



## Exploring U.S. Veterans' post-service employment experiences

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### ABSTRACT

Although most U.S. veterans transition to civilian life successfully, securing employment and reintegrating into civilian communities, some veterans face transition challenges that can lead to or exacerbate mental and physical health problems. Emerging research from a survey conducted by Prudential indicates that difficulty transitioning to civilian life is largely attributable to employment (Prudential, 2012). This study sought to understand veterans' employment experiences. Four focus groups ( $n = 33$ ) with pre- and post-9/11 veterans who at the time were accessing housing and employment support services were conducted. Thematic analysis of focus group transcripts led to the emergence of 2 master themes: (a) organizational and societal barriers, such as limited availability of transition programs, discharge type, negative experiences of support services, and perceived discrimination; and (b) personal barriers, such as lack of initiative to plan and difficulty adjusting to working with civilians. Since data was collected for this study, updates to TAP have been implemented; this may have alleviated some of the reported barriers. The role of veterans' personal characteristics in employment requires attention in the context of agency, initiative, identity, and cultural adjustment. Policy, programmatic, practice, and future research recommendations are made.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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**What is the public significance of this article?**—Results from this research highlight several factors which have the potential to impact veteran's civilian employment success, including; the role of identity; the need to bridge the gap between military and civilian culture; and, the role of veteran discrimination. Moreover, this research raises the need for evaluation of Transition Assistance Programs and the need to improve veterans' agency in planning for their lives post military service.

### Exploring the experiences of U.S. veterans' postservice employment challenges

Reintegration to civilian life following military service is characterized by a series of adjustments. In a qualitative study, finding work was rated as the most challenging postservice adjustment among veterans (Prudential, 2012). A recent survey of veterans in Los Angeles, reported that the majority did not have a job in place when they left service, many reported (potentially unrealistic) expectations of quickly finding a job that meets their skill level and desired income, and several described needing time to adjust to civilian life and determine what they wanted to do before seeking employment (Castro, Kintzle, & Hassan, 2015).

A recent Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) report (2015) stated that approximately 53% of separating post-9/11 veterans face a period of unemployment initially upon discharge. Leaving military service is synonymous to a career change, thus time is required to find new suitable employment (Loughran, 2014). Differences in unemployment between veterans and nonveterans decrease with age and with time since separation from active duty. Loughran (2014) therefore proposes that veteran unemployment rates are mostly explained by the period following separation, and that most veterans find work following this initial job search period.

Applying for civilian jobs may be challenging for veterans as they attempt to translate military qualifications, skills, and experiences to civilian jobs (Hall, Harrell, Bicksler, Stewart, & Fisher, 2014; Harrell & Berglass, 2014). Skills translation and transferability can cause difficulties for civilian employers and veteran employees regarding suitable positions and workplaces (Hall et al., 2014; Harrell & Berglass, 2014). The majority of employers' efforts focus on recruitment of veteran employees without the follow through of managing or retaining veteran employees once hired (Hall et al., 2014). Thus, little is known about veteran employees performance, experiences, turnover, and retention (Hall et al., 2014).

Health problems, physical and psychological, often as a result of military service, may create additional employment barriers (Faberman & Foster, 2013). It is reported that some employers' have concerns of incurring the costs of dealing with PTSD in the workplace (Kleypamp, 2013; Rudstam, Strobel Gower, & Cook, 2012). Poor psychological health can also be an outcome of unemployment (Paul & Moser, 2009). Links between unemployment and psychological health have been indicated in the literature and explained by Jahoda's (1981) latent deprivation theory. Latent deprivation theory posits that the time structure, social contact, common goals, status, and activity, derived from work, are fundamental to our psychological wellbeing; this link is supported by existing literature (Paul, Geithner, & Moser, 2009; Paul & Moser, 2009). Employment is an important aspect of transition not only for the financial compensation, but for the attainment of the benefits proposed by Jahoda. Without these, veterans are at increased likelihood of experiencing psychological problems.

Although evidence suggests the majority of veterans eventually find civilian employment (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015; Loughran, 2014), some veterans continue to experience unemployment. Moreover, some veterans who had initial success in securing employment later struggle to maintain their job. These veterans are vulnerable to psychological difficulties and housing challenges, yet little is known about their experiences. This research addresses the question: What experiences have persistently unemployed veterans had of attempting to find and maintain civilian employment? This study aimed to add to existing literature by developing a deeper understanding of veterans' persistent unemployment problems, in order to enable better support and service provision.

