping perceptions of the value of veterans in the workforce. After all, it is one thing to laud veterans for their perceived discipline and patriotism, but another thing to hire them if an employer believes that veterans also are emotionally unstable and prone to violence.⁵¹ There also is anecdotal evidence of military leaders believing that many service members are not capable of succeeding in higher education, although this can be driven both by negative perceptions of service member capabilities as well as a lack of knowledge of pathways to higher education that exist—even for those who may not have been high academic achievers in high school.

Several initiatives and campaigns have sought to directly counteract negative perceptions of veterans and to promote the perceptions of veterans not as a cause of charity, but as assets to both businesses and civic life.⁵² And while the focus of the messaging of these programs is directed at civilian employers, these programs also play the role of giving veterans the confidence and tools they need to pursue jobs and educational opportunities that at first may appear out of their reach.

Opportunity: Changing the Narrative

While most who work closely with the military tend to view veterans positively and as civic assets, the view from the side of the public, and particularly from employers, remains unfortunately mixed. Moving perceptions of veterans beyond stereotypes or only superficial understanding requires constant and concerted effort. Relatedly, the modern employment environment will require more than simply gratitude and recognition for past military service, but a recognition of both the hurdles and opportunities that come with employing veterans. Those designing and implementing veteran employment programs therefore must ensure that a positive, yet realistic and productive, narrative is part of any new initiative.

For employers, and those working with employers to bolster veteran employment initiatives, program narratives should include:

- Veterans can be assets to companies, but may need to be viewed as investments over time as opposed to having immediate impact due to the need to acclimatize to civilian workplaces and learn new skills.
- The task of translating veteran skill sets must go beyond MOS-translators to the next step of designing tailored pathways for individuals that make those skill sets relevant to specific occupational roles.
- Veterans are not “uniform,” but represent the diversity of America and share the value of service, no matter their gender, race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation.

The messages that should be included in programs for veterans seeking civilian employment are:

- Doing hard things in the military does not mean everything in civilian life will be easy; it just demonstrates a capacity to accomplish difficult tasks.

- Direct translation of military skillsets to civilian occupations is rare, and the need to upskill, reskill, or adapt for success in the modern workforce is increasingly a requirement for civilian employment.
- A plethora of supportive resources exist, but veterans must take ownership of their path to employment.
- Appreciation of past military service may open doors, but it is on the veteran to demonstrate the ability to bring value to a civilian organization.

Lastly, those committed to supporting veterans in transition must take a long-term view of fundraising. Because the “victim” narrative resonates with many Americans it can be tempting to highlight veteran needs in fundraising pitches. Unfortunately, this can be a counterproductive approach as it can shape civilian employer perspectives such that they may be hesitant to hire veterans, no matter the skill sets they bring.

5.0 THE OCEAN OF VETERAN EMPLOYMENT SERVICE PROVIDERS

There are numerous programs and initiatives designed to decrease veteran unemployment and to assist veterans in transition, ranging from the aforementioned federal government programming, to focused hiring efforts by private sector companies, to large and small nonprofits focused exclusively on veteran transitions. In fact, there are so many different initiatives that it would be difficult to argue that adequate resources and tools are not available to assist veterans seeking employment. Unfortunately, finding, evaluating, and accessing these tools and resources can be a significant challenge in itself.

As but one example, the recent report from CNAS, “From Sea to Shining Sea: State-Level Benefits for Veterans,” found that there are more than 1,800 state-level benefits for veterans, with those related to employment and education being the most prevalent.⁵³ However, the report also found that the quality of those benefits varied widely, and that even finding and applying for the benefits is often challenging.

