

Veterans in the Workplace: An Analysis of Military Veteran Underutilization in the Civilian Workforce

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Abstract

Literature supports the idea that military veterans have faced higher unemployment rates in the civilian workforce compared to the general population since World War II. There are approximately 200,000 individuals phasing out of the military each year; about eighty percent separating after a certain number of years and the remaining twenty percent retiring from a branch of the military. The primary objective of this paper is to present factors that contribute to employment rates among veterans and how hiring veterans adds value to civilian organizations. For the purposes of this study a mixed methods approach to gain the best understanding of veteran underutilization within the civilian workforce using publicly available online resources. The qualitative research focused on the resumes of five veterans, while the quantitative research analyzed the unemployment rates for veterans and the civilian workforce each year from 1948 to 2016.

Keywords: Veterans, Unemployment, Civilian Workforce, Military

Introduction

Military veterans have held some of the most elite, challenging, and life-threatening occupations in the United States (U.S.). Yet, nearly 70 percent of veterans state that transitioning to a job within the civilian workforce is among one of their greatest challenges upon separating from the service (Stone & Stone, 2015). Ostovary and Dapprich (2011) stated

“Transitions alter our lives—our roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions...It is not the transition per se that is critical, but how much it changes one’s roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions. The bigger the change, the greater the potential impact and the longer it may take to incorporate the transition and move on” (p. 63-64).

It can be argued that transitioning from the rigidity of a military work environment to the civilian workforce is a double-edged sword. On the one side, being gainfully employed is correlated with a better quality of life and a more positive self-esteem with veterans bringing significant experience and maturity to the potential employer (i.e., leadership, teamwork, discipline) (Cohen, Suri, Amick, & Yan, 2013).

Despite proficiencies veterans have to offer and the many benefits associated with employment, these individuals with combat experience often have higher unemployment rates compared to the civilian population. This is due to a variety of factors including the perceived stereotypes associated with veterans (i.e., mental illness, addictions, post-traumatic stress syndrome), translating job duties from the military to civilian work environments, and the role and limited knowledge that human resource professionals have in recruiting, hiring, and retaining military veterans (Stone & Stone, 2015). Nearly 200,000 individuals transition out of the military each year (Anderson & Goodman, 2014), about eighty percent separating after a certain number of years and the remaining twenty percent retiring from a branch of the military (VA gov, 2013).

Not only do employers and professionals not understand how to integrate veterans into the civilian workforce, veterans themselves often have a skewed perspective related to employability expectations upon their separation from the military. Literature has supported that recently separated veterans often display five major themes that provide explanation as to why veterans themselves have a hard time with re-entry into the civilian workforce. These themes include culture shock from the military to the civilian work environment, lack of understanding how their skills transfer, lack of job preparation for the civilian workplace, lack of knowledge in searching for jobs in the civilian workforce, and concerns over compensated (Simpson & Armstrong, 2009). Many veterans and employers lack the knowledge and understanding of what is needed to hire veterans. It is the purpose of this paper to review how the factors mentioned above contribute to low employment rates among veterans and how hiring veterans adds value to civilian organizations.

Veterans seeking gainful employment in the civilian workforce faced challenges since World War II. Individuals returning home from combat did not know the job market that they were coming home to, nor the financial situation of their families. Following the Great Depression, the unemployment rate decreased from 9.9% to 1.2% due to the number of women that entered into the workforce. There were still 15.7 million veterans without gainful civilian employment once the war ended. It was anticipated that the number of veterans being unemployed ranged from 7 – 20 million after the war. With anticipation that a significant number of veterans would be unemployed, President Roosevelt signed into law the GI Bill. This provided the financial support for millions of American veterans to obtain an education and was the basis for the knowledge-based economy the U.S. is today. While the GI Bill was a step in the right direction helping millions find gainful employment upon receiving an education, millions more still remained unemployed (Workforce, 2012).

