



# How Military Service Affects Veterans' Job Outcomes

COLLECTION:  
WRITING BY VETERANS  
STUDIES STUDENTS

**ARTICLE**

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**VIRGINIA TECH.**  
PUBLISHING

## ABSTRACT

The US military transforms civilians into soldiers, and with this transformation, they widen the gap between them and those left behind in civilian life—differing in how they view priorities, mental health, discipline, teamwork, and work ethic. This gap contributes to the difficulties many veterans face as they transition from the military back into a nonmilitary environment. From forming relationships to finding work, the effects of military service influence the ease with which US veterans settle into their post-service lives: in some aspects, it is a boon and in others a detriment. This article examines the issue of veterans' civilian employment by considering veterans' voices and research on the realities of “military friendly” companies and hiring practices.

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## KEYWORDS:

veteran employment; student writing; civilian-military divide; military friendly; veterans studies

## TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Le, N. Q. (2024). How Military Service Affects Veterans' Job Outcomes. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 10(1), pp. 27–31. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v10i1.513>

To ensure the security of its nation, the US military composes itself under a multitude of branches: the Army, the Marines, the Navy, and the Air Force, to name a few. These branches are then further organized and operated by employing an all-volunteer force of civilians. They are trained for combat, maintenance, administration, technological operations, and/or other skills to fulfill their tasks. The military transforms civilians into soldiers, and with this transformation they widen the gap between them and those left behind in civilian life—differing in how they view priorities, mental health, discipline, teamwork, and work ethic. This gap contributes to the difficulty many veterans face as they transition from the military back into a nonmilitary environment. From forming relationships to finding work, the effects of military service influences the ease in which US veterans settle into their post-service lives: in some aspects it is a boon and in others a detriment.

Correspondingly, with one's occupation being so important in maintaining and improving their livelihood, any problems veterans face when it comes to finding work will affect their transition as a whole. As mentioned in the *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, veterans' employment is associated with good mental health, and unemployment is associated with "depression, self-pity, self-absorption, higher risk of substance abuse, and feelings of worthlessness" (Bonfils et al., 2015, p. 52). Combining this with the fact that the percentage of adults with military experience is shrinking and fewer individuals have connections to the military (Grohowski, 2023), these problems grow increasingly unresolved. Thus, it is vital to recognize and explore the ways military service has impacted a veteran's ability to find and keep work to improve their livelihood in an environment where their connection to civilian society is shrinking.

For example, within the military, the skills servicepersonnel learn are valuable. As such, according to the *Journal of Veterans Studies*, many veterans want to use these skills in their civilian jobs (Kirchner & Minnis, 2018). However, in the nonmilitary workforce, the value of those same skills may be seen as inapplicable, and these veterans' desires go unfulfilled. Furthermore, the military fosters a mindset that can prove detrimental to a veteran's chances at finding desirable employment.

On this topic of mindsets, the military's effects on mental health, such as PTSD, has the veteran dealing not only with their health, but also the stereotypes associated with mental illness (Bonfils et al., 2015). Not all is lost though, as certain groups—termed veteran friendly—have come to recognize these factors and give priority to recruiting veterans coming out of the military (Kirchner & Minnis, 2018). But even these advantages come with their caveats. As a result, military service trends towards a net

negative impact on a veteran's occupational outcomes, despite having some possible benefits.

## NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF MILITARY SERVICE

To further elaborate, this negative effect is better seen during Williamson's oral interview (in Beckelheimer, 2021). Williamson details her experience serving in the Navy to her transition back into civilian life. She explains that because the military has a different system when it comes to operating technology these skills are not easily transferable into the civilian sector: "We can't say I have 15 years of experience in this because it's a different system, which takes us into like an entry level category knowing that we're like advanced or managerial level as far as experience" (in Beckelheimer, 2021, 1: 44: 59). Consequentially, this results in veterans like Williamson who may have the skills for advanced occupations being denied positions, due to a supposed lack of experience. The time veterans spent in the military proves to be detrimental as they are left with a gap in their resume.

Moreover, to clarify what is considered a desirable job, a journal article about veteran employment and military friendly companies explains that "nine of ten veteran respondents on a study of past service member employment reported the opportunity to use their skills and abilities as the most important aspect of civilian employment" (Kirchner & Minnis, 2018, p. 104). In other words, there is a discrepancy due to military service instilling veterans with workable skills. However, these skills—such as programming, maintenance, and combat—are not readily transferrable into the civilian workforce. The military's adverse effects on employment then reduce the quality of veteran livelihoods as they find it more difficult to find fulfilling work in their post-service identities.

On top of the non-readily transferable hard skills (i.e., maintenance, programming, and other military-specific skills), military training promotes certain soft skills that may not be beneficial for those seeking work in the civilian labor force. In his oral interview, Barney reminisces about his time in service and how he did not do much thinking of his own until he got out of the military: "You don't do too much thinkin' ... When you go in the service, you'd be here today, you'd be there tomorrow. You do your job and you're told when" (in Terkel, 1984, p. 531). Being part of the force that was responsible for dropping nuclear bombs on Japan, Barney underwent additional training for his vital missions, yet he claims his service was characterized by following orders. There's an implication that independent thinking and individualism were not soft traits the military

emphasized during training. Instead, Barney was taught the value of obedience in high-stress situations. Only when he transitioned back into nonmilitary life did he learn to think for himself and develop his own personality (Terkel, 1984).

From Barney's account, one can see that the skills military service teaches and the ones learned in nonmilitary society are different. An article in the *Journal of Veterans Studies* (Kirchner & Minnis, 2018) explores the effects of how a lack of certain soft skills affect veterans' employment. Kirchner and Minnis (2018) pointed out companies that considered themselves military friendly and therefore focused on their veteran employees' professional development and learning. The authors found that professional development and learning for veterans meant the development of soft skills like "money management, communication and business skills, financial education, interviewing" (Kirchner & Minnis, 2018, p. 100), and leadership development.

