

A Proper Transition: Success After the Military

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ABSTRACT

Military lifestyle, standards, and culture are developed and fortified throughout soldiers' service, the decision to exit the military is often difficult, and challenges related to post-transition adjustment and employment are substantial. The U.S. Army's Transition Assistance Program (TAP) attempts to alleviate these challenges by teaching soldiers about the obstacles they will face as well as the corresponding strategies that can enhance the likelihood of a successful career transition. The purpose of this qualitative research study is to understand the key factors both internal and external that allow service members to successfully transition from the military to the civilian employment sector. This study presents findings from a nonexperimental survey design with the administration of a survey for qualitative thematic analysis. The surveys examined ten veterans' perspectives on what was beneficial to their transition out of the military. Analyses of the veterans' survey responses revealed three themes: (a) the value of experience, (b) having a plan, and (c) prioritizing yourself. Saturation was achieved with each of these themes through thematic analysis and data analysis through the qualitative analysis software Dedoose. Thus, the findings highlight transition veterans' perspectives that soldiers going through TAP have unique learning needs and challenges that may impact their transition experience.

Keywords:

Military Service, Transition, Transition Assistance Program (TAP), U.S Army (USA), U.S. Navy (USN), U.S. Air Force (USAF), U.S. Marine Corps (USMC)

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CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

Between 2014 and 2020, more than 1.2 million service members joined the 2.3 million veterans who have already separated from the US military since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2014; 2019). According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office on average 200,000 servicemembers transition to civilian life each year (2019). For the fact that military lifestyle, standards, and culture are developed and fortified throughout soldiers' service, the decision to exit the military is often difficult, and challenges related to post-transition adjustment and employment are substantial. The U.S. Army's Transition Assistance Program (TAP) attempts to alleviate these challenges by teaching soldiers about the obstacles they will face as well as the corresponding strategies that can enhance the likelihood of a successful career transition.

This study presents findings from a nonexperimental survey design with the administration of a survey for qualitative thematic analysis. During the qualitative collection, the datum was collected, and thematic analysis was conducted using the analytical program Dedoose, in order to develop qualitative themes from the participant's responses. The goal of the quantitative phase was to identify potential indicators or factors that indicate a successful transition from the military. The three key themes which emerged from the data were, prioritize yourself, have a plan, and the importance of experience

Problem Statement

Postmilitary employment challenges are a particular concern for transitioning service members (Harrell & Berglass, 2012). Historically, unemployment has been a common issue, but in the past few years, the rate has favorably shifted for veterans (Hiring Our Heroes, 2016; Veterans' Employment and Training Service, 2018). While lower rates of unemployment among veterans is encouraging, the percentages should not suggest veteran employment problems are obsolete. The current issue becomes connecting veterans with viable employment that allows the service member to utilize their military experience and contribute to society. While veteran unemployment rates have lowered in the past 5 years, there is still a 56% percentage of service members that are unable to find stable employment commiserative their military earnings (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2019). The problem addressed in this study is the ability for former servicemembers to find stable and adequate employment after their military service.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this nonexperimental qualitative research study is to understand the key factors both internal and external that allow service members to successfully transition from the military to the civilian employment sector. The researcher interviewed ten purposefully selected individuals who have exited the military and were able to successfully transition into civilian employment. The researcher explored these results in more depth by use of semi- structured interviews of the participants, and triangulation of the data with existing literature of veterans being successful after the military. In this

research study, the qualitative research questions addressed what classes and services the veteran received prior to exiting the military, and how those classes and services helped them prepare for civilian employment.

Significance of the Study

This study provided a deeper understanding of how servicemembers successfully transition to the civilian employment sector following their military service.

Approximately 200,000 service members transition from military service to civilian life each year according to the Department of Defense (DOD) which is about 8.31% of the total force (Gurkin, 2019). During their service, all members of the military are employed and receive regular paychecks; medical care; and other benefits, such as housing allowances. Once they leave the military and become veterans, they must learn to become a civilian again. They are responsible for finding a job, going back to school, obtaining health insurance, childcare, and finding a place to live, among other life activities.

If veterans are also recovering from their war experiences, it can compound the difficulty they experience in successfully completing their readjustment. Existing research shows that the three greatest risks to veterans transitioning out of the military are unemployment, legal problems, and substance abuse. These three risks are compounded when the transition is unexpected, or the service member is not prepared for the transition. The significance of this study lies in isolating the risk factor of unemployment

and being able to identify the key factors that allow for a successful transition into the civilian work force.

Definitions and Terms

Air Force Specialty Code (AFSC) is similar to a MOS code, it is an alpha numeric code identifying a specific military profession held by members of the United States Force.

Expiration- Term of Service (ETS) is a date on which a service member's current contract ends and the service member is free to leave the military or sign another contract.

