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*Center for Innovation and Research
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FROM WAR TO THE WORKPLACE: HELPING VETERANS TRANSITION TO CIVILIAN WORK SETTINGS

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In a previous CIR policy brief, Little & Alenkin (2011) pointedly addressed one of the main barriers confronting veterans attempting to seek employment: potential employer mental health stigma. In this month's brief, we aim to expand their analysis by discussing other causes and effects of veteran unemployment. Subsequently, this brief provides various recommendations that aim to reduce veteran unemployment and help veterans transition to civilian work settings. Recommendations are based on knowledge gained from existing literature and empirical studies focused on veteran employment.

Veteran Unemployment in Context

Securing gainful employment and establishing financial stability are key transition goals for veterans transitioning from military to civilian life (Elbogen, Johnson, Wagner, Newton, & Beckham, 2012). However, many veterans are struggling to secure employment once they return home. It is estimated that out of 11.3 million veterans in the civilian labor workforce, 945,000 are unemployed (Institute for Veterans and Military Families, 2012). In the past few years, veteran unemployment rates have teetered at about 8.3%, slightly lower than the

national civilian average of approximately 8.7% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010-2012). Even though this is a positive sign, a closer inspection shows significant cause for concern. Young veterans (18-24), female veterans, and National Guard Members/Reservists rank among the most at-risk of being unemployed, with unemployment rates at 29%, 9%, and 11%, respectively (BLS, 2011-2012).

The root causes of veteran unemployment are complex, but can be attributed to number of factors. First, veterans are struggling to navigate and find work within the U.S. labor market, which has limited job opportunities and is still recovering from a severe economic recession. Second, there appears to be a significant knowledge gap between work-seeking veterans and civilian employers (IVMF, 2012). On the one hand, large numbers of veterans do not yet possess the skills needed to qualify for certain job opportunities and are simultaneously finding it difficult to effectively translate their military skills into language that is accessible to civilian employers. On the other hand, civilian employers may find it difficult to understand military jargon and occupations; thereby hindering employ-

ers from seeing how veterans' military skill sets can be used to enhance organizational performance (IVMF, 2012; Harrell & Berglass, 2012). Recognizing the value and skills veterans bring to an organization is extremely important. As noted in a large study of OEF/OIF veterans, it is clear that veterans associate their satisfaction with a job to how well an employer applies their existing skills and abilities (Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, 2012). Finally, geography may be a key barrier to employment, especially for veterans from rural communities. When veterans return to their communities they are finding that local businesses are either not hiring or are

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offering jobs that do not match their existing skill sets. As a result, increasing numbers of veterans are relocating with their families to other parts of the country where job opportunities are more readily available (IVMF, 2012; Monster, 2012).

The Effects of Unemployment at the Ground Level

Upon reintegration to civilian life, veterans may be unemployed and facing serious financial challenges resulting from their military service. Indeed, new literature is arising that identifies the correlations between combat exposure, military training, service-connected disability, multiple deployments, psychological war injuries, and increased financial hardship (Elbogen et al., 2012). Employment can serve as a protective factor mitigating such challenges and can be an integral component of a healthy transition to civilian life (Elbogen et al., 2012; Hassan & Chicas, 2012). Employment provides not only monetary resources, but also latent benefits such as increased social activities, feeling of shared activities and goals with coworkers, and structured time schedule (Jahoda, 1982; Wanberg, 2012). The military provides strong latent benefits through unit cohesion, paternal leadership, and supportive battle buddies (Adler, Bliese, & Castro, 2011). As servicemembers separate from active duty, some of them are highly influenced by losing the latent benefits and report social isolation and cultural division with the civilian population (Schell & Tanielian, 2011).

