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VOICES
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America's Veterans *A Sound Investment*

By William B. Caldwell, IV and Crispin J. Burke



Center for a
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“All our veterans deserve the opportunity to contribute to society once out of uniform.”

GENERAL MARTIN E. DEMPSEY, CHAIRMAN OF THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF

I. INTRODUCTION

America is proud of its armed forces. The U.S. military has consistently garnered the highest confidence rates of any government institution for decades, and understandably so.¹ The United States asks much of its men and women in uniform, and despite the challenges of two difficult wars, service members have answered the nation’s call with enduring courage, commitment and character.

Grateful Americans have often asked how they can best thank veterans. In short, veterans would be best helped not with charity, but with opportunity.

Most of the men and women of today’s all-volunteer force joined the military to challenge themselves and to serve others. The majority of veterans want to take on new challenges and continue to serve as a valued member of a team. America’s business owners and hiring managers would certainly benefit from adaptive, hard-working employees who are able to anticipate change, multitask and work well under pressure. In short, there is a strong business case for hiring U.S. military veterans.

II. VETERANS: UNIQUELY QUALIFIED EMPLOYEES

America’s veterans are exceptional. Service members are subjected to a rigorous vetting process before they enlist or commission, highlighting their competitive advantage relative to their peers. Fewer than one in four Americans can even meet the minimum standards to join the U.S. Army.²

From the outset of their experience, service members gain skills that allow them to succeed in both military and civilian life. The first, formative military experience at basic training provides new recruits with valuable skills in teamwork, leadership and discipline. Subsequent training, education and development continue to improve valuable technical skills in fields such as medicine, communications, maintenance and information technology. All service members are trained in management and leadership skills. Service members continue to develop as they progress through the ranks and serve in challenging operational environments where they must navigate complex problems and accomplish tough missions, often with minimal guidance, and demonstrate tremendous initiative.

It can be difficult to translate the challenging nature of military service into terms of the marketplace or adequately capture the full breadth of the responsibilities that rest on the shoulders of many young service members.

During the last decade of war, thousands of young men and women – many still in their 20s – served in Iraq and Afghanistan and were charged with immense responsibility and authority.

For instance, a typical officer in his or her late 20s might serve as a commander of an organization, a company, of more than 100 troops.³ The officer might be assigned to Afghanistan, responsible for the security of 100 square miles or more of territory and charged with the daunting task of bringing stability to areas that have known nothing but war for three decades. Certainly, this is no small task, and junior leaders must quickly learn to adapt and solve some of the most vexing problems imaginable.

At any given moment, officers may be expected to serve as teachers, physical fitness advisers, counselors, mentors, mechanics or operations managers – and, of course, always as leaders. Their actions are closely scrutinized by other service members, as well as the entire world.

To succeed, service members must quickly become masters of their trade, incorporating their formal training, trial and error, innovation and advice from subordinates to overcome obstacles. They must be experts at many functions of military leadership, including operations, logistics, administration and military law.

Service members apply different leadership styles to different situations. Contrary to popular belief, military leadership is more complex than simply shouting and obeying orders. In many instances, military officers and noncommissioned officers work alongside troops from other services or allied nations, or with representatives from various government and nongovernment agencies. In complex operating environments, such as Afghanistan, military leaders have to lead through the power of persuasion and consensus-building. In short, they must inspire action through the power of ideas and by leading from the middle. The skills that serve them well on the battlefield will serve them well in business.

As service members progress through the ranks, they learn to perform different jobs, often in a variety of organizations. This means they must be

adaptable, creative and fast learners, able to move between organizations and cultures.