## Method

### Sample

This research was commissioned and funded by a national nonprofit organization providing national veteran housing support and employment services. A purposive sample of veterans using this service at the time of the study were recruited. Program coordinators at the service invited veterans to take part. Thirty-three veteran clients agreed to participate and were recruited to one of four focus groups. Two groups of veterans who served before 9/11 ( $n = 8$  in each group) and two groups of veterans who served post-9/11 ( $n = 7$  and  $n = 8$ ). The sample consisted of one women, the Army was the most represented service branch, veterans had

**Table 1.** Demographics and military service characteristics of focus group members.

Characteristic	Pre-9/11 Group 1 ( $n = 8$ )	Pre-9/11 Group 2 ( $n = 8$ )	Post-9/11 Group 1 ( $n = 7$ )	Post-9/11 Group 2 ( $n = 8$ )
Age range (years)	49–61	46–66	24–33	24–36
Females	0	0	1	0
Service branch				
Air Force	0	2	0	2
Army	5	3	3	3
Marines Corps	1	1	3	1
Navy	2	2	1	2
Range years of separation	1974–1994	1963–1988	2005–2014	2005–2013
Range number of years since separation	21–42	17–42	1–10	2–10

served across Vietnam, Persian Gulf, and recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, and time since service separation ranged from 1 to 42 years (see Table 1).

All pre-9/11 veteran participants and veterans from one of the post-9/11 groups resided at a transitional housing unit. Veterans in the other post-9/11 group lived in various circumstances including their own home, parents' couch, and friends' couch. All participants had experienced persistent employment challenges; that is, they had been unemployed for extended periods of time, with more periods of unemployment than employment either since exiting military service (post-9/11 group) or in the last few years, which had been a contributing factor to their being homeless and residing in a transitional housing unit (pre-9/11 group). This sample of veterans were not representative of the veteran population. The majority of U.S. veterans are employed and have permanent housing compared to this sample of veterans who had persistent unemployment and housing difficulties. Therefore, this sample represents a specific group of vulnerable veterans. Because of their employment and housing situations this sample may have been at increased risk of experiencing co-morbid mental health issues (David P. Folsom et al., 2005), although these were not objectively examined in this research.

### Materials

A semi-structured interview schedule with open-ended questions guided the focus groups covering the following questions:

- (1) Journey from military service to civilian employment:
  - (i) Let's discuss your experiences of leaving the military and finding employment.

- (2) Methods:
  - (i) What things have you done to find work?
- (3) Barriers and enablement to employment:
  - (i) What barriers did you face in your process of gaining employment?
  - (ii) What enabled you to gain employment? What helped in finding and maintaining any employment you had?
  - (iii) What do you think are the biggest employment challenges facing veterans?
- (4) Experience of services:
  - (i) What services have you used?
  - (ii) What services would you like that they do not currently provide?
  - (iii) How could the services be improved?

Focus groups lasted approximately 1 hour and were digitally recorded. Recordings were transcribed by an external transcription service. The transcripts were read by the research team to ensure accurate transcription.

### **Data analysis**

The transcripts were initially analyzed by Mary Keeling and Sara Kintzle for the purpose of the commissioned research, meeting the specific requirements of the funders (Kintzle et al., 2015) using a brief thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2008). For this study, the transcripts were subjected to a secondary in-depth thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2008) where convergence and divergence between participants and group dynamics were examined. Because of the depth of this secondary analysis, the results of this article, although reflective of the initial analysis, move past the results of the brief analysis to reveal new depth to understanding the veterans' experiences as represented by novel themes.

The secondary analysis was conducted by Mary Keeling. Each transcript was considered independently beginning by reading and re-reading the transcript for refamiliarization, leading to a close line-by-line analysis and the development of initial codes, which in turn led to the development of themes and subthemes. The researcher was mindful to not let the emergent themes from each focus group inform analysis of each other. Once analysis was complete for each focus group the researcher looked across the analysis of all groups examining convergence and divergence to develop a master table of themes. The analysis focused on examining interaction between focus group members highlighting deviant cases and divergence as well convergence of experiences. Differences between the pre- and postfocus groups were examined. The analysis

was independently audited by other members of the research team.

