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Title:

Military personnel and the transition into civilian employment: A systematic narrative review

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Abstract:

Background: Service personnel are often of working age when retiring from the military. A sizeable number of military personnel transition into civilian careers every year, but little is known about the impact of this transition.

Objective: This systematic narrative review aims to consider the international evidence about military personnel's experience of transition to civilian employment.

Methods: Four bibliographic databases were searched for published research about fulltime regular military veterans in civilian employment. Twenty-three studies were identified that included both qualitative and quantitative research. These studies were graded as moderate to good quality.

Results: Four themes emerged from the review: the value of military experience; successful career transition; the difference between military and civilian employment; identity as a veteran. Key points were: veterans might hold a naive view of the value of their military experience; being able to transfer job skills to civilian employment may be an advantage; there were differences between the military and civilian workplace; constructing a civilian workplace identity included adjusting to different workplace values.

Conclusion: Further research into the experience of deciding to leave the armed forces may help the armed forces to develop strategies for retaining personnel. No study focussed solely upon midlife career change and research into this area is important because military careers typically finish midlife.

Keywords: Career; Military; Veteran; Retirement; Transition

INTRODUCTION

Within the United Kingdom, the number of military personnel leaving the armed forces each year ranges from ~13000 to ~23000 [1–6]. These new service leavers then join the two and a half million working-age veterans, a total figure that has remained constant over the past decade [7,8]. This represents a sizeable group of people transitioning from military to civilian employment. Veterans exiting the military following a longer period of service were reported to fare better than early service leavers because they have adapted well to military life and have a firmer foundation upon which to launch their civilian careers [9]. However, those leaving the service following a longer career may hold an idealised view about the value of their previous military work experience and a naive view of civilian work [10]. Finally, military personnel are encouraged to hold values that include placing the needs of the military first and viewing their role as a service as opposed to a job [11]. All of this is indicative of a period of adjustment that may be turbulent at times but may need to be effectively navigated by veterans if they are to transition to civilian life successfully.

This systematic narrative review aims to consider the available evidence about how armed forces personnel experience the transition from military to civilian employment. The focus is upon well populations of veterans moving into civilian work, as opposed to those who are medically discharged from the military, in receipt of disability benefits, homeless or struggling with mental health problems that might have affected their ability to find work. While these latter groups represent an important minority, the findings from this review will add context to current knowledge about the impact of career transition upon wellbeing and identify current gaps in research.

SEARCH STRATEGY

Four electronic databases (CINAHL, ProQuest Business, Scopus and Web of Science) were searched using the following search terms: (veteran* OR service leaver*) AND (work OR job OR employ* OR career* OR retir* OR transition*). In addition, a military database of papers published by the King's Centre for Military Health Research and the reference lists of

included papers were manually searched. Studies were included if the population was fulltime regular military veterans with a focus upon civilian employment. Studies were excluded if the participants were primarily reservists, homeless or conscripts; if there was no focus upon employment; if the emphasis was upon mental ill health, physical illness or disability benefits; or if the study was testing out an intervention. Figure 1 illustrates a flow diagram representing the process for identifying studies. The diagram follows the PRISMA recommended structure for transparent reporting of the review process [12]. In total, 23 studies were included in this review (Table 1).

QUALITY APPRAISAL

The quality of the included studies was assessed with the aid of the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) critical appraisal tools for cross-sectional studies, quasi-experimental studies, cohort studies, and qualitative research (JBI, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c, 2016d). The studies were graded for the percentage of JBI criterion that they met and, for each study, the specific JBI appraisal tool and quality grading are presented in Table 2. Overall, the studies included most of the criterion relevant to their stated methodological approach and could, therefore, be graded as moderate to good quality.

FINDINGS

Four themes were identified that related to veterans' experiences of the transition from military to civilian employment: value of military experience; successful career transition; difference between military and civilian employment; identity as a veteran.