State-level benefits are but one type of resource available to veterans seeking employment. Among the other services offered are a myriad of public and privately funded online tools, some of which aim to translate military skills into civilian analogues or to collate job offerings for veterans.⁵⁴ Other programming is aimed at mass awareness, working to motivate companies to hire more veterans and to raise awareness of veteran employment opportunities in certain industry sectors.⁵⁵ There also are programs designed to provide technical training, which can help veterans gain a foothold in a particular industry, or try to reskill themselves after service. Nonprofits that are “high touch” focus on providing personalized services to small cohorts of veterans, normally selected through an application process, and placing them in jobs in the right industry and at the right level.⁵⁶ Veteran-specific firms also have emerged within the headhunting and job placement industry. These efforts are typically very specialized but may take a cut of future earnings in keeping with similar, civilian-focused models.

With the number and diversity of resources available, the challenge is not mobilizing resources, but enabling veterans to navigate these resources in a way that best fits their interests, talents, and potential. Currently it is nearly impossible for veterans in transition to understand the full breadth of options available to them and which will best help them achieve their goals. While the numerous efforts largely include thoughtful programming, there remains a lack of clear pathways from military service to particular jobs—there is no comprehensive roadmap as to which credential, academic degree, or job placement program would best help a veteran reach a particular career goal.

Adding to the challenge is that all veteran-serving organizations are not created equal. While the vast majority are well intentioned, many may not be able to deliver the specialized programming that individual veterans need. Interviews with nonprofit leaders reveal that many struggle with the pressures of fundraising, which sometimes leads to an expansion of services provided, even if the services are not within the organization's expertise. Similarly, competition for funding may prevent coordination across organizations. Smaller organizations also face the challenge of spreading awareness of their services. A particularly acute problem in the realm of veteran education is the way that for-profit educational institutions are incentivized to proactively advertise to veterans, sometimes leading to educational choices that are more expensive and less effective than other educational options.⁵⁷

In recent years veteran-specific “concierge” services have been established that provide personalized services to help veterans navigate available resources. These often are found at the local community and state levels and often are focused on assisting veterans and their families to navigate medical and financial crises; many include employment services as well.⁵⁸ These organizations may provide a model for helping veterans navigate employment challenges at the national level.

6.0 DESIGNING AN IDEAL SOLUTION

While improvements are needed in veteran pathways to employment, a lack of support and interest is thankfully not part of the problem. As this report has noted, along with previous efforts to understand the landscape of veteran support, there is a “Sea of Goodwill” toward the American veteran community. Yet challenges remain.

6.1 IMPROVING VETERAN AWARENESS

As the number and type of services, and service providers, has expanded, so has the challenge of finding the appropriate resources to fit the skills and desires of individual veterans. From the perspective of the veteran seeking employment, the overarching challenge to navigating this “Sea of Goodwill” to meaningful civilian employment is awareness, which is important across three dimensions.

First, there is the challenge of gaining an understanding of the full range of civilian employment options. Given that many transitioning service members may have limited civilian employment experience, and that many military occupational specialties do not translate directly to civilian jobs, it takes significant exposure for veterans to understand the breadth of potential occupations available

to them. Currently, most transition-support efforts prioritize exposure to jobs similar to those a veteran held in the military. This may be the most direct path to employment, but also may contribute to lack of fulfillment or underemployment by keeping veterans on a narrow employment path.

This need for exposure ties into the second challenge related to awareness, which is matching veteran interests and potential with the right job, as opposed “the right job for right now.” The challenge here is less a mechanical one of matching skill sets, but in providing veterans the tools to take a broader view, and the time to assess choices through a process of intentional decisionmaking. Such tools have been extensively developed for choosing educational paths, a key part of transitioning to civilian employment, but should be expanded to fit the entirety of the transition process.⁵⁹

Lastly, getting a service member to desired, meaningful employment in an increasingly tech-centric work environment requires an awareness of available resources that can be used to acquire the skill sets the desired occupation demands. Currently, exposure to upskilling or reskilling opportunities most often comes in the form of companies or educational institutions advertising the certifications and degrees that they offer, but few comprehensive resources approach the issue from the veteran’s perspective and assist in navigating the myriad offerings, or in appropriately piecing together diverse services that may be perfectly suited for helping an individual veteran achieve his or her employment goals.

