

WORK FUTURES RESEARCH CENTRE

Veterans' opportunities and obstacles to transferring skills to civilian jobs and careers

In 2016, about 2.5 mio veterans lived in the UK and each year about 16.000 men and women leave the Armed Forces. The employment and un-employment rates of veterans and non-veterans are very similar. However, veterans and non-veterans differ with respect to employment sector, education and qualifications. What are the opportunities and obstacles to transfer skills gained during military service to the civilian sector?

Key Points

- Veterans are interested in and find employment in the private, public and third sectors in a range of occupations and turn to self-employment
- Careers advice for veterans including training in CV writing needs to be improved and standardized approaches should be avoided
- Employers need a better understanding of military careers, CVs, and skills
- Networks and networking play a crucial role for hiring processes
- Mentoring schemes should be supported: Mentors can identify suitable employment and 'translate' military skills to the civilian sphere

Introduction

Leaving the armed forces is a cultural transition which involves the loss of military structure, status and camaraderie. As long as military and civilian spheres are experienced as distinct, it is important to know whether and how social, cultural and symbolic capital acquired in the military can be transferred to the civilian sphere. Research on veterans'

transition to the civilian sphere so far tends to focus on the difficulties adapting to civilian work and life and has addressed problems such as mental health, substance abuse, homelessness, unemployment, criminality, and violence. More attention needs to be paid to the successful transfer of skills from military to civilian careers.

The Study

The following findings are based on life history interviews that were carried out in the UK between May 2017 and July 2018 to investigate the pathways that led participants to join the UK Armed Forces and their skills acquisition experiences. Military service provides resources for personal growth and allows service personnel to acquire a wide range of skills. It is important to know, whether and how these skills can be transferred. Funding for this research project has been provided by the University of Southampton.

Research participants were recruited through personal contacts, word-of-mouth, flyers, advertisements in Soldier Magazine and a local newspaper, a Skills Fair at Tidworth Garrison, charities, and a military network in a large company. So far, sixteen white British men were interviewed. It is desirable to carry out additional interviews with women and men from different ethnic backgrounds. Research participants served in the British Army, the Naval Services and the Royal Air Force and included officer

and non-officer ranks. Ten participants had been officers who might have been more willing to talk about their experience than non-officer ranks. Perhaps they had a more successful transition due to access to more resources than lower ranking personnel. This will require further research.

The oldest participant was in his 80s and had served for two years in 1955 to 1957 (National Service). He was included in the sample because he was actively involved in his old regiment organisation and in supporting service leavers and veterans. The youngest participant was 27 and had served from 2008 to 2017. Only two participants had served less than five years, five had served between five and nine years, five between ten and nineteen years, and four longer than twenty years. Four research participants had left between 2015 and 2017, three in 2012 and 2013, nine had left earlier (between 1957 and 2005). This means that their transition experience reflects changes in services available to veterans.

Key Findings

Overall, respondents described their transition to civilian work and life as smooth and successful. They had acquired skills and made use of training opportunities throughout their military careers and of the available support in the transition period. This included accessing military as well as civilian networks to find out about the skills

needed to pursue a career or setting up a business, finding an internship or a job.

Continuities and Discontinuities

Participants found a range of different job opportunities. Some types of employment were characterized by continuities, for example working outdoors as farmer, windfarm manager, as landscape gardener

or on an oil rig. Others were self-employed as consultants and developers, while still others worked in the private, public or third sectors. One respondent used his transition entitlement for university fees and enrolled as a student. Even if the transition was experienced as unproblematic, service leavers and veterans missed military culture and stated that 'nothing compares to the armed forces'. The role in the military is associated with identity, status and camaraderie.

Military-Civilian-Differences

A number of respondents mentioned that they missed the banter typical for military culture and that they were careful to avoid saying something inappropriate in the civilian workplace. Some found it hard to get used to more a deliberative decision-making style and what they felt was a lack of efficiency in the civilian workplace. However, some respondents noted that lengthier decision-making processes might lead to better results. Being stereotyped as ex-military was identified as a problem. Some respondents were motivated to participate in the study because they wanted to correct the 'mad, bad and sad stereotype' which they felt was disseminated by charities. One respondent put it very aptly: 'too much sympathy, not enough empathy'. Despite missing the culture and camaraderie of the Armed Forces, overall respondents said that they wanted to make a clear break.

Transferrable Skills

Respondents emphasized that they were proactive in getting ready for their second career. They had made use of websites to find out about job opportunities and

enterprises and were aware that they had a lot of transferable skills including leadership skills, project management, policing, setting up and implementing protocols and standards. Those who wanted to join humanitarian organisations were disappointed to realise that these often expected academic degrees and did not necessarily acknowledge skills acquired during military service. The participants were not interested in working as private security providers in humanitarian or other contexts.

Veterans Transition Support

There were mixed views on the support that was available to service leavers and veterans. Some respondents said that the Armed Forces provided good resources for resettlement. Everyone mentioned Careers Transition Partnership (CTP)* though not everyone made use of this service and those who did found it not necessarily useful. CTP's 'one-size-fits-all' approach was criticized by all respondents. Some pointed out that there was too much emphasis on jobs in the building trades (which some found useful for personal purposes, DIY, but not for their career development) and not enough on the service sector. They felt that the available training and courses needed to be more individualized. Those who knew what they wanted made good use of suitable training opportunities and internships. CTP's approach to CV-writing was perceived as problematic. Participants noted that civilian employers do not understand careers in the Armed Forces, thus one has to learn – and be taught -- how to present the acquired skills. Some respondents were critical of the support provided by the Armed Forces which was characterised as 'awful' and felt that

that 'people are abandoned'. This criticism was not necessarily based on personal experiences, although a few respondents had personally experienced difficulties obtaining support. Negative experiences included delays in dealing with the paperwork which jeopardized starting a job, internship or university study.

Networking and Mentoring

Formal and informal networks were key for a successful transition. Being interviewed for a job by someone who had served was as

important as hiring someone who had served. In both cases employee and employer have a shared experience and understand the skillset someone brings to the job. In addition, respondents stated that one can trust someone with a military background. Respondents described informal as well as formal networks. Some respondents could access support at the workplace and benefited from mentoring, CV writing workshops, internships and networking events.

Policy Implications

Military service offers opportunities to acquire a wide range of skills that can be transferred to different sectors of the labour market. However, veterans need to learn to communicate these skills in the civilian sphere whereas employers need to develop a better understanding of the skills developed during military service. This can be supported through CV writing and application training that takes the interests and skills of service leavers and veterans and

consider the diverse range of career opportunities in the civilian labour market.

- Standardized and target-driven approaches should be avoided.
- Mentorship programmes and peer support in the private, public and third sectors should be supported.
- Veterans should be consulted and be involved in the design of support structures for service leavers.

* <https://www.ctp.org.uk/>

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