Military Occupation Specialty (MOS) code is the alphanumeric code identifying a specific military profession held by members of the United States Army and United States Marine Corps.

Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) is the military operation in Afghanistan.

Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) is the military operation in Iraq

Transition Assistance Program (TAP) provides information, resources, and tools to service members and their loved ones to help prepare for the move from military to civilian life.

Ratings are a series of letters that identifying a specific military profession held by members of the United States Navy; it is equivalent to MOS codes used by the United States Army and United States Marine Corps.

CHAPTER TWO: Review of the Literature

About 300 employment assistance centers have been established at military installations worldwide (Gurkin, 2019). These centers operate the mandatory TAP, which provides counseling, employment assistance, and information on veterans' benefits to help separating servicemembers transition to civilian life. Before members from any branch of service depart from the military, they are required to complete a DOD-sponsored pre-separation counseling and transition program, based on Public Law 101-510 and Public Law 112-56 (1991; 2011).

In 2011, new congressional legislation was passed under The Veterans Opportunity to Work (VOW) Act for those who have been on active duty for 180 days or more (excluding those on active duty for annual training or going to school) (2011). The U.S. Army's transition program is called the Soldier for Life—TAP; it was congressionally mandated in 2011 for all soldiers transitioning out of the Army and is reinforced in Army Regulation 600-81 (2016). The program prepares them for postmilitary life and includes assistance with their transition to civilian employment (Kamarck, 2018).

The military becomes a way of life for soldiers. As such, transitioning out of the military is frequently cited as a trying experience for soldiers due to the numerous and varied challenges encountered along the way (Cole, 2014). Aspects of postmilitary life

such as finding civilian employment, identifying a new sense of purpose, and family adjustment require a period of learning and adaptation for soldiers (Morin, 2011).

However, veterans discharged under non-routine conditions are at greater risk for several reintegration outcomes of significant public health concern including unemployment, legal problems, and substance abuse.

Employment

Postmilitary employment challenges are a particular concern for transitioning service members. One study comprised of over half a million veteran job seekers found veterans struggle to find meaningful employment, with nearly one-third experiencing underemployment (Barrera & Carter, 2017). Civilian employment may at times seem daunting for veterans, with many acknowledging the disconnect they feel with their civilian employers. For instance, a study of more than 700 post-9/11 veterans revealed 41% of respondents believed hiring managers do not understand their military experience and 37% believed hiring managers actually devalued veteran experience (iCims, 2016).

A study of veterans leaving the Canadian and United Kingdom (UK) military revealed that a forced transition through a medical or enforced discharge was associated with poorer transition outcomes and higher rates of unemployment (Ray & Heaslip, 2011; Van Staden et al., 2007) Ultimately, the largest concern for veterans that transition out of the military to find employment that is not minimum wage and is comparable to

their military pay and benefits; however, most times this is unattainable with the skills and tools provided to transitioning service members.

Legal Problems

Some veterans recently separated from the military also face legal difficulties, including being arrested, convicted of a crime, and sentenced to serve time in jail. A study showed that in the UK service members that were transitioning out of the military after serving a sentence in the military prison were less likely to be able to successfully adjust to civilian life; and 37% of those surveyed were homeless and unemployed within 6 months of separating from the military (Nakashima, 2019; Van Staden et al., 2007). In a 2007 report from the Department of Justice, there were an estimated 5,280 veterans who had separated from the military between 2002 and 2004 who were incarcerated in either state or federal correctional facilities in 2004 (U.S. Department of Justice, 2007). One study's findings suggest many veterans would benefit from services provided through medical–legal partnerships and expanding these partnerships may help address veteran homelessness (Nakashima, 2019).

Although a majority of incarcerated veterans served during a wartime period, a much lower percentage reported seeing combat duty. This is indicative of a flaw in the transition programs. While combat operations in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF)/ Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) can increase the probability that a service member will have legal problems, the issue is not linked solely to combat veterans.

Substance Abuse

Despite numerous attempts by the Department of Veteran's Affairs (VA) and other agencies over the past two decades to reduce problematic substance use, rates of substance abuse in veterans continue to rise (Teeters et al., 2017). Many veterans lack adequate resources and have difficulty acclimating to civilian life. Rates of substance use disorders and mental illness are higher among former service members compared to their civilian counterparts (Moore et al., 2019). Readjusting veterans with substance-abuse problems, pose challenges to successful reintegration into civilian life and, in extreme cases, may lead to outcomes such as incarceration, homelessness, and suicide. Active-duty service members can face dishonorable discharge and even criminal prosecution for a positive drug test while in the service, which can discourage illicit drug use as per Army Regulation 600-85 (2020). Once active-duty personnel leave the military some protective influences are gone, and substance use and other mental health issues become of greater concern. More than one in ten veterans have been diagnosed with a substance use disorder, slightly higher than the general population (Teeters et al., 2017).