Value of military experience

The value of military experience represents two different phases in career transition, which are, when preparing to leave and in the civilian workplace. Two studies considered the value of military experience when preparing to leave. A descriptive qualitative study focused

on the perceptions of British Army personnel who were leaving the military [10]. Participants generally described a naive attitude to civilian employment that was grounded in unrealistic or poorly informed assumptions about the superiority and usefulness of military experience in future civilian workplaces. A Belgian experimental study involved sending two identical job applications, one describing relevant military experience and one detailing comparable civilian experience [17]. This study found no difference in the frequency of call back for the first interview. Whilst acknowledging that there might be differences in employer attitudes in the UK compared to Belgium and the range of jobs applied for was limited to a restricted range of low skilled job roles. These studies suggest that veterans' assumptions about the superiority of military experience were naive and that military experience neither advantaged nor disadvantaged them when job seeking.

The remaining studies focussed on veterans' experiences once they had gained employment. The findings were mixed with some studies reporting positively and others more negatively about the value of previous military experience. Examining evidence that reported positively about the value of military experience, a cross-sectional study of physician's assistants in the USA reported that veterans perceived that their military background was valued by both colleagues and patients [18]. More specifically, they considered stress management, teamwork, and leadership as positive military characteristics. This was supported by a qualitative study of American nurse academics, which also identified a strong work ethic and willingness to take risks or to innovate when in leadership roles [19]. A final mixed methods study observed that no difficulties were encountered with skills transfer to civilian employment amongst UK veterans and related this to a "can-do-attitude" [20]. While these studies do suggest the potential positive benefits to military experience, it remains unclear if veterans' perceptions of the value of such characteristics were shared by their employer or work colleagues.

By comparison, some studies revealed a more negative view of the value of military experience in a civilian work environment. Two qualitative studies reported upon ex-military nurses' experiences in the USA. The first was of nurses in clinical areas, who reported that their

military experience was neither understood nor valued [21]. The participants perceived that they had a broader scope of practice than their civilian counterparts. The narrower focus in the civilian workplace meant that their wider skills, knowledge or experience were not utilised. However, differences did not seem specific to clinical areas, as nurse academics also indicated that applying military skills within their office environment generated conflict and it was challenging to explain the intrinsic value of military training to civilian employers [19]. In a later study, the authors went on to suggest that despite finding it challenging to communicate with civilian employers, nurse veterans perceived military skills as a strength [22]. The difficulties in relating military experience to civilian workplaces were not solely reported amongst US military nurses. A qualitative study of UK general veterans reported that current employment was not grounded in the same level of expertise or skill as previous military roles [23]. This was supported by a study of UK infantry that highlighted a perceived difference between military and civilian roles and a feeling that skills were underused in the new workplace [24].

Successful career transition

This theme focuses on variables that may lead to a successful career transition. This is important because maintaining civilian employment may lead to socio-economic stability. A survey of Indian air force veterans ranked employment as the second most important socio-economic need after children's education [25]. One factor that may promote successful career transition and job security was skills transfer. A US cohort study reported that skills transfer from military to civilian employment occurred in 47% of cases and that there were gender and role differences, e.g. more females in healthcare [26]. A cross-sectional study comparing US veterans to civilians reported that veterans were overrepresented in roles such as security, engineering, and factory work but under-represented in healthcare, creative jobs, and clerical work [27]. This suggests that veterans may seek out future careers that relate to their previous military work experience, which seems a logical strategy for optimising skills transferability.

Indeed, Israeli and US quantitative studies suggest that preparing to leave and developing transferable skills were important strategies for successful career transition [21,28–30]. This is supported by a survey of US pharmacists that reported transitioning to a similar civilian role might be associated with a smoother transition [31]. However, this may not always be about a specific job role, as US veterans who became franchisees reported a higher degree of job satisfaction than a civilian comparison group [32]. It seems that transitioning to a very similar role or having the flexibility not to have to conform fully with civilian work practices may have positive benefits for veterans.