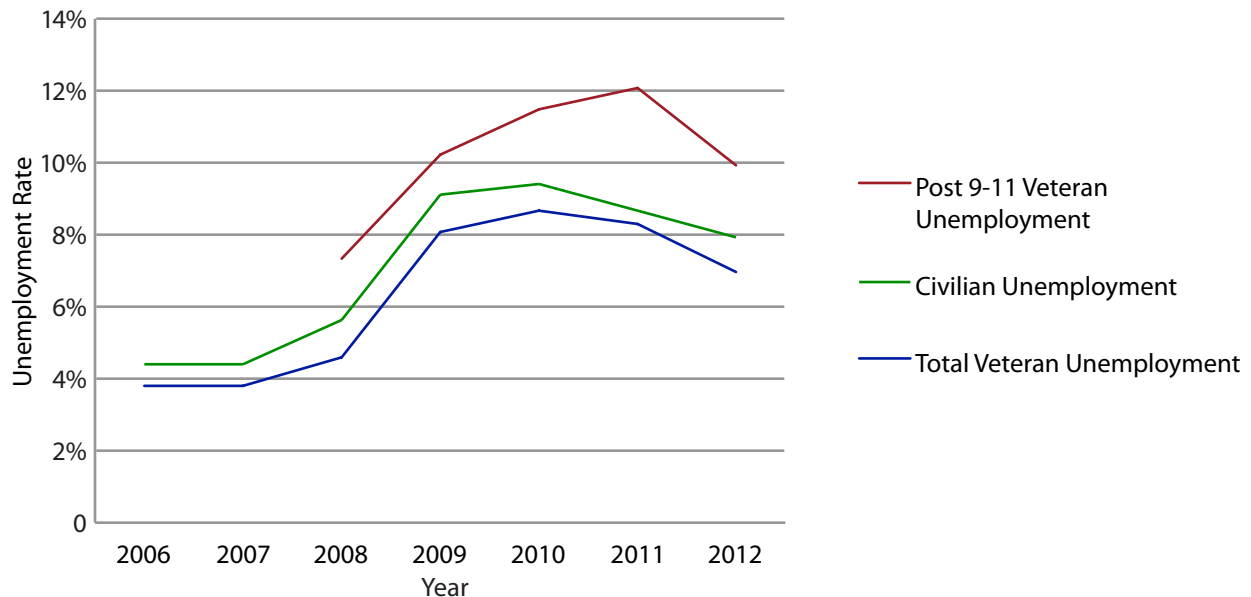
Employers have long recognized these strengths. A survey of more than 800 private-sector employers showed that most managers felt that military veterans were “better” or “much better” than civilians in areas such as teamwork, reliability, openness to other cultures and races, and work ethic.⁴ Not surprisingly, then, veterans as a whole have traditionally enjoyed better employment rates than the national average.⁵

Yet for veterans of the post-9/11 generation, this has not always been the case. Despite their skills and accomplishments, these veterans have struggled with unemployment rates that exceed the national average. Although the current jobless rate for post-9/11 veterans has improved, the data suggest that young, recently discharged veterans still struggle to find work, particularly if they lack college education.⁶

The impending U.S. military drawdown will certainly exacerbate the already high unemployment rates among veterans. Though post-9/11 veteran unemployment has eased in recent months, it may rise in the next few years as the military shrinks to pre-9/11 levels (or less), shedding between 75,000 and 150,000 personnel – the equivalent of the worldwide workforce of global giants like Microsoft and Amazon.⁷ The Army and Marine Corps both will likely lose at least 10 percent of their manpower – roughly one service member per squad.⁸ If sequestration takes full effect as scheduled, these reductions could be even more drastic.⁹ The most severe end-strength cuts proposed in the Strategic Choices and Management Review (SCMR) would reduce the active-duty Army to 380,000 and the active-duty Marine Corps to 150,000 – or by 31.16 percent and 25.78 percent, respectively.¹⁰

This poses a problem not only for veterans, but for American businesses as well. The private sector could benefit immensely from the experience veterans have gained.

FIGURE 1: COMPARISON OF UNEMPLOYMENT RATES 2006-2012



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey, 2006-2013.