## **Results and discussion**

Thematic analysis led to the development of two master themes representing two employment barriers: organizational and societal barriers and personal barriers. A third theme was identified but is not included in this report as these barriers are reported extensively in the civilian and veteran literature. These barriers included mental health and substance abuse; criminal record; racism; age discrimination; physical health challenges; and the recession.

### **Organizational and societal barriers**

Consistent with the Military Transition Theory (Castro et al., 2015), the veterans experienced barriers to employment perceived to be specific to the military organization, their service experiences, and society's perceptions of veterans, as represented by five sub-themes: less than honorable discharge; lack of transition support; starting over; negative experiences of support services; and perceived employer stigma and discrimination.

#### **Less than honorable discharge**

The nature of the military transition proposes that the way veterans exit service impacts their transition trajectory (Castro et al., 2015). This is evident in veterans who received a less than honorable discharge, such as one pre-9/11 and one post-9/11 participant. Their discharge status meant their exit was abrupt and were not afforded time to prepare. Moreover, their discharge status made them ineligible for benefits and access to VA services (Collins, 2012). Having a less than honorable discharge may be indicative of other factors likely to create challenges (i.e., substance misuse). Despite this group of veterans' additional support needs, limited services are available to assist them. Further investigation of these veteran's specific support needs should be conducted and used to inform service provisions.

The impact of discharge status was discussed across all focus groups due to consistent experiences that employers are most interested in this detail of veterans' service histories: "Because they just want to know, first thing they ask you, you got honorable discharge or dishonorable?" (male, Pre-9/11 Group 1).

#### **Lack of transition support**

The Department of Labor are responsible for delivering the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) with input

from other agencies (e.g., Department of Defense, Department of Labor, Small Business Administration) to support military personnel preparing to leave service. TAP was not available when the pre-9/11 veterans left service, thus they reported receiving no transition support. Despite the availability of TAP, the majority of post-9/11 veterans reported feeling unsupported; seven veterans reported TAP to be a “box checking exercise”.

“I really anticipated getting more information from the TAP ... like he [another veteran in the group] said, it was just checking the box. It was something they had to do but they didn't really care what you got out of it and they were almost going to let me get out without even having gone” (Male, Post-9/11 Group 1)

The majority of the veterans reported their leaders disinterest once they knew they were leaving, prioritizing attention on those continuing to serve. Three post-9/11 veterans reported that their leaders provided little to no encouragement to attend TAP and five post-9/11 veterans reported not being afforded the time to prepare. Almost all of the veterans discussed ways in which the military had created unrealistic expectations of civilian life, such as veterans being a priority for support services and that veterans find employment easily due to their military service.

Similar negative perceptions of TAP have been reported elsewhere (Prudential, 2012). Because data were collected for this and previous studies, updates have been made to the TAP program. The update is based on the military life cycle model, which promotes planning for life after service early in personnel's military careers and promotes leaders support of their subordinates plan (DoDTAP, 2014). The updated TAP requires evaluation including the content, relevance, engagement, leaders' encouragement of attendance, and ensuring availability and access to the program for all exiting service personnel (Hall et al., 2014).

### **Starting over**

This theme captures the veteran's feelings that having given their lives to military service, they were now disadvantaged as they had to start their lives over as civilians. Eight veterans across the pre- and post-9/11 groups discussed feeling they were “starting from the bottom” in entry-level jobs paying minimum wage, often because of the lack of a college degree and/or challenges transferring military skills and experience to civilian jobs. Skills mismatch is most pronounced amongst those who did combat roles and did not develop technical skills (Loughran, 2014). These problems also likely arise from limited knowledge of how to talk about military skills in civilian terms. TAP

teaches skills translation; a lack of attendance and availability of TAP could have exacerbated the veterans experience of starting over.

Two post-9/11 veterans specifically discussed their frustration that although employers stated they were “veteran friendly,” the majority of the jobs offered required college degrees, yet serving in the military had precluded them from attaining such qualifications. “We get punished for going in to the military too because some of these jobs require college degrees ... we went into the military, some of us might not have college degrees” (male, Post-9/11 Group 1).