Those individuals involved with the highly controversial Vietnam War brought a new set of challenges for veterans seeking employment within the civilian workforce (Stone & Stone, 2015). Due to the high unemployment rates among these veterans compared to their civilian counterparts, the Vietnam Era Veterans' Readjustment Assistance Act (VEVRAA) was established in 1974 as a means to improve veteran employment rates in the civilian workforce. This act required that employers with federal contracts or subcontracts totaling \$25,000 or more provide veterans of the Vietnam era, disabled veterans, and/or active duty veterans with affirmative action and equal employment opportunities, thereby increasing the number of veterans employed (United States Department of Labor, 1974).

The most current veterans returning to the U.S. after serving post 9-11 in Iraq and Afghanistan, unlike their predecessors, had significantly different deployment experiences not only in the area that they served, but also in the type of combat encountered. Due to advancements in technology (robotics, drones, body armor, intelligence related systems), there have been an increase in the number of U.S. soldiers' lives saved during combat, but at what cost? Nearly sixty-six percent of today's veterans leave the military with some type of physical disability (loss of a limb), mental disability (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety), and/or a cognitive impairment (traumatic brain injury) (Stone & Stone, 2015). Furthermore, many veterans experience what is known as signature disability, having either PTSD, traumatic brain injury, or both, which studies have found triple the rate of unemployment (Rudstam, Gower, & Cook, 2012). Despite the amendments made that extended VEVRAA to cover today's veterans, their unemployment rates are still considerably high (United States Department of Labor, 1974).

Statement of the Problem

Large numbers of military personnel transition out the armed forces on a yearly basis. While these individuals have had careers within the military, their shift from the rigid military environment to the individualistic civilian workforce can be a hard transition. The problem that military veterans face to gain meaningful employment in the civilian workforce is thought to be linked to a variety of different factors including the stereotypes that veterans have, lack of knowledge among professionals about recruiting and hiring of veterans, and the ambiguity of job duties from the military to the civilian work environment (Stone & Stone, 2015). In analyzing a veteran perspective, their high expectations of gaining employment along with their lack of knowledge on resources made available to help them better transition into the civilian work environment (Simpson & Armstrong, 2009). The purpose of this study was to gain a perspective and analyze what factors may contribute to their underutilization within the civilian workforce.

Theory of Underutilization of Veterans in the Civilian Workforce

Homecoming Theory:

Developed after World War II, the homecoming theory serves as the framework of the transition from the military to the civilian lifestyle based on time and space. This theory emphasizes the themes of disconnection and isolation as a challenge for the returning veteran. Both the veteran and the persons at home have had different experiences while the member of the military was serving. This separation causes a change in the dynamic. There can be challenges that coincide with this such as reestablishing lost connections and adapting to changes (Ahern, Worthen, Masters, Lippman, Ozer, & Moos, 2015).

The challenges that the veterans face upon returning home include their expectation versus the reality of the world that they are coming home to. These differences often result in a culture shock to both sides. Assisting the veteran transition back into their civilian role and for those at home to reestablish connections with the veteran despite changes that may have occurred is important (Ahern et al., 2015)

Disability Model

Stone and Colella's (1996) disability model, utilizes cognitive framework to gain a better understanding of the factors that affect the hiring of individuals with a disability. Stone and Stone (2015) utilized this model to explain why veterans are being hired in the workforce at a lower rate compared to their civilian counterparts. This model places emphasis on 1) the stereotypes that individuals with disabilities have, 2) categorizes key attributes that are likely to influence hiring practices among professionals in employment settings, and 3) to provide strategies that should be utilized by both veterans and organizations to ensure that the hiring process of veterans brings less challenges (Stone & Stone, 2015).