A UK qualitative study suggested that the lived experience of transition may be dependent upon the strength of military ties [33]. This view was supported by earlier British narrative research that identified some people were more assimilated to military culture than others [34]. This latter study reported that both groups were generally able to readjust to civilian life and to make career choices that fitted with their occupational skill set. However, for those who were more closely wedded to military culture, this may involve a period of disillusionment and change of perspective about the military. Thus, how strongly a veteran holds on to a military culture may be a factor in career transition.

A final component to a successful career transition was about strategies to manage the transition process within the civilian place of work. This was described by US nurse academics as a challenge to be met and that there was a need to learn about a different work culture [22]. Meeting this challenge involved asking questions, joining working groups focused upon achieving specific tasks or roles, and networking [19]. Finding a work-life balance was also about learning to say no to new tasks, which was perceived as less acceptable within military culture. This seems consistent with a final qualitative study of US veterans that described the need to learn new processes combined with a personal capacity to reflect upon and to accept change [35].

Difference between military and civilian employment

Camaraderie and communication were two areas where veterans observed a difference between military and civilian employment. Camaraderie was a factor in maintaining trusting relationships and team ethos that many veterans reported as being less evident within civilian work environments. Trust in colleagues and teamwork are highly valued within military settings, possibly to promote resilience to arduous and dangerous situations. Less camaraderie was reported in one US cross-sectional study [31] but also in a variety of qualitative papers from both the USA and the UK. For nurse academics, less camaraderie meant less teamwork and individual rather than collective goals [19]. This is consistent with military service viewed as a lifestyle emphasising group rather than individual goals [21]. UK veterans also described a distrust of civilians that resulted from a perceived barrier between work and personal life [20]. Similar views were expressed by US veterans, who stated that the camaraderie experienced in military work built trust and a collective purpose; and this was less evident than previously anticipated within civilian work [36]. Whilst it is difficult to be certain why, what is clear is that there seemed to be a perceived difference in work culture and that this was felt by veterans from a range of different countries and different military backgrounds.

A second difference was communication, interpersonal communication at civilian workplaces felt unfocused to veterans [36]. This was supported by UK veterans who felt there were lots of meetings but very little action, and that direct communication was not the norm [20,24]. American nurse academics elaborated upon this, suggesting that direct communication was met with resistance and needed to be tempered to facilitate effective communication [19]. The idea of resistance is of interest and may indicate a cultural difference in how people shift from discussion to delegating tasks or communicating a plan of action. This may also be evident within non-verbal communication, where it was observed that leadership and status were clearer within military compared to civilian workplaces [19]. In summary, it seems that veterans trusted civilian work colleagues less, had weaker relationships, and might need to adjust to

differences in both how leaders present themselves and how people communicate with each other.

Identity as a veteran

A final theme was about adjustment in work identity as a veteran that was affected by two factors which were the strength of previous military ties and flexibility to change. The impact of the strength of previous military ties was reported in four qualitative studies. One study described cutting those ties as a loss that was compounded by geographical or spatial separation, for example, losing access to military bases [23]. This loss seemed worse for those who did not choose to leave the military, but all reported missing their previous support networks. Two UK studies suggested that this loss was moderated by the strength or dominance of their previous military identity [33,34]. The studies concluded that those veterans with more transferable skills, or greater contact with civilians and civilian workplaces while still serving, might have been less immersed and found the process of adjustment easier. Despite this, a final UK study indicated that veterans generally felt drawn to other veterans and the reason described was sharing a common set of cultural norms and values [20]. This suggests that veterans may experience a shift in their work identity when they leave and that this process may be more difficult for some. However, all may still identify as military and feel a connection with other veterans.