Summation of Literature Review

The greatest risks to a veteran's reintegration into society after a term of service in the military are unemployment, legal problems, and substance abuse (Barrera & Carter, 2017; Moore et al, 2019; Nakashima, 2019). Of these risk factors, the one that could have the greatest impact on a veteran's future is employment, as it could possibly affect the other two risk factors. With stable and suitable employment, a veteran would be able to mitigate possible legal problems and/or substance abuse. In order for veterans to find

stable and suitable employment, a veteran must have the right skill set to be able to enter and benefit from the civilian workplace.

CHAPTER THREE: Methodology

The study used a nonexperimental, qualitative research design with the administration of an open-ended question survey for qualitative thematic analysis and literature review to explore the research question. The rationale for using a qualitative method is that it is able to capture the trends and details of the situation. Liberty University Institutional Review Board approval was received to conduct these interviews on 27 April 2021.

Research Design

Qualitative research is “an inquiry process of understanding” where the researcher develops a “complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting” (Creswell, 2003, p. 15). Data analysis is based on the values that these participants perceive for their world. Ultimately, it produces an understanding of the problem based on multiple contextual factors (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

During the qualitative collection, the datum was collected, and thematic analysis was conducted in order to develop qualitative themes from the participant’s responses. The goal of the qualitative phase was to identify potential indicators or factors that indicate a successful transition from the military. That data in turn was qualitatively analyzed, and triangulation of the data with existing literature to help explain why certain external and internal factors that may be significant predictors of the veteran’s success

after the military. The rationale for this approach is that the qualitative analysis will refine and explain those statistical results by exploring the veterans' views in more depth.

Research Question

For this study the guiding research question is: What factors (internal and external) allow service members to successfully transition from the military to the civilian sector?

Data Analysis

Before the statistical analysis of the qualitative interview results, the screening of the datum was conducted using the online data analysis program Dedoose. Data screening identified potential indicators or factors that indicate a successful transition.

Target Population and Sample

The target population in this study was adults who have received an honorable discharge from the U.S. Military. Each participant had current, stable civilian employment and had completed at least some part of their prior service transition assistance program.

Preference was given to individuals that completed their service component transition assistance program; however, this was not a disqualifying factor. Recruiting of participants was through email and social media (Facebook). The sample size was 10 qualified applicants.

Description of Participants (*n=10*)

Participant Pseudonym Names	Branch of Military	Years of Military Service	Characterization of Discharge	Enlisted or Officer
Bill	Active Army	20	Retirement	Enlisted
Eugene	Active Navy	12	ETS	Enlisted
Green	Active Army	24	Retirement	Officer
Hannah	National Guard	8	ETS	Enlisted
Jeff	Active Air Force	20	Retirement	Officer
Keith	Army Reserves	10	ETS	Officer
Luke	Active Army	20	Retirement	Enlisted
Mike	Active Army	21	Retirement	Enlisted
Rusty	Active Navy	6	ETS	Officer
Tim	Active Army	8	ETS	Enlisted

Research Permission and Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues were addressed at each phase of the study. Compliance and permission were achieved in accordance with the regulations of the IRB (Liberty University, 2021). An informed consent form was developed and distributed to all participants. The form stated the participants are guaranteed certain rights, they agreed to be involved in the study, and acknowledged their rights are protected.

CHAPTER FOUR: Results

The three key themes which emerged from the data were, prioritize yourself, have a plan, and the importance of experience, as opposed to the traditional view that higher education was the most important tool post military. A major influence on these issues was the length of service that each individual had in the military. While post-secondary education and the need for a transition assistance program (TAP) were also common, the majority of the participants did not weight those factors a heavily.

	Advice	Class Suggestions	College Education	Employment	Least Beneficial Class	Most Beneficial Class
Future Planning	11					
12 Month Out	6					
Prioritize Yourself	13					
Career Fairs		12				
Certifications		4				
Educational Planning		4				
Talent Management		5				
VA Counseling		5				
Associates			3			
Bachelors			5			
No Education			7			
College				10		
Experience				14		
Financial Management					4	
Interview Techniques					1	
Resume Writing					1	
SFL-TAP					4	
VA Benefits					1	
Interview Techniques						7
Resume Writing						6
VA Benefits						8

Table 1 Co-Occurrence of Themes

Experience

Clearly, pursuing a traditional four-year degree can cost a lot. There are a vast number of programs that the military offers service members to attain a degree, both while in and after the military. However, the data shows that the majority of service members will not pursue a degree until after the military, if they do at all. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) (2021) shows that there are benefits to pursuing a degree. This leads us to ask the question as to why service members are exiting the military without any kind of college education.