The original model that Stone and Stone (2015) discussed in their article, *Factors affecting hiring decisions about veterans*, was modified for veteran hiring within the civilian workforce. This model stated that raters (individuals that interviewed the applicant) would assign the applicant into a category (e.g. Vietnam War, Gulf War, post 9-11). Based on the individual, the rater would then categorize applicants into stereotypes (e.g. veterans are mentally ill, physically disabled) and the rater then applied the stereotypes into expected job related performances (e.g. the veteran is physically disabled and therefore will not be able to perform the job duties in a satisfactory way). Resulting from this process, if there are any negative expectations regarding the job performance of the veteran, the rater will most likely not hire the veteran as an employee because they are thought to be less suited for the job (Stone & Stone, 2015). It should be noted that most stereotypes about veterans have proven to be very inconsistent and speculative. Because of this opposite ends of the spectrum categorization of veteran stereotypes and the little research done on these stereotypes in the employment setting, additional research needs to be done specific to employer-veteran relations that may affect hiring decisions (Stone & Stone, 2015).

Military to Civilian Work Environment-Translation of Job Duties:

Another factor that contributes to the high unemployment rates among veterans is that employers and veterans alike have a hard time translating their job duties from the military to job duties in the civilian workforce. From the veteran's perspective, because the military does not use resumes to "apply" for jobs, it is often hard for them to determine the skills they acquired throughout their military experience that translate to organizations. To support this, one study found that 12.1 million veterans indicated that they struggle with explaining how the skills they acquired in the military translate to civilian job duties (Stone & Stone, 2015).

Employers also are not clear on how the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) veterans acquired from their military jobs realistically fit into the professional civilian work environments. Due to this ambiguity of the KSAs veterans receive throughout their time in the military, studies have found that employers use "gap filling" to measure the suitability of a veteran in specific civilian job roles. This "gap filling" often leads to employers relying on the stereotypes associated with veterans, which can negatively impact the perceived job performance and hiring decisions for the veteran (Stone & Stone, 2015).

Human Resources Role in Veteran Recruitment & Hiring:

With more than half of today's working age veterans returning home with some type of disability, a question is, "how prepared are human resource professionals to recruit and hire disabled veterans?" It appears that HR professionals want to do "good will" hiring, however a large scale study done by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) revealed that nearly half of the 1,083 human resource professionals surveyed lack the knowledge to do so and what resources to utilize to follow through (Rudstam, Gower, & Cook, 2012).

In the same study SHRM surveyed HR professionals related to their knowledge of recruiting veteran employees. Despite the fact that the federal government instituted VetSuccess and Wounded Warrior Programs to assist employers to recruit veterans; 73 percent and 61 percent respondents, respectively, have not heard of either of these programs. Of the organizations that have heard of these programs; 73 percent of government professionals have heard of the Wounded Warrior Program, compared to the 37 percent of professionals in the private, for profit organizations. While these professionals have heard of this program, only 2-3 percent actually utilized it for recruiting veterans (Rudstam, Gower, & Cook, 2012). Many veterans, whether disabled or not, often turn to government assisted programs such as VetSuccess and the Wounded Warrior Program. With a high rate of HR professionals not having heard of these programs coupled with a low utilization rate with the ones that have, the chances of a veteran being hired in a civilian work environment are greatly reduced (Rudstam, Gower, & Cook, 2012).

Veteran Perspective

In addition to employers that do not understand how veterans transition from the military to the civilian workforce, veterans themselves are often do not have the skills necessary to be successful when it comes to finding gainful employment. Separated veterans often display five major themes that are thought to help explain why veterans themselves have a hard time with re-entry into the civilian workforce. These themes include culture shock from the military to the civilian work environment, lack of understanding how their skills transfer, lack of job preparation for the civilian workplace, lack of knowledge in searching for jobs in the civilian workforce, and financial concerns (Simpson & Armstrong, 2009). These themes can potentially carry over to help explain why veterans are not finding gainful employment within the civilian workforce.