Individual flexibility to change to a new work identity as a veteran is the final component of this theme. Holding on to some elements of previously held military workplace values was reported as continuing to shape people's identity as veterans [36]. Those elements were taking action, being disciplined, leadership skills, and respect for authority. However, the importance of letting go and recognising the military as only one part of a person's working life was also reported as being a way of enabling people to open up to new opportunities [23]. It may be that some veterans are better placed to negotiate their new work identity. A cross-sectional study identified that both more senior military rank and political skill moderated the

degree of conflict experienced in constructing a civilian work identity [37]. The process of opening up to new opportunities was also reported in nurse focused US qualitative studies, which was about accepting the differences between previous military environments and civilian workplaces [21]. In addition, while holding on to some values remained relevant, what was also important was the flexibility to unlearn old processes, to adopt new processes, to adapt skills, and to think strategically about how to contribute to the new workplace [19]. This suggests that forming a civilian workplace identity involved a period of adjustment, and a willingness to let go of some elements of a previously held military identity, in order to learn or adopt the values, norms, and behaviours of the new workplace culture.

DISCUSSION

Military service encourages selfless commitment and loyalty to the organisation [11], which means that it has the feel of permanent employment and it continues for an extended period of time, for example, a full military contract is 18-22 years in duration in the UK. This means that military employment holds the illusion of a long-term career and stability with the same employer across the lifespan but, in reality, employability within the military ends in the middle of a typical working life, necessitating a midlife career change and reintegration into civilian communities. Considering areas for further research, no study within this review focussed solely upon midlife career transition.

A further area that was not fully explored within the reviewed literature was how veterans reach the point of deciding when to leave the forces for civilian employment. One framework that includes this phase, within a broader explanation for the process of career change, is the Transtheoretical Model [38]. When applied to career change, the model focuses upon the reasons for changing career, the process of taking action, and adjustment to a new work environment [38]. Interestingly, the model incorporates precursors that exist prior to the observable change, or a readiness to change career [39], that suggests there is a process before taking action that may be relevant to how veterans effect a career change [40]. Further research,

could contribute to knowledge about veterans by exploring this element to career change. This may be of relevance to the armed forces should they seek to retain experienced military personnel for their entire military contract.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

This narrative review has adopted a systematic approach to identifying relevant studies. This approach has the advantage of demonstrating to the reader how research papers were identified for inclusion within the review. However, a limitation to this review is that the selection and appraisal process was carried out by one reviewer, as is common with narrative reviews. A further strength of the study is the international flavour to the included studies, where themes were identified that transcended national borders. However, it remained beyond the scope of this review to consider in greater depth what difference national support for veterans, norms, and attitudes may have had upon veterans' experiences of career transition.

CONCLUSION

This systematic narrative review has focussed upon well populations of veterans. A key point was that veterans might hold a naive view of the enhanced value of their military experience when seeking civilian employment. In addition, the perceived value of military experience once in employment was mixed. However, being able to transfer job skills to civilian employment may be an advantage, and such skills could be developed while still serving. Most studies identified distinct differences between the military and civilian workplace, for example, camaraderie, trust, and teamwork. Constructing a civilian workplace identity involved opening up to new ways of working and adjusting to different workplace values. Further research into midlife career transition and the experience of deciding to leave the armed forces is recommended.

KEY MESSAGES

- Veterans might hold a naive view of the value of their military work experience.
- The perceived value of military work experience was mixed.
- Transferable job skills may be an advantage, and such skills could be developed while still serving.
- Further research into midlife career transition and the experience of deciding to leave the armed forces is recommended.