6.2 THE POWER OF PERSONAL NETWORKS

In designing solutions to veteran employment challenges and finding the most effective ways to make veterans aware of diverse career options, the role of interpersonal contact and personally observed experience cannot be overstated. Technological solutions and online social and professional networking sites are valuable tools, but only insofar as they facilitate meaningful interpersonal contact. A consistent theme across interviews with nonprofit leaders and academic admissions officers is the power of personal networks in opening pathways to transitioning veterans. Seeing a fellow member of a cohort navigate to a specific educational institution or nonprofit organization has been seen to lead to an increase in interest and demand from others in that cohort.

This is not a surprising observation, but it highlights an often underappreciated dynamic at a time when significant attention is being placed on virtual networks. The challenge for those seeking to design networking services for veterans is not necessarily to expand the sheer number of people in a veteran’s online network, but to expand meaningful connections that can help in the search for employment. One way to do this would be to help veterans more easily see the paths that current and former members of their military cohort (whether defined by unit, deployment, or occupational specialty) took to obtain post-military employment and to understand where they can find supportive veteran communities in the civilian workforce.

However, work on expanding meaningful connections in veterans’ networks must not focus solely on the number of other veterans they are connected with. After all, the point of transition services is to make veterans successful in navigating a world not dominated by other veterans. One of the

lessons learned from nonprofit leaders assisting veterans pursuing entrepreneurship is that there are significant limits to veteran-centric programming and networking. There is comfort to be gained from commiserating with others who understand your background and challenges, but there also are limits to what one can learn from people with similar backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives. Those designing veteran transition pathways therefore should look at how to help veteran networks evolve over time. Veterans naturally will start with veteran-heavy networks that they can lean on as they start their transition journey, but the destination should include networks that are dominated by those who are in a veteran's chosen post-military field or occupation, whether or not they also are veterans.

6.3 STANDARDS FOR SERVICES

Beyond the challenges inherent in building the networks of veterans and making them aware of employment opportunities so they can choose the right path for themselves, those designing veteran employment services must think about how to achieve three standards often lacking in such efforts. The first challenge in improving veteran employment support systems is to design personalized services for individual veterans. As nonprofits, businesses, and educational institutions have stepped in to assist veterans, they naturally do so in a way that advertises their own specific services. This is natural and generally well intentioned, but it can leave an individual drowning in a plethora of tools and websites, the majority of which will not be directly relevant to the needs of any specific veteran.

A related challenge when navigating so many resources is finding which are most effective, and avoiding those that might be predatory, or at least an inefficient use of a veteran's time and/or financial resources. Lastly, services must be provided holistically, such that the search for employment is not derailed or at least not addressed in conjunction with other concerns. Most directly, the pursuit of higher education and career planning should be viewed as complementary efforts. No less important are concerns of healthcare, housing, and financial security. If resources addressing these challenges are difficult to access, or not seamlessly linked from employment programs, veteran efforts to achieve meaningful employment may be unnecessarily disrupted while addressing more immediate threats to a veteran's well-being.

While these standards for veteran employment services (personalized, effective, and holistic) are often met by local "concierge" resource coordinators and some of the more robust and high-touch veteran nonprofits, the challenge is to take these types of quality services to scale to effectively serve the population of veterans currently seeking employment—and the more than 200,000 additional veterans transitioning out of the military each year.

Opportunity: Civilian TAP Consortium

"You can't scale touch, but can scale scope of people invested in the issue"
—Danny Chung, chief of staff and business manager for Military Affairs at Microsoft

Taking high-touch services to scale is a daunting challenge and can even be seen as something of an oxymoron. However, via collective action that combines the efforts and technological prowess of

those companies and organizations looking to serve and employ veterans, the landscape of services provided to veterans could be greatly streamlined and improved.

Service members leaving the military are required to attend TAP, offering a single point of contact and dissemination of information. Unfortunately, but for valid reasons of privacy and the need to keep separation between public and private interests, this access point is not fully open to every organization that would like to offer products and services to transitioning service members. As a result, veterans seeking additional employment services beyond those provided by the government are on their own to navigate the ‘Sea of Goodwill’ that resides online and outside the gates.