What this research showed was that it was not until the service member was out of the military that they were able to attend college. While there are several probable contributing factors as to this, the bottom line is that these service members are coming out disadvantaged to their civilian counterparts when applying for a job. According to a 2017 Harvard Business School study, between 2007 and 2010, job postings listing a bachelor's degree requirement as a condition of employment rose by 10% (Fuller et al., 2017). The difficult part for service members that do not possess a bachelor's degree, is how to convey to a potential employer the value of their military service.

The research shows that the longer someone was in the service the higher starting salary they were able to attain after leaving the service. The data also showed that when a service member had a degree, they were able to supplement their experience or lack thereof. Participant Mike said, "Experience is a nice to have but jobs have requirements

in order to fill them. In this case, my degree evened the playing field allowing my experience to stand out.”.

The difficult part becomes when a service member tries to explain their military service in words that are understandable to a potential employer. Participant Eugene, who left the US Navy said that he was, “provided a ‘more or less’ synonym chart on converting military jargon to civilian lingo” during his resume writing class that he attended prior to leaving the Navy.

A majority of the study’s participants voiced concerns with the current transition programs across all branches of the military. However, all participants stated the necessity of a transition program which reflected triangulation. Currently every active-duty service member must attend a mandatory one-week class prior to being able to transition out of the military. This is not a requirement for Reserve or National Guard service members. During that two weeks there are several “sessions” or individual classes that a service member can elect to take.

The research data showed that a majority of the participants found the classes useful and applicable to their situation which also reflected triangulation. However, the effectiveness of the classes varied by location. There is not a standard course material for these individual classes, making the value of them dependent on their instructor.

Planning

The next common theme that was prevalent during the research was the importance of having a plan prior to exiting the military. Luke, one of the participants, stated that the, “least beneficial [class] for me was the whole what are you [going] be when you grow up”. Participant Eugene stated that, “I saw a lot of kids do their 4 [years] and get out with no real plan”. It cannot be stressed enough, to the importance of having a plan prior to exiting the military. While programs and classes like Soldier for Life (SFL) TAP or Goals, Planning, and Success (GPS) Class attempt to prepare service members for life after the military, it ultimately is a personal responsibility.

Prioritization

The last common theme during the experiment was the importance of prioritizing the individual during the last year of military service. One of the interviewees stated that “once you decided that you are retiring, ensure that becomes your number one priority” (Green, 2021). Participant Green went on to say that military, “timelines move quick, and you do not want to miss [them]”. This was a common theme that individuals that are preparing to exit the military need to focus on life after the military.

CHAPTER FIVE: Recommendations

This research provided several recommendations of improvements to the military's transition program. While the fundamental classes and programs are in place for a successful transition out of the military, the existing data shows that they are not as effective as hoped. The most significant recommendation from this research is the need for a class that helps transitioning service members translate their military experience and knowledge into equivalent civilian employment experiences. This is possible with the incorporation of career fairs or job fairs during the transition period. There were 12 references of this during the 10 interviews and 40% of the participants mentioned that a career fair or the like would have assisted them in their transition.

	Career Fairs	Certifications	Educational Planning	Talent Management	VA Counseling
Interview 1	3	0	0	1	0
Interview 2	0	0	0	0	1
Interview 3	1	0	0	0	1
Interview 4	0	0	0	0	1
Interview 5	7	1	2	2	0
Interview 6	0	0	0	0	1
Interview 7	1	0	1	1	0
Interview 8	0	2	1	0	0
Interview 9	0	1	0	0	0
Interview 10	0	0	0	1	1
Totals	12	4	4	5	5

Table 2 Prevalence of Suggested Classes

While the military as a whole is making improvements to their transition programs, there is still much that needs to be adjusted. With the civilian employment sector expanding, the demand for qualified workers is increasing. If collectively, society is able to employ veterans, then the work force will not only be employing highly skilled worker, but they will be reducing the taxing effect of unemployed veterans that are turning to substance abuse, violence, and crime to survive after the military. If the civilian employment sector is able to employ veterans, then they are able to tap into the skills veterans have learn through their military training and continue refined those skills as a civilian.

CHAPTER SIX: Conclusion

Prior research shows that veterans that are discharged and exit the military unprepared are at greater risk for several reintegration outcomes including unemployment, legal problems, and substance abuse (Barrera & Carter, 2017; Moore et al, 2019; Nakashima, 2019). This study shows the best practices for mitigating these outcomes. The three key themes which emerged from the data were, prioritize yourself, have a plan, and the importance of experience. With adjusted training focused on these factors, veterans would have a higher chance of being successful after the military. This will not only enhance society as a whole by employing highly skilled workers, but reduce the taxing effect of unemployed veterans on communities across the nation.

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