A further two post-9/11 veterans reported that despite attaining a college degree while serving, they were frequently rejected from jobs they believed themselves capable of fulfilling, being told they lacked civilian work experience. The Prudential report recommended customized transition support to teach veterans how to translate and exploit their skills and work experiences (Prudential, 2012). An individualized approach to transition assistance may be unrealistic in the context of the number of transitioning veterans. Recent updates to TAP however, focus more directly on skills translation and assisting personnel to be prepared (DoDTAP, 2014). This new approach may help new veterans avoid feeling they are starting over by improving their ability to translate their skills and experiences.

### **Negative experiences of support services**

All of the veterans reported negative support service experiences that led to employment barriers. This included poor service provision, limited dissemination of information about support and benefits, and feeling that civilian service providers were unable to offer good support due to mismatch in communication and a lack of understanding of veterans' nuanced needs. These veterans' experiences are consistent with reports of poor quality levels of care across various VA facilities (12News, 2016; Bream, 2014). Across all focus groups, veterans reported preferring service staff to be veterans and peer-to-peer informal support. Communication mismatch is reported in the literature as impacting military to civilian transition including employment and support service provision (Shields, Kuhl, Frender, Baurmann, & Lopresti, 2016). Nonveteran service providers should be trained in military cultural competency to aid their ability to form rapport and engage in effective communication. Many veterans were untrusting of veteran hiring programs and “veteran friendly” employers, believing they were not offering jobs relevant to their interests or skills, that paid a fair wage, and that veteran employers were motivated by

the tax break: “I get the feeling they say they want to hire veterans right . . . I feel that some people may just want to take advantage of the veterans and the benefits that we bring” (male, Post-9/11 Group 1).

Many employers have hiring initiatives and recruitment staff trained to understand the skills military personnel offer (Hall et al., 2014), yet civilian employers may require additional training in communication and trust building with veterans. Moreover, an evaluation of veteran hiring programs is required to ensure veterans are not being exploited and are benefitting from programs.

### ***Perceived employer stigma and discrimination***

Veteran discrimination, including concerns surrounding mental health, was reported, consistent with existent literature (Galluci, 2010). Two post-9/11 veterans had experienced interviews where employers asked if they had been in combat or served in the marines followed by negative comments about combat veterans: “And then they asked me how long ago did I leave combat zone? And I told them three years, and then they told me, ‘oh, then you’re good, we don’t want to deal with guys who just came back’” (male, Post-9/11 Group 1).

Discrimination concerns meant approximately a quarter of the pre- and post-9/11 veterans did not disclose their veteran status on job applications. There is, however, little rigorous evidence for the existence of employer discrimination against veterans in the literature (Loughran, 2014). Consistent with research investigating attribution errors and a tendency to make discrimination attributions (e.g. sexual or racial) to protect self-esteem (Major, Quinton, & Schmader, 2003), discrimination may be used as a coping mechanism protecting veterans from acknowledging personal barriers, such as health or attitudinal, which impact employment. Attribution errors among veterans may not just be in the context of discrimination but all reported barriers. Thorough investigation of veteran discrimination and of the role of attribution errors is required.

### ***Personal barriers***

Consistent with the Military Transition Theory (Castro et al., 2015), this theme reflects the impact of personal characteristics and individual approaches on employment barriers, reflected by two subthemes: planning and preparation and military and civilian cultural clash.

### ***Planning and preparation***

Personal preparedness impacts transition (Castro et al., 2015) and was evident among these veterans, all of

which except for three, reported not preparing. Unpreparedness was partly attributable to organizational barriers as described previously. However, limited initiative and motivation were also evident. As one veteran stated, “No one told me to prepare,” and another: “The tools are there, the motivation is not.” This apparent lack of agency may be associated with the institutional nature of the military. During military service personnel subject themselves to the orders of their leaders with little opportunity to plan, prepare, or initiate tasks (Jolly, 1996). Some veterans blamed the military organization for their limited preparation and resulting challenges; however, this appears consistent with the proposed role of attribution errors described above.