While any single organization is challenged in getting its services in front of transitioning service members, there would be tremendous value in a consortium of civilian resource providers working together to present the range of veteran employment programs provided by the civilian sector. The lack of consolidated resources during and after transition makes it difficult to identify available pathways and understand variations in eligibility requirements by program, and also ignores the very real possibility that veterans may seek out such resources at several key points post-service, such as after their first job in the civilian sector, or when looking to move to a new area of the country, or upskill into a different field.

Such a consortium, through consolidated efforts and the efficient use of technology, could implement a number of improvements to existing pathways to veteran employment. Among the possibilities:

- Better connect existing service providers to form a stronger national network of services that cover the entire life-cycle of veterans in transition
- Facilitate linkages between local- and state-level concierge service coordinators to create a more robust, national network for veteran support
- Consolidate free tools and online resources to educate veterans on the challenges of transition and to make more informed choices about how they spend their time and money when deciding on education and employment options
- Design and implement comprehensive search tools that aid service members in navigating the universe of commercial, nonprofit, and government services, and in piecing together pathways to appropriate employment
- Build a “Common App” style form for veterans through which they can apply for multiple programs by filling out one form, further linking veterans only to programs for which they are eligible.

By building consolidated search functionality, such a consortium could move the universe of veteran service providers closer to two key, yet elusive goals. The first would be to move closer to the “no wrong door” standard of service, whereby a veteran seeking assistance will be directed to best-in-class resources, no matter which organization the veteran first contacted with an inquiry for assistance. The second would be in establishing implicit quality control for services offered to veterans. By offering educational and evaluation tools in conjunction with linkages to various services, veterans will be better able to evaluate their options generally while also being presented with exposure to best-in-class offerings that they might not otherwise find.

7.0 CONCLUSION

This overview of existing research and the current state of programs and services supporting veteran employment presents a mixed picture. On the one hand, unemployment overall is down, and veteran unemployment rates generally have moved to historical norms relative to civilian unemployment rates. There are indications, however, that many veterans are experiencing underemployment. Unfortunately, fine-grained data on veteran employment is scarce and researchers are stuck between the blunt, large-scale analysis made possible by government data, or are limited to richer studies that are sometimes limited in the veteran subpopulations under analysis. More support to veteran-focused research would be helpful in painting a clearer picture of the hurdles and opportunities facing veterans seeking employment.

That said, the universe of services available to veterans and service members in transition has grown significantly over the past decade. Government support continues to improve, and recent changes to the TAP program seek to provide more time for service members to prepare for transition out of the military. The armed forces also have improved the tools available to service members seeking to obtain educational credits during service, offering a potential point of entry and support for organizations working to better prepare service members for eventual civilian employment. Similarly, more attention is being paid to the employment challenges facing military spouses, which is a key component in the financial health of modern, dual-income families.

Nonetheless, veterans still face challenges in transition. The perceptions, or misperceptions, of veterans and the skills they bring to the workforce are a perennial challenge. It will require constant emphasis and work to move beyond the hero/victim dichotomy, which is unhelpful for establishing understanding and meaningful connections with the public and potential employers. Somewhat new to the environment, however, is the changing employment landscape, where automation and technology are making hurdles to employment even higher. This threatens to make direct matching of military skill sets to civilian employment opportunities an even rarer phenomenon, and will make upskilling and further education a transition requirement for more veterans.

Lastly, the universe of organizations offering services to veterans, the “Sea of Goodwill,” is fairly large. This is fundamentally a positive development, but it also means that veterans face myriad choices in transition that often can be confusing and, sometimes, lead veterans down sub-optimal paths. Connecting quality resources across the spectrum of veteran needs, and helping veterans navigate these offerings, are therefore two easy ways that civilian entities, working together, can vastly improve the employment prospects of America’s veterans without necessarily creating new programs.

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