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Table 1 Included Studies

Authors	Year	Country	Participants	n	Methodology	Focus	Findings
Mangum & Ball	1989	USA	General veterans	1697	Cohort	The relationship between in-service military training and post-service work experience	Skills transfer occurred for 47% of veterans and 50% of civilians; Amongst veterans, it was beneficial to have worked in a trade rather than combat branch of the military
Spiegel & Shultz	2003	USA	Naval officers	1015	Cohort	The association between pre-retirement planning and job role with retirement satisfaction and adjustment	Level of life satisfaction and adjustment to civilian life were associated with preparedness and skills transferability
Baruch & Quick	2007	USA	Naval officers	334	Cross-sectional	The transition from stable military to dynamic civilian workplaces	Those who focused upon feeling personally fulfilled or self-actualisation reported greater civilian career satisfaction and quality of life; They were also more satisfied with their career transition
Vigoda-Gadot, Baruch, & Grimland	2010	Israel	Senior officers	202	Cross-sectional	The antecedents for a successful career transition	Making preparations for retirement, social capital, view on organisational dynamics and work-family conflict may impact upon a service leaver's transition
Brock, Wick, Evans, & Gianola	2011	USA	Physician's assistants	412	Cross-sectional	Veterans' attitudes about the physician's assistant profession	Patients and colleagues valued their military background; They perceived their strengths as being able to manage stressful situations, work in teams and leadership
Zinn	2011	UK	General veterans	14	Narrative research	The impact of military culture upon an understanding of life course	Veterans adjust from a supportive environment of certainty and stability to a civilian environment that is less clear and leads to increased uncertainty
Walker	2013	UK	Army	28	Descriptive qualitative	Experience of leaving the army	It is difficult to project into a civilian other from the position of significant military employment experience; Veterans risked being ill-prepared because they held naive views about civilian employment
Baert & Balcaen	2013	Belgium	Job vacancies	348	Experiment	To find out if there was a bias towards or against selecting veterans for an interview for civilian jobs.	Overall there was no difference between the treatment of military and civilian job applications with regards to call back for the first interview
Herman & Yarwood	2014	UK	General veterans	27	Descriptive qualitative	Experience of post-military identity	The main themes were a feeling of loss, letting go and seeking out continuity between military and civilian identity
Burkhart & Hogan	2015	USA	Female veterans	20	Grounded theory	Experience of transitioning into and then out of the military	There was a period of adjustment where participants felt that they had different values to civilians and maintained a sense of separateness by identifying with other veterans
McAllister, Mackey, Hackney, & Perrewé	2015	USA	General veterans	251	Cross-sectional	Conflict between civilian and military work identities	Higher rank moderated the impact of conflicting identities; Political skill also moderated this conflict but more so for officers than lower ranks
McDermott, Boyd, & Weaver	2015	USA	Franchisees	1280	Cross-sectional	Veterans' satisfaction at owning a franchise compared to civilians	No difference between military and other franchisees in overall satisfaction which combined life satisfaction, career satisfaction and job satisfaction
Bennett, Wellman, & Mahmood	2015	USA	Pharmacists	276	Cross-sectional	To explore factors related to military pharmacists as they transition to civilian employment	Most found career transition as expected or easier than predicted; Those who went into similar civilian clinical roles found the transition easier;