Simpson and Armstrong (2009) stated that "many veterans experience challenges when transitioning from an extremely regimented culture to an unstructured environment that focuses on individuality" (p. 179). Many also grieve the loss of the identity they had in the military, with leaving their rank behind them as they transition out. These factors combined together can lead to veterans being challenged to find employment within the civilian workforce. The second and third theme of lack of knowledge in transferrable skills and job preparation, respectively, are interrelated. For many veterans, the only job that they ever had was the one that they held in the military. This leads to veterans being unprepared for the civilian workforce because there is ambiguity with the skills they acquired in the military and how they translate to a civilian job.

Veterans, unlike those in the civilian population, may not have organized resumes, cover letters, or participated in interviews. The fourth theme of lack of knowledge in job searches also potentially leads to veterans having increased unemployment rates compared to their civilian counterparts.

Veterans generally are unfamiliar with the vast array of resources made available to them to aid in their job search. There are support structures for veterans seeking positions that include VetSuccess, Veterans to Work, Hire Heroes USA, www.dol.gov/vets, and www.va.gov/jobs. Despite the resources available, they are many times not utilized and veterans get discouraged when they do not find a job within a specific time frame. The last theme of concern is salary and benefits. Some veterans worry that upon taking a job in the civilian workforce they will not be able to afford the relocation expenses (Simpson & Armstrong, 2009). These factors contribute to an increased number of unemployed veterans.

Methodology

Context for the Study:

For the purposes of this study a mixed methods approach to gain the best understanding of veteran underutilization within the civilian workforce using publicly available online resources. The qualitative research focused on the resumes of five veterans, while the quantitative research analyzed the unemployment rates for veterans and the civilian workforce each year from 1948 to 2016.

Research Design

The unemployment rates were collected from the Bureau of Labor Statistics website from the unemployment rate section. Creswell (2014) states that “pragmatism as a worldview arises out of actions, situations, and consequences rather than antecedent conditions...Instead of focusing on methods, researchers emphasize the research problem and use all approaches available to understand the problem” (p. 10). It was determined that a mixed methods design approach would be utilized, more specifically the convergent mixed methods approach. In this approach the qualitative data and the quantitative data was collected and analyzed separately, then compared to each other to determine if the findings confirm or deny one another (Creswell, 2014).

Procedures:

The data for this study was collected from publicly available online resources (i.e. Bureau of Labor Statistics and online articles). The qualitative data analyzed five veteran resumes based on the characteristics of each resume. The quantitative data analyzed unemployment rates of civilian and veterans in the U.S. between the years 1948 to 2016 and was collected from the Bureau of Labor Statistics website. The average of each year unemployment rate was analyzed; comparing the civilian unemployment rate and the veteran unemployment rate. A regression analysis determined if there were any statistically significant differences among the two unemployment rates.

Data Analysis Procedures to be Utilized:

The qualitative data collected for this study was analyzed to compare the components of a resume that employers evaluate for job candidates. The data was analyzed in Microsoft Excel using a line chart as well as a regression analysis. Regression analysis was chosen because it compares independent variables to examine any potential relationship among the variables (Creswell, 2014). Unemployment rates from the civilian and veteran populations from the years 1948-2016 were also analyzed. The regression results were presented in a statistical table in Microsoft Excel.

Results

Qualitative Results:

Five aspects of five veteran resumes were reviewed for: Organization (bullet points, paragraph, combination), Organization (Chronological vs Themed Experiences), Length (Number of Pages), Experience (Jobs, Relevant Skills), Education, and Language.

Organization: One respondent used bullet points only

Two respondents used paragraphs only

Two respondents used a combination of bullet points and paragraphs

Organization: Some followed a themed sequence while others followed chronological order

Length: One resume was one page, two were two pages, and two were three pages

Experience: Two respondents listed military experience first on their resumes, three respondent's listed military experience within or at the end of their resumes

Education: None of the veterans included education information in their resumes

Language: All of the veterans used military terms in their resumes

The evaluation of the resumes provided results that would support that veterans separating from services require support in seeking employment and applying for positions in civilian organizations. This would include cover letter and resume writing, methods for seeking open positions (organization websites, networking, print), interview strategies, follow-up letters and telephone calls. Also, the understanding of technology (email, texts) related to securing a position is an important skill in seeking positions in today's organizations.