In addition, unemployment could be associated with deteriorating mental health for veterans. In many cross-sectional studies, strong associations have been found between mental health and unemployment. In such studies, experience of job loss was followed with poorer psychological health (Paul & Moser, 2009). A meta-analysis summarizing twenty-seven studies examining people who lost their job from a factory foreclosure can legitimately posit the temporal order of the two variables and suggest unemployed people are more likely to suffer from emotional distress (Paul & Moser, 2009). The findings imply that veterans struggling

with securing stable employment are likely to be at-risk for mental health problems, if the job loss is prolonged. However, there are many variables moderating the link between unemployment and mental health including demographic, social support, financial resources, cognitive appraisal, and coping strategies that could alleviate the negative influence of unemployment on mental health (Paul & Moser, 2009; Mckee-Ryan, Kinicki, Song, & Wanberg, 2005).

Addressing Veteran Unemployment

Given the extent of veteran unemployment rates and challenges, public and private sectors have joined forces with the federal government to develop comprehensive response measures. Several policies and programs have been designed to reduce veteran unemployment and bolster the labor market's capacity to employ veterans (Harrell & Berglass, 2012; IVMF, 2012; Little & Alenkin, 2011). Most notably, there is a significant push on behalf of the private sector to recruit and hire veterans to work in their organizations. Initiatives such as the 100,000 "Job Mission" led by JP Morgan Stanley Chase and "Hiring our Heroes" by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce are cited as key models of public/private partnerships intended to reduce veteran unemployment (IVMF, 2012). Such models are serving as critical pieces of the larger movement to ensure veterans are securing employment and effectively transitioning to civilian life.

In addition to hiring veterans, ample attention should also be placed on gaining a deeper understanding of how veterans' skills actually translate to civilian work settings. Achieving this aim is important for veterans and civilian employers. To veterans, it means knowing how to recognize and leverage their military skills in a way that aligns with their work-related roles and organizational goals. To civilian employers, it means recognizing the value of a veteran's military service and connecting them to work-related roles that maximize their military skill sets.

Notable efforts are being made to make this translation clear to the civilian and veteran community. Such efforts clarify the interrela-

tionships between skills gained through the military, their application in the business setting, and the positive effects they can have on an organization's performance. Clarifying these linkages is a challenging task, but once the linkages are made, it becomes very clear that hiring and retaining veterans makes good business sense (Harrell & Berglass, 2012; IVMF, 2012).

The CIR Veteran Employment Survey

In an effort to contribute to the growing body of literature that evaluates these linkages, it is important to assess the attitudes and perceptions that civilian employers consider when thinking about veteran employees. To this end, the USC Center for Innovation and Research on Veterans & Military Families (CIR) developed and distributed the "Veteran Employment Survey," which includes a sample of 77 representatives from 37 businesses in the public and private sectors. The majority of survey participants are mid-to-senior level managers, served in the military, expected to hire veterans in the near future, and work in large (200+ employees) organizations that have veteran employees. Sixty-five percent of respondents are from the private sector and come from a range of industries, with most representation from human service, health care, education, and financial services.

Given the amount of survey respondents with prior military service, the research team disaggregated the data to further examine differences between veteran and non-veteran respondents in order to mitigate possible sample biases. Closer examination of the data showed that responses were still generally very positive; however, responses were slightly more positive among participants with prior military service. We found this to be the case, especially among mid-to-senior level managers with prior military service. Among this group, support for the following statements was significantly higher compared to civilian participants: "I believe that military skills easily translate to the

workplace" and "I believe that veterans effectively translate their military skills to the workplace."

Employers expressed very positive feedback about the types of strengths they believe veterans bring to the workplace. More than 85% of respondents agree that veterans are: disciplined, make good leaders, work well in teams, show organizational commitment, and bring cross-cultural experiences to the work place. Further, more than 80% of participants agreed that veterans take on high levels of responsibility and are advanced at team building skills compared to civilians. In addition, 83% of respondents felt it was valuable to expose their workplace to individuals with military experience. As these figures indicate, veterans are perceived to have a diverse range of skills that may be appealing to civilian employers. Similar findings were also found in prior research and employer-based surveys (Harrell & Berglass, 2012; IVMF, 2012; Monster, 2012).

Employers also mentioned several concerns relating to veteran employment. For instance, 56% of respondents do not believe that military resumes are easy to interpret. This was especially the case for non-veteran participants and mid-to-senior level managers. In addition, 29% of respondents did not agree that veterans effectively translate the value and/or relevance of their military skill sets to the workplace. Several specific concerns were cited in regard to hiring veterans including: struggling with the transition to civilian life, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and adjustment to civilian organizational culture.