Unrealistic expectations created by the military, reported above, resulted in a lack of initiative and agency to plan among some veterans, who reported not thinking about employment, instead thinking about reuniting with family and friends: “Let’s not forget guys that when we’re getting out we’re not thinking about jobs or anything. We’re thinking about skating, not going to work, you know” (female, Post-9/11 Group 1).

The lack of preparation appears rooted in military enculturation but is arguably the responsibility of the individual. As well as the military setting realistic expectations, providing time to prepare, and encouraging personnel to attend various employment services (Hall et al., 2014), which are likely aided by the updated TAP program (DoDTAP, 2014), an additional intervention is required highlighting the importance of personal agency. This might be in the format of veterans who already transitioned presenting at mandatory pre-TAP classes to inform soon to transition personnel of the realities of finding civilian employment, and ways TAP and other preparations can help. Personal agency to prepare might be improved by using a motivational interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 1991) approach in a pre-TAP class to assist in motivating veterans to plan for their future.

### ***Military and civilian cultural clash***

A challenge maintaining employment, reported by all of the veterans, was the clash between military and civilian work ethic and culture which led to frustrations and sometimes termination or voluntary exit from employment. Consistent with existing research (Brunger, Serrato, & Ogden, 2013), veterans reported that communication variances make relating to colleagues and peers difficult. Missing the cohesion, camaraderie, hierarchy, and time structure of military work made civilian work frustrating for the veterans: “And

I'll be picking up the slack working circles around everybody, its' just like no respect ... They don't even know ... where you came from or the structure you were a part of because they don't even know about structure" (male, Post-9/11 Group 2).

Cultural dissonance was exacerbated among veterans who continued a strong affiliation to military cultural norms and their military identity. When old role identities and expectations linger in to new roles, the ability to fully assimilate into new roles is inhibited (Ebaugh, 1988). The development of a military identity is likely synonymous with the development of self-esteem (Brunger et al., 2013). Leaving the military may threaten identity and associated self-esteem, leading veterans to retain their military identity, which, although protecting the veterans' self-esteem, may create a barrier to employment. Consistent with Brunger et al. (2013), the important role of identity and cultural assimilation in transition should be highlighted to transitioning military personnel via workshops at TAP delivered by veterans who have already made the transition.

### **Implications and recommendations**

Since data collection, TAP has been updated. It is possible that some of the reported organizational barriers may be addressed by these updates however, evaluation of TAP is required to assess its effectiveness before we can discern its impact. Additions to TAP should aim to improve veterans' agency over transition planning and highlight the important role of identity. TAP should be provided to all exiting personnel regardless of discharge status. Further research is required to understand the needs of those with less than honorable discharges and specific services provided to support them. Research investigating veteran discrimination is required, as well as research investigating attribution errors and barriers to employment among veterans.

Methods to bridge the military/civilian cultural gap should be targeted at military personnel, veterans, civilian employers, and civilian service providers. For military personnel and veterans, TAP could include modules on civilian cultural competency. For civilian service providers, military cultural competency should be mandatory for any nonveteran working with veterans. The development and dissemination of a veteran/military cultural competency handbook to employers, companies, and businesses, who are actively engaged in veteran hiring programs and claiming a tax break associated with their veteran hiring, could raise awareness among civilian employers and human resources departments for the need to

aware of the cultural and nuanced needs of veterans in the workplace. Military cultural competency training could also be made available and publicized in the handbook.

### **Strengths and limitations**

The qualitative design led to rich experiential accounts of veterans' employment experiences adding to the literature highlighting the need to address employment barriers at an organizational and personal level. Focus groups were conducted in Southern California and may not be representative of veterans in other areas of the United States. Moreover, the sample consists of veterans accessing employment and housing support services and therefore is only generalizable to a similar veteran population.

### **Conclusion**

Although the majority of veterans find civilian employment soon after leaving the military, some veterans have persistent employment problems years after discharge. Using a qualitative method, this study indicates that barriers to employment among a vulnerable group of veterans are best considered as organizational and societal and personal. Although recent updates to TAP may have alleviated many of the organizational barriers, the role of veteran's personal characteristics requires further attention, especially in the areas of attribution, agency, identity, and cultural adjustment. The exclusion of veterans with less than honorable discharges from services, benefits, requires reconsideration.

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