Converting military terms to terms that human resources and hiring managers understand is imperative; as well as converting military skills to terms organizations determine important. Many veteran applicants may be deemed not meeting the skills noted in position postings; not moving forward in the hiring process at the first review.

Quantitative Results:

A comparison of civilian unemployment rates against veteran unemployment rates from the years 1948 to 2016 was analyzed (Figures 1 and 2). The regression analysis demonstrated a strong positive relationship between the two variables (civilian and veteran unemployment rates), resulting at .667. The line chart using the same data supported the regression analysis in that there was a relationship with the unemployment rates of the civilian and veteran populations. The line chart mirrors lines support that there was a relationship established between the two variables.

Discussion

The qualitative results found that some of the components of the resumes hindered individuals finding gainful employment within the civilian workforce. Three major themes were found among all resumes: 1) the resumes had some type of military language (i.e. battalion, infantry) that could potentially be confusing to some employers, 2) the resumes included skills that were embedded amongst other words, skills which were de-emphasized based on their placement within the resume, and 3) some of the veterans did not put any management or leadership experience on their resumes which led to missed career opportunities (Arendt & Sapp, 2014).

These three key findings relate to the underutilization of veterans within the civilian workforce. The first theme, “the use of military language”, can easily confuse potential interviewers that do not know how to translate military terminology into a civilian job role. This potentially leads the interviewer not to hire them if they do not understand the military language at first glance of a resume. The second theme of including skills that are embedded within a resume can lead the professional that reviews the resume not to take the time to find the skills that these veterans have because there are not blatantly obvious to the reader. The third theme of veterans not listing any of their military experience in which they served as a leader or in a management position potentially lead employers to not hire that veteran because they are not going to fish around a resume to find what an applicant’s experience is (Arendt & Sapp, 2014). These themes may help explain why veteran unemployment rates are higher compared to the civilian unemployment rates.

The quantitative results present some unexpected findings. The regression analysis provide proof that there was a strong positive relationship between the two variables (civilian and veteran unemployment rates), resulting at .667. The line chart, using the same data, supported the regression analysis related to the relationship of unemployment rates of the civilian and veteran populations. The data on the line chart also mirrors one another again providing support that there was a relationship established between the two variables.

Limitations

Based on the findings of this study, there are several limitations. The first of the limitations were that no human subjects were actually studied. Human subjects for the qualitative evaluation would have provided a larger sample size. A second limitation for this study was that there was a very limited number (5) of veterans that were studied for the qualitative study, so the results are not significant enough to generalize to the entire veteran population. A third limitation to this study related to the quantitative data. Yearly averages were used instead of a monthly basis as given for the unemployment rates so the ending data could have potentially been skewed. A final limitation dealt with the unemployment rates. Veteran unemployment rates included those individuals that already transitioned out of the military, while civilian unemployment rates still included the individuals that are transitioning out, which was the focus of this study.

Conclusion

With nearly 200,000 veterans phasing out of the military each year, professionals in the civilian workforce need to be better informed as to the benefits of hiring veterans and how to provide a supportive orientation to the organization (Anderson & Goodman, 2014). A SHRM study reviewed responses from 400 organizations on hiring a veteran reported that the organizations that go above the law’s requirements often employ veterans at a higher rate. Providing a more tailored employee assistance program specific to veteran needs, offering special training to refine their KSAs to make them more suitable for the civilian workplace, offering flexible work schedules during their transition from the military to civilian life, and recognizing military service would improve recruitment and retention initiatives (Arendt & Sapp, (2014), “Veterans in the Workplace: Recruitment and Retention (2013)).