III. VETERANS EMPLOYMENT: WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS?

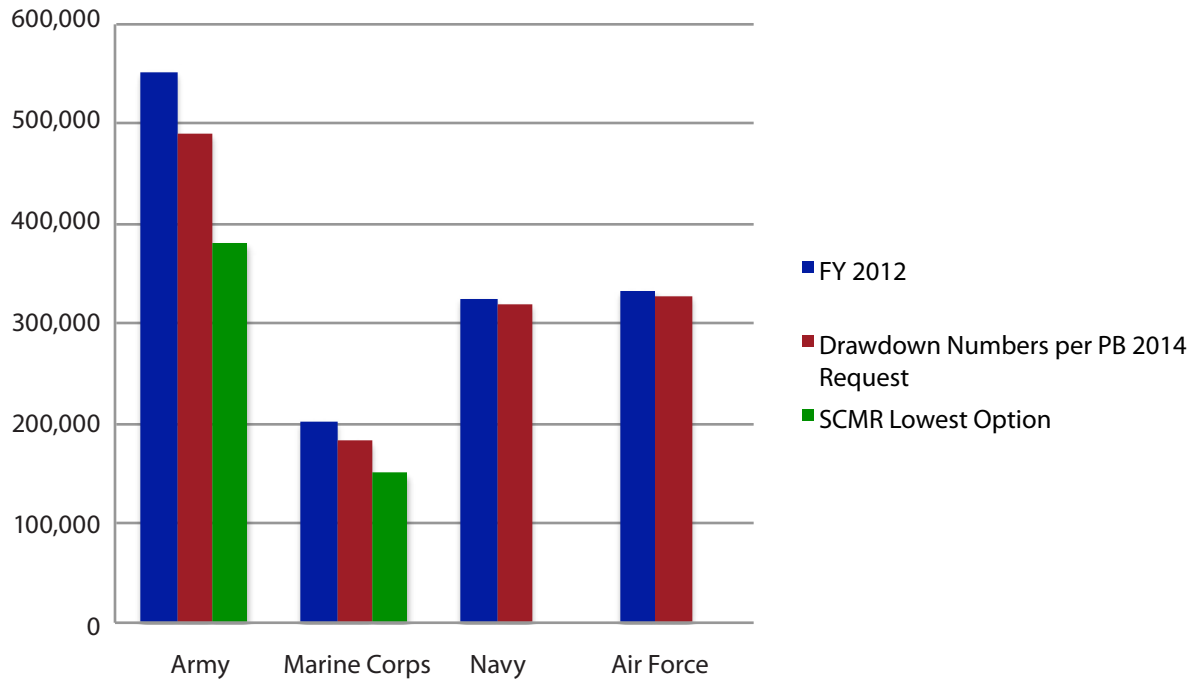
Given their hard-earned experience, post-9/11 veterans are frustrated when employers fail to appreciate their value. One Iraq War veteran wrote about his experiences with unemployment:

Armed with “down-range” management experience, I assumed I’d have little trouble finding work after completing a master’s degree in 2006. Instead, I spent 11 months unemployed, trying desperately to hold onto my dignity. Medals - awarded for leading dozens of 101st Airborne Division soldiers in combat - sat in a drawer next to my bed, worth nothing as I sent out resume after resume. As I tried to convince recruiters that I was qualified - that my experience mattered - my checking account ran dry. Eventually, I was offered a short-term contract with a non-profit. They offered me significantly less than I’d been making in the Army, but I was grateful and

took it. What I didn’t realize at the time - and what many don’t realize today - is that this difficult transition isn’t out of the ordinary for new veterans.¹¹

Veterans face employment challenges for a multitude of reasons, many of which stem from America’s growing civil-military divide. Veterans often fight to overcome negative stereotypes and myths, many of which are perpetuated by Hollywood movies or sensational headlines.¹² Moreover, many hiring managers have little familiarity with the military, leaving many veterans at a loss as to how to translate their skills and experience into terms that potential civilian employers can understand.¹³

FIGURE 2: ACTIVE DUTY END-STRENGTH



Source: National Defense Budget Estimates for FY 2014; Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel, "Statement on Strategic Choices and Management Review."

Note: The Strategic Choices and Management Review only identifies end-strength scenarios for the Army and Marine Corps.

IV. VETERANS: MYTHS VS. FACTS

Myth: Most service members returning from Iraq and Afghanistan have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and may have a propensity for workplace violence.

Some veterans report being questioned by hiring managers for indications of PTSD during job interviews,¹⁴ even though the practice is technically forbidden.¹⁵ In surveys, many employers said that it would be more difficult to accommodate those with PTSD.¹⁶ Worse yet, a recent survey found that more than half of Americans believed that "the majority" of veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan suffer from PTSD.¹⁷

In recent years, the Department of Defense has encouraged service members to break the stigma

associated with PTSD and to seek help for what, ultimately, is a natural reaction to a traumatic event. However, many civilians see service members speaking openly about their struggles with PTSD and mistakenly believe that anyone who serves in the military is somehow "broken" by war. This attitude is only compounded by depictions of veterans in popular culture and sensational news stories. For example, one interviewee for a recent Center for a New American Security report revealed an all-too-common fear among employers:

