

Debunking myths in veteran hiring

Veterans are experienced, intellectually agile individuals
whose employment can help close the talent-shortage gap.



Introduction

The war for talent is raging. Most organizations know that an equal employment rate for women could help close the talent-shortage gap. Few organizations recognize and know how to tap into the talent pool implied by the reference to a talent “war”: veterans.

Myths that negatively impact veteran hiring and retention abound. The first myth we want to dispel holds that veterans see higher rates of unemployment. Through incredible effort by the government, nonprofits, and businesses, the unemployment rate for veterans has declined steadily since 2010, when it equaled the unemployment rate for nonveterans (9.4 percent; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010) to an April 2017 low of 3.7 percent, almost a full percentage point lower than the national average (OEO & VBA, 2017).

Nevertheless, challenges remain for veterans, 453,000 of whom remain unemployed. Veterans have difficulties finding and staying in civilian jobs, despite strong incentives for companies to hire more veterans (e.g., The Vow to Hire Heroes Act of 2011). Sixty-five percent of veterans, regardless of rank, leave their first civilian job within their first two years (Maury, et al. 2014).

Veterans’ challenge has shifted from finding a civilian job to finding the right job. Once they have found the right job, turnover among veterans declines (Schafer, et al. 2016). Organizations who hire veterans and help them translate their competencies and experiences for the best fitting job are rewarded with highly resilient employees accustomed to performing and making decisions under rapidly changing circumstances (Harrell and Berglass, 2012), who assume trust in their coworkers and leadership (precursors of organizational performance; IVMF, 2012), who have a strong sense of

Organizations that take hiring and retention of veterans seriously are often rewarded with resilient, trustworthy, and results-driven employees who succeed in dynamic environments. Knowing how to translate veterans’ competencies into well-fitting job roles and management levels is critical, as is an understanding of military culture to overcome stereotyping in veteran hiring. Pro bono leadership programs help veterans meet future civilian employers half-way by helping them find their passion and value in the civilian workplace and by providing them with the language necessary to translate their skillsets and experiences.

responsibility, and who see tasks through to completion (SHRM, 2012).

In this paper, we view veterans’ challenges with finding and staying in civilian jobs through the lens of the myths that surround them, ranging from myths regarding competencies—“veterans have lower emotional stability”—to myths regarding experiences—“veterans are only trained in one, military-specific field.” Combating these myths will help hiring managers and veterans when determining the right kind of job to offer and to accept, respectively, and will pave the way for successful veteran hiring and retention (Stone and Stone, 2015).

Myths regarding competencies

Because only about 9 percent of the population has served in the armed forces (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016), many hiring managers are unfamiliar with military culture, a lack of familiarity that can lead to stereotyping when making hiring decisions. Research suggests that hiring managers tend to view veterans as having higher potential for leadership and teamwork, but having a lower capacity for self-control and being flexible and independent, e.g., questioning assumptions, challenging status quo, etc. (Stone and Stone, 2015), which might negatively impact the types of jobs veterans are selected for.

Stone (2016) confirms that veterans have in fact equal levels of self-control and flexibility as their civilian counterparts. Data from the Korn Ferry Institute support these findings, in addition to supporting the view that

veterans get high scores on people-oriented competencies. In the Leveraging Military Leadership Program (LMLP), co-sponsored by Harris Corporation and Korn Ferry Hay Group, 292 veterans were found to score higher than the American norm on mental and people agility (see Figure 1).¹ The LMLP veterans scored lower than the norm on competencies related to stepping up and addressing difficult issues, gaining the commitment of others, and maneuvering comfortably through complex policy-process, and people-related organizational dynamics. Given the highly bureaucratic nature of the military, there is oftentimes an expectation that following orders takes precedence over independently leading change, which may be driving LMLP veterans' lower change agility scores.

Figure 1
LMLP veterans' learning agility scores



¹ The Korn Ferry Institute analyzed viaEDGE scores for a group of 292 veterans who participated in the Leveraging Military Leadership Program. viaEDGE is a measure of learning agility, comprised of five factors. LMLP veterans vs. norm on mental agility $p = .049$, people agility $p < .001$, change agility $p = .001$, results agility $p = .216$, and self-awareness $p = .282$. The veterans participating in the LMLP are not a randomly sampled group of U.S. veterans.

LMLP veterans were found to be intellectually agile; able to make sense of complex, high-quantity, and sometimes contradictory information to effectively solve problems. Additionally, LMLP veterans were found to be people-smart: adapting their approach and demeanor in real time to match the shifting demands of different situations; relating openly and comfortably with diverse groups of people; recognizing the value that different people bring; and developing and delivering multi-mode communications that convey a clear understanding of the unique needs of different audiences.

