

LOST IN TRANSLATION

Vets say military life and civilian workforce are "two different worlds"

By Joe Mullich

A retired Green Beret officer and Iraq combat veteran, Chad Storlie was shocked when he applied for business internships and was told point-blank: "What you did in the military doesn't really matter here. You guys patrol, shoot and jump out of planes — we don't have a need for those kinds of skills."

Intuitively, he knew the casual dismissal of his military career was off-base. "Military skills do matter and make a difference in the business sector," he says. "In the military, you have to learn safety, ethics, saving money, operational efficiency and the right way to treat other people." But at first he didn't know how to communicate those skills to a civilian workplace that seemed like an altogether different world.

NAVIGATING NEW TERRAIN

A recent study from the Volunteers of America, an organization that has empowered U.S. veterans since the Civil War, found Storlie's frustrations are hardly unique: Many veterans struggle with translating their military skills to align with civilian job descriptions — and many don't feel good about the jobs they land. As for the hiring process, a separate survey found more than 70 percent of hiring managers have trouble making business sense of military experience.

Chris Payton, a former naval officer who now serves as staffing and operations executive for Bank of America, believes that education is required on both sides of the employment fence. "People in the military don't have context for life in a civilian world," he says. "And a lot of civilians have preconceived notions about veterans' experiences that aren't true."

This year, Bank of America rolled out a series of web-based modules that help veterans understand how to better navigate the corporate terrain, such as "Captaining Your Career," which focuses on subtle elements of civilian life, like how to promote yourself in the workplace.

"Self-promotion is a concept that is foreign to many former military personnel," Payton says. "They need to be educated about the value of publicizing their efforts to make sure their boss and others at his or her level know what they're doing."

Another module gives managers a perspective on military life so they can understand their veteran workers better. For example, Payton says that the general impression of structured military life can sometimes lead managers to assume that former veteran workers are inflexible.

"That's actually a misconception," Payton says. "Veterans tend to be very flexible, especially those who have dealt with wartime conditions," he says. "But they are used to structure. Sometimes they may seem more rigid in a less formal atmosphere, if you don't understand how their viewpoint was shaped."

Tyler Gallenbeck says he wishes he had a better understanding of the differences between the civilian and military worlds when he left the Marine Corps in 2012 after six years as a platoon sergeant in Iraq and Afghanistan. He'd been in the Marines since his teens. Like 40 percent of transitioning service people, he left the military unsure of what he would do for a living.

"You're kind of babied in the military," he says. "You have people who handle your dental, medical and taxes. In the corporate world, your boss isn't responsible for your day-to-day life tasks."

Entering the civilian world, he went through "a rocky transition." Unable to find a job, he lost his home to foreclosure, his marriage crumbled and he spent eight months homeless. Then he discovered NPower, a nonprofit that helps veterans with free professional and technical skills training, mentoring, apprenticeships and employment services. Today, Tyler is an information technology security analyst in San Ramon, California, with specialized staffing firm Robert Half.

"I was surprised to learn companies were less concerned if you had hard technical skills than whether you were personable, could fit in with a team and learn quickly," Gallenbeck says. "There's a premium on the soft skills you learn in the military because the technology proficiencies change frequently. In this field, everyone must learn new things all the time."

EMBRACING A NEW CULTURE

Military skills fall into three general categories. The first is attributions, which are the soft skills Gallenbeck mentioned. The second is direct skills translation, which means military experience — like technology and managing supply chains — that meshes neatly with corporate positions. The third is universal skills, which are valuable experiences that require some savvy to translate to civilian life.

"As a manager, you need to examine the skills vets have and determine how they tie into the challenges that your business faces," Storlie says. "For example, many ex-military are great at running simulations of plans against the competition. The concepts behind war games are applicable to a wide range of corporate efforts, such as: 'If you open a new retail location, what

focus groups, vets described their inability to relate and adapt to the civilian workforce.

After living with Russian, Romanian and other foreign military forces, Storlie thinks veterans should look at a work environment as you would a foreign culture.

"You pick up a lot by sitting in a city council meeting in Iraq, watching how people interact," he says. "When a veteran enters a civilian workplace he or she should do the same thing. Be respectful, observe, simulate or copy the actions you see. Do people eat lunch together or alone at the office? Rather than try to replicate what you would do in the military, you should try to understand and embrace a new culture."

—J.M.



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