Discussion & Recommendations

Based on empirical research on negative effects of unemployment, securing employment is one of the first steps veterans can take to successfully transition to civilian life. In an effort to facilitate veteran employment in the labor market, CIR conducted a survey illuminating the positive perceptions and attitudes employers

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have about veterans. Survey findings bolster existing efforts to examine why hiring veterans makes good business sense. Today's business environment can greatly benefit from the skills and experiences veterans bring to the workplace. However, a common challenge cited among civilian employers, including our sample, is that employers are unsure how to translate military skills and Military Occupational Specialties (MOS) to corresponding civilian work roles and responsibilities (IVMF, 2012; Harrell & Berglass, 2012; Monster, 2012). The lack of translation serves as a significant barrier to helping veterans attain meaningful civilian work experiences. The CIR Veteran Employment survey data illustrates that an effective strategy to mitigate this challenge may be to hire veterans into human resource or supervisory positions. Within these positions, veterans can assist businesses in translating the military skill sets of veteran employees and support veterans as they adjust to the civilian workforce setting. In turn, businesses could be better positioned to leverage veteran employees' military skill sets in ways that effectively increase organizational capacity and performance.

As the CIR employment survey indicates, civilian employers may be aware that veterans may experience transition challenges and that work performance could be affected as a result. Supervisors and managers should demonstrate a degree of patience as veterans adjust to the civilian employment environment and to new occupational responsibilities. It is important to note that a veteran's recent employer was the U.S. military and thus they are accustomed to a much different type of occupational culture. For example, some veteran employees may seem to be rigid in their decision-making, but that is because the military has a highly structured chain of command and a very prescriptive way of carrying out tasks. Further, it is important to consider that their previous workplace may have been a war zone where life-threatening danger was a constant in their lives. As a result, it is likely that veterans will need additional support while they adjust to their new work environment.

Local Vet Centers or Veteran Service Organizations (VSO) may be valuable resources for civil-

ian employers that hire veterans. It would be enormously beneficial for the employer to invite one of the Vet Center counselors (or someone from a VSO) to brief supervisors and managers on how to more effectively incorporate and support veterans in their workplace. Establishing a conduit between the employer's Human Resources Department or Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is also necessary. Vet Centers and VSOs are located in communities throughout the country and have been established in part for the purpose of helping veterans adjust to civilian life in their home communities. Most have counselors who are veterans with specialized mental health training and have shown receptiveness to assisting local employers with successfully reintegrating veteran employees into the civilian workplace.

Additional Recommendations

The following recommendations are supported by our analysis and synthesis of existing literature. The recommendations are not exhaustive, but do reflect the inherent complexities in addressing veteran unemployment. Further research and evaluation in this area is needed to respond to growing and evolving needs of veterans looking to integrate into the civilian workforce. Our hope is that these recommendations contribute to existing efforts aimed at curtailing veteran unemployment.

1. Increase public and private sector funding to train human resource personnel on interpreting military language, occupations and military culture.
2. Encourage civilian employers to hire supervisors with military backgrounds in order to translate and maximize veteran employees' skill sets.
3. Develop and sustain supportive mechanisms through Employee Assistant Programs and Veteran Service Organizations
4. Establish conduits of veteran employment support between both small-to-large employers and business organizations such as local Chambers of Commerce and business service clubs.
5. Fund research initiatives that evaluate the protective and risk factors associated with veteran unemployment, especially among

vulnerable populations such as young veterans, female veterans, National Guards Members/Reservists, and disabled veterans.

6. Broaden support for veteran hiring initiatives and media campaigns that focus on veteran strengths, while promoting the development of long-term strategies that help veterans thrive in civilian work settings.
7. Encourage employers to implement appropriate tracking systems that evaluate how veterans are performing in civilian work settings and utilize data-driven solutions to enhance employment support.

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The views expressed in this policy brief are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the USC Center for Innovation and Research on Veterans & Military Families (CIR) or collaborating agencies and funders.

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