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# BRIDGING THE TRANSITION GAP

HELPING AMERICA'S VETERANS  
SUCCEED IN THE CIVILIAN WORKFORCE





# INTRODUCTION

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Each year, approximately 200,000 service members leave the United States military and transition to civilian life.<sup>1</sup> They bring with them leadership skills, technical expertise, discipline, and mission-oriented thinking that are highly sought after in the private sector.

Yet despite these strengths, the transition from military service to civilian employment remains one of the most challenging periods in a veteran's life.

Veterans experience higher unemployment rates than civilians during their first year after separation, and many struggle with underemployment—working in jobs that fail to utilize the skills developed during their military careers.<sup>2</sup>

Beyond economic outcomes, employment instability during the transition period can affect mental health, financial stability, family relationships, and long-term career growth.

Helping veterans successfully transition into civilian careers is therefore not only a matter of economic policy. It is a matter of national responsibility. The men and women who served their country deserve a system that ensures their talents continue to strengthen the nation long after their military service ends.

# THE VETERAN WORKFORCE OPPORTUNITY

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The U.S. Armed Forces represent one of the most sophisticated leadership and training institutions in the world. Military personnel manage complex logistics operations, oversee multimillion-dollar equipment, lead teams under extreme pressure, and operate cutting-edge technology systems.

Despite this extensive experience, many veterans find that the private sector struggles to interpret the value of military service.

One reason is the fundamental difference between military and civilian career structures. Military roles are defined by rank, mission, and operational responsibilities, while civilian employment relies heavily on industry-specific credentials and job titles.<sup>3</sup>

A logistics officer responsible for coordinating supply chains across multiple continents may struggle to convey the civilian equivalent of that experience on a résumé. Similarly, a platoon sergeant who supervised dozens of personnel may find that employers fail to recognize the leadership and organizational skills that role required.

This mismatch represents a missed opportunity not only for veterans themselves, but also for employers and

## 50% OF POST-9/11 VETERANS

Report that their civilian jobs underutilize the skills they developed in uniform.

*Source: Institute for Veterans & Military Families<sup>4</sup>*

the broader economy.

The transition from military service to civilian employment is often referred to as the **military-to-civilian transition gap**—a gap driven by structural and cultural barriers that, if left unaddressed, lead to underemployment, financial instability, and increased stress during one of the most vulnerable periods of a veteran's life.

However, these challenges are solvable. America has invested billions of dollars in training its military personnel. Ensuring their success after service is both a moral responsibility and an economic imperative.



*“Veterans possess leadership, resilience, and mission-focused thinking that are difficult to replicate in traditional workforce training programs.”*

# BARRIERS TO TRANSITION

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Successful reintegration into civilian employment requires overcoming several intersecting barriers. Prominent among them are:

- **Cultural translation**—the difficulty of converting military experience into language that civilian hiring managers recognize.
- **Credentialing & licensing**—civilian rules that require veterans to repeat training they have already completed.
- **Psychological transition**—the loss of mission, identity, and structured camaraderie that military life provides.
- **Employer misconceptions**—persistent stereotypes that discourage companies from actively recruiting veteran talent.

## CULTURAL TRANSLATION

Military occupational specialties (MOS) and ranks are not easily understood outside the armed forces. Civilian hiring managers may struggle to interpret military terminology or grasp the scope of leadership responsibilities held by service members.

This communication gap creates uncertainty for employers and can result in veterans being overlooked despite strong qualifications. Research from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation finds that many employers report difficulty understanding how military skills translate to civilian roles, particularly in leadership and operations management.<sup>5</sup>

Without better translation tools, veterans are routinely passed over for positions they are highly qualified to perform.

## CREDENTIALING & LICENSING

Many military jobs require highly technical training that exceeds the standards required in civilian industries. However, service members often must repeat training or certification programs when entering the private sector.

Military medics, aviation technicians, and mechanics may possess years of experience performing complex tasks, yet still face licensing barriers in fields such as healthcare, aviation maintenance, transportation, and skilled trades.<sup>6</sup>

*“When employers understand military experience, they often discover leadership talent they would otherwise overlook.”*

This duplication of training delays employment and imposes unnecessary financial burdens on veterans and their families.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL TRANSITION

Military life provides a strong sense of mission, identity, and camaraderie. The civilian workplace often lacks those structures, leaving some veterans feeling disconnected or uncertain about their new roles.

Research from the RAND Corporation has shown that veterans transitioning to civilian life may experience increased risks of depression, anxiety, and identity loss during this period.<sup>7</sup>

Employment plays a critical role in stabilizing this transition. Meaningful work provides structure, financial security, and a renewed sense of purpose.



