

Your next mission: A civilian career

By Jackie Dishner

Planning ahead can help ease the transition process for military service members facing the challenge of a highly competitive job market.

As soon as you decide to leave the military, you've accepted your next mission: to find a new career. It turns out, no matter your rank or the number of years you've served, this is going to be one of the most difficult assignments yet. The sooner you get started, the better.

"I was naive to the whole job search process," says San Diego-based Jay Koranda, senior partner with Orion International, one of the largest private military recruiters in the United States. A 12-year Navy veteran who worked as an aviation electronics technician and served as a Master Training Specialist, Koranda knew he could work in electronics and on jets, "but outside of that, I had no idea how and where to look. I was not sure how my background would fit into companies."

Because of his experience, Koranda knows that someone who has spent the last four years as a "trigger puller" in combat may not know how to translate those skills into something marketable in the civilian world. That's one reason why he now helps other veterans find their way.

His company provides practice interviews, resume writing services, a mentorship program and hiring

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conventions, where 75 percent of those who attend will find jobs. Koranda also helps military service members determine if they need additional training, certification or licensing in order to compete or be more marketable against their peers and civilian job-hunters, and he encourages them to start taking those classes before leaving the military, if possible.

Planning ahead

Military recruiters recommend beginning the recareering transition process as far ahead as 24 months for retiring service members and 12 months out for those separating from military service. The nearly one million unemployed military veterans have their work cut out for them, especially if they entered the service right out of high school. According to experts, today's employment challenge rests mostly with the post 9/11 veterans, ages 20-29.

Chances are they've never drafted a resume, searched for a job or participated in an interview. Add to the challenge that many civilian employers don't understand how veterans' military experience translates to civilian abilities and the odds seem stacked against them.

Doubly challenged

Trained to work with a team toward a specific mission and getting definitive feedback, military veterans are surprised to learn "civilian life is not at all like that; it is more individual-based," says Mike Echols, Ph.D., executive vice president of Strategic Initiatives and the Human Capital Lab at Bellevue University.

Echols says the transition from military to civilian employment should begin with the most basic question: "What do I want to do with my life?"

Echols is quick to point out, however, that this is not just a veteran problem. Students, in general, are expected to pick a major in college before they know who they are. That's why they change their majors so many times, he says. Yet, military veterans are doubly challenged because they come back into the civilian world with a language barrier—military speak that a human resource expert doesn't understand. And, according to Echols, even HR isn't asking the right questions.

Military veteran job candidates should be friendly, look the interviewer in the eye and adopt a less-rigid stance; don't address the interviewer as Sir or Ma'am and, above all, smile.

"We need to educate both the vets and the hiring managers," he says.

A recent national survey by University of Phoenix suggests that while former military service members expect to use their military experience in a civilian position, very few—less than one-third—actually put those skills to work. According to the survey responses, many veterans can identify their marketable skills; teamwork, the ability to work under pressure, leadership, problem solving, critical thinking, communication and accountability, but they don't know the best way to "sell" those skills through civilian-style resumes and interviews.

Three-part process

Russ Hovendick, founder of Directional Motivation and Client Staffing Solutions, a top recruiter in South Dakota that works with military veterans, is the author of the book *Deployment to Employment*. He says the biggest challenge is speaking the same language when it comes to translating skill sets developed during military service to what's needed in the civilian job market.

Hovendick suggests a three-part process focusing on preparation, presentation and professionalism to help bridge the gap.

According to Hovendick, preparation includes advance research on the hiring organization, a civilian-style resume—one without military acronyms and jargon—and appropriate interview clothing and style.

Presentation includes a self-assessment to discover which characteristics set the military veteran candidate apart from others who may be interviewing for the same position. Civilian hiring managers expect job candidates to sell

themselves—not an easy task for former military personnel who are used to praising their team. Yet, it's crucial for veterans to learn how to self-promote.

Professionalism is very different for military veterans and civilian employees. Military veteran job candidates should be friendly, look the interviewer in the eye and adopt a less-rigid stance; don't address the interviewer as Sir or Ma'am and, above all, smile.

Finally, Hovendick says that professionalism includes realizing that transitioning is a long process, so don't let it become overwhelming.

For example, T.J. Seifert, who served for 12 years as an officer in the Naval Reserves, working on a submarine nuclear power plant, thought he'd have a job within a matter of weeks after he left the service. He became "downtrodden" when interviews didn't pan out. He sought advice from family, friends and the support center on base and, along the way, he discovered he needed to better illustrate his management skills on his resume. He also signed up for mock interviews in order to strengthen his ability to "explain why I would be a good fit." Now, the husband and father of two works as a project manager at Covanta Energy, a waste-to-energy company in Pennsylvania.

Hovendick explains that military veterans may not land the job they want at first. "If you are rejected, be willing to learn from it. But if you don't find the job you want, Hovendick says, "Take a lesser job while you acclimate."

Be proactive

Scott Radcliffe, a West Point graduate who spent six years on active duty and two tours in Iraq, left the military in 2008 to run for a congressional seat in his home state of Ohio. He lost. When it was time for him to make the transition into civilian life, he says, "It wasn't easy. I wasn't able to find work right away.... It's not what you're used to. I almost didn't know where to start."

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– Mike Echols

He agrees with experts who say the cookie-cutter approach to transitioning that the military requires you to sit through is limited, as it's “designed for everybody, from the 20-year-old specialist to the 28-year-old captain.”

The environmental engineering major, who was first a tank platoon leader and then a speechwriter in the Army, eventually secured a communications job in Texas.

His advice: “Be proactive. No one's going to just give you a job. Make yourself employable, leverage your relationships, seek help outside the military, and network.”

Answering the call

Los Angeles-based Dan Goldenberg, a 21-year active/reserve duty officer in the Navy, helps veterans sift through the thousands of nonprofit resources to find the best help available through the foundation he manages, Call of Duty.

In addition to the mandatory transition program the Pentagon requires, Goldenberg explains that military service members need step-by-step help to complete the career transition piece. It's

important for them to know how to benefit from the GI Bill, communicate their skills, market themselves and overcome misconceptions about veterans, as well as negotiate a salary or raise, which they've never had to do before.

“It's not just about the list the government gives you that you check off,” he says. ★



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