I think, in general, people are positive toward veterans and especially toward wounded veterans. The dark area is PTSD and the unknowns about veterans, and wondering if this guy is going to go postal one afternoon on my job site. This concern may be overblown, but it only takes one incident. [The mayor and I] tried to push [preferential

hiring for veterans] into businesses in [our city] through advocacy groups. We were making some progress, and then the local newspaper had a front-page story about a veteran that went crazy and killed [someone]. That one article turned back so much work we had done with local businesses to be favorable hiring vets. Employers are busy enough; they feel they don't need to add to those problems by hiring vets.¹⁸

Civilians should be aware of three important facts regarding PTSD: First, most combat veterans do not suffer from PTSD.¹⁹ Second, not everyone with PTSD is a military veteran – nearly 7 percent of Americans will be diagnosed with PTSD in their lifetime.²⁰ Finally, those who receive treatment for PTSD generally go on to lead happy, successful lives.

Of course, PTSD is a real challenge for some service members and veterans. It is estimated that roughly one in five veterans from Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan and Operation Iraqi Freedom in Iraq come home experiencing post-traumatic stress.²¹ Yet with treatment, those with PTSD can, and do in most cases, fully recover and can make a real contribution to the workplace. In fact, employment itself can help ease the effects of PTSD, as it gives victims a sense of purpose and a comforting daily routine. Indeed, a number of veterans organizations have found great success leveraging public service for therapeutic value, putting combat veterans to work building houses, providing disaster relief and in other roles.²² Most importantly, employed veterans have less time to dwell on painful memories when their minds are occupied with work.²³

Myth: Service members are less educated than civilians.

One recent survey showed that Americans perceived veterans to be less educated than their civilian peers.²⁴ However, this is not supported

by the evidence, which shows that the veteran population is, on average, better educated than the civilian population as a whole.

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The military's selection and recruiting process explains this disparity. It is extremely difficult to enlist in the military without a high school diploma or its equivalent. By contrast, nearly 20 percent of the U.S. Army's target demographic – those between the ages of 17 and 24 – do not have a high school diploma or GED. Officers, moreover, generally require a bachelor's degree in order to commission. These entrance standards may get tougher as the military shrinks, becoming more competitive. After entry, the military provides its recruits with additional training and education, which in many cases is equivalent to college coursework (and recognized as such by many colleges that give credit for military training). The end

result is a veterans population that is more educated than the civilian population as a whole.

Myth: Service members lack creativity. They simply follow orders.

The military can be viewed as a rigid, hierarchical environment in which orders are followed without question. Military veterans may perpetuate this belief in job interviews through rigid posture or by giving short, direct replies.

Of course, military training emphasizes discipline and regimen. However, service members often find themselves in situations in which they must operate without formal orders or address new and unique problems and missions, using creative problem-solving skills to accomplish their mission. In fact, according to the Apollo Research Institute, half of employers felt that veterans were “better” or “much better” than their peers in creativity.²⁵

Fact: American veterans have skills that businesses can use.

Many companies have already figured out that it pays to have veterans on their team. A comprehensive study by Korn/Ferry International found that:

- Former military officers represent a disproportionately high percentage of S&P 500 corporate CEOs, relative to their percentage in the general population.
- In 2005, S&P 500 companies led by CEOs with military experience had higher-than-average returns.
- CEOs with military experience lasted much longer on the job than those without military experience (an average of 7.2 years, compared with an average of 4.5 years for their civilian counterparts).²⁶

The high performance rate of business executives with military experience is not a chance occurrence. The CEOs in the study attributed their success in

the corporate boardroom to their military experience, citing its role in teaching them teamwork, organizational skills, goal-setting, ethics and the ability to remain calm under pressure.

Fact: The military forces service members to be leaders.

An important difference between the military and the private sector is that the military has an “up-or-out” personnel system. Unlike their civilian peers, service members cannot spend more than a few years in a given job or assignment. They must demonstrate the potential to serve at the next higher rank, or they will be forced out. This means that the military places a premium on leader development.

This fact has not been lost on employers. During a period of rapid expansion in 2008, Walmart hired 150 former U.S. military officers to serve as retail managers. Veterans only needed a short training program, and the program was highly successful.²⁷

V. HIRING CHALLENGES

Many business leaders have emphatically stated that they want to hire veterans.²⁸ Walmart recently announced that it plans to offer a job to any honorably discharged veteran as part of a plan to hire more than 100,000 veterans during the next five years.²⁹

But while corporate leaders are getting the message, middle management often is not. Because of the growing civil-military divide in the United States, most Americans simply do not understand the value of certain awards, military rank, career paths and accomplishments. Given that less than 1 percent of Americans serve in uniform today, the unique language of the military can be difficult for civilians to understand.