While the presence of military friendly companies is counterintuitive to the idea that military service negatively impacts a veteran's chances at favorable employment, the main focus is on the fact that companies recognize that there is a need for veterans to learn other skills. This implies that companies believe military service does not properly train veterans with the soft skills necessary to succeed in the civilian workforce. As a result, veterans applying for work at organizations that are not military friendly may find their chances hampered by this belief of their lack of professional skills. Whether or not there is an actual gap between veteran and civilian skills—as Barney's experience (in Terkel, 1984) claimed—veterans' quality of life is negatively impacted by the preconceptions companies may hold for veteran applicants.

On top of that, these preconceptions do not only extend to a veteran's skillset but to their mental health as well. Veterans dealing with PTSD also have to face stereotypes associated with the mental health issue when looking for employment and in the work environment. For the effects of PTSD on performance, the *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* reported that PTSD noticeably impacts veterans' health, personal motivation, and work skills vital to their success in the work environment (Bonfils et al., 2015). Additionally, veterans with PTSD are more likely to be unemployed in general. Considering that military service put these veterans in highly stressful situations, the influence of their service can be directly attributed to their difficulty finding and succeeding in their civilian occupations.

These negative impacts continue to harm the veteran as stereotypes about their mental health also contribute to their trouble with employment. In a survey featured in *Veterans in Workplace*, one veteran claimed that he was worried that too much of a focus on PTSD would permeate a stereotype that veterans are not suitable for the workplace

to employers (Burton Blatt Institute, 2013). In other words, there is a fine balance between accommodating for those with PTSD and tragicizing it to the point where it infantilizes the veteran and harms their employability. According to the survey, there are companies who participate in the latter and help spread the idea that veterans are risky employees to take on due to their mental health (Burton Blatt Institute, 2013). As a result, just the status of being a veteran brings prejudice about their mental health, which can negatively affect their job outcomes. This creates a feedback loop, as being unemployed comes with higher risks of worsening mental health and worsening mental health with lower employment rates. With the increased chances of suffering from PTSD from being in the military, veterans are particularly vulnerable to worsened employment options once they transition back into civilian life.

## BENEFITS OF MILITARY SERVICE

However, as mentioned before, recent developments in the awareness of veterans struggling with transitioning back into the civilian labor force has led some to argue that companies are more willing to hire and invest in veterans. Thus, military service helps its veterans find jobs as companies—like Amazon, General Electric, General Motors, Comcast, and more—use recruitment and outreach programs to find veteran employees (Kirchner & Minnis, 2018). By holding veteran job fairs, military friendly companies attract veterans seeking jobs, hire them, and invest in their professional development. The negative effects of lacking hard and soft skills that military service may have caused are then neutralized on paper as companies are willing to hire and train US veterans. Furthermore, the mentorship program—as described in *Veterans in Workplace*—puts veterans in contact with other veterans to help the transition back into the labor force, which helps them thrive once they are hired (Burton Blatt Institute, 2013). So, rather than military service being a negative influence on a veteran's chances of being hired, their military service is what allows them to be seen and recruited by companies who are willing to invest in their growth.

## HOW THE BENEFITS ARE NOT AS STRAIGHTFORWARD AS THEY SEEM

In actuality, there are shortcomings when it comes to the military friendly companies' hiring and investment practices. While there have been strides in increasing the opportunities given to those with military service, these strides have had less than optimal results. These military

friendly companies mainly focused on the early transitional phase of veterans exiting the military with a steep drop in support later in their careers (Kirchner & Minnis, 2018). Relatedly but not necessarily causally, around half of these veterans end up leaving their first nonmilitary job.

This high turnover rate may point to an underlying problem in the company environment. For example, veteran Brandi Pett, as part of her oral history interview, mentions how trust and duty were crucial values in the military, which seem to be lacking in the civilian workforce: “One time I got really upset with my boss because she had done something pretty underhanded and took credit for a lot of work that she had not done, that I had” (in Howard, 2022, 1: 09: 00). Her experience offers insight into the disconnect between company goals and employee environment. Thus, while companies may take strides in increasing their openness to veterans, there is a gap between veteran values and civilian actions, which make it difficult for the two to work together at times. Under these circumstances, the negative impact of military service on a veteran’s chances of finding and retaining desirable work may be mitigated but not entirely negated.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, when taking into account the lack of transferability in skills, the gap in mindsets, and the effects of mental health and their stereotypes, the disadvantages the military leaves its veterans with when it comes to employment outcomes becomes obvious. And, while there have been efforts to address these obstacles, these efforts have been met with mixed results. Companies and organizations have recognized the problem, but it seems that they are not listening to veterans’ voices. Instead, they are applying surface-level solutions without addressing the actual needs of the former servicepersonnel. Veterans want to use the skills they learned while in service. They feel that companies are framing veterans with PTSD as damaged goods. They feel civilian culture lacks the trust and sense of duty associated with the military. Without hearing and properly acknowledging their voices, veterans will continue to struggle with finding fulfilling work in their post-service lives.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

## AUTHOR INFORMATION

Nathan Le is a fourth-year student at the University of California, Irvine. Being the son of a Marine Corps veteran, he has taken an interest in veterans studies: the obstacles veterans face, how they express themselves, and many other facets of veterans studies. After pursuing his degree in Business Economics, he plans on enrolling into UCI’s School of Law to pursue his J.D. to better help the people in his community.

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**Submitted:** 26 September 2023    **Accepted:** 03 October 2023    **Published:** 05 February 2024

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