## EMPLOYER MISCONCEPTIONS

Despite growing awareness of veteran hiring initiatives, misconceptions about veterans persist. Some hiring managers mistakenly assume that veterans are more likely to suffer from mental health conditions or struggle with workplace integration.

In reality, research consistently shows that veterans demonstrate strong leadership abilities, high levels of teamwork, and exceptional problem-solving skills—qualities highly valued in modern organizations.<sup>8</sup>

# WHY THE TRANSITION GAP MATTERS

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The challenges veterans face during transition have broader implications for the American economy and national workforce.

Veterans represent one of the most highly trained talent pools in the United States. Fields that benefit most from veteran leadership include:

- **Cybersecurity**
- **Engineering**
- **Supply chain management**
- **Healthcare**
- **Aviation**
- **Advanced manufacturing**

When barriers prevent veterans from entering these industries, the nation loses valuable expertise. Conversely, companies that actively recruit veterans often report improvements in team cohesion, leadership development, and operational performance.<sup>9</sup>

Helping veterans transition effectively is therefore both a **moral obligation and an economic opportunity.**



# POLICY SOLUTIONS

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Addressing the military-to-civilian transition gap requires coordinated action across government, industry, and educational institutions. Several policy options offer particular promise.

## IMPROVING SKILL TRANSLATION

The federal government should expand programs that translate military occupational specialties into civilian career pathways.

Existing tools, such as the Department of Labor’s Military Occupation Translator, represent important progress but remain underutilized. A more robust national framework could help employers better understand how military training aligns with civilian roles in fields such as project management, logistics, engineering, and information technology.

Universities and workforce development organizations should also integrate military experience into professional certification pathways.

## MODERNIZING CREDENTIALING

States should continue modernizing occupational licensing rules to recognize military training. Many states have begun adopting policies that allow veterans to apply military experience toward profes-

sional certifications in healthcare, transportation, and the technical trades.<sup>10</sup> Expanding these reforms nationwide would reduce barriers to employment and accelerate workforce integration.

**200,000**

Service members transition out of the U.S. military each year — a continuous pipeline of skilled talent for the civilian workforce.

*(Source: U.S. Department of Defense<sup>1</sup>)*

## STRENGTHENING TAP

The Department of Defense Transition Assistance Program (TAP) provides valuable resources for separating service members. However, participation levels and program quality vary significantly across installations.

Strengthening TAP could include earlier career planning beginning 12 to 18 months before separation, expanded partnerships with private-sector employers, and dedicated job placement and mentorship support.

## EXPANDING EMPLOYER PARTNERSHIPS

Private-sector leadership is essential to closing the transition gap. Many successful veteran employment initiatives already exist, including corporate hiring commitments and apprenticeship programs.

Policymakers could encourage broader participation through:

- **Federal contracting incentives**
- **Tax credits for veteran hiring programs**
- **Industry coalitions focused on veteran employment**

Such partnerships help translate military skills into workforce opportunities and standardize best practices across sectors.

## SUPPORTING VETERAN ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Many veterans possess strong leadership and operational management skills that translate well to entrepreneurship.

Expanding access to veteran-focused small business programs—including mentorship networks, business training, and capital investment opportunities—could help more veterans launch and grow successful enterprises.

Programs such as the Small Business Administration’s Veterans Business Outreach Centers already demonstrate the potential of this approach.

## MILLIONS

of Americans are employed by veteran-owned businesses, which generate hundreds of billions of dollars in annual revenue.

*(Source: U.S. Small Business Administration<sup>11</sup>)*

Veteran-owned businesses already represent a major contributor to the American economy. Expanding support for veteran entrepreneurs strengthens local communities while creating new jobs.





# CONCLUSION

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The transition from military service to civilian life represents one of the most important—and often most difficult—moments in a veteran’s career. While America’s service members leave the armed forces with extraordinary skills and leadership experience, structural barriers in the civilian workforce can prevent those talents from being fully recognized and utilized.

Closing the transition gap requires coordinated action from policymakers, employers, educators, and veteran advocates. Improving skill translation, modernizing credentialing requirements, strengthening transition assistance programs, and expanding private-sector partnerships can help ensure that veterans successfully integrate into the civilian workforce.

The men and women who serve in the U.S. military devote years of their lives to defending the nation. Ensuring their success after service is not only a matter of gratitude—it is an investment in America’s economic strength and future leadership.

When veterans thrive in the private sector, their leadership, discipline, and resilience continue to benefit the nation they once defended in uniform. Helping veterans transition successfully is therefore not simply about employment—it is about honoring service by ensuring that those who protected the country have the opportunity to help build its future.

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