When hiring managers fail to comprehend the skills veterans bring to the workplace, it doesn't just lead to unemployment. It can also lead to underemployment.

In one instance, a business hired former U.S. military company commanders – officers with a minimum of a bachelor's degree, who had commanded units of more than 100 people, responsible for tens of millions of dollars of equipment. Yet these veterans were hired to do menial data entry.³⁰ Underemployment is not only a problem for veterans. It is bad for business as well, because it leads to high turnover.

Both veterans and hiring managers contribute to this problem. Most military service members have never written a resume, applied for a job or attended an interview. Their careers are managed by a centralized personnel office, which assigns a service member with the correct qualifications and training to an opening or vacancy anywhere in the world. Service members have to learn to perform their new job, and how to work in a new organization, but they have little control over their careers until they reach very senior levels. Consequently,

today's military does not help its veterans develop the skills they need to navigate the civilian labor market. Although the services have recently launched an overhauled Transition Assistance Program,³¹ this does not make up for years of lost experience in the civilian workforce.

Military service members can struggle to translate their job skills into the language of the marketplace. This is exacerbated by the fact that many hiring managers do not directly read resumes. Instead, many companies and recruiting firms use search engines and software tools to find keywords and patterns in data that veterans may not have because of their time outside the civilian workforce.

Today's military does not help its veterans develop the skills they need to navigate the civilian labor market.

Challenges can mount during the interview process. Simply dressing the part may be a challenge for many veterans; some may have never worn a business suit before. Some military mannerisms – such as short, to-the-point answers, or answering questions with “sir” or “ma'am” – may be off-putting to some interviewers, but yet it is intended to demonstrate respect and acknowledgment of others.

VI. THE WAY AHEAD

Employers have generally been receptive to the prospect of hiring veterans, and veteran employment has recently improved. However, the nation can do better, by focusing on three major efforts: First, employers still struggle to find qualified veterans to hire, and the government ought to assist more with that. Second, the United States can do more to educate midlevel hiring managers about the unique qualities of veterans, and can also do more to educate veterans about navigating the civilian labor market.

The problem isn't that there are too few resources, but rather that the existing resources are too scattered. An online search for "hire veterans" yields thousands of results. Indeed, several federal agencies manage Web-based resources to help veterans find employment, including the Department of Labor, the Department of Defense (DOD), the Office of Personnel Management and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). These government resources don't just compete with one another, but also with veterans service organizations and commercial websites. Commercial sites, which tend to rank higher in search engine results, are a particular concern because they may charge fees for services and may, in rare instances, be a scam.

The U.S. government can do a better job in consolidating and coordinating its efforts to create a comprehensive source for both employers and veterans. This one-stop source should be promoted at veterans job fairs, business seminars and other venues. Transitioning service members should be encouraged to submit resumes through this consolidated service. This site should incorporate the best features of each individual service to maximize its utility. A consolidated service would not only help eliminate confusion, but it would also improve "name recognition" for both employers and veterans. The government should continue to partner with existing online giants that are already offering

services to help transitioning veterans, such as Google and LinkedIn.³²

In addition, agencies with a vested interest in veteran employment – such as the DOD, the VA and veterans service organizations – should continue to educate hiring managers about the value of hiring veterans. One veteran reported that he felt that his three years of military service was little more than a "black hole" in his resume, as hiring managers struggled to understand the skills he acquired during that time. Workshops and seminars can help hiring managers make sense of awards, promotions, responsibilities, assignments and training. Each of the services currently has a transition office (such as the Army's "Soldier for Life" program) dedicated to these issues. Those offices could provide training to human resources personnel, hiring managers and business executives around the country, focused on best practices for hiring veterans. The transition offices could also solicit feedback from hiring managers, so as to best highlight the skills they are looking for and allow veterans to emphasize those qualities in their resumes.

VII. CONCLUSION

Unemployment among veterans is a serious problem, one that will likely grow in coming years as the services feel the effects of sequestration and potentially shrink even further. Veterans leaving the U.S. military represent a tremendous asset to be leveraged by society, because of their education, experience and demonstrated commitment to excellence. There is a powerful business case for hiring today's veterans – but this case must be made persuasively to dispel the myths that impede veterans from finding employment and achieving their full potential.

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