Veterans also bring a number of key KSAs that can greatly benefit the civilian work environment including leadership, the ability to work as part of a team, and discipline, despite the negative stereotypes that minimize them. Studies have consistently proven that veterans perform just as well if not better than their civilian coworkers on job related tasks (Stone & Stone, 2015). If this true, then why do veterans have high unemployment rates compared to the rest of the civilian working age population? There are multiple factors that overshadow why employing a veteran has a negative connotation (i.e. stereotypes, hard to translate KSAs, HR's lack of knowledge), when in reality it is positive both for the veteran (i.e. providing them with a better quality of life, positive self-esteem) and for organizations (i.e. adding diversity to their workforce) (Cohen, Suri, Amick, & Yan, 2013).

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Figure 1. Comparison of Unemployment Rates Among Civilians and Veterans

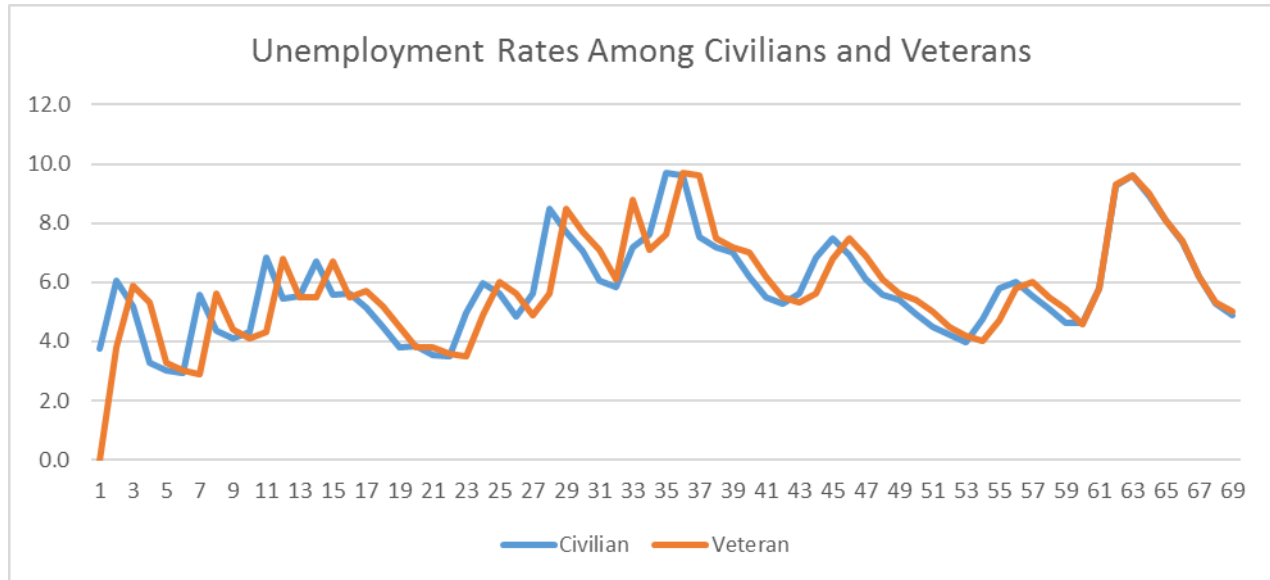


Figure 2. Regression Analysis of Unemployment Rates

SUMMARY OUTPUT								
<i>Regression Statistics</i>								
Multiple R	0.8161381							
R Square	0.6660814							
Adjusted R Square	0.6610221							
Standard Error	0.9628032							
Observations	68							
<i>ANOVA</i>								
	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Significance F</i>			
Regression	1	122.041009	122.041	131.653	2.26857E-17			
Residual	66	61.1813444	0.92699					
Total	67	183.222353						
	<i>Coefficients</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>t Stat</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>Lower 95%</i>	<i>Upper 95%</i>	<i>Lower 95.0%</i>	<i>Upper 95.0%</i>
Intercept	0.950804	0.44488332	2.137199	0.03629	0.062565763	1.83904217	0.062565763	1.839042174
	3.75	0.8431777	0.07348586	11.47401	2.3E-17	0.696458486	0.98989699	0.696458486