							Those who found transition more difficult reported greater links or connection to the military
Maharajan & Krishnaveni	2016	India	Air force	400	Cross-sectional	Resettlement needs when transitioning to civilian life	Getting a job was ranked as the second most important socio-economic need after children's education and before finding a house
Schulker	2016	USA	General veterans	923507	Cross-sectional	The types of occupations where veterans gain employment	Veterans were overrepresented in roles such as protective services, maintenance, transportation, engineering, computing, production compared to civilians; Veterans were underrepresented in roles such as healthcare, arts, legal and office work
Suzuki & Kawakami	2016	USA	General veterans	11	Grounded theory	Experience of transition to civilian life	Internal aspects to military life that were maintained after leaving included: Action, discipline, leadership, structure, and respect for authority; Civilian life felt more individualistic, and there was less emphasis upon teamwork
Beech, Gold, & Beech	2017	UK	Infantry	5	Descriptive qualitative	To examine how veterans use narrative to form personal and social identities	Difference between the experience of teamwork and leadership in the military to civilian life; Difference between military skill set and a civilian role which resulted in a perception that skills were underused
Chargualaf, Elliott, & Patterson	2017	USA	Female nurse academics	13	Descriptive qualitative	Experience of work transition	Military values generated conflict amongst other faculty members; Limited interest in military experience by civilian peers; Expected to fit into norms of a new culture; It was difficult to explain military skillset to a civilian employer
Dirani	2017	USA	General veterans	10	Descriptive qualitative	The challenges veterans experience through the process of transfer of training from the military to civilian workplaces	Knowledge transfer involved: Personal capacity which was about identity, perceptions, reflection and resistance to change; Unlearning old processes and adopting new ones; Shifting values about work from 24/7 commitment to 7/24
Elliott, Chargualaf, & Patterson	2017	USA	Nursing	10	Descriptive qualitative	The transition from military to civilian nursing	Separation began when decided to leave forces; Civilian role was more different than had previously anticipated; Military nursing experience not understood or valued; Shift in identity as adjusted to a new role as a civilian nurse and let go of previous military culture
Binks & Cambridge	2018	UK	General veterans	7	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis	The effect of transition from military to civilian life upon identity	Some support staff had a transferable skill set which resulted in a smoother transition, possibly because the bond to the military identity seemed weaker, for example, nurses
Edelmann	2018	UK	General veterans	28	Descriptive qualitative	Why some service leavers do well and others do not	No difficulties with practicalities of new employment or with skills transfer; Veterans felt that they worked harder to achieve deadlines and were more committed; Veterans felt they were more team-orientated whereas civilians did not value collaboration towards a common team goal as highly; Distrust of civilians due to more demarcated boundaries between work and personal life compared to service personnel
Chargualaf, Elliott, & Patterson	2018	USA	Female nurse academics	13	Descriptive qualitative	Experience of work transition of veterans who became nurse academics	There was a period of adjustment that was difficult; Military leadership skills seemed useful for university leadership roles

Table Error! No text of specified style in document.. Quality Appraisal

Authors	Year	Methodology	JBİ Appraisal Tool	Grading (%)*
Mangum & Ball	1989	Cohort	Cohort	64
Spiegel & Shultz	2003	Cohort	Cohort	67
Baruch & Quick	2007	Cross-sectional	Cross-sectional	75
Vigoda-Gadot, Baruch, & Grimland	2010	Cross-sectional	Cross-sectional	100
Brock, Wick, Evans, & Gianola	2011	Cross-sectional	Cross-sectional	63
Zinn	2011	Narrative research	Qualitative	60
Walker	2013	Descriptive qualitative	Qualitative	70
Baert & Balcaen	2013	Experiment	Quasi Experimental	100
Herman & Yarwood	2014	Descriptive qualitative	Qualitative	40
Burkhart & Hogan	2015	Grounded theory	Qualitative	80
McAllister, Mackey, Hackney, & Perrewé	2015	Cross-sectional	Cross-sectional	88
McDermott, Boyd, & Weaver	2015	Cross-sectional	Cross-sectional	63
Bennett, Wellman, & Mahmood	2015	Cross-sectional	Cross-sectional	80
Maharajan & Krishnaveni	2016	Cross-sectional	Cross-sectional	38
Schulker	2016	Cross-sectional	Cross-sectional	75
Suzuki & Kawakami	2016	Grounded theory	Qualitative	80
Beech, Gold, & Beech	2017	Descriptive qualitative	Qualitative	70
Chargualaf, Elliott, & Patterson	2017	Descriptive qualitative	Qualitative	80
Dirani	2017	Descriptive qualitative	Qualitative	70
Elliott, Chargualaf, & Patterson	2017	Descriptive qualitative	Qualitative	80
Binks & Cambridge	2018	Interpretative phenomenological analysis	Qualitative	70
Edelmann	2018	Descriptive qualitative	Qualitative	30
Chargualaf, Elliott, & Patterson	2018	Descriptive qualitative	Qualitative	80

*Percentage of appraisal tool criterion that were fully met

Figure 1. Study Selection Flow Diagram (PRISMA)