“Harris looks to hire veterans because of the superb leadership and execution skills they develop in the military,” says Robert Duffy, senior vice president of HR and administration at Harris Corporation, a leading technology innovator for government and commercial customers. “Veterans also bring a level of maturity and flexibility that is extremely valuable.”

That LMLP veterans would be more learning agile than the norm on mental and people agility may come as a surprise to some in the private sector, who have the preconceived notion that military members are highly regimented and not creative in their thinking or in their social conduct. However, as business leaders who have hired veterans and former military members who have successfully transitioned to the private sector can attest, military experience promotes mental and people agility. Military members work with people on teams from a very young age, and are trained to persuade, manage conflict, and build networks in a matrixed environment to drive results.

Figure 2

Learning agility is key to leadership success Highly learning-agile people are promoted twice as often over 10 years (Feil, et al. 2014).	
Mental agility	The extent to which an individual embraces complexity, examines problems in unique and unusual ways, is inquisitive, and can make fresh connections between different concepts.
People agility	The degree to which one is open-minded toward others, enjoys interacting with a diversity of people, understands his or her unique strengths, interests, and limitations, and uses them effectively to accomplish organizational goals.
Change agility	The extent to which an individual likes change, continuously explores new options and solutions, and is interested in leading organizational-change efforts.
Results agility	The degree to which an individual is motivated by challenge and can deliver results in first-time and/or tough situations through resourcefulness and by inspiring others.
Self-awareness	The degree to which an individual has personal insight, clearly understands his or her strengths and weaknesses, is free of blind spots, and uses this knowledge to perform effectively.

Myths regarding experiences

The most commonly mentioned challenge by employers with regards to hiring veterans is their fear of difficulty in skill translation (Workforce Solutions, 2014). Hiring managers unfamiliar with military job roles and responsibilities might bring to mind Hollywood's depiction of physical conditioning, strict drills and discipline, land navigation, and explosives and fire arms training.

Instead, veterans are as varied in their experiences as their civilian counterparts, ranging from administration and logistics to communication and law. Many veterans possess technical expertise, including training and certification in military systems that often become the current technology in the commercial sector. Companies looking for specific communications—or network—engineering skills can find this expertise among veterans. Harris Corporation, for example, is a leader in tactical communications, avionics, and electronic warfare. “We invest in the Leveraging Military Leadership Program² and other initiatives to hire veterans and embrace their unique experiences. Their expertise and skillsets help us produce technologies that, in many cases, go back to protect our men and women in uniform,” says Robert Duffy of Harris Corp.

Furthermore, the military's leadership development process is robust and predictable, producing high-caliber leaders tasked at young ages with managing far larger groups of direct reports than business managers do. Marine Corps Infantry Officers graduate the Marine Corps Infantry Officer Course to lead platoons of up to 40 enlisted infantry people, at the ripe average age of 24.

Perhaps because of the potent leadership development journey military members undergo, chief executives who have served as officers constituted 8 percent of the S&P 500 in 2005, compared to the 3 percent of the male

population, on average, who have served as officers (Korn Ferry, 2006).

Military service among CEOs is associated with ethical behavior and conservative corporate policies (Benmelech and Frydman, 2015). Military CEOs are less likely to be involved in corporate fraudulent activities and perform better during industry downturns. The average tenure of a CEO with military experience is over seven years, compared to the average five years for CEOs without military experience (The Conference Board, 2015).

Korn Ferry Hay Group's *Leveraging Military Leadership Program (LMLP)* guides successful transitions from military to civilian careers. During the four-month program, veterans receive the same research-based leadership development services that Korn Ferry Hay Group offers to boards, CEOs, and senior executives at global organizations. Upon completing LMLP, veterans can articulate their value proposition using competencies that recruiters, hiring managers, and networking contacts understand and embrace. Veterans are taught to back up their value proposition using practiced stories from their military service without the use of military acronyms and terms. As part of the development process, veterans are also given an assessment that measures learning agility and self-awareness—proven predictors of future success.

² Harris Corporation has co-sponsored nine of 10 Leveraging Military Leadership Program cohorts.

Shifting focus: from hiring to increasing retention, performance, and satisfaction

Capital One promotes veteran success with hiring-manager training and affinity groups.

Capital One, a financial services company offering credit, savings, and loan products to customers in the U.S., Canada, and the UK, takes a two-pronged approach to strengthening both the number and the engagement of its employees who are veterans.

First, Capital One's Military Business Resources Group, Salute, has 11 chapters that conduct local lunch-and-learns with hiring managers, explaining military-rank structures and compensation and preparing hiring managers to discuss civilian-equivalent compensation packages with candidates who are veterans. Adherence to basic qualifications in new hires is critical for Capital One hiring managers, who learn what "military equivalent" means. The veteran-support hiring model at Capital One encourages hiring managers to embrace all diversity, veterans included.

Second, all new hires who identify as veterans are welcomed by a local Salute (a military business resources group) chapter leader with lunch. Veterans are offered a mentor and a buddy—another veteran employee—and are encouraged to enroll in Capital One University's two classes on company culture and talent management processes, designed specifically for veterans and spouses of veterans. Locally, there are also ongoing volunteer opportunities and social events to encourage community among the members of the military business resources group.

The efforts have not gone unnoticed. In 2016, Capital One received many top diversity awards, including the prestigious *Military Times*' "Best for Vets," *Hiring our Heroes*' 2016 Military Spouse Employer of the Year, and *Victory Media*'s Military Friendly Employers (Silver).

To ensure veterans maximize the value they bring to their new employers, organizations should meet them half way, firstly by training recruiters and hiring managers to understand the nuances of attracting and hiring veterans, and secondly by providing veterans with resources that allow them to assimilate into their new company culture. Since 2010, Capital One has engaged in both efforts to successfully hire and engage veterans. For example, Capital One hiring managers are trained on military-rank structures, compensation, and civilian-equivalent experiences. "Hiring managers want to see a

round peg in a round hole and do not understand that veterans are Jacks and Jills of all trades," says Tom Downs, Senior Manager of Diversity and Inclusion at Capital One, and army veteran of 21 years. Capital One's military business resource group educates hiring managers on internal education and experience accumulation within the military. Downs says, "some specialty fields in the military do not do credentialing, so hiring managers need to understand what the equivalent of a certificate would be in years and specialty of military service."

Particularly helpful to veterans is Capital One's competency/experience-translation service, whereby candidates who are veterans insert their military occupational specialties and the translator returns relevant roles that fit with their military experience.

Discovering what type of job or role they are both skilled in and passionate about is not an easy process for transitioning veterans. Programs like the Leveraging Military Leadership Program help veterans realize their potential in the civilian world by helping them define their core purpose as leaders and the value they can bring to their civilian organizations. Says LMLP alumni and colonel in the U.S. Navy, "Before I attended LMLP, I didn't even know where to start... and the program showed me you start with yourself. [LMLP] was a trajectory change that will forever impact my professional career."

Veterans' initiatives do not end with ensuring more veterans are hired. JPMorgan Chase & Co., a leading global financial services firm and one of the largest banking institutions in the U.S., has moved from focusing primarily on increasing the number of veterans in the firm to looking for ways to retain veterans, enhance their performance, and increase their satisfaction. In its commitment to veterans, in 2011 JPMorgan Chase & Co. cofounded both Syracuse University's Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF), an interdisciplinary academic institute advancing the lives of American military veterans and their families, and the Veteran Jobs Mission (VJM), which has as its goal to hire a million veterans.

Says Ross Brown, managing director and head of military and veterans' affairs at JPMorgan Chase & Co. and army veteran of 27 years, "To get to the competencies veterans bring—character at a young age, ability to work as a team, focus on the mission—we have to make sure that they can achieve their potential." JPMorgan Chase & Co. therefore offers veterans a robust mentorship program that helps them acclimate to the organizational context, observe successful performance

from civilian mentors, and continue finding purpose outside the military. "Many veterans joined the military out of a sense of service and this need to serve doesn't end after they leave the military," Brown says. "We promote engagement in the communities in which our veterans live and work so that they can continue to feel a part of something bigger than themselves."

Organizations that are considering beginning or expanding their veteran initiatives should consider:

1. Coaching high-potential veterans through the application, interview, and selection processes, including translating their skills and experiences and helping them find their passions.
2. Providing data-driven context for hiring managers to understand and select veterans for jobs that fit their competencies, experiences, and passions.
3. Thoroughly onboarding veterans to more rapidly assimilate them into the company culture.
4. Providing affinity groups for employees who are veterans to create a cohort around them.
5. After the new-hire and onboarding periods, partnering employees who are veterans with civilian mentors who model success within the industry or function.

Leaving the responsibility to successfully transition into a civilian career solely to the veteran omits the other half of the contributing force: the organization. To ensure buy-in and engagement from the veterans, "It is critical to have veterans on that team," says Downs of Capital One.

Conclusion

Because the talent pool is finite, tapping from it anything less than 100 percent results in artificially capping the potential for growth and innovation. Around 200,000 veterans a year transition out of the military, a talent pool from which organizations stand to benefit tremendously. Contrary to popular belief, veterans have been trained and developed to be socially and mentally agile, and gain experience in demonstrating competencies like *managing complexity*, *building effective teams*, and *instilling trust* far more and at an earlier phase in their careers than people who have not been in the military. “There’s a heartfelt commitment in JPMorgan Chase & Co. to support veterans, and it starts at the top,” says Brown. “This is the truth and the bottom line: Hiring veterans is good for business.”

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